



MOTH & THE FLAME
BEGINNING OF THE BEAT

I

The Radiant Sun of which we speak, never sets;
Our World is upheld by its Light.

The past forms the basis of our present life and the intricate relationships we have with everything and everyone. If we consider our evolution from a spiritual perspective, we may perceive a slow but inexorable progress from the darkness of ignorance towards the fully conscious Light of our real essence. Each is placed in circumstances uniquely critical to awakening, but, like Sleeping Beauty, our soul awaits her Prince—or in other words, the divine spark—as I would ultimately discover.

My parents were farmers and artists; our berry and vegetable fields were caringly wrested from the unspoiled forests of Vancouver Island, with mountains rising on three sides. On the 6th of January, 1944, while unloading 100 lb. sacks of potatoes off the back of the pick-up truck, Mum went into labor, and I was born, joining my older brother Godfrey, stepbrother John and *Happy*, our family collie dog.



*John, Arran, Godfrey, Rupert & Gwen, with Happy (dog)
Mountain Valley Farm, Glenora, Vancouver Island - 1946*

For a while we lived in a hand-hewn log-house overlooking the Gold-stream Valley, most fortunate to live in proximity with forests, streams, ocean, lakes, fresh air and mountains. Nature was everywhere. Few places on the planet can rival the remaining magic, yet-unlogged spaces of Vancouver Island.

Recollections of My Indian Career, the gilded leather-bound autobiography of great-grand-father, J.M.. Cripps, fired my vivid child's imagination, its musty pages detailing life in colonial India from 1839-1878.

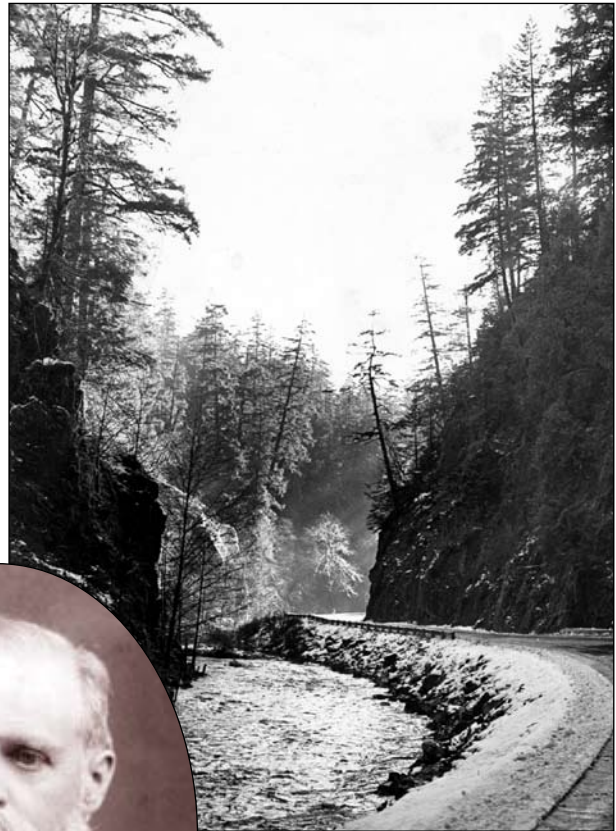
MOTH & THE FLAME - BEGINNING OF THE BEAT



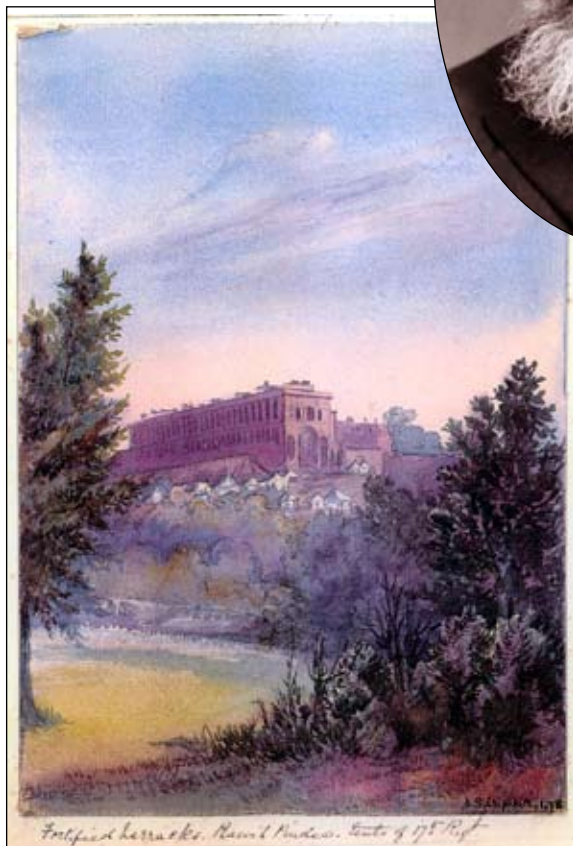
Nature Boy, 1949

Goldstream
River

‘...and the
laughing
waters laughed
upon their
way...’



Lt. General J.M. Cripps



Fortified barracks, Rawalpindi,
17th Regiment
Watercolor by Agnes Cripps, 1872

Only thirteen copies of *Recollections* were ever printed; each illustrated by exquisite original watercolors by Agnes, the General’s daughter—my father’s mother.

She painted tombs, temples, bullock carts, rivers, fortresses, ports-of-call and mountain passes in India during the British Raj. Grandmother Agnes, who passed away before my birth, was born in Peshawar—India’s wild North-western Frontier (now part of modern Pakistan). The other twelve copies of the book are now untraceable.

In my child's mind's eye, India's mystery beckoned, like a distant voice from some faded dream. This, and an illustrated *The Jungle Book / Mowgli*, by Rudyard Kipling, were my favorite reads. In summer I would tan so darkly that my parents would call me 'Little Hindu', which to me was a high badge of honor.

In my eleventh year I was sent to summer Bible camp. Religion was a huge mystery to this otherwise unchurched boy, soon to be immersed in resounding sermons, hell-fire warnings, salvation's promise, verse memorization and the love of Jesus.

One day the minister called me to his office and asked, 'Do you want to be saved from eternal damnation in the name of our Savior?' Scared, I said, 'Yes!' 'Then you are saved!' I was thus dismissed, somewhat underwhelmed, for I had imagined salvation as supernaturally tangible, and



Bolan Pass, North Western Frontier
 Watercolor by Agnes Cripps, circa 1870

momentarily mourned the vacuum. Nevertheless, a natural prattle with the Divine began in my heart. The old hymn *He Walks With Me* swam in my consciousness as a form of reality, but my askings were mostly confined to finding lost marbles or winning first place in the race.

I felt called to the ministry, seeking a door to God. Learning of my zeal, Dad took me to the pristine forest behind the farm, a place of extreme beauty and peace. ‘Arra-boy, this is our church; this is our cathedral,’ he gestured with a sweep of hand as we stood overlooking the verdant Goldstream Canyon at our feet, while fir and cedars towered above. A whisper of distant waterfalls and wind caressed the moment, imprinting it. I then entered his faith of nature-communion. Organized religion, its institutions and ministers, he felt, often divided people by race, nation, outer observances and dogma. When pressed on the subject, he quietly maintained that churchianity imprisoned, rather than freed the spirit. He was not an atheist. In one of his songs he wrote:

*The time will never come / When He will turn His face /
From rich or poor, or close the door / On any creed or race...©*

One day two boyhood friends and I stood quiet in chest-high ferns in another glade of that sacred forest. An enchanting ringing seemed to come from everywhere, within, nowhere, and now-here—the Player unseen. When asked if they could hear it too, my pals looked at me blankly. In the years to come I would discover others who listened deeply to this same creation-tone. Wordsworth glorified *sermons in stones and books in rivulets*; Thoreau attuned to his *distant drummer*; and Plato listened deeply to the *Music of the Spheres*.

Mum loved the feel of the earth; a connoisseur of unnoticed beauties—the subtle patterns in a stone, the color of a leaf, a tiny wildflower springing from emerald moss, water dancing in sunlight, maidenhair ferns waving on a wet canyon wall; she had the gift of enabling others to see as she saw. Following deer paths through the forest was always an education as she pointed out the wildflowers and plants of the region, giving us both their common and Latin names. As well, she would bake and take cookies to the abandoned elderly, allowing me to tag along on her merciful errands. Her strength of character and artistry inspired many, although she rarely suffered fools gladly. We felt the strength of her disciplining hand!

Dad raised unique varieties of vegetables, berries, and fruits. Renouncing modern chemicals and mechanization, he discovered simple, economical methods to strengthen soil fertility and the health of plants. The message of his life could be distilled into a single, simple teaching—certainly one to guide my future path: ***‘Always leave the soil better than you found it.’***

Extolling the virtues of the lowly earthworm and organic mulch, he wrote in *Sawdust Is My Slave* (1951), *Earthworms, in the Utopia I had created for them, worked day and night to improve my soil by burrowing through it, digesting and spreading humus... I couldn't lose, for when they died, I still had their remains to provide my plants with rich plant food... I had never had a slave before, except my wife, but this didn't put me far ahead for I was her devoted slave also...*¹



Mum

When not toiling the land, his spirit soared through music and verse. Lyrics for hundreds of songs, poems and articles flowed from his pen, despite an inability to read music (he would hum his melodies to a pianist who would translate them to musical notes). Here's one, *This Earth is Mine*:

*This Earth is mine to have and hold, this dust beneath my feet.
God gave me hands to cherish it, to help the hungry eat;
And if I treat it as my friend, ten times it will repay;
The sweat, the toil, my good red soil, this Earth is mine today.*

*This earth is mine to have and hold, it lies beneath my feet;
I know that on the summer dust, the steam of rain is sweet;
And when I'm weary, old and worn, I know that I can say,*

'I'll pass it on to other hands, more fertile than today.'

It waits for me with loving arms, this Earth is mine that day. ©

In *A Guy Like Me*, he gives thanks for the blessings of the land:

*Across the plain, my yellow grain / lies restless as the sea;
How could this all be given to a guy like me?*

*To fill my need I sowed the seed, and now repaid I'll be;
How could this all be given to a guy like me?*

*The seasons change with splendor, my ceiling is the sky;
The earth my master, cruel and tender, happy man am I!*

*The sun, the rain, the wind, the snow, the rapture to be free,
How could this all be given to a guy like me?*

*Two arms that gladly share my toil, or hold me tenderly;
And this has all been given to a guy like me. ©*

Perhaps to initiate his twelve-year-old son into one of the more questionable rites of manhood, Dad took me hunting one night on a backfield of the farm. ‘Pit-lamping’ involves blinding a deer in the high-beams of a vehicle’s headlights, thus allowing the ‘brave’ hunter to shoot the defenseless creature. On this particular night we startled a family of four deer dining in the strawberry field, their eyes glowing eerily in the glare of our lights. Dad put his 12-gauge shotgun through the window and blasted the nearest animal, filling the cab with a deafening roar and the smell of gunpowder. The wounded deer leaped away into the darkness. The next morning, a few hundred yards from the shooting, lay the stilled doe. When her belly was slit open, a remarkably human-looking fetus slid out. It was pretty shocking, and the smell of evisceration was awful. Overcome with remorse, Dad never again touched his extensive gun collection (he was a captain in the Scottish Infantry in WW1), nor did he eat venison again. In fact, nine years later, his tenderheartedness led him to avoid eating the flesh of any animal until he died in robust health at eighty.

Goldstream Berry Paradise—our farm—was sold the following year. Along with an idyllic childhood, I was parted from my beloved cat. From the time he was a fuzzy little kitten, I had trained him to turn like a whirling dervish whenever I circled my finger in front of his face, thus earning him the name ‘Dizzy.’ We were closer than words could convey, and followed me everywhere. I had never known real grief before, but the enormity of the loss of the farm, the blue-green mountains and my beloved Dizzy, hit me like a ton of bricks. On parting, I wept uncontrollably, while Dizzy yowled in the field, vainly trying to follow our car as it rolled down the tree-lined Humpback Road for the last time. Dizzy was left to fend alone on the abandoned farm, as I too would have to learn to survive far away in the concrete jungles of L.A., San Francisco, and New York City.

From our pristine island, we traveled by ferry across the Strait, then by train, far south to smoggy Hollywood, California, where Dad pursued his musical



With ‘Dizzy’ in a two-room log cabin which I built in the forest behind the farm with an axe and handsaw (1956).

dreams. At thirteen I learned to my dismay that violent gangs controlled the schools and streets, where the wary and the strong survived. No fan of gangs and not particularly large or strong, I learned a little Okinawan jujitsu for self-defense, which taught that even someone small or weak could use the momentum of someone much larger and stronger against them. In grade eight, I had only taken a few lessons before becoming the unprovoked object of attack by the toughest gang leader in Le Conte Jr. High, a very tough school on the edge of East L.A. When the bully ended up unconscious on the ground without my having to strike a blow, I sensed a hidden life-force, called *chi*, or *prana*. After this unusual experience, the superstitious gang left me alone, to my great relief.

We settled into our rented palm-shaded hacienda in the Hollywood Hills. One hot afternoon as I was watering the plants, a lean, orange-white tomcat walked up the front steps toward me. Beneath the grime was a remarkable resemblance to my long-lost friend. ‘Dizzy, is that you?’ I whispered, circling my finger in front of his face. To my utter amazement, that scraggly cat started to turn around in circles. Next, he was purring and blissfully rubbing my leg. Sweeping him into my arms, I ran to the house, yelling, ‘Look, look, it’s Dizzy!’ Somehow, he had crossed the Juan de Fuca Strait, and traveled 1,500 miles overland to find his boy in the middle of a city of millions. What a story Dizzy could have told! Who says animals don’t have souls?

The following song, *The Lord Looks After His Own*, was selected as the theme-piece for *Perry*, a feature Disney film, on the condition that all ‘Lord’ references be deleted, but Dad refused to change what he felt was a true inspiration—and thus the big time passed him by.

*The chipmunk is lucky, he doesn't know it,
Chews on a nut, but didn't grow it...
The goose flies south, his mate beside him,
He has no map nor course to guide him...*

*Though winter creeps down and down the mountains,
Turns the waterfalls to crystal fountains, the Lord looks after his own...*

*Gone is the glory of the sun, gone is the summer rain,
Though only blue notes fill the air, lovely spring will come again.*

*Though life will bring you tears and sorrow,
All men will share that great tomorrow,
The Lord looks after his own. ©*

—Rupert Stephens

At fifteen, my secure, trusting world abruptly ended: mum and dad separated, Godfrey roared off on his Harley motorcycle for New Orleans and high adventure, while my school grades went from an almost perfect score in grade nine to straight F's in grade ten, with the exception of an 'A' in art. Confused and dispirited, my once-together family scattered to the winds, and I decided to follow my brother in the way of the artist. For several desperate years, while spewing forth paintings and verse, I identified with the Beat generation and its icons. The Beat and the bohemian were rebels against the norms and limits of established society, predating the hippie era by several years. Painters, sculptors, poets, writers, jugglers, jazz musicians, anarchists, scoundrels, existentialists, drug experimenters—all sought something not quite definable, yearning to break through the self-prison to find, to know, to dance with the muse. I absorbed the best art I could from my contemporaries in an effort to find my style, if not my self. Art school was not in the cards; mine was the hard-knock variety. At seventeen, one of my poems appeared in *The Mendicant Poetry Journal*; by twenty, several one-man shows of paintings were under my belt—but nothing came close to satisfying great restlessness and a growing spiritual hunger.

Substance abuse and excess characterized the sixties. Scrawled on Venice and North Beach alleyways were its pagan slogans: *Art is Love is God and Blessed, blessed oblivion...It's Cool & Cool is everything!* Rebellion, anarchy, booze, drugs—soft, hard, psychedelic, uppers, downers, promiscuity, madness and drunkenness were cool, and God was 'dead' unless He or She or It existed as a reflection somewhere in a riff of Bird's alto sax or a moment in tripping poetry. The most memorable mescaline insights were back-door, trap-door entries to lower astral, telepathic, ancestral, animal, comic book, surreal stream-of-consciousness places, where matter thinned just enough to allow some flotsam and jetsam of paranormal awareness to slip through. What about the price of entry? How many of my peers had I seen consumed by drugs and alcohol, haggard, dragged away and locked up, violated and forgotten?

*I have seen the best minds of my generation
destroyed by madness, starving, hysterical, naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn
looking for an angry fix...*

HOWL & Other Poems, by Allen Ginsberg

There were some bright lights as well as black holes in this cultural galaxy. Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*, Paul Reps' *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*,² Aldous Huxley's *Doors of Perception*, Gurdjieff's *All And Everything* and

Meetings With Remarkable Men, Alan Watts, Kerouac, Gary Snyder and others, to name a few, helped broaden my limited horizons.

I met a few spiritual seekers—although apparently I was not—and befriended the reclusive Eden Abhez, author of the song *Nature Boy* made world-famous by crooner Nat King Cole. Eden was the first vegetarian I'd ever met, part of a handful of health and fitness devotees from the Hollywood Hills, including well-known Gypsy Boots and Al Jacobson, founder of the natural food company, *Back to Eatin'*. Yet every hope, each oasis, turned into an empty mirage. The sun might have been rising for others, but mine was a furtive life in self-imposed shadows. Often broke, I slept on the beach, drunk on cheap wine or high on drugs, sometimes crawling into a cardboard box to mitigate the winter cold. When hungry, I ate discarded food, or begged. Whenever I could, I painted. Misery was my companion, relieved and exacerbated by illusive excesses, a course which took but two years to break body, mind, and spirit. Like Rimbaud, I tried stringing garlands between the stars and dance, but could sustain neither the tightrope nor the frenzy. Having known hunger, poverty, danger, and addiction, by seventeen I was a haggard alcoholic and drug-dazed atheist railing against the Author of pain. One day dragged into the next, as mind grew black as Poe's raven. Jimmy-the-Beard, a derelict poet, appeared on the boardwalk, taunting me with a line from e.e. cummings: 'How do you like your blue-eyed boy, Mr. Death?' And he walked on, cackling.

With no further will to continue my misery, I dragged my feet across the cloying sand and entered the waves on Venice Beach. Pounding, chilling surf frothed up to my neck, push-pulling my rag-doll body through the vortex. Soon, no more torment, I thought, before succumbing to the cold, turbulent sea.

As I slipped beneath the waves, inexplicable serenity began to glow within, coupled with an urgent beckoning to discover life's purpose and begin anew. It was not too late! I struggled to disengage from the powerful undercurrents, and emerged at the foaming edge. Shivering, I staggered across the expanse of cold gray sand and fog. Tormented, yes. But quitter? *Never!*

1. *Sawdust Is My Slave* in its entirety can be downloaded from www.naturespath.com

2. I met the elderly Paul Reps in Vancouver in the seventies. A close friendship ensued which lasted until his death. Paul confided to me that he had received initiation from the great Indian sage Sant Kirpal Singh in the early sixties.