# Seeing and Surviving in Timothy Findley's Short Stories

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In the introduction to his only collection of short fiction, *Dinner Along the Amazon* (1984), Timothy Findley writes that for thirty years he has "turned again and again to the same unvarying gamut of sounds and images."[1] He mentions the sound of screen doors banging and distant gramaphone music, the images of photographs and Colt revolvers kept in boxes or drawers, the sight of a chair falling. These personal obsessions are permanent fixtures in his fictional world. (His agent was once struck by the number of rabbits in his work: "Oh God, Findley—*not more rabbits!*" [ix]). In her review of *Dinner Along the Amazon*, Barbara Gabriel defines some of Findley's central preoccupations:

> The themes which dominate the major fictions are all here, too: the betrayal of the child in the mausoleum of upper middle-class family life, the revulsion from violence and war, the primary values of animals and nature, displaced by a technological and anthropocentric Western civilization. But one theme emerges in clearer outline than ever before. . . . [In] Findley's postlapsarian universe the canker in the rose is not sexuality itself, but the relations between the sexes since time primordial. The breakthrough in the publication of this volume is to a starkly sexual politics.[2]

The review presents a useful thematic summary; what I would like to focus on, however, is one particularly important detail of characterization in Findley's storytelling (present in the novels and film scripts, too)—the act of looking at a person or thing—an act which helps to define both individual characters and the relationships among characters, and which tells us about the kind of world in which they operate.

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[1] Timothy Findley, *Dinner Along the Amazon* (Markham, Ont.: Penguin, 1984) ix.

[2] *Canadian Fiction Magazine* 54 (1985): 87.

Most of Findley's characters spend much of their time simply watching other people and themselves; even the animals of *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (1984) are tireless watchers of other creatures. Hence we note the importance of vantage points in Findley's terrain—where the sniper lurks, the sentinel stands—and the need for sharp eyes, binoculars, telescopes, cameras (to capture the visual impressions, to stock memories like photographs), and the ubiquitous mirrors. Perceiving the self (or selves) is a major preoccupation because it is enjoyable as well as unavoidable, a source of innocent fun, and sometimes the gratification of less obvious, often libidinal, desires.

Findley's characters, then, typically are intense spectators, and the spectacle they behold is frequently unusual, if not bizarre, when judged by the reader's everyday experience. Difficulties arise when a character's view is so extraordinary or his or her behaviour so uncanny as to seem "crazy." A key word in Findley's writings and conversations from the early novels, through the stories and his numerous interviews, to *The Telling of Lies* (1986), is "crazy." This craziness extends from that of the mere eccentric to the homicidal sociopath and the actual certified lunatic (Ezra Pound in "Daybreak at Pisa" in *Dinner Along the Amazon*).

Visual images and scenes in which characters stalk, observe, or make eye-to-eye contact with others as they try to maintain defensible positions on life's contours—an especially difficult task for those already unbalanced by the abnormal pulls of temperament and habits of mind—are numerous. In the twelve stories which comprise *Dinner Along the Amazon*, optical imagery is Findley's primary means of projecting his imagined world into the reader's purview. We "see" how his characters are thrown off-center, how they are diminished or enlarged or in some way distorted (sometimes tragically, often comically) by the emotions which roil within them and which result in eccentricity. More precisely, in *Dinner Along the Amazon*, Findley points to eyesight as a way in which people try to control or cope with life. Sight is used for at least five purposes:

1. to get the lay of the land, especially in the stories of youth, and to survey in order to survive;
2. to locate oneself, especially in stories where mirrors are prominent, in order to confirm one's existence;
3. to obtain gratification;
4. to communicate emotion or information, as with a "telling glance," or to show recognition;
5. to attack or threaten, stares being more abundant than smiles.

A number of stories in *Dinner Along the Amazon* illustrate these situations.

## I

Findley's "Hello Cheeverland, Goodbye" opens with an epigraph damning the spiritless people of the land and raising an anguished "Howl, howl, howl." A second epigraph identifies the place as not New York, Connecticut, or New Jersey, certainly not Ontario (although the story first appeared in *The Tamarack Review*), but Cheeverland. (The comic exaggeration of events and characters in this story is in the spirit of John Cheever's early whimsical, later sardonic, chronicles, and they also exhibit Findley's own peculiar combination of the grotesque and the funny.) The setting is the affluent shore of Long Island Sound, where "chocolate" maids (that is, "darkies") draw "hand-rolled cigarettes" out of Benson & Hedges boxes and babysit the children of millionaires. One of these heirs is 240-pound Neddy Baker, an idiot of 23 years, who bawls obscenities toward William F.'s "Buckley-ham Palace," on the far conservative shore, when he is not "pointing out to sea like a man who cannot make others believe he has seen a sinking ship or a hand that has waved and disappeared" (151). This frantic fellow might remind us of Faulkner's Benjy, but the waving hand is horrifically Findleyan; it appears again, at the end of the story, savoured by a neighbour's dog: "The thing between its paws is sticking up like a butcher's bone—all red at the top and ragged" (188).

Although the wives in Cheeverland regularly view others through their windows, Neddy is the first of the watchers to be individualized by name in the story. He is an aggressive watcher, although his energy is too diffuse to be sadistic. Neddy's elderly neighbour, Professor Orin Dinstitch, late of Los Alamos, is not an aggressive watcher (although the "allure of violence hangs" about him) because he has sublimated instinct and canalized his venom into cruelty toward senior citizens. He is secretly delighted "with the way they will not die." The professor's mad spinster sister, however, is a scoptophilic watcher of the sexual, rather than the sadistic, variety; she wishes to ingest the object viewed through her binoculars. The first person she observes on the day the story begins is a stranger who arrives at the Andersons' house by taxi: "Call him Ishmael," Findley resonantly declares. This strange Canadian, whose name is taken from one of Cheever's literary forebears, has written a novel that the Andersons want to produce as a TV Film of the Week ("not the same thing as a FILM"). Ishmael is settled into the maid's room now that

Rosetta has moved back "downtown" where the Blacks gather. The room is conveniently near the bath where Ishmael drinks vodka and fantasizes over his collection of porn magazines.

Being television professionals, the Andersons are concerned with creating images. Alicia Anderson is obsessed with violence, not mere eroticism; she adds ultra-violence, as Anthony Burgess might put it, to simple melodrama. She makes the voyeur in Ishmael's novel murder the girl that he was content to watch. Ishmael is a passive onlooker to the changes made by Alicia, who would transform everything in the TV viewers' menu if her dinner fork were a magic wand. "Surely you must *see* that?," she grills Ishmael about the need for "violent death" (Findley's emphasis, 172). She affects a Bloomsbury hat—"the very image of Virginia Woolf," writes Findley—but she carries a loaded .32 revolver in her bag, as does Rosetta, because "one can't be too careful these days." There is a hilarious scene in the Andersons' kitchen when Alicia and Rosetta apply "Three-in-One" to their pistols while Rosetta mutters "Jesus" (is this a sacrilegious joke?) and drips the all-purpose oil onto the newspapers which report rabid violence downtown: "MAN'S WORST ENEMY: THE DOG."[3] Her lover Clyde has told Rosetta that it is time they moved uptown. "But there's nowhere for you to live up here," says Alicia, whose liberalism has its limits. "Oh, *we* ain't gonna move," Rosetta replies, "It's the gasoline that's coming up" (Findley's emphasis, 163). The story shows that violence and hard drugs have indeed penetrated the Sound, as have nude lesbians, backyard target practice, and power mowers that "shatter the pristinity of the atmosphere" (161)—as did the Los Alamos bomb!

The next house guest who comes to the Andersons', watched by Miss Dinstitch and Ishmael, is Addie, Alicia's dangerous sister. As Addie enters the house by the front door, Arthur Anderson is in back with his telescope trained on the fighting Kileys, an unhappy couple struggling in a sailboat. Lesbian Lydia Harmon, who is watching the voyeur, greets Arthur from the rear, "Who's winning?" We notice that both Addie and Lydia are lovely, but physically androgynous, and both like to see people squirm. Lydia caresses Arthur's foot with her toe; Addie will later do

[3] The scavenger dogs which (since at least as far back as the 1950s) harrow the fiction of such writers as John Hawkes, Harlan Ellison, and Ernest Herbert (*The Dogs of March* [Markham, Ontario: Penguin, 1980]) have become a real menace of urban vigilantism in the 1980s.

much more for Ishmael. Arthur is sure Addie "*needs*" to be seduced (Findley's emphasis), but he collapses his telescope and moves away. He finds solace in "Kiley's dog," a forsaken creature with no other name:

> Slowly, the dog begins to fawn on Arthur's hand and Arthur wonders how often any other hand, especially a Kiley hand (Edward's with its dreadful rings—Emmaline's with its sun spots) is ever laid this way, receptive of an ear to scratch and received so gently into the wet of that eager mouth to have its finger chewed. Probably never. (169)

This strange eroticism is recaptured and transformed at the end of the story.

The first person whom Addie meets inside the house is Ishmael, who has the "crazy" thought that one of them must be at the wrong address. Findley's emphasis is on the visual strangeness and the power of the eye to engage in combat: "Their eyes are locked so tight that Ishmael has to turn away" (170). Ishmael is the first to break in this contest of wills, and Addie backs him from the living room. Outside he is spotted by a surly youth waiting for the bag man, who confronts him, and again Ishmael backs away, into the "moonlike glow of the street lamps," where he discovers the Kiley's dog, frightened and howling against the dark like a brute chorus, night's counterpart to Neddy Baker. The surly Dennie Baker, the junkie, is watched by Miss Dinstitch, whom Findley describes as "the very image of a giant Cacropia, trapped and pinned to the trellis with her Chantilly wings waving in the breeze and the dust of her Yardley's powder scenting the air with despair" (174). There appears to be no refuge for the timid in Cheeverland, although there is a trace of pity: "*Oh, everyone*, Miss Dinstitch sighs" (Findley's emphasis, 174). But this pity is just a spinster's velleity, not a response evoked in the reader of this dispassionate story.

Inside the community's houses, the "howling" of a sports broadcast contends with the "aviary of voices" of people partying. At one party, the unhappy Arthur is suddenly pinned against the wall (akin to a Prufrockian social specimen) by the drunken Edward Kiley, who does not like spying telescopes. In a moment of lucidity (Findley's hy-

per-reality[4] ) Arthur knows that he is being asphyxiated in plain sight and that no one cares to notice. There is justice in Cheeverland, of course, for Arthur has lusted after Edward's wife. His last conscious glimpse is of a hand that is tendered lovingly to Alicia by Lydia Harmon. Perhaps Lydia is seducing someone, as Arthur hoped she would, though he surely did not think it would be his wife. However, we are told nothing of what goes on in Alicia's mind regarding Lydia other than the elliptical "Lydia. Oh. But no." These words are repeated, set in the context of Alicia's "*maddening*" thoughts (Findley's emphasis, thrice repeated) about her swollen ring fingers, the agony of the morning sun ("nailed to the sky"), and her need to "forgive someone," for an entirely imaginary wrong, because her psychiatrist advises that this will make her feel good. Alicia, the television dream-maker, needs to invent scenarios in order to give her life reality.

Ishmael, too, is in search of someone, anyone who can give substance to his life. Unfortunately for him, Ishmael is too passive toward the world; he is disappointed that, for instance, the binoculars of a hidden watcher (Miss Dinstitch) are not focused on him. He is excited by Lydia's nakedness, but he "bites his lip" in frustration rather than approach the woman. His narcissism is tied to pain, even though he is non-violent in his actions. He thirsts for more details about the murders downtown. Ishmael fits into a mongering society which feasts, in cannibal-fashion, on "people" features in countless magazines and tabloids, and in TV's surfeit of rich and famous "lifestyles" for popular consumption. He is delighted when he spies, in the Andersons' bathroom, a bottle of man's deodorant called "Lash." His sexual life is adolescent, and he is driven to a frenzy of shame when Addie discovers his cache of porn magazines and "pins" the evidence to every surface of Ishmael's room. The razored-out photos stare at Ishmael from everywhere when he steps through the doorway: "every eye on Ishmael: eight hundred and fifty-two women, fingered, licked, explored, and spattered from every conceivable position" (185). "A paper love-life isn't much," Addie mocks, while poor Ishmael squats on the face of "Caroline Caress." "I don't know why you want to live," she goes on relentlessly. But Ishmael the writer is a producer of paper love-life, and he lives, and will continue to

[4] Perhaps like the anxious "lover," again from Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," who sees his raw nerves displayed "in patterns on a screen"—I hope to show that Eliot's influence (even imagery) is pervasive in a number of stories.

live, at the instinctive level of "auto-erotic response" (186). He is filled with the stuff of Films of the Week.

By the end of the story, Ishmael is ready to venture out of his room again, soothed by an afternoon of cigarettes and vodka, the legal addictions of Cheeverland. A battered Arthur Anderson remains under sedation in a hospital room, perhaps dreaming of the sea-girl, Emmaline, who will not sing to him. Addie leaves behind the memory of her castrating scissors. The music of Alicia's cello restores temporary order to the twilight zone: "And now it is evening, but not quite night." Late-night Cheeverland glows on the "flicker of white-fire" where the TV's are still on but the image is gone. But by Monday, downtown will be closer to the Long Island Shore, for violence has invaded the suburbs:

> Now, Rosetta stops herself cold at the foot of the Andersons' walk. There on the lawn with something between its paws, is Kiley's dog. . . . It is a human hand and the dog, at last, is complete as Rosetta and the world around her fade. (187-88)

"Hello Cheeverland, Goodbye" is set in a violent world south of the Canadian border, but violence is endemic to Findleyland, beginning with the early novels, *The Last of the Crazy People* (1967) and *The Butterfly Plague* (1969), and the earliest of his stories (as they are dated by the author in the introduction to *Dinner Along the Amazon*), where violence is seen as part of growing up.

## II

Two of these early stories, "Lemonade" and "War," deal with a young boy's need to attract the attention of a parent—the mother in the first story and the father in the second. In both stories, the child's problem centers on the actual mechanics of seeing and the difficulty of bringing the parent into focus. Perception is literally the subject in these stories, as well as functioning as a metaphor for understanding or communication.

In "Lemonade," Harper Dewey's father died in the second world war, and Mrs. Renalda Dewey lives a life apart from her child and the Black maid, the strong and courageous Bertha, who attends to the big house and nurses the spoiled and drunken mother. Mrs. Dewey is incommunicado behind curtained bedroom windows or in-

side her hearse-like limousine. As summer wanes, it seems "that Harper didn't see his beautiful mother for days on end." On the rare mornings when he is admitted to his mother's room, he sits beneath a blanket teepee on her bed, wrapt in a "trance of perfect silence," and watches as she, silent in front of a mirror, transforms herself as from a cloud, "like a floating figure in a Japanese print [cf. the detached "Kabuki" in a later story], with the silence, the intensity of a mime" (12). He remembers that once, when he had entered the invalid's room unannounced, he had discovered a different Mrs. Dewey, "like a vile photograph forced before his eyes":

> His mother's face pressed against the sheets—his mother's mouth all open and showing where she had no teeth—his mother's eyes which had no brows—and all of this, all of this "face," was the most insipid colour, a horrid yellowy white—pressed against the pink sheets like an advertisement for sickness. (10)

This erotic gargoyle is thrust upon him insistently.

Which is the true Mrs. Dewey? When Renalda Dewey looks into the mirror, it is "as though she couldn't find herself there. She had to go very close to it and lean one hand against the table to steady herself and she had to almost close her eyes before she found what she was looking for" (13). What she is looking for is the person of worth she once was; what she finds, what she hides from her son with the deviousness of the drunk, is the cache of the family jewels she pawns piece by piece. The central part of the story deals with Harper's efforts to sell lemonade, laced with mother's gin (a fateful genetic trait), in order to replace the lost family fortune. Often in Findley's fiction, commodities are traded in a bid for affection.

Harper is haunted by the "Duty Letter," written by his father just before he died in the war, which enjoined the son to look out for his mother. He feels that some unspeakable burden will keep him from fulfilling his responsibility, and his feelings toward his mother are ambivalent, for he throws a stone at the window where she watches his lemonade bazaar. During the night after the bazaar, he has a dream in which his mother, wearing Harper's sunhat with the green eye-shade (casting a sickly pallor over her face), serves lemonade to her husband. The dream of the Oedipal son reveals the turmoil within Harper:

> He was about to reach them, about to throw the gun away, when his father's face suddenly blanked out the entire picture and he shot at it, firing three times into the mouth.
>
> The face fell apart as though it had been torn like a piece of paper and the pieces melted into the air and ran, waxlike, down a pane of glass. After that, everything began to fade—the pictures and the noises together—rushing away into final darkness and silence. (56)

Findley times his narrative so that Harper's dream occurs at the moment when Mrs. Dewey shoots herself with her husband's Colt revolver; thus the son is released from conflicting duties, and the parents negate each other. The curtain descends on another of Findley's Southern Ontario Gothic tragedies (see also *The Last of the Crazy People*, the story of the Ross family in *The Wars*, and so on). However, the suicide of Mrs. Dewey is not quite the end of the story, because Harper takes his bazaar earnings to Woolworth's, buys an assortment of jewelry, and then buries the gems (as seems fitting to him) with his beloved guinea pig that had been abandoned to drown during the stormy night of Renalda Dewey's death. It is important to Harper that he "show" the burial rites to loyal Bertha and that this firmly rooted (obviously "earthy") woman should reassure him that Mrs. Dewey will "see" what they enact in the garden. The boy has come to terms with mortality and responsibility.

The story entitled "War" is also about growing up and has as protagonist a boy two years older than Harper in "Lemonade."[5] The age difference, together with the fact that Neil Cable's father is living and the father of two sons who have friends, introduces the element of male bonding into the children's world. Neil believes that his father is responsible to him for a promise made and that promises must be kept among peers, even if Neil has to run away temporarily (as Harper does, too) in order to save face. The story of how he hides in a barn, although he is afraid of stepping on a duck in the dark, is told by Neil two years after the event and is put into a humorous perspective. He explains how he spied on the policeman who led the search party: "He urinated against the wall inside the door. It was sort of funny, because he kept turning around to make sure no one saw him. . . . [But then he spotted Neil and asked]

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[5] Harper is eight years old in the first story; Neil is twelve in "War," but is recounting events which took place in the summer two years previous.

'do you want to tell me what you're doing up here?' 'No.' I think that sort of set him back a couple of years" (72-73). However, it is in earnest that he throws stones at the father's face until the man falls unconscious, at which point Neil drops to his hands and knees in grief. It is only years later that he fully understands what happened that day. The father could not teach the son how to skate that year because duty called him off to war. A photograph caught the visual impact of the day's events: "He looked just like he does right there in that picture. You can see where the stone hit him on his right cheek—and the one that knocked him out is the one over the eye" (81). Neil wishes that he had not thrown the stones, but he keeps the photograph because he did. "War" is not a story in which the Findleyan parent betrays the child, as it has been interpreted, but one in which the boy takes a step out of childhood.

## III

In "War," the process of *seeing* changes from active aggression (the attack upon father-figures) to passive contemplation of a photograph. In a later story, "The Book of Pins," sight is again used against others. The protagonist here is a successful middle-aged writer, Annie Bogan, whose view of life is essentially a distancing one, compatible with her cool temperament. Her clear eye is ruthless. She believes that people must be kept "at bay," as can be seen in this description of Annie Bogan in the hotel lobby at the beginning of the story:

> In the lobby, the dark oak panels shone with the same deep glow of oil-of-lemon wax and the smoky mirrors reflected still the same old women in the same brocaded chairs. Nothing changed. The people were changed, perhaps, but never their image—never the basic reflection of what was there. (204)

Annie zeroes in on a clerk who wears the hotel logo, L'Etoile, and she thinks, Good, Mademoiselle Star, "That pins another one."

Annie is a lepidopterist in words, so her volume of poems must be a book of pins, incisive sketches sliced out of life. "I have made razors of my life, my words," she writes, "because my life, my words have razored me" (216). She treats real people as she does fictive ones, and her relations with others are gambits to avoid commitment.

She answers the telephone in French, for example, in order to avoid recognition, not as a bilingual gesture; in public places she hides behind "green specs" and outlandish clothes, and she wears so much overly-white makeup that she is known as Kabuki Bogan to her friend F.N. Thompson. The clash of red, white, and black in her appearance makes her noticed but mysterious. Her existence is so formal, so much a matter of artifice, that she is also known as the Lady of Words.

One result of her disguised life is that she sometimes fails to recognize herself as a Canadian: "Annie watched herself waiting in the mirror across the room. She was wearing red. Her face was absolutely white [cf. the mask-like facade of the Duchess—another pretender—in *Famous Last Words*] and her eyes were absolutely black. She was Irish, but her long, white face, black hair and vivid mouth had a way of making her image Japanese" (207). When Frannie Thompson's voice suddenly sounds at the other end of the telephone line, Annie's mind momentarily goes blank and she is "lost in the mirror." Her existence is suddenly contingent when others name her (a fact underscored by the closeness of "Frannie" to "Annie"). She feels that someone has pinned her. She then turns to the other kind of pin that has become indispensable—a heroin needle—and she becomes a specimen of her own entomology: "And she lifted the dress and she floated, all in red, across the room toward the windows. . . . The Lady of Words was pinned against the glass. If only F.N. Thompson could see her now. His Lady. Laugh" (209). Findley might add pinned figures to his list of obsessions.

Findley emphasizes her plight in visual terms. When she descends from her room to the "haven" of the hotel's *bistro*, she finds herself "mirrored" in the zinc of a tabletop by the "dangerous light." Annie sees the mentally-disturbed Frannie approach her through "glass refractions" and a "Gauloise fog" of narcotic smoke; she watches him "sideways" while he scans the room apprehensively. Whereas Annie was "cast adrift" earlier in the presence of Frannie, who "did not look sane" to Annie, she begins to feel "moored" again once they exchange words. She notices her friend's lack of will, and she fights the certainty that "she'd pin him, if he wasn't careful." She then asks him to light her cigarette, and Frannie fumbles in an effort to put "the flame at her disposal," as if transferring his ebbing vitality to Annie, who drifts toward sleep as Frannie drifts toward death. Depressed when he leaves ("*he's F.N.*

*Thompson, for God's sake*"), she gives herself a needle in order to fall asleep "without the pause of thought." Her isolation as an artist in words demands a high psychic price. In blotting out thought, she diminishes her sense of self to the point where she needs a mirror to confirm her own existence:

> Annie made herself sit still. She was dressed. Erect. Immensely real. The mirror told her so, far off across the room. And now, she truly waited. (216)

On the bed in the hotel room are spread her fetishes: "the razors waited." What do the razors await?

At least once in nearly all the stories in *Dinner Along the Amazon*, Findley employs triple repetition, a sort of triadic phrase, to indicate either an obsession in a character's mind, a sudden discovery or revelation, or a shift in his narrative into either subjective time (duration) or the timelessness of fairy-tale. At such triads, the story either stops or begins again. In "The Book of Pins," the triad is "And she waited. And she waited. And she waited" (216). The verb is repeated five times within a few lines near the end of the story. We are not told just what Annie is waiting for or what thought processes are catalyzed by the razors which are set out on velvet cloth like precious gems or miniature *seppuku* swords. Annie is now more passive than active. She expects things to happen to her, thinking that "maybe, some other success [i.e., another book] she'd engendered [would] overtake her by surprise." The final paragraph of the story repeats the beginning, and we assume that Annie Bogan will continue to live and write on the razor's edge: "The people were changed, perhaps; but never their image. Never the basic reflection of what was there" (204, 217). Her artistry is formulaic and her sensibility anesthetized against reality; there is no evidence in the text that her work will add new depth to the human image, for her perception cuts too thin. The epiphany is that she is encapsulated in herself.

## IV

Findley is concerned with the isolation of the individual and the fact that we can perceive others only from outside—setting aside, for the moment, the ability of one person to force himself or herself into the consciousness of another. The viewer may be simply the receptor of sensa-

tions, a kind of camera eye. For us as readers, however, the physical details, optical images, send signals that guide us on our path of interpretation.

The story "Losers, Finders, Strangers at the Door" begins with the following epigraph:

> Some lives
> are only seen
> through windows
> beyond which
> the appearance
> of laughter
> and of screaming
> is the same. (189)

In some cases the lack of connection between people (viewer and subject) is total and is manifest as *silence*, a word found often in Findley's writings. It is easy to understand why his readers have found a source for Findley in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), especially the Game of Chess portion of that disturbing poem, where the woman laments to her companion: "Speak./ What are you thinking of? What thinking? What? / I never know what you are thinking. Think."[6] A Findleyan character who carries on such a one-sided conversation is Daisy McCabe of "Losers, Finders, Strangers at the Door."

Daisy McCabe, also known as Mrs. Arnold McCabe, speaks through various voices in this story—which actually has a more dramatic structure than the pieces in *Dinner Along the Amazon* that are termed plays-in-progress. Daisy is a lonely soul distanced from others, who include Arnold, her husband, who is away on a trip (presumably); Mrs. Rosequist, the maid, who presently has the day off; an anonymous taxi dispatcher;[7] an unnamed friend whose husband likes to be beaten; and, finally, Caleb, the young man who comes to the door and then sits down to eat lobster. Daisy is also distanced from herself in that she play-acts situations and adopts different roles (for instance, she takes a turn at "Lana Turnering"). The various *voices* in the story involve changes in tone toward the persons addressed by Daisy—but also include stage-directions and

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[6] *The Complete Poems and PLays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber, 1969) 65, lines 112-14.

[7] This enigmatic messenger who seems to exist at the other end of the telephone line is less urgent than the presence which communicates "HURRY UP PLEASE, ITS TIME" at the end of the Game of Chess; he suggests a link with the outside world, whereas the timekeeper tolls its termination.

authorial asides—whereas the *roles* are Daisy's consciously-adopted fictions.

The role-playing is a variation on Findley's self-reflection theme which sets one of his characters before a real or metaphoric mirror (perhaps one of the character's own creations, another fragment of the self) in order to show changes in personality. Once she had a face as lovely and innocent as Caleb's, Daisy tells him; but then "one day, in the mirror, the loveliness—the innocence—is gone. And only the sinister remains (she faces him): as I'm sure you can see" (199). Role-playing drains away her own sense of self to the point where she would cease to be real if Arnold were to exit permanently from her life and take with him his name. The polyphony of voices through which she speaks creates fantasies that are disguised scenarios of her existence with Arnold. The geraniums which hang in their iron cages far over Daisy's head—which seem to cry for water—objectify her isolation ("she stares at the cages, with their shadows reaching down around her—dry and red and whispering" [193]), and, since "flowers are the genitalia of plants," the geraniums serve to focus her sadomasochistic urges:

> I just castrated that geranium. You see? And, there's a theory, also . . . (she twirls the scarlet head between her fingers, rolling it back and forth) that if we only had microphones sensitive enough—the picking and cutting of flowers would produce an unbearable scream. (195)

Daisy may be the author of the story's epigraph. She might also remind us of Eliot's nervous, desperate speaker in "Portrait of a Lady," "slowly twisting the lilac stalks" while she chatters to a quiet young man who resists her conversational gambits. Daisy's tone ranges from the whimsical to the sardonic. She likens her macabre musings to those of Christina Rosetti, "or some other darling of the death-set" (191). She dismisses a frontal approach to the geranium problem as beyond her scope:

> Well—the point is—water the plants.
> But I can't do that. I can't. I mean, it would be a *scream*—just simply *crazy* . . . me falling off a chair with a watering can in my hand.
> (My emphasis, 191)

The scream is a joke, a howler, as well as a self-inflicted fright. Daisy seldom views herself as an active achiever;

more often, she sees herself as one who either can or cannot bear things. This passivity is characteristic of what might be called an intransitive mode of vision.

However, "Losers, Finders, Strangers at the Door" also includes a transitive mode of vision. Daisy *uses* sight as a weapon against the stranger at the door: "She *shoots* him a look; servile is as servile does, she says; you needn't rehearse in front of me" (my emphasis, 195). She actually "says" nothing at this point, but she demonstrates her "malice" by throwing a plucked geranium that lands "only approximately" in Caleb's lap. This overt sexual challenge is taken up by Caleb for he "looks directly at Daisy" and she, with tears of joy, at him. This is a breakthrough. Visual communication replaces hostility and relieves Daisy's anguish that began with the departure of Arnold and the loss, in a taxi cab, of her glove (a talisman commonly linked with a sexual role). The story has a comic ending because Daisy now sees in the stranger who "appeared" at the door an understanding companion who is tall enough to water her plants.

Vision as communication is especially important in the suspenseful story entitled "What Mrs. Felton Knew." From the very beginning of this work, we are spectators to some sort of emigration or forced migration. Families are leaving their farms in whatever cars or trucks are available; the windows of the vehicles are tightly closed; the passengers are looking out for tanker trucks, airplanes, and other signs of danger. We do not know who the feared "they" are or where they are, nor do we know where the fearful are going, but they do not appear to be headed for civilization. The terrified people are ashen, pale as death; but we do not know the etiology of their condition. Findley masterfully *validates* paranoia in this remarkable story. It seems—indeed it *is* the case—that a person now needs a licence to live on the land that is being taken from those who, for countless generations, have lived off the fruits of the earth. An old story is being relived: man is driven from paradise again. The biblical flaming sword and trumpet are replaced in Findley's apocalypse by the "E.R.A." and its Siren that screams the triadic message: "This is the end. This is the end. This is the end" (127).

Up to the point at which the siren screams at the edge of the wasteland, the story is told as matter-of-factly as Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," an even more muted horror story. "You may wonder what the townspeople made

of all this," Findley's narrator observes, "and probably question the morality of their silence, because they were so close to these events and even neighbours of the victims" (127). The explanation for the apathy is that people are "adept at going blind." The decimated people are now called the "Rural Expendables" and the means of extermination (instantaneous combustion which leaves only a thin film of ash) is the Environmental Redevelopment Agent (Findley's acronymic pun for the infamous Agent Orange and other equally *r*ighteous *a*menities), which is sprayed over the countryside by hooded "Foresters" in flame suits. Findley combines genocide with acid rain to produce what might be called geocide. Are we being called upon as witnesses or as accomplices in this dystopian nightmare?

Only one individual, who happens to remember the emotion of anger, decides to fight the menace at the minimum distance which binoculars allow: "He was going to force a pair of eyes to look into his own. Someone had to *see* someone. . . . He would start a conscience. Somehow" (129). Through his binoculars Barney Lambert beholds an incredible sight:

> They were approaching the river now—three tankers, each leashed by hoses to six men, and behind the tankers a travesty of hope so insidious that Barney could not believe his eyes—an ambulance marked by huge red crosses. How could it ever stop to take in survivors when of course by the very nature of the solvent there could be no survivors? It was there only to satisfy the grotesque conscience of the Government and of all the World Bodies that were dedicated to Cities and that supported this scheme for the control of rural populations. (130)

The eyes which Barney Lambert finally sees do not see him; the teenage Forester's eyes are cognizant, but void of any recognizable human emotion.

The grotesquerie and absurdity of the scene indicate that Findley's writing here is closer to nightmare than to fable. At this point in *Dinner Along the Amazon*, Findley's optics broadens the field of vision to include all men and women, the past of the species and its possible future; and then, to continue a filmic analogy, an authorial voice-over is imposed. The nightmare goes on ("There is no ending to this story. . . . only what is and was and will be" [132]), presumably, while the narrator breaks off to ask us why

*we* accept "the present scheme of things." The final paragraphs added to the end of the narrative are in the language of reasoned discourse which argues the need for a clearsighted view of our place on a fragile planet. Findley takes a great phrase from Yeats—"terrible beauty"—to describe "the massive immolation of trees and grass and flowers and insects," the passing of the world which he celebrates so jubilantly in *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (1984).

The horror of the holocaust in "What Mrs. Felton Knew" is closer, in the chronology of his works, to the inferno in the plastic parkland, another case of paradise lost, described so sardonically in *The Butterfly Plague* (1969, revised 1986). The reader may recall how, in that novel, the gates of Alvarez Canyon, in southern California, were locked to contain the panic: "The chains of the fence bulged, almost gave—but did not. Paws reached through. Beggars. Dead. Noses, eyes, portions of torn and unrecognizable anatomy dropped . . . melting in the grass. . . . But no one saw it. No one heard it. No one was there. Or, so they all claimed" (*The Butterfly Plague*.[8] Over the years the author has turned again and again to the imagery of the Holocaust and the subject of irremediable guilt.

Strife between people and between people and the physical world is a condition of human existence which has its analogue in the theologian's concept of original sin. The "sexual politics" that critics find in *Dinner Along the Amazon* is but an aspect of (in Yeats's phrase) "the desolation of reality." Findley is part intuitionist, part empiricist, generally a pessimist on moral issues; he is no facile meliorist who relies on religious nostrums, and, at its best, his fiction avoids prescription. Without being a nature worshipper, Findley follows a kind of natural religion, an almost Jainist benevolence, though he would demur at these labels for him.[9] But let us not delude ourselves (his work tells me): life is brutal; yet it must be seen for what it is. A quest for something better or cleaner, if it becomes a quest for perfection, inevitably kills, as did the drive for racial purity. Findley takes the historical phenomenon of Nazism to be a particularly heinous example of man's unending brutishness. The evil of brutishness stems from a failure in per-

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[8] (Markham, Ont.: Penguin, 1986) 143.

[9] George Woodcock has written that the theology of *Not Wanted on the Voyage* is close to that of "any good Gnostic or Catharist." See Woodcock's "Timothy Findley's Gnostic Parable," *Canadian Literature* 111 (1986): 232-37.

ception: unawareness of the here and now. "Someone sold us out," a character notes in his latest novel, *The Telling of Lies*, "but only when we ceased to pay attention."[10] Attention must be paid to our present conduct and to the fruits of our actions. The Buddha preached on roughly the same theme 2500 years ago; Findley knows that the message bears repeating.

This Eastern view of the phenomenal world in relation to the Good Being (as Mahayana Buddhism has it) calls to mind Findley's fascination with Ezra Pound, a founder of Imagism and a self-taught Orientalist. Pound is in the background of *Famous Last Words* (1981) as the poet whom Findley admired for his clear-sightedness, his minute attention to physical detail. It is the Ezra Pound who deviated from visual fidelity into murky theory who is the subject of "Daybreak at Pisa" in *Dinner Along the Amazon.* Critic Alberto Manguel observed that the story presents Pound "purging in his cage the sin of visionary poetry.[11]

In this marvellous story, the mad poet, kept in a filthy penitential cage by the military police, is also locked into the recital of his litany, as Findley writes: "treason . . . traitors . . . tortured . . .trapped" (222). It is the long-beleaguered Dorothy, his wife, watching him with "practiced paranoic eye," who remembers, in Findley's vivid world, what her son once was: "He was a tall, great man," says Dorothy, looking past the wire at time: the past. "With a great red head of snakes for hair and his eyes were green, like glass. He gave off heat. I'd never felt so much heat. But his shadow . . . in his shadow I was cool" (222). Possessing the gift of hyper-realistic sight which Findley bestows on his remarkable women, Dorothy zeroes in on the fallen man's plight:

> And Ezra says: 'You mustn't be afraid.' He wants to make her laugh. She won't. 'The *sky* is not afraid,' he says. 'I shout at her all day—and look at how calm she is. . . .
>
> 'Ezra . . . ?'
>
> 'Are *you* afraid?'
>
> 'Yes.'
>
> * * *
>
> Then Ezra smiles. 'Don't turn around,' he says.

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[10] Timothy Findley, *The Telling of Lies* (Markham, Ontario: Penguin; New York: Viking, 1986) 359.

[11] Review in *Books in Canada* (June-July 1984): 13.

> 'Why not?'
> 'There's a bird in your saucer,' he says.
> And there is. It is feeding.
> (Findley's ellipsis, my break in dialogue, 225)

This is the sort of story that has no beginning, as Findley writes in "Losers, Finders, Strangers at the Door," that other story about "iron cages," but only an entrance into and departure from others' lives. Ezra and Dorothy go on eyeing each other and chatting about the earth and sun and words.

Ezra Pound invented a persona, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, and gave him existence in a series of poems which mirror the aesthetics of Imagism and European culture circa 1915. Timothy Findley put HSM into a novel, *Famous Last Words*, which establishes this persona as a witness to cultural and sociopolitical events in Europe circa 1940. Two of the well-known mirror images in *Famous Last Words* show how Findley's optics of awareness (my general term for what is seen and how things are seen) orders relationships in this complex world.

In the first case, Mauberley is watching the young Wallis Simpson (the future Duchess of Windsor) as she sits with her back to a mirror, in the lobby of Shanghai's Imperial Hotel. Her face appears to HSM as an elegant mask suited to the international cabal in which she figures. HSM can watch his own white linen suit flashing as people pass in front of Wallis—yet it is she who is impatient, restless for a throne. HSM is foregrounded in this picture, for the viewer must see through the opacities of his narrative to determine the realities of this complex book: "All I have written here is true, except the lies." Findley's story of the duke is meant to be mythic in dimension: the story begins, perhaps, "a million years ago at Windsor." But such a temporal span suggests the blending (and the facticity) of history and myth. The Duke's "secret place" is a mirrored room where he beholds versions of himself "tricked out in light and shadow":

> In the furtherest mirror he saw the Prince of Wales—with all his golden features intact and not a single line on his face [the mirror later shatters into myriad splinters]. In the middle glass he saw himself precisely as he was: the very man who sat and stared with forty-six years of lines. . . . But in the third mirror the shadows

> fell wrong somehow, and all he could se was a hunched old man without a face. (246-47)

We see the events of *Famous Last Words* as refracted through the eyes of many different characters, and the result is a wonderfully rich historical artifice.

Not only does Findley use point of view as a narrative technique, but he also uses literal eyesight to show how we understand or deceive ourselves about the world around us. Among Findley's favourite verses are Pound's great lines: "First came the seen, then thus the palpable / Elysium, though it were in the halls of hell, / What thou lovest well is thy true heritage / What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee."[12]

When Findley writes of Pound's friend "Old Possum" (T.S. Eliot) in "Out of the Silence," he uses visual imagery to talk about the communication between Tom and Vivien Eliot and the state of Vivien's mind. In the Introduction to *Dinner Along the Amazon*, Findley says that his two plays-in-progress are drawn from real life; not that the Pounds or the Eliots would have recognized themselves in the works, but that "something overheard or spotted from the corner of my eye, caught at my attention and worried me until I had it on the page" (xi-xii). He might have noticed that the "corner" of the woman's eye "twists like a crooked pin" in Eliot's "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" (11. 21-22). Or what Findley heard about the Eliots might have been read in the diaries of Virginia Woolf or in the Sitwells' letters. He undoubtedly recalled the tormented woman in *The Waste Land* who asks, "Why do you never speak?"

What Findley shaped out of hints and guesses is as follows:

> Both at first, were equally fond of silence. Out of the silence Tom made words and put the words on paper. Seeing the words on paper, Vivien caught the first disturbing intimation that the silence they had shared had not, in fact, been shared at all. Tom had been raiding her dreams, her privacies, even her nightmares. (226)

Vivien tries to "shield her eyes"—first by turning off the lights, then by blotting out consciousness with narcotics—so

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[12] "Pisan Cantos, LXXXI," in *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1972) 520-21.

that she will not be flooded by the white light that illuminates the dreaded words on the page. Yet she compulsively clothes herself in white because it is the very emanation of her being. Light, she tries to explain to the psychiatrist, is noise, like the shattering of glass. Findley's brilliant synesthesia makes us feel Vivien's growing terror of unspeakable pain. Tom pictures the anguished woman in an explosion of white noise: "Vivien, twilit in her pallid dress, stood in his mind before her bedroom mirror, staring at herself. And he knew she was waiting for the bursting to begin. White, he thought, must be the loudest noise of all" (227).

In fact, T.S. Eliot acquiesced to his wife's commital to Northumberland House in the mid-1930s, twenty years after their marriage in 1915, and at this point she "disappears from sight," according to biographer Peter Ackroyd (*T.S. Eliot* [London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984] 233). Findley constructs an elegaic passage based on the recurrence of "after . . . " phrases ("after the April afternoon was safely shut away behind Venetian blinds," and so on), following the rhythmic pattern of "What the Thunder Said" (*The Wasteland* V), and thus he affords a certain stateliness to the otherwise macabre meeting in the asylum. He presents Vivien's rebuke to Tom in the following words: "I have gone mad . . . your word, not mine . . . and *you* have not. Gone Mad. Or, so they say. Or so that open door implies. [The door is only open for Tom.] Yet, all we've seen is what we've seen *together*, you and I" (229).

Findley's creation of the Eliots in "Out of the Silence" is an imaginative triumph far superior to the occasional melodrama which has been produced by lesser artists. Findley is so obviously at home with the two highly-strung instruments who were T.S. Eliot and Vivien Haigh-Wood that he can propose a magical hypothesis: "It was as if he had willed a fictional lady with whom he was obsessed to come all the way into real life" (Introduction xii). Of course, it is Findley who is the Pygmalion. The poetry written by Eliot before he met Vivien suggests that in her he found a kindred spirit of the opposite sex, the anima (Findley told Graeme Gibson that he is "very Jung-oriented") which mirrors vital images back to the self. Findley's Vivien outlived her usefulness to the poet, who believes that "her language—sense of language—was dying, dead" (228). The ending of "Out of the Silence" is especially funereal because it makes clear (in terms that are reworked in "Dinner Along the Amazon") that Vivien's life was one prolonged

abortion of the spirit. "You lived and died inside yourself," Findley's Eliot reflects with uncharitable smugness, "Damn you." The only duty left for the poet was to write her epitaph, which is Eliot's thought at the end of Findley's story. Although the nature of the epitaph is not spelled out in Findley's story, it would be poetic justice for Vivien to haunt Eliot in the "loud lament of the disconsolate chimera" in "Four Quartets" ("Burnt Norton," *Complete Poems and Plays* 175).

If the optics of "Out of the Silence" focusses on the sundering of a relationship, the title story of *Dinner Along the Amazon* lets us view a relationship that seems to survive on marital discord. The story begins at a critical point in the marriage of Michael and Olivia Penny, a pair of middle-aged English teachers who maintain a civilized (that is, constrained and sterile) home in an affluent part of Toronto. Appearances "reflect" to Olivia the imminence of a "tidy horror" that suggests pregnancy, which Michael could not live with because he hates the future. Nature is a force that the Pennys do not want to face. Olivia buys an armful of flowers, for example, but does not know what to do with them. The couple's dog, Grendel, is known only for playing dead, when he resembles his masters with "alarming veracity."

A dinner party allows display of the flowers and lets the Pennys communicate (despite tense moments) with each other and with their friends through "badges" of gesture and the visible "clues" to the "meaning of what [is] being said." When the guests eventually leave the dining room, "an ordered ruin," and Findley turns to his magical mirrors to frame and intensify the scene, behold an epiphany:

> . . . the chairs pushed back, reflective or violent or simply dispensed with—and the low, silver bowl of freesia, the flowers drooping as if they had been assaulted—and the mirrors that reflected mir rors that reflected mirrors—each one holding its perfect image a further remove, like sign posts down a road that led into darkness.
> (251)

We note that the ruin is ordered and that this order is temporary, existing only in the light of a few "guttering candles." This is the order of fellowship on the communal level; the order is "dreams," the idea of hope itself, on the individual level. Outside of order, at the edge of each

dream, is chaos. Outside the Pennys' bedroom door, the troll of the night gnaws on a bone, for Grendel lives in a "cave" haunted by prehistoric shadows.

The authorial voice in the story is finally optimistic, if faintly so, for it places man outside the heart of darkness and denies the pedagogical bravado—"Kurtz and the Monster, walking hand in hand: *that* was the future, according to Michael"—that would stifle hope in Olivia. (Findley's women are generally stronger than his men. Recall Iris in *The Last of the Crazy People*, Naomi in *The Butterfly Plague*, even Mrs. Ross in *The Wars*.) The signals we read in the final part of "Dinner Along the Amazon" are clearer than at the beginning. The last "word" we receive in the story is a *visual* sign—Olivia smiles on Michael—for the final sound is silence, an ellipsis in the text. First our attention is directed toward Michael's window shades—visual barriers—which act as a buffer against the natural world, while the rest of the house—the crystal prisms, the fire in the grate, the floorboards and the casements—all sing and sigh in resonance with the spring thunder outside. Olivia turns to the front door, letting in the air bearing "spring rain and the strong smell of budding." Does her action signal the reorienting of her attitude toward the earth, or the prompting of an impersonal will deep within herself? The sound of her voice blends with the susurrus of the rain. The harmony of woman and nature that is established here, as at the end of *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, is Timothy Findley's blessing on the species.

Thus in *Dinner Along the Amazon*, Findley presents a variety of people communicating by visual means. Success or failure in human negotiations, even survival itself, depends heavily upon the non-verbal signs I have described. From the frequency of ellipses in Findley's texts (especially in dialogues), we infer that the unstated thought (even the unthought), conveyed through the eye, is as important as actual verbalization in maintaining the state of awareness ("attention"), the continuous vigilance, which Findley considers fundamental to moral perception.

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