

the waives

for Corbin and Cindi Keep

Uncle Edward did watercolours. Very precise, with details in sharp colours against a carefully chosen wash. Accurate, gentle, honest, a little sentimental. And very literal: he only painted what was there and painted a lot of what there was. Telephone lines, garbage cans, things people might leave out of their paintings or edit out of their photos. He was known for his accuracy, and a picture was once used to settle a lawsuit. There must have been a view of the sea from the house when it was new, because in the painting there was the half built house and there was a little silver shimmer of sea.

Though he wanted the facts to show, he wanted them striking. He wasn't beyond making them in order to paint them. He would hire painters, house painters, to colour things the way he wanted them. A truck that didn't fit the composition was once disappeared into the exact green of the forest. At least it became the exact green in his picture, and the owner got a new spray job for his rusty jalopy out it. When he arrived with his easel and paint box people would take in their washing and put away wheelbarrows and lawnmowers, not because they did not want to spoil the painting but because they did not want their colours improved. Small dogs and red-headed children, too. The lawsuit took a different turn when someone remembered a length of reflective foil pinned to a hedge, just where a gentle shimmer would balance the reflection from a pond on the other side of the construction.

It was a retirement hobby for uncle Edward and as he became more accomplished his ambitions increased. Luckily he could afford his scenes. He developed a taste for the improbable, though it always had to be real. A

parrot on the dock, a bright purple biplane with a girl on its wing. He would stare at particular trees, cars, hedges and imagine how they would look in other surroundings. So he would have them duplicated, or moved, to where he wanted them in his scene. He paid ten men to cut through the trunk of a Douglas fir and manoeuvre it onto a flat-bed truck, holding it vertical all the while with six cables in constant adjustment. It was unloaded and held standing in the middle of the school house lawn while he painted. An honest painting, the cables were visible and even the men and their winches. But you would have thought they were dancing, and the tree had grown there.

He began to look longingly at houses. He would talk in frustration about how they were so often built in the wrong places and in the wrong orientations. He had a small cabin moved up a steep hill and perched at the edge of a cliff above the sea, with a third of it lurching unsupported over the drop. He took his time doing the picture, which also involved a raven and several azalea bushes, and then had the cabin carried back to where it was. After all, it had no foundations and was just sitting on the ground anyway. And the owners were away, or so he thought, not realising that there was a sleeping child in the house all along.

He was so excited when the owners of a house he admired and whose location he deplored decided to move. To move the house, that is, to a point on the far side of the island. It is something we do from time to time out here. You ease the house off its foundations, put rollers beneath it, and roll it ever so slowly along to somewhere it can go onto a barge and then, hoping for calm weather, you tug it to where you're going. Then you ease it off and roll it to where you want it to be. But Helen and Masoud's house was large, three stories if you include the gable bedrooms, and very irregularly shaped. That's why uncle Edward liked it; it was full of shadows and reflections and contrasts. Or would be, if it was in the open sun with water all around it. They were delighted when uncle Edward offered to pay for the move.

He paid for more than the move. He laid on a Persian rug to be hung out of an upstairs window, and a brass band on a barge of its own. The second barge had a flag-pole with an unusually elongated maple leaf flag. And besides and between the barges there was a dragon boat paddled by twelve strong girls. The idea was this. The house would go on the barge; the band would go on the other barge; the tug would tug both barges and the dragon boat would paddle along until it was needed. It would be needed when the whole procession came around the point into the bay. Uncle Edward would be sitting just where the house would line up with the mountain in the far distance across the sound, framed by the maple leaf banner which would make a symmetry with the vertical trunk of an arbutus on the point. The band would play and the girls in the dragon boat would hold a position half way between the barges, while uncle Edward captured the moment on canvas.

He always said that he would look at a scene and see it instantly as a picture. What to bring out and what to make obscure, where the edges should be. And then he paid no attention to the time it took to paint; he was painting the scene as it had flashed into his vision. But painting does take time. The hand moves only so fast and the paint goes on in layers. Capturing a moment is not a momentary thing.

The tug appeared around the point. The barges followed. The painting began but the procession continued. Lines were drawn and washes applied. "Hold it right there" he shouted into his cellphone. The tug rotated into the wind, the tide began to turn, the dragon boat fell behind. Ten minutes later they were in approximately the same positions. For five minutes. Then again ten minutes later, though the rug was now flying from the flagpole and the dragon boat girls were drinking beer with the brass players. Then the wind came up and the sea was churned between it and the opposing tide. One

barge bumped the other, just gently but enough to shake the gables of the house. The tug captain signalled that he was abandoning his stationary position and heading off for his destination. In fact he let slip the cable on the second barge, intending to recover it later once the house was safely delivered. But the cable whipped round and caught on the porch of the house while the second barge grounded itself in the bay. So the whole train - tug, barge and house, barge and band with dragon boat - stalled and churned.

The cables groaned, the wind shrieked, the people shouted. Just what you'd expect. The top of the house took flight and landed on the other barge. The bandsmen jumped into the dragon boat and let the girls paddle them to shore. They were wise to, as when the cables snapped they snaked back and forth across the decks, searching for victims. The roof of the house floated peacefully in the bay while the tug pushed the first story round the point to its destination. And uncle Edward.

He just sat there on the shore, surrounded by ruined sketches and mingled paints. Wide smile, dazed eyes, no words. He picked up his brushes and broke each one, then strode back to his car. Not defeated; he knew where he was going.

He had been an eccentric amateur till then. His pictures were in shows if he was paying the rent. But there were headlines when his set of fifty pen and wash drawings was shown. They featured boats of an indeterminate shape with people paddling on all sides. Angry and fearful faces arranged vertically and horizontally. Unidentified dark things flying through the air. There was sequence, but one had no idea which drawing came first.

Hokusai meets Turner, they said. A renaissance of the Haida tradition of marine art, grotesque and natural. A challenge to our preconceptions of the nature of Art. A brilliant fusion of the landscape and narrative traditions. The

Way Forward for Canadian painting.

Helen and Masoud's house stands on its new lot, overlooking the bay. Crouches, rather, or lounges. The second storey has a new roof and is joined diagonally to the first storey, which has the old roof and gables and is slightly further down the slope. A horizontal staircase runs from one of the gables to the second storey. There is a tall flagpole in the middle of the yard, and occasionally a brass band will sit on the porch and practice.

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