LOWRY'sGHOSTS

MALCOLM LOWRY LIVED IN A SHACK IN NORTH VANCOUVER, DRANK IN THE CANTINAS OF CUERNAVACA, MEXICO, AND WROTE *UNDER THE VOLCANO*, ONE OF THE LAST CENTURY'S GREATEST WORKS OF FICTION. **CHARLES MONTGOMERY** VISITS HIS HAUNTS, TALKS TO HIS EX-WIFE, EXHUMES HIS PAST AND TRACES HIS GENIUS.

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN CAIRNS


CUERNAVACA

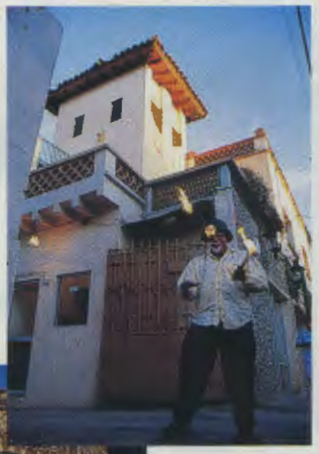
SOME FOLKS STILL THINK THEY CAN FIND THE GHOST OF MALCOLM LOWRY IN NORTH VANCOUVER, OUT ON THE COBBLESTONE BEACH AT CATES PARK. > THEY WILL REMIND YOU THAT HALF A CENTURY AGO, THE BIBULOUS LITERARY GENIUS LIVED FOR 14 YEARS IN A BEACH SHACK RIGHT WHERE BURRARD INLET DOG-LEGS INTO INDIAN ARM. FOURTEEN WHOLE YEARS—THAT'S ENOUGH TO MAKE ANYONE A VANCOUVERITE. THEY'LL TELL YOU THAT, BETWEEN STUMBLES THROUGH THE WOODS AND PUB CRAWLS WITH THE LIKES OF POET EARL BIRNEY, LOWRY WROTE *UNDER THE VOLCANO*, ARGUABLY THE GREATEST WORK OF FICTION EVER PENNED ON THE WET COAST—HELL, ONE OF THE GREATEST NOVELS OF THE 20TH CENTURY, ACCORDING TO LITERARY PUNDITS AND THE MODERN LIBRARY. > LOWRY MOVED AWAY, DIED IN A STEW OF GIN AND BARBITURATES IN ENGLAND IN 1957. His shack is long gone, too: bulldozed into the salal to make room for Cates Park. But some people can't seem to let him go.

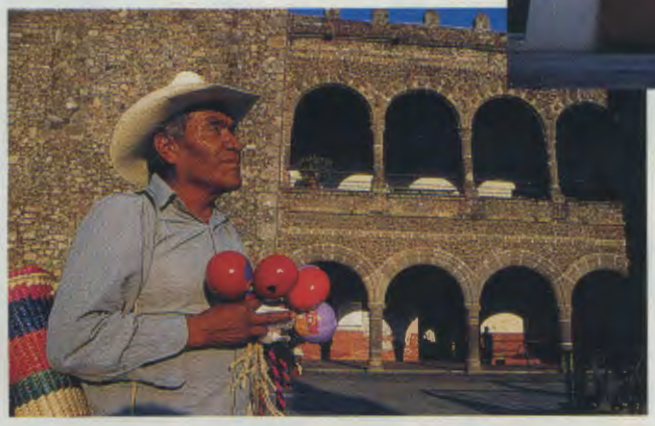
Writer Michael Turner tramped this beach looking for Lowry back in 1993, then opened a bar named after him just across the inlet at the North Burnaby Inn. The Malcolm Lowry Room lasted a couple of years, but the pierced-tongue crowd still holds their annual Under the Volcano music festival in Cates Park, a stroll away from Lowry's beach. And travel books instruct Lowryphiles to head to the park to get a feel for the novelist's creative stomping grounds. It's as though some part of Lowry might still be crashing through the salal at Roche Point, half-finished bottle of bootleg gin in hand, waiting to assail passers-by with apocalyptic metaphor.

Well, he isn't. You could wait for hours on that beach, pace until the October rain soaked you right through, and Lowry still wouldn't come to you. A dead man's ghost doesn't stick around to hand out metaphors, and the places he walked will tell you nothing about his inspiration. His footprints simply disappear. As for the people who try to tell you they know a dead man's secrets: don't trust them.

I know this because I was among the thousands of people to fall into a Lowry obsession after tackling the great novel. I waded through the biographies, the collected letters and the autobiographies of his acquaintances. I rented the documentary video. I surfed the Lowry websites and harangued Lowry scholars in three countries. It wasn't enough. I wanted to meet his ghost—or at least find the magic out of which Lowry created *Under the Volcano*. So I packed my dog-eared copy of the novel and headed to the place where all Lowry obsessives eventually land: not North Vancouver but a city under a volcano in central Mexico.

Under the Volcano, if you haven't read it—or couldn't navigate its harrowing prose—is the story of a ruined man, a former British Consul who spends the last day of his life stumbling between mescals in a "fictional" Mexican town. It was declared a masterpiece when published in 1947, and Lowry's Consul emerged as the archetypal anti-hero for his age. But the setting, a sleepy town of high walls, empty swimming pools and lunar potholes, was as much a character in the book as the Consul. Lowry called it Quauhnahuac. But everyone else knows it as the village where Lowry and his first wife, Jan Gabrial, arrived by bus in late November 1936. Cuernavaca. Population: 8,200. Lowry rented a bungalow where he could see the snow-capped volcanoes, Popocatépetl and Ixtaccíhuatl, in the distance. From the edge of his garden he could also peer down into the barranca, a deep gorge that cleaved Cuernavaca in two. The volcanoes and the canyon would become Lowry's great metaphors, the unattainable heights and the terrible abyss which, in Cuernavaca, waited for you around every corner.





FROM TOP: THE HOTEL BAJO EL VOLCAN, WHERE LOWRY ATTEMPTED SUICIDE. A STREET VENDOR AT THE CORTES PALACE.

Early the next year, local police discovered the corpse of a murdered tourist in that canyon. Lowry dumped the bloodied body of his own fictional hero down the barranca, too. Cuernavaca, he later told his publisher, was a forest of metaphors. Dark ones. It was here that Lowry and his Consul began their spiral into "mescal-inspired phantasmagoria." They drank themselves right into the abyss.

DOCTOR ADAN CORTÉS NOGUERON, manager of Hotel Bajo El Volcán, was delighted to see me. Beaming. We hurried up to the top of a tower that protruded from the hotel at the crest of Calle Humboldt, just above Cuernavaca's barranca, and he flung open the tower's chevron-shaped windows. "See," he said. "This is where Malcolm Lowry wrote his big book. Hundreds of people like you come to see it every year. Swedes, Danes, Germans. Now it's my office!"

The doctor left me alone in that tower to gaze out across the barranca and consider his lie. Lowry didn't write any books in this tower. He and Gabrial lived a block away at 62 Calle Humboldt (an address which no longer exists), according to Lowry's own letters. Lowry didn't even enter this building until 1946, when he returned for a holiday with his second wife. In his book, the tower was sinister, gruesome: the home of his hero's cuckolder. In real life, it was where Lowry opened a letter from his publisher, telling him his novel wasn't good enough. Lowry made a half-hearted attempt to slash his wrists, then he sat down and composed a 30-page defense of the original *Under the Volcano*. He hit the bottle again, too.

The citizens of Cuernavaca care about history, enough that the town supports a full-time historian. I went to visit him the next morning, thinking he could tell me about Lowry. Valentin Lopez Gonzales was an irritable bear who didn't like to be contradicted. I asked him to help me find Lowry's house. He told me I was staying in it. I explained, in halt-

ing Spanish, that he was wrong. "Bajo el Volcán! It means under the volcano! That book was written right in your hotel room," Lopez insisted. And then he punched his desk so hard that his secretary flinched. As I retreated, she took pity on me and told me the local expert on Lowry was really an old gringo named John Spencer.

We found Spencer up by Cuernavaca's Franciscan cathedral, the one with a skull and crossbones above the entrance. Spencer was slumped in the corner of a juice bar, gazing intently at his knees. He looked old enough to have tied a few on with Lowry, but said he had arrived from the States only 35 years ago. That's when he started his campaign to get Lowry's statue erected in the zócalo. "Everyone has got it all wrong about old Lowry," Spencer told me. "They say he was a drunk. A borracho. Well, Malcolm Lowry was an important writer. He did not drink. He didn't!"

Lowry not a drinker? I didn't bother reading Spencer my favorite line from *Under the Volcano*: "...what beauty can compare to that of a cantina in the early morning?...Not even the gates of heaven, opened wide to receive me, could fill me with such celestial complicated and hopeless joy as the iron screen that rolls up with a crash..."

I shouldn't have been surprised by the fictions of modern Cuernavaca. The accounts of people who spent time there with Lowry were just as contradictory. Take Conrad Aiken. Lowry's teacher and mentor arrived in Cuernavaca in May 1937, in need of accommodation, and a quick marriage to his young travel companion—and an even quicker divorce from the wife he left in England. Aiken despised Mexico: "Jesus, what a climate, what a country, what a people," he wrote to a friend.

In his autobiographical novel *Ushant*, Aiken complained about everything from the food to the "dreadful sewage canal" which ran through Lowry's garden (and from which he claimed to have rescued a soused Lowry one evening). And Aiken described Lowry's wife, Jan Gabrial, as a heartless, unfaithful floozy who left the writer alone with his mescal, a view that went unquestioned until Gordon Bowker's 1993 Lowry biography, *Pursued by Furies*.

Gabrial has insisted both she and Lowry were entranced by Cuernavaca. "We fell in love with the country, the handsome people, their mocking laughter, and a quality I could only describe as bite," she wrote in her recent memoir, *Inside the Volcano*. She also gave an interview to *Salon* magazine, complaining that Lowry's penis was too small.

I called Gabrial at her home in Los Angeles before my own trip south. I asked her to tell me about the darkness, the tragic melancholy of Mexico. She said Cuernavaca had been beautiful, even the barranca, even the days spent hunting for Malcolm in the cantinas. And Malcolm had kept an even keel at first. He was writing almost every day until that "shithead" Conrad Aiken stepped off the bus from Mexico City. She insisted it was Aiken who made Lowry miserable, dragging him off to the pubs every day. Unable to evict Aiken from her cottage, Gabrial had given up and left town.

"From the minute Conrad arrived, it was a battle for Malcolm," Gabrial, now 90, told me. "And about that drainage ditch. It wasn't foul at all. It was a pretty stream. Don't believe anything Conrad Aiken wrote."

I COULD STILL HEAR GABRIAL'S protestations as I sat in Lowry's tower above the barranca, scribbling on my copy of *Under the Volcano*. Distracting as hell, Gabrial was. Her spirit and Aiken's were right there in the book. Paste together their conflicting recollections and you have a kind of outline for *Under the Volcano*. Lowry, like his Consul, couldn't—or wouldn't—reign in his self-destructive alcoholic urges or their heartbreaking effects on his marriage. Lowry's hero stumbled from pub to pub, spouting brilliant poetry and political commentary, a perfect fusion of the author and the cynical Aiken, observed biographer Bowker.

But none of these supporting actors seemed to have seen the Mexico of *Under the Volcano*, the place where tragedy never slept, where Lowry's Consul confessed: "...I like to take my sorrow into the shadow of old monasteries, my guilt into cloisters and under tapestries, and into the misericordes of unimaginable cantinas where sad-faced potters and legless beggars drink at dawn, whose cold jonquil beauty one discovers in death."

I was desperate to find that place in the city around me. Cuernavaca, I imagined, had a story to tell and Lowry had been its messenger. The city's dark magic might still appear in its architecture, its broken streets and its people. Clutching the cronista's map, I searched for that melancholy place, and found a near carbon-copy of the village Lowry called Quauhnahuac—on the surface, anyway. Adjust a few street names and the first chapter of *Under the Volcano* becomes a virtual walking tour of the city.

I found the Casino de la Selva, the setting for the first scene in *Volcano*, on a hill across the barranca. But when I climbed the casino's cracked stone wall for a look inside, I saw a wasteland of rubble and scarred cactus. "It's

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all closed," said a woman who watched me from the sidewalk. "All dead."

I looked for Lowry in Jardin Juarez, where shade trees quivered with shrieking birds. Brass bands still hooted from the garden's cast-iron bandstand, just like Lowry had described, but they now competed with drumming troupes decked out in the tie-dye shirts and Zapatista bandanas now favored by the children of Mexican bankers.

Cuernavaca has long been a retreat for the elite of Mexico City. But now that the capital is only an hour away by freeway, the hideaway is about as sleepy as Whistler Village. On the zócalo, that grand plaza where Lowry and his hero crept from bar to bar, hipsters now shake their booties to piped-in Alannah Miles and rev their BMWs in a Latin version of the Robson Street parade.

Where were the volcanoes? I climbed up through the bowels of the cathedral one afternoon, but Popocatépetl and Ixtaccíhuatl had already faded into the muddy horizon. In Cuernavaca the smog now rises with the sun, obscuring the mountains by midday.

The barranca is still there, a 50-metre-deep gash through the heart of the city. Slopes choked with fig trees and banana give way to shadowy crevasses where grey drain water tumbles through a labyrinth of boulders, shopping carts and toilet paper. But even the abyss is losing its metaphorical sting: one section of it has been cleaned up, and walkways installed, so sweethearts and seniors might stroll beneath the trailing vines. It was disappointingly pleasant.

Cuernavaca seemed familiar and yet sharply strange, not quite like it should have been at all. Not particularly profound. Or sad. This was a cheery, energetic place without time for tragedy. I was, of course, despondent. I resolved to find Lowry in the cantinas, which never failed to provide the writer with his conduit to hell. But all the cantinas on the zócalo were gone, replaced by spiffy restaurants and discos.

El Universal, the bar where Lowry came up with the final scenes of *Volcano* during an all-night bender, had been renamed La Universal—feminized and converted into a cafeteria, where American expatriates now talked software over breakfast. "Stay out of the real cantinas," advised one elderly American I met at La Universal. "Those boys are uneducated, unscrupulous and desperate. They'll roll you." Then he told me how to find El Danubio, one of the last cantinas left in the old town.

An hour later I was pushing through a shuttered doorway into a Lowryan hallucination. El Danubio was filthy and packed with sad-eyed cowboys, greasers in Mike Tyson T-shirts and businessmen nursing Coronas. A wrinkled mariachi wandered the tables with a guitar, his crooning barely audible above the rhythmic yelps of techno-cumbia blasting from the juke box.

A waitress in pink short-shorts winked at me with her one good eye. I took the only seat left, under the Madonna poster—that's Madonna with the push-up bra, not Madonna and child—beside a man who had apparently just returned from the toilet. He had two fresh palm prints on his T-shirt. The man pulled his shirt down across his belly and introduced himself. Senor Felisiano—translated roughly: Mr. Happy—grabbed the waitress by the thigh and pulled her to the table.

"You like this chica?" Felisiano bellowed. "You can have her right now. Upstairs." And then he said some very dirty things about the one-eyed waitress. She slugged him but then she looked at me with an affirmative nod and a silver-toothed smile.

"Buy me a drink," she said.

"I am looking for a writer," I told her in halting Spanish. "A famous drunk."

"Well, they all come here eventually. The borrachos, the doctors, the lawyers, the mechanics, the truck drivers, the altar boys."

Soon there were six of us around the table. It took me four cubanos—beer with lime juice and lots of salt—to get my courage up. "I want you to hear something. Something about the bars of Cuernavaca," I told them. I pulled out a photocopy of a letter Lowry had sent to Aiken—a poem he had written as he sat all alone at another long-gone Cuernavaca cantina.

"Come on guys, shut up," I said. Then I translated for them: "Where are your friends you fool you have but one/And that a friend who also makes you sick/But much less sick than they: & this I know/Since I am the last drunkard," I paused for effect:

"And I drink alone."

My eyes got all teary at the profound tragedy of it all, and the artfulness of my performance, and the discovery of the dark, sad anarchy of El Danubio, and these, my desperate friends, who must surely have understood the pain of the great drunkard. I looked up from my paper and my companions were howling with laughter. Felisiano put a greasy hand on my shoulder.

"I don't know what you are looking for, my friend. But here we are the happiest people in Cuernavaca. We pass these dulce moments together, then we go back to work. Now why don't you buy the girl a drink?"

Of course he was right. The cantina was in

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fact a jolly place, as lively as any in Cuernavaca. It dawned on me that to find the abyss I would have to create it myself, leave my wallet on the table for thieves, pick a fight or stay until dark, then fall head-first into the barranca. Or, like Lowry, I could graduate from beer to mezcal, straight up, and lose myself in apocalyptic visions.

Lowry's brilliance increased with every drink, with every tragedy, say those who chased him from cantina to cantina—and, for that matter, those who drank with him here on the shores of Burrard Inlet. He hit his creative stride in the space between tipsiness and his alcohol-inspired hallucinations. To be with Lowry in those moments was to feel transported inside a novel that included you, recalled Vancouver poet Earl Birney in a 1961 CBC interview. On a Lowry binge, said Birney, "Every thing lost its ordinary reality and took on the reality he was imposing on it."

Under the Volcano wasn't Cuernavaca's story at all. The city was merely the canvas on which Lowry painted his own hell, and then willed himself into it, spiralling downward with his fictional Consul. He drank himself into a crippled but mystic state, he consorted with prostitutes and he spurned Gabrial until she abandoned him for the last time, leaving for Los Angeles in December 1937. Then Lowry hopped a bus for Oaxaca, to look for the strongest mezcal in Mexico—and an even deeper abyss.

But amid all that chaos and damnation, Lowry did give life to a version of paradise. His characters in *Under the Volcano* all dreamed of it: a fjordland of forested hills and sawmills and rumbling freight trains, and a little shack hanging over a beach of rough stones covered with barnacles and sea anemones and starfish. It was like nothing you'll ever see in Mexico. In fact, it was none other than a nostalgic version of his beach at Dollarton, right down to the distant view of Burnaby's oil refineries.

OF COURSE. IT'S ALL THERE. ENOUGH to make some people go hunting for Lowry beneath the cedars in Cates Park, or pacing the beach at Roche Point, hoping the waves on those cobblestones will imitate the moans of a hopeless, brilliant drunkard. Enough for them to try to picture a shack still hanging out over the barnacles and a pudgy, florid-faced man scribbling away on the verandah. Enough for them to imagine his ghost might still linger where he walked, or wrote, or drank, or screamed at the furies that agonized and inspired him. Enough for some people, but not for me.