

EPIC RITES PRESS



# crudely mistaken for life

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poetry by Wolfgang Carstens



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epic rites press, 240 - 222 Baseline Road, Suite #206, Sherwood  
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epic rites press: “because all our fingers are middle ones”™

**For Tracy Lee – for never giving up on me**

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## happy birthday Mr. Cool

my father turned sixty today –  
which is two decades longer  
than anyone expected  
him to live.

he always thought that he  
was Mr. Cool;

he wore gold and diamond rings  
on every finger of both hands  
except for his thumbs,  
three heavy gold chains  
around his neck,  
with a St Christopher's medallion,  
a crucifix, and an eagle.

his sleeves were always rolled up,  
his shirt always half unbuttoned,  
showing off his chains and chest hair.

he wore a thin, black leather coat  
all year round.  
even in winter,  
when it was minus forty,  
he'd be shovelling snow –  
coat unzipped, sleeves rolled,  
shirt unbuttoned, no toque,  
no scarf, no gloves, no boots ever.

he always wore a large belt buckle  
that read “bullshit” –  
he was one tough son of a bitch:

one time, when his second wife died,  
and her family blamed me because  
i never accepted her as my stepmother,  
my father put his oversized fist  
through a plaster wall –  
it broke clean through to the other side.

then, shaking his wrecking ball  
of a fist at everyone in the room,  
he growled, “who’s next?”

another time, when he was drunk  
and looking to rent a prostitute  
down on Jasper Avenue,  
he was jumped by five guys  
and thrashed to within an inch of his life.  
they lifted all his jewelery  
except for one ring which he refused  
to give up no matter how much or how hard  
they beat him – he clenched his fist  
tighter and refused to uncurl his fingers.  
even four weeks later when he was out  
of the hospital his face was so mangled  
he was unrecognizable to me.

sadly, apart from his toughness,  
his only other discernible skill in life was drinking.

it was incredible how he poured vodka  
into a tall glass, added a splash of Kahlúa  
and guzzled it down in one long uninterrupted gulp.

he went from stone cold sober  
to shitfaced in thirty seconds –  
you could actually watch his eyes glaze  
and cross before his empty glass hit the table.  
the last time i saw him was Thanksgiving 1995.  
i hadn't been there more than twenty minutes  
and he was already trashed beyond repair.  
after falling and destroying a glass table  
he tumbled down steep basement steps  
and couldn't climb back up –  
when i went to help him  
his third wife Janice screamed, “don't fucking  
help him! if he can't get up the stairs under his own  
steam then he doesn't deserve to fucking eat.”  
so i left him down there in the dark  
bleeding from his nose and mouth,  
crumpled on the cold concrete floor  
like a wet, dirty towel.

as i think back now,  
beyond these demented highlights  
from home movie reels,  
my father did nothing but disappoint me.  
he used to read my poetry and bitch  
about lack of paragraphs and punctuation.  
“but it's a poem dad,” i remember saying.

even after my parents split up  
i remember standing at the front window  
with my suitcase every Friday waiting  
for him to show up – but he never did.

worst was being abandoned  
at hockey practice.  
all the other kids were already gone  
and i would be standing there like a sucker  
with my heavy bag of hockey equipment,  
forced to carry it home in sub-zero temperature.

my father turned sixty today, two decades longer  
than anyone expected him to live.  
he hasn't seen his son in almost fifteen years,  
he hasn't met any of his five grandchildren,  
they've never even seen a picture of him.

it's as though he never existed.  
which is fitting i suppose  
because that's how i remember him –  
invisible.

## **anniversary of your death**

today is the anniversary  
of your death.  
it's been seven years  
without you

i talk about you often,  
telling stories about  
how you earned your nickname, "Lucky,"  
how you cheated death  
at least a dozen times,  
triumphant with your bloody  
fuck you finger

not that last time though.  
i try to put myself  
in your shoes, but cannot  
walk that mile,  
cannot begin to imagine  
the terror you experienced  
in your last hour

when news of your death  
reached us we learned that  
you were working  
in the wild woods  
of British Columbia,  
and that one night,  
after a hard day's work,  
you stepped behind your trailer

to take a piss –  
that's when the bear grabbed you,  
dragged you off screaming  
into the woods.  
your co-workers followed your screams  
found you half-eaten  
and chased the bear  
away with shovels  
they carried you back to camp  
laid you in front of the fire  
phoned 911 and waited  
for the helicopter to arrive.  
they were busy trying to stop buckets  
of blood from escaping your body  
when the bear returned  
and dragged you off a second time.  
they said that your screaming  
lasted long after you disappeared  
into the dark woods

there are pictures of you on my walls  
but i don't need them as reminders  
because every time i look at my son  
i am reminded of you

he was not named after you  
but rather because of you,  
because of the way you lived each moment  
as though it were your last

my son, Behr,

turned seven this year.  
he is a symbol of your strength,  
of your perseverance,  
of your defiant middle finger,  
of the tremendous force required  
to end your lucky streak  
and drag you off  
into the wild, wild woods

## **missing in Canada**

when i was younger i stuffed some clothes  
into a backpack and boarded a Greyhound bus  
with a rail pass and no particular destination.

i didn't tell anyone that i was leaving;  
i had no intention of returning – i wanted  
to disappear.

as the bus carried me across Canada  
it stopped in many small prairie towns where  
i'd light a cigarette in front of shop windows  
and study faces on missing person posters.

once i recognized one of the faces –  
it was the photo of a young man  
that worked as a cashier in a gas station  
in one of the small towns in which we'd stopped.

the man was neither missing nor dead  
nor in any kind of distress whatsoever –  
in fact he appeared happy and healthy –  
apparently the only foul play involved  
was his own desire to go missing in Canada.  
here is a man much like myself, i thought,  
as i entered the shop and put the poster  
inside my backpack.  
i found out two months later that my ex-girlfriend  
was pregnant – so not wanting to be like my own  
deadbeat father i jumped on a bus to take me back

home into the city of my birth.

as i passed again through that small prairie town  
i entered the gas station, handed the poster  
to the young man behind the register and smiled –  
“it’s too late for me man,” i said, “but for what it’s worth  
i hope they never fucking find you.”

## **flowers that count for nothing**

emptying lint from the dryer trap  
today, i remembered when Annie had  
come to live with me after she'd  
slipped on the ice and broken her ribs.

she was forced to wear a clamshell  
brace around her midsection.  
after weeks of her constantly asking  
to loosen/tighten/remove it, i exploded –  
reducing Annie to tears in the laundry room  
because she hadn't cleaned the lint trap.

now that Annie is under blades of grass  
i find myself on a roller coaster ride  
down memory lane – each joyous memory  
supplanted by the rickety car plunging  
downwards putting my guts into my boots.

i did not love her hard enough, was not  
patient enough, could not forgive her  
in all the ways that she forgave me.  
desperately wanting to wish nothing  
different forwards or backwards, i cannot –

so i weep by her grave-stone  
offering stupid flowers that count for nothing.

## **a wrecking ball to swing in our direction**

what humanity needs is a predator  
to kick us off the top of the food chain,  
to restore perspective  
and humility to our species,  
to knock humanity back  
into the animal kingdom  
where our vegetable brains belong.

if only dinosaurs could return  
and show us how flimsy our human constructs  
really are – how stupid we are,  
thinking our ideas can conquer  
our environment by improving upon its design,  
only safe behind locked doors  
until a Tyrannosaurus Rex walks  
right through our living room walls.

i welcome aliens from outer space  
appearing in the night sky  
to disprove that bullshit book  
the bible once and for all –  
appearing to imprison us in cages  
as part of some inter-galactic zoo,  
an interstellar freak show,  
where our silly human tricks  
like talking, writing poetry and praying  
are on par with the beach-ball  
balanced on the tip of a seal's nose.

restored to the earth  
by something stronger, smarter,  
with better weapons to execute us  
for our crimes against the natural order

yes, anything to restore healthy levity  
to the sick joke that is humanity  
is welcome here.

### **about the author**

Wolfgang Carstens lives in Alberta, Canada with his wife, five children, two cats and a dog. His poetry is printed upon the backs of unpaid bills.

CRUDELY MISTAKEN FOR LIFE is Wolfgang's first book.

