



ARITHA VAN HERK

## RUNNING [FROM] THE FAMILY TOWARD STORY

### Abstract

“During certain hours, at certain years in our lives, we see ourselves as remnants from the earlier generations that were destroyed” (Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family*, 179).

This meditation on the contingencies of autobiography and biography employs Susanna Egon and Paul Eakin to unpack the covert trajectory within every family memoir. Using Michael Ondaatje’s fragmented and intensely erotic autobiography, *Running in the Family*, to frame the generative chaos of inheritance and genealogy, this textual bricolage seeks to subvert the aphoristic essentialism of stories familial and historical. Exploring a parental tale as mirror to Ondaatje’s search for his father, this ficto-critical self-portrait examines the hybrid and speculative story of the immigrant, migrant, and displaced family in transition and translation.

The ineluctable curse of running within the family while running from the family, avoiding the family even while the story yearns for the family, leads directly to autobiography as fictional exploration. The fiction of the self seeks to translate the peripheral into the tangible. In the course of that metaphrase, the subject examines her own indeterminate site, the shadow source of absence, and the temptations of forgery. Like Ondaatje in *Running in the Family*, this search for ways to translate a “father” from remnant into chronicle engages with the mystery of bloodline, and how inheritance blurs the clean lines of record. It examines how autobiography becomes less than confession and more than experience, hyperbolized life and altered self-portrait, profile and sketch, archive more than monograph, allegory rather than apologue, slippage and self-delusion. The family as a site of indeterminacy transcends the conventions of both auto and biographical to shadow its own future.

### Key words

*Michael Ondaatje; autobiography; biography; bricolage; Dutch; family; fiction; ficto-criticism; forgery; genre; genealogy; immigration; migration; The Netherlands; rumour; textuality*

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In Michael Ondaatje's iconic escapade, *Running in the Family*, the family becomes the site of an autobiographical excursion both fanciful and intensely erotic. In that text's wonderful improvisation, Ondaatje offers a model for biography and its paradoxical relation to the autograph. He approaches the story of self and family aslant, through escape, flight, creative intervention and evasion. Such subterfuge proves useful, in that one is not really writing biography or autobiography, merely shuffling through snapshots of the past in search of answers to a few unasked questions. Ondaatje names the space "a dark room where I listen and wait" (Ondaatje 1985: 203), and there, in a limbo-like hiatus as timeless as the monsoon, he articulates his love and solace.

Once in a while, when I am deliberately looking the other way, I catch myself making notes toward an invented autobiography, a scribble of words that will illuminate my own inheritance. I veer away from the temptation as much as possible; I am a latecomer, a trespasser in the lives of my parents. I do not believe that I have the right to appropriate their particular sufferings or triumphs. But their story becomes every day inescapable, a part of my own story.

There is certainly a point when we understand that the process of self-discovery is "finally inseparable from the art of self-invention" (Eakin 1985: 55). And so I biographize the fiction of my living. "Life" is too complete, too much entire. Living, this fabrication-embroidery becomes an excursion toward the possible over the permissible, a gloss for the unavoidable, a confession of the dissatisfaction of all who seek to outrun the affliction of inheritance.

I am both kin and offspring, one of a clan and class, article and extract. We cannot disentangle ourselves from family and yet that family is unbearable, a crucible of yearning and rejection. My family is a sprawling, confused site, stretched in too many directions, fiercely contentious, argumentative and dodgy, hard workers and secretive lovers. We refuse to disclose our vulnerabilities to one another, insist on a pragmatic face-forward, all of us dressed in what we have become. We run from the family we were, avoid the family we are. And then are brought up short, reminded of the knots that bind us to this tribe, the claim of consanguinity.

"Let us grant the very concept of the self as a fiction, let us speak in the French way of textuality of the self. After such knowledge, why do authors still indulge in, and readers still consent to, a fiction of this kind?" (Eakin 1985: 27). The answer to that question is present in its asking: because it circles an eternal fascination, that of origins and antecedents and their repetitions. We believe, vainly and with incredible optimism, that we will be able to discover both a cause and a cure for the family that possesses us. The autobiography as flight is not a fiction.

Predestination is one of my familial conditions, impossible to describe and impossible to escape, an ordinance and a plan, although imperceptible enough. A Calvinist impetus stalks my inventions, the textuality of the family I run from. I wish that we were Catholics, savouring lit candles and confession, able to play whist and crib, to dance and to take a drink. But despite a leavening of Huguenot French and Jewish blood, we are behavioural Calvinists, adamantly so.

My father was a Calvinist. Opaquely, I suspect, although he lived devoutly enough. Claimed to believe in predestination, and then figured out that fate was measured by the work he did.

He died, not suddenly or unexpectedly, but in his own time, frustrated with his body's limitations and ready for a sleep deeper than the restless naps he found himself inhabiting. Since then, I practice inventing him, write for him character traits and qualities. I spy on him, unroll scenes that I scrutinize for motives. He has become the subject of my scrutiny, as if I can supply evidence of who he was after the fact. I am shamed by my voyeurism. I cannot reconcile my own after-the-fact interest with my resistance to him in person.

Here merges the fiction of evidence and the tenacity of invention. Susanna Egan (1999: 84) observes:

Literary autobiography is a shape-shifter, a chameleon, blending and distorting genres in response to the pressures of life circumstances. It raises questions about the role of life in the rendering of art [...]. Just as such writing implicates the reader in pursuit of the subject through its camouflage and hiding places, so too it implicates the reader in its generic permutations. Disrupting the contractual obligations of genre disrupts both expectations and satisfactions, enforcing an intense level of interpretive participation in the autobiographical act. Furthermore, as writers reflect the conditions of their relatively uncharted experience, they foreground their processes of artistic construction, as if to guide their readers through the quicksands of interpretation [...]. Given the complexities of these transitions, the subject emerges as the result of generic negotiations, responding to particular difficulties, permeable, unstable, essentially in distress.

Distress is its own impetus. Distress and desire live under the same roof.

I try to imagine the many rooms and beds my father slept in before he transplanted himself across the ocean from Europe to Canada. I try to imagine him waking, twelve years old, within his growing body, to the touch of the blankets on his skin, and how he would have stretched his limbs toward the corners of the bed.

Those questions I am not able to ask him. Did he sleep alone, or did he share a bed with one of his brothers? Was he often tired, or did he wake full of anticipation? What was it like, to sleep in a horsehair bed in a farmhouse in South Holland in the 1920s?

I look for his story about sleep, his habits of sleep, as if they will inform my own sleeplessness.

He cherished dawn, its crisp intensity, stillness that hung over the damp grass, the clear, sweet-smelling air. He was up before any of us, striding through the pasture in his boots. He practiced a solitude difficult to interrupt, strangely intense. I watch that now, in the past tense, his turned-away expression, as if he

were watching a different story than we were, or as if he knew where the story mattered, while we had barged into the middle.

De Man (2001: 920) can rage about the implied diegesis of referentiality about “autobiography as de-facement,” as if it were a closed system. Where, I keep wondering, is the theory for autobiography as peripheral glimpse, indecipherable and unrecoverable? Too much time is wasted on the trap of “authenticity” and its addiction to self-justification.

It is May. There is snow on the ground. This is Canada, after all, and in the high country of the foreland thrust sheets, the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, I have seen snow in every month, including July and August. Snow is a fact of weather. Snow declares the alliteration of winter, waiting around the corner of every motive. Snow covers the tracks of the past.

I approach family with melancholy alertness, a wariness that borders on anxiety. The family I was born into was too close, too insular, difficult to breathe in. We closed ranks to protect ourselves against the possibility of interruption. We were not frightened, but we were ready for a siege, poised always on the edge of that circle.

Michael Ondaatje begins his search for his father with “the bright bone of a dream I could hardly hold onto. I was sleeping at a friend’s house. I saw my father, chaotic, surrounded by dogs, and all of them were screaming and barking into the tropical landscape” (Ondaatje 1982: 21).

Dogs believed my father. He told them their names and they tilted their ears and laughed the laugh of attentive canines. He called them, and they ran to him, eager to work. My father woke the dogs and they got up with him, confident that he raised the day. My father never bathed a dog in his life. He did pull porcupine quills from their snouts with a pair of pliers. It was a necessary kindness, fierce pain with no pampering.

Ondaatje names the action of his journey back to Asia, his family and his childhood, as “running” (Ondaatje 1982: 22). The pun is obvious, what runs in any family is relational. What runs in my family? Caution, reticence, a covert anxiety about what we have become or what we narrowly avoided becoming. We run from that terrifying insight. Some of my siblings take refuge in religion. We all take refuge in work. We are hybridized Calvinists. Our passion for work puzzles easy-going Canadians. Our citizenship is of a different genre, which has to do with running from escape.

My father invented an alternate geography to the one where he was born. He lurked as a farmer in Holland until he could escape, at 34, and begin all over again. He wiped his past as clean as a slate, and did not recount enough of that past for us to recover more than a few names and places. We were given mere fragments, scraps that even a dog would not rouse itself to snap at.

On his quest for his father, sitting in the old governor’s home in Jaffna, Ondaatje tells the reader: “When the Dutch first built this house egg white was used to paint the walls” (Ondaatje 1982: 24). Egg white. I imagine a busty house-frau, separating yolks from whites, careful not to let one part of the egg touch the other. Only

the Dutch would be so obsessive. More likely a platoon of servants painted those walls with egg white.

I could use an aunt like Ondaatje's Aunt Phyllis, an aunt to translate my father to me. Ondaatje confesses that he is "especially fond of her because she was always close to my father" (Ondaatje 1982: 25). But my Dutch aunts, with whom I've tried to connect, are more puzzled by my father than I am. They claim him as a brother who departed long ago, left them to perform their parts in the family's three-ring circus, but they hesitate about any designation more precise. He was *koppig*, stubborn, they assert, but then stop, shyly, not even certain enough to apply that word to the man he became. They treat me like a kidnapper, one of the reasons that my father was stolen from them, although I was not born until fifteen years later.

The Dutch. Good for paintings, cleanliness, and water control. Otherwise, dismissible, available for the contemptuous disdain of those who think of the Dutch as too white and too secure. A student once told me that my Dutch Calvinist inheritance gave me an unfair advantage over others and that I ought to recuse myself from writing or work. Having a Dutch Calvinist background an advantage. I was thunderstruck, my surprise turning me into cold silence. The misery my family had endured an advantage? Here was the judgmental side of spoiled Canadiana, the hierarchies of disadvantage.

Silence. My father was a silent man. He said very little. He practiced silence, and he relied on strength over speech.

When Ondaatje's father is confronted by his enraged family about his Cambridge deception (he had sailed from Ceylon to England, took his entrance exams for Cambridge but failed to pass, and then lived for two and a half years off their money there, while they believed that he was a legitimate student), he takes refuge in silence. "My father [had a] useful habit of retreating into almost total silence, of never trying to justify any of his crimes, so that it was difficult to argue with him" (Ondaatje 1982: 32). How to argue with disagreement: silence. "To the extent that language is a figure (or metaphor, or prosopopeia) it is indeed not the thing itself but the representation, the picture of the thing and, as such, it is silent, mute as pictures are mute. Language, as a trope, is always privative [...]. To the extent that, in writing, we are dependent on this language we all are [...] eternally deprived of voice and condemned to muteness" (de Man 2010: 930).

My father and his father did not speak to one another for fifteen years. The silence between them was as thick as Canadian cold. My grandfather was convinced that my father, by immigrating to this country of snow, was wilfully going to hell, and so he damned him to hell. They stood mute on either side of the Atlantic. But my cousin, years later, told me that on the day that my father left for Canada, she saw our grandfather crying, his head on his arms behind the barn, great muffled sobs that terrified her.

In *Running in the Family* Ondaatje's father becomes engaged to his mother as a means of deflecting criticism. This is a story that I would like to invent about my own parents, but they had no engagement. They appear to have had a loose agree-

ment, where my father visited my mother (“I could hear his *klompen*, outside on the road,” she said, “long after dark. He was always late”). They probably saw one another in church. They went on a couple of bike outings; one photograph shows them lined up with friends in a garden setting. My father, who stands off to the side, although beside my mother, is loose-limbed and relaxed but alert to the treachery of leisure. He is a workingman dressed for a brief holiday. He looks – unsettled.

Was there any rumour of a happy ending for him?

*Dienst.* Army service. All young men were required to register for military service in the Netherlands. My father was in the army from 1935–1938. I am guessing about those dates although there must be records. He came out of *dienst* and began farming with his father, courted my mother with a desultory patience. As a member of the reserves, he was one of those 100,000 men mobilized in April of 1939, although no one in the Netherlands wanted to stare at war with Germany. Until Hitler invaded the Netherlands, Slag om Nederland (the Battle of the Netherlands) begun on May 10, 1940. It was a five-day war, tanks against bicycles. The outcome was inevitable. History records it all in books.

My father read with a studious intensity that combined respect with a tentative suspicion of books. He read as carefully as if words would spring up to trap him when he hesitated. He did not as Ondaatje’s carelessly rich family did, “read books on the moonlight porch, slicing open the pages as they progressed through a novel” (Ondaatje 1982: 40). He had no moonlight porch, no books with uncut pages. My father was especially sceptical of novels, their inventions following paths that deviated from history. He knew how implacable history could be. He felt that, having escaped history, he ought to be respectful of its details.

In history, he played a small part. In the Battle for the Netherlands, he was a foot soldier, stationed at the Grebbe Line, which was supposed to be the height of land where the Germans could not cross. But those few and poorly trained men were no match for the Germans, and they could not hold the line. Under cover of ground fog the field army successfully backed away from the Grebbe Line farther inland. But that position was no better. Almost 300,000 men were captured or escaped. My father was captured, held as a prisoner at a farm.

Fighting was almost irrelevant. Negotiations between the Germans and the Dutch over the terms of surrender were brusque and efficient. While the Dutch tried to gain time, the Germans threatened severe annihilation. Two squadrons of Heinkels attacked Rotterdam, dropping more than 1,300 bombs, which destroyed the inner city. The statistics are in the books. 814 civilians killed. 24,000 houses destroyed by fire. 80,000 inhabitants homeless. The Germans threatened that if the Dutch did not capitulate, den Hague and Amsterdam would meet the same fate. The Dutch love their historic cities. They capitulated.

My father vanished then. Captive, he was captived. No one knew if he was alive or dead. My grandfather did not know. My mother did not know. He was imprisoned by invisibility. Young soldiers were to be sent to work in the camps in Germany unless they were farmers (the Netherlands was intended to feed the



whole of Germany). My grandfather argued with the air, raged that my father was a farmer. But no one cared. Except for one neighbour who wanted to rent his land to a hard-working farmer. They set out together, with my mother, in search of my father. They drove from farm to farm, bivouac to bivouac, in search of my father. He had vanished. They drove farther and farther, there in the heart of the capitulated Netherlands, found various regiments but not my father. It grew late and dark, and they were about to turn for home, to accept my father's loss, but were told there was one more outfit being guarded in a remote farmhouse some miles distant.

The farm lay quiet in the dark and dead of night, the captured and exhausted men sleeping in the hayloft of the barn. My grandfather and the neighbour went inside for a cup of coffee and my mother went down to the barn, called up the ladder to the guard to ask if there was anyone named Willem van Herk. The guard was frank and friendly, said, "I think so," and shouted back into the loft. My father, tousled, exhausted, dirty, bare-footed, tentatively climbed down that ladder and re-appeared in history.

Two weeks later, my grandmother found him sleeping in his bed in his own room. And so I learn that he had his own room, private, separate from his brothers. My mother had met every train the day before and he had not appeared, vanished again. Pulling in later than late, on a train in the middle of the night, he borrowed a bike at the station, rode home and fell into bed, exhausted. The war had exhausted him, and he was ready to be a farmer. He married my mother shortly thereafter and they rented the neighbour's farm. Everyone pretended that normalcy had returned, despite the horror of occupation, which grew worse as the war stretched toward its conclusion of starvation and death.

War is a master narrative that erases logic, which eventually undermines any narrative validity. Egan argues that "Lived experience that lacks a master narrative is precarious at best, impervious to examination, analysis, or understanding. At worst, such experience is invalid – incredible, invisible, unreal" (Egan 1999: 226).

My father and mother married. They rented the neighbour's farm. Their master narrative was survival.

Some of this arrangement was made possible by my grandfather's reputed fierceness. His rage and his dour face made him look like a Calvinist, or what I imagine a Calvinist looks like. My father could look like a Calvinist when he wanted to, but he could also look mischievous, *ondeugend*, as if he possessed a secret wellspring of prankishness.

There were no alcoholics in my father's family. Their robust sobriety was almost excessive. Their one addiction was work. Family photographs were taken of all of them, nine children lined up in the dairy barn, pitchforks and milk pails in hand, with my grandfather and grandmother off to the side. In formal photographs, weddings or funerals, they look dogged and resentful. In the barn, they are alive with intention, clear-eyed, proud of hard work.

After all his deprivations, the army with its rigid measures, the war meting out starvation and death, what did he crave? Had he no addictions? He hid those

desires well, kept them secret from himself. He liked a cigarette on Sundays. If visitors came from the city and brought a box of cigars, he'd have one, but didn't savour it the same way he did cigarettes. But his asthma intensified, and he gave up cigarettes, as thoroughly as he had immigrated. No one was allowed to smoke around him, not in the house, the car, or even on the yard.

As for gambling, no one even dared to own a pack of cards and there wasn't one member of the family who could identify clubs from hearts or spades. Ondaatje learns that "the only occupation that could hope to avert one from drink and romance was gambling" (Ondaatje 1982: 48). The joyousness of this declaration, the intensity with which Ondaatje explores his family's love of wagering, is as unusual as helium or laughter.

My father didn't gamble, disapproved of cards, drank only that yellow egg liquor called *Advocaat*, which he purchased carefully, at the Alberta Liquor Control Board outlet, one bottle every six months. The original *Advocaat* was a drink made or invented by the Dutch population of Suriname and Recife, avocados apparently the key ingredient. When they returned to the Netherlands, where avocados were not available, those who had grown used to *Advocaat*'s creamy blend of egg yolks, aromatic spirits, sugar, brandy, vanilla and cream, managed to achieve a similar texture and taste with thickened egg yolk. The colour of the drink was daffodil, but the taste supremely disgusting, as cloying as egg yolks with brandy naturally are.

When my relatives came to visit the land of snow, they brought Jonge Jenever, which my father regarded with dense dislike. He regarded all bottles with suspicion. For him, a dipperful of cold water was the pinnacle of refreshment.

My father worked horses, but not racehorses, workhorses, great draught workers who pulled implements. They were as obedient to him as dogs, head down and chest strong into the harness. He left off horses here in Canada, took to farming with tractors. That was more difficult, and he fought with machinery, always in need of coaxing, oil changes and repairs and his own peculiar brand of swearing while he lay beneath those mechanical structures.

And my father's army friends, were they rakes and rascals? I hope he knew a few companions in possession of "tumescant" (Ondaatje 1982: 45) hearts, despite the gaunt years of the 1930s and the terrifying years of the occupation. There was little time for romance, despite the speed at which liaisons were formalized.

Ondaatje muses that, "It seems that most of my relatives at some time were attracted to somebody they shouldn't have been" (Ondaatje 1982: 53). Such transparency is amazing, delightful as a bribe. We keep our attractions secret in our family, biding our time. Never show fascination with another person, but watch them carefully, record their speech and their movement.

It was women who were attracted to my father, the blade of his high cheekbones, his white/blond hair and intensely blue eyes. He was, it was laconically repeated, "a good-looking man," and women noticed him, although he wouldn't have deigned to notice them noticing. He was careful about himself, worried that his secret love of pleasure would be discovered. And so he kept shy, pretending to be an inarticulate farmer, an immigrant canny but still uninitiated. He had his



opinions, and stubborn they were, but he mostly kept quiet unless given an occasion for eloquence, weddings, when he would suddenly stand and begin to make a speech, wild and tangled and full of passion, half-Dutch and half-English, a celebration of melange. But I would not know what gossip said about him.

Ondaatje speculates on attraction and love affairs and fidelity, how they become fluidly impossible moments that cannot be pinned down. "Truth disappears with history and gossip tells us in the end nothing of personal relationships. There are stories of elopements, unrequited love, family feuds, and exhausting vendettas, which everyone was drawn into, had to be involved with. But nothing is said of the closeness between two people: how they grew in the shade of each other's presence. No one speaks of that exchange of gift and character – the way a person took on and recognized in himself the smile of lover" (Ondaatje 1982: 53–54). My parents were elastic in their conjunction. At times they seemed unbearably, embarrassingly close. At other times they fought and spat, pushed back from one another in fury.

We children accompanied their passion, but were granted no model for the personal. We were cursed with the search for that lover's smile. Did any of us marry for love, or was that a dream beyond the reach of our ambitions? We were intent on improvement; that was the legacy of my father, rising past the platform of our immigrant limitations. Love was dangerous. "Where is the intimate and truthful in all this? Teenager and Uncle. Husband and lover. A lost father in his solace. And why do I want to know of this privacy? After the cups of tea, coffee, public conversations ... I want to sit down with someone and talk with utter directness, want to talk to all the lost history like that deserving lover" (Ondaatje 1982: 54). Intimacy was a luxury. There are families who demonstrate more desire than ability. We were like that.

"A lost father in his solace" (Ondaatje 1982: 54). Did my father know solace? Did he think himself lost, out there on the edge of the world, the parkland of Alberta, the fields around him stretching their arms out with infinite work? Was he tempted to give up? He too was "strict, aloof" (Ondaatje 1982: 55), intent on forging his own way without interference. And if he was ever tempted to be less private, he stopped himself. His strictness was physical, intent. His quick swipes were impossible to avoid, and stung more for their rebuke than actual hurt.

Still, we never buried family arguments. They were grudges that rose again and again in the arguments detailed around the table, the table where we sat together to eat, just enough room for the seven of us, the bowls steaming in the middle of the table, the smooth, comforting cutlery in our hands. They were both "painfully strict meals" (Ondaatje 1982: 56) and profoundly chaotic, interrupted by cows getting loose, and visitors raising dust up the long driveway, sudden darts toward the sink and stove, the dogs barking in the yard.

But yes, he was "a real part of the landscape" (Ondaatje 1982: 56) in the new snow country, his body walking out to the back quarter interested in the land, assimilating his crop from the green stalks of wheat to the grasshoppers that leapt ahead of his feet.

Wild oats. Do I have half-siblings somewhere in the world? I imagine them as distantly related but not related, looking like imprinted shadows of my father with pale hair and intense eyes, a bone structure as strong as his. Where would he have had time to bring them into being? While he was in training, in the army, before he married? Or after he was married, the war making everyone heedless of consequences, irritable at the strictures of time and fidelity. And what resides at the centre of any rumour? My father's determination and stubbornness, my father's discontent, my father's rage or passion causing imaginary sisters.

I have tried to find traces of my father's origins in whisper-thin church records. One Pieter Van Herk was a deacon in the old Saint Pauluskerk in Antwerp. Or so a stone in the floor declares. Does it matter, such ancestry and its tracings? Does it reassure the seeker to find one's name, a litany of generation asserting legitimacy? I have sought out ledgers, run my finger down a list of names that I have no stories for. There are now too many people in the world for us to keep memorials like graves and gravestones, although my father lies in a rolling grassy park east of Edmonton.

The migrant memoir is always about a return to a different place. It locates itself in a destination and then works backwards to a country of origins, a set of ancestors baffling and inscrutable, completely separate from the experience of the subject in the present. The search becomes itself a fiction of quest and desire, frustrated and aroused by unfamiliarity.

We sleuth our first memories in those houses where we never lived, those skies that never rained on us, aunts who never kissed us. Sometimes, deep in the solar plexus, we hear a choir chant and recognize its rhythm. Sometimes, turning the corner of a tree-lined street, we recognize the spirit of a house, the tone of a ghostly relative. Or know in the taste of cinnamon and cloves a long-dead ancestral recipe.

"I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner" (Ondaatje 1982: 79), declares Ondaatje, striving to find himself in the space between the two. I walk the streets of Amsterdam cursing at the tourists who do not understand the spectacle they make of their avaricious gape. I march around Rotterdam looking for a few old stones that survived the bombing. I search for old maps of Lekkerkerk in South Holland, determined to unearth my father's childhood environs. There is no surrealism there, but a crowded order, houses jostled close to one another while the green soil glows with peat. Ouderkerk op den IJssel, the farming village where my father was born, now outpost for Rotterdam commuters. In the Middle Ages it was a swamp. Roman coins suggest that those legions too passed.

And what have those remnants of the past to do with me?

[A]utobiographers have always wrestled with the split between subject and object, between writing and written selves, seeing the very act of autobiography as present "reflection" upon the past. Contemporary autobiographers, furthermore, who seem to stake no claim for a unified

or coherent identity, seek no illusions of coherence from the reflections available to them. Their texts display fragmentation, incoherence, even dissolution. (Egan 1999: 11–12)

The splinters of whatever actions placed me in this moment never quite come together but remain a bricolage of lost intentions.

Is it ancestors that the bio-text searches for? Am I looking for stiff-bosomed aunts wearing white lace caps who would sprinkle sugar on bread and butter? Do I yearn for Dutch uncles with their broad hands and stern admonishments? I have plenty of those. My relatives fit the model, are indeed frank, obstinate and blunt. None of the van Herks hold their tongues or speak softly. They continue to offer advice as if it were irresistible, better than a gold standard. All the clichés, anti-Dutch slurs that are no treat at all, Dutch defence a retreat, Dutch headache a hangover, Dutch courage the liquor itself, Dutch nightingale a frog. To “Do a Dutch” is to commit suicide. Always a temptation.

Rain. Nightingale frogs. I have a predilection for rain, its moist touch. Even surrounded by water, I have never learned to swim, could fall in a hundred ditches or canals or fluvial rivers and drown, over and over. Low-lying and densely populated, my origins are damp as a *kikker*, yes frog. My father wanted to leave that persistent wet. One big river delta, swampy muck. Every step left a small trace-pool of water. Every hoof left a pockmark filled with water.

The damp disgraces foreigners more than prodigals. They wear the wrong shoes, the wrong coat. They insist on large umbrellas, awkward duffels, and have no idea how to ride a bicycle through puddles.

I come by my lies and my love of rain honestly. In searching for the past, I discover that Dutch painting has stimulated a fine side effect – forgery. The Deventer-born Han van Meegeren was in 1947 almost more popular than the Dutch Prime Minister. During the war, he had successfully forged paintings by any number of Dutch masters, fooled various art experts, and even passed off a fake Vermeer to Hermann Göring. The Dutch loved his cunning, his trickster success, and repeated over and over the story that when Göring was informed that his “Vermeer” was actually a forgery, “[Göring] looked as if for the first time he had discovered there was evil in the world” (Wynne 2006). Han van Meegeren took autobiography to a different form, the signature of an infamous art forger, *een meestervervalser*. Now forgers are forging his signature, so that the domino effect continues. The forger has become more collectable than those he emulated so well. He is the path to a gullible biography, inchoate, dissolute.

The Dutch, and I include myself, admire ingenuity, the deft turn of hand that pockets a fact and replaces it with a tulip.

The forger tempts me to include for ballast the biotext of eminent forefathers and mothers.

The Dutch scientist Christiaan Huygens (1629–1695) discovered Saturn’s moon Titan. He also invented the pendulum clock. We had a pendulum clock that did not keep time. It had lost some frail precision when it was carried to Canada.

I can list those who harbour some Dutch ancestry: Herman Melville (not a surprise, with the sea-faring Dutch), Walt Whitman (appropriately long-winded), Marlon Brando (Dutch courage, say no more), Clint Eastwood (the retributive squint), Bruce Springsteen, Ronnie Van Zant, Franklin and Theodore Roosevelt. Martin Van Buren spoke Dutch as a boy; he was the first president of the United States not of English, Irish, or Scottish descent. Thomas Edison (who stole from Tesla) book-ended to Robert Moog (inventor of the Moog synthesizer). Such a marvellous collage of fast-talkers and politicians, inventors and camouflage artists. Elegant forgers.

Was Dutch ever a language of power? Always, I suspect, a language that others could mock, make fun of. Too thickened and clotted by half. After Indonesia's independence, Dutch was rendered powerless in colonial terms. Still, the Indonesian language inherited many words from Dutch, some scholars arguing that almost one-fifth of Indonesian words can be traced back to Dutch. I refuse to believe that. I have been to Indonesia, to Bali and to Jakarta. I was almost happy there, for a few moments. The harsh volcanic fields spoke volumes.

My family owned no slaves, no fine Golden Age paintings. The furniture my parents shipped to Canada was heavy oak, but not finely crafted or antique. It was tough and functional and in the dry air, it split and cracked.

As quiet as he was physical, my father did not use English easily. After years in Canada, the Dutch tongue too slid away from him, and his linguistic self-portrait was a series of monosyllabic words that he would utter with definite intensity, either pleasure or impatience.

Still, he read aloud to us, a chapter from the Bible every day. He had faith that he could persuade us to have faith, and so he read those wildly improbable stories of disciples and their wrongdoings, kings and their failures to adhere to the law, women enjoying immaculate conceptions. He treated those fables as matter-of-factly as the weather, our snowstorms, our needing to tend the animals, clean and feed and water them as diligently as if we were in a medieval mystery play.

He knew "the old pleasure of darkness" (Ondaatje 1982: 89). He sifted darkness as deftly as if it were sun, negotiating the short hill between barn and house as regularly as any run-off, finding his way through the stilly parkland night.

And "the used heart" (Ondaatje 1982: 94), what about his? Did it stumble when he finally gave up, had enough of gazing out of windows down limited city streets that he hated? Did he dream of the damp grasses in the fields where he used to work? I failed there, should have taken him out into the parkland, the fields stretching away from the straight roads of the grid system, while he gazed contentedly at the receding sky that rushed toward him.

He loved cherries. He went to movie night at the care facility and took the free bag of popcorn back to his room. He pored over my history of Alberta, proud at last that I had written a book he could be proud of, not the thin fabric of fiction but a book with some reference to facts. He wanted to live in a western. He got half way and settled for a settler's life, farming, the clean drudgery of agricul-

ture. I carried lunch out to the field when he was seeding. He stopped the tractor, climbed down and sat against the wheel, opened the wax wrapping on the sandwich, and unscrewed the lid from the glass jar of coffee. I should have talked to him more then, asked him those questions that plague me. We exchanged silences that now I try to fill with metaphor.

And games, did he play games? I want to ask him that question, about his pleasures as a boy, did he hunt eels, shoot birds, did he steal cookies? The questions that will never be answered waken the hour of the wolf and in the thick of night demand answers. The next day I call my mother and she refuses to answer. Guarding his secrets, along with her own.

Pretending great passions. Were there any? Passions unsolved and untested, waiting to return. Of course there was no time for that, no chance. The war came. My father was sent to the Grebbeberg. They were defeated, captured. His father rode to find him, to talk the commandant out of sending him to Germany. He insisted that my mother ride with him, and they faced the fierce May wind for days and days, searching for a captured company of men.

I am back to relatives. Aunts. My father's sisters. Mad with passion for the wrong men, marrying above or beneath them, but never on the level. Fierce riders of bicycles, arms akimbo over a garden patch. Moving with the husky energy that I too have inherited, the impatience of a dense body that needs to get a job done. Substantial, van Herk women are substantial, impatient, sturdy. My mother didn't cotton to my father's sisters, held a narrow-eyed suspicion of them all, even the younger ones that were children when they left. The sister who married, and then had twelve children, one after another appearing on a wave of fecund overwork. The sister who married the married man, or at least pursued him before he was a widower. His wife was found drowned in a well, and no one knew if she fell in, jumped in, or was pushed. The prior wife, that is. My mother calls it *schandalig*, but she prefers them scandalous, her in-laws, those sisters of my father who crowded around him when he re-appeared the few times that they went back to visit, back to the old country, that destination of the past. These women didn't settle for flirtation, they married disaster, walked right into the arms of collaborators and soldiers, already married neighbour men, mechanics and factory boys. They wouldn't take no for an answer. My father regarded them with fond suspicion, an older brother, the prodigal who vanished to the other side of the world and so became their mythic relative, the *Canadees*. As we were, exotics of the snow, they were convinced. Not even close to civilized.

My grandmother lived close to those sisters and watched over them, but stayed clear of the adventures, their raised voices thumping against the walls, their wild gangly children who hated school and turned themselves into truck drivers and milkmen. She lived and died cautiously, serving me cookies and coffee in her small living room, her bent, tough little frame barricaded with photographs. She did not blossom after my grandfather died. Instead, she lowered herself into a bitersweet sadness, her tearful eyes and gentle face hovering in the background of her squalling family.

In truth, the van Herks cannot claim “an eccentric bloodline” (Ondaatje 1982: 113), but a normal one, content with its own restlessness. They were restless, though, that restlessness competing with their Calvinism, which tried to keep them quiet and subdued. It never worked. They broke out into wild disagreements with one another, frantic competitions that unfolded their celebratory rage. But “why should we forgive our enemies?” asks Robert Kroetsch, and I want to repeat that line to my father now, my father who kept a fine tally, but moved to Canada to avoid having to live with the list.

In truth, people who married van Herks were lucky. They found themselves yoked to workers and impetuous hewers, people who got the job done, even if they invented multiple whirlwinds in the process. If van Herks got sick, they recovered after the shortest of intervals. If they fell, they broke no bones. They were elastic, rebound material. Widows found second husbands quickly. Children prospered and grew larger than their parents. Engagements weren’t announced, but lived, and everyone was happy if the wedding took place before the bellies drew notice.

They were great gallivanterers. My mother used that word most about her sisters-in-law, their gallivanting between the Hoge Hexel and Wierden was famous. It looked innocent enough to me, the trips to town or the market, the meetings of the women of the church. These women weren’t admired from a distance. They were close and smelly, deliciously warm of touch. By contrast, my mother was a brooding solitary; she seemed jealous of their sociability, gleefully solitary. They’re older now, hearts failing, hearing gone, but they hold fiercely to their resilience, their ebullient rage. Nobody can take that away. They won’t be pinned down, keep driving long past the time that they should, have given up stockings and corsets. Their hair flies out from their nimbus skulls in a fairy froth. They were always short of money, but never brooded about that lack, instead made feast with what they had. They told no one who had fathered their children and they preferred long-suffering husbands, although a couple married dull men who tried to confine them with childbearing and raising. It never quite worked.

As grandmothers they were desultory, sending children outside to play regardless of ditches or dangers, spoiling them extravagantly, and pitting one child against another. I never saw them in bathing suits. I saw them driving, sedate cars that had only forward and reverse. I saw them laugh at the private jokes of the *Twentse* language. I saw them haggle at the market, tease the butcher, swear at the baker delivering the wrong number of *krentenbrood*. They stole flowers, cuttings and bushes, they decorated cream cans, they joined sketching clubs. But none of them were “lyrical socialists” (Ondaatje 1982: 122). They were instead rhapsodic Calvinists, marching into church like the duty it was, and then heading home for coffee and cake, the Dutch soup that was traditional on Sundays, families sitting around the *voorkamer* smoking and talking until five in the afternoon. Is it possible for such hearty and disingenuous Dutchness to carry its own theatre on its back? They didn’t know theatre, but didn’t need it either, their family dramas more than enough.



I don't know what killed my grandmother, my father's mother. My father's father died of crankiness, he was as miserable as possible under the circumstances. My father went back to see him, probably to make peace of a silent and Calvinist kind, to read through their mutual disagreements again. They faced one another over the time that had passed with faces like granite. In that way they were exact mirrors. "Mirror talk begins as the encounter of two lives in which the biographer is also an autobiographer. Very commonly, the (auto)biographer is the child or the partner of the biographical subject, a relationship in which the (auto)biographical identity is significantly shaped by the processes of exploratory mirroring" (Egan 1999: 7). As I mirror him now too.

He wanted adventures. Perhaps he might have run away to sea if he had not been a farmer. He yearned for the tang of water, and the *son et lumière* of thunderstorms revived him. Wildlife on the farm he tolerated, except for gophers, their holes in the pasture a danger to the cattle. Coyotes and deer, rabbits and muskrats were prior occupants, and he steered around them. He found a stone hammerhead once, saw it plowing, and climbed down to retrieve it, a beautifully shaped hammerhead with the line where the leather wrapped around as clear as a ditch. I admired it, and he offered it to me, but I was shy of taking objects from the farm, felt they belonged there. Then the house burned down, and the stone hammer was lost in that blaze. It's probably still hunkered in the ground, waiting for another discoverer. I should have taken it home with me.

Bathing in the tub, in front of the stove, the water heating in pails on the stove. The huge galvanized washtub, cold to the touch no matter how hot the water. How did my father bathe then, when I was too small to remember? Did he crouch in that small space and sluice water over his knees, his certainly tired limbs? And what was his private pleasure? What did he think of sleep, of food, of warm water? He sighed sometimes, a deep sigh that came from his diaphragm, that came from his childhood, his dreams, his altered life. I wonder too about the number of times he must have thought he was going to die, and how he decided to accept that moment, the "wet alphabet" (Ondaatje 1982: 142) of fate. He thought so when he was under fire, when they were being held at the farmhouse while the German command tried to figure out what to do with these skinny, impossibly innocent children dressed as soldiers. He thought so when he faced those occupiers, the guns they were quick to point. He thought so when the farm suffered from drought, low prices, the bank manager, our lack of concern.

My mother cut his hair, put him on a chair and wrapped a kitchen towel around his neck. He was compliant then, as never, willing to let her trim around his ears and at the edge. He had large intelligent ears, and even later when he was almost deaf and heard very little of what we said, he seemed to be good at listening.

He left a soaked and rainy country, small as a *dubbeltje*, to open his gaze to large spaces, wide and terrible with blue, the sky above so huge it seemed to swallow all beneath it.

What did he own? Not much. A good suit of Sunday clothes. Work pants, and those chequered flannel work shirts that are warm and efficient. I kept one of his

undershirts, worn next to his skin when he was older and often cold. He owned the labour of his hands. He owned the ritual of work that he accomplished over and over again, the days passing from one season to the next. He owned his own mornings, when, awake long before us, he went out on the farm and walked its shape, knew himself to be its owner.

Ondaatje's father asks his mother, "How *dare* you follow me'?" (Ondaatje 1982: 150). But that was not the question between my father and my mother. How could she *not* dare to follow him, his determination to get away from the lion-shape of tiny Holland and find a different spot in the world, one that would accommodate his breathing. What "new dark unknown alphabet" (Ondaatje, 150) did the two of them accommodate, their transition from the Netherlands to Canada so drastic, so utterly estranging that they had to re-learn everything that they remembered and everything that they had forgotten. They took with them three children, as white-haired and *koppig*, as obstinate as he was. They took a *kist* of furniture, their bikes and leather coats, hoes and a stone grinder, Dutch woollen blankets and the pendulum clock with the horse prancing above the eternally late hands. They took nothing of any use, and they invented everything over again when they got to Alberta. They knew one word: potato. They did not have the language to complain.

Before he died, at the small desk that they put in the corner of his room in the home, he sat and wrote. My mother will not let me read those notes, at least not yet. He seems to have been transcribing his life, writing a journal of what he remembered. Or setting the record straight. I wait to hear that voice. Our parents are the "parentheses" (Ondaatje 1982: 154) around us, their pasts enclosing the lives that we think we own. The curve from our births to our deaths, a half circle of inheritance.

From where do we learn "our sense of secrecy, the desire to be reclusive" (Ondaatje 1982: 168). I have it, I think from years of watching them, the family without memoir, memory transcribed in a past I had not participated in and thus could not share. We had no theatre or romance, that had been left behind in Holland, for it had led to the five years of deprivation and concealment that then signalled to my father the necessary leaving that changed his life and gave me mine.

And what were our "rules of decorum" (Ondaatje 1982: 169)? Learn to eat together. Sit quietly while we listened to him read to us from the Bible, that remarkable compendium of stories that he revisited and revisited, even while it was obvious that church itself bored him, he could hardly bear to sit through sermons. And how could I get to know "his secretive and slightly crooked humour" (Ondaatje 1982: 170)? I hadn't the key, had not been raised within its zeitgeist and origins, and so I could not find that shape. I ran from the family, and only now begin to search for ways to run in the family.

His abundant sadness. How "I would be doing something and suddenly look up and catch his face naked. And full of sorrow'" (Ondaatje 1982: 177). Exactly that, sorrow. Hard to see in a father, such intensely distilled regret, but I am glad

he was not one of those father/fools, baseball and sports and beer, too close to their childhoods and their children.

He had a gravitas that I will not be able to erase. He had moved through many sorrowful rooms, stacked with loss. He was profoundly angry with his own father, counting what was owed and what was due. But he crossed the silence between them finally, a quiet reconciliation.

And there is no conclusion, no ready finale to this invented autobiography. "During certain hours, at certain years in our lives, we see ourselves as remnants from the earlier generations that were destroyed" (Ondaatje 1982: 179). I did speak to my father as an adult, but we confined ourselves to work, duty, snowy weather. The chasm between us was uncrossable, but we looked at one another over it and somehow read a similar story. He watched me as if I were dangerous, my often bad behaviour, my swearing, smoking and drinking, my elevated speech. I am the child "made hazardous" (Ondaatje 1982: 180), but he knew that would be the outcome, one so determined to pore over words in some vain attempt to order the chaos of lives fragmented and erased. And after all, what are our ancestors? In this family, no ministers or translators, no lawyers or bankers. No, not a one. Farmers and *dijkgraafs* and eager landsmen, horse buyers and milk men, men who used their hands usefully.

I never saw my father drunk. I never saw my father naked. I never saw my father silly, although I saw him laugh. I saw him asleep. I saw him fierce with discontent. I saw him enraged. I saw him focussed, gritty, determined to get the job done. And then turn toward the closing day with that purposeful walk. When we had bonfires in the bush, he built fires so huge that we could not get close enough to roast our wieners and marshmallows. He believed in the statement of size, the assertion of presence. And impatient, God, he was impatient, impetuous, unwilling to wait, even if he thought about his impatience slowly. Shy too, shyness like a bloom inside him.

It is too late for me to trace him down. I cannot "get him right" but regard him in those incomplete fragments that recur when I wake at night, or hear the burr of his voice, his accent now softened by years of Canadian English. "Not that we ever thought we would be able to fully understand you. Love is often enough, towards your stadium of small things" (Ondaatje 1982: 201). His stadium was the light of the dawn. The cows moving quietly ahead of him down the path toward the barn. The dog at his heels. His arms stretched wide.

I resist the communal act of talking to my siblings. Besides, they all have children and look a direction different than mine. Even my mother bristles a fierce resistance to talking about my father. After he died, she was furious at him, complained that he had selfishly left her to deal with everything. She meant, I think, life without him. Her pride is of a different stripe.

I have kept his glasses, which he needed only late in life. The last time I saw him, I cut his fingernails, which the nurses had neglected. They were jagged and uneven, and his hand in mine was paper-warm.

Egan discusses *Running in the Family* as a hybrid and speculative story. “With materials of so many kinds and from so many sources, speculation is the only possible procedure and space the only comprehensive dimension in which to imagine it. Distinctions between then and now, before and after, become irrelevant. Causality is never an issue because no event can be identified as the result of another” (Egan 1999: 153). Causality then is what I must relinquish.

Saul argues that Ondaatje’s “ambivalent relationship to ‘home’” (Saul 2006: 35) has less to do with his father than with his own movements, his peripatetic restlessness. That restlessness performs its own stealthy observation. Ambivalence must be the space in which every self invades the story of self, regards it cautiously as a Canadian coyote.

Stephen Spender ponders his own telling of his own story by recognizing its duality. “An autobiographer is really writing the story of two lives: his life as it appears to himself, from his own position, when he looks out at the world from behind his eye-sockets; and his life as it appears from the outside in the minds of others; a view which tends to become in part his own view of himself also, since he is influenced by the opinion of those others. An account of the interior view would be entirely subjective; and of the exterior, would hardly be autobiography but biography of oneself on the hypothesis that someone can know about himself as if he were another person. However, the great problem of autobiography remains, which is to create the true tension between these inner and outer, subjective and objective, worlds” (Spender 1951: viii). I cannot write a poetics of autobiography without doubling the doubleness, searching for why I run from my family. And why I run toward them, intent on disturbing the mirage between us.

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ARITHA VAN HERK, University Professor and Professor of English at the University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada, is the author of five novels, *Judith*, *The Tent Peg*, *No Fixed Address* (nominated for the Governor General’s Award for fiction), *Places Far From Ellesmere* (a geofiction) and *Restlessness*. Her wide-ranging ficto-critical explorations are collected in *A Frozen Tongue* and *In*

*Visible Ink.* Her irreverent but relevant history of Alberta, *Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta*, won the Grant MacEwan Author's Award for Alberta Writing. That book frames the new permanent exhibition on Alberta history, which opened at the Glenbow Museum and Archives in Calgary in 2007; her latest book, *Audacious and Adamant: the Story of Maverick Alberta*, accompanies the exhibit. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and she is active in the literary and cultural life of the west, the nation, and the world.

Address: Professor Aritha van Herk, FRSC, Department of English, University of Calgary, Calgary, T2N 1N4, Alberta, Canada. [email: [vanherk@ucalgary.ca](mailto:vanherk@ucalgary.ca)]

