

ROBERT  
MACDONALD



ALL CRAZY  
FOR  
TYPE, INK,  
PAPER, AND  
GLUE

## P R E A M B L E

The following is the text and graphics from a presentation given by Robert MacDonald before an audience at the Kelly Library, St. Michaels College at the University of Toronto, on January 22, 2019, on the occasion of the opening of the Canadian Fine Press Exhibit, which celebrates letterpress publications, hand-printed ephemera, chapbooks and other fine press works held in the University's special collections and libraries.

When asked to provide a prospectus for the presentation, Robert submitted the following:

All crazy for type, ink, paper and glue:  
Instructive narrative meanderings in printropica,  
bibliophrenia, and typomania.

This presentation will be a play in one act, featuring a dialogue by a Narrator with the following Characters, living and dead: Nelson Ball, author, editor, publisher; Alan Fleming, designer; Will Reuter, designer, printer; Gerald Giampa, printer, typographer; Yuri Rubinsky, publisher; Glenn Goluska, designer, printer.

The Characters are distinguished by the fact that they materially contributed to the four decade long education of the Narrator, Robert MacDonald, as a designer, typographer, printer, and publisher.

The Characters also have another thing in common: they indulged an outsized love for, obsession with, and pursuit of, the printing and publishing crafts and arts. That towering love,

## FOR TYPE, INK, PAPER AND GLUE

obsession, and pursuit made them capable and eager to create works of wondrous beauty, delicate intimacy, literary persuasiveness, stunning elegance, souring ambition, and brave innovation.

There will be heroes and villains in this story, as well as successes and failures, triumphs and sorrows. All these the Narrator took into himself, found inspiration and guidance, and transformed into his own creative narrative. The story will follow his personal journey of exploration, will reveal the inner workings of man, material, and machines, and will come clean about creativity, ambition, perfectionism, obsession, desire, compassion, joy, wisdom, and praise.

This will not be a sad story, but it will have its difficult moments, and will not be without pathos. It will be a story of inky fingers, and grand dreams, and the consequences thereof. It hopes to be a bright spark to the tinder of the imagination, for those looking for heat on a cold January night.

Most of all, this presentation will bring to life a time that is gone, and some of the distinctive people that wandered into a specific frame during that time, made their contribution to a history yet to be written, and to the Narrator's personal dialogue with destiny, and wandered away, into the mists of memory.



Robert MacDonald was a graphic artist who became a typographer, who became a printer, who became a publisher, who became an information architect, who became a program director, who became a writer, who became a designer – and who still can't get over how much fun it all was in spite of the vicissitudes of fate and fortune. Now an avid reader, social activist, and cottage gardener in the outrageously beautiful and strange Okanagan valley, he still often rises to a creative challenge, especially if type, ink, paper, and glue are involved.

## INTRO

Thank you for having me here. I am honoured to be able to share some stories with you.

I took inspiration for this talk from Annie Dillard, who, when asked the meaning of life, offered this:

“We are here to witness the creation and abet it. We are here to notice each thing so each thing gets noticed. Together we notice not only each mountain shadow and each stone on the beach but, especially, we notice the beautiful faces and complex natures of each other. We are here to bring to consciousness the beauty and power that are around us and to praise the people who are here with us.”

I bring greetings from the unceded Syilx Okanagan territory of lakes, rivers, grasslands, orchards and vineyards, verdant meadows, virgin rainforests, and mountain vistas beyond compare.

I spent more than 10 years of my life living and working within 10 blocks of where we are right now, and many of the events and people I’m going to be talking about tonight took place, or started here, in these same environs.

I’ve come to be with you tonight to share some memories of a time that is gone, and share a few stories of people and the things they did, made, and made possible.

I’ve also come to talk with you about design, which is the oldest profession, rumours to the contrary. It’s been

around since the hunter gatherers started making tools, drawing pictures on bones and in caves, adding herbs to broth and yeast to flour and water, and shaping stories.

The first person I want to introduce you to is me.



## Robert MacDonald

Here I am in the mid-1970s, at my desk at Dreadnaught, and 837 steps from my desk at the University of Toronto Press. You can see that time has had its inevitable way with me.

When I was a decade younger than here I didn't know about design, but I knew I wanted to draw. I grew up a postwar airforce brat, moving around a lot, but otherwise mine was a typical 50s – early 60s childhood.

That was until my best friend got falsely charged with rape and murder, and was sentenced to hang at age 15. His name was Stephen Truscott, and he didn't hang in the end, but his life was ruined. He was innocent, but they didn't care, and off he went to adult prison.

My life was also ruined, but in a different way. I have never been able to get over the feeling that they - whoever they are – were coming for me too.

I spent a couple of miserable years, lonely, moping, reading my way through the local library, making morbid drawings.

I am also a survivor of the bomb culture. A generation of children were told that the Ruskiies and/or the Yanks were on their way over the horizon any day now, to nuclear carpet bomb us puny Canadians – if not the whole world – into radioactive glow-in-the-dark cinders.

The only lights for me in that bleak darkness was the local library and an after-school job at the local paper, the Huron Expositor, where I got to clean the Linotype and the ancient Excelsior press, put away display type, and let the ink and varsol soak into my veins.

As well, there was an older kid in our small Ontario town who dressed in odd clothes, wore a beret to high school, and told me about music and poetry. He will appear again in this story.

Eventually, I ran away from my pre-scripted life. It was the 60s, I was almost 16, hitchhiking was easy – even across the US border without documents – and California beckoned. I made it to Los Angeles, managed by subterfuge to get hired by Disney, and spent 3 months sitting at one of the hundreds and hundreds of desks in rows in a massive former aircraft hanger, painting the yellow on animation cells for the Spanish-language version of Snow White, for

slightly more than a buck an hour, until they discovered I was illegal, and I was on the road again.

So, if you ever get to see the Spanish version of Snow White, pay special attention to the yellow in the middle part. That's me.

The only people who would hire me were inventing the underground press. My art skills and willingness to work long hours in exchange for papers – which I would then have to sell on the street to pay for food and lodging – made me a valued collaborator. Peace, man. I was living the California dream, and it was the summer of love.

I spent a couple of years productively meandering in that underground press scene, moving up the west coast to Vancouver, paste-upping my way, and eventually all the way back to Toronto. Here I was involved in starting Guerilla, Toronto's first underground paper.

A shoestring operation, it depended on the facilities of a small early-Canlit publishing company, Peter Martin Associates, in a basement a couple of blocks from here, to enable typesetting and pasteup. We were certainly a ragtag group of writers, editors, graphic artists, paste-uppers, and cartoonists – amateurs all. Guerilla stretched social conventions, challenged the system, spoke truth to power. It was Marxism with flowers.

Alas, I found the Marxism a little too prescriptive and strident for me, and after a while left to start another paper, Dreadnaught, in a decrepid flat over the worst Indian restaurant on Bloor Street, close to the Brunswick Tavern,

with Jim Christie, the legendary vagabond writer, and Marcel Horne, the ill-fated professional firebreather. It was an epic failure.

An education was by then a bridge too far for me, so I decided I needed to become an apprentice. Here's what, or more properly who, I found.



## Roy Miya

Roy Miya was an artist and jazz musician, who, in order to support himself, operated a signmaking and silkscreen printing company in an industrial area near Yonge and Davisville. His daytime clients were retailers, politicians, and entertainment venues. I was one among many apprentices in a busy shop pumping out signs, posters, ads, and other commercial bric-a-brac. Most of our work was loud, but Roy was a rigorous perfectionist, and everything we did was to a high standard. He was generous with his time and I learned a lot from him.

His other clients were artists, galleries, and alternative organizations, most of whom he gave discount deals and many times he charged nothing at all. Roy was at heart a

jazz musician, and the evenings and nights in the studio were filled with poetry readings, jazz concerts, parties, and parties, and parties. Sometimes, the party would start in the studio and then move down to Gerrard Street into the infamous Bohemian Embassy.

I left Roy's to enter the advertising industry as part of what became known as the hippie intake, first at Foot Cone & Belding. I vainly thought I could burrow into the propaganda heart of capitalism and take down the whole ugly mess from the inside – singlehandedly if necessary.

Instead, I put flowers and butterflies on Kleenex boxes. I marketed nutrician-free breakfast food to kids. Advertising gave me creative opportunity, money, awards, and taught me how to navigate a 3-martini client lunch, and consume amphetemines, all of which made me miserable again.

And, just as he had in the depth of my teenage misery, this person popped into view.



## Nelson Ball

Nelson Ball was still the beatnik poet I remembered from high school. He and a bunch of other writers ran a cacophony of poetry readings, and published chapbooks and pamphlets. I visited him at his place on Harbord Street, where he ran his Weed/Flower Press with his artist wife, Barbara Caruso.

He introduced me to some of the other writers - most notably B.P. Nichol – who were doing the same kind of work as he was, and to jazz, and to gay people, and to weed, which turned out to be much better than amphetamines.

Most of his publishing was inspired by American writers and publishers – Olson, Creeley, Ferlinghetti, et al. Most such publications were produced on mimeograph machines in those days, on plain paper, staple-bound, with minimalist

covers. It was all about not getting in the way of the writing. And informed by poetry, poverty, protest, and postmodernism, all afoot in the zeitgeist.

I was inspired by the potent enthusiasm, the disdain of convention, and the in-your-face creativity. I bought a mimeo machine, and started playing around with typing machines, mostly electric typewriters with odd typefaces rather than the standard ones. I was starting to get the itch.

I decided to try publishing. And as luck would have it, I found this guy.



## Allan Fleming

Allan Fleming was the real deal, a designer with serious chops. His power was in making complicated things simple. And beautiful, and functional, and universal, and wonderful. And he did it with the elan of a born showman.

In his career he had created books, magazines, advertisements, and graphic identities that established his reputation as a master.

I knew that he was a big deal, but with the ignorance and vanity of youth, I thought he would see me as a worthy collaborator.

I asked him for a job and a miracle happened. He welcomed semi-literate apprentice me into his protean circle, with qualifications that paled by comparison with those of Antje Lingner, Laurie Lewis, and Will Rueter, the other

production people in the Design department at the august University of Toronto Press.

I can't tell you how vain I was arriving on my first day, and how humbled I was within hours of my arrival. They – Allan, Antje, Laurie, and Will – were, I soon realized, Gods among mortals. Each and every one of them were already the me I wanted to be, but didn't know yet.

Humbled and inspired, it wasn't long before I was copying them. From my dim corner of the studio I could see into their bright, brilliant rooms, and for two years I spied on them every moment I could, and I learned slowly how to talk, and to act, and how to think, and eventually how to create, like them. Bad, pathetically bad, at first, but getting better every day, day by day.

For two years I worked – on the job, and at home – 16 to 20 hours a day trying to learn everything I could about typography and design. I read my way through the Design department library, Alan's personal library, the libraries at the University and the Central Library, and I scoured the secondhand bookstores, reading on repeated visits anything I couldn't afford to purchase.

I drew and drew and drew. Hundreds of pencils passed through my fingers, thousands of tissue paper sheets, as I traced millions of letters, in a intense pursuit of just the right look and feel.

I read about and looked at colours, by themselves, and in combination. I copied Goethe's efforts to understand the magic subtlety of colour in nature. I studied texture,

and form and shape. I studied white space, and balance, and repetition, and all the other secret sauces of design. I studied artists, and photographers, and designers. I rubbed paper between my thumb and finger, testing the texture and temper, testing myself, memorizing. I was a human sponge, loose in the world.

I memorized every typeface in the Encyclopedia of Typefaces, and hundreds more. I haunted the libraries, wandering the shelves, taking down random books, determining the font used, and examining all the design details. I was a minutia machine, made to be paper, to be type, to be colour, to be tone, to be atmosphere.

Alan mentored me through all this, in person and on the phone, and wrung every ounce of creativity out of me, challenging me. Over and over again I designed book covers and book texts until he was satisfied that I had done the best I could do. He taught me how to think, how to create space in my head for ideas and creativity. He taught me how to draw letters and words and pages and more, and bring them to life. He taught me how to listen to the text, and let it whisper to me what it wanted to look and feel like, to see through the readers eyes.

And one day, just another everyday ordinary day, I was a typographer. I thought in type, and I could compose a whole piece of work in my imagination, and when complete and perfect there, then put it down on paper. I was a maker of typographic worlds that lived in peace and harmony with man and God.

At that moment, I raised my head from my single-minded pursuit of design perfection, and was not afraid. I could influence, and maybe help define the future. I had that deep knowing of things, the skill, and the humility necessary to actually make things happen.

I started looking around for other challenges, and skills I could add to my design arsenal, and it wasn't long before this person showed me one.



## Will Rueter

Will Rueter was one of the people I had scrutinized at U of T, as he went about almost effortlessly making brilliant book designs happen. But I gradually became aware of another side of Will: the craftsman.

Will could do stuff with metal type, a printing press, ink and paper that would, and still does, take my breath away. When you hold an object of his work in your hands you are transported to a world you may never want to leave. It's better than most food, and may even be better than chocolate or goat cheese.

Down in his cramped basement on Major Street, just south of Bloor, he assembled a studio in which he could ply his printing magic, under the imprint Aliquando Press.

In order to garner as much time as possible with him, I became an occasional babysitter and home repair helper. Any time I could, I would listen to him talk about his tools,

his materials, his techniques, and especially his ideas for hours untold, and ply him with questions – why this letter, why this typeface, why this indent, why this paper, why this size, why this colour, why this idea. He was generous with his time and talents, and once gave me a Victorian broadside which today hangs on the wall of my backyard studio.

All the stories, and all the detailed answers he gave to my questions, proved to me that he knew stuff, deep stuff. No detail was too small to deserve his attention. He heard the same secret whisper I'd learned to hear, but he took it into other realms, by choosing texts that allowed denser elaboration and exploration, that tilted into the majestic.

His typographic chops were matched by his bookbinding ones, and he could devise unique and powerful ways to house his texts that brought added magic to the mix.

Although he produced too few works, and too few of each work, all are worthy of attention and praise, and I prize the few I have. I visit them in my small library often, and they still speak the language of craft and creativity.

I decided that I would try to find some way to start a little letterpress operation in my own basement. I started looking around for a press.

## MEANWHILE

Fleming, discerning my itch to explore new challenges, offered me several. He advised me to spend any time I could spare at the legendary Coach House Press, just up the street, to see if there were advantages to be had with the technologies and processes they were using and exploring, that might be applicable to U of T Press and some of the projects that were arising.

After six months in the company of the madmen and magicians at Coach House, not least the druidic mastermind Stan Bevington, I wrote a memo that recommended that U of T Press adopt Coach House, move in together in a big house across the alley from them, maybe become part of Innis College – and hey, why not adopt Marshall McLuhan and his accolade media mavens at the same time – and make media history. Nothing whatsoever came of that, but I did learn a lot about commercial typesetting and printing.

Fleming also allowed me time to explore other ideas and opportunities. He had spent time in England during his formative career, and I asked for time to explore the roots and branches of typography. I secured invitations to fondle the Frye types at Oxford, white glove the typographic archives at Cambridge, and at St. Brides printing museum off Fleet Street in London, and stay a week at Kelmscott House in the company of the ghost of William Morris. I was fully hooked.

Within months, back in Toronto in the basement of 24 Sussex at Huron, I had acquired a Pilot press and some fonts, and started the adventure that would be a far more fullsom iteration of Dreadnaught. I don't have time to tell that story now, but within 5 years Elizabeth Abraham, Deborah Barnett, and myself had created a hotbed of creative energy that attracted a continuous stream of collaborators. Writers, editors, illustrators, typesetters, printers, binders, graphic artists and more were welcomed into the workshop, and often put to work on the scores of projects that happened every month. In order to make the printing ambitions viable, we took on graphic design work, mostly for nonprofits and publishers. More and more creative people joined our cooperative, contributing depth and rigour to our efforts.

Over time we acquired a massive amount of type, presses, typesetters and ancilliary equipment, enough that we could open another shop in Nova Scotia, which included a handmade paper operation. Unfortunately we couldn't make it work or pay, and that equipment ended up at NSCAD.

Instead of moping in the east, or back in TO, I headed out west to see what trouble I could cause there, and among many interesting print and type people I encountered, I came across this person.



## Gerald Giampa

Gerald Giampa had a fully equipped print shop in a basement storefront on the edge of the downtown Eastside in Vancouver. Like most new generation printers, he was self-taught. He also had an obsessive, eccentric edge that of course made him a magnet for print people like me.

Outside of printing, the only thing he showed any interest in was grape growing and home brewing wine and drinking prodigious amounts of it, and telling wild and wonderful stories.

We collaborated on a couple of posters for the Literary Storefront that was located in the same seedy neighbourhood. We also started work together on a book project,

commissioned by the equally eccentric but massively influential bookseller, Bill Hoffer, based on the work of the 60s iconographic Japanese-Canadian, photographer Tamio Wakayama, but it proved to be too many bottlewashers.

Giampa tried to convince me to go in with him to buy the distressed assets of the Lanston Monotype company that consisted of thousands of matrices of famous typefaces, along with the equipment to make more, and cast them into type, and thousands of boxes of promotional materials from its past. It was a treasure trove, and one threatened with destruction if no one bought it.

I didn't, but he did, and after a dozen years making type, and digitizing the fonts, and making new fonts with the brilliant type designer Jim Rimmer and others, he packed it all up, shipped it to PEI, where much was somehow destroyed by a tidal wave. He moved what was left to Norway, then back to PEI, and eventually sold it off in order to buy a boat and sail the southern seas.

Every time I look out to sea, whatever coast or continent, I look for Gerald. I imagine him riding high, drunk as a skunk on his horrible homebrew, chasing another horizon, another dream.

Back in Toronto, another adventure was about to start, involving this person.



## Yuri Rubinsky

Yuri Rubinsky was a genius. He was trained as an architect here at U of T, but he never practised in any traditional sense, instead chasing a wide and continuous range of creative pursuits. He showed up in the basement at Dreadnaught one day in the early 1980s, and we put him to work just like we did with everyone. He was brimming with ideas and energy and had one of the biggest networks of friends, contacts, and collaborators I've ever come across.

He was an early adopter of desktop publishing technology. Later in the decade, he became the public face of SGML, the mother of HTML. He knew a lot of stuff, and he could turn that knowing into multitudes of other knowings, doings, makings, and imaginings. He had a sorcery about him, a dervish quality, a boundless optimism.

His was a warm, charming, interesting, and productive presence.

Yuri recruited me into a group of like-minded conspirators, including Marc Giacomelli the advertising wizard, Ian Wiseman the TV/radio producer, and Ian Brown the journalist – and we set out in the early 80s to see what trouble we could get into together.

In short order we all co-wrote a novel, produced a parody newspaper called *Not the Globe and Mail*, a play based on *Invisible Cities* by Italo Salvino, a magazine called *About*, a series of books under the imprint *Invisible*, most notably a travel guide called *The Wankers Guide to Canada* which made fun of just about everything we hold precious about our cultural identity – not least our foot-long hotdogs and unemployment insurance. We also turned the book into a record album featuring the band *Rush*, and the hosers *Bob and Doug Mackenzie*.

We also initiated a collaboration with the Banff Centre, that eventually begat the Publishing Workshops. We created and offered fast-track education in the aesthetics and mechanics of book and magazine, educational, and digital publishing in Canada. Yuri was the director for the first couple of years, and we offered two 2-week courses – one each on book publishing and magazine publishing. I carried as the director for 15 more years, adding seven other 1- and 2-week courses, and offering three of those with U of T for five of those years, sometimes in Toronto, and in Guelph and Peterborough.

The directors role was to develop curricula, recruit faculty – a combination of grizzled publishing veterans and recent upstarts – and manage the recruitment, scholarship programs, and logistics.

I have to say that those summers in Banff were pretty great, even if I was working 20 hours a day for 40 days straight.

We generated over 2000 graduates over that 15 year period, and contributed a lot to the inevitable changes happening in the media ecosystem. More Canadian, more rigour, more women, more diversity, more tools, more companies, more jobs, more energy, more opportunity, more voices, more places, and more attitude.

Some of the programs continued at SFU and Ryerson, riding the rough disruptive seas, adapting to the changes constantly buffeting the media industries.



At the same time, I was developing a new identity for myself. Having learned while working with all the people I've discussed and many more, I was also coming to the realization that there was an opportunity to rewrite the script for Canadian publishing.

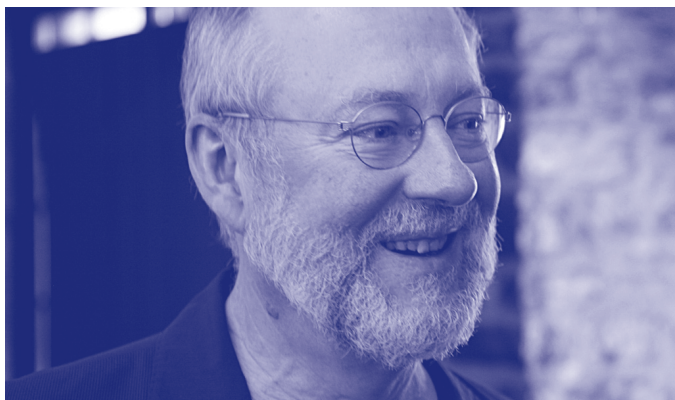
The simple version is that I was spending a lot of time trying to figure out what Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman and others were talking about when they referred to the idea of Media Ecology.

Based on my own experience working with dozens of magazine and book publishers in Toronto, plus working with Fleming, it bothered me that 80% of the English language books published in Canada in 1980 were published within 10 miles of where we are right now. So, I decided that Canadian media needed a farm team, a big, robust cluster of smaller publishers who could represent the stories of their place, tell the stories of their people, and foster the voices of their writers.

I started the Media Futures Institute and spent the next 15 years starting and repositioning publishing companies: 35 book publishing companies, 18 magazines, 3 digital publications, plus many more individual projects. I worked with existing publishers and startups in 18 cities and towns from Sudbury to Victoria, Montreal to Halifax. I worked with governments, agencies, associations, universities, colleges, collectives, cooperatives, clusters and businesses of all sizes and shapes. And with individuals.

I also spent some time in the US, doing more or less the same thing.

I would return to Toronto regularly, and when I could I'd visit this guy.



## Glenn Goluska

Glenn Goluska was, like Yuri, a person who could make things happen. Different things, of course, but just as surely as Yuri changed the digital landscape, Glenn changed the letterpress one. Anyone who had the opportunity, like I did for more days than I can count, to sit with him while he pounded away at his beloved Linotype, or watched him compose type while whispering to himself in some language only he understood, or argued with him about Bulmer vs Bodoni – him the whole time pulling books from his or my library to bolster his argument – has not lived.

Who knows where the quest for letterpress perfection comes from, the stubbornness, the willingness to embrace frustration and failure as much as success. Glenn had it in spades, and his work shows it. We lost him too soon.

## E N V O I

Let us always remember and praise those that make beautiful things, no matter how humble their efforts, no matter how modest their works.

I am appreciative that the libraries and archives here at U of T have dedicated their considerable resources to honour the people and groups that I've discussed, so other generations can discover what happened close to here, and across the country, when we were in danger of losing the voice of our country, a danger that has not gone away.

The end of the industrial letterpress age in the early 1970s delivered into the hands of amateurs like Will, Glenn, Gerald, me, and many others, a gift of equipment and opportunity. We swam into that ocean of tools and knowledge and we allowed it to sweep us up into its inky embrace as much as we could, and used it to honour the people who had preceded us, who too had been swept up by type, ink, paper, and glue.

Glenn, like Allan, Gerald, Yuri, and so many others, are gone. We have been left behind, to remember and honour them. Having lived my life believing I would "live hard, and die young", I was surprised to still be alive when I reached 50.

I decided to try a different route, and decamped to the Okanagan. Now I tend a perennial flower and fruit garden in the front of my small house, and a vegetable garden behind. I paint, distill, volunteer with Hospice to help people die, and on occasion journey up and down the Valley to explore the desert at the south end, and the last interior rainforest at the north.

I design every day in my backyard studio that looks out onto my vegetables and trellices. I design dozens of books and magazines every year, dozens more websites and other digital ephemera. I engage with issues, run a local lecture series, and occasionally start or reposition publishing companies – 15 so far in an area of less than 400 thousand people.

I especially like the work I do alongside a group of writers, editors, artists, and others in 7 countries on 4 continents. We produce books and elaborate, stimulating, and uplifting Sunday School curricula for 20,000 progressive churches around the world. It's all about social justice, peace, and empathy. It's about listening, and about tilting into the wind. It's about living a full measure of childhood while you can, and finding something great to believe with all your heart and head.

I still look over my shoulder, but with less trepidation. They – whoever they are – are still out there, but I've come to terms with them.

And finally, I would like to remind you how this talk got started:

I hope that like me you witness the creation and abet it. I hope that like me you notice each thing so each thing gets noticed. I hope that like me you notice the beautiful faces and complex natures of those who are with us.

Before they are gone.

