

## Reunion

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We are at the brink of great change, and we, gathered here today, are the generation that will live through that change. Like it or not, we have been chosen. Together we will experience awesome events: the success, or perhaps the failure, of humankind to come together to address climate change, to deal with an influx of refugees and migrants, to address problems that transcend borders and countries. We will make a union of the people and for the people, or we will fail to do so.

A definition of the word “reunion” that speaks to me is “the act or process of being brought together again as a unified whole.” But we have never been a unified whole, where each of us has her or his valued place in the world, where each of us matters. When we speak of reunion, we are speaking of an act of imagination. Writers know something about such acts.

It is not a reunion of which I wish to speak, then, not a return to Eden, to a time and place where people were guardians of nature and genocide hadn’t been invented yet. I don’t believe there was an Eden to which we can return.

There was, however, a time when people were more aware of their interdependence with the natural world. Perhaps more of us can reunite as we learn such knowledge, re-learn it, study with Aboriginal people across the globe a new way of being in the world, which is, at heart, a very old way redefined for a new era.

In my country, Canada, there is a great deal of talk and some genuine efforts to create a new union with First Nations people, who suffered the invasion of Europeans and the attempt to destroy their culture. The term we use is reconciliation. This term is resonant for me. Can we recognize our mutual humanity, our right to coexist, our obligation to sustain the earth that sustains us all, from Finland to Canada, Fiji to Cambodia? Can we reconcile ourselves to living differently, or will we be permanently at war with what needs to be done?

It was with some strange hope that I read recently that population scientists had radically overestimated the population explosion. Turns out we are heading into a period of depopulation. People are moving from villages to cities. When women move to cities they choose their own friends and family pressure becomes less important. Women work for wages, and have greater autonomy. And guess what? When women have more freedom, they have smaller families. Some of them have no children at all. This, I thought, this freedom of women may be what changes everything, may be enough to stop the arc of the pendulum as it swings toward destruction, to make the pendulum swing the other way.

It wasn’t right away that I made the connection between another statistic I had read some years earlier, a statistic so terrible and quietly shocking I folded it away in a corner of my mind: the one hundred million missing women across the world, murdered due to femicidal violence, or aborted because they were female. This many millions of women who cannot have children of their own, quietly erased: do we owe to these disappeared women the survival of our species?

Ironically, fewer women on this crowded earth of ours has not raised the status of women. It has not led to a reunion between men and women. In those countries where a son is welcomed far more than a daughter, the lack of marriageable women has led to violence and suffering, but not to equality.

So what is a writer to do, writing now? How do we address the fear, the murderous hatred of the feminine, the desecration of those not like ourselves? Where do we go from here?

I'm going to read you a couple of paragraphs from a new short story I wrote that speaks of another reunion, the twisted reunion of a mother who believes her murdered daughter and dead husband have come back to her as dogs. It's called:

### **You're Home Now**

Earl was always chasing pussy when he was alive, so it was no big surprise when he came back as a Weiner dog. One night he showed up, scratching on my door with a trembling paw, probably on account of all he did wrong before as my husband. "Get!" I said, banging the screen door so fast he jumped back just before it clipped his snout. He whined, nudging the door.

"Get lost, why don't you?" I said, blocking his way with my foot as he stuck his snout through, and then pushed with his shoulder, real cautiously. When he knew he couldn't overpower me physically, he went straight for the heart. He sat down, his ratty tail slapping the porch a hundred rotations a second, and just looked at me with his sad brown eyes. That Weiner dog stared into my soul. That's how I knew it was Earl, come back to me. I had no more fight left.

As a man, Earl never brought me flowers. He never took me dancing. He didn't need to. It was those brown eyes of his, so sad they could melt you. They got me every time. I wasn't the only bitch who flipped when that dog came calling. Oh, but when Earl Cooper was sweet on me he didn't need to say a word. Those eyes pierced my heart back then. He got me again, standing on my porch, grinning up at me from that chinless doggy face.

Earl sniffed, then moved forward to lick my big toe. But then Linda, my daughter, trotted over, growling deep in her throat. Linda came back to me as a standard poodle, a black one. No surprise there. She was smart, but a lot of people thought she was dumb. For most girls, this is a winning strategy, but Linda was unlucky. Still, in the end, she was smart enough to make her way home to mama, and that's what counts. Earl wagged at Linda, sniffing politely at her rear end. Linda's black lip curled, showing the pink. She lunged. I grabbed Linda by the collar. I figured Earl had been punished enough.

That night I slept better than I had in a long time, Linda on one side of me and Earl on the other. The next morning he was up before I was, with that eager look on his face that said, "Eggs, please?" I made some for Linda too, but she just sniffed. She prefers chicken, poached, white meat only.

It was like a second honeymoon for me and Earl. Him not being able to speak really worked in our favor. "I'm sorry about your heart," I told him as we cuddled together on the couch. "If I had it to do over again, I'd do it different.

We don't want to look back and say, if we had it to do over again, we'd do it differently. We can only begin, in our limited ways. Festivals like this one, that bring writers together from all over the world to use our imaginations, to unite: they are a great and hopeful opportunity.

We want so badly to connect! If this weren't the case, we would all turn away from social media, that unprecedented loop of intimate news on what people we barely know are doing, eating, thinking (or what they want us to think they are thinking).

And we are afraid. Afraid of scarcity, of difference. Afraid of the unknown future, of losing what we can barely maintain.

Writers can be so difficult! It was with great sincerity that I told my friend (also a writer) that one of my New Year's Resolutions was to make friends with someone who wasn't a writer. We live too much in our heads and not enough in our bodies and hearts. But we can strive to do better. We can listen. We can imagine union, and embody reconciliation. We can observe and record and write the truth. These are all sacred duties in a time of upheaval.