

The
DEATH
of the POET

N. QUENTIN WOOLF



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NINE

And I had thought that I was at home, gazing out upon a herb garden like my own, its colours bleached by a cold sunlight, and I fancied that I was a butterfly, able to absorb the sun's medicine from the sunbeams – a sensation that made all the little hairs on my butterfly body shiver delightfully. Somewhere, unseen, a choir lamented. Miserere! The air tasted of Sunday roast beef, and iron. And yes, I thought, yes, I shall remain here eternally, for this is my home, and it is perfectly peaceful, and I shall open and close my wings for as long as I please.

Yet all the while some persistent thing scratched away at the back of my mind, wanting to remind me... of what? A chill light rain had started to fall: icy darts pricking my face. It hurt, and I had a good idea why, but even as the earth shook under me, I determined that I should keep my eyes tight shut.

I tried so very hard to hold on to home.

The choristers had started to scream, individually and in fear of their lives.

I tried to touch the pain in my face, but my face wasn't there.

EIGHT

078

At the exact moment you entered into my life (1994, February twenty-ninth, maybe six and a half minutes before the top-hour link into the commercials and the ten o'clock news), I was raring to slap down Louis from Modesto. Louis believed we all had worms in our heads that controlled how we behaved and would one day force the human race to exterminate itself.

Louis wasn't what I'd call my typical caller to KVOC. Most of the callers were tight.

Louis was already pretty heated up by the time the producer ushered you into the studio. You didn't so much as glance my way. You had a Winona Ryder complexion and owl glasses, and a tweed jacket that probably belonged to someone else. Kinda scatty; kinda hot. Within the hour you'd sock me in the mouth.

Down the line, Louis was demanding, 'So how do you explain war?'

'How do *you* explain war, Louis?' I said. 'Oh, I'll bet it's worms again, right?'

'Yes sir.'

'No such thing as free agency out there in Modesto?'

'That's what I'm trying to tell you. Once it's inside your head, you're locked into doing what it says.'

'Louis, do you have a worm inside your head?'

'Yes sir.'

'What kind of work do you do, Louis?'

'I'm a security professional.'

'You stand in front of a store?'

'Yes sir.'

Ordinarily, new guests to the station made a performance of settling down – getting tangled up in the headphone leads, mostly, or playing with the mic arms like safari monkeys – you didn't do

that. You paused to check out a framed black-and-white photo of the station owner meeting Salvador Dali – you smiled at it like someone recognising an old friend; then you pulled a book out of your bag, threw yourself on the couch, and made it clear you could give a damn what the rest of the world thought about that. An old bald-headed professor came in, and then a jock in a blazer: my interview crowd. You didn't look up once.

'OK, one thing, Louis, stop calling me sir, save that for your mom. You carry a gun, professionally, right?'

Once I'd reassured Louis I was only kidding about his mom, he admitted to the gun.

'And this worm of yours is in control?'

Louis agreed that it was.

'Be honest with me, Louis,' I said, dropping my voice low. '*Mano a mano*. You think that worm might make you do something crazy, one day?'

Louis deliberated. We were four minutes off the news. The clock was counting down. While Louis spoke, I tapped on the glass screen that separated you from me, and you started out of your reading. I pointed at my phones and you put yours on. Like the jacket, they were too big for you. You were twenty-seven and you smiled at me like you were ready for me to be very, very stupid.

'Carry on, Louis, I'm listening,' I told him, and on the internal circuit I said to you, 'Hi, I'm John Knox.'

'Sorry?'

'I'm John Knox.'

'Yes, I know that,' you said.

'So you're my historian?'

'I'm *an* historian. Art history. Postgrad.' There was seasoning in your accent I couldn't place.

'You don't look like one.'

'I beg your pardon?'

I said, 'That was meant as a compliment.'

Your smile was starting to look like it was hard work.

'Yeah,' I said. 'I mean, I meet a lot of historians in this job and most of 'em look like the 'before' for some kinda procedure, whereas...'

We stared each other down for a moment; and then we both looked at the bald-headed professor of history, who regarded us disapprovingly over his half-moons. You nearly cracked and laughed, but kept up the professional face.

Louis kept talking. He sure believed in that worm.

You asked if this was gonna take long. Not that it seemed to matter: you'd unselfconsciously brought the world's biggest book, with a butterfly on the dust jacket – *Papillon*, you told me, when prompted. I named the author, Henri Charrière, saying his name the French way. That made you take the time to look at me, through narrowed eyes.

I imagined what you'd be like to kiss.

There was one minute left on the clock. I apologised with a gesture and put my fader back up.

'OK – Louis, I tell you what I'm hearing. I'm hearing there's a dude in a uniform out there, he's been given a weapon and right now he *isn't sure* whether he might one day spray bullets into the good citizens of Modesto. The worm you describe – no, shut up, man, you've had your say – the worm you describe was identified ninety years ago as your id, Louis. Not Satan, not some worm – the part of you that, as a human being, you have a responsibility to keep in check, dude. Don't construct some belief-fantasy why it could be OK to act like a whack-job. It's never OK just to feel and do. Common sense is not a disease. Dan Quayle is not the norm. Pull your shit together, Louis, and face life like the man you are. We have news next; later we'll be remembering our guest from last year, the mighty and dearly missed Bill Hicks, but first I'll be talking to the smouldering student of history Rachel McAllistair and a couple of other folk about America at war and propaganda imagery. This is John Knox, telling it exactly like it is, on KVOC, the Voice of the Bay, 1510. We're on the airwaves because you guys buy stuff from our sponsors, so thank you for keepin' us talking. Here are some messages about the great products we're proud to endorse. Stay with.'

I looked to see what you'd made of my flattery, but you were reading your butterfly book.

In honour of Louis, I put on a Nirvana song just before you came on air – the one that starts with loading guns. The shine was gone off grunge (this was way post-*Badmotorfinger* and *Dirt* and *Nevermind*), but playing it still felt right. While I joined you and the jock and the professor from the war museum in the discussion part of the studio, a digital clock counted down to the end of the song. Unlike real life, radio is all about knowing how many minutes and seconds you have left.

The professor was old-school – he existed in a cloud of chalk dust. You, on the other hand, looked like a girl playing dress-up; beneath the outsize tweed with the *Dynasty* shoulder pads, you wore a black shirt buttoned low, the way only flat-chested girls can, and a zillion pendants, and Doc Martens. You shook my hand. You had a soft, hot hand. I wanted to hold on to it.

‘So you’ve listened to the show, right?’ You hadn’t. ‘Callers call in, I give them a hard time if they say something stupid, which some will; you guys get an easy ride. The idea is we just stir up the topic, get into the angles.’

‘I heard this is filmed,’ said the professor.

‘Yes it is.’

Yes it was. It was taped on a single camera, in a resolution basically unsuitable for broadcast. We had a hook-up with a low-rent satellite outfit in Santa Monica. They used to get OK ratings off the back of our show – that was before we got the FM licence for the Bay area, before we knew what simulcasting and syndication were.

I still have the tape. It’s getting old, now. Sometimes, when I want to remember you the way you were right at the beginning, I drag the old VHS machine out of the spare room and put it on. I get scared in case the thin tape might tangle or snap. One day it will. One day, without warning, you’ll be gone.

In the tape, we sit around the studio table in 1994, headphones on: a pretty random quartet of human beings, set against a backdrop of my autograph written in blue neon. Your long hair is down as though you want to hide behind it, and you seldom look up, until I say the word Chomsky, at least.

Until that point, the debate has been measured and academic – the kind of brain-food I got famous for making famous. We’re

discussing mustard gas. It's part of your specialism. The fucked-upness of World War One has been sketched. For Americans that war was a one-year nothing, but in Europe it was four long years of every known thing getting blown away, and gas drifting across fields, and I still have enough Canada in me to recognise the names Passchendaele and Somme. We talk about the image of a butterfly sitting on the muzzle of a cannon from the Great War, and the flowers in gun barrels in Washington in '67. But whereas the older two guests are talk-circuit pros and know the hand signs that mean speed up and hand over, and know how to be interrogated, when I coax you to be more specific you say, 'So annoying,' and when I invite you to develop the conversation in a new direction you throw a total shit-fit, claiming discrimination on the grounds of age, or because you're a woman.

'As listeners to this show will know,' I warn you, 'I love everybody, and especially women.'

'That's great, I love men.'

'I'm happy to hear that.'

'You gotta love 'em, don't you? Otherwise they're fucking *intolerable*.'

Inside the first three minutes, it's clear to me, the other guests and everyone listening in that you hate my guts.

But I catch the swear with the mute and the delay, and we labour on through that show: the show I can recite verbatim, the show I play over and over again in the dark: my only moving pictures of you. The best time, the time when you are most you, is when you riff on Woodrow Wilson's response to the sinking of the *Lusitania*. God, you're on fire. The smoke signals say *this is what I believe*. That was his moment to respond, you scoff, but all he did was send diplomatic notes. It should have been his Boston Tea Party, his Pearl Harbor – the point of no return, the first step in a ballet of revenges. You actually use that phrase: a ballet of revenges. I don't know what about you to fall in love with first. The Great War, you pronounce, sent one half of the poets looking for refuge in an imagined golden past, while the rest tried to craft a language beyond violence with which to report the apocalypse. You say that without notes, and without blinking, and you are beautiful.