



THE FIRE NEXT TIME

(or, The Ballad of the Old Rideau)

News item, October 1979: 'The historic Rideau Club ... was destroyed by fire last night.... It struck some observers as an ironic coincidence that the Club, for over a century a male preserve ... had just accepted its first woman member...'

Ironic? A coincidence? I have wondered, off and on, if there were more to the story. And last night, as I lay dreaming, a voice commanded me to write what I have here set down:

CANTO I: PROLOGUE

On a soft afternoon near the end of October
 When the trees try on crimsons and yellows,
 From the House on the Hill emerged purposeful, sober,
 United, a bunch of the fellows.
 They glanced at the clock in the shadow-strewn Tower,
 Dodged traffic with pin-striped decorum,
 Then mounted the steps to the real seat of power:
 The Club – their own sanctum sanctorum.
 Fine leather armchairs, austere, patriarchal,
 Caressed the chaps' haunches and withers,
 While footmen fetched flagons of roseate sparkle
 In flurries of hithers and thithers.
 So serene was the scene they were much loath to grapple
 With that which had caused them unrest:
 The fly in their ointment, the worm in their apple,
 The bird now befouling their nest.
 How could it be true, a few fell to musing,
 While footmen tiptoed to and fro,
 How could it be true they were threatened with losing
 The old solid-gold status quo?

CANTO 2: THE ELDEST SPEAKS

The eldest addressed them. His dewlaps were shaking;
 His voice was a wheezy huff-puff;
 But his tones set the bones of his hearers to quaking
 When he said, 'It has gone far enough!
 The decade is dark with this shameful disaster!
 Our good name is stained with disgrace!
 For what man among us can call himself master
 When his women won't stay in their place?
 We shillied and shallied, went soft in the head,
 We dillied and dallied and coasted.
 We thought they'd be bought with a crust of our bread,
 But they want half the loaf, nicely toasted!
 We grovelled and gave them a year of their own
 (Though 'twas only a ruse to confuse 'em);
 Now they aim to reclaim their erogenous zones,
 Their back and their front and their bosom!'



CANTO 3: THE TOSSPOT SPEAKS

A chap who was taking a nap by the fire
 (He was rather too fond of hot toddies)
 Came out of his coma enough to inquire:
 'What? They want to control their own bodies?
 Deliver us all from such impious prattle,
 Sweet Jesus our Virgin-born Saviour!
 And bring back the days when we ranked 'em with cattle
 And beat 'em for balky behaviour!
 You know when it started, this whole hanky-panky?
 October eighteenth, 'twenty-nine.
 That idiot Limey, Lord Chancellor Sankey,
 Said women were persons, the swine!
 I knew right away that our heydays were waning
 (Oh, why was Eve made with a tongue?)
 And all on account of the cursed complaining
 Of uppity Nellie McClung!
 He stopped and dropped into his favourite dream
 And he snored an indelicate cadence;
 He dreamed he was pleasantly letting off steam
 Flogging sixty-nine stark naked maidens.

CANTO 4: THE ADMIRAL SPEAKS

Then an admiral (who, from Her Majesty's Navy,
 Had lately retired on full pension
 To sleep in the Senate and pocket the gravy)
 Saluted and snapped to attention.
 'Avast and belay there, me hearties and mates!
 (And he curled a most nautical lip.)
 'Did Magellan surrender in difficult straits?
 Did Drake or Lord Nelson jump ship?
 Now women are useful, and again his lip curled,
 'Especially in hammocks and galleys.
 I've used them in most of the ports of the world,
 Especially the ones in back alleys.
 The others should stick to their diaper and mop –
 It's all that they're good for, God rot 'em –
 For why should they try for a rocm at the top
 When they're only a womb and a bottom?
 So ready about, boys, and anchors aweigh!
 (And he danced a most nautical jig.)
 'And as for the mutinous wenches, I say,
 Let's throw the whole crew in the brig!'



CANTO 5: THE REVEREND SPEAKS

Next up stood the upstanding Right Reverend O,
 Who daily swooped down like the Vandals
 To ban Margaret Laurence and Alice Munro
 (And nightly wore rouge and pink sandals),
 And waving the books tightly held in his hands,
 He thundered, 'Behold what you see there!
 Nuns – minus habits! Hogs – minus glands!
 And a she who consorts with a he-bear!
 Their strumpetry trumpets in novels infernal,
 They wallow in Satan's thesaurus!
 We must burn every word, even *Ladies' Home Journal*,
 And amputate every clitoris!'



CANTO 6: THE DOCTOR SPEAKS

'I'm shocked,' said a doctor from Great Gopher Bluff,
 'By their talk of their knockers and knickers!'
 (On the side he sold contraband copies of *Snuff*
 To Great Gopher gawkers in slickers.)
 'Then, hypocrites all, they've the gall to wear crepe
 At a rally protesting the lot
 Of some silly Sally who died in a rape
 And who likely deserved what she got!
 I move we restore that tradition of yore –
 No more should we bend or be lenient –
 Where we labelled them Virgin, Wife, Mother, and Whore,
 And shopping was much more convenient.'



CANTO 7: THE STUD SPEAKS

A fellow who'd fed on filet and gazpacho
 While axing a tax break for mothers
 Arose, struck a pose that he fancied was macho,
 Rubbed his fly on the sly and said, 'Brothers!
 They want equal jobs and they want equal pay;
 They clutter our locker- and wardrooms.
 They want equal rights and they want them today,
 And they mutter in back-, bed-, and boardrooms!
 A party's been launched by a lady named Laura,
 And Mo barks at Joe from behind.
 (For who but Mo Who threw the bacon to Flora
 To thank her for eating the rind?)
 Have they robbed us of pluck? Shall they just run amuck
 Till the sexes have gone all askew?
 Is the bull to give butter, the doe mount the buck,
 While the hen mocks the cock's doodle-doo?'



CANTO 8: THE ELDEST SPEAKS AGAIN

Worried, some hurried to check the front door,
 Or scurried for more double scotches;
 And some, contemplating what fate held in store,
 Convulsively covered their crotches.
 How they sighed as they tried to relieve their unease!
 How they yearned, how they burned for some solace!
 They pondered a Telex to Qom or Tabriz
 To borrow a few ayatollahs;
 They hoped that the Pope, quoting scriptures of old,
 E.g., Gen., Ex., Lev., Numbers and Deutero.,
 Could shepherd the women back into the fold
 With his 'Virtus est fetus in utero.'
 Then the eldest ahemmed (to clear the catarrh)
 And the silence fell chill as a tomb
 As he slowly ignited his Cuban cigar
 Till it glowed in the gloom of the room.
 His voice when he spoke was a ragged falsetto
 And his eyes and his mouth were quite wild:
 'By God,' and each word was a jagged stiletto,
 'This temple shall not be defiled!'
 The chaps made no sound as he wound down the hall
 With the grin of a too-thin piranha,
 And no one among them could later recall
 If he'd stubbed out his smoking Havana.



CANTO 9: THE PROPHECY

By midnight the fire had burst into view,
 The sparks sprinkled down in a shower;
 The roof fell through about ten after two
 By the clock in the shadow-strewn Tower;
 And the light leaped up through the marvelling air
 Past the place where the stars begin,
 Beyond the conjunction of When and Where
 Till, freed from the cosmic skin,
 It came by and by to the Highest of High,
 The One before Whom is no other,
 The Answer to Why, the Ineffable I,
 The Weaver, the Lever: THE MOTHER.
 She watched as the signal swam into Her ken;
 She nodded and said as it dwindled,
 'The boys have been playing with fire again,
 And they know not just what they have kindled.'
 Then the galaxies rang with Her anger and sorrow:
 'Will these sons of My daughters not learn
 That nothing can halt what shall come on the morrow?
 That freedom and truth cannot burn?
 O beware lest you make your own Hades, boys,
 Lest you sow what you'll reap with regret;
 And prepare, O prepare for the Eighties, boys,
 For you ain't seen nothin' yet!'

CLAIRE MACKAY

Artwork by Liz Martin