

The Archivist Andrew James Paterson

Douglas Hutchinson has been an archivist for nearly four decades now. On an unusually cold mid-June day, he became pensive about his profession.

How did I end up like this? Why did I end up like this?

When he was an unsuccessful artist, Douglas became involved with galleries and organizations. He always seemed to be the minute-taker, the record-keeper. The board member who could remember names and dates.

So he realized he would never be a successful artist and, without resuming his education, became a historian-for-hire. He would freelance and eventually be hired for resident positions rather than specific projects. He would eventually make a tidy but hardly lucrative living.

But why did Douglas Hutchinson gravitate to being an archivist? Well, he had the archival personality. He could match dates of the week with dates of the year. This event or exhibition happened on this day and this day was a Thursday and not a Wednesday therefore it must have happened in this year and not in that year.

He remembered that in his childhood he thought he would predict the weather based on the day of the year. There was a thunderstorm on day 242 which was August 30th except in Leap Years when it was August 29th. After a couple of years he realized that his system simply did not work. But the mentality never disappeared or evaporated; it became more and more pronounced as he aged.

And now, on Social Media, a founding member of a local gallery was upset that there was no 50th Anniversary Exhibition. Douglas knew this founding member and he groaned. Well, first of all the gallery is not going to be having some big definitive anniversary exhibition during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Second, probably the current administration of this gallery is utterly uninterested in celebrating its founders and their friends who were overwhelmingly maybe even exclusively white.

But then these organizations did form and performances and exhibitions did take place. Therefore, they should be documented or itemized and not casually thrown into the nearest dustbin. So...how to do this without succumbing to not only nostalgia but also exclusionary sentiment?

Douglas Hutchinson was an archivist. He didn't know the answer to that question.

Anna Barclay routinely checked her email after her mid-afternoon tea.

She was surprised to notice that finally a prominent local publisher had responded to her submission of a deceased friend's poetry. She opened the email.

Alas, it was a rejection letter. The editor had stated that the poetry committee or board had seriously considered Veronica's manuscript but that difficult choices had to be made and there had of course been so many submissions, so therefore Veronica's manuscript could not be published but best of luck elsewhere.

Where? Anna decided a cigarette and a glass of red wine were necessary.

Veronica was a very good poet according to her friends who knew much more about poetry than she did herself. But Veronica had been too shy and lacking self-confidence to submit to so many potential publishers when she was still alive. And then many years ago she had committed suicide.

What a fucking waste", Anna muttered.

She couldn't decide if the rejection email was a form letter or an individual response. Whatever. She guessed that nobody wished to be dealing with a dead writer and her surviving family

She was not interested in any of her other email messages and certainly uninterested in social media at this moment. During this bloody pandemic she killed so much time on Face Book and Instagram and even Twitter. Killing time on Twitter, such an oxymoron.

Music might be a distraction. She decided on something fairly extreme...Scott Walker's last album *Bisch Bosch*. Last this and last that. Too many deaths and final statements. So many people who would never be collectively memorialized because of this still ongoing pandemic. Patios were being reopened and meanwhile there were warnings about an even more contagious strain of COVID-19 called The Delta Variant.

Wasn't that a country song? Or then there was the Delta blues. Scott Walker had nothing to do with delta this or delta that.... he had been borderline operatic. But ultimately unclassifiable.

Anna was really hating the idea of ordering and classifying. Real artists could never be classified. Scott Walker and her friend Veronica were prime examples of this resistance to ordering and petty filing.

She thought about the man she had met before the latest lockdown, at a small west end gallery. His name was Douglas...not Doug. Neither Douglas or herself had liked the exhibition much, so they struck up a conversation and then went for tea. Douglas was mysterious to her. What was his sexual orientation? She could usually tell but with him she couldn't. Bisexual? Or maybe

asexual? Douglas was an archivist and archivists could be good company but ultimately they were boring because they were interested in histories and not people,

History herstory theirstory. Anna butted out her cigarette and sipped her wine. Scott Walker's voice was wonderful but damn it to hell. She would have to think about where else to submit Veronica's manuscript.

“Uh-oh”

He hadn't seen the speeding car. He had began crossing the street without looking to his right. Silly boy, Philip told himself. When you have your head in the clouds always cross at the intersection and on the green light. Your jaywalking days are over.

He had been absent minded because he was carrying too much around in his head. Like how to take on yet another poorly-paid proofreading job and stay at it long enough to make enough money to get the hell out of here.

And where would he go now that travel restrictions were slowly lifting? Maybe to the east coast to see his friend Jason? Or preferably somewhere to which he had never been. Prague, in which he had actually spent an afternoon and an early evening? Havana, except not in the summer season?

“Watch your head”, he told himself again. He could see pedestrians looking at him as if something was seriously wrong. Well, something was seriously wrong. He always had his head in the clouds and the clouds weren't really all that fascinating. They were obsessed with details relevant to one or two people at the most. Who really did this on what day in what year so long ago? And other proofreading conventions.....was her name Sara or Sarah with an aitch? Brian of BrYan? Names names names.

In all of his freelance proofreading he wasn't really doing anything that spellcheck and grammar check couldn't do better. He, Philip Brooker, would catch words that were not in the custom dictionary and say don't you mean this word instead to his client. And then the client of the client, the writer, would roll his her their eyes and proclaim there is so such a word you silly prat, mainly because I am a writer and writers make up words all the time so fuck you and your village grammarian mentality.

He had the light and he crossed the street. Better cross before some drunken speedy coke head driver steps on the gas. Philip didn't trust drivers. He couldn't drive. He had tried once and it had nearly been a disaster.

Walking ahead of him he thought he recognized a former English teacher. Mrs. Anna Somebody or Other. He had not gotten along with her. Mrs. Anna Somebody had always been reminding him that there were other students in the class who had the right to ask more interesting questions than the ones he automatically piped up with. She was right, of course. But he had never changed.

His former teacher was walking with a woman. He had always suspected that she was a dyke, not that her sexual orientation had anything to do with her habitual reprimanding of his questions in her class. Hell, he wasn't even the worst of the curious boys. Little Francis Winston who was the son of a big Conservative Party bag man, now he had been the worst. Every class little Francis would put his hand up and say Mrs. Somebody I was just wondering and it was a cue for the rest of the class to fall asleep.

"Jesus, man". Philip looked up and he had almost bumped into another pedestrian who appeared to be a few sandwiches short of a picnic. Thanks Christ he had never learned to drive.

She shook her head when she thought about the young man that Anna had recently pointed out to her. She knew the type all too well... so full of useless information that he couldn't concentrate on being a proper pedestrian. The last person one would invite to a dinner party. The young man was probably an lifetime trivial pursuits contestant....the kind of jerk who would know the understudy for this famous actor in this famous movie. Or a music geek.....who was that session guitarist on that obscure record who later became famous?

Actually Anna had been difficult company lately. She smoked and drank too much for one thing. And then she had her obsessions. Always playing those Scott Walker streams. Oh for sure Scott Walker was the thinking person's David Bowie but what did that mean...really?

And then she had her wandering eye and it had been wandering in the male direction. Anna had been curious about that archivist Douglas Hutchinson but she had also avoided him. Douglas was actually a very nice man and interesting company. He knew full well the contradictions of his chosen profession. He knew that archives were by definition preservationist and there were so many things that had long been routinely and dutifully preserved which in reality should have been seriously problematized if not destroyed. Not only statues but records and of course history textbooks. Douglas Hutchinson was painfully aware of these fault lines but also knew that events that happened could not simply be wiped out and that sometimes alternative narratives did emerge from the contents of the dustbin and so forth.

She herself would have loved to enjoy tea and then wine with Douglas. But alas that would never happen again. Unfortunately, Douglas had recently died.

