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Special reality: Malcolm Lowry's last notebook

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ABSTRACT

How does it feel to encounter a writer through his or her archive? In this piece of creative non-fiction, I explore my encounter with Malcolm Lowry through his archive at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver: specifically, through a set of love-notes written to his wife, Margerie Bonner, and through his 'Last Notebook', a tiny notebook kept during the Lowrys' trip to Northumberland and the Lake District in summer 1957, just weeks before Lowry's death. I reflect on the sense of connection across time created by this encounter with a writer's archive, and connect this to the way that Lowry himself explores the same sense of connection in his short story 'Strange Comfort Afforded by the Profession'. I consider what type of text a writer's notebook might be, particularly whether or not we might agree with Kirsty Gunn's claim that a writer's notebook is the 'most private' type of writing, and I reflect on what my own responses to Lowry's notes to Margerie and 'Last Notebook' might tell us about our relationship, as readers, to those writers who matter the most to us.

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> … according to the special reality of Sigbjørn's notebook at least …
>
> – Malcolm Lowry, 'Strange Comfort Afforded by the Profession' (1961, 110)[1]

Tuesday, 12th April 2022. It's the morning of my first full day in Vancouver – or, rather, on the campus of the University of British Columbia, where I'm staying, and which is all I've seen so far of the city. The previous evening, trying to get my bearings, I had walked across the whole UBC campus, across Marine Drive and down the steep wooden steps, built into the cliff-side among the tall pine trees, to Wreck Beach. The hiss of small waves breaking and the glitter of water through the trees gave me my first ever sight – and sound – of the Pacific, albeit the calm of Vancouver Bay, protected by the islands in the Strait of Georgia from the full fetch of the ocean. Perhaps ironically, given that I had come here to think about Lowry, the first writer who came to my mind when I saw the Pacific was Raymond Chandler. I remembered his beautiful, melancholy descriptions of the ocean at night, his private eye Philip Marlowe sitting alone in his car somewhere high above, looking out over the sea, hearing it, smelling it on the night air along with

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the smells of sage and manzanita and his cigarette. Thinking about whatever messy tangle he's trying to unravel this time, wishing maybe that the sea could wash everything clean.

Now, the next morning, I'm in the basement of the Irving K. Barber Learning Centre, which houses Rare Books & Special Collections and the UBC archives. I'm here initially to meet the senior archivist, Krisztina, before making my first foray into the Lowry archive itself. Krisztina greets me and takes me into a panelled room just off the main reading-room within Special Collections, so that we can talk – quietly – without disturbing the two or three researchers who are already working at the long tables. I tell her that I feel unsure what I'm doing here; I've never used a writer's archive before and, since I'm not doing archival research in any strict sense – I'm not trying to untangle the complicated genesis of any of Lowry's texts, or trace a particular passage back to its source in the drafts – I feel that perhaps I don't have any real right to be here. But Krisztina says she thinks it's better in some ways to come to an archive without a fixed purpose. People often come to archives looking for an answer to a specific question, she says, but archives don't necessarily work like that. She says it's better to allow the material to lead you, to allow it to suggest new questions, questions you didn't necessarily know you had.

I'm struck by her phrasing: *archives don't work like that*. That idea of things *working*, having an effect. I remember walking on the beach at Caldy, recalling Lowry's description of the same place, the way that (as I put it to myself) his words *began to work*, to imprint themselves on the landscape around me. And I think too of Lowry's description, in his famous letter to Jonathan Cape, of *Under the Volcano* as a machine, a kind of infernal system of causes and effects, symbols and coincidences, followed by his wry comment, 'And it works, too, believe me' (Lowry 1995, 506, Vol. I).[2]

*

The first thing that strikes me is that way that Special Collections is a kind of world to itself, ordered and controlled by its own careful formalities and procedures. Everything has to be checked into a locker, except my notebook (which however is weighed and a careful note made of the weight, so that it can be weighed again on the way out), my reading glasses and my phone. ID is required, so I have to hand over my passport, which is carefully locked into a small numbered compartment inside a desk drawer; in return, I'm given a small yellow card, with my name carefully printed on it, which sets out the various rights it confers and restrictions it imposes: *The University of British Columbia Library. Rare Books & Special Collections. University Archives. User Card. Valid for on-site use at the above locations only. Use of this card is subject to UBC Library Loan Regulations and University policies regarding use of information technology facilities. Non-transferable.*

Some of the other people working at the tables are surrounded by stacks of box files, but in the case of the Lowry holdings, because of their literary value, the material can only be brought out one folder at a time. So the librarian brings the first folder I had asked for, sets it on a large grey velvet mat on the table next to me, gets me to sign a small paper slip, and goes away again. I sit for a few minutes looking at the unopened folder – a plain ordinary manila one – slightly askance, not quite wanting to start. Not knowing what I'm looking for, or what I might find, or whether I'll find anything at all.

Feeling a little overwhelmed by the prospect of beginning with any of the manuscripts, not knowing how to approach this enormous mass of material (the inventory of the Lowry

holdings that Krisztina had emailed to me several months ago runs to 176 typewritten pages), I've decided to start with something personal: the 'Notes from Malcolm', as the holdings list calls them, amplifying: 'Notes, in essence love letters on small scraps of paper, written daily to Margerie'. According to the list there are seven folders of these notes, the one in front of me just the first. I open the folder and find plastic sheets holding, in heat-sealed pockets, little notes written in pencil on small pieces of coloured paper – yellow, green, blue, pink, brown, mostly the same size, about six inches by three, as though part of a pad of tear-off notes or a set of index cards. They're written using a private language of 'all the little animals', referring to Margerie as 'Miss Hartebeeste' or variations of it. Many of the notes feature comical-wry little poems:

> The day it is a monochrome
> The dawn it is invalid
> And there is oil upon the foam
> And I am feeling pallid[3]

Sometimes it's clear that the playful tone is an attempt to compensate for something, remorse following an argument or a piece of bad behaviour:

> The morning rain is raining
> A morning pain is paining
> The morning gull is cruising
> While this duck tries to sing
> Unlike the morning kettle
> Which is in chilly fettle
> Just like Popocatapetl

– and written down the right-hand side, 'Contrite poem of love to most loved Hartebeeste from certain loved ducks'.

A great many have the sketch-symbol for birds on them, rows of flying vs. And on the backs, the 'means of delivery', as though they were telegrams: *By the Harlequin Duck. By Tufted Puffin. By baby gull. By kingfisher. By vesper thrush. By evening robin. By loving Mrs Bufflehead. By six beautiful jays. By gleaming, good, gallant shearwater.* So many types of bird and creature invoked as messengers.

And so many – dozens, maybe hundreds – of these notes. They must have been written almost every day, and after the smallest, most fleeting separations – a trip to the store, a short walk on the beach. I find myself wondering how Margerie received these hundreds of little notes – whether the joke, the twee private language, wore thin? Whether she ever wrote any in response? (There are none here.) And although my first feeling is a kind of elation, the sheer extraordinary fact that I'm sitting here looking at Malcolm Lowry's own handwriting, I soon start to feel a little awkward and embarrassed, uncomfortable to be reading things very clearly not intended for anyone else's eyes (much like Lowry's writer-protagonist Sigbjørn Wilderness in 'Strange Comfort Afforded by the Profession', who, copying out the text of Shelley's marriage licence in Keats' house in Rome, comments in his notebook 'Sad – feel swine to look at such things' (Lowry 1961, 100)).

I return the folder with the notes (one folder out of seven was definitely enough) and ask for the next thing on my list, a notebook catalogued as 'Lake District, England – Lowry's "Last Notebook"' (I had been immediately drawn by the idea of a last notebook,

though at the same time puzzled by those scare quotes; is there, then, some question as to whether this really was his last notebook? Or some other reason for the quotation marks?) When the librarian brings the folder I think at first it must be empty, it seems to weigh nothing. I slide out the notebook and almost gasp at how tiny it is, how frail it seems. Again maybe six inches by three, a tiny red-covered pocket notebook, Atholl Series No. 311, ruled inside for accounts. I remember these red covers, the Atholl name, the stylised design meant to represent a wax seal; maybe they sold these notebooks in the village paper-shop when I was a child? On the back cover (which has become the front cover, because the writing starts from the back of the book) someone has indeed written, in pencil, in a large looping hand quite unlike Lowry's own, 'Last Notebook'.[4] (Later, having looked at the manuscript drafts, which often feature editorial exchanges between Malcolm and Margerie scribbled in the margins, I'm able to recognise this looping handwriting as Margerie's.)

Immediately, instantly, this feels different from the notes to 'Miss Hartebeeste'. Turning over the tiny pages, deciphering the tiny pencilled handwriting, I recognise the same sort of mixture of things that I might write in one of my notebooks – visual notes, observations of a place, scraps of overheard conversation ('Who telled thee twas the last train to Newcastle?'), the text of advertising signs ('Invest in safety with the Abbey National', 'Virol Growing Boys Love'), two full pages of geological description obviously copied out from a book. And thoughts, reflections: one page begins with the comment 'Importance for a writer, once having learned something, to repossess the position of his own former ignorance'.

Holding this tiny notebook, I feel a tightening in my chest. The *special reality*, as Lowry puts it in 'Strange Comfort', of the writer's notebook. The – I want to say the sacredness of it. And the fact that this one was written in, and about, places that I know – Northumberland, Newcastle, Carlisle, the Lake District. And the dates – early June 1957. Just three weeks before he died, back in Ripe, in Sussex, on the night of 26th–27th June. This is the diary of the last trip the Lowrys ever made.

> Sunday, June 2nd.
>
> Much mist, lake with much mist rising from it, like steam from cauldron: cool, promised to be fine day. We walked along edge of Grasmere, to Rydal Water. Afternoon fine and hot, rowed Margie to island – difficulties of aluminium boat.
>
> On island
>
> Wonderful springy soft turf. With wild thyme, buttercups & daisies. Stone sheets where W. wrote poem. Ecstatically happy afternoon.

A vertiginous feeling. I write in my notebook:

> – This is so beautiful. (& the strangeness that I am copying out in pencil, in my notebook – thank goodness they allowed me to bring it into the archive – what he wrote in pencil in *his* tiny notebook.

Ecstatically happy afternoon. I'm close to tears, reading these words, thinking: how can this be just three weeks before he died? And I feel glad – ridiculously, pointlessly glad – about this happy afternoon. But reading the account of the next day, I'm struck by the ominous repetition of a particular phrase:

> M flings herself down, then up came an uneasy wind, & that's when the weather changed.
>
> First like a cold breath coming up from the depths of the ravine & the waterfall; cold currents of air that have nothing to do with the day or the weather.
>
> The weather had changed

The last phrase underlined, a single long pencil stroke the width of the notebook page. And I begin to notice these underlinings, scattered throughout the book, places where something deeper seems to break up to the surface, Lowry's own fears, his seeing of symbols. At the beginning of the book, there's a summary of a day-trip to the Farne Islands off the coast of Northumberland on Ascension Day (30th May):

> descending vertiginous steps backwards perpendicularly on a windy breakwater into a pitching boat; getting out of the same boat onto slippery rocks […] then the same thing on another island where you fall flat, but by the grace of St Cuthbert are not hurt; and then slipping in oil on the return trip: – importance of all these things in a day: [?]. Joy of the day modified by a sort of terror at the prospect of these occurrences.

This feels so characteristically Lowryan, the real (and beautifully described) landscape becoming at the same time symbolic or even allegorical territory, the single day becoming (as in *Under the Volcano*) itself a kind of spatiotemporal territory to be navigated (successfully or not), a space of symbols and portents generating a state of mind precariously combining both the heights and the depths of emotion, joy in the moment admixed with terror at what may be to come.

Almost at the end of the notebook, on the last page of notes on the trip, another piece of underlining jumps out at me:

> Thursday June 6 – set off to Rydal Water, crossed the little bridge, by this time our little bridge, came out to a clear space of meadows (& such) running up to the sun.
>
> It was a fresh day of cool showers & spots of sun & we didn't wear our macks. Wore jackets, woollies.
>
> A walk of rhododendrons: wild lilac coloured rhododendrons but in various gardens […] were rhododendrons of palest shell pink & sparkling snow white & crimson rose-pink (M thought) & some odd small ones of a strange salmon pink
>
> But finding it hard to see anywhere to live

I sit, staring at this phrase with its emphatic underlining. There's an obvious surface reading: that the Lowrys had conceived the idea of trying to move from Sussex to the Lake District – drawn no doubt by the way it reminded them of Dollarton. But it's impossible not to read it – or we might say re-read it, from the privileged position of hindsight, the knowledge that this was written less than a month before Malcolm's death – on a deeper level too, as an echo of Jacques' reflections in the first chapter of *Under the Volcano* as he walks alone round Quahnahuac on the night before he's supposed to leave:

> A sense of fear had possessed him again, a sense of being, after all these years, and on his last day here, still a stranger. Four years, almost five, and he still felt like a wanderer on another planet. (Lowry [1947] 1962, 15)

In *Forests of Symbols*, his study of Lowry's work, Patrick McCarthy quotes Zachary Leader's remark 'Writing asks of writers, even those who feel most alienated, that they be at home in the world, by which is meant using and shaping it, as well as recognising its otherness and integrity' – and comments in response 'It is hard to imagine anyone describing Malcolm Lowry as "at home in the world"' (McCarthy 2016, 213). This seems both essential and true, in terms of understanding Lowry. It's evidenced everywhere, by everything – the biographical facts of his life, the novels and poems and stories he wrote or tried to write. But there's something deeply moving, almost physically painful (the tightening in my chest, the feeling that comes before tears), in seeing it underlined – literally – in this single sentence, handwritten in pencil, in this tiny notebook, the centre pages falling out from the rusted staples, this line written just weeks before Lowry's death. I sit for a long time just holding the tiny book in my hands, staring at the handwritten words, the long heavy underline, imagining the movement of his hand, the weight of it on the page – *this*, I'm writing this down, remember this. I've only been in Vancouver for one day, I haven't yet seen Dollarton or Stanley Park – I've barely even left the UBC campus. But already it feels to me that – as Krisztina said could happen – this archive has led me somewhere unexpected. Already, I feel that I've come closer to Malcolm Lowry than I ever imagined I could.

*

Is it private, a writer's notebook? Kirsty Gunn, in *My Katherine Mansfield Project*, suggests that not only are notebooks private, they are *more* so than other types of writing, even the ones we would typically think of as private: 'Notebooks must contain the most private kind of writing. More secret by far than a journal, or even a diary with its rules laid down to record the business of the day.' What gets written in a notebook, she goes on to argue, is private or secret because of its uncertainty, its provisionality: 'Notebooks are tenuous, uncertain. They are ideas scribbled down in haste, beginnings, questions, and quotations that speak from one writer to another' (Gunn 2015, 110).

A writer's notebook certainly feels like something not intended to be seen – the 'wrong side', as it were, of the tapestry that might later be woven from the notebook's fragments. Part of the poignancy of the Lake District notebook, of course, comes from the fact that no published, or even formed, texts, *would* emerge from it, because Lowry died; it remains a text that only *has* a 'wrong side'. But I'm interested by the difference in my response, first to the notes to Margerie, then to the notebook. Reading the notes I felt voyeuristic and vaguely embarrassed – both on my own account and on Malcolm's. Because it seemed such a private thing, that whole running joke (or, after a while, not-joke) about the little animals, El Leon and Miss Hartebeeste. It was a means of keeping their intimacy and their relationship functioning. And not only were none of those notes or jingles intended for anyone else to read, I began to feel that I didn't want to read them, because the intimacies and intricacies of Malcolm and Margerie's relationship were nothing to do with me and – I realised – not what I was interested in exploring.

The notebook felt totally different, even though that too wasn't intended for anyone else to read. (In *Dust*, Carolyn Steedman suggests that this is true by definition, on one level, of anything read in an archive: 'the Historian who goes to the Archive must always be an unintended reader, will always read that which was never intended for his or her eyes' (Steedman 2001, 75). But that 'not intended for anyone else' – it seems,

in the case of the notebook, to be something quite different from the case of the love-notes. It isn't a case of privacy between two people. And it isn't, as it were, emanating from the person as someone in a relationship, but *as a writer*. It's the way a writer encounters the world, in all its apparent randomness and mixture and shifts. This tiny 'Last Notebook' displays so perfectly, and in such microcosm, the way that a writer operates, that way that he or she navigates the world and experience and thought and memory. And dream. And fear. *The weather had changed*.

And it didn't feel voyeuristic to look at it, because I felt that I *understood* it, I understood exactly why he had made the notes and observations that he had, and I imagined myself showing him some of my notebooks and saying 'See – just the same'. It made me feel that we shared something. Even perhaps that it might have been some comfort to him to see that.

*

This idea, of a kind of comfort through a sense of connection across time, is precisely the topic of Lowry's story 'Strange Comfort Afforded by the Profession', in which his protagonist Sigbjørn Wilderness (cursorily described as 'an American writer in Rome on a Guggenheim Fellowship' (Lowry 1961, 99)) sits in a bar re-reading his own notebooks and reflecting on the 'special reality' they create, by virtue of their unintended juxtapositions, echoes and ironies. Wilderness has just come from visiting the house where Keats died, painstakingly copying out letters from Keats' friend and physician Severn describing the poet's suffering and eventual death ('the following lines had been crossed out by Severn but Sigbjørn ruthlessly wrote them down just the same: *for his knowledge of internal anatomy enables him to judge of any change accurately and largely adds to his torture*' (Lowry 1961, 101)). In his notebook, he finds an account of his visit to Poe's house in Richmond, Virginia, two years before, including a fragment from a similarly anguished letter:

> Excerpt from a letter by Poe – after having been dismissed from West Point – to his foster father. Feb. 21, 1831.
>
> 'It will however be the last time I ever trouble any human being – I feel I am on a sick bed from which I shall never get up.'
>
> Sigbjørn calculated with a pang that Poe must have written these words almost seven years to the day after Keats's death, then, that far from never having got up from his sick bed, he had risen from it to change, thanks to Baudelaire, the whole course of European literature … (Lowry 1961, 106)

Reflecting on the awful sense of exposure, of vulnerability, created by the experience of seeing these letters and personal effects on display (and how much of Lowry's own vulnerabilities, his complex relationship with his own father, his mingled sense of guilt and pride in relation to his writing, can be seen in this passage!), Sigbjørn thinks:

> Ah ha, now he thought he had it: did not the preservation of such relics betoken – beyond the filing cabinet of the malicious foster father who wanted to catch one out – less an obscure revenge for the poet's nonconformity, than for his magical monopoly, his possession of words? (Lowry 1961, 108)

Considering whether he might attempt to use his Guggenheim Fellowship to write something comparing Keats and Poe ('But compare in what sense, Keats, with what, in what sense, with Poe?' (Lowry 1961, 108)), he experiences something of an epiphany:

> Probably there was a good idea somewhere, lurking among these arrant self-contradictions; pity could not keep him from using it, nor a certain sense of horror that he felt all over again that these mummified and naked cries of agony should lie thus exposed to human view in permanent incorruption, as if embalmed evermore in their separate eternal funeral parlors: separate, yet not separate, for was it not as if Poe's cry from Baltimore, in a mysterious manner, in the manner that the octet of a sonnet, say, is answered by its sestet, had already been answered, seven years before, by Keats's cry from Rome; so that according to the special reality of Sigbjørn's notebook at least, Poe's own death appeared like something extraformal, almost extraprofessional, an afterthought. Yet inerrably it was part of the same poem, the same story. (Lowry 1961, 109–10)

Pulling from his pocket a different notebook, Sigbjørn finds the scribbled draft of one of his own letters, dating from (he recognises) 'absolutely the lowest ebb of those low tides of his life' (Lowry 1961, 111), the whole letter a desperate cry for help: 'Literally I am dying in this macabre hole and I appeal to you to send me, out of the money that is after all mine, enough that I may return. Surely I am not the only writer, there have been others in history whose ways have been misconstrued and who have failed … who have won through … ' (Lowry 1961, 112).[5]

As the story ends, Sigbjørn finishes rereading the letter, finishes his drink ('his fifth unregenerate grappa' (Lowry 1961, 113)), and manages a laugh – 'loud', Lowry says, leaving us to imagine for ourselves the mixture of bitterness and triumph, despair and hope, that the laugh must contain – the 'strange comfort', the only comfort, that the writer can take from seeing himself as part of the long history of writers and their struggles, his own life becoming part of 'the same poem, the same story'.

*

At one point in 'Strange Comfort', Lowry describes the vertiginous effect produced in Sigbjørn by his rereading of his notebooks:

> First, he was conscious of himself reading them here in this Roman bar, then of himself in the Valentine Museum in Richmond, Virginia, reading the letters through the glass case and copying fragments from these down, then of poor Poe sitting blackly somewhere writing them. Beyond this was the vision of Poe's foster father likewise reading some of these letters, for all he knew unheedingly, yet solemnly putting them away for what turned out to be posterity … (Lowry 1961, 106–107)

And at the end, after reading his own letter, he reflects with grim humour: 'what if they had found this letter – whoever "they" were – and put it, glass-encased, in a museum among *his* relics? Not much – still, you never knew!' (Lowry 1961, 112)

For me, sitting in the Special Collections room at UBC, looking down at Lowry's own handwriting covering the pages, the feeling is equally vertiginous. I'm now caught up in this endless chain, I'm part of the story, and I can feel too this seesawing emotional response. I want to reach out across time, to say to Lowry: yes, I am here reading your private notes to Margerie, and I do feel a swine to be looking at such things; but also, look, here are your texts, your drafts, your manuscripts, your notebooks, your letters, and they're here because they matter to people, to readers, to other writers; they're here because you did – in a way – win through …

'His notebooks', Sigbjørn reflects, 'tended to consume themselves at both ends' – and the tiny red notebook does indeed start at the back and upside down. Perhaps this itself

reflects the writer's sense of never quite doing the thing he was meant to do – he isn't using this notebook, neatly lined and ruled for accounts, for the purpose it was intended for, rather for the accumulation of these scraps of thought and observation and overheard speech and sudden flash of ideas; so why not indeed start at the back and upside down?

And it strikes me that the difference in my response, first to the love-notes, then to the notebook, goes some way to clarifying something in relation to the question of what I might be looking for – of what, for me, this relationship with a dead writer is about. It moves me to see, in his tiny cramped handwriting, in pencil (both more immediate, and also more provisional, than ink), Lowry's thoughts and notes, his reflections and observations – his simply going about the work of a writer, even if he had no sense at the time of where any of it might end up or whether it could or would lead anywhere. It's the writer's driving need to make meaning, to make a pattern, and therefore to go on recording, observing, writing things down, to note down whatever strikes you, in the hope that somehow, at some point, a meaning, a pattern, will emerge (as W.G. Sebald puts it, the writer's task, or compulsion, is that of 'making something out of nothing' (quoted in Joseph Cuomo, 2010, 93–117, 99)[6]). It's the not-knowing, the vulnerability of it, that is so moving – and in a way that, to me, Malcolm's painstaking construction of a childlike world of 'little animals' and personas, in his notes to Margerie, is not, because that doesn't go any further than the two of them, it's really nothing to do with me at all.

It's this vulnerability, this not-knowing, that Lowry seems to be addressing in the comments on the second page of the notebook:

> Importance for a writer, once having learned something, to repossess the position of his own former ignorance: the impressions life makes on the uninstructed consciousness, viz upon one's ignorance, may have a poetic truth in the presentation they will lose as one acquires more knowledge, because the knowledge is likely to be corrupted by misinformation (amid the knowledge), whereas the ignorance is relatively pure, may indeed be near to a sort of absolute. (in my case)

And it's connected too to what Krisztina said to me before I went into the archive – the importance of remaining open to where the archive itself might lead you, the way it might throw up new questions, or show you answers to questions you didn't even know you had.

In a perfect demonstration of the 'special reality' of a writer's notebook, the jumps and juxtapositions it makes, this reflective passage is immediately followed by a beautiful piece of direct observation and lyrical description:

> Chapel of St Cuthbert. Lunch among the sea-pinks over an abyss with rocketing cormorants and shags, walking over a soft carpet of silverweed with their gold buttercup flowers where eiderducks brooded in soft nests made of their own down.

On one level, this could be seen as a traveller, a tourist, simply making a record of a specific place, a specific moment. But it's not just that. It's also a writer working at the language, working to find the words to convey (accurately but also surprisingly, unexpectedly, movingly, memorably) what he is looking at, what he is thinking and feeling – we see it in that brilliant verb *rocketing*. And we see it in that last description of the eiderducks, brooding 'in soft nests made of their own down'. The sonic and visual patterning in the two pairs of words here – *soft nests*, *own down* – creates a sense of closeness, of gentle

cradling; and if we read this with an eye, or an ear, to the bigger picture, and especially to Lowry's sadness at having left Dollarton, his sense of displacement (*but finding it hard to see anywhere to live*), there's a poignancy, and an irony, in the image of the ducks, able – unlike humans – to make their homes, their comfort and protection, from their own bodies.

This sense of a writer *working*, even in the smallest scrap of description, seems to me to pull, in some ways, against the belief that a writer's notebook is private or secret, not intended to be seen. Certainly, a notebook is not intended to form a coherent or continuous text; in that sense, it isn't intended to be read. But the observations, the pieces of description, the bits of dialogue or even the thoughts that a writer writes in a notebook are always in a sense pitched towards a future reader – they are always potential material for some later text that *is* intended to be seen, to be read. (In 'Strange Comfort', Lowry makes the same observation about a writer's letters, in this case Poe's: ' … these letters which, whatever they might not be, were certainly – he thought again – intended to be private. But were they indeed? Even here at this extremity Poe must have felt that he was transcribing the story that was E.A. Poe' (Lowry 1961, 107)). The vulnerability lies in the fact that the writer, writing something down in his (or her) notebook, may well have no idea what that future text could look like, or whether there will be a future text at all. And yet he goes on writing things down, trusting, or trying to trust, that something will come of it, because it's what he does, it's his way of being in the world.

At one point in the notebook, on an undated page, Lowry makes the following observation:

> Impression that objects are trying to communicate to you with love:
>
> beyond limitations of country & time
>
> the pier in Grasmere trying to look like Dollarton
>
> the island ditto
>
> the buoy 'marker' [?] trying to look like the head of a seal

This comment speaks to so much that was so important to Lowry. It's a heartbreaking testament to how much he missed Dollarton and his and Margerie's home there. It shows his deeply felt response to place, to the world around him – extending even to what we might conventionally think of as inanimate objects, which nonetheless have the power to move us, to hold meanings for us, and which perhaps Lowry sometimes did think of as enjoying their own form of consciousness; in a letter to his editor Albert Erskine, he writes of their hand-built pier: 'The pier is the most sentient object of my acquaintance […] It is capable of crying and singing and also of considerable anger and I have also fancied on occasion that it was talking to itself, doubtless composing a subaqueous barnacly sort of poem' (1996, 146, Vol. II).[7] It harks back to his sense of communion with the wild creatures – and in this, it makes me think a little differently about the love-notes to 'Miss Hartebeeste', the notes that he imagined being sent by the various birds and animals that lived around them ('delivered by Sealogram', I remember being one of the recurring puns). Perhaps, too focused on what I had seen as their rather cloying private language, their clumsy-seeming attempts to re-woo Margerie after a quarrel or a bad mood, I'd overlooked the way in which they too draw on a genuine sense of the

natural world as full of communication, as even full of love – beyond limitations of species, perhaps, as well as of 'country & time'.

And perhaps in a way this perception, or impression, of objects in the world as fundamentally benevolent, even loving, and as offering a kind of communication, if we could only hear it, goes some way to countering the sense of Lowry as someone who never was 'at home' in the world – or if not countering it, at least showing its other side. Lowry was someone who responded deeply, we might think sometimes hypertrophically or even pathologically, to the world around him. The 'Last Notebook', in the 'special reality' of its tiny pages, shows us both sides of this deep responding: the joy and the terror, the ecstatically happy afternoon and the fear that the weather has changed. Much like the first chapter of *Under the Volcano*, which we can only read (or re-read) in the shadow of the Consul's and Yvonne's deaths, so too this notebook can only be read, or re-read, shadowed by our knowledge of Lowry's death a bare three weeks later.

On a walk to Rydal Water, the Lowrys come across a memorial bench, and Malcolm records the inscription:

> In Loving Memory of
> Mary [D—— ?] Wood
> Passed from this life
> September 30th 1953
>
> She Loved the Birds & Green Places,
> And the Wind on the Heath, and Saw
> The Brightness of the Skirts of God.

He comments: 'A fine idea: a bench, instead of a tombstone.' The next line, written faintly and loosely on the page, as though to suggest that even in writing it down, trying it out, he is at the same time *not* writing it down, refusing to take it quite seriously, amid all this beauty and wonder, reads: *All ye who sit here think of Malcolm L*.

I close the tiny red notebook, sit holding it for a few minutes more before sliding it carefully back into its plain manila folder and returning it to the librarian behind the glass counter. I hand over my notebook to be weighed again; proving satisfactory (the weight entered carefully in pencil on the sheet), it's returned to me, together with my passport. I collect my belongings from the locker and head up the stairs and out through the big wooden doors, into the British Columbian spring day.

Notes

1. All quotations from works by Malcolm Lowry, including unpublished material, reproduced by kind permission of SLL/Sterling Lord Literistic, Inc.
2. Malcolm Lowry, letter to Jonathan Cape, 2 January 1946.
3. Malcolm Lowry Fonds, Rare Books and Special Collections, University of British Columbia; Box 53, Folder 1. All quotations from the 'Notes from Malcolm' are from the same folder.
4. Malcolm Lowry Fonds, Rare Books and Special Collections, University of British Columbia; Box 7, Folder 14 ('Lake District, England: Lowry's "Last Notebook"'). In my quotations from this notebook, question marks inside square brackets indicate places where I was unable to read Lowry's handwriting. My underlining preserves Lowry's own underlining.
5. The letter is supposedly written to 'a Los Angeles lawyer', whom Sigbjørn's family have appointed to keep him out of trouble, who controls his access to money and who has sent him to live with 'a religious-minded family' in Seattle. Sherrill Grace, the editor of Lowry's

Collected Letters, discusses this letter in her essay '"The Daily Crucifixion of the Post": Editing and Theorizing the Lowry Letters' (2009, 70–90, see 77–78). As she says, it seems highly likely that this fictional letter is a reworked version of a letter written by Lowry himself some time in 1939 to the Los Angeles lawyer Benjamin Parks (like Grace, 'I smell a *real* letter here' [2009, 77]). Lowry's father had appointed Parks to keep Malcolm out of trouble, and Parks had sent him to stay at the Vancouver home of a businessman, A.B. Carey, while also keeping tight control of Malcolm's access to money. Desperate to escape from this stranglehold, Lowry wrote anguished letters about the situation throughout 1939 and 1940, including many to Margerie Bonner (who would become his second wife) and to his mentor Conrad Aiken. The Collected Letters does include a number of letters from Lowry to Parks, but none that looks like an 'original' for this letter in 'Strange Comfort'. Grace notes that most of Parks' files from this period were destroyed 'to increase office space' (1995, Vol. I, 205), so this putative letter from Lowry – if it existed, if it was sent – may have been among them. In her introduction to the Collected Letters, and in her essay '"The Daily Crucifixion of the Post"', Grace analyses the complex ways in which letters, for Lowry, crossed generic boundaries, arguing that there can be 'no absolute difference between the Lowry letter and the Lowry fiction' (2009, 70–71). I am grateful to Sherrill for email discussion of the conundrum of this letter and for pointing me in the direction of her essay.

6. 'This preoccupation with making something out of nothing, which is, after all, what writing is about'.
7. Malcolm Lowry, letter to Albert Erskine, 5 March 1949.

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