

The Child Is Father Of the Man

How **ROBERT BLY** transformed his struggle with an alcoholic dad into a strange, mythicized phenomenon of celebrity and mass therapy

By **LANCE MORROW**

Failure is the toughest American wilderness. Robert Bly, who is now a leader of the men's movement and author of *Iron John*, spent some years in the territory. His wilderness lies three hours west of Minneapolis, out toward the South Dakota border, in flat farm country around Madison (pop. 2,000), Minn., "the Lutfisk Capital of the World."

Bly was the high school valedictorian who went to hell, who might have amounted to something as a farmer but instead lived on a spread his father gave him. He raised four children but otherwise, in Madison's eyes, produced nothing except obscure poetry for 25 years. He drove old cars and wore old clothes, and when Vietnam came around, he talked like a communist. His father, Jacob Bly, was a respected farmer who turned alcoholic. Robert had to fetch him out of the bars downtown sometimes.

A double humiliation: his father's alcoholism, his own failure. Why did Bly stay on all those years, during the prime of his life, on the nonworking farm half a mile from his father's boozing? "The alcoholic parent is not satisfied with his own childhood," Bly says, using the bruised rhetoric of recovery. "He wants yours too." When the father vanishes into alcohol, the son lingers and lingers, searching for a lost part of himself.

The old man, Jacob Bly, was living on a diet of Hamm's beer and doughnuts in the last days: the breakfast of champions. Robert confronted him about the drinking one day, and his father said, "Go to hell!" Robert had been meaning to bring up that subject for years, and he felt much better after he did.

Tolstoy was wrong when he said all happy families are the same, and all unhappy families are unhappy in different ways. It is surely the other way around. Family misery has a sameness, a sort of buried universality: "I come from a dysfunctional family," people always say when they start their 12-step testimonies, and then they all launch into the same story, though with a thousand different shadings and details.

It is Bly's story, to some extent, with the difference that whatever Madison may have once thought, Bly is a gifted poet, critic and showman who has transformed his long struggle into a strange, mythicized American phenomenon

of celebrity and mass therapy. Bly is the bardic voice of that interesting but vaguely embarrassing business, the men's movement, which strikes many men as somehow unmanly. Well, says Bly, that shame is something they will have to get over.

Bly's book *Iron John* has been 38 weeks on the best-seller list; he addresses men's gatherings around the country, speaking a fairy-tale code about "bringing the interior warriors back to life" and "riding the Red, the White and the Black Horses." He talks about each male's lost "Wild Man," that hairy masculine authenticity that began getting ruined during the Industrial Revolution, when fathers left their sons and went to work in the factories. The communion between father and son vanished, the traditional connection, lore passing from father to son. And with it went the masculine identity, the meaning and energy of a man's life, which should be an adventure, an allegory, a quest. Bly, with some validating help on television from Bill Moyers, has brought the masculine psyche onto the stage of Oprah-consciousness. There it is either enjoying its 15 minutes of fame or re-making Americans' understanding of men, and therefore of men and women and of life itself.

"You cannot become a man until your own father dies," Bly says. Bly's father died three years ago at the age of 87 in a Minnesota nursing home. Bly is 64, so by his own reckoning, he did not become a man until he was 61. He was a long time working on it.

A man's goal in his quest is a kingliness, a regal self-possession. Bly looks kingly enough at moments as he sits in his new Minneapolis house—a handsome, substantial Midwestern paterfamilias place that he has just acquired. He divides his time among this house, another on Minnesota's Moose Lake and stops on his lecture tours. The Minneapolis house feels cleansed of ghosts and even gentrified. A poet named Louis Jenkins (author of a splendid collection called *All Tangled Up with the Living* and other books) is doing some work around the place for Bly and emerges from the basement from time to time as if he had been down there rewiring the house's unconscious. Bly sautés scallops for his solitary lunch, which he takes at the kitchen table in the company of a new biography of Goethe and Robert Fagles' translation of *The Iliad*.

Bly is too much a showman (with a touch of the mountebank) to stay in the king's role for very long. I have a theory that children of alcoholics make brilliant mimics, because reality and identity for them are unstable, subject to sudden disappearances and weird transformations. They are constantly auditioning nuanced identities in hopes of pleasing insanely unpredictable parents. At the kitchen table now, Bly becomes his spiritual and poetic mentor, William Butler Yeats, going trancey and reciting *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* in a high Irish singsong, tone-deaf Yeats sliding up and down at the end of the line searching for the note.

For many years, Bly supported his family by giving poetry readings. His voice is a highly developed instrument that he uses to take many different parts: monsters, little boys, savages, princesses and even his mother years ago whining at his father, "Why do you always have to behave like this?" which, of course, gave old man Bly the signal he needed to head off in an explosion of dudgeon for the bar.

Bly says it was around 10 years ago that he began working on the *Iron John* story. "I had been giving seminars in fairy tales to support myself—mostly to women. I realized that I