

The Free Lancer, 1993 Onward

Leaving my Moose Cree friends
Heading down from the North
Yes, the world is changing
The tide's gone out.
Welcome to Villeray!
Now, where do we put the canoe?
Think it through.
I'm a communications healer!
Should I start a practice?
Well I know three people here, so ...
Let's go? Why not!
Buy the Macintosh, sheesh!
It cost too much and now I—
Just want to play ...
Back to work!
Do the math! Make a plan!
Fill in forms and stand in line
Now it's official.
Make connections!
Do I need a survey?
Should I talk to an expert
Or just do it my way?
Expert says: "Impress me!"
So I do what I do
It's what I like to do, but mixing in
Images—moving and still—with text,
Not too moving, but matter-of-fact.
And he says
"That's good ... That's very goooood ..."
And he adds ...
"Hey, I can use that! You give me ideas!
Meet me soon and you can work on healing
my communications."

And work we do
And this works with that
At a winter conference centre in
Sainte-Agathe-des-Monts
And we connect and shake hands with
People who sell liquid air
And my knuckles are white as we drive back
through deep snow.
Then a cheque arrives and things calm
down.
Call an accountant,

And he calls and says, "I got a guy who needs
you ..."

Work for us a few days on site?
Sure I can!
Le Devoir?
A must, for Madame l'Infographiste!
Someone wants a touch-screen interface?
Sounds logical! The real deal!
Write a short bio, Madame Juge Ruffo?
Who'd say no?
Help you out,
Honourable Monsieur Hébert?
How do you spell *Katimavik*?
Oh, but, dare I ask you all, please,
Why not just the editing for me?
You see,
I'm rather partial to structure—
It's what I do, when I do
What I like doing—
What? I mean, "*Pardon?*"
Oh ... English AND French,
Well, ok, the pictures and layout too,
Yes, I know you are the writer;
Yes, I like variety too, sir.
Yes, I've heard flexibility is key to success.
Thanks for the advice.
No, it's not a stretch; I'll make it work.

Volunteer for this,
Help with that,
Organize and gain new skills
And meet and meet—
But who needs this? ... Work *all* the time!
But I do what I do, when I can.
It's what I like to do.
Downtown on Bishop Street
I hang my hat beside the expert's ...
He is kind and also
Wanted healing hands
Touching his questionnaires each day,
For banks, and for that alcoholic malt
beverage company, and for
Telecommunications, and for smokes, and
for trendy coolers.
And I build a clientele
And follow up on their files.
A client asks, "How do you do it?"

“Do what?”
“This work here—
You never showed me where I went wrong.
Where are the marks?
I wanted to know what to correct.”
“Um, the customer is always right?”
“You had some ideas
That you said would help.
Was it magic?”
“If things change for the better, then
That’s just editing! It’s what I do.
You wanted results!
We found a critical path.”
“Hmmm, you say it’s our stuff
And I recognize it, but
We didn’t make it like this.
This is you, Chris.
Thanks. We feel better.

Woops, some don’t pay ...
Hey, y’see this lance? It ain’t free!
Some nights are long,
And if you’re pregnant—
Well, there’s no time for that!
Take your laptop with you!
And better have Plan B,
The transparencies!
Who will be you
While you are breastfeeding
The next big project?

They applaud your courage
And hand you more stuff
And you work while the midwife checks
Things ... and delivers,
And they send you dates and fruits and files
and crackers and pâté and cheques
But it never seems to be enough—
Write, yes, but more tech help needed—
(But that’s like play, and not what I should
do when I do what I like to do!)
Buy us the stuff and make it work
Ms. Multimedia with the not-so-free lance
That’s slipping out of your hands.
So?
Learn more; drive more;
Help more; look for more;
Take on more; buy more!

And yes, that 200-dollar removable drive is a
doorstop now,
But take care of business.

Who can help me when I need to get better
and faster at all these tasks?
Now I’ve moved to the ’burbs—
I need to associate
But with whom?
Just the other Mac users? The techies?
But what about
Those who do what I do?
... Some times, no, a lot of times,
No one else will do!

One cold November,
In the great Salon of the Book
I meet the editorial people—
My own kind;
Well, I now see they are so.
Accepting me, they take me in on trial.
They have a cause to associate tonight:
Dinner and talk about freedom of speech.
Rub my eyes. Is it the 60s?
How do I join you folk?
They are struggling hard to make it work.
Can the free lance extend a hand?
Yes, most certainly yes! Where do I begin?

The need is great, yes, but you can start by
Taking minutes first, then, please learn
“Robert’s Rules.”
Now we are ready to pass you the torch.
You’re voted into chairing and leading,
otherwise, still mostly doing what you do—
Luckily, you still sort of like what you do,
And I list my name—plunge it deep—
Among theirs, in their *Directory of Editors*.
And can you help organize seminars and
workshops and a national conference?
The food is so good in Montréal

But now the free lance is pressed far out.
'Cause some projects have a life of their own.
You can push them over the edge and into a
new medium
Look, they’re caught in a Web—
THE Web—

Whoa, now, that's new!
Loooooook arrrrrrrouuuund ...
I like this fuzzy little space
Things work there!
They blink, they link, and just think!
It's a new way to drink it all in,
So I can keep doing what I do.

Now it's not that I don't like it
But this freely lancing can be a bit
Discouraging, the icing on a stormy cake,
Especially after being caught in the Web
(Which not many have seen yet)
Could there be something there?
You know, a new project after
That little toddling one that's not quite
finished yet—
Like that, but without the breastfeeding and
day care?
Well sometimes it's exhilarating
But it's often lonely just being
Miss Red Pencil, coordinator of things
Quality dependent.

Oh, where are the sweet ideas?
Our little adventurer is moving on
Starts kindergarten and now what?
Long days improving text, making lunches
and waiting at day cares and school bus
stops?

The government has called
They liked your listing in the *Directory*,
And liked other
People like you, also listed there.
“Mm, yes, I associated with the editors
And described myself as one of them, yes,
As one whose ‘abilities lie where word,
number, and image meet’
That's me all right, well it was—”
Post partum ... post scriptum.

Many editors are invited
To send in applications
And so, too, may you,
But not *just* you, of course,
It's about fairness, transparency,
True competition, ethics, values,

Exams and smiles in interviews
Oh, and do you speak the other language
too?

Ah! *mais oui !*
“*Il est dangereux d'avoir raison quand le
gouvernement a tort.*”

Ha, ha, ha ... sounds like Voltaire!
But good enough, yes.
And work a bit, then more exams,
Interviews, reviews, points of view,
Study hard—language tests, next.

And now one so longs for the free lance
Remember how it swooped across to seize
the sale?

It didn't always get to sport with what it
wanted, though; ... perhaps that lance
Was always just a lucky stab in the dark.

So it's time to choose:
Buy more new technology or face the
interview music!
Back in hallowed Guy-Favreau Complex
Editors are being tested,
And one of us will pass
Through the vortex—likely
Setting the lance aside ... forever.

Work a while on contract
Then more applications, exams, tests,
interviews, and contracts.
Meanwhile, at the round table, you can see
it's probably about the money.
One may fare a little better than valiant
knights and ladies who freelance a lot.

But the old network buzzes and beckons
So some late nights and reckoning at
Winnie's
And it's back to sharpening the lance
Then grinding it back down on the Programs
and policies, telecons, speeches, Writing to
inform Canadians, ensuring clear
communications in plain language ...
Yet seeking relief
Swooning into the fire of a Blue Metropolis
and more conferences, workshops,
Absorbing and absolving,
The bookish ones brandish duelling

Swords as they polish professionally.
And thus we acquit ourselves well with
Our fine lances, and freely forge new
weapons.

So now I'm whispering thanks
For tips and tricks boiling up from the
Kettles of Smithies who thought the
Knights and ladies of the Literary Order
Just might have need of them:
For Biography (Thanks Michael Holroyd),
For Science (Thanks Wayne Grady),
For Poetry (Thanks Peter Levitt),
For Writing for the Radio (Thanks Peter
Downie),
For Creative Non-Fiction (Thanks Bill
Weintraub).
I use what you taught each day
While fencing with the cursor on the screen
Doing what I like to do—
Either just for the sheer hell of it,
Or, jousting astride a government steed,
Editing, writing, devising how to put it,
For reports, for initiatives, and for
encouraging citizen engagement.

Alas, the free lance is less free!
But was it for this?
(See, I'm asking Question 1 in Wordsworth's
The Prelude)—
And fair Margaret Goldik asked, "Would I
Talk about writing for the Web?
Could I give her association something?"
They were wondering.
Hmmm ... Could I?
I had been wondering, too,
What to do with it and now
This chance
(Though the Web's changed in 10 years)
So maybe a workshop or two
To work out some ideas I've had.
Just can't let go of the lance!

Now, in the Forum, Hear ye, hear ye! Articles
wanted for a book—in French—on editing
So I poke at the strange matter of
Rewriting; something I like to do:

"All writing is rewriting," they say,
Is it worth another look?
I'll try, Professeure Bisailon
(Might need another lance! En garde!)
Yes, it's rewriting as seen from the trenches,
so a process becomes clearer.

And today as a new quest looms
For God's sake, please,
No one shout "Jump"
(Already wondering, "How high?")

There's just no telling
What will come of it ...
Poking, or
Pole vaulting with the lance,
To leap *ex libris*?
There will be consulting, learning, practicing,
understanding, taking part, serving, creating,
giving, helping, healing—
Maybe more midwifery—
Certainly the singing of metal
Being pounded on an anvil ...
Time for a transformation—some alchemy.

*Dedicated to the generous volunteers and staff of our
writing and editing associations, and to those who
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