



CLASS MAMMALIA

I knew he wouldn't be there. Of course I did. So why the disappointment, the lingering sense of loss?

I haven't made a practice of visiting writers' graves. There's only been one other, the shady creekside resting place of the woman who penned one of my favourite opening lines: "The river flowed both ways." So simple, so perfect—a sentence that somehow cradles the entire novel to come. Margaret Laurence is more than a writer I admire, she's a writer I hold dear, one whose authorial voice shines through the mere mastery of her works to summon up a beloved presence in the room. There aren't many authors I feel that way about, but I recently went in search of another, beginning with his bones.

Steinbeck Country. It may be a cliché, but it's what I thought—pretty much the first thing I thought—when friends invited my husband Clive and I to visit them at their winter rental in Monterey. We spent the first day marvelling at the benevolent weather, the breathtaking seaside walk. The second day was drizzly, so the four of us drove inland to Salinas, where Steinbeck was born and where, despite all the trouble he had with the smaller minds of that small city, he chose to be buried in the end. The Garden of Memories

Cemetery was our first port of call. There's nothing grand about the place; a few towering cypresses are all that save it from being downright ordinary. A painted sign of the variety that directs day-trippers to antiques points the way to the Steinbeck grave. The writer lies with his third wife and widow, and with the parents who brought him into the world. Four plaques on a large stone slab, one of which is decorated with offerings. On the day we came to pay our respects there were coins and pine cones, a golf ball, a charm in the shape of an open book. How many had been there before us? Was I the only one who had trouble connecting the name on that plaque with the name on some of my most cherished books?

We drove slowly into the heart of town, passing the bank that Kate patronized in *East of Eden*, the family home where *The Red Pony* took shape while its author's mother sickened and died. We toured the National Steinbeck Center, which, though it reminded me of the books and movies they gave rise to, did little to call up the writer himself. Even Rocinante, the camper he called home during the epic road trip chronicled in *Travels With Charley*, spoke more of his

absence than anything else: the dog that had been his companion portrayed as a front-seat shadow; the camper with its closed cupboards and half-drunk bottle; the typewriter he would never touch again.

Over the following week we did our best to keep the great man in mind. We watched DVDs of *Cannery Row* (a sweet and silly mash-up that features glorious sets and one of the goofiest dance scenes of all time) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (a gorgeous, harrowing homage, true to the novel's message, if not to its final scene). We had every intention of seeking out the cottage where the writer had lived with his first wife, but somehow we never got around to it. Perhaps because the historic home we did happen to pass—once his maternal grandmother's—had devolved into an abandoned, weed-strangled eyesore that smelled of ghosts.

The closest I came to detecting Steinbeck's presence was on that seaside walk, but even there—where I might have been setting my foot precisely where he had set his—it was more of a hint than a haunting. The truth is, I was taken up with another presence, this one collective rather than singular, and as evident as the other was elusory.

Regular walks from our Pacific Grove cottage to the fabled Cannery Row took us past a small, sheltered beach. A lovely spot in its own right, it was further favoured as a haulout site for harbour seals; depending on the day, up to a hundred of them gathered there to stretch and scratch, fan their flippers and yawn. Young ones flopped up out of the surf to join their mothers where they lay, some on their sides, some on their shimmering bellies. They shone like polished stones—dark spots on silver, pale spots on blackish-brown. A chain-link fence kept my kind from disturbing them. Time after time, I stood watching through the mesh for as long as my walking companions were willing to linger. It's as close as I come to worship—*Glory be to God for dappled things.*

They weren't the only marine mammals in plain sight. There were sea otters too, sweet-faced hunters gliding through kelp forests, keeping the voracious sea

urchins in check. After feeding, they wrap themselves in a frond or two to keep from drifting away while they nap. Sometimes they hold paws in their sleep so the current won't separate them. Mothers cradle their young on their chests; they've been known to carry a pup for days after it's died. I can't say if the one we got close to was a mother or not, only that it was on its own. As we strolled to the end of a breakwater near Fisherman's Wharf, it swam a lazy backstroke among the moored boats, a half-eaten sea urchin resting on the furry platter of its chest.

We heard sea lions barking from time to time, but it wasn't until we rented bikes and toured the scenic 17 Mile Drive that we caught sight of the creatures responsible for that jubilant sound. Hundreds of them were congregating just off shore, on and around the tiered island of Bird Rock. They're more adept on land than seals are—able to rear up and sway, to use their flippers as rudimentary feet—but it's in the water that they truly come into their own. The bay was alive with them: slick heads and flippers, golden backs and sides. In places they leapt clean out of the surf, their bodies so many drawn and quivering bows. Even from a distance it was thrilling. We humans have our outstanding specimens, but every sea lion is an athlete, an acrobat shaped to perfection by the chase—the silvery prey before it, the sharp-finned predator in its wake.

Days later, back at the breakwater where we'd watched the otter swim by, I met a large bull sea lion up close. Asleep on one of the big rocks shored up below the walkway, he posed no threat; even awake he couldn't have made the climb. He was close, though, very close. I could have laid on my belly and reached down to stroke him where he slept.

His pelt was the colour of kelp, a tribute to the gold-green giants that form those underwater groves. I tried not to disturb him, but he must have caught wind of my scent, or felt my shadow fall across his lovely fur. Class mammalia, fierce in battle, devoted to our dependent young. His eye was dark and depthless. When it opened to meet mine every nerve in my body caught fire.

BACK HOME IN TORONTO, I STOOD RESTLESSLY by the window, looking down on the snow-bound street. At length I abandoned the whited scene and begin trolling the bookcase, retrieving first *Cannery Row*, then *The Grapes of Wrath*. I turned to another of my favourite opening lines: "Cannery Row in Monterey in California is a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream." It's true. There's less of the stink and noise than there would have been in Steinbeck's day—before the place became a pretty portrait of itself—but the light and the tone and the poem are still there. Certainly the nostalgia and the dream. Thanks in no small part to the man who immortalized it, the row endures as the neighbouring ocean and its creatures do: in spite of human mismanagement and greed.

Setting the comedy aside, I cracked the tragedy, not at the first scene but at the last. Rose of Sharon's baby has been born lifeless. Somehow, despite all she's been through, she lies down beside the starving stranger and offers him the milk in her breast.

Suddenly there he was—not the Steinbeck who strode along that living shoreline and piloted that old camper and turned to earth in that unassuming plot; I'd never met him and I never would. The creature I was acquainted with—the *presence*—was where he'd always been: in the unabashed song of that beginning, in the profoundly mammalian moment of that end.

—Alissa York

LESSONS IN DEMOCRACY

The popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Iran, Libya, and Bahrain have justifiably captured the world's attention, but it is possible that the West's support and interest emanates partly from a conceit about our own democratic systems. *Look what's happening*, we say to ourselves as these events unfold, *they want to be like us*. We believe that today's Western democracies are the most open, transparent, and engaged systems of governance the world has ever seen. Why do

we think this? Well, we have hundreds of years of generally positive history and experience to draw on. We've created the ultimate democratic tool—the Internet—where little is sacred and all is available. We've made real progress in the rights of women and minorities. And even when our history and technology fail us, we have groups such as WikiLeaks prying in every corner of our governments' operations to expose malfeasance. It's easy, in other words, to become complacent, even smugly satisfied, with our democratic success.

The evidence, however, suggests our Western commitment to democratic principles is fading—and fast. For example, we have, in the United States, the Tea Party and Birther movements, which interpret democracy only in the narrowest of senses. In Canada, the Harper government's contempt for basic democratic processes deepens. Witness recent events such as scuppering parliamentary committees and overturning decisions made by supposedly arms-length government agencies, not to mention serial pro-gouging. All this highlights the fact that today's truly profound expressions of the democratic impulse seem to be occurring in places not previously known for their egalitarian ways. In fact, Canada's claims to high democratic ideals probably peaked a generation ago.

It took place in the fall of 1980 and winter of 1981, beginning with the publication of one of those notices that commonly appear in newspapers across the country: "Individuals and organizations are invited to forward written submissions, or requests to appear, to the Joint Clerks of the Special Joint Committee on the Constitution of Canada," it read, so as "to consider the document entitled 'Proposed Resolution for a Joint Address to Her Majesty the Queen respecting the Constitution of Canada.'"

In quality and quantity, the response to the Trudeau government's plan to patriate the constitution (until then a United Kingdom statute) surpassed all expectations. The Special Joint Committee of the Senate and House of Commons heard from legions of ordinary Canadians about what they'd like to see in a new home-grown founding