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The Death of Harold Ladoo

Dennis Lee

Harold Sonny Ladoo was born in Trinidad, in 1945 or earlier, of East Indian descent. In 1968 he came to Canada, where he published two novels. He was murdered in 1973 during a visit to Trinidad.

I

The backyards wait in the dusk. My neighbour's elm
is down now, dismembered, the chainsaw finally
muzzled, and the racket of kids has dwindled
to timber dreams in the night. Along the lane
the air-conditioners hum, they
blur small noises.

Darkness rises through the leaves.

And here I am, Harold,
held in the twitchy calm of the neighbourhood, remiss and
nagged by an old compulsion, come at last
to wrestle with your life,
waiting for some kind of words.

Five years ago this spring —
remember how we met? We drank
outside at the Lion, sun lathering us, the transport-trailers
farting along on Jarvis, your manuscript
between us on the table and
what did I see then?

A skinny brown man in a suit — voice tense, eyes shifting, absurdly
respectful . . . and none of it connected:
that raucous, raging thing I'd read, and this
deferential man.

Then it began: your body
didn't work you had to learn it all
right now! it was part of one huge saga (*what* was?)
Greek restaurants
till 3 a.m. after class, in the cane-fields
till eight and you learned to read
in hospitals the professors here
all dunces your vicious unlikely family and

dead soon, you would be
dead and nothing
came right on the page, you went and
burned the lot was this guy for real? your voice
still soft though jabbing now, you were being
frozen out by Canada, you had
no talent the eyes! and
twenty-five novels in all, the saga my god those
eyes! the table going
away, the drinks, the traffic, those liquid
eyes unhooding, a current like jolts of
pain in the air —
and I was at home, relaxed.

I'd never seen the urge to write so badly founded. Nor so
quiet, deadly, and convincing.

And neither of us dreamed how many times
we'd carry on that way,
in pubs, apartments, planes —
so off-hand together, and afterwards
so hellishly impressed. Consumed with
shaky impending triumphs, our own;
how much we hated writers;
money; our messed-up marriages — in ad-lib
swagger & glee, each hoping
the other would make it real.

Sweet Jesus! the CP freight comes through the yard like
death on wheels, a moving barrage
200 feet away.

And as the rush of noise recedes
they do arrive,
the balky words I've waited for:

*"If any be rage,
pure word, you:
not in the mouth not in the brain, nor the blastoff ambition —
yet pure word still, your
lit up body of rage. As though . . ."*

But Harold, what bullshit! sitting here making up epitaphs.
They're hardly what you need.

Your look won't smoulder on Jarvis again, and
what is hard
is when good men die in their power, and the scumbags flourish,
and the useless question that
flails up cannot furnish even

the measure of such injustice,
save by its uselessness.

But the friendship came so fast — at the Lion, already
we were comrades.
That's how it seemed.
For I was surely drunk on the flourish of talent,
the welter of manuscripts that kept
surfacing year after year and often
with lives attached:
good sudden friends, two dozen savage hacks
descending like a tribe,
a shaggy new
community of rage where each had thought himself alone
and claimed our crippled native space, not
by choice but finding it laced from birth through our being:
denial of spirit and flesh,
and therefore space of the nation's death,
and also strove I hoped to open room to live in, enacting in words
the right to ache, roar, prattle, keen, adore — to be
child, shaggy animal, rapt
celebrant and all in the one skin,
flexing manic selves in the waste of the self's deprivation, caught up
in dicey improvisations, dirty, playful, extreme yet somehow
rooted in craft and the mind.
And I covet the tongues we spoke, I was
flesh at last and alive and I cherished those
taut, half-violent women and men
for their curious gentleness, and also the need
in extremis to be.
They made good books
and the time was absolute. And often we flirted with chaos
although it was more than that, for mostly I cherished
the ones who wore their incandescent loss
like silent credentials, not flaunting it, courteous implacable men
with the ease of athletes,
and who moved into their own abyss with a hard, intuitive grace.
And the breakdown quotient was high, but
we did what had to be done and
we were young, and sitting there
on the porch of the Lion in sunlight, drinking beside you
listening hour after hour,
I knew that you made one more among us, dragging old
generations of pain as perpetual fate and landscape, sentenced

to work it through in words,
and I relaxed.

Our talks all blur together. That soft voice pushing
deep, and deeper, then catching fire – thirty novels, fifty –
a lifetime of intricate fury, no, four
centuries of caste and death
come loose in your life, the murdered
slaves come loose, great cycles of race and blood, the feuds,
come loose the wreckage of mothers and sons
in Trinidad, white
daytime Christ and the voodoo darkness loose, your voice
hypnotic and I sat there
time and again in a dazzle –
then: quick change,
eyes hooding, hangdog, the
tricky apologies,
swagger of total humility – and then again, quick change and
four days writing straight, no
sleep tell it *all*,
and then the phonecall – one more
livid book in draft: from the Caribbean to
Canada,
the saga piecing together.

Driven, caring, proud: it was
community somehow. And your
dying, Harold your dying
diminished the thing on earth we longed to be, for
rampant with making we recognized
no origin but us.
But my mind bangs back as I say that, jerks and
bangs backwards.
Why should I
tell it like a poem? Why not speak the truth?
although it cancels
all those images of chiselled desolation,
the transcendental heroes I made up
and fastened to the contours of my friends.
But more & more it's a bore, dragging those
props around, arranging
my friends inside.
Piss on the abyss. And on hard intuitive grace.
We were a tiresome gang of honking egos:
graceless, brawling, greedy, each one in love with

style and his darling career. And images of liberation
danced in our fucked-up heads, we figured
aping those would somehow make us writers,
cock and a dash of the logos
oh — and Canada,
but all it's done is make us life-and-blood cliches.
Media fodder. Performing rebels. The works.
Wack-a-doo!
For this I tied my life in knots?

And as for you, Ladoo! — you never missed a trick.
You soaked up love like a sponge, cajoling
hundreds of hours, and bread, and fine-tuned publication
and then accepted them all with a nice indifference,
as though they were scarcely enough. You had us taped, you knew white
liberals inside out: how to
guilt us; which buttons to push; how hard; how long.
The last of the wily bleeders!
Three different times, in close-mouthed confidence you spoke of
three horrific childhoods; it was *there* you first
gave blood, now you could use it
to write. And I was
lethally impressed, and only later realised
two of the childhoods had to be somebody else's:
all those dues you paid were so much literature.
You couldn't even tell which one of you was real.
But I can, now: you were
a routine megalomaniac, taking the short-cut
through living men and women to try and make it big.
It turns my stomach! Come on, did I live
that way too?
But leave me wallow in no more shit about the Anansi years.
Ladoo, you bastard, goodbye: you bled me dry.
You used me! and though the words are
not what I intended, they rankle but let me get them said:
goodbye, and good riddance.

For eight straight years of crud in public places
I worked to incite a country to belong to.
But here, on this leafy street,
I wince at those hectic unreal selves
I made up year by year,
and found I could not shed them when I tried to.
Though how to be in the world?
And when I left them behind

I got here needing
roots, renewals, dwelling space,
not knowing how to live
the plain shape of a day's necessities, nor how to heed
the funny rhythms generated by
the woman I love, three kids, a difficult craft
that takes the carnal measure of my life.
Intricate rhythms of the commonplace:
a friend, a drive, a sky
and I am at home.
Though not to die here, fat & marooned — like a curled-up
slug in a dream of the suburbs. But for
now I am
here, Ladoo, here like
this in the yard and tomorrow,
and sweet and sour rain down on me, and often I
think of those headlong years with bafflement,
good friends and deaths ago,
when voice by voice we raged like a new noise in the orchestra
as though each deficit we harboured needed only to be named
to take on public resonance
and every honest word on a page meant news of another comrade —
like you, Harold.

And the books kept
pouring through your system like heart attacks,
nine in three years,
and the manuscripts piled in your bedroom, uneditable for
new ones would come and
sabotage your life, and second drafts were for
aesthetes, chaff while the fit was on and
unfaceable in the
long dead slumps between.
And your life and your work wrenched farther apart.
You stabbed a man, berserk they had
doped your drink and you
went on brooding on style, your ear emphatic with
Faulkner, Milton, Akebe,
Naipaul, Gibson, Godfrey, García Márquez,
Harris, Carrier: these men you meant to
write into the ground.
No Pain Like This Body came out, that spare and
luminous nightmare and you
went back to
dishwashing, writing all night and flexing new

I needed you to be the thing of fantasy
I now detest, as also I detest
that shoddy yen in myself.
Jesus! that gentle editor
with his tame thesaurus & verse —
out for the kill, like
all the others
taking what he could get: salvation by proxy,
which meant raw energy, and the will to charge ahead
and live in words and not ask any questions,
no matter who got screwed.
Say it: I used you, Harold,
like a hypocrite voyeur.

The wide night drifts and soars.
From here to the luminous moon, this very moment,
how many burnt-out rocketships go stranded,
lost in flawless orbits, whirling through the
stations of mechanical decay
in outer space, our dump though once sublime,
the leisure ground of God while he was Lord.
But they revolve up there. And here — down
here it's jumble:
version by version I shuffle images of you
and cannot hold them together.
A man should not make of his friends a
blur of aesthetic alternatives:
nor of himself, though it feels good.
Yet I also remember your wicked grin, the way it slid like a slow fuse.
And what was real was not the adrenalin highs,
the hype and ego-baths. Not only that.
Men and women were real, for sometimes they handled each other gently.
As one spun out in the frenzy of his number
another would wait beside him, as if to say,
'I do not take this seriously
though you must. Keep pushing. You can be
more than this.'
Beneath the pyrotechnics, beneath the endless
bellyful of ego, yes and even though
each one of us kept skittering through
the tyranny dance of his difficult compulsions,
what surfaced day after day was a
deep tough caring.
Quizzical. Easy. Frustrated. For real.
Allowing the clamour & jazz — the way your

way a human does,
 sensing the prick of
 renewal each spring
 in small green leaves and also the used-up bodies of
 winos, for these come
 mildly rife once more.
 To be finished.
 Commotion between the legs: no more to
 accede to its
 blurred supremacy, the way a
 human does.
 Nor to
 spend your last good
 muscle or wit on something you
 half believe in, half
 despise. Not even to know
 the wet sweet tangled
 stink of earth after rain;
 a streetcar's
 clatter; the grain of wood
 in a desk the way
 a human does. And not to feel
 exasperated pleasure any longer
 as flesh you instigated shoulders
 pell-mell past you, out to
 live it all from the start. It's hard.
 I cannot imagine —
 to be under ground.
 And the press of another life on your own, no
 miracle but acts &
 patience that cohere: all that
 sweet & cross-hatched bitter noble aching sold-out
 thrash of life, all
 gone as you reached it, Harold I cannot
 imagine, to be
 dead the way to be
 not a
 human does.

II

One drowsy bird, from another yard, and again
 the neighbourhood is still;
 the linden tree, the fence, the huddled garages, gone
 anonymous in the dark. And though we

make our peace as man and man
the words haven't come to praise you — oh but friend,
you should not have gone back to the island alone!
you should not be dead so soon!

But I'm floundering still, and every cell in my body
bridles, and tells me it's only beginning;
and I must brood against the grain again,
taking the long way round, interrogating
more than just the accident of who we were.

For often now at night
when the stillness begins to
tick, or if I take on too many meetings,
there is a question, not my own, which stymies my life:
'What good are poets in a time of dearth?'
Hölderlin asked that, master of poets. Who knew.
But I just get embarrassed.

Alienation and Integration: The Role of the Artist in Modern Society.
Panel at 8, Discussion 8:30, Refreshments.

And mostly I believe the artists further
the systematic murder of the real, and if their work does have
the tang of authentic life
it is one more sign that they are in business to kill.

For a civilisation cannot sustain
lobotomy, meaning the loss of awe,
the numbing of *tremendum* — and its holy of holies
goes dead, even the
nearest things on earth
shrink down and lose their savour —
it cannot dispel the numinous, as we have done for
centuries without those exiled gods and demons rushing back
in subterranean concourse,
altered, mocking, bent on genocide.

For the gods are not dead; they stalk among us, grown murderous.
Gone from the kingdom of reason, they surface
in hellish politics, in towering minds
entranced by pure technique, and in an art refined by
carnage and impotence, where only form is real.
And thus we re-enact
the fierce irrational presencing we denied them — only warped,
grown monstrous in our lives.

A world that denies
the gods, the gods
make mad. And they choose their
instruments with care.

Leaders, artists, rock stars are among their darlings. And
to the artist they promise
redemptive lunacy, and they do bestow the gift but what they deliver
is sauce for the nerve ends, bush-league paranoia,
fame as a useable freak, depression, and silence.
Yet nothing is wasted. The artist they favour
becomes a priest indeed, he mediates
the sacraments of limbo.

For a world without numinous being is
intolerable, and it is his gorgeous vocation
to bludgeon the corpse for signs of life, achieving
impossible feats of resuscitation, returning, pronouncing it
dead again. Opening new
fever paths in the death heaps of a civilisation.
And he names the disease, again and again he makes great
art of it, squandering
what little heritage of health and meaning remain,
although his diagnoses are true, they are
truly part of the disease
and they worsen it, leaving
less of life than they found; yet in our time
an art that does not go that route
is deaf and blind, a coward's pastorate,
unless there be grace in words.

But the role comes down like lucid
catharsis: *creator!* taking the poor old
world as
neuter space, as one more specimen, sanctioning
lunacy and rage, the gift of the mutant gods.
And the floating role is alive on its own and always
there now, it idles about & waits, it is after
a man — who knows? bank-clerk, dishwasher, writer, professor —
and when he appears, he is shanghaied.
So, Harold, your difficult life
was yanked into orbit, and kindled, and given coherence,
and blasted apart by the play of that living myth.
Almost you had no say.

Galvanic art! new carnal assertions! fresh nervous systems!
adrenalin ascensions for the chosen!
It is the need to be
one, to be taken whole & alive
by that which is more than oneself, sensing
the body,

the brain, the being
absolved at last in a radiant therapy,
carried beyond themselves, resolved
in single emphatic wholeness:
to live on fire in words, heroic
betrayal.

And I think of others we knew, comrades in Toronto
who toppled headlong like you to the calm of their own myth
accepting its violent poise like the fit of a new skeleton, all that
great fury in focus now in its settled gestures of being,
their lives in shambles still but redeemed by mythic contours
and it moves like fluid skin around them,
holding the
breakable ego, titanic
energies in place at last, no more
questions, or so it seems to one
with myths galore but no fixed will to inhabit them.

And our lives were single then, we were made
valid, though wasted, for I
know the thing I write and I would
gladly go back to that, gladly but I do not believe it.

But you, Harold: you
went and lived in words.
You pushed it past the limit, further than any of us
and also you died of it,
face down, no teeth in your head, at twenty-eight,
dead on a backroad in Trinidad —
though that I believe in. But not
the vanishing act.

The night winds come and go,
and linden drifts like snow around me:
paradise row, and somehow it is
permitted to live here.

But though things fit themselves now, graciously
easing into place, and

are, as
though they had always known,
that too has its proper measure, and cannot stay on
beyond its own good time.

Yet in this blessed breathing space, I see that
every thing must serve too many selves.

And we, who thought by words to blitz
the carnal monuments of an old repression —
we were ourselves in hock, and acting out

possessive nightmares of a
straitened century.

Surprise! we weren't
God's hitmen, nor the
harbingers of raunchy absolutes; and nor is
any thing on earth.

What wonky lives we were — the rub
of all that freedom, spent to re-enact
the dictatorial dreams of gods in their exile.
For madness, violence, chaos, all that primitive handering
was real necessity, yet
bound to their long revenge and to
prolong it would be death.

People, people I speak from
private space but all these
civil words keep coming and they
muddle me!

Salvations come & go, they
sing us by the root-hair — to live for
revolution, for the dear one, for chemical highlights
for power for history for art —
and each one turns demonic, for it too gets cherished as
absolute.

Even that glorious dream
of opening space to be in, of saying
the real words of that space —
that too was false, for we cannot
idolize a thing without it going infernal,
and in this season of dearth
there are only idols.

Though how to live from that and still
resist real evil, how to keep from
quietist fadeouts, that I
scarcely know. But
epiphanies will come when
they will come, will
go; they are not
trademarks of grace; they
do not matter, surprise.

'Everything matters, and
nothing matters.'

It is harder to live by that on earth and stubborn than to
rise, full-fledged and abstract,
and snag apocalypse.

Harold, how shall I exorcize you?

This is not for blame.

I know that

it lived *you*, there was no

choice: some men do carry this century

malignant in their cells from birth

like the tick of genetic stigmata,

and it is no longer

whether it brings them down, but only

when. You were a fresh explosion

of that lethal paradigm: the

Tragic Artist, yippee and

forgive me friend.

But you heard your own death singing, that much I know.

And went to meet it mesmerized – to get

the man that got your mother, yes – but also plain

wooing it, telling Peter you'd

never be back alive. And the jet's trajectory

a long sweet arc of dying, all the way down.

For the choice was death by writing, that

airless escape

from a world that would not work unless you wrote it

and could not work if you did –

or death in the only place you cared to live in

except it christened men

with boots, machetes, bloodwash of murder and vengeance.

The choice was death, or death.

And whatever the lurid scuffle that

ended the thing – your body

jack-knifed, pitch dark, in the dirt –

it was after the fact. You were already one of the chosen:

you died exemplary, and it was

meaningless.

Your final heritage

two minor early novels, one being nearly first-rate.

I read these words and flinch, for I had not meant

to quarrel with you, Harold.

Nor friends, good men, who also lived these things.

Nor with myself.

Though I feel nothing for you

I did not feel before your death,

I loved you, and I owed you words of my own.

But speaking the words out loud has brought me close to the bone.

Night inches through. It's cold. I wish I were sleeping,
or stronger, more rooted in something real
this endless night of the solstice, June, 1975.

Ten minutes more, then bed.

But I know one thing, though
barely how to live it.

We must withstand the gods awhile, the mutants.

And mostly the bearers of gifts, for they have
singled us out for unclean work; and supremely
those who give power, whether at words or
the world for it will bring
criminal prowess.

But to live with a measure, resisting their terrible inroads:

I hope this is enough.

And, to let the beings be.

And also to honour the gods in their former selves,
albeit obscurely, at a distance, unable
to speak the older tongue; and to wait
till their fury is spent and they call on us again
for passionate awe in our lives, and a high clean style.