



PROJECT MUSE®

Totem Figures

TJ Dawe

Canadian Theatre Review, Issue 141, January 2010, pp. 54-93 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ctr.0.0015>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/372734>



Totem Figures

By TJ Dawe

TOTEM FIGURES / CTR 141 WINTER 2010

TOTEM FIGURES

Caution: Copyright TJ Dawe. This script is protected under the copyright laws of Canada and all other countries of the Copyright Union. Changes to the script are forbidden without the written consent of the author. Rights to produce, film or record in any medium, in any language, by any group, are retained by the author. The moral right of the author has been asserted. For performance rights, contact the author TJ Dawe, #5-1555 E. 5th. Ave., Vancouver, BC, V5N 1L6.

Totem Figures, written, directed, and performed by TJ Dawe, premiered April 29, 2008 at the Havana Theatre in Vancouver, BC. It premiered as a Fringe show at the Orlando Fringe on May 15, 2008 and has since played at fringes in Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Victoria, Vancouver, and Edmonton.

Inspired by his experiences performing the play and speaking with audience members afterwards, Dawe recently launched a website (<http://www.totemfigures.com>), which features twenty-five-minute podcasts with prominent Canadian writers and performers including Bill Henderson, Jay Brazeau, and W.P. Kinsella. In these podcasts, the interviewees discuss their “totem figures,” which range from Ray Bradbury, Robert Altman, and Edward Albee, to Luigi Pirandello, Elvis, and the Beatles. Website visitors can also view short video clips of these “figures” in performance or interview settings. In the future, Dawe hopes to use some of the material gathered on the website as the inspiration for a book on totem figures.

Bare stage. Apart from a chair. Or a small stool. And a mic on a mic stand. Pointed towards the chair.

For preshow: TJ sits on the chair (or small stool) upstage, fingerpicking an acoustic guitar, pointed towards the mic on the stand.

At the appropriate time the lights dim

He puts the guitar away

A general wash illuminates the stage

He picks up the microphone

And speaks...

Fifth Business is Robertson Davies’ best known book
it’s a novel
it’s the first book of his I ever read
the main character is a hagiographer – an expert on saints
and he isn’t Catholic
he’s interested in saints entirely from his own inclinations
and he’s really interested in saints, lemme tellya
he travels to Europe to research them
he writes books about them
he’s a boarding school history teacher, and a war hero
and he talks to his students about history
and heroes
and saints
and myths
and folklore
and about how patterns in mythology appear in regular

people’s lives
whether they’re aware of them or not
whether they mean them to or not
even if they reject the idea

“Totem Figures” is a term I use to describe the icons of
someone’s personal mythology
the word “totem” is borrowed from First Nations culture
in BC and the Pacific Northwest aboriginals carved and
painted and erected totem poles
which told the story of a given native band
or family
or individual
through symbols
mostly animal faces
I grew up in Vancouver
there are totem poles in parks and museums there
we studied aboriginal culture in school

I didn’t work out any of this beforehand when I came up with
the term
that’s just what popped into my head to describe the idea
I’ll get to that later in the show
but the unconscious choice of the word “totem” is an indication
of the fact that growing up where I did left an imprint
it’s part of the story of my life
it’s part of my personal mythology

this is a show about personal mythology
about the idea that we’re all the main character in our own
life story

spinning out our own epic adventures, our own mythology
 with everything we do and every choice we make
 we tend to think of epic adventures and mythology as things
 that happen to other people:
 larger than life fictional characters from other countries from
 thousands of years ago
 but I contend – and this isn't just my idea – that the reason
 mythology speaks to people –
 and by mythology, I'm talking about any story told by anyone
 at any time, as long as it speaks to people
 it could be the Epic of Gilgamesh
 but it could just as easily be Iron Man
 or the Golden Compass
 or the Golden Girls
 or a story your aunt told you about the time she almost got
 married but didn't
 as long these stories speak to you
 and the reason they speak to people is because they are an
 analogy for life
 for the things people go through
 for the epic adventure each of us is on between birth and death
 so I consider everyone in this room – everyone on the planet
 – to be an epic adventurer
 in our own more modest, metaphorical way
 even if we aren't literally fighting dragons
 or traveling through space
 or going into the bellies of actual whales and dying and being
 reborn
 on a metaphorical level we do all of these things all the time
 especially when we take a step into the unknown

so if you were to look at your life as an epic adventure
 as a grand myth
 if you had your own totem pole
 if you had your own personal Mt. Rushmore
 your own Sgt. Pepper's album cover
 that told the story of who you are
 and what you've done
 and who and what has influenced you
 who would be on it?
 what would be on it?
 could be anyone
 could be anything
 depends entirely on you

could be a family member
 could be a political figure
 or a writer
 or an athlete
 or a friend
 could be a character in a novel
 or a superhero
 or a place

or a nationality
 could be an occupation
 or an object
 or an animal
 or an activity
 or an organization
 or a word
 you name it, you decide
 Totem Figures

Totem Myths
 are stories we keep coming back to for a good chunk of our
 lives
 again – could be anything
 could be a religious story
 could be a fairy tale
 could be a folk tale
 or a movie
 or a novel
 or a comic strip
 or a cartoon
 you name it
 you decide
 Totem Myths

Totem Figures, Totem Myths

anyone can adjust these definitions as they see fit
 anyone can rename these terms as they choose
 because everyone's mythology is their own

now, the thing about Totem Figures and Totem Myths is
 they aren't just people and places and ideas and stories we like
 I mean, they are
 but at least potentially, they're also more than that
 they're a portrait of you
 they can tell you a lot about yourself
 what you value
 what you aspire to
 they can give you strength
 they can give you that spark of hope right when you need it
 the most
 and most importantly
 they can point you in the direction you should go when you're
 standing at a crossroads
 which is where I'm sort of at

Hi
 welcome to the show
 thanks for coming
 I'm TJ Dawe

as I mentioned, I'm from Vancouver, BC
I'm 33 years old
and for the last ten years I've toured the Canadian Fringe
theatre circuit – which, in case you don't know, is a sequence
of ten, eleven, twelve day theatre festivals very deliberately
arranged in an orderly sequence east to west across Canada
starting in Montreal in June moving west, a new city every two
weeks – Ottawa, Toronto, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Edmonton,
Victoria – until you get to Vancouver in September
if you want to start a little earlier, there's one in Orlando,
Florida in May
and I do that one too
anyone can apply to these festivals – as many or as few of them
as they choose
anyone can be accepted, no experience is necessary
selection is by lottery or first come first serve
and there are between fifty and a hundred and fifty applicants
accepted in a given festival, depends on the festival

I've done 83 fringe festivals so far
the fringe circuit's the hub of my year
I tour pretty much every summer
almost always with a new autobiographical monologue
and every tour I've done has built on every previous tour
because fringe audiences are smart
they talk to each other
they remember shit
and every tour since 2000 I've found myself involved in
multiple shows on the tour
either as director, co-writer, dramaturge or collaborator of
some kind

I've done some theatre work outside the fringe
but not much
and most of it has been somehow related to something I have
done or something I will do on the fringe

I'm absolutely aware of how fortunate I am to lead the life I do
people know me when I walk around a fringe
and stop me to say hello
or to give me their take on something I said in my show
which is especially flattering, to think that something I said
stayed with someone outside of the 90 minutes they spent
with me in a darkened room

to answer a question I sometimes get – yes, I actually make a
living doing pretty much nothing but fringe festivals
mind you...
I'm of no fixed address
all my stuff's in storage
I have no car
no assets
no debts

no pets
no dependents
I dress like a slob
I read used books
I don't drink or smoke
and I don't like going out

Another question I'll sometimes get is
so what are you gonna do now
I mean, all these little skits you do on the fringe are fine and
dandy
but you're not gonna tour the fringe the rest of your life, are
ya?
What are you really gonna do

and my general response to that is
fuck you!!
don't you think I put my heart and soul into these shows as
it is?
don't you think they take everything I've got?
and what's wrong with what I'm doing in the first place?
and who the hell are you??
mind your own goddamn business!!

I usually phrase it a little differently than that
it's more like
well, y'know, I've got some ideas I've been kicking around
for a movie
or for a full length play
or a novel
or, y'know what? I came up with this idea for a radio show a
while ago
that I'm really hoping to get around to doing some serious
work on sometime soon

-

Luke Skywalker's an orphan

I don't do segues, by the way

and him being an orphan makes him an instant outsider as far
as I'm concerned

there are a lot of orphans in popular mythology, if you think
about it

there's Little Orphan Annie – obviously
Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*
Sleeping Beauty
Cinderella
Snow White
Harry Potter – and Voldemort

Frodo Baggins
Spiderman
Superman
Batman – and Robin
Anne of Green Gables
Tom Sawyer
Pollyanna
Tarzan
Simba, from *The Lion King*
Aladdin
Tony and Tia, from *Escape to Witch Mountain*
Punky Brewster
Webster
Arnold and Willis from *Diff'rent Strokes*
Oliver Twist
Moses
Oedipus the King

That's a pretty long list
if you think about how many people out there actually are
orphans
what's the deal with that?
they're not making these for the orphan market

how many of us have always felt like an orphan
how many of us have fantasized we were an orphan
how many of us have always felt like the outsider

-

now, I never played any kind of *Dungeons & Dragons* role playing
games growing up
I wanted to
I just didn't know anyone who had the stuff
there's a lot of stuff if you want to play those games
there's boards
and books
and figurines
and dice with four sides
and dice with twelve sides
dice with twenty sides
even dice with six sides
and you need at least three or four people
and you need time
a single game could take weeks, or even months to play
there's a lot of organization if you want to play those games

I did what I could
when I was ten or eleven I'd take a piece of notepaper
and draw a map on it, of a castle or a maze
and I'd put something in each room:
a monster or a trap or a clue or a weapon
and I'd come up with a story for the thing

who the hero was
who the villain was
what the mission was
and I'd guide my friends through it, one at a time, in the
schoolyard, at recess

when I was 18 I left home and went to university
lived in rez my first year
and some of the guys in my building were into those exact role
playing games
like, the real ones
they started one up
and they asked if I wanted to be involved
hell, yes!
here was my chance
it was a fifty years into the future game titled *Shadowrun*

so step one: create your character
you could be any kind of character you wanted
there was a guidebook specifically devoted to describing all
the various kinds of characters, with pictures and attributes
for each one
it helped if you kept the rest of the group in mind
there were three other guys
one was the GM – the game master – you have to have one of
those – that's the storyteller, the referee, the God of the game
one guy was a decker – which is a futuristic hacker – and you
had to have one of those in this game, 'cuz it's the future
and the third guy was a street samurai – which is your basic
big musclebound all purpose ass kickin' tough guy – a warrior
and after careful consideration I made my character a street
shaman – a magician
and part of being a street shaman is you have a totem animal
and the book gave you a list of animals you could choose from
with pictures and attributes for each one
and I settled on raccoon
whose clever hands can draw the bait out of any trap
those were the book's actual words
sounded good to me

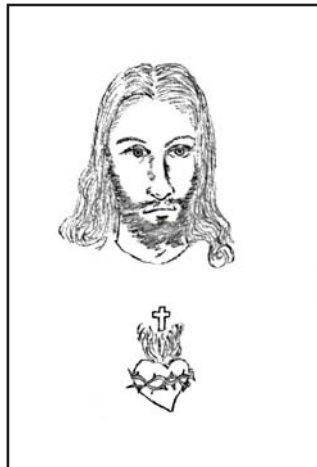
we played whenever we could
two, three times a week
we had a good time
soon other people in the building heard about it
asked if they could join
we always said yes
they'd create a character
join the game
and before long there were too many of us trying to play at
once
and the whole thing collapsed
and we never started it up again

but something I noticed even then
was that every single guy who joined the game
would make his character a street samurai
and he'd make him as big
and as buffed up
and as loaded with machine guns
and futuristic weapons
and bio-enhancements as he possibly could

and it wasn't too much of a stretch to realize
that these characters
were us
this is who we wanted to be
we'd taken our ideal versions of ourselves
and projected them onto a fantasy landscape

and out of everyone there
I was the only one who'd chosen to be a magician
someone who puts words together
in order to bend reality

and my totem
was the thief



Jesus Christ.
Sketch by TJ Dawe

The story of Jesus is a story of death and rebirth
Jesus surrendered – this story's in the gospels – so frightened
about what he'd have to go through that he prayed in the
garden of Gethsemane for the cup of suffering to be taken
from him
basically saying "God, don't make me go through with this"
and he was so scared he burst a blood vessel in his forehead
but he went through with it
and on the cross he cried out "My God, my God, why have you
forsaken me"
those were his last words

he died
was buried
and rose again

now, whether that actually happened or not
whether that happened like that or not
that's the story I grew up having told to me week after week
or in some cases – day after day
for some pretty critical years of my development
that's the story the entire Christian religion hinges on
the crucifix suggests that story
and the crucifix is the symbol of all Christianity

knowing what you have to do
surrendering to it
in spite of the fear
in spite of the brutal, inevitable, agonizing death
doing it anyway
dying to it
and being reborn

Robertson Davies was one of those writers I hadn't read much
of, but kind of figured I should
I'd read *Fifth Business* when I was 24 and really liked it
and I'd read three of his other books over the next five years
and I really liked them
and he's a pretty significant writer – at least in Canada
he's probably got a place on the Mt. Rushmore of Canadian
Literature
or at least on the Sgt. Pepper's album cover of Canadian
Literature
and something inside me whispered that it would be in my
best interest to see what he had to say

so one month I picked up and read his novel *The Rebel Angels*
and then the next month I got *What's Bred in the Bone*
and then the next month *The Lyre of Orpheus*
and the next month *Murder and Walking Spirits*
one a month for four months straight
didn't mean to do that

I was traveling at the time, just picking up what I could to read
but once I noticed that pattern, I thought
that's interesting
one a month
not too demanding a schedule
why not keep it up?
he's got a finite number of books

so I did
kept reading him, one a month
and I read the Salterton Trilogy

and *The Cunning Man*, which he wrote in his eighties
 and *A Voice from the Attic* – this non-fiction book about literature
 and reading
 three books of columns from his newspaper alter-ego, Samuel
 Marchbanks from the forties and fifties when he was ran a
 newspaper in Peterborough, Ontario
 book of journalism
 book of ghost stories
 book of plays
 three books chronicling the first three seasons of the Stratford
 Shakespeare Festival – the Canadian one – which he had a
 hand in founding
 books of essays
 lectures
 articles
 letters
 interviews
 one a month
 took about a year and a half

and with everything I read, the other books were fresh enough
 in my memory for me to notice patterns
 here's the thing: if you go through any artist's body of work,
 you can't help but notice patterns
 in any non random system, there are patterns
 that's the definition of non-random

and then I read a biography of him
 a six hundred plus page,
 ten years in the making,
 researched
 annotated
 footnoted like crazy
definitive biography
 with pictures in the middle
 titled *Man of Myth*

and then I started rereading him
 one a month

-

when my parents were first married they had a record player
 and a record collection before they even had a bed
 they slept on a mattress on the floor and listened to obscure
 folk music
 they named me after an obscure folk musician

Jean Carignan was a Montreal fiddler who championed
 Quebec fiddle music
 a lot like Michel Tremblay did as a playwright with Quebec
 speech
 before Michel Tremblay, Francophone Quebec playwrights

wrote in proper, dignified Parisian French and nothing else
 Tremblay came along and wrote the way Quebecers actually
 speak French
 it was revolutionary
 he's still alive, still writing, still a cultural hero in Quebec
 Carignan did the same thing with Quebec fiddle music
 he played and recorded the music that came out of Quebec
 he said
 this is our music
 this came out of our lives
 this deserves to be played and recorded and celebrated

he drove a taxi by day
 which he owned
 and played music at night
 he did his own thing
 his own way

some of his fans called him "Ti-Jean" Carignan
 "Ti" being short for "petit"
 meaning "little"
 Little John
 Johnny, basically
 it's a common nickname prefix in Quebec, especially for boys
 a lot of boys go through a few years of being Ti-Jacques or
 Ti-Paul
 but no one's real name, like on their birth certificate, is Ti-
 Jean, or Ti-anything
 the way no one's real name in English Canada is Billy or Bobbi
 or Jenny
 except me
 but it's anglicized
 because my parents aren't French
 and don't speak a word of French
 so it isn't the French "Jean" – J-e-a-n
 and it isn't even quite the English "John" – J-o-h-n
 my name, on my birth certificate and driver's license and
 passport is correctly spelled
 T-i-hyphen-J-o-n
 endlessly mispronounced in English Canada and in the States
 at the dentist's office they usually call out for "Tie-John"
 so I just go by TJ
 so my name
 is a deliberately misspelled obscure nickname
 from a culture I didn't grow up in
 and have no genetic relation to
 which even my own parents can't pronounce correctly
 it's sort of like a Japanese couple
 in Japan
 who speak no English and have never been to the US
 naming their son "Larry"
 because they're fans of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*
 and spelling it L-a-r-r-r-i

the upside to growing up with a weird-ass name
which I didn't appreciate at the time
is that it's this constant subtle reminder that you're on your
own path

my middle name is David – spelled the normal way
I'm named for a basketball player
Dave Cowens was a centre for the Boston Celtics in the
seventies
not the tallest player
or the flashiest
but he led the team to two NBA championships
he took two months off from one season cuz he was burned
out
and drove a taxi
he'd pick up fares and people would say to him
“aren't you that guy from the Celtics??”
and he'd say “Naw. I get that all the time. I just look like him.”
He lived in a modest apartment in downtown Boston,
even though he could have afforded something much bigger
and much better
he did his own thing
his own way
and then he did something very unusual for a professional
athlete:
he retired early, because the game wasn't fun anymore
Now he's a coach

David's also a figure in the Old Testament
the shepherd boy who slew the giant with nothing but a sling
and a stone
the underdog who went on to become king
also an artist
a songwriter
and the ancestor of Jesus

my last name – Dawe – D-a-w-e
there's no S at the end
people often put an S at the end and I've never understood
why
even journalists do that sometimes
the name is of entirely uncertain origin
it's common in Newfoundland, where my dad's from
and *The Book of Newfoundland Names* postulates that it might be
derived from the bird “jackdaw”
which is a thieving bird
one or more of my ancestors might have been thieves

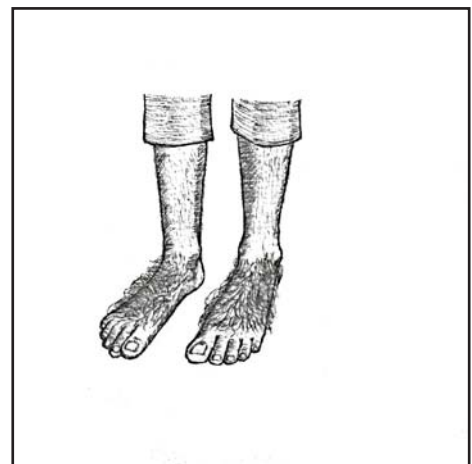
my sister and I once found our parents' “Name Your Baby”
book
and there were two names circled as a possibilities for me
one was was Lach – L-a-c-h – Scottish for “lake”

I have no Scottish background either
and the other was Joshua
a form of Jesus

in *What's Bred in the Bone* by Robertson Davies
another novel
the main character's a painter
and at one point, about halfway through the book, he's
studying under a master
and he gets an assignment to paint a fresco in the classical style
of certain dimensions
on any mythological subject of his choice
and he chooses the Marriage at Cana
which is the story in the gospels where Jesus turns water into
wine

and he paints the scene
of certain dimensions
in the classical style
but he gives the people in the scene faces of people from his
own life
they're still who they are in the story
they're still Jesus and Mary and the bride and the bridegroom
and everyone else
but with the clothes they're wearing
and the expressions on their faces
and an object one of them's holding
and who they actually are in the painter's life, which the people
in the novel don't know about, but I did, because I'd read the
novel and they hadn't
it simultaneously tells the story of the Marriage at Cana and
the story of the painter's life up to that point

he casts his own life story onto a mythological subject



Bilbo Baggins.
Sketch by TJ Dawe

in *The Hobbit*

when Bilbo finally confronts the dragon
he's wearing the ring, so he's invisible
the dragon can't see him but he can smell him
he engages him in dialogue
and asks him who he is
cuz the dragon speaks perfect English...
and Bilbo answers with a series of abstract titles
that describe everything he's been through in the novel up to
that point

and this is the appropriate way to talk to dragons, it says in the
narration
you don't want to let him know where you live, for instance
but it's more than that
it's Bilbo's story
it's who he is
where he comes from
and all of the experiences that have turned him into who is at
that moment
it's his own personal mythology

-

dreams are personal myths
every night your unconscious mind takes whatever's happening
in your conscious life
scrambles it up
and projects it onto a cryptic mythical landscape
and it's up to you to decipher the meanings

-

okay, how's this for a mythic pattern
Jesus symbolism in my life...

my mom was a nun
she really was
both of my parents were in the church when they met
my mom was a nun, my dad was not a priest – he was a
Christian brother
both of them left home to join the church
my mom grew up in Iowa
my dad grew up in Newfoundland
my mom left home at nineteen
my dad at seventeen
they left home to devote their lives to God
the church paid for their college educations
for my mom: Des Moines
for my dad: New York
they became teachers
and taught for the next decade, where they were sent
for my mom: Montana
for my dad: Victoria and Vancouver

they met at Seattle University
getting their masters' degrees in religious education over the
course of three summers
over the course of those three summers they fell in love
at the end of those three summers they left holy orders – with
permission
they moved to Toronto, got married and started having kids
I was born and raised in Vancouver, mostly in the suburbs
well, I was entirely born in Vancouver, but mostly raised in
the suburbs
and we spent a few of my earliest years in Whitehorse

now this might sound like a pretty unusual thing for them to
have done
and it isn't common, but it happens
you can leave with permission and still be a good Catholic
I've met other ex-nuns and ex-brothers who've done the same
thing

but then for me to be born of a nun
granted, an ex-nun, but still – a nun
does carry some interesting virgin birth symbolism
and my mom's name is, of all things – any guesses?
Mary
that's right! How did you know?
and it gets better

and I swear to God I'm not making any of this up
not one detail in this show is made up
and I've never made that claim with any of my previous shows

she isn't just Mary, she's Mary Jo
short for Josephine
that's her middle name
but as a kid, as a nun, now – she's always gone by Mary Jo
so she's both Mary and Joseph!
What the hell kind of bombastic symbolism is that?
If you were reading that in a novel, you'd put that novel down
no editor would let a writer get away with konk-the-audience-
over-the-head symbolism like that in the first place
but it wasn't done consciously
my mom didn't realize it till I pointed it out to her
and I didn't realize it till someone else pointed it out to me
three years ago!

It gets better

my dad's name is Yahweh
no – it's Peter
a very important name in Christianity
the head apostle
the first pope
and a fisherman – and my dad's from Newfoundland

Peter, the rock
the cornerstone
on which Jesus builds his church

my dad was a high school principal
he was a teacher first
but he got his first principalship in his early thirties
when he was younger than I am now
a very young age for that kind of job
and he was a high school principal till he retired in his sixties
just last June
and that, I think,
is some fabulous God symbolism

I mean, on a mythological level your father is God to you
already
especially if you grow up in a Christian family
in a Christian society
God the Father
your mother's familiar
she's the one you know
the one who raises you
but your father's mysterious
powerful
remote
he judges
he loves you
but he can *kick your ass*
my dad even had a beard

and for any kid, school is probably the dominant institution
of your life
you day revolves around school
your week
your year
the clothes you wear
the expressions you use
the people you spend the most of your time with
and in the hierarchy of a school
the principal is God

and I was a student in my dad's school
from grade eight to grade twelve
so being the principal's son was a lot like being the son of God
and it was a small school
four hundred and fifty students over five grades
everyone knew everyone
it was like living in a small town in the middle of Vancouver
there was no chance of anyone disappearing into the crowd
much less the principal's son
everyone knew that about me from the day I got there
students, teachers
no escaping that, no how

the upside to being the principal's son
which I didn't appreciate at the time
was that I got to see my dad in his work environment
every day

I got to see what he did
got to see how other people reacted to him
got to see how he affected the world around him
this world that he'd sort of created and maintained

it was a Catholic school
we had school mass once a month in the gym
a crucifix on the wall in every classroom
life-sized, with a real person nailed to it
no

Religion was a required course every year, for everyone, right
up there with English and Math and Science
and I'm not talking comparative religion, I'm talking Christian
doctrine

the teachers were Catholic
most of the students were Catholic
our families were Catholic

I interacted with very few people who weren't Catholic
and I was an altar boy till I was seventeen
a good one – I did the incense – that was the top job
I prayed a decade of the rosary every night for a few years
there

in silence, in private, by choice
not even my immediate family knew I did this
I had a little plastic statue of Mary by my bedside
and a picture of the somber, suffering face of Jesus
with a crown of thorns piercing his exposed heart
and eyes that followed you no matter where you went in the
room

-

a friend of mine's dad once described to me the difference
between when a dog's been at your garbage and when a
raccoon has

a dog knocks the can over
tears open the bag
digs through the contents
scatters them all over the place
sniffing everything
rooting through everything
having the time of its life
maybe finding nothing it can eat
and who cares, someone feeds him anyway

when it's a raccoon
there's a precise cut

like it was done with a surgeon's knife
at the exact point in the bag where the food is
disturbing nothing else
the food is cleanly removed
and the raccoon disappears like it was never there
sometimes walking through a puddle as it goes, so its scent
and tracks evaporate...

-

every time I do a new one man show
this one's number ten, by the way
I rehearse like crazy
I have to
the script is long and complicated
and often involves a series of disconnected monologues with
nothing bridging one to the next other than the fact that I've
memorized that this one goes after that one
sound familiar?
usually takes me two to three months
and I always reach the point in the process where I lose all
sense of perspective
the stories aren't interesting anymore
the jokes aren't funny
the script turns into this sixteen or seventeen or in this case
twenty-one thousand word parade of pure gibberish
and I have to keep rehearsing, every day, all the same
drilling it in
smoothing over the bumps
burning it into my hard drive

I once read an article in the paper that actually said that actors
approaching opening night register stress and adrenaline levels
comparable to car accident victims
this article didn't say anything about actors who play every
part in the play
and write the script!
It also didn't mention that car accident victims are generally
involuntary
they don't grow up dreaming of being in a car accident
they don't go to special schools to learn how to be in car
accidents
they don't audition for car accidents
or apply to lotteries, and if they're drawn in these lotteries,
pay hundreds of dollars and travel across the second biggest
country on earth at their own expense to be in a car accident
— in a series of car accidents, in these car accident festivals all
across Canada

by the time I open
I can't eat or sleep
I'm in a constant state of heightened emotions
I'm dead certain the show's a piece of shit

I'm a piece of shit
everything I've ever done is a piece of shit
and I will now finally be unmasked for the fraud I've somehow
tricked the world into not noticing I am until now
I want to run
I start making elaborate fantasy plans to cancel the tour
and go off and live in the forest for six months
curled up in fetal position, next to a tree stump
weeping

but I go through with it anyway

and I come out the other side, reborn

and I feel like I can fly
I wake up in the morning feeling like my body is emitting light
I walk the streets, feeling like I've hit a home run
I can hear the crack sound of the bat connecting with the ball
I can see the ball sailing over that back fence

-

so I was raised pretty strongly Catholic
and I believed with all my heart and soul for a very long time
but the whole venture was ultimately doomed if, for no other
reason, because of the music
which, on the one hand, is a gross oversimplification of some
complex spiritual issues, and on the other hand, captures it
perfectly
I mean, have you ever listened to the music in a Catholic mass?
and the way people sing it?
is that the sound of the way these people feel about God?
about being personally known and treasured by the being who
created the entire universe?

here's the thing, though — church music lives on its own plain
it doesn't even occur to us to think of it critically
to even think of it as music that some person, somewhere,
someone with more or less musical talent, sat down and wrote
it's immune from criticism
just like Christmas music
just like the national anthem
but what if you did
what if you looked at it purely as technical songwriting and
playing
and as an expression of feeling
how would it stand up?
can you imagine someone listening to it for its own sake?
can you imagine someone nonreligious coming home from a
hard day's work
flopping down on the couch
cracking open a beer
and thinking

Man...

I need to blow off some steam...
and doing it
by throwing on a record
of an amateur three hundred person choir
of random people
singing Catholic hymns
with no enthusiasm whatsoever
accompanied by everyone's favorite musical instrument: the
organ!
also played by an amateur
and just cranking up the volume
and disappearing into the music
ahhhhh....

I can't even picture the pope doing that

and if God really is everything everyone says he is
like, if he's The Guy
then he's quite certainly many notches above the greatest
human geniuses in every possible field
including music appreciation
so how would that music sound to him?!

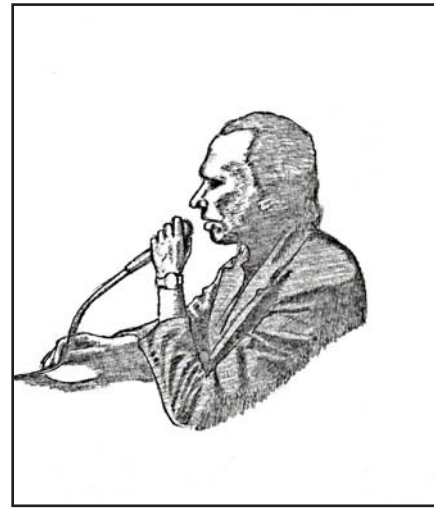
I mean, it sounds bad to me, and I'm just a human!
and if he's everywhere, all the time, he can't help but listen
to it
week after week
day after day
in every church on the planet – there must be millions of them
and he can't forget any of it
what the hell kind of torture is that?!

I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy!
when I die and go to hell for saying all this
that's probably what they'll do to me

or
conversely
is God up there, listening to all this church music
Just diggin' it...
just boppin' along...
cuz I wouldn't even be friends with someone whose taste was
that bad
much less worship them

Charles Bukowski was born in Germany in 1920
German mother
American soldier father
they moved to LA when he was three, where his dad was from

right after World War One wasn't a particularly good time to
be German in America
kids in his neighbourhood called him "heinie" - "hey Heinie!"



Bukowski poetry.
Sketch by TJ Dawe

and attacked him, threw rocks at him

the family was poor in the first place
and then the depression hit

as a teenager he broke out in boils the size of golf balls all over
his face and body
he'd go to the hospital to get them drilled
and doctors would bring in other doctors to look at him and
they'd say
"Look at this case of acne vulgaris! I've never seen it so bad!"
they'd say like this he wasn't there, like he couldn't hear them
then the nurse would come in with the big electric needle and
drill each boil individually
he'd sometimes leave with his entire head wrapped in
bandages, two little slits for his eyes
he'd ride the streetcar home like that
he missed a whole year of high school, because of the boils
and was severely pockmarked for the rest of his life

and he was ugly in the first place
and silent
morose
beaten
and after a certain age, more than willing to fight back
he discovered solitude
discovered writing
discovered reading
discovered drinking

after a year and a half of community college he started drifting
around America
working shitty jobs and losing them
writing short stories and sending them off to magazines and
being rejected by them

he starved
he drank
he lived in cheap rooming houses and sleazy hotels
he shacked up with women who drank and fought and yelled
just as much as he did
he fought in back alleys behind bars and lost most of the time
he was six feet tall but had really small hands, small fists

at twenty-four he rented a shack behind a house in Atlanta for
a buck twenty-five a week
and lay in the scrabby bed
and there was a wire hanging above him which should have
ended with a light bulb
but there wasn't one – just a bare, live wire
and he lay there, swinging his hand
seeing how close he could get his fingers to the live electricity

at thirty-five, back in LA, he lost eight or nine pints of blood in
one day through massive alcoholic hemorrhaging
and he was a broke drunk – no job, no health insurance
he wound up in the charity ward of the hospital
the odds against him surviving: fifty to one
but he made it
the doctors told him if he ever drank again, he'd die
he came out
wrote poetry
and kept on drinking

in his late thirties he got a job as a night clerk at the post office
in LA
sitting on a stool, sorting letters all night

in the meantime he wrote and wrote and wrote
mostly poems
usually autobiographical
his own stories and opinions
no tricks
no rhymes
nothing fancy
nothing abstract
just a raw, honest style like no one else was doing at the time

he started getting published in little magazines
underground newspapers
chapbooks

in the mid-sixties an aspiring publisher heard about him
not an actual publisher – an office furniture dealer who
wanted to be a publisher
came to his place
introduced himself
asked if he had any poems still unpublished
Bukowski showed him a whole closet full

this guy started publishing these poems as broadsides
then as chapbooks
then as full books
he eventually guaranteed Bukowski a small living allowance
– a hundred bucks a month – if he'd quit the post office and
write full time
he accepted
he was fifty
he was terrified
he was certain he'd have to run back to the post office any day
and beg for his old job back



Charles Bukowski.
Sketch by TJ Dawe

but his stuff caught on
he started putting out novels
books of short stories
and one book of poems after another
he carried on long correspondences, writing seven, eight page
letters every day, scribbling little cartoons in the margins
he attracted fanatical fans
and he didn't want them around
he just wanted to stay in
drink
and get the word down the way he wanted it

he put out forty-five books of poetry and prose in his lifetime
when he died in 1994 he was America's best selling and most
imitated poet
and every year since then his publishers have put out at least a
book a year of previously uncollected poems and stories and
letters
and they're still doing it
and they aren't scraping the bottom of the barrel at all

my dad took me to see *Star Wars* when I was four
 now, I've been around four year olds since then
 they're basically amoebas with shoes
 so it's hard for me to imagine I even knew what a movie was,
 much less could follow the story
 but when those big yellow words "Star Wars" blasted off into a
 sea of stars on that big screen
 and the trumpets played the Star Wars fanfare in surround
 sound
 something took hold of me that's still there
 to this day that moment in that movie brings me right back to
 that feeling

I was obsessed with *Star Wars* growing up
 I played with the toys, as many as I could get
 which wasn't that many
 and we lived across the street from an elementary school (that
 I didn't go to) with a full playground and a field
 right next to a community centre with another full playground
 and two swimming pools
 the whole thing swarming with neighbourhood kids
 and against my mother's protests
 I hardly ever left my room
 I'd stay in there, by myself, with the door shut, concocting one
 adventure after another



Luke Skywalker.
 Sketch by TJ Dawe

my favourite character was Luke
 my favourite movie was *The Empire Strikes Back*
 where Luke really learns to use the Force
 and faces challenges – worse than he'd ever have imagined
 and finds out the truth about his father

when we'd go somewhere as a family
 we'd often run into some former student of my dad's

and they'd come up and say hello, and they'd often remember
 him as the teacher who read their class *The Hobbit* or *The Lord
 of the Rings*
 or who'd recommended they read it

turning water into wine
 if you think about it
 really works as an analogy for creating art

Jesus was, in his own way, an artist
 turning the water of regular language
 into the wine of effective speech

he spoke to crowds and to individuals
 he had to hold their interest
 and tell them something they didn't know
 there's an art to that too

and one of the things he said that really stuck with me was

The stone the builders rejected
 has become the cornerstone

Star Wars is about a boy in search of a father

Luke grew up an orphan
 he never fit in to his uncle's world of farming

Ben Kenobi comes along, becomes a father to him
 teaches him
 guides him into a bigger world
 protects him
 even sacrifices his life to save him
 later Yoda takes over

Robertson Davies once said any man worth his salt has more
 than one father in his lifetime

then he discovers Vader's his father
 Darth Vader
 Dark Father
 powerful
 mysterious
 remote
 hardly even human
 more than able to kick your ass



Peter Dawe—TJ's Dad.
Sketch by TJ Dawe

and his final challenge, given to him by Yoda
is that he must confront Vader
and he does
and instead of killing him
and instead of turning into him
he reaches out to him
he does the bravest thing he can possibly do
he lays everything on the line to win the love of his father

-

my mom and my sister and I used to go to my dad's basketball
games growing up
my dad coached senior boys basketball in high school
defensive coach
zone defence
he watched American college basketball like a scientist
he told me the NBA's more about the stars
NCAA's about the coaching, the strategy
he had favourite coaches
he'd tape games

he turned into someone else when he was coaching
powerful
frightening
focused
storming up and down in front of the bench
with one hell of a yell
he was a raging commander on the battlefield

on a weekend, if there was a tournament going on, we'd
sometimes go for the entire day and watch game after game
after game
and sometimes they'd have these funny half-time things
like the "Mad Dash 4 Cash"
where people bought raffle tickets

and whoever got drawn had sixty seconds, timed on the
scoreboard
to run around the court and try to pick up sixty one dollar
bills that had been scattered all over the place
if you got 'em all, you got to keep 'em
but if you got less than sixty, you had to give 'em back, and
you were given a chocolate bar
and there were other things like that at other games and other
school events
we went to a lot of school events
we were the principal's family
if my sister and I had the day off school and there was no one
to take care of us, we'd just go hang out at the high school all
day

I mentioned the Mad Dash 4 Cash at a family gathering a
couple years ago
and my dad told me it had been his idea
he came up with all the ideas for things like that in the school's
life
bits
hooks
concepts for pep rallies
for the awards banquet
for the winter carnival
he wouldn't take credit for them
but he'd come up with them
do a lot of the work getting them rolling
and then stand back as they happened and watch
glad that they'd brought everyone together and given everyone
a good time

-

George Carlin was born and raised in New York City
he was a funny kid
class clown
he'd do impressions of people in his neighbourhood for his
friends
he was raised Catholic
educated by nuns

at seventeen he joined the air force
at nineteen, became a deejay
he had a boss in one of his radio jobs who told him he should
really start writing down some of his ideas
they're good ideas
so he did

he started doing stand-up
he was clean shaven
had short hair
wore a suit

did clean material
played Vegas
and middle class night clubs

at thirty he grew long hair and a beard
started doing material about smoking pot
about the seven words you can never say on television
he explored his ideas, no matter how bizarre they were
he once said
if a centipede wants to kick another centipede in the shins
does it kick with one leg at a time
or does it lean on fifty and kick with fifty?
he came up with a sentence that incorporates all seven deadly
sins:

It enrages me that I, a clearly superior person, should earn
less money than my neighbour, whose wife I'd love to fuck,
if I weren't so busy sleeping till noon and eating pork chops
all day

he put out comedy albums, and won Grammys for them
he was arrested for obscenity
and acquitted

he started getting the occasional film and TV role
and discovered it wasn't really his thing
he wasn't that great at it
compared to stand-up
and you don't get much creative control
compared to stand-up
but you can get a lot more money and fame for a lot less work

he stuck to stand-up
did comedy concerts
HBO broadcast them as specials
he released them as albums
he made that the mainstay of his career
he put out an astounding amount of material – way more than
anyone else of his generation
he just died in June of 2008
and right to the end, in his early seventies he was still doing
over a hundred concerts a year
putting out a new album of all new material every two or
three years
and right to the end, his stuff was better than ever

like most high schools, ours was sports oriented
and the big sport, for guys, was basketball
I started playing on the basketball team in grade five, getting
ready for high school
I sucked
I was gangly, awkward and unathletic

I sat on the bench
kept joining the team
kept sucking
kept sitting on the bench
I was warming the bench in grade ten when it was announced
there'd be a school play for the first time in all my years of
high school
I wanted to be involved
but you had to audition
that scared me
so I just happened to mix up the date of the audition and
missed it
but I talked to the directors after the play had been cast
they said I couldn't have a part, but I could understudy
so I understudied all three male roles, learned all their lines
and I sat backstage in rehearsals with the prompt script in my
lap, cueing actors if they forgot a line
I joined the crew, I ran the followspot for the performances

I really looked up to the guys in the show
they were so funny,
so creative,
so open to life
they talked to me like I was an equal
I was only fifteen
they were seventeen
one of them was nineteen
wow...



TJ Dawe-high school play.
Sketch by TJ Dawe

the school play and the basketball season covered the same
part of the school year
the next year I wouldn't be able to do both

senior boys basketball was a much bigger commitment
and I'd have a good shot at getting a real role in the next year's
play
I'd have to choose

-

The Hobbit is about a company of thirteen dwarves
on a mission to recapture a mountain full of treasure the
dwarves had mined and carved and put the best of themselves
into creating
which was attacked by a dragon
who killed everyone inside and took up residence in the
treasury, in the middle of the mountain
a few of the dwarves were outside at the time
they scattered
regrouped
and came up with this mission to recapture the mountain and
deal with the dragon, somehow
Gandalf, the wise old wizard, chooses quiet little Bilbo Baggins
the hobbit, to go with them as their burglar

I first read this when I was sixteen
and not on my dad's recommendation
my sister's best friend's boyfriend
he was twenty-three
Twenty-three!!!
he talked to me like I was an equal
he even smoked a joint in my presence once – first one I'd
ever seen
he passed it around
I didn't take a hit off it
but I did read the book he recommended

an essential thing about hobbits they left out of the recent *The
Lord of the Rings* movies is that when they want to
any hobbit can step as silently as a cat
it's part of why they walk around in bare feet
but they aren't criminally inclined at all
they're quiet, peaceful, unprepossessing folk
they average three feet tall
and their greatest joy in life is to eat

well, like most hobbits, Bilbo's completely inexperienced as
a burglar
and he has no desire to go on any adventures

and the dwarves aren't impressed with him either
he's smaller than them
he's meek
he's pudgy
he's never been in the outside world
how's he gonna take on a dragon?

or anything else, for that matter?
one of them remarks that he looks more like a grocer than a
burglar

Gandalf defends him
saying
he's the one
I've chosen him
and there's more to Mr Baggins than any of you realize

-

every month or two in school we'd have an assembly
all 450 of us would pile into the gym
sit in the chairs and on the bleachers
and my dad'd be there at the focal point of the gym
mic in hand
talking
walking
making eye contact with everyone there
no podium
no cue cards
he'd talk for an hour
he'd tell a story that was somehow related to something
happening in the school at that time
he'd tell about former students doing legendary things
like being the first woman to serve on a torpedo boat in World
War II
operating the horn
the "a-roo-gah" horn
which he had with him
and that we were now going to use to cheer on the senior girls
volleyball team in the lower mainland finals on Friday!
he made this shit up
my mom's youngest brother had stored some of his stuff in
our basement
my sister and I had found that horn the week before
he had everyone going though
he'd say outrageous things with a completely straight face
he'd weave this elaborate mythology about the school
he'd go on tangents
explore ideas
he'd tie in religious themes
he'd hold the attention of a gym full of teenagers
and he'd always come back to the original point

and if something bad was happening around the school
like a string of thefts, or vandalism
he'd vent and rage
and scare the shit out of us

I first read *Watership Down* when I was eighteen
I was just tip-toeing out of the world of Mad Magazine and
Stephen King novels and discovering everything else there was
to read

and one of the characters in *The Stand*, by Stephen King – my
favourite book at the time – talked about reading *Watership
Down*,

how much it hooked him, even though it was about rabbits –
the dumbest, scardest animals you could imagine

I figured I'd give it a chance
got a copy from the library
couldn't fuckin' put it down
reading that book thrilled me just as much as it did to watch
Star Wars
it still does

Watership Down is about a group of rabbits who live in a warren
and one of them has a flash, a vision of the warren being
destroyed
he doesn't understand it, but he can't deny it
he tries to warn his friends
he tries to warn his chief rabbit
but he gets rejected
and almost no one else believes him either
he's a scared little rabbit
what does he know?
and why would we leave our big, safe, comfortable warren?

a few do believe him
and they leave
they're outsiders anyway
they set out and try to find a new place to live
not really knowing where they're going or what they're doing
and they wind up facing challenges like they'd never have
imagined

I went with the school play
and I got the lead role!
it was a musical parody of *Star Trek*
it was a real, published play – you can Google it, titled *Pardon
Me, Is This Planet Taken?*
and I played Captain Jamie T. Church of the starship Empire
not the greatest script
and I think the directors recognized this, because they actually
let me add my own jokes throughout the whole play, like I was
Groucho Marx or something!
and on closing night I came up with a crazy ad lib cuz the cast
was cracking up and ruining the big crisis scene before the
intermission
I got us to stop the play, rewind and do that part of the scene
again

and we screwed it up again
so I got us to stop, rewind and do it a third time
the audience went bananas

George Carlin had a bit about how people say someone went
bananas
“he went bananas!”
or they say apeshit – “that guy went apeshit!”
bananas *are* apeshit, think about it...

anyway, I got all kinds of compliments for it afterwards, from
the directors
from the cast
from the audience

I felt like I'd live forever
I wanted more of that feeling

I'd done a careers test the year before
an “interest inventory”
not Meyers-Briggs
not the Enneagram
not how you perceive the world
not what you're good at
but what you're most interested in
and my highest scoring category: *adventure*

so when I graduated the next year I went to university to study
theatre
I wanted to be an actor
wanted to be part of that world

I had big dreams
I thought I was on a fast track right to the top

so I left home
to conquer the world
starting in this next city:
Victoria

adventures are daunting
it's fuckin' scary to go beyond the world you know
Bilbo didn't want to go
Luke only left his home planet cuz he had to
same with the rabbits in *Watership Down*
Jesus sweated blood

staying where you are is at least familiar
even if it's completely miserable
at least you know what's what

-

so in university I was suddenly no one
for the first time in my life I wasn't the principal's son
but I wasn't remarkable for any other reason, either
it was no special accomplishment to have been the star of your
old high school drama class
everyone else there had been that too!
each of us had big ambition
each of us told ourselves "well, I'll make it
even if the rest of you motherfuckers quit!
even if I have to starve and live in a garret
which of course I won't
cuz I'm gonna be on the cover of magazines, and winning
Oscars before I'm twenty-five!"

the odds against you making it as any kind of artist are
overwhelmingly against you, no matter how you wanna define
the term "making it"
they tell you this repeatedly in theatre school
quite emphatically
they bring in guest speakers to tell you this

and the further you get into the bigger world, the more this is
impressed upon you on its own
and I was in a bigger world than I'd ever been in before
new city
new environment
new social structure
new everything
and I was scared
too scared to meet people
too scared to audition for plays
for scenes
for anything

I wound up being one of many unremarkable acting students
in my department
one of a hundred aspiring actors
infrequently cast
middle to low end of the pack
good enough to make it into each succeeding year's acting
class and keep paying tuition
but probably destined to graduate
and go out into the real world
and never really get anywhere
and quietly drift into some other profession
and be forgotten

-

well, before long
Bilbo's been captured by trolls

he's been attacked by goblins
he's stayed with elves
he finds the ring at the bottom of a mountain that causes so
much trouble a little while later in *The Lord of the Rings*, but to
him it's just a magic ring that makes him invisible — a real asset
to an amateur burglar
he's stayed with eagles in their own nest — and he's scared of
heights
he fights giant spiders in a dark forest by himself
and he's afraid of giant spiders in a dark forest when he's by
himself
he matches wits with a dragon
and a goes through a whole lot of other shit, too

and along the way — without them even realizing they're doing
it — the dwarves start respecting him
in fact, they start depending on him to come up with a plan
whenever they're in a spot

he's the stone the builders rejected, become the cornerstone

and at one point he's got to come up with another plan
and he does, even though it'll be dangerous and require a fair
bit of luck
but he thinks to himself that he's grown to depend on his luck
a lot more than he did in the old days
and by the old days he was only referring to the previous spring
but that seemed like ages ago to him then

-

I went home for Christmas break when I was nineteen
and one Christmas record ended and I went over and put on
the next one without even checking which one
and it was a single guitar, fingerpicking familiar Christmas
songs

I'd started playing guitar two years before
I was okay
and I liked fingerpicking

here's the thing:
if you practice any art form
or any sport
or any skill at all
even if you aren't any good
it gives you a whole new appreciation for the people who are
good

and this guy was good
simple
not flashy at all
but he was playing these corny old Christmas carols and

making them mean something

I looked at the album cover

The New Possibility

by John Fahey

this had been one of our Christmas records my whole life

I'd heard it hundreds of times

and I'd never really listened to it once

I dug through my dad's record collection and found three other albums by him

taped 'em

and one of them was called *Yes! Jesus Loves Me*

it was all church music

including some of the exact songs I knew from mass!

But the way Fahey played them, they were suddenly imbued with genuine joy

or they were dark and frightening

or they were both

there was a quote on the back of the album cover, from Fahey "Christ is Not CUTE" - cute was all in capitals

I went on to get more of his albums whenever and wherever I could

I'd buy them

borrow them from the university music library

I'd read the liner notes while they played

I'd lay in bed listening to them, just staring at the ceiling

listening to the album like I was watching a movie

imagining what each piece meant

what kind of story it told

they were all instrumentals

Fahey was not a Christian musician

he drew from all kinds of musical sources

folk songs

blues songs

bluegrass

old jug bands

Dixieland

classical music

modern composition

Brazilian music

a Hindu chant

he lived for a year in a Hindu monastery in India in the 70s

but his greatest hit, if you can call it that, was a hymn:

In Christ There Is No East or West

and the way he played it – he went through it twice, slowly and reverentially

and then he sped it up and syncopated it

he made it his own

and scattered throughout his other albums were

St. Patrick's Hymn

Jesus Is a Dying Bed Maker

Fight On Christians, Fight On

Lord Have Mercy

The Episcopal Hymn

and

I Am the Resurrection

Star Wars is about growing up

it's about a whiny kid who's never done anything

from a barren world where nothing happens

going out into the great unknown

and suddenly coming face to face with

love

danger

sacrifice

the discovery of who he really is

and his true potential

with the fate of the entire universe quite literally at stake

he steps up to the plate

and hits a home run, first try

not bad, kid

he steps up again

and gets the shit beat out of him

barely escapes with his life

but he gets back up

he learns to hold his own

he grows up

one thing I did get cast in university

was a fringe show



Daniel MacIvor.
Sketch by TJ Dawe

a touring fringe show
a cross Canada summer long fringe tour!

the word “tour” sounded unbelievably romantic to me at the time
I’d never been on one
I was nineteen
I’d barely traveled

it was a three person play by Daniel MacIvor – my favourite playwright
a recent discovery, too
new, exciting, experimental, accessible theatre
and usually with just one person on stage

discovering Spalding Gray had been like that – that had happened the year before
just a guy sitting at a desk on stage
telling a story from his own life
playing all the parts
doing the sound effects
speaking at high speeds
telling the truth
and being absolutely captivating
a whole play with just one person?
I didn’t know you could do that...

we rehearsed part time for a month and a half
I lived in a house with a bunch of other theatre students, including two people in the show
we were two blocks from the beach
I was in the basement – not in a bedroom in the basement, my bed was next to the furnace in the basement
when we weren’t rehearsing I’d work on my lines
read books
watch videos
listen to music
and write in my journal
about how awesome everything was
and how awesome it was all gonna be



Spalding Gray.
Sketch by TJ Dawe

any adventure always sounds like a lot more fun before you set off on it
an adventure’s only really an adventure when you reach a point where you seriously wonder if you’re gonna come out alive

and your first fringe tour never goes as well as you hope it will
you picture sell out crowds
and standing ovations
and rave reviews
and being pick of the fringe
and your reputation preceding you across the circuit
you calculate how few sell-outs it’ll take to pay off your tour debt
it’ll be easy...

you don’t imagine medium or small houses
you don’t figure that between a quarter and a third of your audience will have gotten in without paying
you certainly don’t anticipate spending more time and energy promoting your show than performing it

promoting a fringe show’s a real grind, man
handing out fliers to line-ups
doesn’t sound that bad
just give someone a piece of paper
how hard could that be?
it’s *fuckin’ hard*
to stand in front of a line-up of strangers
interrupt them
look ‘em in the eye
and tell them that who you are and what you’re doing is worth their time and money
person after person
line after line
day after day
city after city
across the whole goddamn country
and if only one person at the end of a long line-up doesn’t take your flier, even after everyone else has not only taken the flier, but asked for details, promised they’ll come, invited you home for dinner and set you up on a date with their daughter
if that last person doesn’t take your flier, no matter how politely they turn it down, it’s like they’ve stabbed you in the kidneys with a rusty shiv

when we were on tour, I’d get line-ups of popular shows assigned to me by my director
and I’d show up, stack of fliers in hand
and see everyone standing there
and I’d freeze
I couldn’t do it
and I knew how important it was
we were broke

we were in debt
we were starving!
but I couldn't
I'd gone tharn, as they say in *Watership Down*

-

Bilbo's the one hobbit in a company of dwarves
exiled dwarves
he's the least experienced
he's the only one who didn't want to be there
he's an outsider who doesn't even fit in with the other outsiders

Luke leaves the rebels to go off to learn to use the Force
he becomes mystical
he has to confront his challenges by himself
he's an outsider among the Rebels

Jesus and the apostles: outsiders
wanderers
criticizing their society,
their own religious authorities
and within that group Jesus was the chosen one,
the mysterious one
facing his challenges alone

-

it took me most of the way across the country to work up the
courage to flier
and to figure out a technique

our show had an abstract concept and an abstract title
you couldn't describe it in ten words or less
so I'd go on and on and on describing it
I'd make my sales pitch a fast-talking patter
I'd make eye contact
I'd crack jokes
I'd make each sales pitch different, so if someone I'd already
fliered overheard me talking to the next person, they'd hear
me saying different things and maybe keep on listening
each sales pitch was just as much of a performance as anything
I did onstage
I'd quote from our good reviews
and hold up photocopies of them that were cropped and
enlarged to make it look like they were on the front page of
that day's paper
I'd shuffle them one after the other out of a folder I carried
around with me
I had people from further along in the line break off their
conversation and turn and listen and laugh and applaud and
hold out their hand for a flier when I was done
at one point my director tried to flier a guy in a line in
Edmonton, and the guy saw the thing and said

"Oh – I already got one of these
it was from this tall skinny guy who talked about two guys
doing a competition, and this girl in a blue bathing suit sitting
on top of a lifeguard chair..."
he did a full-on schtick impersonating me fliering him for like,
a minute and a half

but handing out fliers is only one aspect of a fringe tour
a fringe tour's a massive experience
a fringe festival's a massive experience
I mean, even if you leave out choosing your script, out of all
the scripts out there
or devising it
brainstorming it
writing it
rewriting it
rewriting it
doing a first reading of it
fielding peoples' comments
rewriting it
rehearsing it
memorizing it
rewriting it
opening it
rewriting it again
even if you leave all of that out
there's so much going on in those two weeks
especially if you're also coming in from out of town

you get in to a given city on a Monday or a Tuesday
you check in at the fringe site office
you get your welcome pack
you flip through the program to see who else is in town
you settle in with whoever you're staying with – usually
someone you've never met before
you go to your venue, which might be nice and might be a
shithole
you have your tech rehearsal
which might be good, might be a disaster
you put the local info on your posters
lug 'em around and start trying to put 'em up
even though somehow all the good spots are taken already
you go to the opening ceremony
you march in the fringe parade
you go to the fringe preview
you do three minutes of your show out of context and have
a bunch of people in the audience who were thinking about
seeing it cross it off their list
you do up your sandwich board
you put up your sandwich board
you hand out fliers to the people standing around looking at
the sandwich boards
you open your show on a Thursday

you keep handing out fliers, right after you've come off stage
you sweat it out, waiting for reviews
hope for good ones
hope for that fifth star
or four
or even just three and a half...
hope for sell-out crowds
hope to chip away at that millstone of a tour debt
and wind up having to swallow a whole bunch of new expenses
you never saw coming
and overcome the reviews that weren't as good as you'd hoped
they were gonna be
try not to let what some critic said about you haunt you for
the rest of your life
but it will
you'll never forget it
you'll tattoo it onto your soul
you'll hear it as you walk around
you'll hear it as you lie in bed
you'll hear it backstage
you'll hear it on stage
fuck it
suck it up
get out there
give those people the show
all nine of them
keep fliering
keep performing
see other peoples' shows
spend what little money you have on beer
read the paper every day
see how everybody else is doing
try not to let your jealousy get the best of you when they all
got better reviews than you
fuck it
suck it up
keep fliering
keep performing
hang out
talk shop with the other performers
gossip
eat from the vending carts
drink in the beer tent
walk back and forth from venue to venue till you know the
streets of that neighbourhood better than the locals do
better than you know your own neighbourhood back home
redo your sandwich board after it rains and the ink from your
reviews drips all down the wood
go to the fringe bar at night
drink
laugh
flirt
flatter

stumble home
conk out on your billet's couch
wake up early, not really knowing where you are
or who you are
get up
get out there
keep fliering
keep performing
day after day after day after day
and right at the point of utter exhaustion
go to the closing night fringe party!!
cheer for the people who win the fringe awards
try not to let your jealousy get the best of you cuz you didn't
get one
fuck it
suck it up
drink your face off
dance your face off
smoke up
make out
pass out
wake up underslept and hung over
puke
pack
drive to the next city
check in at the fringe site office
flip through the program
see who else is in town
etcetera etcetera etcetera

but
apart from what each festival has in common – they're all
radically different from each other!
each one has its own feel
its own cast of characters
its own ups and downs
its own beginning, middle and end
each festival nominally lasts less than two weeks
but quite literally feels like it lasts an entire calendar year
so if you think about something that happened two cities ago
it's like thinking about something that happened two years ago
and multiply that by the number of festivals you're doing on
your tour

and the first time you tour
you don't know any of this
you're discovering it all as you go

-

Canada's a nation of outsiders
we grow up in the shadow of the most powerful and influential
culture in the history of human civilization up to this point

getting a lot of our mythology from American movies and TV shows
 which are mostly written, directed and produced by... Americans!
 with most of the actors being... American!
 most of the characters in the stories being... American!
 which often describe cultural institutions we don't have
 being advertised products we often can't buy
 being wowed by contests we're not eligible for

maybe that's why we produce so many comedians
 and musicians
 and artists, period



John Fahey playing guitar.
 Sketch by TJ Dawe

John Fahey was born in 1939 in Takoma Park, Maryland – it's a suburb of Washington, DC

he was self taught as a musician and composer
 as a teenager he and a friend would go to poor black neighbourhoods and knock on people's doors and ask if they had any old records they wanted to sell

when he was twenty he recorded his first album of guitar music and put it out on his own label:
 Takoma Records
 he made a hundred copies
 put his name on one side of the album
 and on the other put the best blues name I've ever heard: Blind Joe Death

in the sixties he got a masters in music from UCLA
 and wrote his thesis on Charley Patton – a legendary old Mississippi bluesman from the thirties

and a number of times in the sixties drove to the South
 on more record buying trips
 and trying to find old forgotten bluesmen in person, following clues from the lyrics of their old 78s
 twice he succeeded
 he'd hang out with them
 drink with them
 learn guitar from them
 he even helped revive their music careers

he kept putting out records for the rest of his life
 mostly just him playing guitar
 no other instruments
 no band
 certainly no singing
 he was entirely untouched by the musical trends of the sixties and the seventies
 and the eighties
 and the nineties
 he put out over thirty albums
 usually with his own liner notes, which were always funny and intelligent and weird
 he also had a degree in philosophy

he never had a hit song
 never had a hit album
 never got rich
 never tried to

in the last decade of his life, after his third divorce, he lived in a fleabag motel in Salem, Oregon
 his royalties had dried up, and he didn't care
 he had no time for anyone who wanted him play the same old music the same old way
 he hated people treating him like a guru
 he made his living going through the old records in thrift stores and finding ones he could sell to collectors
 he recorded wild dissonant electric music
 he did abstract paintings and kept them in his room
 he wrote articles and stories and kept them in a box
 he had diabetes
 Epstein-Barr
 alcoholism
 he ate at the same cafe every day and always ordered the same thing:
 three scrambled eggs and five or six strips of crispy fried bacon
 and he'd butter and salt the eggs
 and he'd butter and salt the bacon
 he had a massive heart attack
 had sextuple bypass surgery
 and died two days later
 age sixty-one

-

our three person Daniel MacIvor show wound up doing
alternately well and poorly, city to city
we got good reviews and we got slams
we played to full houses and empty ones
we paid off our tour debt with the proceeds from every show
up to and including our fourth last show of the entire tour,
splitting the proceeds thereafter
making four hundred dollars each, for four months work
which averages out to about four cents an hour

but I performed in cities across the country
for audiences of nothing but strangers
and only an audience of strangers can tell you the truth
I got my eyes opened to the cities of the fringe circuit
and to this culture of wild adventuring artists doing their own
thing, their own way
and I'd been a part of that
and I turned twenty

and the show was always a thrill to do
even when there was hardly anyone there
even when we'd just gotten kicked in the nuts by some critic
even after we'd gotten sick of each other from being broke and
living in close quarters for so long
what happened on stage was always magic

our final city was Victoria
we got back to that old house we'd been living in when we
were rehearsing just a few months before, in the Spring
but that seemed like ages ago to me then
I came in the front door, and stood there, looking at the living
room
I couldn't believe I was back
I felt like Odysseus, returned at last
and Tim, this theatre student who'd been there all summer –
Tim was there, and he looked at me and said
you're different
your energy's different
and I looked at Tim
and said
yeah

-

all of my totem myths are the hero's journey

StarWars
Watership Down
The Hobbit
the story of Jesus

they're about leaving the smaller world
going out into the great unknown
facing challenges
drawing on resources you didn't even know you had
your old self dying
as you're reborn as someone better

the hero's journey is an analogy for growing up

all of my plays are about growing up
about leaving your environment
about the difference between how you thought something was
gonna be and how it actually ends up being
and having to deal with that difference
about moving from a smaller world into a bigger one

-

lucid dreams are when you figure out that you're dreaming
and you wake up within the dream
you don't literally wake up
you're still in the dream
but now that you know you're dreaming
you know nothing can hurt you
and you can do anything

anyone can learn to do this
there are techniques you can learn
there are books you can buy

-

I flung myself out on a different adventure the summer before
that, when I was eighteen
did a working holiday in England, a country I'd never been to
and on the flight there I listened to the in-flight audio
entertainment
and there was a comedy channel
and one of the people on it was George Carlin
who I'd vaguely heard of

he was doing a routine about little bits of everyday life
like ice cream headaches
or when you're walking down a set of stairs and you're not
really paying attention and you think there's one more stair
to go when there actually isn't and – WHAM – you slam your
foot down on the floor
or when you look at your watch and then immediately forget
what time it is
so you look again, and you forget again
so you look a third time, and then someone says what time is
it?
and you say "I don't know!"

all of these things everybody does
but no one talks about
no one even thinks about
much less thinks to turn into art
just the clay of everyday life
this guy was talking about 'em
and making 'em hysterically funny
I didn't know you could do that...

I got back to Vancouver a couple months later and started
buying his old records
later I got his stuff on tape
CD
book
audiobook
DVD

when I'd have to read a new Shakespeare play for a theatre
class I'd go to the university music library and listen to the
Royal Shakespeare Company do it on vinyl, and I'd follow
along with the text
in between acts, I'd put on comedy albums as intermissions –
often George Carlin
and as sacrilegious as it is for a theatre person to admit, I
preferred the Carlin to the Shakespeare
whose work is closer to what I'm doing now?

I ended up getting all of his albums
and I started remembering them line for line
intonation for intonation
inadvertently
just cuz I liked them

-

in grade six one day we had a priest come and talk to our class
he asked if any of us were thinking of studying to become
priests
five or six of us raised our hands
I was one of 'em

James Joyce said artists are priests of the imagination
priests are outsiders
artists are outsiders
Salman Rushdie said only someone standing outside the frame
can see the whole picture

live performances are like religious ceremonies
the Christian mass was directly and admittedly modeled on
Greek tragedies
which were both plays and religious ceremonies
theatres are like churches, and vice versa

some churches get turned into theatres
and when a play or a religious rite works, there's a catharsis
that's the whole point
and when it doesn't, there isn't

-

you know, sometimes I'll eat a pot cookie and take a long walk
and go fishing in my imagination
and come up with ideas for movies
for plays that would be too elaborate to do on the fringe
novels
essays
TV shows
ideas that thrill me so much I can't wait to get home and
scribble down pages of notes on 'em
there's at least a dozen files on my computer I've been meaning
to get around to doing some serious work on for some time

don't get me wrong, the fringe is great
but there's other stuff I'd like to do too

it's easy to put those ideas off, though
I'm usually preparing for a fringe tour
doing a fringe tour
or recovering from a fringe tour

and there's no deadline for any of those other things
certainly no paycheck
and quite honestly, no real probability any of 'em 'll ever see
the light of day
I mean, how many zillions of people are out there writing
screenplays?
how many novels never get published?
how many full length plays never get past the workshoping
stage?
can you imagine putting one or two or five or ten years of your
life – and a piece of your soul – into some creative endeavour
that winds up sitting on a shelf, gathering dust, never having
had a chance?

-

There can be negative totems

from Bukowski's early childhood to his early teens his father
beat him at least twice a week
if he couldn't find a minor infraction to punish him for, he'd
make one up
he preached the gospel of work and thrift
and despised his brother who drank and didn't have a job

John Fahey's father raped him

many times, growing up
grinning and taunting him as he did it
threatening to kill him if he ever told anyone
even holding a gun to his head once
in some of his writings, later in his life, Fahey claimed he'd
never known a single moment of happiness in his entire life

George Carlin never knew his father at all
he was a pretty severe alcoholic
so when George was two his mother took him in one arm, his
brother in the other
sneaked out the window onto the fire escape
and never looked back

Bukowski vowed to be everything his father hated
he drifted and drank and got jobs he didn't care about, and
lost them
he slept in sleazy hotels and on park benches
but he kept his job at the post office for over ten years
and he wrote like a driven man
every day
and every night
even after an eleven hour graveyard shift sorting letters
through five decades of hard, steady, daily drinking
and he was more productive and more successful as a writer
than most people ever are at anything
including his father
and he looked like his father
and he acknowledged that his father created him
he said when you get the shit beaten out of you several times
a week for years
you tend to say what you mean

I can't claim anything even remotely like that about my dad
The worst thing I can say about him is that he's really quiet
after my sister graduated high school, he and I would drive to
school in the morning, and not say a single word for the entire
forty minute trip
and quite often the radio wasn't working
he never regaled me with stories of his hard childhood
or of all the people he'd worked with, or taught
not that I'd have listened, I was sixteen

I don't know his life story at all
or his inner life
now I open up my inner life and tell my life stories on stage for
a living, to anyone who'll listen

so I got back from that first fringe tour
run through the ringer
transformed

triumphant
electric
standing ten feet tall
ready to take on the world
starting with my third year as a university theatre student
and I dropped right back into anonymity...
the fringe tour had happened outside the self-contained world
of my theatre department
nobody knew about it
or if they did, they didn't care
I was still just one of a hundred aspiring actors
still didn't get cast much
but now my fires were burning harder than ever

I'd kept up my journal on tour
I kept writing in it

I spent the next summer living with my parents in the 'burbs
driving a truck
saving up
living cheap
spending most of each day stuck in a traffic jam
my thoughts all swirling around me

every day on the way to work I'd drive by this typewriter store
one day I stopped in and looked around
and bought one
fifty bucks
Bukowski wrote on a typewriter

I'd get home from a day's driving and bang out my thoughts
it felt good
and I had nothing else to do
and maybe it'll lead somewhere, someday
maybe not
but either way – it feels good

Watership Down is that classic kind of adventure story
where there's an intrepid and assorted band on an impossible
mission they can't afford to fail
and each of them can do different things
there's the mystic
and the tough guy
and the idea man
and the storyteller
and the leader
and the clown
everyone's got their specialty
everyone's necessary

just like in *Star Wars*

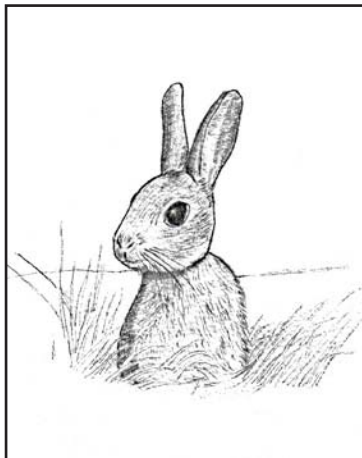
just like *The Lord of the Rings*
just like *The Seven Samurai*
and *The Guns of Navarone*
and *The Wild Bunch*
and *The Great Escape*
just like *Mission: Impossible*
and *The A-Team*
and *The Fantastic Four*
and *The X-Men*
and *GI Joe*
and *The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*

and with any ensemble situation like that
you, the perceiver, are naturally gonna gravitate towards one
character at least a little bit more than the others
you can't help but have favourites
it might not be the same as the popular favourite
or it might be
but there's probably gonna be one character who speaks to
you more than the others

in *Star Wars*, for me, it was Luke
the main character – but an unpopular one, among *Star Wars*
fans

in *X-Men*
I was into comics for a few years
my favourite comic was *the X-Men*
and my favourite X-Man was Wolverine
the loner
the mysterious one
the outsider
and the X-Men were outsiders already

in *GI Joe* my favourite guy was Snake Eyes
the silent one
the mysterious one
the outsider



Fiver from *Watership Down*.
Sketch by TJ Dawe

in *Watership Down*, my rabbit was Fiver
the mystic
the visionary
the outsider amongst outsiders
sensing a pattern here?

and Fiver isn't the main character of *Watership Down*
but that didn't even occur to me
there was something about him that spoke to me

we reveal ourselves with every preference
we can't help it
I got a good friend of mine to read *Watership Down*
his favourite rabbit was Bigwig, the tough guy
my friend
is a tough guy

marijuana came into my life in the latter half of my last year
of high school
and I fuckin' loved it

I was a shy, quiet teenager
gangly and awkward and unathletic
the principal's son
hardly said anything around the dinner table
spent most of my time on my own
in my room, with the door shut and locked
brewing in my own thoughts
marijuana helped them leap out of me

in university I was a shy, quiet theatre student
overwhelmed by the constant theatricality of all the other
theatre students who never seemed to ever fuckin' turn it off
theatre students are an especially flamboyant bunch
way more so than professional actors
theatre students haven't made it yet
they've got something to prove
to themselves

and in any group of people, I'm rarely the one doing the
talking anyway
I'm the quiet one, sitting in the shadows, watching
listening
maybe asking questions,
prompting other people to talk about things I'm interested in
remembering their answers for later
looking for patterns I can use in a show
I'm the thief...

but marijuana generally quiets people
makes them paranoid, awkward, self-conscious

for some reason it has the exact opposite effect on me
and a pattern developed
I'd smoke up with someone at a party
and we'd be having what would start as a normal conversation
and as the marijuana hit our bloodstreams it'd kick my brain
into a higher gear
so as I'd be chasing some point conversationally
my mind'd stay one step ahead of me
so I'd keep talking
and as the other person got more stoned
they'd get more paranoid and self-conscious
so they'd say less
so I'd say more
and then after a certain point I'd realize that the other person
hasn't contributed to the conversation in like, twenty minutes
but they were still listening, they were still interested
and there were other people, and they were watching and
listening and interested too
and I'm standing up
and gesturing wildly
and talking really fast
and I've been doing this for some time
and I could take all this in
and still come back to the original point

and then I'd think
man
if I could get some of this on paper
I might have something

Jesus was a fringe performer
he traveled up and down his country
telling his ideas to groups of people
often in the form of stories
and his crowds were probably about the size of a fringe
audience

he was born and raised in a country occupied and dominated
by the most powerful and influential culture in the history of
human civilization up to that point

now, in case any of you are worried that I've let my minor
fame on the fringe go to my head
along with this supposed "Jesus symbolism" I've twisted out
of my life story
and have come to think I actually am Jesus
reincarnated or otherwise
let me be the first to reassure you
you're right
I do
I am

I am the messiah
I am the resurrection
I am the son of God

and I'm thirty-three!

-
Robertson Davies felt you had to be at least the same age as a
writer to really appreciate a book
so he'd reread a novel by Charles Dickens when he was the
exact same age Dickens had been when he wrote it
and he said he'd get something entirely different out of it than
when he'd first read it when he was seventeen
and he said Dickens was such a genius, he'd reread the same
novel when he was decades older than Dickens had been when
he died
and get something different again

I was describing this to a friend once
cuz it sounded like such an interesting thing to do
the only part that didn't work for me was Dickens
never been into Dickens
but the concept isn't specific to Dickens at all
you could do that with anyone

so I said to my friend, if you were ever to do something like
that
who would you choose
whose work would be significant enough in your life
who would be your... totem figures

who would be on the Sgt. Pepper's album cover of your life
who would be on your own personal Mt. Rushmore

and this idea stayed with me
and I kept thinking about it

and later I thought
if you had your own Mt Rushmore
and looked at the faces, all specific to you
what do they have in common
and what does that say about you

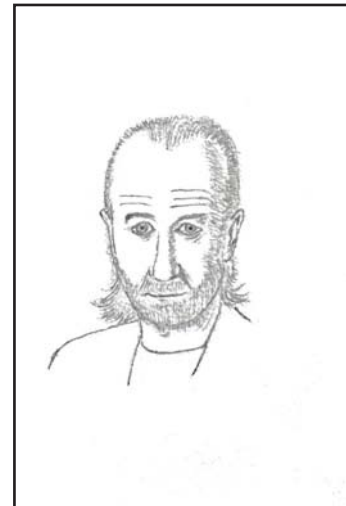
-
on that first fringe tour a company did a play they'd adapted
from the writings of Charles Bukowski
a writer I'd vaguely heard of
I sat watching it in a made-up venue in downtown Saskatoon
all this raw, simple language just pouring over me
just a guy talking about his life
with brutal honesty

making the clay of everyday life... art
I didn't know you could do that...

I got back to Victoria dead broke from that first tour and tried
to find some Bukowski to read
the university library didn't have any
it had all been stolen!
used bookstores never had him
new bookstores often didn't stock him
but I got to know which ones did
I couldn't afford to buy the books
so I'd go in and stand by the shelf, just read a poem or two
and take what I needed

and there was this one poem that just killed me, titled *History of a Tough Motherfucker*
so with a title like that, I thought was gonna be about Bukowski himself
or about a boxer
or a barroom brawler
it was about a cat
a cross eyed
bent spine
chunk missing out of one ear
tailless alley cat
that Bukowski befriends
he starts feeding him
the cat comes over regularly
one day a friend comes by to visit and accidentally runs the cat over
Bukowski rushes him to the vet
the vet X-rays him
says he'll never walk again
but his back was broken once before, you can see it healed, somehow
and he used to have a tail, it must've gotten cut off
and look – someone shot him, you can see the pellets are still in him
he writes him a prescription
Bukowski takes the cat home
lays him on the bathroom floor
cat can't walk, can't move
Bukowski sits on the bathroom floor with him all summer
a long, hot summer
giving him the pills
dipping his finger in the waterbowl, bringing it to the cat's mouth to lick off
over and over again
one day the cat tries to walk
he gets halfway up, wobbles like a drunk, and falls down, flat on his face
he looks up
makes perfect eye contact with Bukowski from that position

and Bukowski says
come on
you can do it
the cat tries again
and....
makes it
Bukowski says
you know the rest
now he's walking again
fighting
cool as ever
and journalists come by to interview him
ask him about his literary influences
and he holds up his crosseyed bent spine tailless alley cat
and says
this!
I'm influenced by this!
by what happens!
and the journalists look at each other
they don't understand
but the cat knows
Bukowski knows
they both know it's all bullshit



George Carlin.
Sketch by TJ Dawe

poets are outsiders
how many people are genuinely into poetry?
George Carlin said more people write poetry than read it
and Bukowski never cared for the company of other poets

comedians are outsiders
a comedian stands separate from the audience
a comedian stands outside of society and notices things no one else does
and says what's the deal with that?

and George Carlin was never part of any comedy scene

there's almost no audience for instrumental guitar music
and John Fahey felt no kinship with the folk music community

teachers are outsiders
ever have the experience when you were in school of seeing
one of your teachers in the supermarket, or at the mall?
ughh...
what are *you* doing here?
and principals are outsiders amongst teachers

-
on that first fringe tour
right when my fears and anxieties were getting the worst of
me
I reread *The Hobbit*
and *Watership Down*
and they gave me what I needed

totem myths are good for that
that's kind of what they're for
to give you that spark of hope right when you need it the most

Bukowski wrote about all his years of working horrible jobs
how he thought to himself once
don't give them everything
keep something for yourself
even just the tiniest bit
a spark can set a whole forest on fire

people rarely read a book a second time, though
even a favourite
much less a third or a fourth time
I've already read it
I know what happens
why would I read it again?

simultaneously, people will readily admit to having bad
memories
the most frequent compliment any actor gets is the one that
means the absolute least to them:
How Do You Remember All Those Lines?

and people will readily admit to not remembering what they
read
even with their favourite book
maybe they'll remember the story
vaguely
or the main character
sort of
or whatever it was that made them think "this is my favourite

book"

but read the whole thing again?
years later, after I've forgotten so many of the details?
after I've grown and changed and I'd look at the thing with a
whole new perspective?
(shakes head vigorously)
I've already read it
I know what happens

-
we reveal ourselves with every preference
we can't help but gravitate toward certain things
everybody's got favourites
no one's into everything equally

your favourite character on *Lost*
or on *Buffy*
or on *Sex and the City*

your favourite story in the Gospels
or in the Old Testament
your favourite prophet
your favourite saint
your favourite Zen parable
your favourite episode of *The Brady Bunch*

have you ever dressed up as someone or something for more
than one Halloween
or wanted to

your favourite actor
your favourite athlete
your favourite wrestler

the pictures you have on your walls
the albums you never get tired of
the songs you can play on guitar
or would if you could
the movies you can lip sync

have you ever been into someone or something before anyone
else
or after everyone else lost interest
or that everyone else never got into at all

why that
why them
what are the patterns
what do they say about you

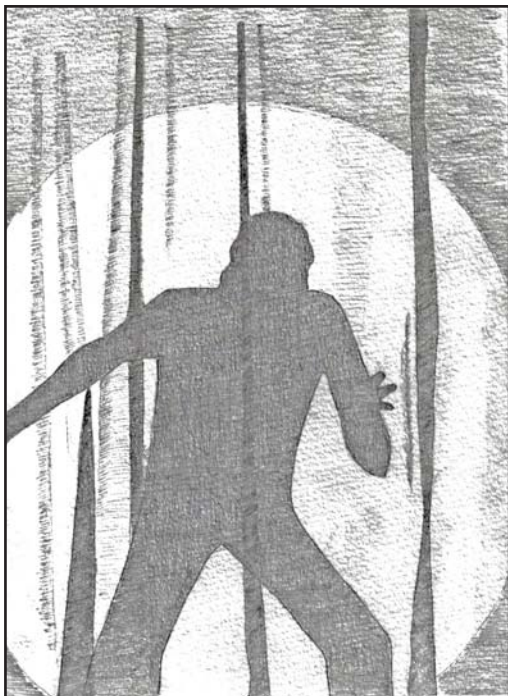
so I'd clack away at the keys on that old typewriter
 when I filled up a sheet, I'd take it out
 drunk with it
 in love with it
 and put it face down on an ever growing pile next to the
 typewriter
 put in a new sheet
 and keep on writing
 filling sheet after sheet after sheet
 spewing shit out
 just cuz it felt good

and then I graduated
 with a BFA
 and couldn't get a job at a gas station
 much less any acting or writing work
 probably didn't help that I was too chickenshit to get out there
 and audition
 Victoria was hard place to get a day job back then

I moved into a moldy basement suite
 I lived on welfare

I kept reading
 I kept writing

George Carlin did one man shows
 he played theatres and concert halls



George Carlin stand-up.
 Sketch by TJ Dawe

not comedy clubs
 he wasn't part of a bill of six or seven comedians
 it was just him, writing and performing his own stuff – he was
 the show

John Fahey did one man shows
 just him on stage
 picking away
 taking the audience on a ride
 his albums are one man shows like that too
 it's one voice, going all over the place
 changing the mood and the tempo
 reincorporating themes
 exploring themes
 taking themes apart

Bukowski did poetry readings in the seventies
 and not part of a night of spoken word
 just him on stage in a theatre, concert hall or night club
 with a desk
 a mic
 a sheaf of poems
 and a fridge full of beer on stage
 as soon as he didn't need the money anymore he stopped
 doing 'em

his books are like one man shows
 the poems are autobiographical
 they're often arranged chronologically, with what part of his
 life they deal with, so there's an arc in the book
 and the poems are spare, they're easy to read
 I can read a book of his poems in an hour or two or three, like
 watching a movie

my dad did one man shows
 in a gym, mic in hand
 writing his own material
 directing himself
 probably never thinking of it in those terms at all

so fighting huge clouds of fear and self-doubt I wrote a one
 person show
 and put it on in my old theatre department
 and then I wrote another one
 and put it on at the Victoria Fringe

I learned from each script as I went
 feeling my way
 I'd never taken a writing class
 I didn't know what I was doing
 I didn't follow any theories

I had no mentor
I just tried to write the kind of thing I'd find interesting if I
were sitting in the audience, watching

I laid the lines of each monologue out on the page like
Bukowski poems
trying to capture the rhythm in the layout
I still do



Peter Dawe-assembley.
Sketch by TJ Dawe

and then I wrote another show
and booked myself a full fringe tour
Montreal to Vancouver
I was twenty-three
seemed the thing to do
I'd done a fringe tour once before
I knew the circuit
and where else would I get something on its feet?
who'd give a chance to an unknown like me?

I had big dreams
I had great expectations, in spite of everything

Carlin was a language man
he'd dissect clichés and euphemisms and redundancies and
oxymorons
he'd talk about the significance of language
what the words and expressions we choose reveal about us as
a culture
and as individuals
we think, largely, in language
language reveals thought

he'd sometimes do these long intricate routines
virtuosic pieces of writing and memory and delivery
that make you laugh and think and change the way you look at
the world and hold your breath and say how does he do that?
How does he remember all those lines?

he'd call himself an entertainer, never an artist
but he'd deliberately show his liberal, freethinking audience
their prejudices and sacred cows
and then take 'em across that line

I used to develop a given piece of material imagining it was a
Carlin bit
how would George say this?
what would he do with this idea?
I still do

so how do I find out who my totems' totems are

John Fahey
look at whose songs he played
read his liner notes
read his books
he's got two books
they're obscure, but they're out there

in Bukowski's poems and novels and stories he talks extensively
about his favourite writers
and how he discovered them
and which of their stuff he liked best

George Carlin, in his stand-up, would tell you all about his
pets
about driving
about the contents of his fridge
but he'd never tell you about his journey as a comedian
or his cocaine addiction in the seventies
or his long, happy marriage
even in his books
he's got three books
you've got to hunt down interviews and articles for that
but he did write an extensive timeline of his life on his website:
georgecarlin.com

my dad doesn't talk about his life
but he'll readily tell you stories about his totem figures
not that he calls them that
they're mostly musicians
Stan Rogers
John Hartford

Steve Earle

and he originated an award in my old high school called the
Principal's Inspiration Award
which came from him watching this guy from our school run
the steeplechase in the lower mainland finals track meet
the steeplechase is five times around the track
with hurdles so big you don't jump over them – you jump
onto them and vault yourself off
and one of 'em has a water pit so big even Olympic runners
can't clear it
so the gun goes off
the runners run
and this guy from our school jumps over the first hurdle –
trips
falls on his face
gets up, keeps running
next hurdle – trips, falls on his face
gets up, keeps running
next hurdle – trips – into the water pit
you know the rest
my dad sitting in the stands,
watching this guy
so inspired he originated an award to commemorate the
occasion
and to be able to tell the story at the awards banquet that year

as a graduation present when I got my BFA
my parents bought me an acoustic guitar of my choice
that one
(points to the one from preshow)

later I mail ordered a John Fahey instruction book
later I found some more transcriptions of his songs on the net,
mostly by fans, on his website: johnfahey.com

I can now play twenty John Fahey songs
it's the only thing I play when I pick up a guitar
it's been like that for years now
each of them took me a very long time to learn
and you don't pick up too many chicks at a party by playing
Jesus is a Dying Bed Maker
I don't go to parties where people play guitars anymore
anyway
I play cuz it feels good
it's meditative
it's fulfilling
I get to know each song a hundred times better than I did
before I could play it
and then when I hear Fahey play the original – wow...

and I'm participating in the world of John Fahey!
it's like shaking hands with Jesus

so that second fringe tour – the first with my own material –
was a real battle
the car I was touring in starting making a funny noise around
Banff
but I had to make my tech rehearsal in Montreal
I pressed on
by the time I brought it to a mechanic it turned out it needed
a new axle
and a new radiator
the bill came to sixteen hundred bucks
if I'd had it fixed in Banff, it would have been twenty-five bucks

I had a stage manager with me doing some of the work
who I'd promised to pay a measly fifty bucks a show
in some cities she made more than I did

no one remembered me from the previous tour
that had been four years before
hadn't been my show
I had no automatic audience
I didn't get any advance press
sometimes didn't get reviewed at all

my show had an abstract title and an abstract concept
I couldn't describe it in ten words or less
so I had to do another long song and dance for every flier I
handed out
and I handed out a lot of fliers
I played to tiny crowds most of the time anyway

I had a set: a big pile of empty cardboard boxes which I had to
scrounge from recycling bins in every city
I'd stand on a chair and do a flip in the air and smash into them,
three times a show, and rebuild the crash pad as I monologued
I'd have to replace some of them within the run, if they lost
their resilience
sometimes I'd overestimate their resilience
and when I'd jump on them the boxes would flatten and –
smack – I'd land on the floor on my tailbone
and have to keep going with the show, as if everything was
fine...

I'd do my photocopying and postage before I'd have breakfast
and sometimes have nothing left for breakfast

I was too shy and too busy to socialize
too broke to celebrate
and there was too much to do, anyway

but then things started to get a little better
 they started to turn around
 I got some good reviews
 people started coming
 I made enough to pay my parents back for the loan to get the
 car fixed
 and right at that moment
 I got mono mononucleosis
 mimicking tonsillitis
 the worst of both worlds
 a disease mimicking another disease?!
 what the fuck is that?
 I've never heard of that
 but it was happening to me...
 I couldn't lift my arm off the bed
 couldn't swallow my own saliva, much less eat
 could take any medicine
 and there is no medicine for mono – no treatment at all
 all I could do was listen to people say
 "oh – you have mono? I had that once, I was in bed for *six months*"
 I emptied my bank account and bought a one way plane ticket
 back to Vancouver
 crashed on my parents' couch
 kicked it in two weeks, and picked up the tour again

cuz there were always moments on stage when I could just
 feel it working
 even if there were only six people there
 it was happening
 the show was coming across
 my own ideas
 my own words
 my own way
 and those six people were getting it
 I knew it,
 and they knew it
 it was a godly feeling
 I felt sixty feet tall
 it was more than worth everything I'd done to get there
 and everything I'd have to do to get back

-

Bukowski described the final time his father beat him
 he'd paste him across his bare ass in the bathroom with his big
 leather razor strop
 and one time, all of a sudden, it just stopped working
 he was still doing it
 it was still connecting
 it still hurt
 but it just didn't mean anything anymore

and he knew it
 and his father knew it
 and the sink knew it
 and the tap
 and the tub
 and the toilet knew it
 and his father stood there, breathing heavily
 confused
 Bukowski hadn't done anything
 hadn't resisted at all
 it didn't make sense

and Bukowski said
 you can do that some more if you want to
 and his father said
Don't you ever talk to me like that again!!

he hung up the razor strop
 left the room
 and never touched him again

-

so the fringe tour became the hub of my year
 the dominant institution of my life
 I applied to every festival and did every fringe I could, every
 summer
 every tour built on top of every previous tour
 so every year I had to top myself
 and every year I had a deadline

when the tour was done I'd scurry off to some day job
 save up
 live cheap
 fill out fringe applications
 mail off a cheque with each one – five or six or seven hundred
 bucks
 and I'd come home, broke and tired and discouraged after an
 eight hour day doing something I hated
 and have to write

I didn't write every day
 there were days and weeks and months when I didn't write a
 thing, and hated myself for it
 there still are

-

my totems are all artists or characters in works of art
 that's no coincidence
 I'm an artist
 this whole map would probably look a lot different if this was
 the personal mythology of a doctor

or a lawyer
or just someone who didn't respond to art that much

my totems are all male
describing the concept to friends I've found people's totems
are frequently their own gender
not always, but often
women more often have men among their totems than the
other way around
women go through the school system, and you can't do that
without reading a lot of books by men
most political figures are men
the Bible was written by men
most movies and TV shows are written, produced and directed
by men,
with men in the lead roles
even a lot of chick flicks are made by men
women have always told their stories on a one to one basis, but
they've only started telling their stories on a bigger scale in the
last century or so
guys have to overcome a fair bit of social conditioning to read
books by women
I've only started reading books by women in the last six or
seven years
not long enough for the ten year yardstick

I came up with this whole Totem Figures idea when I was thirty
and at thirty I found myself with a ten year yardstick
I only really started making my own decisions when I reached
about twenty
and as an adult something comes into your life
and it can't be explained away just by the fact that it's popular
it's yours
it speaks to you
it feeds you
it gives you what you need
and you can't imagine ever being without it

and then it fades away

you notice this, looking back over ten years
I'm sure I'll notice it even more looking back over thirty years
or sixty years

but some things don't fade
some things keep going on strong
and threaten to stay with you for the rest of your life

which ones
what are the patterns

-

I did my show *Labrador* at the Adelaide Fringe in 2000
Adelaide, Australia
only ever having done it a handful of times, eight months
before

Labrador is a monologue about touring to Newfoundland and
Labrador with a children's theatre company
and having that moment where you catch a glimpse of yourself
in the mirror
and for the first time in your life can't deny how much you
look like one of your parents
in my case, my dad
so to deal with this realization I go off to a bar in Labrador City
to get hammered
and I meet a distant relative I'd never heard of
who tells me a family secret about who I am and where I come
from
and then I admit the whole thing's made up
nothing happened in Labrador
and my dad's side of the family is still a complete mystery to
me
maybe that's why I made all that shit up in the first place

I didn't say that last part in the show
that's just me thinking about it, years later

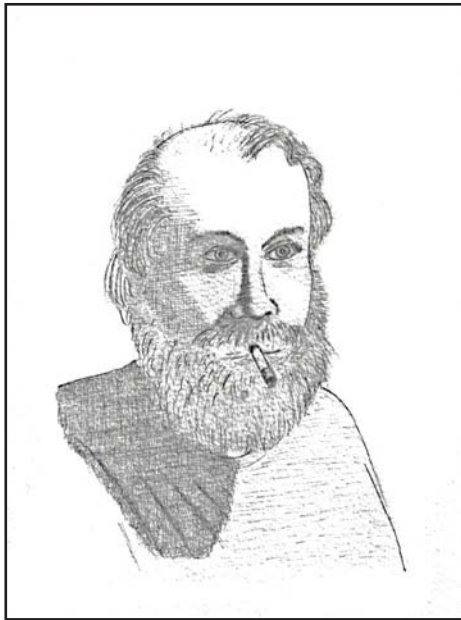
but in Adelaide, I was still pretty new at this game
and just terrified
a long ways from home
overwhelmed by the enormity of what I was trying to do
who the hell did I think I was?

I paced back and forth, backstage
trying to gather up the courage to go out there when the lights
went down
honestly not knowing if I'd find it

and I thought about John Fahey
I prayed to him
called him St. John Fahey
I wasn't really praying
I didn't ask him for anything
and he was still alive, then
I just thought about his originality
his honesty
his creativity
and his courage

-

the word fringe means the edge
the outside



John Fahey-old.
Sketch by TJ Dawe

fringe theatre is the outside of the theatre world
fringe companies don't get funding
don't get taken seriously by the mainstream
or even get noticed by the mainstream
fringe shows rarely get remounted
or produced again
or published
most fringe artists don't get much theatre work outside the
fringe
very few last
and very few are remembered by anyone but the handful of
people who saw their shows
and most people's memories ain't that great

on a fringe tour you're in someone else's house
in someone else's city
in a best case scenario you'll be a star in that city for two
weeks, to a few thousand people
and then you're gone
if you come back any other time of year, you're anonymous
all over again

you bond quickly and intensely with people you won't see
again till next year, or ever again
the roster of performers changes constantly
the staff changes
the volunteers change
the audiences change

the fringe circuit's been going really well for me
I don't poster anymore
I don't flier

I don't go back to a day job when the tour's done

but every new show's a death and rebirth
every time I have to go into the belly of the whale
and every time it's worse than every previous year

and every tour brings new challenges and problems I never
see coming
every time I reach a point where I seriously wonder if I'm
gonna come out alive
and every time I seem to juuuuust make it

and if there's anywhere I'd feel at home, wouldn't it be on the
fringe circuit?
if there's any group of people you'd think would be "my
people" – wouldn't it be the people on the fringe?
but the more I tour
the less I find myself hanging out

I'm still working on learning to lucid dream
I'm an insomniac and a pothead
it's about as bad of a double-whammy as you could have for
learning that particular skill
but still, I've done it maybe a dozen times

in my first lucid dream I woke up in the dream world and
realized I wasn't going to literally wake up
and I thought
hey hey!
let's see what I can do
there was a tree stump
I scooped up a handful of dirt near the base of it
cupped it in my hands
and willed it to change
I was testing my dream superpowers
I concentrated
come on
come on....
after about a minute I opened my hands

it was still dirt

so I tried again
and this time I felt it moving
morphing
after another minute I opened my hands
and I was holding the biggest, reddest most beautiful
strawberry I'd ever seen
it was the size of an apple
I took a bite
it was unbelievably delicious

-

a few years ago some of the other fringe performers and I
started organizing late night cabarets in various cities across
the circuit

get a bunch of people together
doing shit that isn't in their show
and doesn't promote their show
put it on at midnight
shake it up, take a chance, have a good time

for the one in Saskatoon I came up with a hook:
as many companies as wanted to join would write their show
title and their password for a free ticket on a piece of a paper
fold it in half
drop it in a hat
and then we'd all draw from the hat anonymously
and you had however many days from the draw until the
cabaret to see the show you'd picked
and come up with a three minute rendition of it
it was called Spoof Night
that first year, half the companies in the whole festival
participated

I administrated the draw
came up with a running order
went around to line-ups, promoting the event, handing out
fliers for it
I checked in with the performers, asking how their bit was
coming, making sure they were still doing it
I saw as many of the shows being spoofed beforehand as I could
I did a bit, and someone did me
a few companies spoofed me in their bit, actually

and on the night of the cabaret I had a late show myself
so I got there after it had already started
and I slipped in to the back of the venue
and saw people satirizing what was happening around the
festival, onstage and off
saw the people being spoofed take it in exactly the right spirit
saw some people do spoof bits that were better than their own
actual shows

and I felt this warm glow welling up inside me about how
well the thing was going and how much it was bringing people
together
and then I thought
how's that for following in the old man's footsteps
it's the Mad Dash 4 Cash...

-

there are a whole lot of outsiders out there
every sports movie's about an underdog or a team of underdogs

The Bad News Bears
Hoosiers
Rocky

almost every movie period

Forrest Gump
8 Mile
Pretty Woman

every fairy tale
every novel
every story

The Catcher in the Rye
American Beauty
Ugly Betty

okay, maybe not every novel and movie and story
but a lot
and some major ones

Robin Hood
The Matrix
Nineteen Eighty-four

in the Old Testament the Hebrews are enslaved in Egypt
enslaved in Babylon
wandering in the desert for forty years
constantly in conflict in their own land
always on the move

The Karate Kid
The Breakfast Club
Amelie

in the old spaghetti westerns Clint Eastwood's character's so
much of an outsider he doesn't even have a name

My Fair Lady
I, Claudius
Charlie Brown

these are some insanely sweeping generalizations, I readily
admit
but we're all ultimately individuals
and does anyone feel like The Man?

Cyrano de Bergerac
Taxi Driver
Borat

does anyone ever say
I'm part of the dominating force
I fit right in
I'm completely secure with my position, all the time

The Fight Club
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest
The Devil Wears Prada

maybe the artists who created these stories felt like outsiders themselves
but how would their stuff get big if people didn't relate to it?

Lawrence of Arabia
The Handmaid's Tale
The Sound of Music

maybe all of these interpretations have a lot more to do with
the person coming up with them than anything else

The Grapes of Wrath
The Wind-up Bird Chronicle
Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer

since leaving home at 18, I've moved on an average of once
every four months
not including long stints of touring and traveling

Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid
The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy
Mr Bean

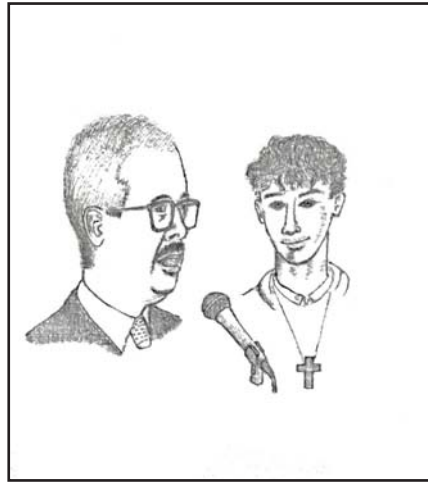
we reveal ourselves with every preference

A Clockwork Orange
The Party
Edward Scissorhands

with what we keep and what we let fade away

The Shawshank Redemption
Lost in Translation
Beauty and the Beast

and there've been plenty of times when I've been the one at a
party doing all the talking
as I said, that's how I got doing one man shows in the first
place
and there are times when I fit right in and don't mind at all



Peter Dawe and TJ Dawe.
Sketch by TJ Dawe

a few years ago I was living a matter of blocks my old high
school
my dad had moved on to another school by then
the new principal had been a teacher when I was student
one of the younger, cooler, teachers – he was a good guy
I stopped in one day and said hello
we got talking
and he asked if I'd do one of my shows for the students
sure
he didn't call it a little skit, so I agreed
he wanted *Labrador*
okay
so a week later, there I was
in that same old gym where my dad had done all those
assemblies
same audience configuration
same bleachers
same school uniforms
same basketball hoops and scoreboard on the wall
and I was about to talk for an hour, to tell them all a story
about my relationship with my dad
possibly using the exact same microphone he used to use

and they surprised me
they brought my dad in to introduce the show
and he described my career to the students
read from one of my reviews
held up one of my awards
and told them all how proud he was of me

there just isn't enough time to talk about every person and
story and influence
this has been a portion of the Mt. Rushmore of my life
the Sgt. Pepper's version of the show would probably take a

week, nonstop
and I could do it, too!

Catch 22 – that's my favourite book, by the way
first read that around my nineteenth birthday
that's where I got this whole scrambled-up-order-that-comes-
together-at-the- end thing
and where I first learned the power of reincorporation
they're pretty much the same thing
I learned these things by osmosis
most of what I've learned in my life has been by osmosis
by doing
putting it into words long after the fact

anyone else could have these exact same people and stories as
totems and draw entirely different meanings from them
or draw the same meanings
everyone's mythology is their own

-

and all of those people asking me what I'm really gonna do
have got a point
which is I guess what makes the question so annoying

so what am I gonna do now
will I tour the fringe for the rest of my days
as challenging and fulfilling as it is
or will I work on some of those other ideas and step out into
a bigger world
can I do both?
do I have the energy?
do I have the guts?

blackout

(blackout)

TJ Dawe is a Vancouver-based actor and director. He has toured the Fringe circuit with his solo shows for many years to great critical and popular acclaim.