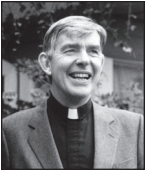

Holy Tensions

*Sculpture by David Robinson, with commentary by
Rev. Harry Robinson*



The Reverend Harry Robinson (1927–2011) was a highly respected Canadian preacher and clergyman, and from 1978–1992 was the Rector of St. John's (Shaughnessy) Anglican Church in Vancouver, BC.



David Robinson is an award-winning sculptor whose work has been exhibited throughout Canada, including three times at Regent College's Lookout Gallery. He resides in Vancouver, BC.

Introduced by Loren Wilkinson

The pages that follow contain images of the sculptures of David Robinson, with commentary by his father, the late Rev. Harry Robinson, an Anglican minister. They are adapted from preliminary work toward a whole book of such juxtapositions of David's sculptures with Harry's words. (Dal Schindell, to whom this issue is dedicated, was one of the early supporters of that book.) The work was never completed. But *Crux* readers can nevertheless get a substantial glimpse of it in the pages that follow.

The trapped and troubled figures in the sculptures of David Robinson, the thoughts and sermons of Harry Robinson, and Dal Schindell's idiosyncratic approach both to his own art and to the use of art in publicizing theological education all intersect with each other in some illuminating ways.

Some of these intersections are easily described. It is no surprise that a son should both resemble—and differ from—his father; and the similarities and differences between Harry's brilliant but tortured sermons and David's equally brilliant, equally tortured figures is evident to any who have experienced both. At first viewing, the sculptures might seem to undercut or deconstruct the "good news" of the gospel, which it was Harry's life work to preach. More reflection, however, reveals the way that the bad news in which David's sculpted characters usually find themselves ultimately illuminates the good news of Harry's sermons; for the gospel

is bad news before it is good news, and no one knew and explained that better than Harry Robinson.

Yet the sculptures are by no means illustrations of the words; if anything, it is just the other way around, as Harry acknowledges in a kind of afterword to the one longer sermon included here (p. 41, following *Font*): "A preacher tries to shape and portray with the elusive substance of words a passing glimpse of reality, while longing to be able to shape with words a picture which might last a hundred generations. But the preacher can only envy the sculptor and his medium."

The deeper connections between the three persons being honoured here is not so easily described, but can perhaps be glimpsed by the title of an important sermon that Harry preached in Montreal in 1994 at "Essentials 94," a conference organized by the more orthodox parts of the (then still undivided) Anglican Church in Canada. The text Harry chose was Psalm 137, which begins, "By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept," and he paraphrased the fourth verse ("How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?") in his title: "Singing the Lord's Song in Post-Christian Canada." And Dal's visual work was likewise notable for the way it placed theological study in "the strange land" of post-Christendom, but illuminated it by drawing on the whole tradition of Christian art.

David's own words on the dilemma of post-Christendom artists are a helpful prelude to viewing his work, in the light of his father's words:

I grew up in a home where the stories of the Bible were not merely interesting cultural artifacts upon which one might make detached commentary from the enlightened heights of modernity. Rather these myths are understood to be the very substance of living ideas, and provide the language through which we might encounter our own time and culture within the created order.

This has been my own bifurcated experience: on Sundays I learned a language of image and stories that both haunt and enrich my imagination to this day; on the other six days I learned a different language of images and stories that also haunt and enrich my imagination to this day. If there has been any dialogue at all between these two polarities, it has been the siphoning off of the church's former cultural potency to fuel the furnaces of a post-modern ethos. For the church has lost faith in its own symbols and images, and they have been stolen, along with those of a myriad of other traditional cultures, by the globalizing spirit of the age.

So am I arguing cultural patricide, bemoaning the loss of traditional faith language? Having heard articulate people whose vocation it is to engage in these debates, I know that they would rightly deem me a poor recruit to that cause. More to the point, my own allegiances run across the grain of this dialectic, governed instead by the different language of sculpture.

"Engaging in the debate" about how to reconnect the narrative of the Bible with the situation of those living in a postmodern and post-Christian culture has been one of the main tasks of this journal, as it contin-

ues to be one of the main tasks of Regent College, which publishes it. Much of the genius of the journal—like Regent, and its wide influence—has profited from the ability to bring the images from the vast heritage of Christian art into live—though often edgy—dialogue with contemporary culture.

Dal Schindell was instrumental in that dialogue (see the opening article in this issue), and one of the ways he contributed to it was by inviting David Robinson to have repeated shows in the Lookout Gallery. The first show, in 1991, created quite a stir (not the least because of the frank nudity of its male figures). Some notes that David wrote for displaying his sculptures suggest that these are no ordinary works:

(optimal specifications; dimensions may vary)

1. Connect hanging cable to grappling hook (supplied).
2. Using a ladder of appropriate height, fling hook up and over the horizon into the unfathomable depths of space.
3. Once cable is secure, adjust height of sculpture.
4. Trim excess cable.

One of the figures displayed in that first show, and included in the following pages, was *Perfect Imbalance* (p. 28). Harry's words about it aptly describe the postmodern condition: "The figure on the far end of the steel beam shows a querulous anxiety that cannot even risk to hope or believe, for the possibility of faith might throw everything out of balance."

The difficult challenge of speaking the Christian "good news" to people in that condition was vividly pictured in another sculpture from that first Robinson show (*Speak*). It now hangs prominently displayed near the faculty offices in the Regent building. The relationship of that work to David's sculpture and Harry's words were described in a tribute to Harry written shortly after his death. After describing the power and impact of Harry's preaching, the tribute continues:

But all that gives the wrong impression. Harry was not, in a conventional sense, an eloquent speaker, and never gave the impression of being comfortable in the pulpit. He often seemed as surprised, as swept off his feet, by what he was discovering in the lectionary as those of us who heard him. Annie Dillard's words about church were never truer than when Harry preached:

Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? . . . It is madness to wear ladies straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.

That sense of vulnerability before an overwhelming stream of scary goodness was the impression Harry's sermons left. To catch an idea of it at Regent, stand in the upstairs halls outside the wash-room and look at the sculpture *Speak* hanging on the wall at the end of the hall. The figure is by David Robinson, whose brilliant and troubling sculptures are very much like his father's sermons. The preacher in the sculpture (though Dave has never exactly told me that) is clearly his father Harry: crucified in the pulpit, perhaps—or longing for a crash helmet as he is swept along on the torrent of truth.

Many who saw the sculpture in that first show recognized how well it caught the challenge of both breaking and building the culture that Christians find themselves in. One alumnus offered at once to raise money to purchase it for display. But at least

one of the persons responsible for fundraising found the image too "negative." Now that it finally is displayed at Regent (mainly through Dal's persistence and David's generosity), it is not necessarily a favourite. Some students find it "creepy"; even those who appreciate it find it hard to walk past that man, crucified in his pulpit, and not reflect on their own condition. But there is no better picture of the relationship between the Christian gospel and a post-Christian culture. (The sort of reflection that *Speak* can evoke is powerfully represented by the essay by Maxine Hancock, now displayed on the wall next to the sculpture, where it continues to trouble both members of the Regent community and unsuspecting visitors. We have inserted her essay in the article that follows—see p. 26.)

The human condition is the subject of the images and reflections that follow: "a little lower than the angels," made of dust and bound for dust, but promised, nevertheless, an eternal future. The ironies of that condition in our own postmodern times are summed up well in one of David's most eloquent themes, the relationship of man and horse. Those specific sculptures speak for themselves, and gain by Harry's words. But David's own reflections on the equestrian theme illuminate the series very well:

In the city where I grew up there was a large park in the middle of which stood a bronze equestrian monument. One of dozens, I'm sure, that had been warehoused out to the still friendly colonies of the shrinking British Empire. That park was in fact full of anachronistic markers of imperial history, a virtual scrapyard of bronze. But to a kid from the modern urban landscape, starved for some kind of beauty other than what was on offer, these oxidized ruins were the very foundations of civilization.

Eventually I caught on that these monuments were widely

considered at best passé, at worst mildly offensive. But before the view was clouded by the smoke-screens of history, through the eyes of a child I saw these sculptures in their most abstract and essential forms, simultaneously full and free of narrative. This first impression has stayed with me.

Nowhere more so than in my perennial return to the equestrian theme. Framed by reflections on its political and military past, I occasionally inquire after this troubled partnership of man and beast as they wander about the imagination—a vivid motif in search of a better story.

David has said, reflecting on his work:

My sculptures, before they are anything else, are manifestations of fitful waking dreams, narratives whole and smashed, images, ideas, all distilled through the moments of time and the particular resistance of matter.

“Narratives whole and smashed” is a good description of the landscape through which contemporary Christians move. Aware on

the one hand of the great overarching narrative of the Christian gospel, we nevertheless find its wreckage everywhere: in Christian Kitsch, self-indulgent worship, health-and-wealth preachers, Tea Party politics, and the capitulation of whole Christian communions to the latest cultural fad.

The task of this journal has from its beginning been to explore ways of recovering, thinking about, and living out the Christian gospel in such a post-Christian landscape of smashed images. The wide cultural knowledge—and quirky humour—of Dal Schindell has been a great asset in that task. The images and words that follow, from David and Harry Robinson, powerfully carry out that task in a different way—perhaps best described in the words of another quirky artist, the American poet Emily Dickinson:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise.

The words and images that follow are very fine examples of telling the truth slantwise. Both they—and the visual legacy of Dal Schindell’s “publicity”—have been a “fine surprise” to those who encountered them.

HOW BEAUTIFUL THE FEET

I run up the central stairs of Regent College and catch my breath at an art installation I pass on my way to a second-floor office—Vancouver sculptor David Robinson’s chalk-white piece: a preacher, pathetically thin and apparently naked, boxed in by a pulpit which is, as it turns out, also a cross. The piece is titled *Speak*, but I give it my own title as I pass: *So, You Want to Be a Preacher?*

What particularly draws my eyes are the long, narrow feet dangling below the pulpit (size 12, triple A, I think), feet that are painfully, vulnerably bare. Every vein is distinct, the feet bony and chalky. Normally, the speaker’s feet would be encased in well-polished leather, and perhaps draped by swishing robes; here, they speak of mortality and fragility. I find these feet throat-catchingly beautiful. In the pathos of these bare feet, the artist insists that we remember the preacher’s humanity.

As I slow my own hurried steps to regard these feet, I am aware that just across the stairway landing is a reproduction of a section of the Grünewald altarpiece, the original of which is installed in the Unterlinden Museum in Colmar, France. Painted by Maria Gabankova, the reproduction is clearly visible from where I stand in front of the Robinson sculpture. The altarpiece is famously richly coloured and distressingly realistic. Again, it is the feet I focus on: the twisted, tortured feet of the crucified Christ, wide and calloused, peasant feet that have never known shoes. These feet do not dangle; instead, they are cruelly skewered by a huge spike to a crude foot-rest mounted on a cross that is bowed by its terrible burden.

The bleeding feet of Jesus force me to see Robinson’s preacher’s feet in a new way. The suffering preacher in his pulpit stands with the One whose story he is telling.

I realize I notice these feet, now, because I also notice my own. For years and years I scarcely thought about my feet—then, quite painfully, they began to speak to me. The podiatrist shows me a model, explaining the source of my pain, and I note the intricacy of the bone structure that has supported my comings and goings all these years. How beautiful they are, I think, those slender bones. How tragically slender and multi-jointed. How beautifully crafted and wonderfully made. No doubt Jesus felt such wonder (and more, for he created those structures in the first place) as he washed his disciples’ feet that night just before Good Friday.

And now I am beginning to grasp something, something that slides away even as I try to articulate it: feet—Jesus’s feet, Robinson’s preacher’s, mine; the feet of the many Regent alumni who are carrying good news as they dig gardens, raise children, make meals; as they write poems, make films, tell stories; as they preach the Word, plant churches, teach, sit in government and corporate offices—all are insistent reminders that we carry out our tasks in a vulnerable humanity shared with each other, and with Christ.

In the incarnation, God came and walked among us, feeling the warmth of the good earth, the tiredness of a day’s standing at the workbench, or of walking in the thick dust of Palestinian roads. As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews puts it, “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses” (4:15 ESV). Because the feet of Jesus were once nailed to a cross, we are connected not only to earth but also to God’s very self, drawn into the life and love of the Trinity. All that touches us also touches God.

So I pause at the top of the stairs at Regent and look from the cruciform preacher to the Crucified Lord and back again. “How beautiful are the feet . . .” I whisper, “How very beautiful the feet.”



Maxine Hancock is Professor Emerita of Interdisciplinary Studies and Spiritual Theology at Regent College.

Editor's Note: This piece by Maxine Hancock was first published in The Regent World vol. 21, no. 2 (Summer 2009), and is now displayed on the wall beside the sculpture Speak (see next page) at Regent College.



Speak

Here is portrayed the conscious self-image of the preacher, arms hanging helplessly at his side, feet dangling helplessly, reaching for some footing which does not exist: the ground has been cut out from under him. The face portrays the inner sense of weakness, which must be disguised as soon as he opens his mouth.

Preaching is a form of public crucifixion, by people who have committed themselves to silence.

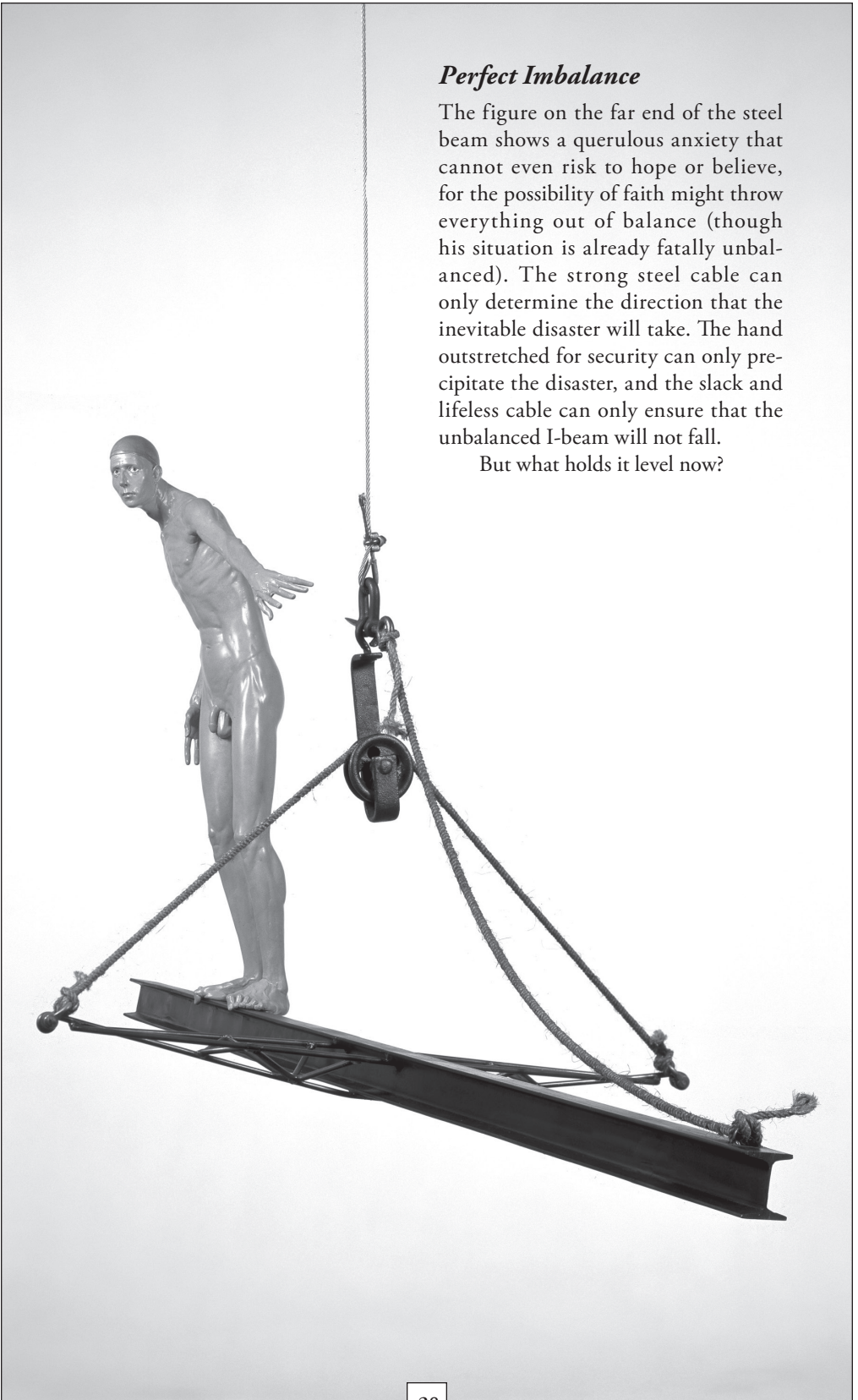
It can't be done without the speaker pretending to be someone he is not, and without the congregation either choosing to be deceived, or contemplating the foolishness of what is being said.

It seems a hopeless and helpless situation from which to proclaim the redemption of humanity, this awareness that the man who speaks to the city must do so out of silence and weakness, and take pride only in his utter humiliation.

Perfect Imbalance

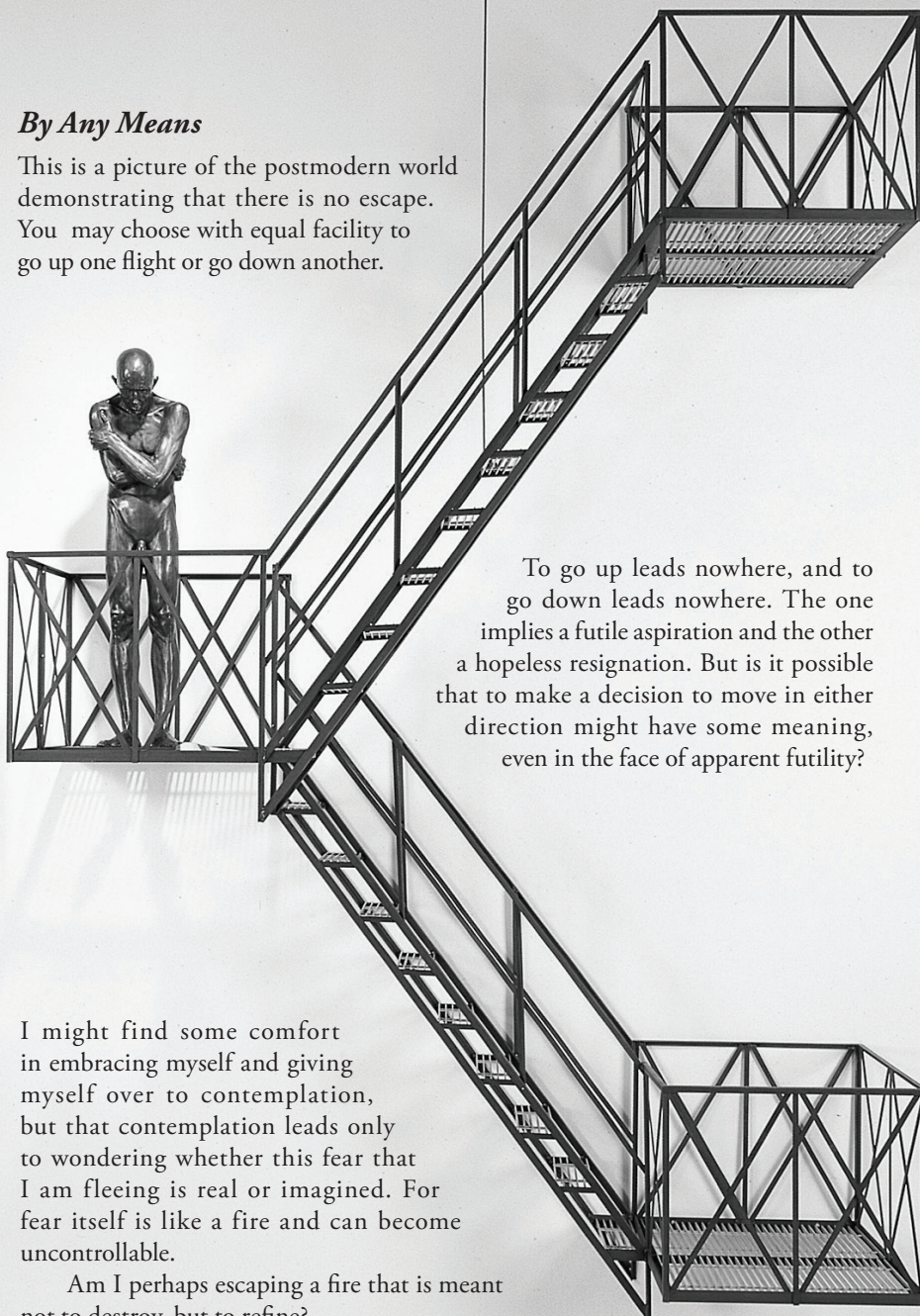
The figure on the far end of the steel beam shows a querulous anxiety that cannot even risk to hope or believe, for the possibility of faith might throw everything out of balance (though his situation is already fatally unbalanced). The strong steel cable can only determine the direction that the inevitable disaster will take. The hand outstretched for security can only precipitate the disaster, and the slack and lifeless cable can only ensure that the unbalanced I-beam will not fall.

But what holds it level now?



By Any Means

This is a picture of the postmodern world demonstrating that there is no escape. You may choose with equal facility to go up one flight or go down another.



To go up leads nowhere, and to go down leads nowhere. The one implies a futile aspiration and the other a hopeless resignation. But is it possible that to make a decision to move in either direction might have some meaning, even in the face of apparent futility?

I might find some comfort in embracing myself and giving myself over to contemplation, but that contemplation leads only to wondering whether this fear that I am fleeing is real or imagined. For fear itself is like a fire and can become uncontrollable.

Am I perhaps escaping a fire that is meant not to destroy, but to refine?



Device and Desire

This is a structure in which the inevitable disastrous consequence is awaiting the moment of fulfillment: relaxing for a moment would have fatal consequences.

All your strength is taken up not in holding things together but in resisting the inevitability of failure.



For The Moment

The reality of our lives is that ends seldom meet spontaneously. Nevertheless, sometimes two conflicting realities have to be joined. And though the two realities belong exclusively to us, they seem to have no natural compatibility; nothing draws them together except our personal necessity. Our deeply personal involvement creates the very tension that makes joining the ends almost impossible.

The stress of our lives is that we almost succeed in joining the two ends, and live as though we have done so, yet know that without our constant determination the ends will fly apart and our whole world will collapse. My question then: Do I abandon the struggle and let my world collapse, living among the fragments of what might have been? Or do I determine to live with the tension in the hope that ultimately the ends will meet and hold?

Is this figure at prayer?



Equestrian (1991)

First you take power:

You are in control.

You give the commands.

Then the power entwines you.

You become what you never intended to be!

You must go where you have not intended to go!

And you must wonder, how did this happen?

Equestrian (2000)

Confronted by art, you sometimes know exactly what it means, but only because you know beyond knowing. Art is able to portray that which lies deep in our subconscious awareness. A horse is endowed with brute strength and a brooding sociopathic intelligence. To harness that strength and domesticate that intelligence has been one of the great delights of humanity. But the riding crop is powerless against the primal strength and brute reality of this unharnessed power, which, with terrified bravery, we attempt to domesticate.





Interval

Wretched as I am, who will deliver me from this body? We battle with ourselves because we are all we have, and are in detention to the body and its demands. Who I long to be I am not. This body of death is part of me, yet still I am not hopelessly locked into the body. I must find in myself an existence that is inseparable from the primitive nature that has all the strength and drive.

There is in me, in flesh and in spirit, in sin and in freedom, both an inseparable relationship between myself and myself—and an inability to distinguish between myself and myself!

I am forced to acknowledge the wretchedness of my situation: my awareness of the reality of self-denial without knowing which self I am denying; the despair of knowing I need no judge to condemn me, for I can do it myself.

William Faulkner once described this struggle: “A human striving against its own nature leaving the characters not blameless or harmless but destroyed and in the very destruction humanized.”

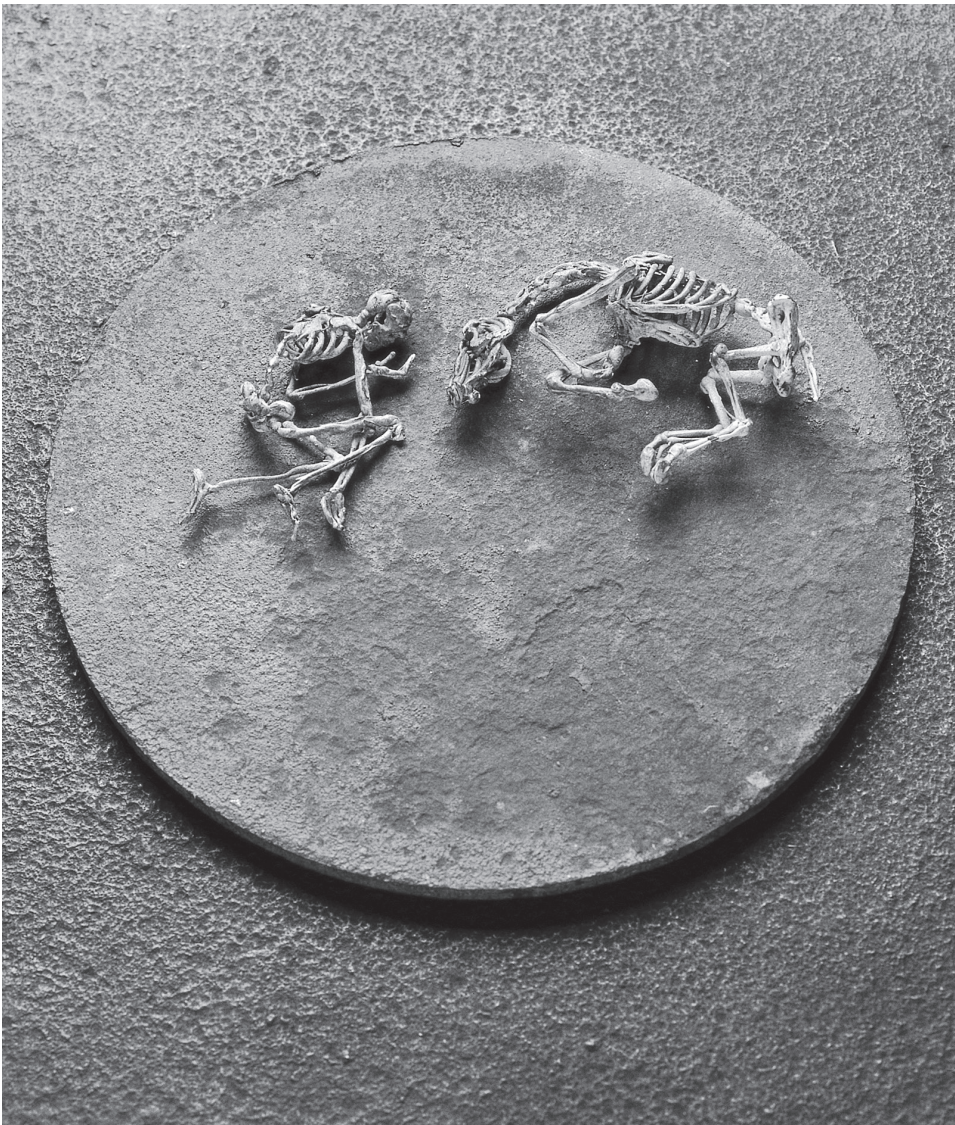
Unsolicited Proposal for a Public Monument

One of our more deeply satisfying imaginary relationships is to a horse: picture the full-dress parade, the cavalry charge, the lonely ride into the westering sun. So in many world-class cities great men from history are memorialized as triumphant, riding a horse whose magnificence rivals that of their rider.

This sculpture records the other side of that history. All that remains are the skeletons of the horse and its unknown and unrecognized rider. Perhaps the statue is a rebuke to history that has too soon forgotten—but perhaps it shows only the failure of one individual to recognize the full extent of his ultimate insignificance.

There is a magnificent equestrian statue of Charles I with his head not yet cut off. So public monuments don't tell the whole story. The only lasting memorial lies in the sands.

Those who find the skeletal remains in the desert can only wonder.





Artifice and Edifice

The necessary harness of technology is suspended on human flesh: he must use the technology to fulfill his task, but abandon it to find his meaning.

A pilot sits in the cockpit of a hundred tons of metal, travelling at a thousand kilometres per hour, at a height where only a jet engine can draw breath. The technology is steel, animated by electronic genius, built at astronomical cost. But the pilot, an easily replaceable part, cannot find meaning in the superhuman capacity he controls. The meaning comes only when he escapes that technology of power and finds the friend, the partner, the child, and the story which transcends all the strength and capacity of the technology, which traps him in a cruciform.

Does he resign himself to the burden of technology? Does technology submit itself to service? Does he become part of his technology? Or does his technology become part of the man?

Circuitous Precipice

We can imagine things we cannot say. And sculpture can show us those things beyond our vocabulary.

No formula of physics can explain the utter impossibility of the situation in which we find ourselves. Physics can only prove gloomy predictions about the outcome of our present predicament.

That inescapable human predicament cannot account for its origins or foresee its end.

So what are we to conclude if the predicted disaster is indefinitely postponed?



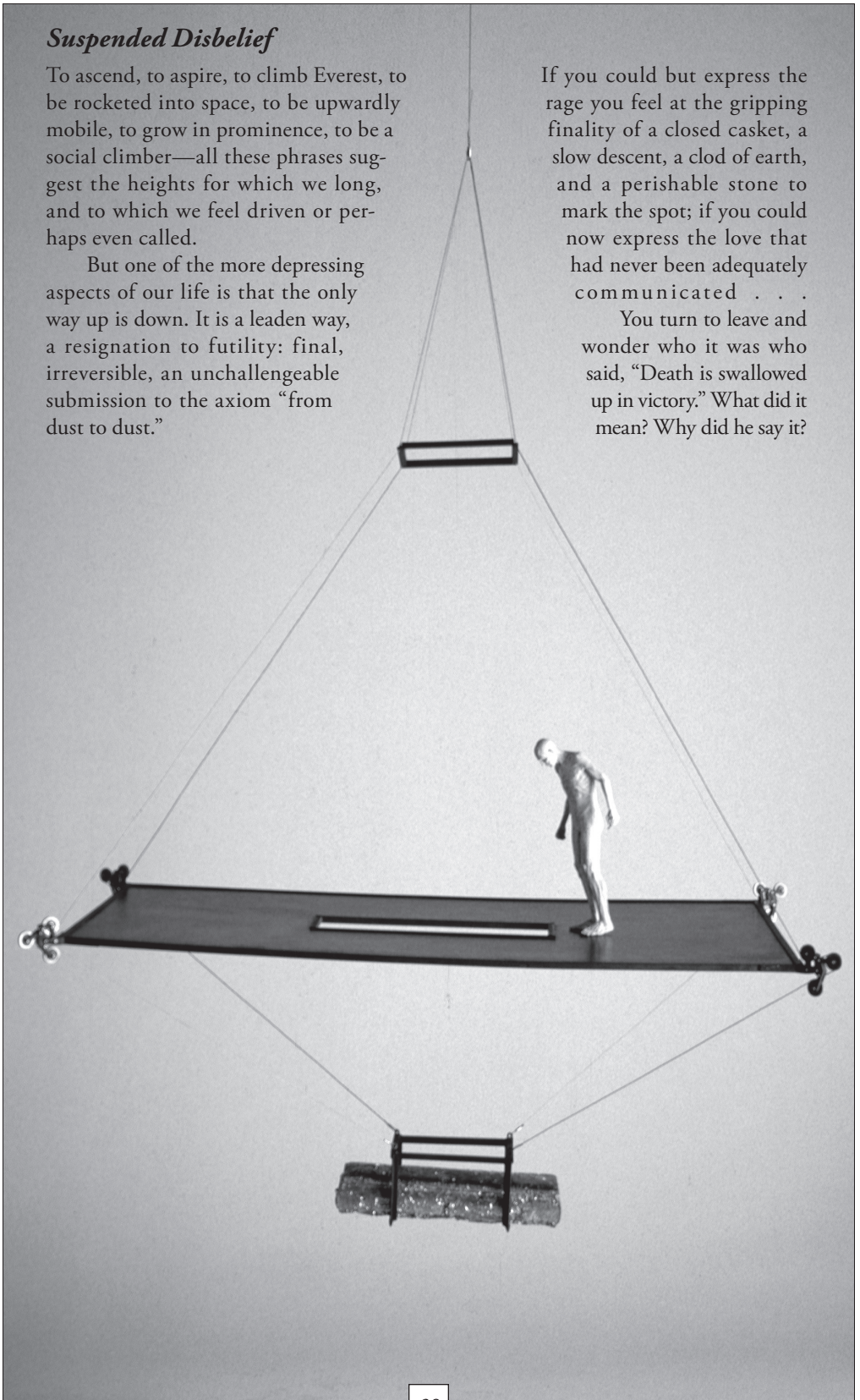
Suspended Disbelief

To ascend, to aspire, to climb Everest, to be rocketed into space, to be upwardly mobile, to grow in prominence, to be a social climber—all these phrases suggest the heights for which we long, and to which we feel driven or perhaps even called.

But one of the more depressing aspects of our life is that the only way up is down. It is a leaden way, a resignation to futility: final, irreversible, an unchallengeable submission to the axiom “from dust to dust.”

If you could but express the rage you feel at the gripping finality of a closed casket, a slow descent, a clod of earth, and a perishable stone to mark the spot; if you could now express the love that had never been adequately communicated . . .

You turn to leave and wonder who it was who said, “Death is swallowed up in victory.” What did it mean? Why did he say it?





Enlightenment

The menial work of chopping wood and carrying water can't solve the impossible problem of how to deliver it.

There is an impossible barrier before me, but my hands are already full.

I am burdened with an essential commodity that I cannot deliver. Between me and those who are dying of thirst stands a barrier that cannot be passed. Thus the growing despair of their need, and the growing frustration of my inability to deliver.

We know that we have to deliver the water, but it is impossible to know fully why it is so important. This realization brings us flat up against the total futility of what we are trying to do, and the total insignificance of what we have to offer.



Font

(An Advent sermon, with this sculpture as text)

The days of Advent have come in this hemisphere, and will take us through the darkest time of the year. The season is focused on “the Coming” of the one who was once judged, condemned, and crucified by the world, but who will come again to put the world under his judgment.

In that moment the elusive and hidden reality of Truth will be pronounced with carefully measured words and will smash the frail and tenuous structures of all our imagined self-justification. Like the very words through which the world was created, these words will bring the whole of creation and the whole of history to their grand finale.

Standing defenseless and naked, anticipating those words, totally vulnerable, we are compelled to abandon the arrogant and greedy grammar of our own self-sufficiency and self-justification. We are covered no longer by our feared but chosen darkness,

in which we have carefully obscured our one-time innocence. Stripped of such garments we find ourselves naked, not the nakedness of shame but the nakedness of innocence. No longer are we driven to hide by reason of the shame of our nakedness but bathed in the reflected armour of light. No longer are we the children of the night but children who belong to the light.

We are starkly naked before the eyes of One whose vision penetrates the body of flesh to bring light to all the secret recesses of our hearts, one who has catalogued all the good, the wayward, and the perverse desires of our hearts. Our deepest secrets are discovered and graciously uncovered by the one who is to be our judge. Our life is to be deeply infiltrated by the powerful detergent of grace. This in order that we may seek from within our lives to make a total response to the love by which we have been captured and taken as slaves: made captive to a freedom we could never know.

So we stand in our nakedness without shame or the compulsion to hide, proceeding as we must through the mystery of time and space, to a place outside the boundaries of time and space: a place far beyond the range of imagination, and yet a place where one day we will arrive and know that it is the place where it all began.

A Christian finds his freedom not primarily by smashing the real or imagined yoke of his oppression.

But rather by choosing to live under the yoke of his Covenant:

A yoke which commits him
to earn his bread by the sweat of
his brow,
to find but one day of Rest following
six days of labour;
to live under the chosen yoke of a
lifelong covenant of marriage;
to accept the terms of the covenant
of Righteousness whereby

We stand naked in the presence of God.

Clothed only in the armour of light, we are prepared

not to hide in the works of darkness,
yoked to the community in which
we are required to love our
neighbour,
in a body that is to be a temple for
the Holy Spirit.

The future of the world is supposed to belong to those who smash the yoke of man's oppression; who smash the confines of our sexuality; who by some deep addiction attempt to smash the supposed tyranny of our mortality:

Breaking free from the tyranny of
domestic (family) life

Breaking out of the imprisonment
of addiction

Breaking free from the tyranny of
ignorance by imagining that they
know it all!

Supposedly you smash your way to freedom and break the yoke in an interminable struggle in which darkness struggles with darkness and the winners and the losers are both defeated.

Light comes into our world with the
discovery

That to be poor is to be rich.

In darkness we discover light.

In weakness we discover strength.

In death we find life.

We find that the child has what the
adult has lost.

To walk in the light means that our nakedness is exposed, that we no longer hide in shame but are clothed with the armour of light, in a land where innocence is no longer despised.

The media keep us up to date on the struggle of darkness with darkness. But in that dark wilderness we are summoned to prepare the way of the Lord.

The figure before you is to remind you that in the matter of Christian discipleship, you may choose to be under the yoke of Christ, or to be enslaved to "the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world" (Gal. 4:9).

You find that your body is most at
ease in the form of a cross.

You find yourself with only a very
precipitous hold on the planet.

The natural position of your body is
with your head bowed.

Your nakedness relieves you from
the vanity of maintaining a life-
long deception.

You are utterly dependent on
finding a source of water, and by
devoting yourself to sharing it,
you find it to be inexhaustible.

The Yoke that you choose to bear
in this world may in fact be the
technology by which you are
lifted to heaven.

The yoke as your chosen burden
may indeed be the means of dis-
covering what is described as per-
fect freedom.

A preacher tries to shape and portray with the elusive substance of words a passing glimpse of reality, while longing to be able to shape with words a picture that might last a hundred generations. But the preacher can only envy the sculptor and his medium. **X**