

student sperm donor meets his 64 children!

In her chapter on organ donation, McTeer lists as an option the long discredited idea that medical personnel be “legally mandated to ask all competent patients ‘in their last illness’... to donate their organs and tissue for transplant. A fine or loss of funding to the hospital

could be imposed for failure to do so.” There is no indication that McTeer means to ridicule this suggestion. She appears to be genuinely blind to the conflict of interest involved.

“Compact and provocative” is how Senator Wilbert J. Keon, in his Foreword, describes *Tough Choices*. This is probably a fair assessment, as is his obser-

vation that this book tackles fascinating and complex issues. Unfortunately, while the book may be provocative it is not always satisfying, and the quality of the writing offers little to entice the reader. Instead, reading it feels like a chore.

**Ann Silversides**  
Toronto, Ont.

## Room for a view

# What I could not return

I close my eyes and as if by remote control my mind flashes back 30 years. Click, and I am 8 years old again. I see the two of us riding rickety old bikes down gravel roads, a breeze sailing over our crew-cut heads. Wheat fields sway in the wind, as if waving me into this reverie. Blue prairie skies stretch before us into the future, many years of which I have already lived.

Sunshine. Gorgeous sunshine. It seemed our constant companion, as if it never rained, as if our lives consisted of endless summers untouched by gray skies or the crack of thunder.

And we were saints, our halos bright as the summer sky. Right. Boys, as they say, will be boys.

*Bang, bang.* (That was the cap-gun six-shooter.)

“Gotcha,” I said.

“No, you missed,” you said.

“No, I didn’t. You’re dead.”

“No, I’m not. I’m the Lone Ranger and he can’t die. Bang! Bang, bang. Now you’re dead.”

“No fair,” I said. “You never die.”

We fired our schemes like bullets against a bull’s-eye of woodland and farm. We pretended to be Ronnie Lancaster, pitching rocks like touchdown passes through the windows of abandoned farmhouses. We skinny-dipped in the creek, clutching our privates, fearful of leeches and snapping turtles. We scoured the land, noting wild flowers, animals and birds. Sometimes we did more than observe.

I crept up to a red-winged blackbird

chirping stupidly in the reeds of a slough.

*BANG.* (That was the BB rifle.)

“Ya got ‘er,” you said.

“Yep, pegged it right in the head,” I said.

“Naw, you nailed it right in the chest. See?”

“Oh, right.”

“Good shootin, anyways.”

“Yuck,” I said.

“What?”

“Look at its eyes. There’s sort of a film over them.”

“That ain’t no film,” you said. “It’s dead. So its eyes are closed.”

“Oh.”

“What did you expect?”

I made no reply. I’m sure I never told you — that I didn’t like shooting birds. Beautiful ones that sang. And I didn’t much like what we did to gophers, either.

You remember about the gophers. It was our prairie right to kill them: they were vermin. We poured water down the hole and as the critter surfaced — either that, or drown — we whacked it on the head with a big stick until it was dead. Used to bother me, seeing that poor thing. A soaking wet gopher bursting for air is a pitiful sight. A child’s natural instinct is to say, “Ah, poor gopher,” and then giggle with delight as it steps out and shakes the water off itself like a dog. You know, a prairie dog. But a kid grows up quick on the prairie. There’s no room for sissy talk. So you smash the gopher’s head or

shoot the dumb bird and feel sick about it, silently.

We grew older, and our thoughts shifted from the natural world around us to our changing physiques. We worried about the wisps of hair at our pubic bones and the new sensations our bodies offered up. How old were we when we first recognized our interest in girls? I see us now as we examined the advertisements in *The Bay* catalogue. The models in their undergarments summoned up shivery, naughty pleasures. We soon realized that the sight of Marion gave us the same goose-bumpy feeling. Ah Marion, the farmer’s daughter, fair maiden!

“Call her up,” you said.

“I don’t really know her,” I said.

“So what? How are you gonna get to know her if you don’t talk to her?”

“Well, you call her up,” I said. “She knows you, you’re in the same class.”

“Xac’ly why I’m not gonna phone her. Look, you’re the motor mouth. You call.”

And so I found myself, receiver in hand, nervously dialing the number. “Hello,” I said (twitch, scratch, sweat). “Is Marion there?”

“Who’s this?” she said.

“It’s Doug, Tom’s friend.”

“Oh.”

“So ...,” I said.

“So?” she said.

“How are you?”

“Okay, thanks. You?”

“Good, thanks,” I said. “Ahh ...” Click. Dial tone. There I stood,

boy—man, mute, cheeks burning, a wave of disorientation washing over me, until you broke the stunned silence.

“You hung up on her! Why’d ya do that? Great, that’s just great. Now she’ll think you’re retarded.”

Fast-forward to the painful memories of high school. We remained friends, yet — at school — were distant. You were a reluctant student, little interested in the finer points of *Macbeth* and immune to the logic of algebra. But your hands were magnificent. Mechanical objects were disassembled and reconstructed at your command, something I was completely incapable of.

Socially, you were aloof and withdrawn, a shadow in the back-

ground of teenage posturing. You lived for your time away from school, those days passed outdoors, camping on a riverbank, waking at dawn to practise the solitary art of fly-fishing or, in winter, snowshoeing a trapline you had set. When I accompanied you, tearing myself away from the teenage world you held in contempt, I saw a self-reliant youth, a friend at ease and alive. In turn, I felt relaxed and capable.

At school, I was unable to reciprocate, incapable of drawing you into a wider circle of friends. I couldn’t demonstrate to you the attractiveness of words, the utility of talking to people, the beauty of typed words strung together in a novel. You read to learn something specific; fiction was a waste of time. Similarly, most teenage talk struck you as useless chatter. You avoided people who needed to talk, needed to impress, needed others. You seemed to need no one; I was one of your few friends.

“Geez, Doug. Why do you hang around that loser?” Susan said, dragging dramatically on a cigarette. It was after school; I’d been trying to summon the courage to ask her out.

“Look, Tom may be a hard guy to get to know, but he’s no loser.”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever you say.

Like, go fish, eh.” She laughed gracefully.

“Tell you what. If I were ever lost in a snowstorm in the middle of nowhere, I’d rather be with Tom than practically anyone else. He’d figure out how to keep us alive.”

“Like I’d ever be lost in the middle of nowhere anyway.”

“Good point. You don’t need to be in the middle of nowhere. You’re lost

most of the time already,” I said, wondering why I had ever considered asking her out. Young people, I now understand, are afraid of non-conformists.

So they find reasons to ridicule. But the outsider himself is still drawn to the opposite sex, even if he can’t admit that to himself.

I am brought up short by a pungent odour. It is not the prairie smell of freshly turned earth or fragrant clover or of rain building in the distance, but the sickly perfume of hothouse flowers. I open my eyes; thirty years fall away in an instant.

Time. Time changes things. Memories fade. Emotions change colour, dry up and flutter to the ground.

I remember how we drifted apart. You stayed on the land that had revealed its character to you, honing the skill of your hands, learning a trade. I moved to the city to huddle over the

printed word and to consider the cast-off thoughts of scholars. Our lives diverged.

And now I wonder if I really understand what happened to you. I think I do, but still I feel the need to invoke excuses. What’s the buzzword? Closure. I seek closure.

I glance beside me and suddenly feel blessed to have my wife and children with me. How I wish now that you had found a partner, raised a few kids, maybe. Things might have turned out differently. Perhaps.

I look to the front of the chapel and can almost see you there, alone, a bottle of booze beside you: your friend, your crutch. And then I imagine you with a rifle to your head, sweat dripping down your forehead, your finger twitching, and I can nearly hear slurred words, your own voice, pleading, no, no, no.

But we are gathered today, Tom, to say farewell. And I am here to reflect on our time together as we ranged over rolling fields under open skies in the grand freedom of youth. We stand now to leave this place, the air redolent with mourning. I am filled with guilt that your life has ended, whereas mine seems, in its possibilities, to have just begun.

As I walk toward the door, the sun, the big radiant prairie sun, strikes my face.

I will always remember you. For all that I took. And for what I could not return.

**Brian Deady**

Emergency physician  
New Westminster, BC



Art Explosion

## R is for writing

Things cannot always go your way. Learn to accept in silence the minor aggravations.  
— Sir William Osler, 1903

Should equanimity be so widely praised for all physicians? — Howard Spiro, 1992

Do physicians go too placidly amid the noise and haste? Have your opinions ever landed you in politics, or in a pickle? There's always room for another view in The Left Atrium. We welcome submissions of unpublished poetry, memoir and fiction. The writing should be candid, but patient confidentiality must be respected. A sense of humour never hurts, and anonymity is an option. In general, prose manuscripts should be limited to 1000 words and poems to 75 lines. Send your rants, your ravings and your recipes for reform to [todkia@cma.ca](mailto:todkia@cma.ca)