

# AGAINST THE MACHINE: MANIFESTO



# Essential Prose Series 194



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Guernica Editions Inc. acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. The Ontario Arts Council is an agency of the Government of Ontario.

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada.

# AGAINST THE MACHINE: MANIFESTO



BRIAN VAN NORMAN



GUERNICA  
EDITIONS

TORONTO • CHICAGO • BUFFALO • LANCASTER (U.K.)  
2021

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Michael Mirolla, general editor  
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Guernica Editions Inc.  
287 Templemead Drive, Hamilton, ON L8W 2W4  
2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, N.Y. 14150-6000 U.S.A.  
[www.guernicaeditions.com](http://www.guernicaeditions.com)

Distributors:  
Independent Publishers Group (IPG)  
600 North Pulaski Road, Chicago IL 60624  
University of Toronto Press Distribution (UTP)  
5201 Dufferin Street, Toronto (ON), Canada M3H 5T8  
Gazelle Book Services, White Cross Mills  
High Town, Lancaster LA1 4XS U.K.

First edition.  
Printed in Canada.

Legal Deposit—Third Quarter  
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2021935737  
Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication  
Title: *Against the machine* : manifesto / Brian Van Norman.  
Names: Van Norman, Brian, author.  
Series: Essential prose series ; 194.  
Description: Series statement: Essential prose ; 194  
Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20210140305 | Canadiana (ebook) 20210140321 |  
ISBN 9781771836951 (softcover) | ISBN 9781771836968 (EPUB) |  
ISBN 9781771836876 (Kindle)  
Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.  
Classification: LCC PS8643.A557 A71 2021 | DDC C813/.6—dc23

*For Susan*

# MANIFESTO



*Definition (Merriam-Webster)*

*Manifesto* is related to *manifest*, which occurs in English as a noun, verb, and adjective. Of these, the adjective, which means “readily perceived by the senses” or “easily recognized,” is oldest, dating to the 14th century. Both *manifest* and *manifesto* derive ultimately from the Latin noun *manus* (“hand”) and *-festus*, a combining form that is related to the Latin adjective *infestus*, meaning “hostile.” Something that is manifest is easy to perceive or recognize, and a *manifesto* is a statement in which someone makes his or her intentions or views easy for people to ascertain.

*While physics and mathematics may tell us how the universe began,  
they are not much use in predicting human behaviour because  
there are far too many equations to solve.*

—**Stephen Hawking**



*All human beings have three lives: public, private, and secret.*

—**Gabriel García Márquez**



*There is something at work in my soul which I do not understand.*

—**Mary Shelley**

# WATERLOO REGION 2012



# 1

**WHEN THEY CAME** for him he knew what would happen.

He even knows them. Gary Wilson, shift foreman, and Stan Oblauski, Union Rep. They come toward him slowly. Doing this against their wills.

Mel Buckworth lowers the weft wire in his hand, half inch black bar. He brakes the big weaving machine. Carefully. It *is* big. He shuts it down with the job half done. A long train of warp wires trail from the machine's back end like cryonic black snakes frozen in mid-slither. Sliding the weft bar, crimped and heavy in his hand, back into the machine's quiver he takes out his earplugs then removes his safety glasses.

They reveal his eyes. Unusual eyes. Blue, with a singular arresting feature. They sparkle. Like diamonds. Add to them his dark hair, strong jawline, a generous mouth and Roman nose and Mel Buckworth appears a handsome man. He is tall though not remarkably so. His body is solid from years of sports and factory work. His age is beginning to show in a thickness around his middle that he would rather not have.

He steps down from the weaver's platform and faces the two men awaiting him. Oblauski stands solid. Big man. Dark eyes. Maybe six-four at least two eighty. He's in his late forties. Wilson steps forward. Much smaller. Wiry, Mel thinks. That's the word for his friend. Always a friend. Since high school. He has that sad look on his face he gets when he reminisces about the old days, usually when he's had a few. Not now. He's sober as a judge. He touches Mel's arm.

"Gotta come with us, Mel," he says.

The floor noise, big machines belching and hammering, makes him raise his voice.

"Yeah," Mel says, "figured as much ..."

"Ain't easy days," Oblauski says.

Mel looks wistfully at his weaver, knowing he won't be seeing it again. He walks with them across the factory floor. It is a huge

building. One hundred metres each way. Green steel girders support the roof. The roof twenty metres up. Rows of industrial strip lights. Fluorescent merciless blue. Gigantic multi-coloured machines hunker in precise rows. Weavers, crimpers, shears, robot spot welders ... there are red and yellow warning tapes glued to the floor around them.

The long wire crimpers line two walls. Different gauge wire spews from their troughs. Weaving machines take up the inside along with the welders, both mechanical and human. The human welders pull down their masks. They look like ancient gladiators doing battle shift on shift. The acrid smell of scorched metal infuses the plant.

At the back taking up nearly a quarter of the floor are the massive shears. They come in different sizes set to cut all gauges of wire, from bar to fence to delicate screen, each woven sheet is sheared to size. The biggest shear has tonnes of pressure with its diamond edge blade easily slicing. It is precise power, from the men who use the lasers to measure and cut, to the glittering edge of the shearing blade when it comes down. There is the shriek of metal and the sharp odour of hot steel.

He'd worked them all. Every machine. Even the loading dock at the back. His first job here was the loading dock. Curt instructions from the foreman. Heavy packets of steel coming in and out. He'd gained twenty pounds in a year. All muscle. Eventually he ran the tow motor shuffling weighty skids around. Then he'd graduated to the interior: first the crimpers then the shears then welding then weaving then ... what?

Twenty-eight years. Twenty-eight years.

## 2

**THEY PASS THROUGH** a heavy door. Its grey thickness slides shut behind them. It cuts out the factory sounds. They climb a steep stairway. Their work boots ring on the metal. Another door, this one black. It slides

open too, then rolls closed behind them. The hallway where they find themselves is quiet. No people armed with paper moving urgently from office to office. No smell of percolating coffee. No gatherings of gossips. Nothing. The closed office doors line either side of the hall. There are mirrored glass windows for each cubicle. The sound is damped by a rubberized carpet. Mel realizes he can hear nothing of the factory itself in this insulated managerial cloister.

Wilson opens an office door. This one swings like a normal door. They enter. Oblauski goes first, swelling his presence to fill the room. He will not make this easy. Mel follows, then Wilson. He closes the door. It gives an unnerving squeak.

The office is austere. A window with its grey blinds open offers a view of the factory. Triple sealed to inhibit the noise, it overlooks the work floor from above. Grey painted drywall forms ascetic space. The ceiling is dotted white acoustic tiles. In one corner sits a black file cabinet and a grey metal desk with a grey cloth chair. Two card table chairs face the desk. They are black. A black wall clock with white face peers down from another windowless wall. A calendar is pinned below it. No picture on its upper page, just all calendar. Each day of January is crossed off up to this day. Red strokes through each square.

Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> 2012.

Mel smirks.

Ironic.

Behind the desk, not rising, sits Herbert Trimble, VP Operations, Kitchener Plant, Erban Industries. Part of the mutable conglomerate which purchased the factory two years ago, he is diminutive. White shirt. Grey tie. Fussy. Balding. His hair salt and pepper. He's permitted himself a pencil moustache. A smidgeon of daring on his tired, bureaucrat's face, he closes a file. He stares at Mel through rimless steel glasses. Mel thinks he resembles a cricket.

"Mr. Buckworth understands why we're here?" he says. His voice is an unpleasant treble. He's been through this before. A veteran of downsizing. Good at his job. That's *why* he's here.

Oblauski's rough voice replies.

"Why don't you explain the process, Trimble? This don't happen

every day. Here's Mel Buckworth just like you asked for, twenty-eight years upstanding employment, best weaver we got. Be nice if you told him what you're gonna do!"

Oblauski has faced off with Trimble more than a few times since Christmas. Oblauski is used to wielding his power; the elected power of the union. He likes it. He once relished fixing things for the workers, getting into management's face. Yet now it seems he can do nothing but make things unpleasant, his power diminished.

"It's not personal," Trimble says. Trimble trembles a little, Mel notices. Is the man afraid of Oblauski?

"Please. Sit," he says. His moustache quivers.

Mel sits. Oblauski stands. Wilson waits just behind them by the door. Trimble shuffles his forms and files. Mel knows what's coming.

"This isn't my doing, Mr. Buckworth."

"Just the messenger?" Mel says.

"The what?"

"Nothing."

"I have these forms for you."

Mel stays quiet.

"I need them signed."

"Need to read 'em first," Mel says.

"Signed for tomorrow then," Trimble says sharply.

Oblauski steps forward. He leans on the desk.

"That's all fine an' good, Trimble! What if he disagrees with the terms?"

He is loud. Pushy. Reducing Trimble. This is how he makes it hard.

"This isn't my doing," Trimble says again as if he is somehow removed from the process. "Right," Wilson says sarcastically.

Mel's eyes are locked on Trimble.

"You owe this man an explanation!" Oblauski says.

"What do you want from me?" Trimble mutters.

"The whole deal!"

"What?"

"Say it first! All of it!" Oblauski leans farther forward on the desk.

"I don't ..."

“Why we’re *here!* Why this man’s *here!*”

“Look, Oblauski, we all know ...”

“Say it!”

Trimble turns to Mel. His moustache twitches again.

“Mr. Buckworth, we’re going to let you go.”

Despite the foreknowledge it hits him like a hammer. He struggles to compose himself. Twenty-eight years. Gone. *Let you go.* Wiped out as if he hadn’t been here at all. Friends here. Even unfriendlies. Relationships from a lifetime. Gone. Erased. Forms in files are the only archaeology that measures who was here. Mel’s hands bundle into fists. Does he cross the desk? Stomp little Mr. Trimble? Kill this pen pusher? Twitching moustache.

What Trimble sees is a slight shift in Mel’s chair and the sparkle in his eyes fade from fury to resignation.

“Yeah. Figured as much,” he says flatly.

“Now the rest of it!” Oblauski says. He has backed off the desk.

“You’ll have to sign these papers ...”

“By tomorrow. Yeah.”

“Preferably today.”

“What about the rest of it!” Oblauski, loud again.

“Surely we don’t have to go into detail ...”

You’re fuckin’ right you do!”

“No need for that, Oblauski!”

“Whatcha gonna do? Fire me?” Oblauski’s laugh is merciless and helpless simultaneously.

“Buckworth here ...”

“*Mister* Buckworth! He don’t work for you no more, Trimble!”

“Alright. Mister Buckworth.”

“What about him?”

“He seems to understand.”

Wilson speaks as if from the ether.

“None of us understand, Mr. Trimble.”

Trimble pulls off his goggle glasses. He wipes them with a cloth, tries to let things settle.

“So tell me,” Mel says.

Oblauski finally sits beside him. He is far too big for the chair.

Trimble puts on his glasses and deliberately turns toward Mel. He twines his fingers together. He rests his hands on the desk. Delicate hands. A thin gold wedding band. Larger Masonic ring. The fingers are too tightly coiled.

Mel looks at him.

His moustache twitches once more.

He is ready now for his recitation. The delivery of the litany.

“As you know, Buckworth, we at Erban are finding it necessary to shift with the times.”

“*Mister* Buckworth!” Oblauski half rises.

Trimble blinks, shuffles and studies files for a moment, then returns from where he has gathered himself.

“*Mister* Buckworth, the global economy is driving changes in our approach. You’ve seen what’s happening in the U.S. since 2008. Market forces. Raw materials. Labour factors. Erban is having to retool, contract a little ...”

“What?” Mel stares.

“Shrink, Mr. Buckworth. We have to lighten our workforce ...”

“He means hire Chinese or fuckin’ robots,” Oblauski mutters.

“Mr. Oblauski,” Trimble’s gaze shifts toward the big man. His face tightens. His eyes are suddenly steely. How did that happen? From distressed weakling to a man with power. In a single instant he has transformed, successfully girded himself for battle, awaited his moment with professional aplomb by allowing Oblauski to use up his weapons. When he strikes, Mel is surprised and impressed.

“That will be enough, sir! Another word from you and I’ll have security remove you from this office.”

He uses a high, hard voice. The little shit has grown some bones.

“You can’t ...”

“I’m afraid I can, Oblauski.”

“We’ll strike. Walk out right now!”

“Why don’t you do that?” A wry smile grows beneath the moustache. He knows where the true power lies. In this exchange there is only one winner.

“You owe this man the truth!” Oblauski blusters.

“And the truth is, Mr. Buckworth, you’re being let go. Not laid off. Not fired. *Let go*. If you sign these papers you will have a severance package befitting your seniority. You will have access to retraining. You will be eligible for employment insurance. You will have a letter of recommendation. And, you will retain your pension benefits though they will not kick in until age sixty-five. You are?”

“Fifty-five.”

“I would advise you to sign the papers. Feel free to read them first.”

Trimble stands.

“Your union representative here will explain what you need. I’ll return shortly. If you have any questions please write them down. There will be no further conversation. I’ll leave you to it, then.”

He is gone in a whisper. The door clicks shut.

Wilson is silent.

Oblauski is gobsmacked.

Mel Buckworth begins to read.

### 3

**THE SCHLEIERKRAUT TAVERN** is crowded and loud. Friday after work. People come from the factories of the industrial basin nearby. Easy to get to, the place is near Homer Watson and Manitou Drive, two major thoroughfares in the city of Kitchener, Ontario, Canada.

The bar itself has a large parking lot, full on Fridays. It’s a building from the seventies, done up as a faux chalet from some German nightmare. The inside has been improved from the old days however. Mel remembers creaking wood floors and five-dollar pitchers, the smell of spilled beer everywhere and always one or two drunks at the bar.

Trendiness has made it a sports bar. A good one. Lots of large

screens at every angle. Dressy now. Good, substantial chairs and tables. It has a fine craft beer selection. The bar is still there though the drunks are long gone with its gentrification. Kitchener's suburbs have grown up around it to the south and west along Doon Village Road and Pioneer Drive. Now it attracts a new clientele, different from the old days. Less grease, more tech. Way of the world.

Some will stay for a few pints with co-workers and friends, others ready themselves for the hockey game on the screens at seven. There will be a band by ten. The suburbanites will show up, the ones who commute to Toronto but live in south Kitchener with its less expensive housing and 401 freeway access. Mel looks around: just people like any others, good and bad, quiet and loud, though with more money than the old regulars, some of whom still show up after work and are gone by supper.

Not this time for Mel.

There are five stages to grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The first two have been covered fully in the Schleierkraut with the deconstruction of Mel's loss: the disbelief and fury, the ways to get revenge, the knowledge the job is irretrievably gone, the pride of once having had work, have all been discussed and discarded.

Voices get slurry.

Rounds get bought.

You stay longer than you should.

Mel and Gary Wilson sit at a corner table. Despite the cacophony of voices around them, they talk. They sit close. Mel has a tall glass of lager in hand, Gary sits with an IPA. There are empty glasses in front of them, white foam mixed with dregs of gold in their bottoms. The six glasses make a kind of wall matching the angle their chairs have turned toward each other. It signals to others who might wave a greeting that they should stay away.

Bar etiquette.

"I seen this comin' a year back when the midnight shift got cut down," Mel says.

"Yeah," Gary says. He takes a sip. What *can* he say?

"Shoulda took that foreman job afternoons, then I'd still be there."

“Not so sure of that.”

Another sip.

“So what about you?” Mel says. “Your job?”

“It’ll go same way as you. They’re just keepin’ us ’round t’ help everybody leave.”

“Ugly work.”

“Otherwise it’d just be Trimble and Oblauski.”

“Fuck that.”

“Can you imagine?”

Gary laughs. Drinks.

“So they told you yet when you’re gone?” Mel asks.

“Afternoon shift is meeting next Monday. Daytime, not their usual time. Right after that the day shift is gonna be called right from work, like you, only all of ’em.”

“What does that say?”

Mel’s turn to drink. Half the glass.

“Tells me Trimble, or some guy above him, is tired of one-on-ones. I think this’ll be a mass firing. Today was for you ’cause you been there so long. You shoulda been a foreman!”

“Lot of good now,” Mel says.

“Can’t do much about it. Can’t strike. Union’s lost, no matter Oblauski’s threats and shouts. Can’t sabotage the machines either.”

“Shit, I never thought of that.”

“Cimolino tried it.”

“Really? The guy workin’ shears.”

“Yep. Tried to jam the big ten tonne.”

“What happened?”

“You seen the new guys walkin’ ’round with clip boards?”

“Yeah, taking inventory.”

“Right. Inventory. Jesus Christ, Mel, you can be simple sometimes.”

“You mean they’re ...”

“Security. Erban Security.”

“The Bosses *told* you about them?”

“You think? Nah. I just figured it out after Cimolino happened.”

“Fucking bastards!”

“I’ll drink to that!”

Wilson downs his beer, slams the glass on the table, followed as hard by Mel’s. They sit a moment, both inside their thoughts. Mel sees the server and puts up two fingers. Instead of bringing beer she comes over.

“Are you guys driving tonight?”

Mel and Gary look at each other.

“Take the empties away, Shirley,” Gary says. “We’ll have coffee.”

“Make that one coffee and one beer,” Mel says.

Shirley stands there.

“I’ll drive him home,” Gary says.

“Alright, one black one gold.” Shirley smiles and is gone.

“What the fuck am I gonna tell, Pat?” Mel says.

“This ain’t your fault, Mel. Just tell her the plant’s closing down.”

“I’m in enough shit with her. I told you ’bout Christmas. Christ, we barely talk now. Since Dani moved in with that geek boyfriend Pat’s moved into *her* room. We don’t sleep together no more. She makes supper. We watch TV while we eat. You know how pissed she is I didn’t come down on MJ when he quit college.”

“What’s your boy doing now?”

“Delivering pizza and playing that fucking computer game the rest of the time. He’s moved to the basement. Likes the big screen. All I ever see when I get home is blue light comin’ up the stairs and guns and bombs and shit nearly shaking the house off its foundations.”

“You don’t have to take that,” Wilson says.

“Oh don’t get me wrong ... he does that daytimes when me and Pat are out working. Couple of times I’ve come home early. Tell him to cut the noise. He does. Then just keeps on playing but wearing headphones. I remember we used to talk.”

“Them games are a problem with kids.”

“Tell me about it. After pizza delivery he comes home, sometimes two or three in the morning, then he’s on his headphones and plays some more. No idea when he sleeps! Slept enough during college, I guess.”

“What’ll you do?”

“Pat wants him out, wants him on his own so he sees what’s going on and goes back to school. I think he’s just like me when I was his age, feeling his oats. But it’s different now. Gotta have education. He don’t see that. Figures something’ll come along. At least I left home when I quit school!”

The beer comes, and the coffee.

“Yeah, things are different now.”

“That isn’t all, Gary. Pat’s restless since the kids have grown up. I don’t know if it’s women’s problems or I watch too much sports or maybe she’s just tired of me.”

“You go home and tell her this crap about the job. Should bring her around. The two of you gotta work this out together.”

“I got hockey tonight. Ten o’clock. She’ll be at home behind her door with her fuckin’ puzzles or asleep by the time I get home.”

“You should skip the hockey, Mel. It’s not every day you get heaved.”

“Gotta do it. This is the A league. A few of the guys were Juniors back in the day. A couple even played pro. Other leagues I can miss ... this one everybody wants in. You miss a couple of games, they don’t keep you.”

“You can’t play drunk.”

“I’m not drunk, Gary. Three pints?”

“Four.”

“I’ll quit after this. Grab some burgers out at 401.”

“Still it don’t seem fair to Pat.”

“I’ll take her out for breakfast, tell her some place public.”

Thoughts of his wife weigh heavily on Mel. They flash through his mind in visions and memories. He has no idea when their marriage began to fail, when they began to grow apart. He recalls instances: fights over his hockey nights, arguments about money, differences over the kids, where to vacation, too much TV, who cleans the house, how to shape the garden, on and on in a crumbling narration of increasing unwillingness to find answers.

Perhaps there are no answers.

Anyway, she's changed. Not the same woman he's known for years. Someone else. Where the fuck was *that* person hiding?

She wanted him to accompany her to a marriage counsellor. He went once. The counsellor was a woman who took Pat's side in every segment of their discussion. She'd accused Mel of not listening, or not listening correctly. What the fuck is *listening correctly*? That was the end of therapy. He thought they could work it out themselves, like adults, like they used to. Pat kept going once every week.

It got worse. He played more hockey in winter, softball in summer in the good, strong company of men. He understood most men: understood their code, the unwritten rules, the right behaviour of guys who respected each other. He thought he'd once understood Mel Junior, his son. Not anymore. Now he's changed too from collegiate champ to a lump on a couch.

He wishes as well he could comprehend his daughter Danielle. She has changed into some other daughter, not the one he raised. Was *that* girl always there deep inside? Did she grow from the soil of experience or just emerge from the dark? Sometimes, he thinks, it's all too complex.

She is with a man now though he is not Mel's kind of man. A little stuck up shit called Stanley as in: "I'm not Stan, sir, please use my name." Little shit. Some big scholarship to University of Waterloo. Computers but not just *any* computers. No. *Nano*. What the fuck was nano? And *quantum*. What the fuck was that? He'd wanted to step on the guy but Dani saw it coming and so did Pat and they both came down on him for being insensitive. He just didn't like the guy! Why was that insensitive?

The beer hits the table half full.

"You're right, Gary."

He has no idea what Gary was talking about just then but he's made up his mind.

"Your coffee done? I'll leave the beer. I don't need it. Gotta be on my game tonight."

"Okay." Gary sets his cup down. "You sure you can drive?"

"Absolutely. All this crap about losing the job. It's got me down."

“It’s a good thing to talk it though, Mel.”

“Yeah. Thanks for being here.”

“You should really go home.”

“I’ll figure out something. Meanwhile I’ve got that severance package should last me a year. Maybe I could retrain. Maybe I could do it with my son, get him off his ass. Look, Gary, I know you arranged for all this today. Nobody else gets this treatment but foremen and office staff. I wanna thank you.”

“It was nothing, Mel. Just making it fair.”

“Yeah. So do you really know when you’re done?”

“Like I said, end of next week. There’s a skeleton crew to shut the plant down but they won’t use any of us. Afraid we’ll sabotage things. So I’m gone with the rest, replaced by robots or Mexicans or some guys in China who work for shit. Listen, that don’t matter. You and Pat get it back together, eh? Maybe you two and Mona and me can go out for dinner when I’m done. Celebrate our severances. What do you say?”

“Has Mona been talking to Pat?” Mel asks.

“I think on the phone a few times. Haven’t seen each other in months.”

“You know what they talk about?”

“That’s Mona’s business. If she wanted me to know she’d tell me.”

“Is it about me?”

“I don’t know, Mel. Honest. I’ll ask her.”

“Okay. Listen, I gotta get some food and get to the rink. Good we did this.”

“Yeah.”

“What’s up with you this weekend?”

“The usual.”

“You still belong to that book club?”

“Yeah. Saturday afternoons once a month. Good people.”

“You read a lot don’t you.”

“I like it. Wish I’d gone on in school y’ know?”

“It was different those days.”

“Different from now, that’s for sure.”

“I wonder what’d happen if I started back in school? All I ever used

my brain for was sports. My brother was the real brains in the family. Well, it ain't gonna happen now. I'll get a job somewhere. Let's go!"

In the parking lot they shake hands then embrace, back slaps on thick coats in the January dark. Just enough light to twinkle the ice sheening the pavement. There is a pile of snow plowed up at one end of the lot. Mel has parked there rather than look for a spot. Now he unlocks his F150. It's old but paid for. That's the good part. And no mortgage. Pat had made sure of that. Save and scrimp and pay cash. So he had no debt. Even his sports bets mostly made money. She hadn't liked him doing that even when he'd won but she'd tolerated it, until now.

*She sure as hell isn't going to like this news*, he reflects. He thinks for a second about going home: turning left up Homer Watson, then onto Highland then Belmont then into Waterloo to his house on Fischer Street. Likely best to get it all over ... have the fight and the tears and the door slams and sleeping alone.

Instead he turns right, heading for Sports World Drive.

## 4

A **COUPLE OF** burgers see him through his drive to Ice Sports arena. He listens to classic rock, turned up, Seger and Springsteen driving unwelcome thoughts from his mind. Not quite.

"... let you go ..." from a mouth with a trimmed moustache.

"Someday lady ..." Seger's voice and sudden thoughts of a youthful Patricia.

"... sign these papers ..." the merciless bureaucrat.

Springsteen's "Hungry Heart" and the ache of old days. The days of youth and promise. So simple then. It didn't seem that long ago yet it also seemed like another dimension. Now it's become days with no future. You can't retire at fifty-five! He shakes his head. He needs

to focus on the game, prepare himself for these guys. He flips off the radio.

There are three former cities joined together by government fiat in 1973, still known separately as Waterloo, Kitchener and Cambridge which, along with the townships of Wellesley, Wilmot, Woolwich and North Dumfries have morphed into something called Waterloo Region. The Tri-Cities, another moniker for the area, share a Germanic, Scottish, Mennonite and later Portuguese heritage. It's a big sports region though too small for professional teams. The populace makes up for that deficiency with plenty of amateur athletics of every description. In winter there is skiing at a small but popular club, curling in various rinks around the city, then volleyball, basketball, and hockey leagues for all ages. The Kitchener Rangers, an OHL team, is sold out annually. Mel drives to the edge of Kitchener, Sportsworld Crossing, for his Friday night game.

This league is special.

He's played with and against some of these men since he was a kid on Waterloo travel teams. A couple even turned pro for a while and several of them were prospects as Juniors, and then there are the few, the very few including Mel Buckworth, asked to play simply through old friendships and known to have retained certain levels of skill.

He parks in the lot then lugs his bag through the spacious new lobby all dove grey and white tiled floor; deep blue railings line the steps to the concourse. A furniture store has paid for a bright orange 3D icon and multiple posters. Garish, but he doesn't mind. By now he ignores it anyway.

He walks over to rink side in time to see the Zamboni clearing the snow and watering the ice ... its wet path forms a gleaming surface. It is the best ice. Clear and polished like a mirror. A perfect surface before the wounds and scrapes made by skate tracks. It is clear and cold at ice level, the only sound that of the machine and the echoes that bounce off bare walls.

He knows once, in his dad's day and even now in rinks in small towns, ice was shovelled and hosed by teams of rink rats ... the boys

who hung out just to get free ice time for their service. Now, like him, they have been replaced by machines. All the old camaraderie gone. Efficiency replacing it all. He turns away. He will watch the Zamboni no longer.

Even his hockey sanctuary is tainted by this day's events.

The dressing room is azure blue and white with polished yellow benches. There has been an attempt at faux woodgrain. Above the benches, spaced evenly where the blue wall turns white, there are clothing hooks. No lockers. Someone always locks the dressing room door when the teams leave for the ice.

As he enters he hears the word "*Bucks!*" from all sides. His nickname. You can't be a jock without a nickname. His comes of two elements: his last name shortened is obvious and then an unexpected hitch to the nickname, his selection skills in sports pools. He's paid for a great many rounds of drinks multiple times with his winnings.

Men in varied stages of undress wave or smile or make jokes as he passes. His appointed place—as all players do he has superstitions—is between Bill Barbour and Tom Turnbull. *Barbs* and *Tommy* as they are better known. Greeting them he doffs his ski jacket, zips open his bag, old style with no wheels, and pulls out a variety of pads. Dressing takes twenty minutes, lots of protective equipment, lines of tape applied, then skates and sweater, ever disrupted by jibes and laughter.

It is an easy place to love, this place. There is an unmistakable bond here. These are men who have lived this ritual virtually all their years. There is no stench of unwashed underclothing. That is for the unenlightened. Their equipment is top quality, not a collection of old used-up gear. Everything has been carefully maintained. They don dry-cleaned orange jerseys with white trim or white ones with black trim depending on their team this night. Sponsor jerseys. Sponsor logos. They have fought for colours since childhood, the uniforms of the game.

At 9:55 they exit the room, their skates on the blue rubberized carpet leading to the ice. They do not speak now. They don't joke. They prepare in the time it takes to walk from the dressing room door to the gate to the ice and then into another world of glistening white

gliding steel red and blue lines cool Freon wind as they accelerate to speed. Fastest game in the world at its best.

Pucks are dumped from a pail. The slap of sticks on ice. The blur of black discs. The boom of pucks off pads. The snap of catching gloves as goaltenders warm up. Long ago it would have been a pond or backyard rink. Shovelled and hosed lovingly by a father. No lines, no boards. Shiny games. Short passes. Quick moves. Miss the net lose the puck in the snow. Spend ten minutes searching. Boys steaming in minus fifteen degree weather. A couple of girls wanting to play. Why not? Winter glory.

At fifty-five, Mel Buckworth is by no means a threat to these players. He should be playing no contact/no slap shot but feels that would somehow diminish him. He plays left defence now. If he's good he can hold his own. The younger players in their thirties and forties fly by him like he's standing still. He tries to be smarter. He has the brain for it. Always has had. Like most guys here he knows how to focus, how to bend his concentration to the moment.

He is the one to retreat tactically when the opposing team grabs the puck in their end. His eyes follow evasive routes as men try to get open for a pass. He sees the passes, hears the stick slaps, watches his own guys scramble to back check. He twists to skate backward, blades rasping the ice just as the puck arrives at a speedy right winger. Young guy. Quick glimpse. No one is with him. He can't pass so he'll try a cut toward centre and leave a drop pass or go round and sweep in the short side trying to get past Mel.

Mel watches his feet. Forget the puck. Any weight shift. Any deke.

There! Right left. Up centre. Counter him. Hip to his thigh. Take his leg out.

Done. Guy's down. Puck's loose. Stick. Turn. Look. Pass. Sharp. Breathe as the play goes the other way.

Glide to the bench for relief.

"Nice one, Bucks!"

Pull out the mouth guard.

"Thanks."

"Oh shit! Look! Yes! Yes!"

“What?”

“Tommy!”

“Yes!”

Puck in the opponent’s net. Goalie sprawled on the ice. Tommy Turnbull’s stick in the air. The excited huddle of men turned boys for an instant.

Nothing like winning.

## 5

**THE FIRST JIGSAW** puzzle was invented by John Spilsbury, a mapmaker and engraver in the mid-eighteenth century. He created his first using one of his maps. The map was mounted on a sheet of hardwood. He created a puzzle by cutting out the countries’ shapes with his saw. By the twentieth century die-cut tools were introduced, changing everything. With these tools plastic and cardboard puzzle production increased in both numbers and complexity.

Now they come in multiplicities of form, shape, material and theme, many of them over one thousand pieces, some up to three, four, five thousand. There remains one common element, however: the puzzles come in a box or bag in loose pieces and somehow someone must use cognitive skills, problem solving and intense concentration to decipher and solve them.

Patricia Buckworth lounges in her family room sorting through puzzle tiles. She has a one thousand piece jigsaw of Dali’s *The Enigma of Desire*. Long gone are the simple castles and landscapes as she’d graduated from one level to the next. Now she puzzles out the most complex of them: Chihuly glass, famous portraits, Byzantine mosaics, surrealists, impressionists, the greater the challenge the more she craves it. Once she played tennis, volleyball, basketball. She still indulges herself with summer tennis. But puzzles are her pastime now; they

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



## *MY THANKS TO*

Diane Eastham  
Lianne McClean  
Richard French  
Doug Hyslop  
Mark Torrance  
Jan Sebald  
Doug Blakey (Watsec Cyber Risk Management)  
Constable Ashley Dietrich (Waterloo Regional Police Service)  
Raymond Laflamme (Institute of Quantum Computing University of Waterloo)  
Mike & Ophelia Lazaridis Quantum-Nano Centre  
Nancy Silcox  
John Oughton  
John Drudge  
David Menear  
James D. A. Terry  
Dorothy Sjolholm  
Henry the House Cat

## *AND*

The many, many friends, students, professors, scientists and researchers who took the time to talk with me regarding my research for this novel.

***AND***

Michael Mirolla for his guidance, patience, and the mettle to trust me with this undertaking.

“No Limits, No Borders.” That’s the truth!

***NOTE***

The Mike & Ophelia Lazaridis Quantum-Nano Centre which plays a central part in this novel was not opened until 2013, whereas I have it running in 2012. My apologies to those who are upset over this tinkering with history. It is a novel after all and the symbolic status was simply too good to ignore.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Once a teacher, award winning playwright, theatre director and adjudicator, Brian Van Norman left those worlds behind to travel the planet with his wife, Susan, and take up writing as a full time pursuit. He has journeyed to every continent and sailed nearly every sea on the planet. Brian is the author of three previous novels: *The Betrayal Path*, *Immortal Water* and *Against the Machine: Luddites*, the first in a trilogy of *Against the Machine* novels. His base is Waterloo, Ontario, Canada though he is seldom found there.