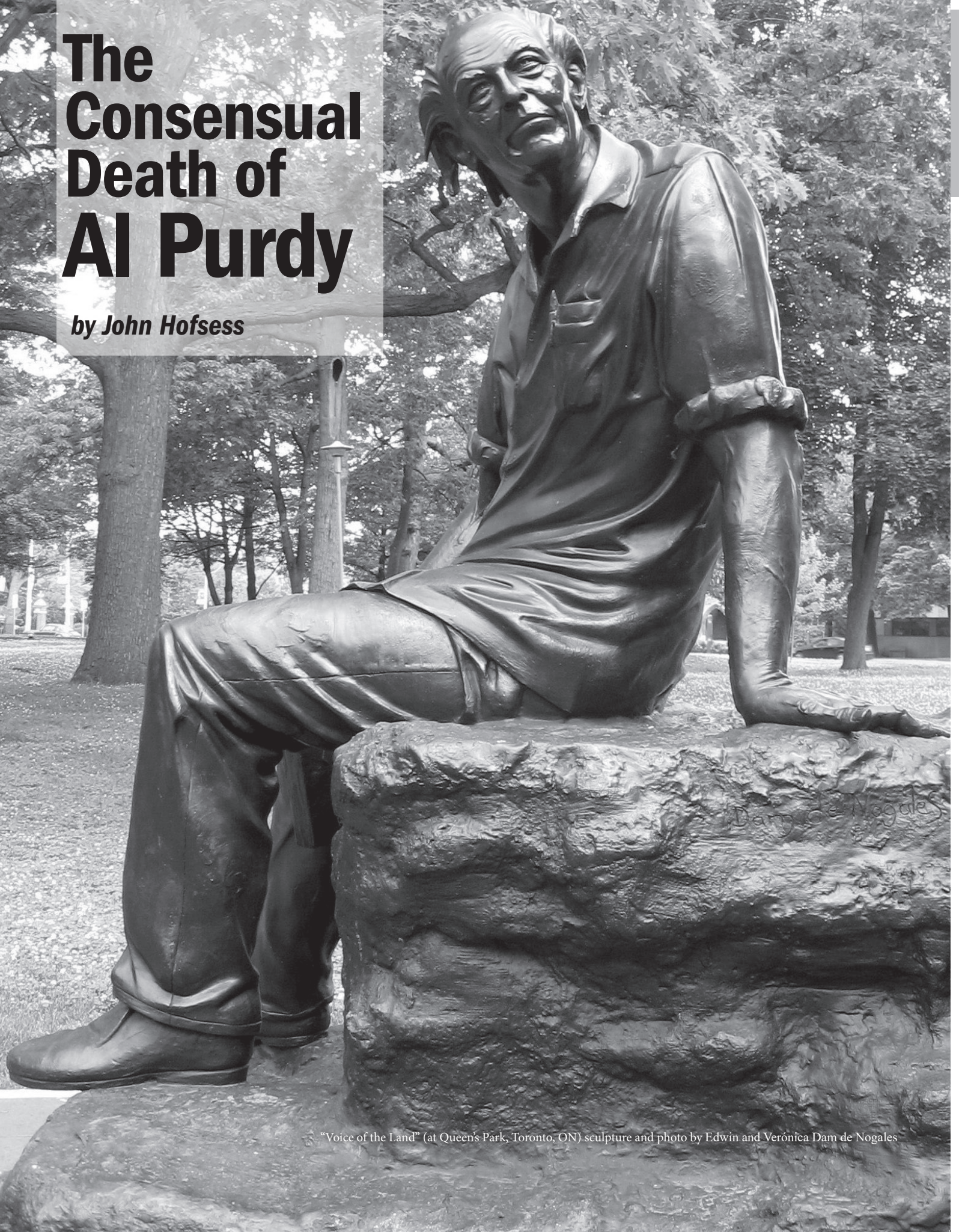


# The Consensual Death of Al Purdy

*by John Hofsess*



"Voice of the Land" (at Queen's Park, Toronto, ON) sculpture and photo by Edwin and Verónica Dam de Nogales

*What shall we say to Death  
with Yes defeated by No  
and only the winter of loving left  
only the snow?*<sup>1</sup>

“**Al Purdy**, a lanky writer whose brash, freewheeling ways masked a love for language that produced 33 volumes of poetry, died on Friday at his winter home in Sidney, on Vancouver Island. He was 81.

*Arguing about Yeats and tinkering with lines of verse to the end, Mr. Purdy died on a bed cluttered with books and papers...*<sup>2</sup>

”

That is how *The New York Times* began its lengthy obituary in honour of Canada’s “unofficial poet laureate.” The words may sound believable but many of the details are false. *I was there*: there was no mention of Yeats, let alone arguments; no tinkering with any lines of verse; there wasn’t a single book on his bed.

At one time in his life, Al might correctly have been described as “lanky”: “a gangly, 6-foot-3-inch, 200-pound man” as the *Times* writer called him, but during the last year of his life, Al lost much of his weight; his face was gaunt, his body shriveled.

As Al once put it: “Everyone gets gypped sooner or later by death or disease or what’s inside them because the world is that sort of place.”<sup>3</sup>

The *Times*’ story appears to be derived (but not credited) from one published in the *Toronto Star* two days earlier:

At the end, Al Purdy died as he lived – hard at work, doing what he wanted.

He was, his publisher Howard White said, putting the final touches to his greatest work, *Beyond*



Al Purdy: Photograph by David Boswell (1978)

*Remembering: The Collected Poems of Al Purdy*, when he died of lung cancer early Friday at his Vancouver Island home.

Mr. Purdy, one of Canada’s greatest writers and one of the country’s best-known poets – his work has been taught in high schools and universities for decades – “died with his boots on,” White said.

His bed was covered with books and papers, he was arguing about Yeats and changing lines in his poems right down to his last breath.

He died like Socrates, taking care of business.<sup>4</sup>

The *Washington Post* offered fewer imaginary embellishments in its tribute:

Al Purdy, 81, a colorful and cantankerous master of everyday life and vernacular language who became one of the most widely respected poets in Canadian history, died of lung cancer April 21 in his home near Victoria, BC.<sup>5</sup>

He sold his first poem as a teenager, published the first of more than 30 volumes of poetry in 1944 and went on to receive his nation’s highest literary hon-

ors. A member of the Order of Canada, he twice received the Governor General's Literary Award: in 1966 for *The Cariboo Horses* and in 1986 for *Collected Poems, 1956-86*. ...

News of his death was carried April 24 on the front pages of both of Canada's national newspapers. Obituaries across the country quoted fellow Canadian poets hailing him as probably the best Canadian English-language poet of the 20th century.<sup>6</sup>

Similar encomiums were published abroad by the *Times of London* and the *International Herald Tribune*. In *The Guardian*. Sandra Martin wrote an affectionate tribute:

Brash, hard-drinking and belligerent, (Purdy) once described himself as 'six foot three of indolence, two hundred pounds of weed,/ my better judgment voted me least likely to succeed.'<sup>7</sup>

A few weeks after Purdy's death, *Maclean's* published a reflective appraisal in which poet Dennis Lee was quoted:

(Purdy's) best two dozen poems make him one of the most enduring of the century in English. They earn him a ranking with figures such as Robert Frost, Dylan Thomas and D. H. Lawrence.<sup>8</sup>

This is the conventional news media at work: hailing and extolling the deceased as a Canadian icon, a social process that peaked (in 2008) with the unveiling of a bronze statue of Al Purdy (a lanky 3 meters tall) in Queen's Park, Toronto, the seat of the Ontario Legislature. (The statue is called *Voice of the Land*; created by Edwin and Verónica Dam de Nogales.) David Miller, then Mayor of Toronto, addressed the crowd at the unveiling: "Al Purdy is one of Canada's greatest poets. This statue...is a fitting

**I replied by return-post that I would meet Al any time, anywhere, and that he could be assured of having any degree of assistance that he wished to receive.**

tribute to a person who enriched the lives of so many Canadians."

What's *fitting* is that irreverent Al, seated and dressed-down in casual clothes, co-exists with statues of Queen Victoria, King George V, Sir John A. Macdonald, among others of dour rectitude. Yet I cannot help but wonder what difference it might have made if Al Purdy had been known not only as a major literary figure but

also as someone who made a rational decision to have an assisted death. Do the powers-that-be in Canada erect statues in esteemed public places for those who *choose* to die?

If mainstream journalism is, at best, a "first rough draft of history,"<sup>9</sup> then *this* report is offered to assist in the future writing of something deeper and truer about the last days of Al Purdy. My account is also, of necessity, about the innovative development of assisted-death methods (NuTech) capable of granting Al Purdy's wish to end his life while preserving his privacy and provoking no controversy.<sup>10</sup>

\* \* \*

**A**l Purdy joined the Right to Die Society of Canada in 1997. Two years later, I was called upon (as the group's founder) to give him advice about how best to end his life. I had long been familiar with Al's work. I was an assistant editor and film critic at *Maclean's* in the early 1970s, when Peter C. Newman hired Purdy to write a series exploring various aspects of West Coast life. Our paths symbolically crossed again when we both worked for *Weekend* and *Canadian* magazines in the mid-70s.

When Al wrote, requesting a private visit, he wanted to know what the Right to Die Society of Canada could do for him. He knew what doctors proposed for him. They'd been



*John Hofsess at Moss Bay Cemetery, Victoria, BC, in 1992. Photo by Andrew McLagen.*

treating him for years. He wasn't inclined to accept his death on their terms.

I replied by return-post that I would meet Al any time, anywhere, and that he could be assured of having *any* degree of assistance that he wished to receive.<sup>11</sup> As a member of the Society, he regularly received all of our news bulletins and copies of *Last Rights*, our quarterly magazine. He was familiar with my views on assisted dying and the offer of practical help that such views implied. An annual membership cost \$35; there was no charge for any of my personal services.

I asked Al to provide me with a written statement describing his situation. A few days later (April 21, 1999), he sent this letter:

Thanks most warmly for your support in my illness. Follows a brief synopsis of it. In late Feb. I had prostate surgery. This brought on atrial fibrillosis, with conequent (*sic*) drugs to control it. X-Rays at Saanichton Hospital showed a shadow on my lungs. A procedure at Vic. Gen. Hos. showed a squamous carcinoma on the left lung, later confirmed by CT scan.

Dr. Sparling and Dr. Griswold tell me this can be – probably – removed leaving me with 80% lung capacity. However, I believe the massive invasion of my body required for its removal would very probably kill me (I am now 80 years old). So that's where I stand right now.

We are busy transferring to my wife's name what it is feasible to transfer. She – her name is Eurithe – refuses to admit that nothing is possible but surgery. She is exploring other avenues, including Dr. Lam, in Vancouver and possibly Dr. Hoffer in Victoria. However, various other old age conditions make it unlikely that my 'quality of life' would be very elevated.

And that's where I stand at this moment. And I hesitate to propose my death very strongly in the face of my wife's resistance. I'm sure you can see what I mean, and my feeling in the matter.

Sincerely,

*Al Purdy*

9310 Lochside Dr.,  
Sidney, BC V8L 1N6  
Apr. 21, '99

John Hofsess,  
Evelyn Martens

Dear Both-of-you,

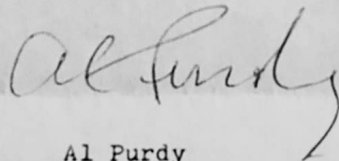
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Sincerely,



Al Purdy

We met at Al's request a week later at his winter home on Lochside Drive near Sidney, BC; he was in disintegrating physical health (suffering from metastasized lung cancer) but still had the sharp mind of "a sensitive man"<sup>12</sup> when explaining what he urgently needed and why. He had shone brightly as a creative force for several decades; now, with a steep decline in his energy, it was sunset time.

Shortly after our conversation began, he said that I was the first person with whom he could candidly discuss not merely death but his *desire* to die, the sooner the better. Whenever Eurithe left the room, Al made candid asides about how he felt. Apparently they did not fully share the same views on consciously choosing death.

I didn't waste his time describing the circuitous path of my life that had brought me to the point where I could be of useful service to him. Nor did we discuss poetry; he had dozens of friends who did that.

I mentioned that another poet whom I knew he admired, the late P.K. Page, was also a supportive member of the Society. He responded: "Knowing Pat, I'm not surprised."<sup>13</sup>

We briefly discussed the suicide of his close friend and fellow writer, Margaret Laurence. At the time of her death (January 5, 1987) the news media reported that Laurence had died of lung cancer. Ten years later, James King in his biography, *The Life of Margaret Laurence*, revealed that Laurence had taken her own life based on information she obtained from the Hemlock Society in the United States.<sup>14</sup> A second biographer, Donez Xiques, states that Laurence "took an overdose of pills" but fails to mention that the cause of Laurence's death was not publicly known for a decade.<sup>15</sup>

King also commented in an interview that some friends of Laurence were opposed to the publication of the true cause of her death.<sup>16</sup> In

the minds of some of Laurence's colleagues, even amongst those who form an influential part of our cultural intelligentsia, suicide was regarded as a shameful sign of weakness, never a sign of strength.

Had it been known, in 1987, that Laurence had chosen a "voluntary death" instead of the socially conventional process of palliative care or the fictional impression that she died in her sleep due to lung cancer, it may have advanced

public awareness of end-of-life problems. The suicide of Québec film director Claude Jutra, a few months earlier (November 5, 1986), by leaping nearly 200 feet from the Jacques Cartier Bridge<sup>17</sup> into the frigid waters of the St. Lawrence river to escape the degeneration of Alzheimer's disease, could have added resonance to Laurence's choice. True stories about two major artists facing catastrophic illnesses might have been helpful in a process of evolving enlightenment about what they, among many others, face at life's end. But because the lives of Laurence and Jutra ended in a haze of ambiguity, nothing changed: most politicians continued playing "dodge the issue"; the squeamishness of many Canadians in facing death persisted.

Claude Jutra now has a Canadian Film Award named after him (annually honouring the "best feature film by a first-time film director" that might otherwise be called the *forever-young* award). In Québec, Jutra is recalled each year by the film industry with *Le Prix Jutra* but none of his friends (apart from me, apparently) honours his death by ensuring that desperately ill people have greater choices in dying.<sup>18</sup> Thus, in 1999, as a result of our politicians doing nothing to advance human rights at the end of life, it was Al Purdy's turn to suffer.

\* \* \*

**Al appeared interested in technical details; Eurithe looked somewhat pained but stoic.**

“Most of us fight to stay alive; a few of us resign from what they think is a hopeless struggle. And that last is what I’m wondering about: is my own forthcoming struggle hopeless?”

– Al Purdy

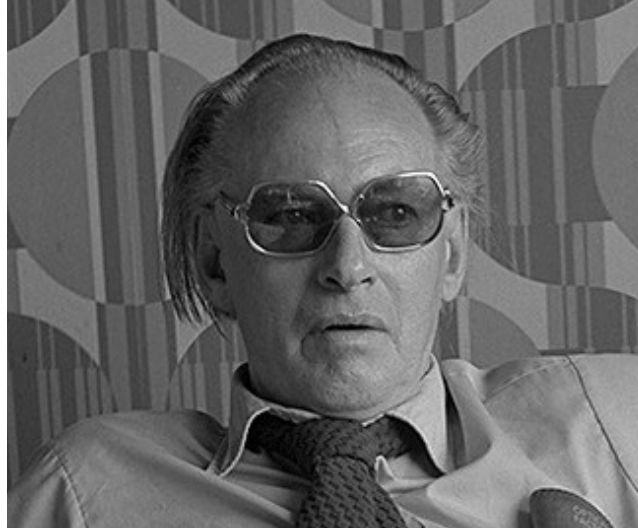


Photo by David Boswell, 1978

We met again at the Purdy’s home a few days later.

I explained to Al and Eurithe that, at one time, the only method of suicide that was considered acceptable by right-to-die groups was an overdose of barbiturates. However, such medications were difficult to obtain; they were not suitable for all people in the quantities that need to be ingested; a person might end up comatose for 8-12+ hours while relatives and loved ones endured a nerve-racking time listening to hours of laboured breathing worrying about if and when the person seeking death would actually die.

Derek Humphry, in *Final Exit*,<sup>19</sup> recommended the use of “turkey bags” following the ingestion of about six grams of barbiturates: in theory, the barbiturates would produce unconsciousness, the turkey bag would hasten death through asphyxia. However, there were numerous reports of people frantically removing the bags due to heat build-up and/or carbon-dioxide distress that they experienced prior to becoming thoroughly sedated.<sup>20</sup>

The *best* method that *Final Exit* recommended was a deeply flawed method. *As of 1998, no one in the world-wide right-to-die “movement” had developed any better method of suicide in the last half century.*

I informed Al and Eurithe that I, with the vital assistance of Gordon Smith (now deceased<sup>21</sup>) who headed the KISS diving-equipment manufacturing company in Port Moody, BC, had recently developed a *non-medical* means of suicide that involved the use of helium. With helium, a person dies quickly and painlessly within two to three minutes; the cause of death is hypoxia, not suffocation.

Al appeared interested in technical details; Eurithe looked somewhat pained but stoic. Al said that, for the immediate future, he was going to follow Eurithe’s advice to see if Dr. Hoffer’s “vitamin therapy” among other treatments would benefit him. When she left the room, however, he said: “Nothing’s going to make me well. I’m willing to face that fact but she isn’t...”

I repeated that they could contact me at any time and that they could have complete confidence in my proven *ability* to help (not simply my willingness to help) whether in BC or Ontario, at either of their residences.

Before I left, we discussed the possibility of Al making a statement that could be published after his death. He said he had no problem with that.

However, the report that he faxed to me a few weeks later ended abruptly. The two-page

document was typed; sometimes with words x'd out and retyped, so that not every word is clear. Al said that he could not write any more:

*Vancouver Island at  
Saanichton Hospital*

In early March of this year the X-Ray technician took pictures of my insides and found something I didn't expect, a partially collapsed lung. This meant further X-Rays, some kind of small camera shoved down my throat at Vic. Gen. Hos while I was under anesthetic; all kinds of other tests and eventually positive diagnosis: inside my chest sitting atop the upper quadrant of the left lung a small carcinoma: cancer. I imagined it like a small grey animal perched on a traffic light, waving at bystanders around the heart and esophagus. Cancer. Of course, that means death if you can't do something about it.

I've lived a long and pretty full life. I'm 80 years old. My wife is six years younger than me; she and I have been together for more than 50 years, sometimes quarrelling violently and making peace, knowing another war was bound to break out. And love? That's always seemed to me a word for romantic novels and moviemakers. But there the thing is, something we, the human race, imagined into existence, and which could not exist without the human imagination. But there it is, love, sitting like a fence post beside the grey carcinoma, refusing to admit that love must die.

But of course we die, all of us, sooner or later. Most of us fight to stay alive; a few of us resign

**“I thought of  
resigning from  
the world before  
the Grim Reaper’s  
arrival. Suicide.  
Here it should  
be mentioned  
that I have no  
conventional  
religion: I do not  
believe in God  
per se. Therefore  
no avenging deity  
would stand at  
the Pearly Gates  
awaiting my  
cringing arrival.”**

from what they think is a hopeless struggle. And that last is what I'm wondering about: is my own forthcoming struggle hopeless? Does it mean a prolonged period of pain after the traumatic invasion of my body by men with knives? And even if I survive, a diminished existence, which I won't call life, will be the only thing possible. Do I want that?

Eurithe talked it over with me at some length. She's the organized person, full of maddening commonsense that no one without a PhD. in dialectics can refute (I've seen them wither and die at her feet, speechless.) Now she wants to explore all avenues of survival, select the one that's most promising and stick with it. I'm the defeatist by comparison. I had pneumonia seven years back and it affected my heart; I

have to take Digoxin (digitalis) daily.

I have neuropathy which means damaged nerves; but the nerves of my legs are more than damaged, they're dead as hangnails right up to the knees. Add arthritis and one or two other unpleasant maladies, plus that Biblical prophet age. So the situation remains: I stopped smoking 20 years back but I have lung cancer all the same (could it be my wicked life style? Maybe).

So we talked and we talked, Eurithe and me. Death seems finally more likely from the sheer volume of words than the invading carcinoma.

(I forgot to mention that my father died of cancer when I was two years old.)<sup>22</sup> And given all the maladies listed above, plus my own advanced age, it seemed likely the assassin would be the physician's



knife invading my (unidentifiable word) unresisting body.

But there are literally thousands of cancer (unidentifiable word ending in “ues”?) including radiation, chemotherapy, vitamin cures, and quacks guaranteed to make you outrun Terry Fox if you pay them enough money.

Given my idea that surgery meant sure death for me, I thought of resigning from the world before the Grim Reaper’s arrival. Suicide. Here it should be mentioned that I have no conventional religion: I do not believe in God *per se*. Therefore no avenging deity would stand at the Pearly Gates awaiting my cringing arrival. And that disbelief stems from the way I have lived my life, which might be regarded as slightly unusual by a few people.

I started to write poetry at age 13; my first poem being an effusion of unbelievable mediocrity, appeared in the school magazine. For this I received a buck, and was infected with a disease more virulent than cancer: I couldn’t stop writing. I played football until my second year at high school (I was quite a large lunkhead), failed the exams and stayed at school anyway; I liked playing football. Eventually I was forced out of school by the numerous cadres of kids, the size of large coke bottles, two of whom grabbed my seat when it was vacant.

I hung around the house pretending to be a writer, while my distracted mother prayed to God for deliverance. In 1936 in the depths of the Great Depression, I decided to ride the freight trains west and get a job on the fishing boats out of Vancouver.”<sup>23</sup>  
(*the note ends*).

During 1999, Al’s notes to his friends became shorter as his energy waned:

He wrote to Margaret Atwood:

I go into hospital June 21, surgery the next day. I hope & expect to come out of it, but you never know. Unknown country.

I’ve had a lot of respect for you over a long period of time... So if I don’t come out of this surgery session as ‘expected’ your own eventual arrival will be attended with drums & flutes, welcoming signs, Love, Al.<sup>24</sup>

And to Dennis Lee:

I go into hospital tomorrow, and I’m not really very optimistic about that.

But I wanted to say: how fortunate to have known you, and for so many years. I’ll remember you for as long as I have memory, and with love, and with admiration, Al.<sup>25</sup>

\* \* \*

Some friends made a pilgrimage to see him. **S**Poet/novelist Steven Heighon<sup>26</sup> travelled from Kingston to pay his respects and say goodbye:

In the spring of 2000 I saw [Al] for the last time, dying at home in Sidney, BC. Jay Ruzesky and I drove up from Victoria and sat at his bedside for a couple of hours, talking with him and at times just sitting there as we waited for him to wake from another short nap. At one point he tried to eat a piece of bread we brought him, but he couldn’t manage.... no eighty-two-year old, horizontal for the last time, exhausted and unable to eat, rages at the dying of the light. That, after all, was a young poet’s prescription.<sup>27</sup> A heroization of the mechanics of dying.<sup>28</sup>

When I next met Al early in March, 2000, he was in much worse shape: he had endured a great deal of pain, he said that he was fed up with the process of dying slowly. Further talks with Eurithe had produced an agreement between them that it was time to “let go.” There was a moment when Eurithe went to the kitchen. Al and I looked at each other in silence awaiting her return, a comfortable silence; then I said in a voice barely above a whisper: “I understand...” Seconds later, we broke the gaze.



Early in 1997, I asked the late Gordon Smith, president of KISS, a Rebreather Manufacturing company in Port Moody, BC, if a modified rebreather could be made, capable of causing intentional death without discomfort. Two years later, he handed me a DeBreather: compact, lightweight, comfortable to use – and lethal.

There had been prototypes that didn't work properly (one overheated the air as it scrubbed carbon dioxide during the breathing process) but at last Smith had a working model.

Our last DeBreather was donated to the Smithsonian Museum, Washington, DC, 2014. [Photo: John Hofsess]

I responded to his needs with a more detailed description of what we could do. I informed Al and Eurithe that, in the intervening year, I, together with Gordon Smith, had further refined various means of causing death that were called “NuTech methods,” i.e., non-medical methods that did not rely upon a doctor’s assistance or prescription. Using such methods he could be assured of a quick and painless death at a time of his choosing.

Al said that he wanted to “get on with it” as soon as possible. Eurithe appeared to respect his wish but with unelaborated reservations. Perhaps she had greater difficulty with “letting go” than Al did. While Al wanted to bring his suffering to an end, Eurithe had to face a new phase of life, alone, as a survivor.

Eurithe may have been thinking ahead as to how best to preserve Al’s literary stature; a natural death from cancer that some journalists would inevitably depict as a heroic battle against the “dread disease” was compatible with preserving a poet’s legacy; *assisted* death on the other hand might upstage Al’s artistic reputation: a reflection of the immaturity of our society concerning chosen death.

It’s also possible that Eurithe had serious misgivings about the two people sitting in her living room talking about “helium,” “exit bags” and “diving equipment” while planning her husband’s death. As Barbara Coombs Lee (who successfully spearheaded the political fight to legalize “physician-assisted suicide” in Oregon) once said of me: “We send people

to *doctors*. Hofsess sends them to the hardware store.”

I can understand Eurithe being apprehensive (if that is what she felt) not so much about our unorthodox methods but due to a more fundamental concern: “Should we *trust* these people? What if something goes wrong?”

\* \* \*

I’d already told Al, the year before, that we had developed a “helium method” of considerable merit for him to consider. In the summer of 1999, I organized a two-day private conference in Berkeley, California, inviting nine associates in the right-to-die field (from Canada, the United States and Australia) to a demonstration of the helium technique, plus we introduced another device called a *DeBreather* based on the technology for Rebreathers developed for underwater explorers. (Gordon Smith manufactured rebreathers for a living; he knew immediately what needed to be done to convert existing diving technology produced by his company to achieve what I could only imagine.)

Considerable progress with such research was made during 1999. *We had used the helium method successfully on five occasions.*<sup>29</sup> The DeBreather had also been tested “in the field.” The DeBreather was successfully deployed several times in assisted suicides in 1999 (in the US) – and reportedly worked precisely as Gordon Smith had predicted that it would.<sup>30</sup>

I asked Al if he cared to know more (I didn't want to tire him). He said: "I'm *very* interested. You're the only one who talks to me like this."

I showed Al the latest model of a DeBreather; each unit cost \$250 (for parts, Smith never charged for his labour). I offered to show Al a short video of another Victoria member (who also wanted an assisted death) trying out the DeBreather briefly and saying that he found it comfortable. (Had any member been interested in using the DeBreather, it would have been provided free of charge; then removed and cleaned for future use).

\* \* \*

Whenever Eurithe stepped out of the room, Al continued a deeper conversation:

"This is all good news to me," he said. "But *why* do you do it?"

I didn't know what to say. There's a great deal of human suffering about which I can do little; but there's one critical area at the end of human life where all that it takes is my *willingness* to relieve the pain of others.

"I respond to people who need something that no one else gives them." I replied thinking that thought for the first time. "Some of them, like you, find me (through the Society) but most people can't." I continued speaking unusually slowly, for nothing I said was routine or pre-thought.

"A few months ago<sup>31</sup> Georg Tintner killed himself. Perhaps you've heard? He was 82; suffered from cancer for six years. He had just finished recording the complete cycle of Bruckner symphonies.<sup>32</sup> I first became aware of him because he was on the cover of *Gramophone* magazine.<sup>33</sup> He received the Order of Canada the year before. Obviously he was a gifted, cre-

ative man and yet – the *only* way that he knew of bringing his suffering to an end was by jumping from the balcony of his 11<sup>th</sup>-floor apartment in Halifax.

"When I heard about Tintner's suicide – brought back painful memories of Claude Jutra leaping to *his* death – I felt indescribably sad. If only he had known how to find me. If only I had known how to find him. I'm not assuming that he'd want a NuTech death but at least he would've had a clear choice and not be driven by desperation."

Al listened attentively.

Eurithe and Evelyn were somewhere else.

"I bought all of his Bruckner recordings. Never paid much attention to Bruckner before. I listened repeatedly to each symphony in a darkened room; and for light, just a few candles. I felt as if I was communing with his soul. Tintner once said: 'Bruckner was a deeply religious man – we all know that. But what he created speaks to even sinners like me.'<sup>34</sup>"

(Al smiled. Though a confirmed atheist he had his own experiences of a similar feeling when he listened to his beloved collection of Spirituals by Mahalia Jackson and Paul Robeson.)

"People like Georg and Claude become a permanent part of my consciousness and help define my purpose. As do you."

This was as close to a personal conversation as ever we shared. Al didn't respond directly to my words; just a slight nod of his head and a long pause suggesting reflection. He'd made up his mind: he would entrust me with his dying. A choice between NuTech methods was his last decision: he chose Rohypnol and helium. (Al clearly found sedation to be appealing; we had no experience combining sedation with the DeBreather.) He evidently liked the idea of planning his own death. Susan Musgrave, who first met Al in Mexico in 1972 and knew him

**"This is all good news to me," he said. "But why do you do it?"**

**I didn't know what to say.**



*Rohypnol is a potent benzodiazepine, about ten times stronger than Valium. The 2-milligram tablet was phased out in 1997 by its manufacturer Roche. In addition to its (sleep inducing) hypnotic effects, Rohypnol quickly reduces feelings of anxiety, stress and nervousness. It was a perfect medication for our assisted death services. [Photo: John Hofsess]*

well, said of his last year: “Al looked at death the same way he has always looked at life – right between the eyes.”<sup>35</sup>

\* \* \*

*I believe: an assisted death should not only be painless and quick but also, if possible, it should be a pleasant experience aesthetically and spiritually.*

That is why, by the time I came to be seriously consulted by Al about his dying, I recommended that he begin by drinking a glass of his favourite wine laced with Rohypnol (tasteless, colorless,

quick-acting). He would pass out within minutes and not be aware of anything further. I recommended that he do this in private with Eurithe sharing a final communion alone together.

Although Al knew what would transpire once he passed out, he would be anesthetized throughout the brief *clinical* procedure of assisted death (just as he would if having out-patient surgery in a hospital).

In Europe, Rohypnol is a widely-prescribed sedative; in the United States, it has been subject to media hysteria and branded a “date-rape” drug. The Canadian government’s position on the drug is somewhere between these antipodes:

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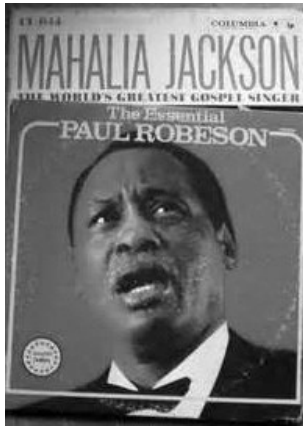
FREETHOUGHT UNDER  
ATTACK IN BANGLADESH

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Two of the Purdy's favourite LPs: *The Essential Paul Robeson*, a double album released by Vanguard Records (1974). Its 31 tracks include the "monologue from Shakespeare's *Othello*," "Sometimes I feel like a Motherless Child," "All through the Night" and the definitive performance of "Ol' Man River," the last song that Al chose to hear.

Mahalia Jackson's *The World's Greatest Gospel Singer* was her debut album with Columbia Records in 1955. It was the 47th best-selling LP that year. Two of Al's favourites were: "I'm going to live the life I sing about in my songs" and "Out of the Depths." Atheism was deferentially silent when Mahalia Jackson sang.

"During the Cold War it became increasingly difficult to hear Paul Robeson sing on commercial radio, buy his music or see his films. In 1950, NBC cancelled a TV interview between Robeson and Eleanor Roosevelt."<sup>37</sup> Purdy narrowly missed meeting his favourite singer during a 1965 trip to New York.<sup>38</sup>

Rohypnol is restricted but a small amount may be in a person's possession providing it was obtained through a doctor's prescription (outside of Canada, since it cannot be prescribed within Canada). It is banned in the US but available in Mexico.<sup>36</sup>

I had in my possession a considerable supply of (original formula, 2 mg) Rohypnol, obtained through a colleague in France over a two-year period. Needless to say, if one has reached the point of being willing to contravene Canadian law by assisting death, violating a drug law – in order to ensure that someone has a more pleasant death – was of little additional consequence. (Importing, and supplying Rohypnol to others are separate crimes.)

E. M. Forster once wrote (in *The Nation*, July 16, 1938): "If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country": a scandalizing idea to express in the jingoistic days preceding World War II but less startling in 1999. My allegiance was to Al Purdy,

an authentic, life-enhancing Canadian, not to the preservation of outmoded laws or the hypocrisies of politicians. I viewed our actions not so much as defiance of present-day Canadian

law but rather as placing ourselves in the future of Canadian society; setting an example of how a person could die in a more compassionate and rational manner.

By giving Al Rohypnol as a pre-death sedative, I was, however, altering the legal gravity of our actions, not merely because Rohypnol is a restricted drug but because once Al became unconscious his death was no longer an "assisted suicide" (with a maximum penalty of up to

14 years imprisonment) but rather became construable as *premeditated first-degree murder*. A law that cannot distinguish between Robert Pickton, Paul Bernardo, Peter Demeter – and *me* is incapable of achieving justice.

Looking into Al's eyes, hearing his words repeated on several occasions, knowing him to be an independent thinker, respecting his intellect – I needed no more evidence that Al Purdy

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authorized me to be his agent and partner in ending his life. I considered it an honour that the technical details of his dying (turning on the helium tank, adjusting the “exit bag”, and the removal of equipment) were left to me. All that he had to do was sip his wine and say farewell to the love of his life, while a Paul Robeson song of which they were especially fond (*Ol’ Man River*) played quietly in the background. *That’s* where his consciousness would end.

Al would have the quick, painless death that he desired. I, however, could become branded as his “murderer.” Under current Canadian law, there’s no official distinction between a mutually consensual act of compassionate death and a vicious killing. Punishment for first-degree murder is uniform and mandatory (25 years imprisonment without parole); there’s no statute of limitations; no mitigation based on circumstances.<sup>39</sup> On behalf of those who asked for my help I defied unjust laws ambivalently. What was I supposed to do in becoming aware of the suffering of people such as Al Purdy? Ignore his misery and do nothing? I’m a reluctant activist but I am even more reluctant to be a coward.

On March 8, 2000, I mailed this note:

Dear Al -

Eurithe says that you are feeling a bit better, having gone off your medications. I am glad to hear that you are having a reprieve from suffering.

I realize that it’s too late now – but one of my deep regrets concerning lost opportunities is that you did not have sufficient strength to express your views more fully on “choosing to die.” The subject of suicide remains – in the year 2000 – much the same

“dirty little secret” that it was in the 1950s. Hardly anyone (apart from Bob Fulford in the 1970 essay we republished in *Last Rights*) has spoken out in

defence of choosing to die on one’s own terms rather than be a hapless victim of misfortune.

One reason perhaps why the right-to-die “movement” in Canada makes so little progress is that it has no prominent voices.<sup>40</sup> There was a time when I was somewhat in demand as a journalist (as long as I confined myself to Canadian film or drama). Or perhaps I was only in demand because I was “*Macleans*’ film critic” not for any value in myself. But ever since I became associated with actively promoting

changes in Canada’s assisted-death laws, I’ve become *persona non grata* among editors. I have not been invited to write so much as an Op-Ed piece in the past ten years. So I who have much to say on end-of-life issues am allowed to say nothing; while you, ironically, whose voice would certainly be heard, can barely speak these days.

Notwithstanding these regrets, I shall do whatever you please, whenever you please. I would like to know if there is a copy of “*Reaching for the Beaufort Sea*” that I may borrow. It appears to be rather hard to find. I’d very much like to read it.

On March 10, 2000, I received a handwritten letter from Al:

I’m having the publisher send you a copy of *Beaufort Sea*. Just bring it around where you’re here next for signing. I’m deeply sorry about the piece on suicide. I can’t even use a typewriter these days without many mistakes & tiring me out in short order. I should’ve seen the Fulford piece but can’t recall it. I thought & think one needs to provide a historical frame for a suicide article. I find it

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very difficult to organize my thoughts. I wonder if I could get Susan Musgrave to write it – she’s a close friend.

Eurithe visited Dr. Hosie on my behalf (as I think she told you) and it seems from what he said that some time should pass.<sup>41</sup> Incidentally, I don’t mind a bit being labeled a suicide. All I’m afraid of is that I’ll be too weak to carry out my part.

Anyway, thanks for your letter & hope that you find some enjoyment in *Beaufort Sea*. Title taken from a song by Stan Rogers.

Best wishes, Al Purdy.

The phrase “the Fulford piece” refers to *The Future of Death* by Robert Fulford written for *Visions 2020* (Hurtig, 1970), edited by Stephen Clarkson in celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Canadian Forum*. The article was reprinted in Issue 17, *Last Rights* magazine (1997), published by the Right to Die Society of Canada.<sup>42</sup>

Fulford wrote, in part:

One imagines people openly discussing their deaths, deciding reasonably and honestly the point at which their lives should finish. In 1970, a willed death, at whatever advanced age, is still considered a confession of failure or madness; in 2020 it may well be considered an affirmation of success – “I have succeeded in my life, I have pleased myself and others, I have decided on many thousands of days not to take my life; now I realize there is nothing ahead for me but boredom and sickness; I have had enough, I am satisfied, I am ready to go.

**Al told me [...] that he intended to write an article about suicide that could be submitted for publication [...]. It was his intention that his voluntary death would (eventually) be a matter of public knowledge; an act committed without shame or hypocrisy.**

One imagines a dignified leave taking, the individual putting his affairs in order, saying goodbye to his friends, gathering his children around him, finally taking his pill. One imagines those close to him being left not with an image of screaming pain and squalid helplessness but of clear, clean finality; death finally controlled and finally robbed of much of its horror.

Fulford wrote the first serious defence of assisted suicide to be published in Canada; it was followed by 25 years of silence on the subject by Canadian intellectuals (although I tried to stimulate public debate on the subject by introducing Sue Rodriguez in 1992 and initiating a

series of Court challenges). Al told me early in 1999 that he intended to write an article about suicide that could be submitted for publication to *Saturday Night* or *The Globe and Mail*. It was his intention that his voluntary death<sup>43</sup> would (eventually) be a matter of public knowledge; an act committed without shame or hypocrisy. We agreed that since he could no longer do justice to the subject of his death I alone was authorized to write an account of what transpired for eventual publication “You write it,” he said. “You arranged everything. Wouldn’t be possible without you.”

It’d be presumptuous to call myself a friend. I was there as a technician: like a plumber or electrician. Al didn’t have to worry about being “too weak to carry out (his) part.” I (along with Evelyn Martens) took full responsibility for whatever needed to be done.

In the last weeks of his life, Al seemed more relaxed. He had the comfort of knowing that a worrisome problem had been resolved. He

could say to himself: “*Any day now, I shall be released.*” Al wasn’t passively making peace with death; far from it – it was his way of denying Death its sting, rejecting its indifference to him; being mortal doesn’t mean that one has to accept prolonged suffering. He would choose the day, the place and the specific means of his NuTech death. Nothing was left to chance.

Several days prior to his deathday (Wednesday, April 20, 2000) we reviewed, for a final time, the pros and cons of revealing or concealing details of his death.

We had three options:

(1) *Al could appear to have a natural death* (“passed away in his sleep”). I estimated that there was an 99% chance that a coroner would accept his planned death as a natural event without asking any questions.

(2) *Al could appear to have committed suicide on his own.* I described to Al how in an earlier instance – involving a woman dying from ovarian cancer (VT in Mission Hill, BC) – it made sense in her case to follow such a scenario. Although the woman was suffering greatly from her illness, it was not plausible at the time that she would die in her sleep. She was considerably younger than Al; her heart was sound. So I suggested to the couple the following plan: we would create a “cover story” (giving an impression that she died alone by her own hand when in fact she died from an assisted death with helium). She would ingest a modest amount of a (slow-acting) barbiturate she had obtained in Agua Prieta, Mexico. I would then give her Rohypnol; *that* is what would put her quickly to sleep. (It wasn’t common for Rohypnol to be used in Canada, let alone by seniors, so the

presence of a commonplace sedative in a body would be identified more readily by coroners.)

Once VT passed out, helium was administered, quickly causing her death. Her husband, meanwhile, who wanted to be with his wife throughout her dying process, was advised to go out before we began on an “alibi mission” and obtain timed receipts from various sources (bank ATM, gas station, supermarket).

VT had been asked earlier in the day to write a short note (creating the impression that she intended to take her own life); this note was placed on the bed beside a copy of *Final Exit* and an emptied box of spilled Mexican pills. I (along with the late Gordon Smith, who provided and operated a small high-pressure helium tank from his diving supplies) and Evelyn Martens wore plastic gloves and paper “booties” over our shoes. We made sure there was no trace of our visit in the couple’s home. We parked discreetly in a drive-in garage in the basement of the house. If we used cutlery or a drinking glass we made sure the items were washed and sterilized.

When the husband returned, we advised him to notify 911 within minutes of our departure. He was later questioned by the RCMP; officers were satisfied when he produced his timed receipts that he had not been present during the period that his wife supposedly took her life. No further questions were asked. The small amount of barbiturate in her stomach was sufficient, if an autopsy was performed, to convince a coroner that she had followed the classic formula of *Final Exit* (sedative plus plastic bag), dying alone<sup>44</sup> when in fact she had a much more pleasant and efficient NuTech death assisted by others.

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Let a reader assume that Al Purdy had the end-of-life equivalent of a back-alley abortion, consider these features of his assisted death:

- (a) he didn't have to travel, near or far, to obtain the service he desired;
- (b) it cost him nothing;
- (c) he was offered the same quality and non-medical method of assisted death (euthanasia, not assisted suicide) that any member of the Right to Die Society of Canada was entitled to have (from early 1999 until mid-2002) wherever he or she lived;
- (d) he was not required to be terminally ill nor be in an extreme state of physical degeneration;
- (e) he didn't have to sign numerous documents to meet the requirements of bureaucrats or have time-consuming consultations with medical practitioners including psychiatrists;
- (f) he didn't have to deal with anxiety over the means of his dying – no equipment was in sight, no bitter draught of barbiturate to drink, no massive overdose of pills to ingest;
- (g) he was not required to do anything except say a private farewell to his wife, cuddle and fall asleep (through sedation) in the comfort of his own home;
- (h) the true cause of death would not be evident;
- (i) we had a 100% record of reliability.

All this from someone with no medical training, no government funding, no grants from foundations: someone who was determined to do more than wring his hands when confronted by suffering – telling Canadians they had to wait, year after barren year, for a political miracle in Ottawa.

A copy of *Final Exit* was suggestively left open at a section headed “Self-deliverance with a plastic bag”; a regular (non-helium) “Exit Bag” was left around her head. *These items were stage-props*. I wanted to conceal the true cause of VT's death so that the “helium method” would remain unknown and no suspicion of assisted suicide would arise.<sup>45</sup> This scenario was successfully followed on two subsequent occasions.

(3) Our last option was confrontational: *notify the authorities immediately as to what had transpired and candidly reveal the details*. This would likely lead to criminal prosecution, although, in 1995, Special Prosecutor Robert Johnston, who examined Sue Rodriguez's

death in 1994, ruled: “Crown counsel will approve a prosecution only where there is a ‘substantial likelihood of conviction and the public interest requires a prosecution.’”<sup>46</sup> I told Al that I was willing to stand trial for his death even though it might mean imprisonment for the rest of my life. In making that offer and facing such a consequence, I was guided by the belief that the social ramifications of such a trial *might* lead to jury nullification and/or law reform. However, the definite downside would be that I would not be able to help anyone else – and I knew that there would doubtless be dozens of other Canadians in the years ahead who would want my help. I was the only person in Canada who offered genuine, meaningful end-of-life assistance.

We briefly discussed each option; Eurithe appeared to favour the first option from the moment it was mentioned: Al would be “released” but in such a way as to maintain the appearance of normalcy and preserving respectability.

For my part, as stated, I was willing to face prosecution *if need be* even though the process might require more courage and strength than I possessed. True stories about the Underground Railroad<sup>47</sup>

fascinated, appalled and inspired me: nudging me beyond my default position of cowardice. I felt a close spiritual affinity with 19<sup>th</sup> century Canadians who illegally helped American slaves become free. In both instances, then and now, the fundamental question was: *who owns my life?*

\* \* \*

On the evening of April 20, 2000, I provided Al with a NuTech death: he drank a glass of wine with Rohypnol privately in the company of Eurithe, the love of his life for 59 years. (Murphy’s Law had one last demonstration of its quirky powers: Al’s Chilean wine was “corked.” Earlier in the day I offered to buy him something better; Al told me not to bother.)

There was no rush, no timetable, no sign of NuTech equipment in the room: Al and Eurithe could be alone together as long as they liked.

At some point during their final communion, Al passed out. Shortly thereafter, Eurithe left Al’s bedside, went down the hall and into the living room. The house was silent apart from a fireplace that sputtered and crackled with burning logs. I (along with Evelyn Martens) entered the bedroom where Al was unconscious. I pinched Al’s skin at various places; there was no response. No sound apart

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from his slowing breathing. I waited a while for unconsciousness to deepen.<sup>48</sup>

Martens’ presence was necessary as Al and Eurithe lived outside Sidney, a considerable distance from the centre of Victoria. Evelyn had a van; I’ve never owned a vehicle nor learned to drive. We needed to transport two bulky boxes containing the “party balloon kits” and later remove the emptied helium tanks. I couldn’t manage on my

own. Almost always we worked as a team.<sup>49</sup>

Evelyn placed two helium “party balloon kits” beside Al’s bed and attached plastic tubing to a Y-connection joined to each tank (so the contents of both tanks would feed together into

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a plastic bag). Our customized “Exit Bag” (22” x 36”) had elastic sewn into a flannelette collar; a Velcro strip was used to seal the bag (a few minutes later) snugly around the neck.

The Exit Bag was first placed around Al’s forehead by Evelyn and then fully inflated with helium. I waited a few minutes longer, still pinching his skin here and there, to make sure that he was deeply sedated. The inflated bag now stood above his head like a chef’s hat. (The reason why the bag is inflated with helium before being pulled down is to minimize the amount of oxygen available and hasten death if only by seconds.)<sup>50</sup>

Evelyn then pulled the inflated bag down over his head and sealed the velcro collar. I increased the helium flow. Al took one deep breath; his entire body went limp. After an interval in which nothing happened, he drew a last breath two-to-three minutes after the process began. These last breaths may have been purely reflexive. I continued to allow both balloon kits to empty their contents of helium (roughly 15 minutes) into the “exit bag,” even though no breathing occurred. Then the balloon tanks were removed and put back into Evelyn’s van for disposal. Well in advance we had chosen a secluded dumpster in an area with no surveillance cameras.

On the way out, around 11 p.m., I turned to Eurithe (who was dwelling deeply in her own feelings, in the living room); I nodded in her direction and said: “It went well.” She was not alone. There was another family member present to comfort her during the night.

Eurithe knew that she was to call 911 in the morning as if she had just discovered Al motionless. There was no need to remind her.

\* \* \*

Al once wrote:

Whatever the unborn and the dead  
may know, they cannot know the beauty,  
the marvel of being alive in the flesh.  
The dead may look after the afterwards,  
But the magnificent here and now of  
Life in the flesh is ours, and ours alone,  
And ours only for a time.<sup>51</sup>

Eventually the “marvel of being alive” turns into the way of all flesh. Some who respect life at its best know when to leave with style and grace.<sup>52</sup> Al said farewell to the “marvel of being alive” in the arms of his wife with a few sips of wine in the comfort of his own home.

Al and Eurithe knew how and when death would occur and had chosen *the time, the place, and the peaceful means*. It was not a prolonged act of dying lasting for hours or days; it took less than fifteen minutes from beginning to end. Eurithe was with Al when he closed his eyes for the last time but not when he technically died. I cannot claim that Al’s dying process was the best that is imaginable,<sup>53</sup> but it was far better than most human deaths and considerably better than many planned deaths in

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states or countries where assisted suicide is legal. Al entrusted his life to me; he believed that my NuTech methods would work as described; he had faith in me that he would not end up in a coma suspended between life and death. He also believed me when I said his death could be taken as a “natural” event. I wanted him to have exactly the kind of death he desired and freely chose. Working with Gordon Smith and Evelyn Martens on previous occasions, I had enough experience (by 2000) to know that I could deliver an assisted death exactly as promised. Each death experience informed the next.

I like to think that Al died realizing that, as one of his favourite writers, D.H. Lawrence, put it, “Death is the only pure, beautiful conclusion of a great passion.”<sup>54</sup> Lawrence was thinking loftily when he wrote that sentence; on a more prosaic level an assisted death has to be well-planned technically and carefully executed for that vision to be fulfilled.<sup>55</sup> Maybe Al had no *poetic* thoughts that night. Perhaps the tactile presence of Eurithe summed up everything.

\* \* \*

Each time that I helped someone to die, my mind blazed with disjointed thoughts and excited feelings; sleep was impossible. I live alone: always have;<sup>56</sup> when I became a euthanasia activist, there was no one with whom I dared to share the details of my activities, thoughts or feelings. I never found alcohol to be a comfort when alone; same with weed, particularly when I want to think clearly. But I have long loved listening to music, mostly classical, at times of intense solitude. During the hours following Al’s assisted death, I sipped pleasantly bitter coffee and listened to Mahler’s *Ninth Symphony* more attentively than I ever had before.

Then I listened to Al read some of his poems<sup>57</sup> in that husky ruffled-suit voice that makes me smile even when the subject is grave:

If death shall strip our bones of all but bones,  
then here’s the flesh and flesh that’s drunken-sweet  
as wine cups in deceptive lunar light;  
reach up your hand and turn the moonlight off,  
and maybe it was never there at all,  
so never promise anything to me:  
but reach across the darkness with your hand,  
reach across the distance of tonight,

and touch the moving moment once again  
before you fall asleep – <sup>58</sup>

Purdy’s spoken words provide a third dimension to his poems; providing pauses, emphases, subtle inflections and the authority of his voice, not apparent on the printed page.

It seemed to me that luminous night, that all the straggly, loose ends of my bewildering existence came together with blazing clarity. Together we celebrated his life *and* death.

We were not aware during Al’s last days, that one of his intermittent friends over a span of 40 years, Pierre Trudeau,<sup>59</sup> was facing his own death. Both had metastasized cancers but Trudeau, in

addition, was diagnosed with being in the early stages of dementia. Both men valued “quality of life”: each would find his own way to end life gracefully. They died within six months of one another in 2000. Trudeau chose to refuse treatment for his prostate cancer so that “the cancer would claim him before he lost his mind.”<sup>60</sup>

Al was affectionately ambivalent about Trudeau. At one point he wrote: “Surprised (Trudeau) remembered me after so long... I had kinda backed off from getting in touch since I thought he’d be so busy and important etc. To my surprise he said he hoped it wasn’t something like that. By god, I have never found him as arrogant as other people say.”<sup>61</sup> On another occasion, Al wrote: “I continually say to myself that poems are the most important thing... (yet) one part of one’s mind thinks one should be a golden boy, having the personality of Trudeau (who even before he got into politics had the personality to make everyone else in a room aware of him)... However, in my own mind I

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think that a good poem says ‘Fuck you’ to all the golden boys.”<sup>62</sup>

Although I communicated twice with Trudeau, late in his life, on right-to-die issues (and received brief courteous replies) he was not free as Al Purdy was to draw closer to a right-to-die organization even if he had the slightest interest in assisted dying. At one time, Trudeau could have introduced legislation that would have helped hundreds of Canadians have an easier time of confronting death; as it is, he provided us with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms that eventually may lead to more enlightened end-of-life laws and policies in the future. Perhaps the Charter is Trudeau’s *nurselog*;<sup>63</sup> its seedlings to be nurtured by Supreme Court Justices.<sup>64</sup> Perhaps that’s all that may reasonably be expected from a political leader in a zero-sum society when dealing with divisive issues.

\* \* \*

Someday, there will be imaginative professionals offering death services much more sophisticated than anything I created. Far from being a criminal activity, providing people with a humane death at a time of their choosing will be considered a valuable public service. I can imagine a euthanasia experience similar to the process depicted in *Soylent Green*<sup>65</sup> or the assisted death scene (using heroin) in Denys Arcand’s *The Barbarian Invasions*. But, while anticipating the dawn of that enlightenment, I chose to relieve suffering to the best of my ability in a legally and politically hostile environment.

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As I listened, during the night, that night, to Mahler’s majestic *Ninth Symphony* – with its anguished awareness of death combined with a hard-won affirmation of life – I was convinced that I had at last found my life’s justification and that I would surely be able to relieve the suffering of many Canadians in the future if called upon to do so.

When dawn arrived, it seemed to me to be one of the most beautiful mornings I had ever witnessed; full of hope and promise. At long last: *a well-organized assisted death service was a reality in Canada*. The timing of Al Purdy’s death (entirely

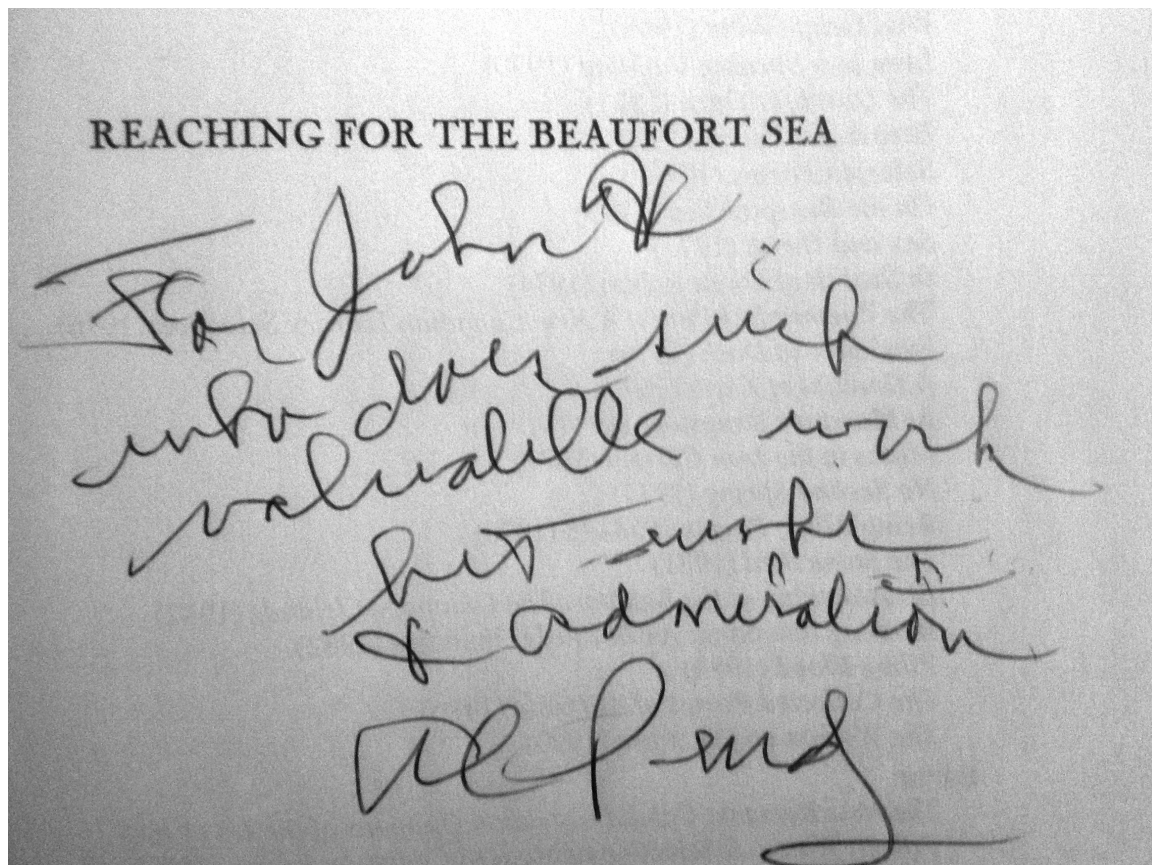
at his choosing); the innovative method of his death (painlessly, peacefully achieved within a few minutes); and the manner of his death (a private act, not micromanaged by any government) created an example of dying that is years ahead of social norms.

I did not have the courage or the means to spare Claude Jutra his final agonies; with Sue Rodriguez I had the courage but lacked the means (nothing comparable to NuTech methods); with Austin Bastable in Windsor (1996), because I still lacked a good method and experience, he went across the border to die with Jack Kevorkian’s help (carbon monoxide); finally in 1998, I had everything needed to begin a truly helpful and desperately needed assisted-death service in Canada.

But – just as there are menacing undercurrents in Mahler’s symphony that undermine its tonality, so, too, there were subversive forces, about which I then knew nothing, gathering strength below the surface of my everyday life; soon to bring bring all of my right-to-die efforts to a crashing end.

Had my life's work remained under my control, I would surely have continued to help Canadians end their lives through my underground services. What happened instead in June 2002 was catastrophic:<sup>66</sup> the assisted-death service that provided great comfort to Al Purdy – the man whom the League of Poets dubbed “the Voice of the Land” – was no longer available to the rest of the Land.

None of that belongs in Al's story, however. For him, and for me, his last night on earth marked the shared fulfillment of an ideal made real. Nowadays: few people are “born free”; fewer still “die free.” The State erodes our freedoms; little by little we become enslaved. On April 20, 2000, Al Purdy rode the rails of a different kind of underground railroad to reach his destination as a free man. •



For John H  
who does such  
valuable work  
best wishes  
& admiration

*Al Purdy*

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## Afterword

It has long been apparent to me that publication of this article (or any information about my underground assisted-death activities) must be posthumous. I cannot accept the risk of imposing upon Canadians profligate legal costs (2-3 million dollars is a conservative estimate for trials, appeals and lifelong incarceration upon conviction). The prosecution of Evelyn Martens on charges of assisted suicide in 2004 cost taxpayers an estimated \$1 million for proceedings confined to one court in Duncan, BC. Criminal charges against me under present laws would be more complex and expensive. If I were alive and in the process of being prosecuted, other individuals might be drawn into a legal quagmire as witnesses if nothing else; however my death will put an absolute end to all such repercussions.

*As a right-to-die activist* I feel obliged to speak honestly about participating in assisted deaths of people who were suffering greatly; *as a citizen*, I feel obliged to spare Canadians the absurd expense of governments enforcing outmoded laws to silence and punish me.

Although I had no remaining family, I had a few true friends who cared about me. Leaving them was difficult. Goodness in people is so rare in this world that it should always be cherished wherever it is found.

I strongly preferred to continue living. Perhaps there was (and still is) a need for a questioning spirit such as mine. But, rightly or wrongly, I felt that I had a civic duty to die if information about my illegal activities came to light by whatever means. The reason I believed such a harsh obligation existed was due to current laws that brand me a heinous criminal. In my view I am someone who aspired to redefine murder when the act is infused with compassion, but current Canadian laws do not allow for any such possibility – especially when the act is repeated: instead I must be evil or insane or both.

## Endnotes

1. Al Purdy, "Questions" in *Beyond Remembering: The Collected Poems of Al Purdy*. Al Purdy, Sam Solecki, eds. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2000, p. 466-467.
2. James Brooke, "Al Purdy, Poet, is Dead at 81; a Renowned Voice in Canada," *New York Times*, April 26, 2000.
3. Al Purdy, *Poems for all the Annettes*. Toronto: House of Anansi, 1973, p. 13.
4. Nicolaas van Rijn, "Al Purdy, 81, a poet of the people – His work taught in high schools and universities for decades," *Toronto Star*, April 24, 2000, p. 1. Purdy had severe peripheral neuropathy in his legs and feet and was definitely not wearing boots in bed, not even metaphorical boots.
5. Purdy died around 10:30 p.m., April 20, 2000; cause of death was not lung cancer.
6. Richard Pearson, "Top Canadian Poet: Al Purdy," *The Washington Post*, April 25, 2000, B07.
7. Sandra Martin, "Al Purdy: Poetic voice for the loneliness and majesty of Canada's open spaces," *The Guardian*, May 10, 2000.
8. John Bemrose, "The Passionate Writer," *Maclean's Magazine*, May 8, 2000, p. 57.
9. The phrase is commonly attributed to former *Washington Post* President Philip Graham (circa 1963) but journalist Alan Barth used the phrase "News is only the first rough draft of history" in a book review, *The New Republic*, 1943.
10. So far, privacy concerning Al's death has been maintained for 15 years and no controversy has been generated. According to Sam Solecki, Al felt so protective of Eurithe that he did not want a biography to be published while she was alive. Sam Solecki, "Materials for a Biography of Al Purdy" in *The Ivory Thought: Essays on Al Purdy*. Gerald Lynch, Shoshannah Ganz, Josephine Kealey, eds. University of Ottawa Press, 2008, p. 20.

11. I did not treat Al Purdy any differently than I did other RTDSC members requesting aid-in-dying. I gave freely of my time to any member who requested my assistance.
12. The title of a National Film Board documentary by Donald Winkler about AP (1988).
13. When *The Stone Bird* was published in 1981, PK wrote to AP: “Maybe you’re our first great poet?” Sandra Djwa’s biography, *Journey With No Maps: The Life of P.K. Page* (2013), depicts Page’s death January 13, 2010, at age 93, as routine: “When (her housekeeper) Luisa came in to wake her, she found that P.K...had died during the night.” Unlike Purdy who could turn to the Right to Die Society for help in 1999, it would be clear to Page from the time of Evelyn Martens’ well-publicized arrest in 2002 (charged with assisting two suicides) that RTDSC was no longer an organization that she could trust. As Lady Bracknell might say: “One charge of assisted suicide may be a misfortune. But two charges looks like carelessness.”
14. James King, *The Life of Margaret Laurence*. Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1997, p. 386-389.
15. Donez Xiques, *Margaret Laurence: The Making of a Writer*. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2005, p. 22.
16. Bruce Hawg, “Reconstructing Margaret Laurence,” *The Peak*, Simon Fraser University, Nov. 10, 1997.
17. In 2004, a suicide prevention barrier was installed on the bridge. Previously, an average of 10 suicides per year occurred (“La barrière anti-suicide a prouvé son utilité,” *Le Devoir*, Sept. 10, 2007). The bridge ranges from 162 to 344 feet above water.
18. For me, Claude Jutra’s terrible death is more memorable than some of his films; I am haunted by what he felt forced to do and profoundly regretful that I lacked the courage (and the means) in 1986 to help him achieve a kinder death. I had known Claude since 1963 (see *Inner Views: Ten Canadian Filmmakers*, McGraw Hill-Ryerson, 1975). No single event had more influence upon me in forming The Right to Die Society of Canada than Claude’s desperate and lonely method of ending his agonies. Every time I retrace his last steps in my mind, his terrors become mine. Claude seems to have confided in no one about his plans (see Ann Charney’s *Defiance in their Eyes: True Stories from the Margins* {Véhicule Press, Montreal, 1995, p. 87-107}). No one should ever be that alone.
19. Derek Humphry, *Final Exit: The Practicalities of Self-Deliverance and Assisted Suicide for the Dying*. New York: Dell, 1991.
20. To offset overheatedness inside a turkey bag, Humphry recommended that a person put a bag of frozen peas on his or her head. In order to delay carbon dioxide discomfort, Humphry recommended that a person hold the bottom of a bag away from the face until drowsiness became apparent, then close the bag with an elastic band – and good luck! For a description of my solution to the same problem, see Chapter Two.
21. Gordon Smith died January 7, 2006, at the age of 56, after a brief illness. Smith was an inventor, machinist, tool and die maker and the most innovative of my NuTech colleagues. I could not have helped Al Purdy as I did without Gordon Smith’s invaluable expertise, practical know-how and generous gift of time in creating and testing NuTech devices such as the DeBreather and the components of our Helium Method.
22. Alfred Purdy Sr. was 58 when Al was born; Eleanor Purdy was 40. “My own connection with these people seemed many generations distant. All the world was old, this very world that was closest to me.” Al Purdy, *Morning and it’s summer*. Montreal: Quadrant Editions, 1983, p. 12.
23. Compare this note to earlier accounts of Purdy’s railriding youth: the decline in creative energy is obvious. See “The Iron Road” from *Starting from Ameliasburgh: The Collected Prose of Al Purdy*. Sam Solecki, ed. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 1995, p. 19.
24. Al Purdy. Letter to Margaret Atwood, June, 1999, in *Yours, Al: The Collected Letters of Al Purdy*. Sam Solecki, ed. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2004, p. 543.
25. Al Purdy. Letter to Dennis Lee, July 5, 1999, in *Yours, Al: The Collected Letters of Al Purdy*. Sam Solecki, ed. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2004, p. 544.
26. Heighton was in his mid-twenties when he and his wife first met Al and Eurithe Purdy at the



A-Frame, midsummer 1988. The visit marked the beginning of an annual tradition.

27. When Dylan Thomas died in 1953 at age 39, he did not embody his famous exhortation: “Do not go gentle into that good night...rage, rage against the dying of the light.” Thomas died in a coma from the combination of undiagnosed pneumonia and an inadvertent overdose of morphine administered by a New York doctor.

28. Steven Heighton’s blog: *On trying to wear Al’s shirts*

<http://www.stevenheighton.com/posts.html>

29. The “helium method” has been used in over 700 deaths (mostly in the US) since 2002, according to estimates by the Final Exit Network. The lethal efficiency of the method has been proven but the ethical appropriateness of some of those deaths is questionable.

30. A rebreather is a technologically sophisticated form of diving equipment: it processes most or all of the exhaled breath of a diver, removes the carbon dioxide and returns a purified air supply (with additional oxygen) to the diver. A DeBreather (as I envisioned it) would absorb carbon dioxide but not add more oxygen; a person connected to a DeBreather would soon be breathing a rising level of an inert gas (nitrogen) with declining levels of oxygen. (Natural air is roughly 78% nitrogen). As long as the body can breathe in gases that are physiologically congenial to it, a person does not experience discomfort or distress. The oxygen declines, the person passes out – and dies comfortably. The process takes about 30 minutes. The DeBreather concept didn’t catch on, as the helium method did, primarily because Do-it-Yourself advocates, such as Derek Humphry who wields considerable influence in the American right-to-die field, could not commercially exploit a fairly expensive device that was not intended for public sale. DeBreathers were primarily useful to those actively providing assisted deaths to others.

31. October 2, 1999.

32. Commissioned by budget label Naxos. As of 2010, “Tintner’s (Bruckner’s) recordings have sold over 560,000 discs.” Tanya Buchdahl Tintner, *Out of Time: The Vexed Life of Georg*

*Tintner*, Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2013, p. 385.

33. *Gramophone*, January, 1999.

34. <http://www.andrys.com/gtmg1016.html>

35. Susan Musgrave, “Remembering Al Purdy” in *Al Purdy: Essays on His Works*. Linda Rogers, ed. Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2002, p. 147.

In 2015, when I asked Musgrave to confirm the accuracy of the comment she replied in an email (May 4): “If I did say this — “Al looked at death the same way he has always looked at life - right between the eyes...” it sounds like something I might have written in a blurb, and perhaps didn’t mean. I suppose it is possible to look life right between the eyes and miss, as it were. To be willfully blind, as they say in law.”

36. In the film *Still Alice* (2015) there is a puzzling scene where Alice (portrayed by Julianne Moore) visits a California doctor and requests Rohypnol. He says: “They’re powerful.” Alice responds: “I need something powerful.” Whereupon the doctor fills out a prescription form. Later she spills the contents on the floor: assuming that Alice broke open several dozen blister-packed tablets and put them in the container, the pills look nothing like Rohypnol. The scene is inauthentic: Rohypnol is illegal to prescribe anywhere in the US and overdoses of benzodiazepines used alone are rarely lethal.

37. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul\\_Robeson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Robeson)  
See Robeson’s *Ol’ Man River*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2lGxGrYz-0>

38. *Yours, Al: The Collected Letters of Al Purdy*. Sam Solecki, ed. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2004, p. 107.

39. Had Parliament seriously considered the single recommendation made by the Senate Subcommittee on Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia in 1995 – that a third category of homicide be created when compassionate intent was a major factor – the huge costs of prosecuting Robert Latimer for second-degree murder would not have been incurred.

40. This is beginning to change in recent years with Dying with Dignity’s Patron’s Council Program: Christopher Plummer, Graeme Gibson, Atom Egoyan, Margaret Atwood, Clayton Ruby,

John Polanyi, David Suzuki, among others, have pledged support for right-to-die principles.

41. I don't comprehend that statement.

42. See Appendix: Robert Fulford gave me permission to reprint his essay a second time in this collection and also to use his title for this book.

43. Al's planned consensual death had shifted from assisted suicide to "mercy killing"; part of a continuum to us though not to the Criminal Code of Canada.

44. *Final Exit* was well-known as a "how-to" manual readily accepted by coroners as circumstantial evidence that a suicide had taken place. We made use of its *reputation* but not the contents of the book itself.

45. During the Evelyn Martens trial in 2004, a coroner reported that Leyanne Burchell died from ingesting barbiturates. Police were convinced that Burchell had used helium. Apparently it never occurred to investigators that the situation could be *both/and* rather than *either/or*. That misunderstanding helped produce an acquittal.

46. Yosie Saint-Cyr, "Euthanasia Subject of Renewed Debate," *Slaw: Canada's Online Legal Magazine*, Sept 9, 2010. (Italics in Special Prosecutor's ruling mine.)

47. See Chapter Four: *Man in Pieces: the post-Purdy years* for a fuller comparison between the eponymous Railroad and my underground services.

48. Customarily we used a sophisticated Masimo pulse oximeter to help gauge the progress of a helium death. But in Purdy's case (for whatever

reason) we did not. One lawyer I consulted in 2014 asked me if I was absolutely *certain* that "the client" was still alive at the point helium was administered. I had to say "no"; I had no scientific data, either way.

49. Except on rare occasions where long distance travel was involved in addition to car driving; as when Evelyn provided an assisted death (helium) to a member living outside of Halifax (2001) following plans that we devised.

50. Perhaps it needs to be repeated here that the human body shows no adverse reaction when breathing pure helium; the body responds as if it is breathing normal air except that the lack of oxygen causes the brain to "black out" immediately.

51. Al Purdy, "Death of DHL" in *Beyond Remembering: The Collected Poems of Al Purdy*. Al Purdy, Sam Solecki, eds. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2000, p. 390-91.

52. "No one knows how to live well who does not know how to die well." Seneca: *On Tranquility of the Mind*. Letter to Seranus. Variant translation: "That man lives badly who does not know how to die well."

53. The art and science of dying well has yet to be invented. I envision imaginative alternatives to the settings and methods of hospitals and hospices; places where death becomes an enjoyable transcendental experience, customized to meet the needs, wishes and desires of the individual who has chosen to die.

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54. D.H. Lawrence, *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, Chapter 15, *The Lower Self*. The following line is: "Lovers, pure lovers, should say: 'Let it be so.'"
55. Somewhat like a movie that requires advanced technology and much technical skill to sustain a compelling illusion on a screen.
56. My humble house of intellect was built beside a Waldenesque pond in Canada: all I desired of life was to have a chance to do meaningful work and earn a modest income. I've envied no one. If, at the end of a day, I have a remnant of self-respect, it's been a good day. I've had no family for over 25 years and prefer calm friendship to passionate love.
57. Al Purdy, *Necropsy of Love*. Spoken Word CD. Winnipeg, MB: Cyclops Press. 1998.
58. Al Purdy, "Necropsy of love" in *Beyond Remembering: The Collected Poems of Al Purdy*. Al Purdy, Sam Solecki, eds. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2000, p. 68.
59. Trudeau and Purdy became acquainted during a group trip to Cuba in 1964 and met with Fidel Castro. See: *Yours, Al: The Collected Letters of Al Purdy*. Sam Solecki, ed. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2004.
60. Althia Rajj, *Contender: The Justin Trudeau Story*. Huffington Post ebook, 2013.
61. Al Purdy. Letter to Earle Birney, August 2, 1972, in *We Go Far Back In Time: The Letters of Earle Birney and Al Purdy*. Nicholas Bradley, ed. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2014, p. 261.
62. Al Purdy. Letter to Earle Birney, June 18, 1969, in *We Go Far Back In Time: The Letters of Earle Birney and Al Purdy*. Nicholas Bradley, ed. Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2014, p. 203.
63. In his poem *The Nurselog*, Purdy describes an ancient tree felled by a wildfire. In the eyes of many, it's just a dead log in a state of decay. But Purdy sees that the log has become a nursery for tiny seedlings, nurturing another generation of trees. *The More Easily Kept Illusions: The Poetry of Al Purdy*, selected by Robert Budde. Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2006, p. 52.
64. Reflected in the Supreme Court of Canada's historic ruling on assisted suicide (Feb. 6, 2015).
65. In *Soylent Green* (1973) starring Charlton Heston, Edward G. Robinson and Joseph Cotton, the Robinson character (Roth) is shown dying while listening to Beethoven and watching split-screen movies depicting Earth as a planet of pristine beauty. A bit cheesy in its film presentation but a rudimentary idea with artistic and therapeutic potential.
66. On June 26, 2002, Evelyn Martens was arrested and charged with two counts of assisted suicide; events about which I knew nothing. Working together, Evelyn and I helped eight individuals to die (between early 1999 and late 2001) and none of those deaths gave rise to suspicion; but when Martens secretly initiated two assisted-death missions on her own, she got charged for both of them.

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