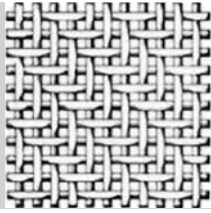




WEBER THE CONTEMPORARY WEST

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Interview Focus



Deriving from the German *weben* — to weave — *weber* translates into the literal and figurative “weaver” of textiles and texts. *Weber* (the word is the same in singular and plural) are the artisans of textures and discourse, the artists of the beautiful fabricating the warp and weft of language into everchanging patterns. *Weber*, the journal, understands itself as a tapestry of verbal and visual texts, a weave made from the threads of words and images.

This issue of *Weber - The Contemporary West* spotlights three long-standing themes (and forms) of interest to many of our readers: fiction, water, and poetry. If our interviews, texts, and artwork, as always, speak for themselves, the observations below might serve as an appropriate opener for some of the deeper resonances that bind these contributions.



THE NOVEL

We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind -- mass merchandising, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the instant translation of science and technology into popular imagery, the increasing blurring and intermingling of identities within the realm of consumer goods, the preempting of any free or original imaginative response to experience by the television screen. We live inside an enormous novel. For the writer in particular it is less and less necessary for him to invent the fictional content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality.

— J. G. Ballard

WATER

Anything else you're interested in is not going to happen if you can't breathe the air and drink the water. Don't sit this one out. Do something. You are by accident of fate alive at an absolutely critical moment in the history of our planet.

— Carl Sagan

POETRY

Poetry is the journal of the sea animal living on land, wanting to fly in the air. Poetry is a search for syllables to shoot at the barriers of the unknown and the unknowable. Poetry is a phantom script telling how rainbows are made and why they go away.

— Carl Sandburg

Front Cover: James Balog, Iceland/Svínafellsjökull Glacier, February 2008. An EIS team member provides scale in a massive landscape of crevasses.

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EDITORIAL MATTER CONTINUED IN BACK

GLOBAL SPOTLIGHT/INTERVIEW FOCUS

- 2 Michael Wutz, "On the Craft of Fiction – E.L. Doctorow at 80"
- 16 E.L. Doctorow, "Narrative C"
- 24 Michael Wutz, "Evolution, Anthropology, and the Narrative Deep Space of Contemporary Fiction – A Conversation with Russell Banks"
- 46 Jan Hamer, "Embracing the Weird – A Conversation with Sharon Olds"
- 85 Julie Rich, "Glacial Speed, Global Warming, Global Warning – A Conversation with James Balog"

ART

- 74 James Balog, *Extreme Ice Survey*

ESSAY

- 107 Jerry Eckert, *Requiem for the Night Sky*
- 127 Naomi Zeveloff, *Echoes of Jewish Back-to-Land Movement Under Utah's Big Sky*
- 139 G.D. McFetridge, *The Little Bighorn*

FICTION

- 58 Stephanie Dickinson, *Jade Dragon*
- 97 Tom Miller Juvik, *Salmon Feed*
- 120 John Norris, *Decoy*

POETRY

- 57 Sharon Olds, *The Word, 1956*
- 72 Mark Aiello, *Mourning the Dinosaurs* and other poems
- 96 Eric Paul Shaffer, *Maybe*
- 105 Maria Marsello, *Some Say* and other poems
- 114 James Grabill, *from Double Helix – a long poem in progress*
- 134 Nancy Takacs, *How to Survive* and other poems
- 148 Michael Morris, *Art Always Begins*
- 150 Casandra Lopez, *Your Name: A Diamond Stolen From Mouths*

152 READING THE WEST



E.L. Doctorow.....2 & 16



Sharon Olds.....46 & 57



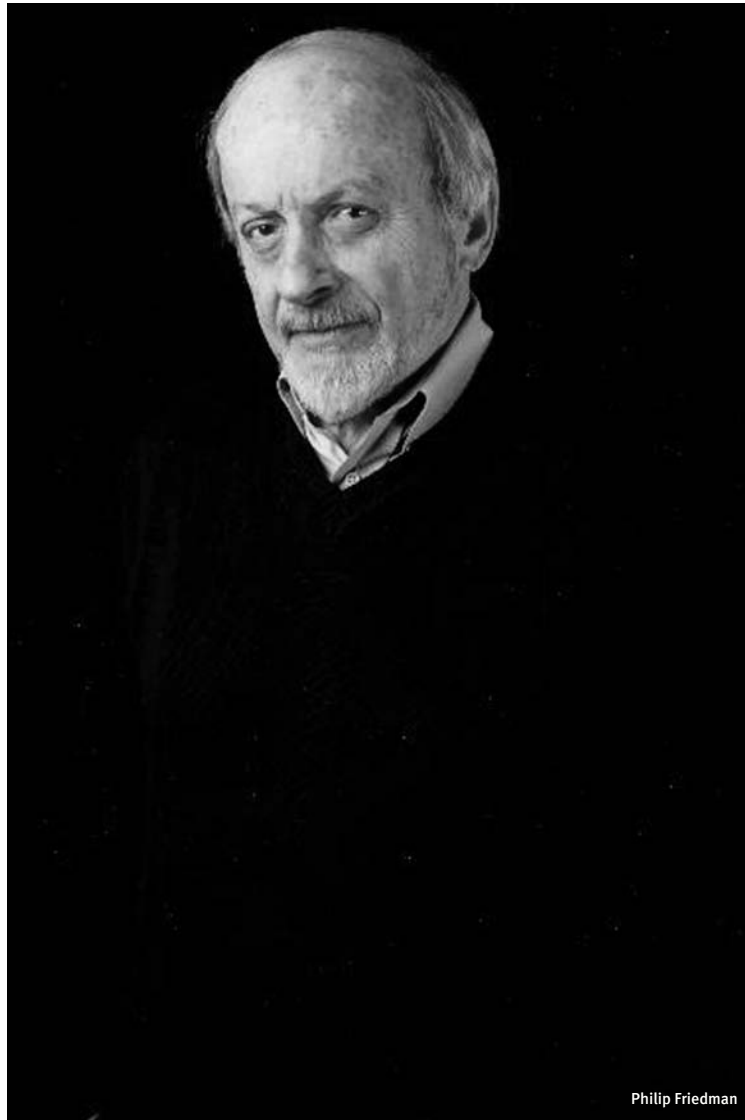
James Balog.....74 & 85



Russell Banks.....24

Michael Wutz

On the Craft of Fiction—E.L. Doctorow at 80



E.L. Doctorow

PRELUDE

E. L. Doctorow is among a small cadre of American novelists admired by a wide international readership and scholars. Thoroughly anchored in a post-World War II American context, and often investigating the popular myths and self-constructions of America, Doctorow's literary sensibilities address current global political and cultural concerns: the intersection of official and unofficial history, the relays between print culture and postprint media, literature and the discourses of science and technology, as well as the idea of narrative as, what he has called, "a system of knowledge." While Doctorow understands the novelist as an archeologist of unacknowledged knowledge, the novelist him- or herself transmutes such leftovers into forms of telling knowledge that speak volumes about a culture's historical moment. Fundamentally oral without presuming to be oracular, fiction for Doctorow is capacious with the intent of offering pertinent cultural critique in the service of human betterment.

Born and raised in New York City within a secular humanist and Jewish cultural milieu, Doctorow often uses the city as an urban microcosm for the themes that are at the center of his fiction. For that reason, his narratives tend to have suggestive allegorical overtones with a wide swath of signification akin to the romances of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Often associated with a liberal tradition that has strong sympathies for the Left, Doctorow is careful not to infuse his fiction with overt politics and ideology. On the contrary, while his novels often propose themselves as counter-narratives to the narratives of state power, he has repeatedly asserted that fiction is the province of art that has no place for propaganda.

Doctorow began his examination of the idea(l) of America, its myths and history,

with Welcome to Hard Times (1960), a parody of the classic Western, and has continued this narrative investigation by focusing on critical cultural moments: The Book of Daniel (1971) deals with the Rosenberg trial, mapping the prevailing national sensibilities in the wake of McCarthyism; Ragtime (1975), Doctorow's first international bestseller, looks at turn-of-the-century politics, racism, and immigration in the manner of a pastiche; The Waterworks (1994) shows the dark underbelly of post-bellum prosperity and the perpetual balancing act of an ethical science in the genre of the mystery novel; and Loon Lake (1980) and Billy Bathgate (1989) interrogate the myth of the self-made man in the (under)world of crime. Often, it is through the lens of a distant historical event that Doctorow reflects on the present, by laying bare the gap between America's idealistic promise and its political and cultural reality. At the same time, philosophical and theological speculations are never far away, as in City of God (2000), in which fictional and historical voices ruminate about the imponderables of the universe. More recently, Doctorow has returned to the subject of history in The March (2005), which reconstructs Union general William T. Sherman's march from Atlanta to Savannah toward the end of the Civil War. Homer & Langley (2009), his most recent novel, tells of the United States' most notorious pair of fraternal hoarders, though not without touching on many of the concerns that have informed a rich body of work spanning more than half a century.

As the recipient of many distinguished prizes, among them the National Book Award, two National Books Critics Circle Awards, the PEN/Faulkner Award, the William Dean Howells Medal of the

American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the National Humanities Medal, Mr. Doctorow has written himself into the canon of American literature. He embodies the virtues of a classical storyteller who is singularly capable of rendering his cultural diagnoses in ambitious and lyrical narratives that have rightly made him an international bestseller.

This conversation took place over several days during Mr. Doctorow's stay at Weber State University in September 2010. I want to thank Edgar for his generosity of time and spirit, and the Offices of the Provost and the Telitha E. Lindquist College of Arts & Humanities for underwriting Mr. Doctorow's visit.



As a one-time editor and long-time writer, the art and craft of editing has been with you throughout your professional life. At what point do you yourself start editing your work – revising it and looking backward at it even as you move your narrative forward? At what point do you start sharing your work with an editor (and perhaps Helen, your wife), and to what degree are you open to her or his suggestions? Can you recall moments when an editorial suggestion or discussion moved your books in different directions?

With some novels I've found myself editing page by page, not proceeding with the writing until I am satisfied with the page just done. In others I've raced right along, doing what might be called gross editing every fifty or a hundred pages, as the book begins to instruct me, and tells me what it needs to be realized. Every book is different—in voice, in construction, in texture—and as you work out its premises you find yourself revising in a way that reflects the character of the book.

Having worked in publishing for nine years as an editor, I learned to be as dispassionate and objective about my own writing as I was about the writing of others. And that

was very useful to me, as a result of which I learned to edit myself in a way that actually separated me from myself as a writer. I put myself in another mental state so that I could admit that something was not right or know that something was. And consequently it became my habit to hand in a manuscript to my editor only after I knew it was the way it should be. So basically, for most of the books, editors have had nothing to do except put the book through to production.

There have been a few exceptions. When I finished *Loon Lake*, I gave it to my editor, Jason Epstein, who was pleased with it. After he had scheduled it and sent it off for design, I decided that it was not right. I said, give me the manuscript, give it back to me. (There were no pdfs back then.) I said, give me six weeks, I need six weeks. And I re-wrote the book in the voice it should have had from the beginning. I had a belated revelation about what the book should be. But it wasn't the editor's insight, in that case. With *The Waterworks*, though, Jason suggested that I was not talking 19th century, I was talking 18th century, and he was right about that. That was an extremely useful, even critical, editorial comment on his part. It turned the book around. There's one other exception.

With *Homer & Langley*, Kate Medina, my current editor, said she felt a need for Homer to say more about his parents. I was reluctant to do that because I didn't want to indicate that there was any psychological reason for the way these brothers acted—that was a different book. But I did make a few additions that answered to that point, and I think they were a good idea and that she was right.

So you pretty much deliver your books over to the editor at a level where they are polished?

Generally speaking, those books go in and that's it. Not only that, but until I deliver the book the editors have no idea what I'm working on. I never talk about it, I can't, and they don't ask. They don't know what it is until it's on their desk or in their computer.

I remember that you once observed about your working relationship with Norman Mailer that he was a dream to edit. It sounds like that's the case for you as well.

Did I say "dream?" But yes, Norman was a professional, he listened and he was respectful. He was nothing like the bombastic public figure; he was a totally different fellow. When I came to The Dial Press there were already galleys printed of *An American Dream*, and I saw immediately that the book had a serious flaw, and I told him what it was. He agreed. But he said it was too late to go back to it, it would require a total overhaul and he just couldn't face it. He said: Why weren't you here three months ago?

Another major writer to deal with was James Baldwin. His was an entirely different

attitude, because once he handed in a manuscript, he gave us carte blanche to do what we wanted with it. He'd be off in Paris and you'd send the galleys to him and not hear back, and not hear back, the production people hollering about the deadline, and Jimmy would write, Dear Edgar, I'm sure you know what you have to do, and it's ok with me, you have my blessing.

A lot of the ideas I had as an editor were for non-fiction books. In those days we were trying to save Dial. It was barely scraping along. So we were doing books about the Vietnam war teach-ins and publishing people like Abbie Hoffman, the Yippie leader. We

published a grand hoax called *The Report From Iron Mountain*, a purported secret government document claiming that peace was not only impossible, but undesirable. That got the front page story in the *New York Times*

and became a best-seller. We were very loose, very spunky and non-corporate at Dial. I published an experimental novelist named Ronald Sukenick, a book called *Up*. When I left Dial, he felt that no one else would publish him if I didn't, and he was right. He ended up starting something called the Fiction Collective, which published work that was outside mainstream publishing.

Sukenick was, by the way, rather popular in German academic circles for a while, together with Raymond Federman. They were working together on the Fiction Collective.

I never had much regard for what they were doing. Sukenick was the best of the group, I



think. I liked *Up*. I thought that was an interesting book.

Any other recollections about your editorial relationships to writers?

My first job as an editor was with the New American Library, which was basically a mass market reprint house, and so the actual editing was minimal, just seeing books through production. But the value to that was getting to read a lot of good stuff—fiction, drama, history, science, and to talk to these authors and get some sense of how they conducted themselves when they were writing.

I worked on books of Ayn Rand and Ian Fleming, to name just two writers of that era—consulting with them about cover design, copy, and so on, and being in position to see what discipline they had or the self-esteem that was corrupting them. (Laughter) I didn't like the James Bond books; I thought they were racist and sexist and in denial of the end of the British Empire, giving some sort of Superman fantasy the name of an intelligence operative. But I liked Fleming, he was a gracious man and charmingly British in his self-denigration. Rand, by contrast, was a horrible woman, arrogant and ideologically stupid. I remember suggesting to her that human beings didn't have to be told to be selfish. I didn't like her at all, and she knew that. She said I had a lot to learn (Laughter). I did, but not from her.

I am curious about your editing practices, in part, because structure and form tend to be specific to each of your books and often largely depend on time frame and narrative voice. City of God (2000), for example, is structurally complex because the novel or-

chestrates three imbricated narratives that take place in different historical moments, and we've got Everett who could be seen as a sort of orchestrator of those narratives in his notebooks. How did you decide to organize and intersperse the various strands of this novel. Was the process perhaps more evolutionary and developmental? How do you arrange?

City of God developed from a story called "Heist" that I had published in *The New*

Yorker. (Uncollected until now, it has been included in the recent collection, *All the Time in the World*.) That story is the spine of *City of God*. It tells of an Episcopal priest whose lower East Side church in Manhattan is vandalized. The big brass cross on the wall behind the altar has been stolen. He hears from a rabbi that the cross has been found on the roof of the rabbi's progressive synagogue in a town-

house on the Upper West Side. And the three characters of that story—the priest, the rabbi, and the rabbi's wife, who is also a rabbi—become friends as they try to figure out why the cross was stolen, and by whom, and why it was put on the roof of the little synagogue. The priest, Tom Pemberton, is undergoing a crisis of faith. He finds himself falling in love with the rabbi's wife, Sarah Blumenthal, and becoming envious of Joshua, her husband.

The critic Alfred Kazin was fascinated with that story. He wrote me asking if there was more to come. He had figured it out. He got it. He was very interested in the religious consciousness of the nineteenth century novelists and poets I worshipped, like Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman. So he picked

up on that, and he was delighted because he had this thesis that put him on the lookout. He had published a critical work called *God and the American Writer* and perhaps felt something of his thesis in that book was confirmed by the story. In fact I had already moved to expand it, bringing in the character of a professional writer, Everett, who, always looking for a subject for his next novel, reads a news account of the stolen cross, and senses it's something that's for him, and contacts Tom Pemberton. That's the way the novel begins to take shape—it proposes itself as Everett's day book as he becomes friends with Pemberton and, later, the rabbinical couple.

The daybook, you see, means everything goes into it, every thought, every speculation, every report of what's happening with the mystery. It invites free associative writing. And so, for instance, the fact that Sarah Blumenthal's father had been a boy in the Kovno ghetto in Lithuania during WW II, gave me a connection to that, and I saw

this whole novel spreading out and finding its depth. I wrote things as they occurred to me, because I had the freedom of writing as in a daybook where Everett would simply put down his thoughts as they occurred to him. It was, in a sense, accepting improvisation as a creative principle, giving in to the intuition of spontaneous connectives, and so that's how we find riffs in the voices of Einstein and Ludwig Wittgenstein. That's how we come to the Midrash Jazz Quartet interludes, where the quartet does for the lyrics of well-known songs what a real quartet would do for the music, doing theme and variations. But the

form of the book finally made itself clear to me when I realized that I had about a dozen things going that I regarded as leitmotifs, and I would just come back to them over and over throughout the book: the whole thing about birds, for instance, or Pemberton's troubled relationship with his Bishop, Einstein and Wittgenstein, the events in the Kovno ghetto, that Holocaust material.

I just modeled the book on my idea of phase music, where every time you come back to a certain theme it changes slightly. That

I modeled City of God on my idea of phase music, where every time you come back to a certain theme it changes slightly. That was the way I composed that book, that's how it was assembled. Basically I found myself working in what is sometimes called "the mixed form," rather than doing a linear narrative wound simply around a story line.

was the way I composed that book, that's how it was assembled. Basically I found myself working in what is sometimes called "the mixed form," rather than doing a linear narrative wound simply around a story line. And some people whom I respected—like the editor Ted Solotaroff, who published excerpts of *Ragtime* in the *New American Review*—were critical of *City of God*. He said it was a ship without a rudder or something like that, and I was

disappointed in him because I knew he was wrong. He'd missed it completely, the convention of that book, its organizing principle.

You once mentioned to me that Harold Bloom called to congratulate you on your achievement.

Yes, the phone rang one morning and it was Bloom. He said, I got your phone number from Don DeLillo (*Laughter*), and he went on for fifteen or twenty minutes about how he never thought that anyone could write about the Holocaust without exploiting it, without

somehow minimizing it by submitting it to aesthetic considerations. And I had. He absolutely raved about it, so that was heartening. I had for years resisted writing about the Holocaust and more or less agreed with those who believed that you could not write about it without being opportunistic, but I found myself writing this book and thought it was all right to be doing it the way that I was doing it. I regard *City of God* as a major work of mine. When I look at it, I can't find anything in it that doesn't belong there.

City of God, I feel, is a particularly ambitious book and received mixed reviews for perhaps precisely that reason. In the New York Times

Book Review, A. O.

Scott acknowledged the novel's commitment to thought, but noted a lack of coherence, and in the New Republic Robert Alter saw City as "a key to all mythologies, and theologues, and histories, and sciences," and as "an undertaking that tests the limits of [Doctorow's] abilities as a writer and finds them sadly wanting." These are harsh words. – I wonder whether these readers are unwilling to accept a more theological and philosophical Doctorow who, in his sixth decade as a writer, is writing directly about contemporary America. Are they too steeped in a reductive image they may have of your work – sepia-toned stories of a by-gone New York – to grant you the creative freedom and courage to push your own boundaries and those of literary fiction?

Well, it is an ambitious book, and when I hear from scholars who teach it, that's enough to inure me from the criticism of the people who turn their back. Good and perceptive criticism can be valuable—you can learn from that. But in this case I thought these guys were wrong.

Maybe it's one of those books that just take time. Do you by any chance remember when Everett describes the book as "a scissors-and-paste-job" and thus analogous to the capacious narrative of the bible?

Yes, I do, and I must say that when I read City of God the first time, that passage suggested itself to me as a compositional model for the novel right away. It is encyclopedic, of sorts, and full of internal tensions.

Yes, that is precisely what this book is. It begins with a somewhat heated account of modern cosmology's version of how the uni-

verse began. Now I didn't see the book as having a biblical model behind it until about the time I had Everett say that. In short, without any conscious planning on my part, the book managed to affect the scissors-and-paste, sewn-together form of

the bible. The first person to pick that up was Mary Bahr, at the time the managing editor at Random House. She said, you've constructed a bible. Then it occurred to me, maybe that's what got this fellow Alter so upset: he is a biblical scholar, who has translated the bible. Presumably he is religiously observant. (He is also the Alter who once said that *The Book of Daniel* and Joe Heller's *Catch 22* were anti-American novels. He's from the love-it-or-leave-it school of literary criticism [*Laughter*].)

Of course Srebnitsky, the tailor – one of the many sartorial figures in your work – exercises the craft that is very similar in spirit to that of the writer, and his rag bin too suggests an analogy to the stitched-together textures of City of God.

Yes. So that can be one way to understand the way the book is put together. When I was doing it, I saw it mostly as circulated leitmotifs—

I regard City of God as a major work of mine. When I look at it, I can't find anything in it that doesn't belong there.

ten or twelve different themes that I return to over and over again. But I think it works both ways, or perhaps with a subtext that proposes an additional anxiety for all of us, and so is a much more impertinently radical book than I ever thought it would be.

City was published in 2000 a year ahead of the attacks of September 11th, and I'm wondering whether the book is marking, at least in retrospect, a kind of allegorical caesura in the sense that we've got two ecclesiastical figures, Sarah and Pem, who are both undergoing a spiritual transformation not sanctioned by their authorities. Does their marriage at the end of the book suggest a kind of new syncretism – a way of maybe bringing various religious traditions into a dialogue?

At that point, I wasn't thinking about its out-of-book application. It just seemed to me that by the time you get toward the end of the narrative, you, the writer, don't have many choices; everything is determined and you just have to fulfill your premises. It seemed to me that somehow I envisioned this character Tom Pemberton in a way that made his marriage and conversion to Judaism inevitable. As a secular humanist in spirit, I have grave misgivings about religion generally, its politicization, its divisiveness. But that ending was appropriate for Pem and Sarah, for those particular people. I would not have thought of it as any applicable syncretism apart from what's happening in the story.

Given your secular humanism, I think it would be fair to say that Sarah and Pem are always thinking outside of their own (theological) box and do not fall within the traditional parameters of revealed religion.

To me, they seem to spiritually reinvent themselves, to be more in tune with their inner sense of being.

You may be right. I do give some lines to that scientist who talks about how you diminish or minimize the universe by speaking of God as a king. I remember enjoying writing that. That minor character comes out of my experience as a student at the Bronx High School of Science. And I think now of the remark of

the late great physicist Richard Feynman who wondered why, given the vastness of the universe, God would busy himself with our little planet.

I ask partly because, as you know, often writers pick up on the zeitgeist, the cultural tremors of their time, and then translate those into their work and, in retrospect,

that work seems to mark a particular moment. City of God could be seen along those lines.

Perhaps so. It is not for me to say.

Many of your novels use a specific historical timeframe as a constructive principle. Homer & Langley, by contrast, takes the reader on a panoramic walking tour through almost a century of Americana, and you extend the fictional lives of your two major players to afford them, and us, this centennial glimpse. To what degree, if any, do you see Homer & Langley as a structural departure from your previous work – similar, perhaps, (only) to the chronological unfolding of World's Fair?

Well, it is true that some of the other books are lateral in the way time is used. And I

suppose this is a more vertical book. But I was helpless to do anything else once I had Homer and knew what he was doing—that this was his memoir, that it would come down through the decades of his life. At a certain point I knew that there were certain qualities of parable to this book. That if it had any value at all, it was in the meaning that was not being expressed. I found myself choosing some things that were not only typical of different periods of time, but that I had previously done in more detail in earlier books, as for instance this business about the gangsters, even though it might seem like I was doing some sort of a round-up of my own works. If readers came to that conclusion, that was their problem. Because the spirit and formal conditions of this story were totally different, and of course it would work if no one knew anything about the previous books. This is a chronologically linear narrative that comes out of Homer's voice. The idea that he was a musician and that somehow this would be reflected in his own language was crucial to the composition. That as a musician he would find a certain need to write sentences that had rhythmic and tonal validity. And that was what occupied me, rather than any particular event that we were covering, he and I, in this book. You know, Mozart used the same melodies in different compositions. They all did. So I am too. *(Laughter)*

Well, the very fact that Homer is blind and that the book is mediated by somebody who has to negotiate and experience the world through his hands and his ears makes it very different from your previous books. You may have similar themes and concerns

that come up in some of your previous work, but the perspective is rather different.

Having read last night about Lissy and the hippies who move in on the brothers, I didn't think I should read about another futile love affair this afternoon (I mean both brothers' undeclared love for Homer's piano student, Mary Elizabeth Riordan). But that certainly suggests that Homer, and more secretively, Langley, led affective lives. And then of course the whole idea of Jacqueline Roux, the French writer coming to do a piece about America and

saving Homer from getting run over and then becoming his muse, so that toward the end we don't know if he's fantasizing about her or it's real—that was nothing I could have predicted for Homer when I began the book. And

the idea that she had this hallucinatory vision of Central Park sinking really appealed to me. It gave me a sense of completion to the book. Maybe the genesis of that was the piano piece Mary Elizabeth Riordan plays for Homer—Debussy's *The Sunken Cathedral*.

Of course, I couldn't help but wonder why a French journalist would be the one to serve as a muse and have the vision of a sinking Central Park.

Jacqueline is European—someone from a part of the world with more history than this country has. I thought of her as a kind of a Simone de Beauvoir. She has this assignment with no particular specificity, but just “to get” America, to define it. Of all the European nationalities the French would be the ones wanting to do that—they would choose some



intellectual celebrity to come and try to figure us out. In Central Park in Manhattan, as you may know, there are places where you can have the illusion of looking up from a valley, the surrounding city skyscrapers all heaven bound, and the park land seemingly below the level of the rest of the city.

Coming back to sound and voice, especially as you hear yourself reading Homer & Langley to yourself, I've noticed that one of the compositional principles is almost an aural dialectic. There is Homer hearing something and then all of a sudden another sound or noise interferes and produces dissonance. And given that he's very attuned to sound, he often registers that. When Langley and his wife, Lilly, are having this debate, Harold is playing the cornet and all of a sudden there is the disapproving screaming going on in the background. Homer & Langley contains many such moments of clashing sounds that seem to me to suggest that you really put yourself into, well, not so much the mind but into the ears of Homer.

That's an interesting observation.

I don't want to project too much into this, but I was thinking of Eisenstein's notion of montage translated from film into the realm of sound – these, you know, literally jarring juxtapositions.

Well, your use of *montage* is appropriate because at a certain point the problem of writing this book for me was not to get too heavily

into scene. That in writing a memoir what was important was the flow of time, and so that suggested the problem of writing a book totally in montage, which cannot be accomplished. It had to alight at certain points. But I wanted the effect of montage even in scene. It was a very peculiar problem, I thought, not wanting to take advantage of the ordinary opportunities of fiction. I felt perhaps I was spending too much time with Vincent and his crew, or spending too much time with Lissy and her friends. But there is a way to do fully developed scenes with the sense of time

passing through them montage-like, so that the book doesn't start and stop, start and stop.

If I may switch to the topic of war for a moment, I would say that in Homer & Langley, you touch on all the major wars of the past century. The Collyers' collection of artifacts begins with the Springfield that Langley brings home and is later complimented by the M1

rifle, and both serve as these really ironic Christmas ornaments on the mantle. Army Surplus goods and equipment seem to be a major stock from which Langley is building and replenishing his accumulations. Why do you emphasize this connection, and it's a sustained one, between the war machine and consumer culture? It seems to be present more in this book than in some of the other books.

Wars are very productive. What really got America out of the Depression was World War II, and suddenly with government infusions

into industry this enormous productive capability appeared. And not only in tanks and planes and guns, but in the amount of clothing that was necessary to outfit the millions of men being drafted. So it's another kind of consumerism, isn't it? Regardless of the reason for its production—the reason for a tank or an airplane—it's material consumption and part of this society. And then, of course, there is enormous waste, which is why Langley goes into these Army Navy stores and picks up these armloads of things for nothing and says they'll be useful someday. So it seems to me there is a legitimate connection to be made between this kind of consumerism and a war. You lose men, you lose lives, you gain an economy, you gain material possessions. And of course that last World War, as Kazin once wrote, was seen as a victory of liberalism, but in fact it turned the United States into a military-industrial state.

Homer has the best of all possible ears because he's blind, and so the most important sense he has, which compensates for his lack of vision, is his ears. The novel to me seems to suggest a redistribution of the senses, which the reader is invited to go along with. We need our eyes to read the text in front of us, but when Homer is feeling his way into the typewriters, he is doing that partly by sound. He can distinguish a Hammond from a Blickensderfer, whereas Vincent, the gangster, associates the staccato of the typewriter with the sound of a Tommy gun. Homer has such finely attuned ears that he can pick out any

particular noise from all the other noises, including that of typewriters. To me he becomes a modern-day Tiresias of the City in that his blindness affords him a peculiar form of vision (or better, audition) and authority that he wouldn't maybe otherwise have.

When Homer attempts to describe his compensatory sense system, he is actually telling the truth about what he feels. And then, of course, Langley turns it into an idea about the philosophical problem of knowing what is

really out there. But Homer is telling his physiological truth. He has developed a compensatory ability.

The traditional trouble is between truth as people find it in empirical investigation and truth that the fiction writer finds. But now we are in a new kind of trouble. It comes of the screening of every possible experience, with whole populations carrying around pocket screens, and reducing communication to 140 characters. If Henry James were alive today, he would take himself out.

You mentioned that the novel's opening sentence, "I am Homer, the blind brother," was catalytic for you. For me, as a reader, it was important, too, in the sense that this sentence announces the novel's sensory change of guards from sight to sound, and Homer,

indeed, describes his dimming vision right away in terms of a cinematic fade out. I wonder whether you were writing for your readers to maybe rediscover their own embodied sensorium, which the sight-based media of the present have accorded secondary status. In the same measure as vision has predominated since the beginning of the 20th century, other senses have been forced into the background. Do you see the verbal structure and texture of narrative fiction, with its imaginary appeal to the enervated body of the reader, as one of the

niches which the novel can claim for itself in the future?

I think of the novel as a major act of the culture. I would rather see it disappear altogether than have it as something to fit in a niche. Of course you are right about the dominance of the visual. Everything is screened; words are screened. In *City of God* Everett talks about movies and how ubiquitous they are, and how he sees the whole world being put on film. He doesn't even begin to say anything about digital photography. Novelists have always struggled with one problem or another that the culture presents—and the form was accustomed to adversity from the very beginning. The traditional trouble is between truth as people find it in empirical investigation and truth that the fiction writer finds. But now we are in a new kind of trouble. It comes

of the screening of every possible experience, with whole populations carrying around pocket screens, and reducing communication to 140 characters. If Henry James were alive today, he would take himself out. But for the rest of us this is our own new challenge, and we will have to do what writers have always done—to take what they give you and turn it back on them. How that will turn out I don't know. It's inevitable that someone writes a novel in the form of e-mails. They have novels written on cell phones in Japan. I don't want to read any of them. They are not the answer. The problem may be insoluble.

In recent years neuroscientists have revised the standard model of the brain. The old idea was intransigent localization, whereas now it is understood the brain has

plasticity and different areas can be retrained, or remapped, and made compensatory for areas that no longer work, as in a stroke, for example. But if plasticity is a fact, the brain can conform over time to the visually dominant culture so that the nature of thinking will change. Reading may not be necessary except for scholars, and someday they may be decoding our novels as scholars today pore over the cuneiform tablets of Sumer. Not a pleasant prospect, is it? But I thank you for thinking of Homer as a first responder to this emergency.

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*Neuroscience is a keyword that I would like to bring up as well. My sense is that your more recent work seems to interrogate the question of human agency and cognition. It's very prominent in *The Waterworks* and it's also in *The March*, and I think it draws attention to that alarming disconnect between head*

*and heart and body and soul in a symbolic sort of way. *City of God* is carrying this connection even further into the present. In the two earlier novels there is Dr. Sartorius who is lifting the lid with his cranial surgeries, and in *City* Everett on several occasions describes human behavior in terms of the language of cognitive science. There is this moment when a crowd in Central Park is trying to eject a thief and the way in which the message of who that is is traveling quickly through the crowd. Everett uses the analogy of rapid communication within an ant colony (which I have also come across in Douglas Hofstadter's Gödel, Escher, Bach), so it's almost a systems-theoretical way of thinking about human behavior. And earlier he discusses*

an ex-Times reporter turned Nazi hunter who accidentally runs into his victim and the traditional causality of decision and action is reversed. Could one speak of a “cognitive turn” in your more recent work?

Yes, that’s good. The ant colony, that kind of distributed brain, has been on my mind, and it is in *The Waterworks* and it is in *The March*. The materialists who say there is no such thing as a soul claim that Descartes was wrong. It’s the brain we are talking about, and when the brain’s not working, nothing else happens. There is no thought, there is no feeling, there is no emotion, there are no ideas and there’s no self-consciousness. So that’s the central issue: the dispute with Cartesian dualism. I’ve been reading Antonio Damasio’s *Descartes’ Error*, and the work of others, who are attacking the Cartesians of whatever version. And then somebody says: yes, you materialists may be right, but how do we get from the brain to the mind—to the most abstract thought with the subtlest emotion, how does that occur? That’s what the cognitive scientists are trying to figure out. A recent piece in the *New York Times* reported about an information theorist saying that the brain aggregates millions of bits of information to create a thought or a feeling. This is fascinating to me, it always has been. In *Billy Bathgate*, too, when Dutch Schultz is dying and spewing out his final lines, the word that, I think, Billy says is “decanting”—everything in his brain is being decanted. The idea of a brain decanting itself of its thoughts as it dies, I like that idea. Yes, the brain seems to have been on my mind for quite some time. The neuroscientists do interest me.

Your work of the past two decades, more so than your earlier work, I feel, pays increasing attention to the body. The Waterworks, of course, dramatizes in almost gothic fashion the abuse and misuse of young bodies in the service of old bodies needing cellular replenishment, and

Homer & Langley tells the story of physical challenges and sensory degeneration, not through the eyes but ears and hands of a blind narrator. Is this sensitivity toward a failing body perhaps connected to your own awareness of the process of aging?

Well, I think that a book in whatever metaphorical way can reflect your state of mind. Books always encode your own life in some way. But remember—codes are cryptic. There’s a somewhat satiric attention to bodies in *Ragtime*. In *The March*, after an explosion one of the Union soldiers is unharmed except for a spike protruding from his skull. In *Billy Bathgate*, which I composed in my fifties, I represent the active sex life of a teenage boy. Representing physicality is a way of doing character. So there has to be writerly attention to the physical being. People have bodies. They’re young or old, tall or short; they are lovers, requited or not, they are blind or deaf, or hale and hearty, droolingly insane, tattooed, handsome, beautiful, good tennis players. Whatever they are is pertinent to who they are. Writers use bodies like they use weather, like they use landscapes. Could Falstaff be anything but what he is if he were not fat? Should we wonder if Shakespeare was fat? If a reader thinks of the writer’s life, rather than that of his characters, then the writer is in trouble. Or the reader is.

Homer is very much aware of his disability and that conditions his entire . . . I can’t say outlook because he can’t see, but he’s extremely sensitive to his lack of vision, of course. He has this line about, toward the beginning, Edward Gibbon’s The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, and he says that this sentence even to this day is better felt than read. Now, that speaks loudly to me, and I can see him reading this. He’s reading with his fingers.

Yes, I imagine the actual scholarship has advanced since Gibbon wrote, and perhaps

scholars today know with more authority the history of the Roman Empire. But I don't think any contemporary historian of Rome can match Gibbon's magisterial prose. And he does get the story right. So you read him and

wonder if we're getting to be more and more like Rome—sending our armies, our ranks, our phalanxes out to destroy the barbarians at the ends of the world, and finding them more than we bargained for.



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E.L. Doctorow

Narrative C

In the seventeenth century, North America was conceived by Europeans as an escape from Europe, a New Found Land for religious separatism and the aggregation of unspoken-for wealth. It was in this era of colonial activity that the seeds of the American narrative had to have been planted. England, France, Spain, and Holland all had staked a claim, but after a hundred and fifty or so years of farming and trading and warring, somehow the English communities along the East Coast prevailed — they prevailed over the French and the Dutch, over the wilderness, over the sometimes hostile native populations, and rather late in the game, they prevailed over the English monarchy. And so the breath of Self-Determination was slapped into our country at its birth.

However we think of ourselves as a nation — call it our narrative, call it our identity myth — it is a sustaining thing insofar as it does not square with some of the grim realities of our history. Children are repositories of one version of the classic narrative, as, for example, it was invested in me and my grade school classmates in the 1930s. During our school assemblies, everything we believed about our country seemed to emanate from the American flag up on the stage. We pledged our allegiance to it. We looked at its field of colors, and spoke the words of the colors, red white and blue, and that's what we carried with us as our feeling, as something as

free and as bright and agile as we were afterward in our games. We all knew the difference between what was fair and what was unfair, and the colors of the flag and the words for the colors meant what was fair. The assumption we made from those colors was of a real, unwavering order of justice for everyone, whether they were big or little, rich or poor. The expectation we had from those colors was of the beneficent intent of an elected American government, standing in service to all its citizens and working to ensure their well-being.

This was the naive, somewhat leftish version of the American narrative appropriately tuned to the time of the Great Depression. Our teachers, knowing how shaky things were, intoned, as in prayer, that America was exceptional. We were a little too young to take in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and so the colors, and the words of the colors red white and blue, are what stood in our minds for the resolved democratic presence of a nation of people who had come from all over the world to be free. They could go to whatever church they pleased. They could speak out without being punished for it. They could vote. If they were old, they could have a government pension. We knew all that. And so we carried the image of our flag and the words for the colors of our flag outside in the sun and clean air of our playgrounds.

Something like this lovely narrative may be held in the minds of school-children today. Many foreigners who continue to come here from all over the world harbor a version along the same lines. The difficulty of emigrating — of escaping from despotism, from a theocracy, from an overwhelmingly corrupt class society, or from irremediable poverty — is a measure of the fiercely held, chaste American narrative in the mind of the newly arrived immigrant. Survival may be difficult, nativist resistance to his presence may be oppressive, but if he is prepared to struggle, to live a menial life, his children will go to college. America is the diaspora of choice, a country in which the freedom to succeed or fail transfers one's fate to one's character, something not possible in the brutal, degraded class society of the abandoned country.

In this shared idealism of the child's instilled faith and the immigrant's groundkissing gratitude, the United States of America is forever the New Found Land.

Call this version Narrative A.

There is a related narrative that, if as idealistic, is not naive. In this version, the flag, and the words of the colors red white and blue, stand for a justifiable American hegemony. It says we are a superpower with a military capacity second to none and an economy that, whatever its ups and downs, is the envy of the world. The generative sources of our historically unprecedented national wealth are a free market philosophy, technological creativity, and the limited liability corporation. Underlying all is the inarguable Social Darwinist distinction that must be made between the haves and the havenots. There is no help for that. We are, after all, part of the natural world in which the fittest prevail. Neverthe-

less, everyone has the right to worship as he pleases, to write what he pleases and say what he pleases, as long as his speech does not libel, slander, or incite criminal activity. We enjoy a degree of free imaginative expression that few cultures in the world can tolerate. But the colors red white and blue and the words for the colors mean this is a country free to do business. There are those who do not appreciate the genius of commerce unhampered by government controls. There are always those who want to fix what does not need fixing. These elements include people in government and labor organizations. It will not do to forget we are a democratic Republic in periodic danger of becoming a socialist state.

Call this Narrative B.

That the 1930s child's (A) and the Social Darwinist's (B) are the Left's and the Right's versions of the American narrative is borne out by the nature of our political life, which oscillates between expansive periods of social inclusion and contracting periods of social triage. So the versions are competitive. (We may go further and acknowledge them as the flags carried by our contemporary Democratic and Republican parties.) But despite their differences, they are bound together by their belief in American exceptionalism. They have similarly benign views of our historic territorial expansion, either as a kind of liberation theology or as manifest destiny, and they are equally steadfast in their allegiance to the flag and to the Republic for which it stands, as delineated in the articles of the Constitution and its amendments.

Finally, the crucial differences between leftist and rightist versions of the American narrative come to be argued in their claims of constitutional authority. The Constitution is our sacred text.

Like all sacred texts, it is subject to commentary, to interpretation, and to statutory application. Its operative verb, *shall*, speaks to the endless future (*"The Congress shall have Power To lay and collect Taxes . . ."*), and so its articles and amendments, while laying down the structure of the nation-state, provide also the means to deal with unimagined circumstances. Historically, the Constitution may have been marred by readings of this or that judiciary, and the difference between its proscriptions and the actual conduct of citizens who have claimed to live according to them may have left the edges of the parchment seared, but the document is still intact, having apparently withstood all abuses but one: when it was invoked to endorse slavery, and a war had to be fought to redact it.

The Constitution is our flag written out in the penmanship of the Founding Fathers. It is the text that, given our roiling history, we do not perfectly embody. It is what we hold to as our identity despite the harsh realities of our national conduct over 235 years. It is the repository of our ideals, shimmering in ambiguity but holding in its articles all the arguments we muster in our seemingly endless leftist/rightist readings. Finally, we live in it, it is our house of many mansions. If anyone on the Left or Right were to pull it down we would have a narrative only nominally American. But that would take some doing, and it would come not from the efforts, legal or illegal, of some marginal political party; it would come from the top, which is how houses are usually pulled down.

Here, in this regard, I offer a view of the last ten years or so of our political life.

George W. Bush was installed as president in the year 2000, when the Su-

preme Court countermanded the Florida Supreme Court's ruling that a statewide recount be conducted, the election in Florida having shown a difference of only a few hundred votes between Mr. Bush and Vice President Al Gore. There were good reasons, including the fact that Mr. Gore won the national vote count, that Republican courthouse rallies at the time verged on thuggery, that the Florida secretary of state, a Republican, refused to grant extensions to counties that had asked for more time to recount, that the votes of three counties where many African Americans lived were never counted at all—good reasons to feel that, as in some banana republic, the legitimacy of a sitting president was in doubt, and that some damage had been done to the Constitution.

From the moment this president chose to invade Iraq, claiming speciously that it had nuclear weapons of mass destruction, he appeared relentless in his violations of Article VI of the Constitution (*"the Constitution, and all Laws of the United States which shall be made in Pursuance thereof; and all Treaties made, or which shall be made, under the authority of the United States, shall be the supreme law of the Land"*). The UN Security Council voted to reject the U.S. decision to invade Iraq pending further efforts to gain inspection of the alleged WMD caches, and though the United States is a signatory of the UN Charter, this president went ahead with his invasion. He would subsequently refuse, with sophistic reasoning supplied by his lawyers, to honor this country's observance of the Geneva Convention regarding the treatment of prisoners of war. He would violate the Treaty Against Torture and the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, which prohibits the infliction of cruel or unusual punishment, calling the torture he had ordered only "enhanced interrogation." Other profound consti-

tutional matters, such as the writ of habeas corpus, the unreasonable search and seizures amendment (IV), had to be reassessed by the courts or bypassed by congressional legislation, all under the pressure of this president's deconstructive policies.

Is it naive, given the dangers to the nation from international terrorism, to demand strict observance of the supreme laws of the land? Hasn't the sacred text been treated carelessly before this? Abuses occurred in the presidencies of Richard Nixon (who resigned after facing impeachment for obstruction of justice and abuse of power) and Ronald Reagan (who was not impeached or forced to resign for his administration's secret sale of arms to Iran and diversion of the proceeds to fund an insurgent war against Nicaragua in violation of the Intelligence Authorization Act, the Arms Export Control Act, and the Neutrality Act). But it is that nascent culture of presidential autonomy created in the forty or so years before the election of 2000 ("If the president does it, it's not illegal," said Richard Nixon) that floated Bush to his level of lawlessness—from his predecessors' indifference to his irreverence, from their disrespect to his heedlessness, from their blasphemy to his subversion. He had taken an oath to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States. His actions altogether would, as a clear moral imperative, call for criminal prosecution. The fact that a successor administration under a Democratic president has refused to bring a case against Mr. Bush and his advisers is a pragmatic but tragically wrong political decision. President Obama indicated a desire not to dwell on the past but to move the country forward. If he felt, on consideration, that everything else in the way of government business might grind to a halt were a legal case to be mounted, it

is something the Republican Party has managed to achieve anyway, even in the face of Obama's bipartisan comity. Incalculable damage is done to our sacred text when such unconstitutional precedents are put in place and left standing. If the American narrative derives from our covenant with the Constitution, to break that covenant is to redact our way to another narrative. Two years into the Obama presidency, the damage is showing up in the streets as a maladaptive antigovernment populism, a vindictive party-above-country politics of the Right in Congress itself, and with a sense overall of some malign antinomian spirit abroad on the land.

Republicans in Texas backed George Bush's runs for governor of Texas, and for president, not because of his sterling character or his intelligence but because he had a name and had grown up drenched in the values of the oil business. Having come late to religion and sobriety, he was, for many, a true American, one who would blur the division of church and state, champion deregulation, and govern on behalf of the people who had put him in office. He had been for years something of a lout, by all accounts silver spooned as the eldest son of a political family, exempt all his life from the usual consequences of bad behavior, proudly antiintellectual as a college student, and all his life contrarian as a matter of principle, so that holding the country's highest office, with deadly stupidity behind the guile, he made policy leaving the American middle class reeling, the wealthy relieved of their share of taxes, the Treasury burdened with enormous debt, the environment trashed, many thousands dead from his elective war, and, with apparent reasonableness after 9/11, the rights of a free American citizenry severely compromised, their

phone calls and email data-mined, their business, medical, and public library records sequestered, and, in disregard of constitutional safeguards, secret warrantless searches made of their homes and businesses.

Mr. Bush also left us with a Supreme Court seeded with arch-conservatives of his own and his father's predilection that would go on, in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, to affirm the First Amendment right of free speech of corporations, declaring them equivalent to human beings, thus bringing into the American narrative something like the fervid life of a golem.

How valid is the Court's ruling that corporations are ontologically equivalent to human beings, perhaps even a new branch of human life distinguished only by its limited liability? A modern corporation is composed of officers, trustees, lawyers, workers, and shareholders. They all are humans of human dimension, but however good and fine they are as people, they are indentured to the corporate creature to whom—for one reason or another—they have given their loyalty and, in some cases, their lives. The corporation's demands require their submission if, as workers, they are not to lose their jobs, or as shareholders they are not to lose their investment, or as executives they are not to lose their year-end bonuses and their reputations in the business magazines. Whatever seeming humanity is the corporation's, it is of an authoritarian character. And so I look at what the Court has given the First Amendment right of free speech:

If it is a corporation that sells cigarettes proven to cause lung cancer, it will continue to sell cigarettes.

If it is an oil company amassing enormous profits, it will continue to expect government subsidies.

If it is a credit card corporation, it will find a way to charge increasingly usurious interest rates.

If it is a health insurance corporation, it will insure a person until she becomes seriously ill.

If it is a pharmaceutical corporation, it will create a medicine for which it will invent a disease or condition the medicine can treat.

If it is a coal mining company, it will strip-mine a mountain, destroying the surrounding ecology and leaving the land desolate to the people who live there.

If it is a multinational corporation, it will park offshore profits in foreign tax havens to avoid paying U.S. taxes.

If it is a Wall Street bank responsible for the subprime mortgage scandal, it will reward its executives with bonuses consisting of taxpayer bailout money.

If it is an energy company with coal-fired furnaces that cause acid rain to fall over the eastern states, it will refuse to invest in equipment that would end acid rainfall over the eastern states.

If it is an ocean fishing corporation, it will use industrial technology to net a kind of fish to extinction, and then go on to another fishery and do the same with another kind of fish.

If it is an oil company, it will deny the existence of global warming in the interest of maintaining the demand for oil.

If it is a life insurance company, it will administer the death benefits given to families who have lost sons and daughters in the war, paying them 1 percent interest on their money while collecting 5 percent interest on it in their own corporate investment accounts.

If it is any corporation, no matter what its business, it will fight attempts to regulate its practices.

As inarguable as these statements are, they should not be read as a moral bill of particulars. Such huge corporations as these operate in accordance with their reason for being. It makes no more sense to condemn them for what they are than to condemn a tiger for running down a fawn for dinner. A corporation is formed to produce wealth. While the people who work for it can take pride in their work, perhaps designing and producing something that sends them home at the end of a workday feeling that they have accomplished something, the corporation itself is indifferent to the product or the means by which its wealth is produced. It will grow bigger and bigger through mergers—that is the corporate proclivity—and, as it does, the different things by which it produces wealth will have less and less relation to one another. A food corporation will produce jet engines, and a soap and toothpaste corporation will sell auto insurance. A corporation will advertise itself as having a human face, as being in business to serve the public, and it will display its workers, usually of many races, smiling and doing their jobs. Yet these same workers will be let go if the corporation is not meeting its projected profits, or they will be deemed superfluous when the corporation merges with another corporation. It's nothing personal, and it never is: the corporation either makes the profit per stockholder share that it needs to keep attracting investors, or it doesn't.

But if we accept corporations on their own terms, we cannot at the same time grant them human rights. They simply lack the range of feelings or values that define what it is to be human. Humans can act against their own interests, they can feel sympathy for others, they can be merciful. Corporations cannot act except in their own

interest, they do not know compassion and will not act mercifully unless there is some public relations advantage to it. Corporations do not live and die, they continue to exist in one form or another apart from the life and death of their members. Corporate executives will support candidates who best serve the corporate interests, and it will not matter that they themselves or their shareholders may feel differently. There will be an overriding logic to the corporate choice that alone is indication that a powerful business entity whom human beings work in service to is not itself a human being deserving of First Amendment rights.

Corporations may be great tromping golems of clay striding the earth, or they may be robotic creatures programmed to smile and say hi, but they are not us. We humans work for these corporations, we pull the levers and sit at the computers, but we are controlled by the unyielding logic of the corporate ethos and we do things as functionaries that we would not do in our personal lives. The corporation diffuses responsibility, supplies rationales. The liability is limited and the rewards are great.

How is anything made different by the Supreme Court's ruling that corporations have the First Amendment right of free speech and can put up all the money they care to on behalf of their chosen candidates right up to the day of election? Doesn't the ruling confer on labor unions the same rights? And, after all, corporate lobbies have been a fixture in Washington ever since politics as an amateur calling gave way to the professionals. A politician's backers are repaid with a sensitivity to their interests. This is hardly news. It is the recurrent truth of Washington, so rhythmically repetitive as to be its heartbeat.

But the corporate sector is already so dominant in its influence as to make of this decision a release of errant energy through the corridors of Washington. The commentators and politicians who see this as a triumph of First Amendment thinking are, like the Court, supposing corporate animacy to be a kind of human life. There is such a failure of analysis in that, it is so obviously fallacious that, granting the intellectual capacity and learning of the justices who voted with the majority, their decision may reflect a point of view that is simply ideological. That they affirm the First Amendment on behalf of big business has its ironies. They overturned elements of two major campaign finance reform laws with this decision. How can anyone honestly believe it will promote democracy? Corporations are insular, their members will put forth the corporate interests regardless of the manifest needs of the country or the planet. In fact, they will do more than that, they will conflate their interests with the public good.

We have been since the end of World War II a national military state. Guardians of a Cold War arsenal of nuclear weapons, we have fought two wars in Asia, one of which, Vietnam, was never sufficiently justified. We have had simultaneous wars in two Mideast countries, and we are occupied fending off an international terrorist movement. We have found ourselves the sponsors of torture and imprisonment without trial of presumed terrorists. We learned well after the fact that we ourselves were subject to secret illegal surveillance by our government, all of these measures claimed as war-time expedients and promoted with a propaganda of fear. We are severely alienated by gross economic inequalities, the ever-with-us malefactors of

great wealth thriving at the expense of the middle class. Fourteen million of us are out of work. Almost two-and-a-half million are locked down in our prisons. It has been quietly accepted that though a former president and some members of his cabinet committed crimes against the Constitution, they are above the law. Elected know-nothings prance about in Washington ready to tear down any program that looks like it might help people. Our once glorious system of free public education is in disarray. And our Supreme Court, perhaps anticipating an unreliable democratic future for the country, has turned to the business community for leadership, granting it the power to change the composition of the Congress.

All this seems to me a process of national deformation.

It may be difficult to imagine a time when the producers of our refrigerators and washing machines, our cars and planes, computers, and high-definition tvs, the big-box marketers of our food and baby clothes and outdoor grills, the owners of our oil refineries and the producers of our pesticides and engineered food crops, the proprietors of our steel forges, chemical factories, media companies, and nuclear energy plants, the operators of our banks, and manufacturers of our arms, all of them so insistently the suppliers of the good and essential things in life, could somehow, by the relentlessness of their corporate energies, reconstitute us as a nation.

How would that work? Tocqueville proposed that tyranny might arrive here stealthily, as a kind of catatonia coming over a sheep-like population. Let us say that in our time it could arrive by degrees with the acquiescence of a propagandized population: the massive exercise of corporate First Amendment rights having methodi-

cally put in place a sitting House and Senate composed of old pols who, over the years, have been the most corporate compliant, plus freshly groomed, suited, and coiffed professional lobbyists, and Congress comes into session as a shining example of a one-party democracy. Antitrust laws, so indifferently applied for so long, are revoked. The impersonal exactions of a ruling corporate culture begin to determine social policy. Federal regulatory agencies overseeing business and labor practices are disbanded. Unions are abolished. There is a steady progression of corporate mergers as the game players converge to compete or collude. A Darwinian principle of natural selection eventuates in megacorporations with the economic heft and working populations of fiefdoms. Collectively, they cannot be distinguished from the government. Yet with the degradation of the middle class—working people unable to buy what they are producing—the economy begins a downward spiral. Street demonstrations pop up in several cities. With the populace finally awakening, Selective Service is reinstated. The corporate CEO who has assumed the presidency relies on Homeland Security surveillance technology developed during the war on terrorism—GPS handhelds, facial recognition software, behavioral biometrics, body heat recognition devices, unmanned aerial vehicles with the capacity to peer through windows from a great distance, and data banks of credit card and cell phone accounts, and Internet social networks—to keep the citizenry under close watch.

I suppose this is a vision of what could be called corporate fascism. It seems in many ways to approximate the Chinese model of State Capitalism, though the Chinese prefer to describe

what they have as “a market economy with Chinese characteristics.” Perhaps we will have a market economy with American characteristics and a Constitution still seemingly inviolate—as is the written Chinese constitution in defense of which Communist Party secretaries throw into jail anyone who asks them to live up to it.

But apart from any speculation of ours, nobody at this moment can consider the state of our nation without foreboding. The inanity of much of our political discourse is evidence of a national intellect ill equipped to respond to global emergencies. By every measure the planet is showing severe signs of stress. Yet the facts of dire climatic change are promoted as fantasy, or as a conspiracy of leftist scientists. To the extent that the megacorporations subscribe to this view, their characteristic self-interest is maladaptive. Eventually, there may have to be wars for water, for tillable land, for livable climates. The mournful facts seem to be clouding up as if some black spiritual weather is coming. A darkness. So one way or another the idea of a free citizenry of the red white and blue, along with what we think of as our exceptionalist democracy, may no longer be sustainable. If that is so, we will have written a new American narrative, though, after all, I don’t think anyone can know just how it will read.

Call it Narrative C.

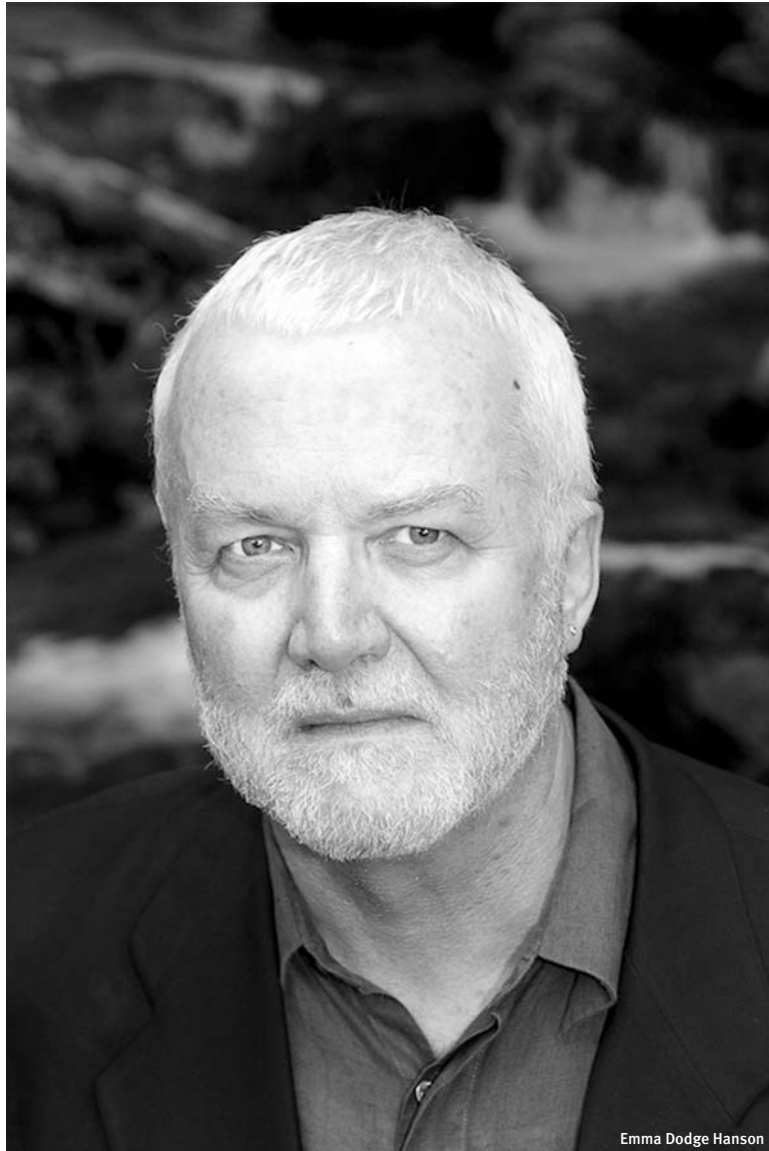
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Michael Wutz

Evolution, Anthropology, and the Narrative Deep Space of Contemporary Fiction

A Conversation with Russell Banks



PRELUDE

Russell Banks is among the most widely recognized writers working in America today. A prolific author since the 1970s, his novels include The Darling, The Sweet Hereafter, Cloudsplitter, Rule of the Bone, Affliction, Continental Drift, The Reserve, and, most recently, Lost Memory of Skin. The Angel on the Roof is a collection of his short fiction written over a period of thirty years, while Dreaming Up America features a body of essays that was previously published in France under the title Amerique Notre Histoire. In 2008, HarperCollins released Outer Banks, which includes three of his early novels, Family Life, Hamilton Stark, and The Relation of My Imprisonment. Mr. Banks has also contributed poems, stories, and essays to The Boston Globe Magazine, Vanity Fair, The New York Times Book Review, Esquire, Harper's and numerous others. Currently he is writing short stories and a screenplay for The Darling.

Mr. Banks is the recipient of numerous prestigious honors, among them the John Dos Passos Award and the St. Lawrence Award for Short Fiction, several Guggenheim and NEA Fellowships, and most recently the Common Wealth Award for Literature. He has twice been a Pulitzer Prize Finalist (for Continental Drift and Cloudsplitter) and three times a PEN/Faulkner Finalist (for Affliction, Cloudsplitter, and Lost Memory of Skin). He was President of the International Parliament of Writers (IPW) and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. His work has been translated into more than twenty languages.

Born in Newton, Massachusetts, Mr. Banks has often acknowledged that his upbringing in a working-class world in New England has played a major role in shaping his writing, and his characters often struggle through major crises and tragedies in the face of extraordinary emotional, psychological and socioeconomic challenges, directed as they are by a deep sense of authorial empathy, passion and compassion. Reducing Mr. Banks' focus to labor-class protagonists, however, would be to belabor what much of the critical tenor has, rather simplistically, labeled "grit fiction," "dirty fiction," or "the new realism." On the contrary, as the following conversation attempts to emphasize, Mr. Banks works on a much wider scale and with a much wider aperture that includes not only characters from all walks of life and continents, but also resonates with large anthropological and evolutionary questions that border on the philosophical and the imponderable.

I appreciate Mr. Banks' time for our conversation during his residency as featured author at the National Undergraduate Literature Conference at Weber State University in April 2011. If he is generous with his characters, he was even more so with me.



I am interested in reading The Reserve not only on its own terms, but also as an homage to many of the modernist writers whose work you seem to echo in the novel. The intertextual chapters remind me of Hemingway's In Our Time and For Whom the Bell Tolls. Hubert St. Germain is the earthy gamekeeper who has affinities with Mellors in Lady Chatterley's Lover. And the psychosexual dynamics of the upper crust could be seen as your version of Tender is the Night transposed into the Adirondacks of the Great Depression: the alleged child sexual abuse of Vanessa by her father is similar to that between Nicole Diver and her father; Vanessa's affair with Jordan is reminiscent of Zelda Sayre's with French aviator Edouard Jozan (which is then, in Tender, mirrored in Nicole's relationship with Tommy Barban); and Zelda was of course eventually institutionalized, much like Vanessa. Do you want to acknowledge – either by design or as they have accumulated in your creative unconscious – your literary predecessors, or are these the empty speculations of a reader?

No, these are no empty speculations. I think this is a very interesting and insightful reading of the sort of the text that lay behind my text. At least for me, and I think for most serious novelists, there is a kind of ghost text that you're maybe not even conscious of some of the time, or even most of the time perhaps, and the novel is a sort of call-and-response relationship with this other text. I'm aware of it to some degree, and then there are others that sort of get dragged into the novel because of that initial association. In my case the initial association of *The Reserve* is with the novel of Hemingway's that you don't mention in your question, *To Have and Have Not*. It's not much admired, really, but has always interested me for a number of reasons. One

is, it was Hemingway's attempt to write a proletarian novel in response to criticism he was



Elizabeth Dohrer

getting in the 30s from Dos Passos and other more politically engaged writers than he was, and it also intrigued me because the book as published is very different from the book before it was edited by Maxwell Perkins. Perkins extracted great chunks of that book because he was afraid of lawsuits. Several characters in there are very closely based on real people in Hemingway's life in Havana, and they were powerful people and litigious, and Perkins was very very worried that they were going to Scribner and that Hemingway was going to be sued, and so he convinced Hemingway to pull chunks of the book out. Because of that, there are odd lapses in the book, and it is hard to follow simply, which is unusual for Hemingway. Hemingway is nothing if not easy to follow. I've always been intrigued by the book and its history and its role in the Hemingway canon, and the attempt by a purely literary artist to answer to the political ideologies of his time. He was tormented during that period in some ways, and he went to Spain and wrote about it in great detail, both as a journal-

ist and then as a novelist in *For Whom The Bell Tolls*. On the other hand, he also helped

The Tales are also located in upstate New York.



produce and promote a film about the war to raise funds, and he went to Washington with his wife, Martha Gellhorn, and buttonholed the Roosevelts.

She is also mentioned in The Reserve, I think, in a brief comment Vanessa makes, something about "that Gellhorn woman."

Yeah, right. So that funny book of Hemingway's was the ghost in the works for *The Reserve*. I wouldn't try to "do" any other than maybe the most flawed book of his, but that kind of dragged in other things and other books you identified. Of course, if you're going to do that, then you're going to have Fitzgerald somewhere, and then some of these other figures are going to come into your mind and it was impossible to keep them out. I was thinking about *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and the earthy gamekeeper is an archetypical figure in American Literature, too. He shows up in Hawthorne and so on, and it's not just British by any means, but a 19th century American figure. He shows up as Natty Bumppo in *The Leatherstocking Tales* and, in fact, I think I alluded to that deliberately.

Yeah, the Adirondacks, that's all *The Last of the Mohicans* country, and so I was trying to invoke that archetype, certainly. So it isn't farfetched and you aren't projecting into the text, except in as much as it would be reductive, which of course you aren't, especially in the context of your other questions which are not promoting or endorsing a reductive reading. It's just another layer of significance to the images.

I noticed that on the level of names in The Reserve as well. There is Hubert's first wife Sally Lawrence, and there is Jordan's first wife Anne Sayre, which sounds very much like Fitzgerald's wife, Zelda Sayre. The more I look at the novel, the more I'm noticing what may be cross-references and echoes.

Lawrence is an old Adirondack name. There happen to be a lot of Lawrences in that region, and so that was probably my first grab. But you know, you have always a range of motives. There's never one reason for choosing a name for a character; there's usually a nest of reasons and they're all woven together, and you don't feel the need to extract one from the other. You say, "Yeah, sure, it feels right. I'll go with it."

One feature I've noticed about your names for a number of years is that they seem to have double consonants or double vowels. That may be reflective of the characters' duality and their split selves, much like a binary model.

Yeah, I've been wondering about that. I know that with naming characters, or places, for that matter, I'll often have a list and just cross off the boring ones. I do a lot of that kind of selective process. It's not so much that I'm trying to generate associations as I'm trying

to get rid of the boring ones. I've walked through graveyards extracting names.

I enjoy walking through graveyards myself and reading the inscriptions on the stones. – Another novel that came to my mind as I was reading The Reserve was Loon Lake by your fellow New Yorker E. L. Doctorow, which resonates quite a bit with your novel.

Yeah, I think so. It's a book I like a lot. I remember talking with Doctorow about it and, to my surprise, actually, he hasn't spent a lot of time up there in that part of the country, but he approaches things slightly differently than I do with regard to research. In some ways, I think, there is a magic to that place. That region has a set of American associations that go back to the early 19th century. It was the last wilderness in the east and it's retained some of those qualities even into the 21st century. But for eastern intellectuals and artists and painters and writers throughout the 19th and well into the 20th century, the Adirondacks region was the West, in a sense. It was the wilderness, it was the wild continent, the new world. It was what was left of that initial vision of the new world when the Europeans first arrived. So it has a real powerful resonance and a very powerful early appearance in our literature, from James Fenimore Cooper on. At the same time, too, it had a vividness and a resonance for the commercial classes, for the wealthy of New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Hartford, etc. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in particular, they would go there and build what they called their 'camps,' which were these elaborate log palaces, and live with what they somehow felt was a wilderness experience. But it's kind of the tail end, the dregs of the American wilderness fantasy. I think that Doctorow sensed that too

and was claiming that a bit in his novel. Joyce Carol Oates has done it in one or two of her books, and then there are scenes in some of William Kennedy's books, most recently *Roscoe* (2002), that take place in the Adirondacks and have a similar kind of reverberation. It's an interesting end of something that points back in time in American history, which is so short but nonetheless has depth.

Permit me to come back to a recurring theme in your fiction: child abuse and child sexual abuse. More often than not, the kids exposed to it suffer from lifelong psychological damage, and even the ones that emerge from it more or less intact are haunted by traumatic moments. The theme has a particularly strong hold on you and doesn't seem to let you go. Why this focus on what reads almost like a primal scene in need of revisiting? Is it a commentary on the defunct child-parent (and parent-parent) relationship of industrialized nations? A biological crime against our own species? I understand it is also central, from the perpetrator's perspective, to Lost Memory of Skin.



Well, it's not because I myself suffered from child abuse or anyone in my family, to my knowledge. I think it first really appears in

the form of violence and alcoholism in *Affliction*, then it appears more pointedly in *The Sweet Hereafter* and *Rule of the Bone*, and it's sexualized by then. Then later on, it's in the background and part of the story of *The Reserve*, and it's central to *Lost Memory of Skin*. I think what happened was somewhere in there, before *The Sweet Hereafter* and *Rule of the Bone*, I began to reflect on the changing perception of children in our culture in a kind of anthropological sense, and I began to perceive a shift that I saw as taking place over the last half century or so, maybe over the last three generations of parents, where children have become a consumer class and an essential part of our consumer economy, and we've essentially as a result abandoned the children in a very unconscious and

deep way to the economy. And I just became preoccupied with this abandonment; sexualization of children is one of them. It's one way we sell products, and if you sell products by sexualizing, then you are sexualizing the consumer at the same time. And if the consumer is a child, you are not protecting the child from the economy. It was across the board, it wasn't just one person or another person to blame, it was something that was anthropologically deep. And it was a horrible mistake, a species-deep mistake.

So it is a kind of biological crime against our own species, which, incidentally, is one of the points you made in your reading last night, at least indirectly—that one of the

responsibilities of our species is to care for and protect the young?

That's how I'm perceiving it, and I started to get that with *Rule of the Bone* and *The Sweet Hereafter*, which, if I had my way, I would have published side-by-side, together in one volume, because to me they're about abandoned or lost children. *Rule of the Bone* is from the child's point of view, and *The Sweet Hereafter* from the adult's point of view, the community, that is. They can both be read as moral fables, in a way. And that's one reason why

the school bus (in reference to one of your written questions you gave me) appears in both. It's the link between the family and the larger community and the state, and it's when you first allow your child out of your protective cocoon and out of the

cave, as it were. I remember the bus as being, finally, safety away from the home if the home is a dangerous place. On the other hand, it can be very threatening and often was, too, because you don't have the protection, and you're suddenly at the mercy of other strange adults and other children, bullying and all the rest of it that takes place.

The double sidedness of the school bus image was very evocative for me, and those two books sort of led me into this central story that I have come back to again and again in different ways from different angles just out of, I suppose, an ongoing obsession and fear—fear with regard to what are the long-range consequences of this. Every parent now in their 20s has no memory of life



before television, before the 24/7 presence of advertising, and the targeting of children as consumers. It's an enormous factor. It's brilliant if you're looking at it strictly from a manufacturers' and retailers' point of view because the thing about children as a target audience is that they constantly replace themselves. You can have the same product—sneakers, let's just say—out there and every time the kid finally outgrows the need for and desire for sneakers, there's another bunch waiting. It's a kind of auto-colonialism. In a way, we've ended up colonizing our own children ourselves, having run out of places on the planet where there are natives dumb enough to give us their raw materials in exchange for a few beads and axes. Instead, we have come home, finally, and we've found another native population that we can exploit in exactly the same way. I'm reminded of that line by Joyce about the old sow that eats her farrow. That's what we've become, in a way; we're devouring our children.

It sounds like a form of cannibalism, really.

Auto-cannibalism is what it becomes, if it's the species, the same species where we are devouring our young. It is a huge issue, and I don't know how to approach it except piecemeal from one angle and then another trying over time to acquire a set of dramas and narratives and images that will allow me to explore it.

It's a powerful theme in your work, which the reader can't help but notice. Related

to that are the fairy tale motifs in your fiction. In The Sweet Hereafter, esp. in Atom Egoyan's film version, is the Pied Piper, which you develop in a sustained way in The Reserve, along with Humpty Dumpty, Cinderella, and others. Child sexuality and fairy tales seem, at least upon first glance, to be at odds with one another and yet you bring them together into one shared discourse, if you will.

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It's also in *Rule of the Bone*, esp. Peter Pan and those childhood stories. The ones that last and the ones you can invoke that way are stories that cut to the quick of when you're a child and stay there the rest of your life. All you have to do is say Peter Pan, and all kinds of images pop up, and they're both threatening and satisfying. It's flight and freedom and permanent childhood on the one hand, but also entrapment and danger and all kinds of other things, on the other. And they are sexualized flying around in their night-gowns. This is sexy.

I couldn't help but think of Jordan in The Reserve also. Jordan is quite literally a flighty character.

Yes, flying around in his airplane, the little prince. There he goes!

I seem to remember that he is actually being called that by Vanessa.

I love doing that because it's a shorthand, of course, and all you have to do is touch that button and a whole lot of other things fall into

place quickly. But it's not meant to be allegorical and to be taken to that level or that literal a sense of interpretation. I didn't want to do that, so you have to find the line where you can both invoke the image and acquire the resonance that it has and the meaning that it carries without making a reductive reading available. And you, of course, wouldn't be the kind of reader who would pursue such a literal or narrow reading, that's obvious.

Keyword intertextuality, which we already touched upon in relation to the bus that appears in The Sweet Hereafter and then in a sort of redemptive way in Rule of the Bone. What was really pressing to me as I was reading those two books side by side again was whether you felt that you had to recuperate that bus for your own vision as a novelist. It becomes a vehicle of death for fourteen children and then morphs into a sort of a home for...

Yes, for nurturing and protecting, because I managed to associate that with it. Yeah, in that case, specifically, I wanted to get back to it and revisit it because there were two sides to it, and I was aware that I only treated it in one way and didn't treat it in the other way. I remembered even from my own childhood, and from my kids when I was putting them on school buses, that it meant freedom. They got away from the controls of the family and the home and all the rest of it and any of the anxieties and dreads that were associated with that, and it was also a growing experience. I learned a lot of dirty jokes. I learned a lot about sex on the school bus and all the things you're acquainting yourself with for the first time in the outside world. And so there was all that possibility, and I was trying to do that.

But I think that at the end of every novel, every novelist feels a sense of frustration, like, 'I didn't really get there. I got here but not there.' So you go back again in order to deal with that sense of frustration and try to satisfy it and get over it. In *Lost Memory of Skin*, it's a return to South Florida for me, my continental drift, and in many ways it's a return to the territory and some of the narrative means of *Continental Drift* twenty-five years later. Because as much as there is about South Florida in that book, there's also much that isn't there and I didn't get it in. The focus

of the book was too hard and too narrow, in a sense, and so I couldn't get over here and I couldn't get over there. So I'd go back again, and I think it's that kind of nest that leaves and creates that kind of intertextuality the reader later will uncover and see. Maybe it's good or not, or use-

ful or not—I don't know—but for the writer it's really a return to try to get at something you couldn't get at, or didn't, or you failed to get at, in the previous visit. And I think that was true of when you mentioned Faulkner earlier and him going back. He couldn't get it all in. You can't get it all in, even though the novel is a big baggy monster and you're supposed to be able to put everything in it you want. The truth is, you can't. And you have to go back and revisit it and try to put in what you missed.

There's this undistilled residue that you want to rework again in a different shape.

Yeah, or something that the light didn't fall on. Writing is like working with a flashlight in a cluttered basement or attic, and you know you can only see so far. It's jammed full of stuff and you can only see some of it at a time.

And so you're walking through it and you come back out and you say, "No, I missed it. I'm going to go back and just look, go along the south wall and look at it this time."

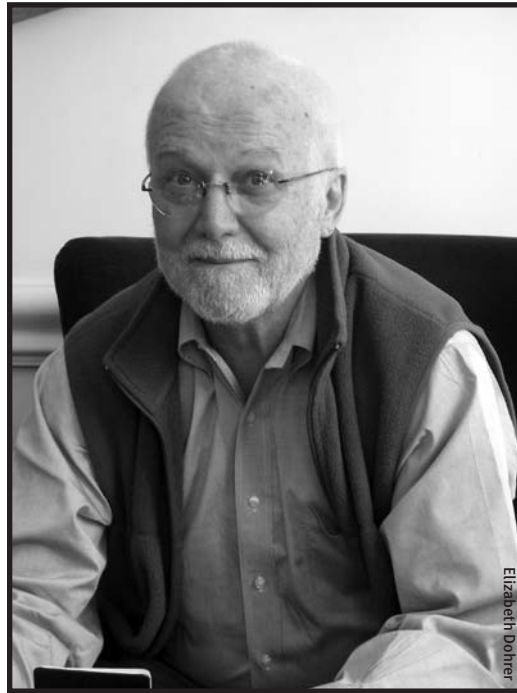
That's true of your locales, and also of some of your characters. Mitchell Stevens, I think, has a brief appearance in The Darling, as does the son of Vanise Dorsinville from Continental Drift.

They reappear. Dolores Driscoll reappears in *Lost Memory of Skin*. She shows up in South Florida, in case you ever wonder what happened to her after *The Sweet Hereafter*. These characters are vivid enough for me. They still have a pulse, so I reinvoke them once in a while; it just depends on who it is. I always liked Dolores and kind of wondered what happened to her, and I hoped that she had a happy later life, so I had to give her one. The only two other characters I'd like to revisit somewhere down the line if I live long enough are Bone Chappie and Nicole Burnell. I'd like to know what kind of man he turned out to be and see him in his 20s or maybe 30s, see what kind of adult male he became. And the other is Nicole Burnell. They're both adolescents, I think that's why. They still had a lot of room to grow, and a lot of distance in front of them, and they both are characters I admired, their strength and their vigor.

Both in The Sweet Hereafter and Rule of the Bone, they seem to be as close to

being a center of ethical integrity, if there is one — despite their young age and their experiences, and perhaps precisely because of it.

Yes, maybe because of their young age. It's true, I've noticed that before that they are the two adolescent characters I've spent the most time with. They are the characters who show the most moral clarity over the long run. That's why, I guess, I want to revisit them and see what adult life did to them.



Speaking of Rule of the Bone, that's a novel that has often been acknowledged as capturing the authentic voice of a street-savvy teenage drifter in search of belonging, much like a working-class version of Catcher in the Rye in the 90s. And throughout your work, you have reproduced the voices and visions of marginalized and oppressed peoples to great effect and with great

genuineness. Yet when Bone reads Uncle Tom's Cabin in seventh grade, he observes a close connection between subject position and narrative perspective that suggests how difficult, if not impossible, it is to separate story from gender, race, and class. If the novel had been written, not by a white woman, but a black man or woman, he says to his white female teacher, it would have been even better than it already is (and he promptly gets a D). Is Bone's observation a

reminder – to the reader, to yourself, to any writer – of the unbridgeable gap between authentic voice and self, of our human urge to imaginatively inhabit the lives of others yet knowing that we will always fall short of it?

That's an interesting question, and what may lie behind that is how I imagine—how I end up hearing—the voice of the characters. I'll take three in particular, Bone, the situation in *The Sweet Hereafter*, and Hannah Musgrave in *The Darling*. All are first person narratives, and they're all characters very unlike me. So it's not a case of mimicry or ventriloquism, on my part; at least that's not how I imagine it. I imagine first a listener and who they were talking to. That's a way of stepping around that gap that you point to, that unbridgeable gap between authentic voice and self, and the lives of others and knowing we're going to fall short of imaginatively inhabiting it. And so if I know how people sound when they're speaking to a certain person under certain circumstances, I can imagine that person and those circumstances.

So in the case of Bone, when does a kid that age—suspicious and abused and alienated—tell the truth. And then I remembered myself, of course, when I was that age in a similar mental and emotional state. The only time I ever told the truth was late at night, in the dark, looking at the ceiling, on my bed with my brother two years younger in the bed next to me, and I would tell him everything I was afraid of, everything that I feared and wanted and desired. So I just invented that circumstance. And I invented myself as another kid in the bed next to Bone while Bone is telling the truth.

In the case of *The Sweet Hereafter*, I invented a lawyer, myself, who was deposing these characters, much the way Mitchell Stevens is deposing Nicole at the end. And the format for those four narratives is essentially that of a deposition by an attorney. So these are people who tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, to an attorney because they're sworn to it. And as a matter of fact, I read a lot of depositions by parents who had lost children in accidents. A lawyer friend of mine gave me a whole stack of them just so I could get the tone and the kind of details they would reveal under those circumstances,

and the kind of things they would withhold.

And in the case of Hannah Musgrave, I imagined the listener as a man of her age, education, background, not necessarily the same class, a white man—an intelligent and maybe intellectual man—sitting with her on her front porch throughout the summer while she tells her story over maybe

a couple of beers. So I know how a woman would speak to a man under those circumstances. I don't know how, if it was a woman she was talking to, what she would say would be very different. She might tell more about her body, more about her sexuality. There's a lot of stuff Hannah leaves out. And because I don't want to make any false surmises or assumptions, I didn't want to cross that line and restrained myself.

I just got into an interesting discussion with a French writer in New York, an Afghani French writer actually, and because we both have written about characters that are very different from ourselves, the interlocutor asked us how we felt about that. I mentioned that I feel a certain restraint and inhibition if I approach a character who's racially or

In the end, finally, no human being is truly knowable, and the closest you can get to knowing another human being – and in some ways the most honorable thing you can do – is to acknowledge that.

culturally or gender-wise different or radically different from myself, and I'm afraid of projecting, and so I contrive ways to get around that. The Afghani French writer, by contrast, just said, "No, I take the liberty all writers have always taken. I am everyone"—that kind of grand, romantic view of the writer. I can't quite go there and have always felt a certain restraint there. I don't uphold it for anyone else, just something I feel myself. And it does address that gap you point out, and I think it conforms to a deep sense

I have, that in the end, finally, no human being is truly knowable, and the closest you can get to knowing another human being—and in some ways the most honorable thing you can do—is to acknowledge that.

Even the person him- or herself probably would be unable to probe the innermost recesses of their being.

It's a kind of western European and North American fantasy, I think, that there is at the core

of personality, at the core of consciousness, an almost physical structure, a Freudian structure in three parts—or whatever models are out there—that can be known and can be understood, instead of a kind of space, which is what I perceive at the center. It's closer perhaps to a Buddhist point of view, and so that's why I have contrived these various devices to step around that problem. Not to avoid the problem so much, but not to become victimized by it.

Many of your especially educated characters tend to see their life in terms of fiction and narrative models, before being

pulled back into the world of reality. Hannah notes that "eventually, literature got displaced by reality, as it invariably does, but for a while everyday life had the clarity, intensity, and certitude of fiction," and she repeatedly frames her life in terms of literary structure before noting the difference between story and actual emplotment. As a writer making his life with the crafting of words, how are you yourself separating these two realms. Do you find that there

are occasions when the two of them are merging?

Yeah, they do merge when I'm working on a book. The reality of the fiction starts to exfoliate. It grows and creeps in through the windows of my real life, as it were, and starts to take over. My wife could tell you about that because she knows that that world is becoming more vivid to me than the day-to-day life that we lead together. In a sense, I've left home for a while, and it's happened in very

amusing and literal ways to me where, for instance, I'm writing about places I happen to live, like the Adirondacks, and at the time the landscape and the people and the map really displace the landscape and the people and the map of my real life to the point where I expect to run into them down at the post office and that sort of thing. I literally do. And there is that vividness to it in the process. But after the book is finished, of course, it fades very quickly, except in one and slightly different sense than the question implies: There is an interrelationship between the works and my real life inasmuch as I begin with something that's really important to me and which I want

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to try to understand a little bit better than I can without having written this novel; and then at the end, if the novel has changed me, which has almost always been the case for me in terms of my writing, I become a slightly different person as a result of the experience of writing the book. I haven't just performed something, I've performed something that's essential to the formation of my own mind and character, and so I'm altering my experience, in a sense, and in so doing altering myself, and so each work changes me into a slightly different person with a slightly different angle on the world. And that then informs the next stage of my work and may be one reason why the books differ so much, which kind of puzzles critics

and reviewers sometimes, and they think, 'God, this isn't what I expected. I was looking for another *Affliction*, some more blue collar stuff here,' or whatever. But it's because I've changed, and I'm now interested in something a little bit different, just a slightly different shading and another locale and so on.

There was a moment while working on Cloudsplitter when you needed to take a break to write Bone in between. I understand you took a breather because it was so involved and concentrated. Bone, by contrast, has a different level of density the writing of which afforded you creative breathing space to resume work on Cloudsplitter.

Absolutely, yeah, the two books have a different density. The other thing with *Cloudsplitter*

was the problem on how to bring together this mass of information—historical, geographic, political, and so forth—into a narrative that had some momentum to it that was personalized in a way that a novel has to be. Also it's fairly hard material; I just got bogged down about halfway through and was overwhelmed by it. It took six years to write the book, and at the time I was three years into it and getting tired. It was simple physical fatigue.

At that time I was teaching a little workshop at a prison nearby, and once a week I

would go over and work with these young guys that were just kids—they were twenty, twenty-two, twenty-four years old—serving two to three years for non-violent crimes. In order to be in this work-



shop, they had to have a graduate/GRE high school equivalency, and I was just getting their stories and getting involved with them and how they got to be who they were: here they are, bright kids, and they're in prison in upstate New York. How did that happen? And five, eight years ago—yesterday practically—they were teenage boys and didn't get picked up except by the police. So I got really kind of distracted too, and then that took me to these homeless kids in America in the early 90s. There was a phenomenon that people were not really observing—this large growing population of homeless teenagers all across the country. And they weren't just black ghetto kids; they were white middle-class kids dropping or being dropped, so that took me off into the subjects that lie behind *Bone*—the mall rats and those kids. In a way, it was a relief and only took about a year to

write. Also, it's a type of picaresque, with one episode following another; it's not densely complicated plotwise, or layered, and has a very straightforward structure, so it fell into place fairly quickly. Then I could return to *Cloudsplitter* refreshed, it seemed, and said, 'Oh, I know how to do this now; I can get that. Speed it up as we go along. The pacing is slow at first, like a big train pulling out of the station, and then it gets roaring and we go faster and faster and faster as the time goes by,' and so on.

It sounds like you were working pretty much in two creative registers. Both books changed you in a different way and prepared you to revisit this idea of homelessness on an adult level in Lost Memory of Skin. You often locate character within natural forces to suggest the contrast between puny human intention and the impunity of the cosmos, and you also have a strong interest in seeing humans within a more geological and evolutionary time frame. (In Continental Drift, the contrapuntal migrations of Bob and Vanise become miniature versions of global tectonic shifts, and in The Darling, the cognitive world of chimpanzees is at odds with the rationality of human being.) Would it be fair to describe your enlarged vision as a novelist in such evolutionary or biological terms? Such an aperture strikes me as going well beyond the, rather confining, categories of regional realism or "grit fiction" that are often applied to your work.

Yeah, I like to think so. I'm always a little irritated by the tendency to put me in a niche that is blue collar fiction, grit lit—what do they call it in England, dirty fiction or dirty

realism—and lump me together with writers I admire: Raymond Carver, Richard Ford, Andre Dubus, and so forth. These are writers whose work I have great respect for. I think what I'm trying to do is somewhat different, even though on the surface the use of detail is very similar and some of the characters are similar in terms of background and social context. But it is also true that I tend to see them against a historical and a geological and even an anthropological ground and play their lives out in a much larger scheme. Finding ways to do that within the realist vein is a little difficult at times because the obvious way to do it is in the tradition of the so-called magical

realists, like Márquez or even Faulkner and Toni Morrison who you could call that, and yet I am still unable or unwilling to quite let go of the mundane, ordinary day-to-day details of life. It's just the way I happen to see the world; it's interconnected in that sense. It may be, too, I'm not comfortable with the kind of surreality that

dominates a lot of that fiction, at least not for myself. I love reading it, and some of the writers I admire enormously, but I just can't quite go there. So it does puzzle some readers because it's not realism quite, but it is, isn't it, and yet it's not—it's something else.

I like the larger aperture because it allows you to resonate with Darwin and our own evolutionary history, such as the connections you establish between us as a species and the chimpanzees' forms of communication.

That's a good way to put it, I appreciate that. Evolutionary history fascinates me, and I think if I hadn't become a writer, I would've liked to become an evolutionary biologist or some-

Evolutionary history fascinates me, and I think if I hadn't become a writer, I would've liked to become an evolutionary biologist or something. I'm fascinated by this whole evolutionary complex.

thing. I'm fascinated by this whole evolutionary complex. I'm endlessly fascinated by it and try to read about it whenever I can. I can't keep it out of the books, and the older I get the less able I am to keep it out.

You were talking about primate forms of communication yesterday, actually, in your talk, and I'm wondering whether you see yourself validating the novel as a form of the highest literary genome? Literature, in a sense, as the human contribution to speciation and evolution in a larger sense?

In a sense, I do feel that. I hate hierarchies or art in genres or forms, and I'm suspicious of them. Whenever one is called the queen of the arts, I reach for my revolver. But on the other hand, as I was arguing last night in that talk, I feel that the novel has uniquely created ways to celebrate the significance of individual human consciousness and that there's no other art form that does it quite that emphatically and that pointedly. That's the history of the novel beginning with Cervantes, and I think that's why I return to it as a reader, why I return to it as a writer. And so I suppose that is an evolutionary step. It may be a political step in the sense that there's almost a Whitmanesque impulse behind it. So, yeah, I'm not made miserable by the idea that it's the evolved literary genome, as you say—that's not a bad phrase.

It may be among the highest forms of the cultural genome in the hands of a writer who can work (with) the suppleness of language and articulate the nuances of hu-

man Being with a capital B. Painting can't do that to the same degree, and neither can music, much as I love both of those art forms as well.

It may be too why the novel really doesn't appear or rise to prominence until the rise of the middle class, as they say, in Western Europe, when there are the first inklings of universal human rights and respect for individual liberties etc. This is starting to appear in the 17th

and 18th centuries and eventually takes over our view of human life and the dignity of the individual human being and the validity of the individual human experience. And of course that ends up confrontationally related to the church, to the state, to every form of power and control. That's what I was saying, too, last night about the novel being essentially subversive.

Typically against established authority and power, and in favor of empowering

the individual. And I would also add that in the late 18th century, the beginning of the 19th century, you have the emergence of the major western democracies, the rise of literacy — it's almost like a feedback loop.

Yes, that's right. It's like a feedback loop, one can't survive without the other.

The Darling is filled with the sights, smells, and sounds of Liberia, as they are perceived through the, first, fresh, and eventually refreshed, sensorium of Hannah Musgrave. My sense is that you're using all of the resources of literary fiction

to develop a particularized universe and to organize the auditory, visual and olfactory riches of your narrative world. Are you perhaps writing – more so than in the past – with an awareness that the novel has to renew its claim to legitimacy in our world of digital and instant information processing?

I don't think I'm consciously involved in a negation and argument with the other forms of narrative that are taking over our lives to such a degree. I don't have a quarrel with any of it particularly. I think what you're perceiving is my insistence, for myself, in the process of writing to be sure that I can see and hear and smell, and that all my own senses are engaged in the course of writing. For me, this is a credo almost, and it goes back to Joseph Conrad, who first said in . . .

The Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus?

Yes, that's it. Above all, I want my readers to see. He didn't mean, understand; he meant, see—to have a vision. And I have long believed that essentially reading fiction is out-of-body travel. It's oral and visual hallucination. That's what you're inducing, not as John Gardener described it, as a continual dream, but as a hallucination, a continual, controlled, shaped hallucination. That's what you're doing, and if you can't invoke that hallucination in yourself, then how can you expect to invoke it in a reader? And so my first task is to invoke it in myself. That's generally how I work: if I'm not seeing it or hearing it, at least when I write

dialogue I have to hear it. It might not work, but at least I heard it. And the same thing when I'm describing a scene. And so I think what you're picking up in *The Darling* is, yes, you can see it.

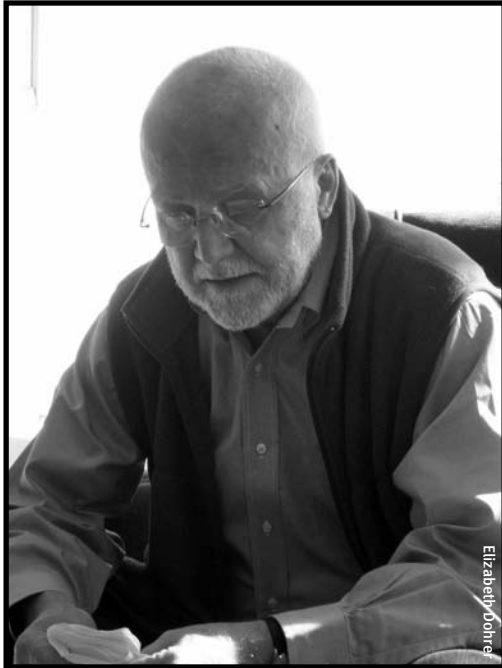
I think one reason filmmakers get interested in my books is because when they read them, they can kind of see it taking place. The book may not be shaped in the slightest like a film—*The Sweet Hereafter* isn't shaped at all like a film, and *Affliction* has got an unreliable

narrator and other literary contrivances—yet when filmmakers read these novels, as some of them have, they'll call me up and say they saw the movie in the book. It wasn't written at all with that in mind, of course, but because I saw it when I wrote it, that's what's happening. And the differences between a written work of fiction and all the other forms of narrative story that we are faced with in increasing numbers and increasing seduction—often beautifully presented, speedily presented—is the immersion experience that you have with

A novel is interactive storytelling in a way that film can never be, and no amount of film, theater or anything that presents itself in real time can ever operate with the same intimacy as a novel does, because with fiction it's the reader bringing to the experience of reading his or her own memories, dreams, and imaginings, fantasies, unconscious desires, and all the rest of it in helping to assemble the unique story.

fiction, and the fact—and this is the one that matters the most to me—that the reader is co-creator. A novel is interactive storytelling in a way that film can never be, and no amount of film, theater or anything that presents itself in real time can ever operate with the same intimacy as a novel does, because with fiction it's the reader bringing to the experience of reading his or her own memories, dreams, and imaginings, fantasies, unconscious desires, and all the rest of it in helping to assemble the unique story. Everybody's version of a

novel is different. That's a kind of intimacy that no other art form permits that I'm aware



of. Well, poetry perhaps, where poet and reader both are co-equal in a way and create together this mirror, the individual poem that the reader takes away, and then the next reader comes in as a different one and so on.

And it's portable too. You can take the book with you.

Yeah, exactly. You can read it in the bathtub, too, which you wouldn't want to do with your iPad.

Speaking of this interaction between fiction and other media, Hereafter and Affliction have both been made into powerful films, and some of your other work is being or has been considered for cinematic treatment. At one point, Agnieszka Holland was said to work on Continental Drift, and Jonathan Demme and Wolfgang Petersen, among

others, expressed an interest in filming your work. Could you give us a sense as to where some of those projects are?

Yeah, a lot of the information out there circulates and is in error now. *Rule of the Bone* is being developed by a small, independent company in New York to be directed by Debra Granik, who also directed *Winter's Bone* (2010) that won the big prizes around. She's just great; she's a wonderful young director whose work I admire enormously, and I'm executive producer and working with her and the producers in New York. She's writing the screenplay with her writing partner, and they're very close to it, and we think we can have that set up this year. It'll be the third *bone* film for her. Her first one was called *Down to the Bone* (2004) and the second *Winter's Bone*, and then this one. They all have the story of an adolescent at the center of them—an adolescent boy in the first one, an adolescent girl in the second, and drugs are a part of that context in all three of them. She said it's a complete coincidence, and I said, yeah, right, but it is like a trilogy. Someday the critics will look at it that way.

Scorsese was originally going to direct *The Darling*, and I was writing the script. I am still the writer of the screenplay and Focus Pictures was developing it for Marty to direct and for Cate Blanchett to play in. And then a year goes by, and I wrote a script, and the usual kinds of hemming and hawing go on, and Marty got off on three other projects and does this documentary about the Rolling Stones. Eventually, he says, actually I'd like to just be executive producer on this; I think you need a young director. Mainly he didn't want to go to Africa, I think. And it's true—we do need a young director. We need somebody who's willing to go spend eight or ten weeks shooting in Africa and working with animals and all kinds of other stuff, and this is not his thing anymore, so I said fine. He's attached still, I'm attached as a producer and have rewritten the screenplay now about four or

five times, and we're still trying to get it set up with the right director. I'm trying to find the right person and that's not that easy. It's dark and serious material, and expensive. We kind of hope it'll all suddenly click together, but it's a hard season right now to sell something like this to financiers or studios. Studios won't touch it, so it would have to come more independently produced than that. Even with Scorsese attached as executive producer, what that means is that I can get people to return my phone calls; that's basically all.

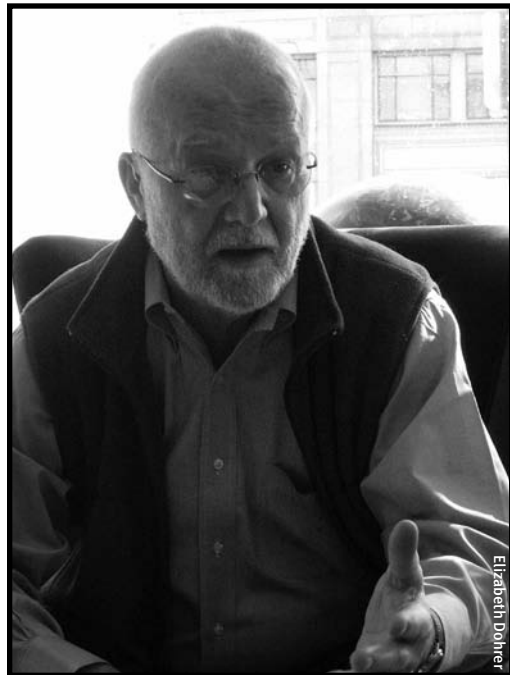
I've been trying to get *Continental Drift* made for a decade with Raoul Peck, a Haitian director who's based in France, a wonderful director who's made some extraordinary films, but he's not much known in this country.

I admire Lumumba (2000), a postcolonial take on the revolution in the Congo and Patrice Lumumba's eventual murder at the hands of what seems like an international conspiracy.

You do? Oh good, you know his work. He and I have become quite close over the years. We've written a script—I wrote drafts and then he and I worked together, and I'm just keeping as much control over that as I can. It's the one project—that and *Bone*—that I really wanted to hold on to and get the right combination of people for. If it never got made, I wouldn't lose any sleep over it, but if it does get made, I want it to be made correctly, because I feel protective toward the Haitian material and don't want Haitians misrepresented the way they have been misrepresented so much in American films, particularly. Raoul is the right director for that. He can protect the Haitian part of the material; I can protect the American part of the material.

I seem to remember that you mention Frantz Fanon in The Darling, and I think that Raoul Peck's sensibilities have partly been shaped by Fanon's powerful political writings.

Yeah, absolutely. He and his family fled Haiti, too, and he was raised in Congo and then moved to Europe and was educated in Europe, where he attended a film school in Germany. He's a very worldly and sophisticated, politically engaged man. We've written and rewritten the script, done this and that, and there have been actors attached for a while—Josh Hartnett wanted to do it, Willem Dafoe when he was young enough wanted to do it—but we have been unable to get it financed because it's just too dark a story. I remember being told at one point some years ago by a studio executive, "Well, you know, if you change this from Haitians to Cubans, we'll make it tomorrow." And I said, "No, no, that's not the case, you can't do that." But that's the kind of thinking you have to deal with. And it's true; it is dark material and nobody comes out of it looking good, except Vanise Dorsinville, the Haitian woman who survives.



Whose son reappears briefly in The Darling, if I remember correctly. As a New York taxi driver, or something?

Yeah, that's right.

I understand that you prefer working on a computer because it allows you to put your thoughts down quickly, so that the conception and writing of a scene or dialogue almost coincide. The writing speed on the machine gives your prose a natural fluidity, and it taps into your free-flowing unconscious before a more conscious, internal editor is raising its head. Conversely, I also understand that (like Paul Auster, say) you occasionally find yourself coming back to writing by hand. Could you please comment on this going back and forth between one and the other?

It's really a way of avoiding that self-censoring editor inside myself, who is a male figure. The muse may be female, but that censor editor is male and so I'm trying to dodge him, to stay just ahead of that person. I'll even let him take over when I do the rewrites, but not when I'm trying to compose. I can get away with it for a while on the keyboard, and then I find that I can't, that the censor is starting to intrude and find his way into the room; then I switch over to writing by hand. And that works for a while too, but I do go back and forth now pretty regularly. There isn't a discernable pattern. This last book, *Lost Memory of Skin*, I'd say I probably wrote half of it in longhand in notebooks, the first draft and the other half straight onto the computer, and then I had my secretary type up the notebooks for me onto the computer and merge them. At that point, I begin the revising process, which can take much longer than the actual initial draft, but that's when I'm willing to let that editor, that censor, that patriarchal figure come in and make his judgments and so on. That's when I need him. I don't need him when I'm trying to work with what I don't know. Nelson Algren, who was my mentor when I was very young, used to say, "A writer who knows what he's doing doesn't know very much," and I believe that. You don't want to know what you're do-

ing, and how to make that possible is difficult if you are—especially if you are—an intellectual yourself and you love literature and the templates are flying by in your mind constantly. And it's very hard to not know very much, especially the older you get. It gets harder because you do know more and people think you know what you're doing, and so you've got to go back to that blank slate every time.

Have you ever thought about maybe writing your novels with voice-activated software? I know that Richard Powers, for example, is doing that. My understanding is that he's walking up and down his living room or his bedroom and speaking his text into a microphone.

He is? That's interesting. I think I did read that somewhere. Henry James narrated those last novels of his to a typist. I actually have thought of it and have been slightly intimidated by the idea of having to speak, but it might be an interesting experiment. I'd like to try it. I don't know where it would go, but it would be interesting to try it. I'll see how Richard Powers comes across. He's a brilliant writer. I really admire his work.

You just talked about the internal patriarchal editor raising its head. What is your working relationship with your publishers' editors? At what point do you yourself start editing your work—revising it and looking backward at it even as you move your narrative forward? At what point do you start sharing your work with the editor, and to what degree are you open to suggestions?

My publishers' editors have indeed been for the most part men, too (unlike my long-time literary agent, Ellen Levine). I've been at HarperCollins since 1982 when I was writing *Continental Drift*. I had been at Houghton Mifflin before that and did about four books with them, then I went to HarperCollins and had a great editor for many years, Ted Solatoroff. He

was a great literary editor of that generation, and he and I were very close and he worked very well with me until he retired. Then I had a wonderful and brilliant man named Robert Jones, who edited *Cloudsplitter* and *Rule of the Bone* for me, and then he died of AIDS. He was a novelist himself and had published two very good novels besides being a full-time editor. My next editor became Daniel Halpern at Ecco/HarperCollins, who has been my editor since. He and I actually go back to the sixties when we were young together and close friends. He was editing *Antaeus* magazine for years and founded Ecco Press, and I used to publish in *Antaeus* and we became friends and neighbors and traveled together. Dan is a great literary mind. He's a wonderful editor, he's very loyal and everything like that, but it may ruin a good friendship. So I said, "let's see whether we can avoid discussing money. That's strictly between you and Ellen. You and I can stay safely away from all those subjects that cause breaks between editors and writers who happen to be friends, and we'll see if we can do this"—and we have! Dan is an old-fashioned literary man; he's a poet himself and a hands-on editor, and he's read everything I've ever published going all the way back to my 20s. I've had really secure good and long-term relations with publishers and agents, and have stayed close by them. In fact, my professional life is much more stable than my personal and marital life in many ways has been, so I've been very fortunate that way.

I'm pretty open to Dan's suggestions as editor up to a point, but don't really show the work until I think it's done. I don't show it to anybody, really, and then I first show it to my wife, and even her I don't show the rough stuff. But when I think I've got something solid—I'm still in process, of course—I'll show it to her and then continue to work, and then eventually show it to Dan, and sometimes I might show it to someone else if there's an area I really want to get his or her take on, something particular about the subject mat-

ter, maybe race or gender or something. I'll say, 'Does this sound like a woman to you? Does this work? Is there any place in here where this goes flat and only a man would say such a thing?' That sort of thing. I might give it to Francine Prose or someone like that, a friend whose opinion I respect, who I would actually listen to.

You tend to use music as a buffer to the outside world and as a kind of soundtrack triggering the writing. What kinds of music did you listen to during the writing of your various novels?

It's not so much a soundtrack, it becomes association. It's anything you can use. Hemingway, I think, sharpened about ten pencils every morning. Buddhists light a little cube of incense to induce this same state of no-mind when they meditate, and I put on tunes—it's the same thing. It's music I'm associating with the writing, and so I can drift out of the immediate world into that fictional world more quickly. That's really the purpose of it. It does vary from book to book. With *The Reserve* the soundtrack that was playing was mainly the



music that the characters would be listening to. I was playing a lot of that early jazz and classical American jazz of the 20s and 30s, which I happen to like, and so it's fun to do and does create a bit of a soundtrack, I guess, but it's the music the characters would like. It doesn't always work that way. With *Bone* I actually listened to the music Bone was listening to as he goes along, starting with heavy metal, moving through grunge and so on, and ending with Charles Ives; I was progressing the same way he was progressing. Then with *The Darling*, I had Ives playing again, now that I think of it. Actually, Ives comes up in the novel as the favorite music of Hannah's father. I was playing a lot of African music then, too, but it is music I associate with the characters.

I also tend to build while I'm writing the book. I tend to build a big bulletin board, and I just stick up little totemic items that I associate with the material. In the case of *The Darling*, I had pictures of dirigibles and stuff up, Capra pictures from the Spanish Civil War, big maps of the era, postcards from the 1930s of the Adirondacks, and that sort of thing. Just totemic in a way, creating a little environment that lets me drop back to that world more quickly.

Bone, in particular, is going through these metamorphoses in terms of his musical sensibility. He enjoys classical music, but can't quite put his finger on it because he hasn't been acculturated into it. If he had had a different upbringing, he would have been able to fully partake of these both low/grunge and high/classical traditions.

Oh yeah, because he's an intelligent kid. I think why people like him is because they realize he's smart. He's smarter than Russ, and that's why Russ is very useful in that way. Because Russ thinks he's smarter than Bone, and you can tell very early on that Bone is smarter than Russ, and smarter than Bruce and all the bikers, and smarter than almost everybody he deals with, but he doesn't know it himself.

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In 2008, when the French writer Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio won the Nobel Prize in Literature, Horace Engdahl, the permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy had harsh words for the state of American literature, which he described as being "too isolated, too insular" and "too sensitive to trends in their own mass culture." Do you share this assessment? The infusion of immigrant cultures into the United States

would seem to be able to produce quite easily a literature that is as cosmopolitan and international in its reach as the Swedish Academy is looking for. It's been almost 20 years since an American writer got the award.

I'm not sure Engdahl's comments are representative of the European attitude toward American fiction. Otherwise, how do you explain the popularity of American fiction among European writers and intellectuals as well as general readers? In France and Germany, in the UK and in Scandinavia, and in Italy and Spain, American writers have been translated widely. And it's a lot of the most

difficult and best writers, too, not just pop writers, and so I think that that's his parochialism there, and I wouldn't use it to gauge the European mentality by any means. He's obviously wrong. One of the reasons American fiction is so popular in France and in other European countries is because it is so varied and reinforced by the presence of African American history and Asian American history and Latino American history and Native American history. It is all coming together and merging and making a *mélange* that's much richer than anything that's going on in most of Europe.

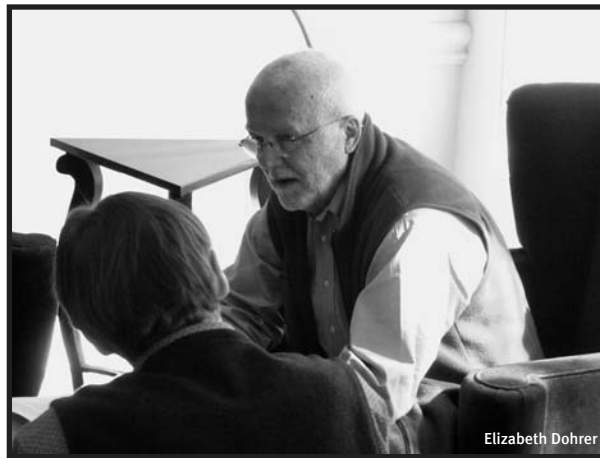
I also think Europeans are just beginning now to realize that some of the best and most interesting writing in their native languages is being done by the ex-colonials. Coming up out of French

Africa, out of Ireland, Australia, Asia, and the subcontinent, these writers are dominating the British writers. They're going to have to deal with that. In a way, the Americans are the model for multicultural literature, which is the future of literature; it's world literature. What's emerging in the 21st century is that the old national literature—the idea of a national literature: the great American novel, the great French novel, etc.—is a 19th century imperial fantasy, a nationalistic fantasy. Now there's world literature evolving, and that's why Engdahl's is such a parochial statement. It doesn't acknowledge that Americans, in a way, are the model for that. Americans, too, are going to have to start publishing more translations—we're the parochial ones in that sense. But we can barely cover our own territory, we've got so much coming in. It's

a very rich time, I think, and a very exciting time for writing in America, fiction writing, particularly. It's a wonderfully interesting time in terms of the publishing industry going through its shift. It's so radical, and nothing since the 16th century has been this important and interesting. I'm glad to be alive and writing fiction right now than at any other time in history.

Your fiction certainly transgresses national boundaries on all kinds of levels, and you

regularly allow (or force) your characters to migrate and integrate into, or clash with, new cultural environments. Your literature is "Commonwealth" writing in the best sense of the term.



I like to think so, that's good. There was a point some years ago where I realized I had probably more in common with a Chinese novelist than I did with John Updike, even though John Updike and I are both white American men who happen to be living in New England at the time writing in English. But there was a kind of tribe that was worldwide, of writers that I had loyalty to, which I suggested last night when I said that my flag is my skin. As a writer I have no nationality.

But one more thing about the Nobel, I think, is that, as you said, it's been almost 20 years since it has been won by an American—Toni Morrison. That's partly because of the stupidity and the politicization of the Nobel committee, because American foreign

policy has been so aggressive over the last twenty years, and in particular the last fifteen maybe—the Bush years—that it was very difficult to give the Nobel to an American without somehow taking a political position. It's like maybe giving it to an Israeli writer in a funny way right now. It would have to go to someone who is a dissenter, and then that would be

seen as a political position too. They didn't give it to Philip Roth, and so I think that that's part of it, and that may be fading, although they stupidly gave the Peace Prize to Obama. Boy, was that political. That's like saying, "Thank God Bush is gone." That's the Thank-God-Bush-Is-Gone prize. It was so funny, it's stupid.



Michael Wutz is Presidential Distinguished Professor in the Department of English at Weber State University and the editor of *Weber—The Contemporary West*. He is the co-editor of *Reading Matters: Narrative in the New Media Ecology* (Cornell, 1997), the co-translator of Friedrich Kittler's *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford, 1999), and the author of *Enduring Words—Narrative in a Changing Media Ecology* (Alabama, 2009).

Jan Hamer

Embracing the Weird

A Conversation with Sharon Olds



Sharon Olds is a self-described poet of the body and of the family. She is the author of ten collections of poetry, beginning with *Satan Says*, where she explores the glories of language in poems about early marriage and motherhood. In subsequent collections, such as *The Dead and the Living* (winner of the Lamont Poetry Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award) and *The Unswept Room*, she writes with humor and insight about her children, with painful clarity about her own childhood, and with disarming frankness about love and sexuality. In her book *The Father*, she writes of her relationship with her father and of his death, and in her most recent book, *One Secret Thing*, she laments both the death of her mother and the horrors of war. She has also published *Strike Sparks: Selected Poems 1980-2002*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 2002.

Olds was born and raised in San Francisco, graduated from Stanford University, and then moved to New York, where she earned a PhD from Columbia University. Olds is a senior faculty member and former director of the graduate program in Creative Writing at New York University, where she teaches poetry workshops. She received a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest grant in 1993 to fund a writer's workshop program she founded at Goldwater Hospital for severely handicapped adults, and she was the

New York State Poet Laureate from 1998 until 2000.

Olds visited Weber State University in the spring of 2011 as part of WSU's 26th annual National Undergraduate Literature Conference (NULC). While here, she gave two readings and participated in two panel discussions along with the other featured speakers, novelist Russell Banks and poet Terry Gifford. The poems she shared with packed audiences of students and faculty attending the conference included a few of the humorous odes she is currently working on: odes to everyday objects such as the condom, the tampon, and the composting toilet – ordinary items connected to the body.

During her visit, Olds and I had time for a discussion of her poetry, her work in the MFA program at New York University, and the debt of gratitude she feels for other women poets who served as examples of what was possible. We also discussed her 2005 letter to Laura Bush declining an invitation to dinner at the White House (reprinted in *The Nation*), and her close friendship with the poet Ruth Stone (who died a few months after our conversation, on Nov. 19, 2011, at 96).

We concluded our talk with her advice to young writers, from which I drew the title for this interview.



"We shouldn't have to try to be normal when we're writing. That part of what voice is is that sound of originality, which is weirdness. And I so understand the desire to be normal, I've always had that desire, but we can't indulge it too much. When we're writing, if something weird comes in, what a blessing. "

You've already discussed the issue of whether or not your poetry is autobiographical, how you've been grappling with that over time, and my question is, do you really think it matters? I understand that people might want to know, but you're not holding this out as autobiography and you're not saying this is literally true. Do we expect that of our poets? Should we? Does the reader care?

I was once reading at a high school—this was maybe ten years ago—and I did my thing of saying I can't say it's me or not. And a kid said, if I thought you had made all that up, I would be very mad at you. I said I completely understand what you're saying. It wouldn't be fair, it wouldn't be right. I said, I still can't talk about it. It's very important to me not to talk about it, but I understand completely what he meant. I think it would be extremely weird if I was making things up. I didn't want to say I wasn't, because I didn't want the sort of sensation-alistic aspect of some of the material to seem more interesting than how the poems bottle in, shape the imagery or the lines or something like that. And I also didn't want to talk about my life. But I didn't realize that I didn't have to talk about my life now. But I'm not sure why. Partly it's just that I don't have any imagination. I'm not a fiction writer. It's all I can do to try to do something with what's real—and what's real seems to me mysterious enough! What happened about saying if it's "true" was that a young woman interviewing me was so sad. Her face fell, she was so sad when I said, "I

can't say," and it was her sadness and her youngness that made me think, "why am I doing this and why do I have to keep doing this?"

I know what you mean about not having the imagination to make things up—I can't write fiction. My only voice is my own. And while we're talking about voice, I watched a video of a reading you had done and you were talking about finding your voice when you were about thirty and that a lot of other things were going on. You were finishing your PhD, raising children and everything was kind of coming together, and then in Satan Says, in the very first poem there's this explosion of language. I don't know if it's voice, but it's certainly language that seems like "oh, phew, now I have permission to find my voice." So clearly you've found your voice, you teach poetry, you teach—

I don't think I had felt I had permission. I think I felt I was willing to do the wrong thing, if that's what it was.

No one said it was okay,

and it wasn't; it's not okay in terms of different people's values. So it's true that I wrote it with great joy, but when I was first writing, I didn't think anyone would see it. So this is what happens with us as writers—slowly it comes, if it does, into the public, into some sense of audience. But please go on with what you were saying. It's just that it was more important to me to sing these songs than it was to be loyal.



Elizabeth Dohrer

Or a good girl, or something like that, because to me we're taught to be ladies, to wear the white gloves, figuratively or not, and a head scarf in church and all that. I grew up with that too, and I get that. No, I think my question was leading to the idea of working with students. What advice do you give? How do you help a student find his or her voice?

I think that the first thing we do at NYU in graduate school around the workshop table—there are twelve of us plus me—is we listen to what each person is doing, and we realize that everyone is doing something different. That we aren't all trying to do the same thing, we don't all have the same aesthetic or point of view or ideas or language or anything, so first is listening, and then gradually as you get to know what someone is trying to do, then you can help out by saying, "right here, I think you're doing what you're trying to do and here, maybe, you're not." And then later, much later, we can say—maybe over coffee—what we like and don't like. So at first, we're trying to get to know the worldview, the aesthetic, the provenance, the domain—maybe the domain of someone's poems, and talking from within their own terms, and then gradually, if I feel that someone could be an even better poet by changing what they're doing a little, later on in a semester, probably in conference, not around the table, I'll say something about that. Or I'll ask them, "what do you think, if anything, dominates in your poems? The intellect? The soul? The vocabulary?," and

then see what their sense of it is and then see if they would like there to be more balance or less balance.

Maybe the issue, when you phrase it that way, becomes, "this is what you say that you value the most, but what we see is that your emphasis is maybe not bringing that out."

Maybe not so much that as, "what do you want the work to be? Do you think that something, that one of those things is dominant, and you would rather have it not be?," because there isn't even a "we" when you



sit around the table and there's twelve other people. Each poet is getting back different opinions. I think the idea underneath this is that everybody's integrity of voice is very important to me, as my own was or I suppose is. So I wish for others what I'm wishing

for myself. For it to sound like someone, like a real person.

Another thing that you do that I find really fascinating is the work you have done – and I don't know if you're still involved in it directly – at the Roosevelt, or rather Goldwater Hospital. Where did I get Roosevelt from?

Well, it's on Roosevelt Island, which used to be called Welfare Island. No, I'm not involved with the running of the workshop any more, but every year there's a reading I attend, which is a celebration of the poems being written. The teaching is done by our graduate students in the program.

What drew you to that in the first place?

Well, I was invited to teach an eight-week course at the hospital. They hadn't had recreational therapy there that had to do with writing—it was Jean Kennedy Smith who started the program, now called Very Special Arts—and so I started this eight-week class, and realized that it was going to be over, that “seed money” means it's going to end. You just get it started, and then it ends. So I started involving our writing students from NYU, and asking friends to come teach there, since I couldn't, with my teaching and traveling, once a week as I did for the eight weeks, and now that program is in its 26th year, I think.

When I was preparing for our visit, I came across the letter that you wrote to Laura Bush (declining an invitation to a dinner at the White House). And you describe so eloquently in that letter what these people at Goldwater Hospital were able to do and how their voices were so strong that they would bring it out in spite of unbelievable difficulties.

I thought she would sympathize with that as a teacher and a book lover. Maybe she did, I never heard back.

I remember when the letter to Laura Bush was in the news. I read The Nation, so I remember this event, but I did have to go back and look it up, and I really like the last line. It sounds like poetry. “I thought of the clean linens at your table, the shining knives, and the flames of the candles and I could not stomach it.” That's beautiful. I hope that there was something in her that went, “this is serious stuff.”

Everybody's integrity of voice is very important to me, as my own was or I suppose is. So I wish for others what I'm wishing for myself. For it to sound like someone, like a real person.

Well, she certainly recognized that I had suddenly turned very rude. I'm sure she recognized that, because I was so careful up until then to be polite so she would continue to read it.

What I really wanted to ask was about the letters that came in to The Nation. They were quite lovely, especially the one – I believe it was a gentleman – who said, “I understand this, but boy I really would have liked it if she had gone to the dinner and just let them have it.” I wondered if that was ever even an option that you considered?

Well, sure, but I knew it wasn't the right thing for me. I thought of Eartha Kitt, but Eartha Kitt was Eartha Kitt! She was a great artist and a great brave soul, and she was a very special guest of theirs and she stood up to sing and everyone was watching her and listening. I was

not going to have that kind of a venue, and also I'm not articulate on the spot, I get too nervous. And I thought it was better to spell it out, because then I could say what I had to say and my nervousness wouldn't get in the way.

I can understand that. I think I might have thought I would do something like that and then I'd get there and I would be cowed by the pomp and circumstance of the occasion and not do it, and then I would kick myself for the rest of my life. I sort of thought that might be what your answer would be. Let me ask about your poems about your children, from their births to their various rites of passage. How did your children feel about being the subject of so much...

I still don't really talk in an open way about my life, so what can I say? I think anyone who has a mom who is a family poet, and a poet of the body, is going to find potentially a good example of saying what matters, and potentially also something kind of ridiculous and weird! So I would think that such poets would get regularly teased by their children for such a thing. I don't really sense that those are their lives, what's in the poems—just a mother's version. I still don't feel comfortable in talking about them, bringing stories of them into our dialogue.

It's a good question, it's an important question—I just feel it's not right for me to do that.

I tend to think of some of your very personal poems as a mosaic of a life, and you're not writing necessarily about your life in that sense, but have you ever considered doing that? A Mary Karr type autobiography?

Isn't she brilliant? Have you read the new one? Have you read *Lit*? That's some book.

Yeah, it just made me really glad I'm not an alcoholic so I don't ever have to go to all those meetings and get down on my knees, but yes, it was excellent.

Her . . . being out there is just . . . I love that book, I love all her books. She's a wonderful poet also.

I first came to her poetry after I read The Liar's Club.

I couldn't write prose, it's hard for me. I've done just a little, but I'm not very good at that.

Well, you're certainly good at the poetry, so why would you?

Well, like I said at the reading, most of the poems I write no one ever sees. So I'm not someone who just turns out a poem and then a week later turns out another one and both of them belong in books. No. It's much more something I'm trying, something I'm trying to do.

And there's a fairly long time lag, it seems, between events and the publishing of a poem, and there's a digestion of the experiences and processing going on before the poems see the light of day.

Most of the poems I write no one ever sees. So I'm not someone who just turns out a poem and then a week later turns out another one and both of them belong in books. No. It's much more something I'm trying, something I'm trying to do.

Well, they're usually written right away. But I put books together slowly. Sometimes individual poems are sent out to magazines pretty soon, so it's not that I wait and then years later... although

that happens with some poems. It's just the business of typing them up, rewriting them, sending them out, I've never been very good at that. I'm kind of slow at that. I mean, there is partly the phobia of the rejection, which is always so disheartening.

Do you still feel that after ten books of poetry? It doesn't go away?

Not for me, because our work keeps changing and, you know, you could get to a point where it just wasn't there anymore. So yeah, if someone accepts a poem of mine, I am so happy. I am so happy.

In your introduction to Ruth Stone's collection What Love Comes To, you describe her poetry in terms that I think could

be applied to yours: "her sharp focus is not blurred by ladylikeness. She has a canny lack of respect, her voice is unsentimental." I don't know if you look at yourself that way — no, you don't?

I look at Ruth that way, for sure, but I'm very sentimental. Then I try to rewrite the poems so they won't be so sentimental. Or a whole poem will just be hopelessly lost because it's too sentimental. But I think I have a lot of ladylikeness—not a good quality. Ruth had to try to break up with her own ladylikeness. She's just a genuine phenomenon.

You mention meeting her in your late teens or early twenties. Was she a teacher of yours? How did you meet?

It was through a family friend, through a friend of a friend, really. I just ended up in Vermont at her house for a week-end when I first met her. I was about twenty-one, something like that. And she's so generous, a very generous listener and, of course, her work is just so fantastic.

I've been reading it and I have to thank you for introducing me to her work because I wasn't familiar with it. It was actually in your little book on the elegy that I first came to read her work. We had a faculty favorite poem project a couple weeks ago, and I read "Curtains" and explained why I was reading it and the last line, "See what you miss by being dead." I was widowed a few years ago and that one really...I feel that. She said exactly what I want to say so many times when I have these imaginary conversations with a ghost. See what you miss by being dead? I want to go home and disgorge the contents of my day to

someone...and this isn't about me but that connected —

Right. Ruth's poetry is about all of us, and we make those connections with it. And I think, also, she really is so naturally out there, it's not like the kind of bravery where someone is afraid and they work their way through it. She's just who she is.

My colleague knew her at SUNY Binghamton. All these little connections.

Well, certainly Ruth and Muriel Rukeyser and Gwendolyn Brooks.

Right, those were the names I have written down because you've mentioned them as —



From that generation, but then also younger than them, Adrienne Rich has been so important to me. I saw that being a woman was a strength for them, in terms of the originality of their

poems. So they were like wonderful examples of what could be done.

I answered my own question about whether or not you knew Muriel Rukeyser because I realized she was a teacher of yours. Did you also know Gwendolyn Brooks?

I knew her a little bit. I would be a host of hers a couple of times when she would come and read, and I would give her a bouquet of flowers and I was just a huge, huge fan of hers. And Muriel, the class that I took from her at the Y was a poetry appreciation class. It wasn't a workshop. She brought in poems she loved and talked about why, and she asked us to bring in poems also. I think maybe once in the semester we could read a poem of our own. She was a mentor in terms of, again, a

courageous woman and originality. She had a kind of a bold elegance about her but she didn't mince words. She was quite direct. Same with Ruth. Both of them, direct and generous. Outspoken.

And wonderful people to have as mentors and role models to sit next to and to adore. Without pioneers like that, do you think you would have been able to find your voice as early as you did? Or at all? It's an unanswerable question, I know.

It was very encouraging, mainly not just as—I can't get quite the words, but it was just a joyful thing that they were. I grew up, as most of us did, in an intensely sexist atmosphere. And there they were, women out in the world each doing her brilliant, unique thing.

And doing something that you wanted to do. When did you start to think of yourself as a poet? You wrote poems, but when did you know you were a poet, something different than the millions of unhappy teenagers who sit and write poetry in their rooms, which never sees the light of day because it shouldn't.

Well, I think all of us have a lot of doubts about our legitimacy as writers, and as people, and I probably had a few books out before I was more comfortable with just the ordinary fact that I was writing these poems all the time and some of them were getting published, and I was teaching—that there wasn't another word to use for me. But what I had thought of as poets when I was younger

was something distant from me, and something unlikely, or I don't think I thought that that could happen.

I think an interesting way to think about that question is, when did you first write on your tax return under profession: poet? That's a way to think of it, if you look back you might think, "hm, okay, that year I said I was a poet instead of professor or something else."



Elizabeth Dohrer

Well, it's hard for me to say professor, since I'm really a workshop teacher. I am officially a professor and I'm very, very grateful to NYU for my job and for my tenure and the whole thing, but I'm not like a literature professor who knows the history of literature. I'm more like in a guild, where we sit down together and pray that something will come to us.

And maybe that's part of the reason you're still teaching. You theoretically could be retired now, but there's that energy back and forth that's still fulfilling, I'm guessing.

It is, that's true. The night before the first class of the semester is always hard because you think, what do I have to give? But then once we're all talking together, if you're telling the truth, and you're positive, not lying, and you're letting it go slow enough so that no one comes in and just feels attacked on all sides as if they want to give up, it's a fulfilling experience.

I was listening on the radio to an interview with Samantha Chang, who is the director of the Iowa Writers Workshop, and apparently she's just come out with a novel talking about the writers' workshop kind of thing. She was talking about the tears when a piece is ripped to shreds, and why people do this, and is that really necessary?

Yes, but we want to have a kindly, honest, supportive, working life together.

Well, one reviewer, Carol Stone, said that your poems ultimately succeed in moving readers because of your search for the source of human evil; your line in "The Quest" is, "This is my quest, to know where it is, the evil in the human heart," yet so many of your poems describe the beauty in ordinary life. Isn't it likely that many readers are at least as moved by your search for beauty as your search for evil?

Who knows what evil lurks in the heart? Well, they are the poems of someone who is kind of scared of bad people and scared of bad luck and aware that life can be very hard. Yeah, I guess I feel that there's some balance of praise and love and hate in my world. But I'd be the last person to know if there really was.

Ambivalence is a part of the human condition that maybe is never expressed more beautifully than in some of your poems about your father: I love him, I hate him,

right next to each other, and many of us, if we're honest about our feelings, have said that, felt that about various things in our lives. It's a common experience but uncommonly expressed, and it seems courageous to write about that very ambivalence because so many people want to seem certain.

Well, I couldn't seem certain. I don't know, I think in some of my poems there's a kind of excess of certainty, but I know what you mean.

All of us have a lot of doubts about our legitimacy as writers, and as people, and I probably had a few books out before I was more comfortable with just the ordinary fact that I was writing these poems all the time and some of them were getting published, and I was teaching—that there wasn't another word to use for me. But what I had thought of as poets when I was younger was something distant from me, and something unlikely, or I don't think I thought that that could happen.

Your most recent book, the section of war poems, seems like a bit of a departure. I think of them as war laments, but obviously you're not a soldier writing from that perspective.

Right, right. I like that, war laments. I think also, growing up with a certain amount of fundamentalism, in a religion that emphasized hell, meant that I was a bad person, and so that gives you a life-long struggle of trying to see yourself clearly, not actually a wicked person, but a person

with faults, etcetera. I think the emphasis on evil has to do with a religious background as well as a difficult family. It's a combination of the two.

I think it's fair to say you had a difficult childhood, to put it mildly, but with good things in it, certainly, and you write about all of that. I love the poem that you read today about your parents in 1937. You say, 'this isn't going to be a good thing, but yet,

go ahead and I will tell about it'. That's certainly not the only thing you've written about it, but you seem to have been very determined not to repeat your parents' experiences with your own children. At least from what we read, I guess my question is, did the poetry, the process of putting this on paper, did that help you to avoid that cycle that so many people seem to fall into, repeating the things that were done to. . .

I think we all have regrets about ourselves as parents. If we had very difficult parents, it makes it more likely that we will be difficult parents.

Well exactly, that's what I'm saying. Did the poetry help you to have an outlet for the fears that you might become like your parents?

I don't really know. I think that writing the poetry was probably very helpful to me, but did it heal me? No. Was it therapeutic to some extent? Sure. Has it been a pleasure to make things? And the poems which I've written which I like—that make me feel good, but no, I think the anger in the poems was in the poems. It wasn't in me as a person. It wasn't in me as a daughter, it wasn't in how I behaved. It was in the poems because that was when I was sitting alone in a room writing down what I really thought. I think to me that's a kind of important distinction. That it didn't heal me, that I had to work—as I still am working—as a person on positive thinking about myself and my writing. But who knows what would have happened if I hadn't written those poems. That might've made my life harder, it probably would have.

What you just said really clarifies something I hadn't thought about before, but basically, it makes very clear that you're saying, I'm not writing about my life. These are poems, they are an expression of something that is part of me but they are not me.

They're as close as I can come. Some of them are angry poems, but that's not been my style much.

And that doesn't mean you're an angry person.

Well, and maybe it would have been better if I had been, who knows? But anyway, the two don't necessarily touch on each other.

You read a poem today about your long marriage disintegrating and the feelings you expressed seemed universal. But I take the Threepenny Review and the most recent issue has a poem of yours with the lovely title "Discandied." We had a group discussion of your poetry a week or so ago for some students who got a free copy of Strike Sparks and came together to eat pizza and discuss the book. So I read this new poem to them and they all really enjoyed it. I find it especially satisfying because it's the "okay, I'm ready to be not feeling sorry for myself now" thinking.

And to see my own share in the relationship and the mutual causes. There was so much idealization that I've had all my life. Another poem that's going to be in the book says, "they say now, for it to work, you're supposed to be equal" or something like that, and that's true. There's so much joy in the marriage poems in all the books and that was a blessing in my life and in all our lives.

When we were reading Strike Sparks no one had read any poems that indicated anything other than marital bliss, and so I pointed out that in "The Shyness" and "Psalm" there were the first hints of a disturbance in the force, but I saw that only by reading essentially everything, not just the collection. Only then did I start to see it, and then of course the next book was focusing more on the death of your mother and the war, but when I read this new

*poem I thought, okay, I get it, I see that.
And of course, I absolutely adore the title,
"Discandied."*

Thank you, I was very glad she [Wendy Lesser] accepted that one.

Well if you have one more question, what would it be?

Because I teach and I advise students of Metaphor, our student literary journal, I wonder what advice you would have for students who are trying to become writers, other than the obvious "read, read, read and write as much as you can?" We're an undergraduate institution mainly, but in the creative writing program we're trying our best to foster young poets and writers. What would you leave them with?

The advice that I always give to young writers, which is, I feel, maybe in Utah less required than elsewhere, is, take your vitamins, don't drink too much, don't take drugs, get a lot of exercise, take care of your body, it's your instrument of perception and creation. Don't do anything you don't want to do and in terms of relationships with other people. And then I think the other would be about being weird. That we shouldn't have to try to be normal when we're writing, and that part of what voice is is that sound of originality, which is weirdness. I so understand the desire to be normal, I've always had that desire, but we can't indulge it too much. When we're writing, if something weird comes in, what a blessing.

Sounds great to me.



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Sharon Olds

The Word, 1956

Cramming us in church gloves, and coats,
my mother would take us to visit her elderly
friends, dark gardens with stone pools,
fish made of golden coin-sacks. I liked to
see my mother with someone she would never
beat up, my mother almost nervous
in a room of luxury, in a house
which belonged entirely to one old lady,
in silk, with a voice that did harmony
with itself. I would peek at the people who brought things
in, like the Kings in the creche play.
And at fourteen, I got to go alone
to my favorite lady, we ate the sandwich
of thinnest bread, inside it just leaves
from a stream. We sat in cold summer
before a fireplace fire like a Siva
dancing, and she asked what I thought about things,
and she listened. And while we were talking, she said
the word. It was in her mouth, a moment,
as if in a washing machine for words,
and then it was out in the flame-dried air,
like a seed, from a tomb, that sprouts after a hundred
years — the word abortion. I did not
need one, too young, and she too old
at last, but the word was a heavy housekeeping
key, given over into my hand,
as if the lives of women were not
unspeakable — even that
unmothering word was permitted to be somberly
thought, and uttered, there in the room
of ease built on the hard labor of others.

Stephanie Dickinson

Jade Dragon

If I hear the song in my running dreams, then I fly or I lift the ceiling and take off. When I hear the song awake something is about to happen. My eardrums tickle. The sleep music stops and the door opens part way. Here in the dormitory at Crippled Children's Hospital and School there aren't any locks. It's Saturday and I'm in my nightgown. I sit up on my bed and dig my fingers into my calves.

"Is Rose about?" a guy's voice asks. "I'm her brother Wiley." He pushes the door in all the way and stands next to Rose's desk rubbing his hands together. The fringes of his suede jacket look frozen as icicles. He's tall.

"She's in the hospital with chicken pox," I say, reaching for my wheelchair parked beside the bed. "Quarantined." The hospital is in another building separate from the school. Rose and I have roomed together since the eighth grade and now we're juniors. There's not a kinder or smarter person on Earth. It must have been because she was born on the Reservation that she'd missed her chickenpox vaccination.

"You're Jana, right?" he asks the air. Unless he comes in farther he can't see me.

"Wrong. I'm 77." I glance over at the empty bed across the stretch of grey-pink flecked linoleum where strewn clothes look like they're trying to run away. The floor seeps heat no matter how cold the room is. Like summer in



Destoroyah, not winter in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. My alter ego is JadeDragon_77 a female warrior from the Temple of Godzilla. I love Godzilla movies.

He chuckles, walking deeper into the messy room and finding out for himself Rose isn't there. Snow is melting from his silver-tipped boots drooling puddles on the linoleum. His jacket's sleeves smell like they're thawing. He glances in my direction and then does a double take. I'm wearing a red sleeveless gown that pictures a smiling cat and the words *Hello Kitty*. I try to cover my large breasts. They embarrass me. Rose told everyone for months he was coming. Everyone knows how proud she is of her brother graduating from law school at the University of Wyoming. Big shit Wiley who didn't show up for Thanksgiving or Christmas or her birthday. They forgive him for everything because his fiancé was abducted from a mall parking lot and killed. But that was years ago. Wiley is the first Barking Moose to finish high school, college, then law school. By this time next year Rose will be the second Barking Moose to graduate from high school. They scraped Crippled Children's faculty from the bottom of the barrel: geriatric substitute teachers and PE coaches dismissed for cause from regular schools.

"Well, aren't you going to ask how your sister is?" I say.

He pulls the tie out of his ponytail and shakes his hair free, like a black horse stumbling up rimrock, finding its footing, then banding it back up again. His eyes are the same as Rose's without pupils or irises, just solid black suns that could heat whatever they looked at. Like the strike and slam of black flint.

"How is she?" he asks, craning to look at the pyramid of Coke cans taped together to resemble the great pyramid in the Valley of Kings. Then he seems to be studying me. "Rose told me about you." His glance of a second ago turns into a staring contest. Who will blink first? "My sister said you were very pretty."

I wonder how he heard that since he never visits or calls. I drop my legs over the side of the bed. My nightie bunches up and I notice him noticing the dirty bottoms of my feet. Check out the linoleum floor if you wonder why. I need to transfer into my chair but that's my business how I get from bed into my wheelchair. I don't want to do it in front of him. He slips his hand into his jean pocket and digs for keys. "Can you show me where the hospital is?" he asks. My cheeks burn and I tell him I have to get dressed first. He can ask one of the aides to show him or he can wait outside in the hall.

After I've changed into my JadeDragon_77 t-shirt and jeans I roll out barefoot into the hall and find Wiley waiting. He knows from being around his sister how to walk alongside a wheelchair girl and not push in a bum's rush. I lead him through the tunnel that intersects the physical therapy rooms and the hospital facility. There's the click of Canadian canes, the thump of crutches. The parallel bars

they torture you on. As long as you can walk, no matter if you do it like a crab, you're better off. No thank you. I sit in a wheelchair and move myself along with my feet. I hate wearing socks and shoes, but in winter when I go outside I compromise and wear clogs.

"Hey, 77," the physical therapist Wesley Snobel says to me, smiling. He seems to be on his way to the soda machine in the hospital lobby. A large-bodied, square-headed man with brown eyes and frame glasses, a goofy grin takes up most of his lower face. "I missed you in Wednesday's gym class." Well, I sure didn't miss him or the class where they make gimps play ping pong or badminton. The A.B. aides have to run all over for the balls and birdies. "Remember, 77, if you want to graduate with your class, physical education is mandatory."

I roll my eyes.

He gives Wiley Barking Moose the once over and waits expecting me to make an introduction. If he expects that he'll have a long wait. I roll into the hospital lobby where Eleanor Peglog sits at reception. Wiley follows. Wesley Snobel must put two and two together and at least come up with five. "Oh, you must be one of Rose's relatives," he lights up, "but sorry you won't be able to see her. Chicken pox is a communicable disease. There are students around here who might not survive a bout of it." Then he gives me a meaningful look and addresses himself again to Wiley. "Mrs. Peglog will tell you the same thing. We take extreme care. Our students come first. And, 77, put some shoes on."

We enter the butter-pat-sized lobby of the twenty-bed hospital that adjoins Crippled Children's school. Mrs. Pegleg wearing her purple eye shadow and candy striper uniform queens the security desk. She reminds me a little of my other icon Tammy Faye Baker of the PTL (Praise the Lord) Club. Wiley explains who he is and how he wants to visit his sister.

"No can do, Mister Barking Moose. Rose is in quarantine. Absolutely no visitors," she says, batting her eyelashes like mascara-drenched spiders. I think of Godzilla vs. Hedorah. The alien Hedorah evolves into an amphibian and his gigantic tongue licks the pollution from the air. He fattens on plastic bags and sludge. Mrs. Peglog and Wesley Snobel remind me of the poisonous emissions of Hedorah.

"What a drag," Wiley says, reaching into his jacket for gum and offers me something fruit-striped. I fold a stick into my mouth. "I'm sorry for waking you," he apologizes, then takes hold of the grip bars on my chair and pushes me down the hall, hurtling me along. I thought he knew better. You couldn't count on people. Like Rose couldn't count on Wiley. The only thing you can do with people is trick them. When we reach the elevator he lets go of my chair. From the side his jaw juts. Like the photograph of Crazy Horse on his pinto, his nose high and sharp.

"Would you mind taking me to Dunkin Donuts?" I ask. "I like the coffee there with real cream." That is what they cleared off the Cheyenne and Crow and Oglala Sioux to build.

The elevator opens and he pushes me inside. He hesitates. "I don't know where Dunkin Donuts is. And you'd have to put socks on and get a coat if I said yes. Really, I need to get going."

"Well, where are you going?"

He looks like he's deciding whether to answer. The horses are stumbling on the rimrock. "Near Pipestone. I have a cabin there. I'm going to hole up for a month and study for my bar exam."

"You mean if they'd let us in to see Rose this is all the longer you would stay? She thought she could count on you for Thanksgiving." I push the hair out of my face. "I need to get going too. But I never get to go anywhere!"

He takes the gum out of his mouth and balls it into the wrapper and looks for a wastebasket, then apologizes for being in a hurry. "How old are you?"

I shrug. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-six," he answers.

"I'm sixteen."

His eyes spark, but deep inside like flints striking. Like you could fall a long way into them before you hit bottom. "You have to get your coat, 77. It's about ten degrees outside."

Sixteen is the age of consent in South Dakota. At sixteen you can drop out of high school. You can marry. I don't bother with the sign-out sheet next to the front door.

Wind blows across the crusts of old snow in the parking lot. All the dirty snow reminds me of how my eyes roll back when I'm asleep, and because the muscles in my lids don't work properly they can't close all the way. It is how the dead sleep and I imagine when Godzilla dozes his eyes roll back like milk buckets. Wiley pushes me in my wheelchair to the oldest Ford pickup in the lot. The hood must have been replaced because it's yellow while the rest of the truck is a deep, indigo blue. The fenders and grill and headlight caps shine. I like that. How people care for their things means a great deal to me. He opens the passenger's door, then lifts me into the cab. I don't feel him brace himself or stagger. I smell clay and scrub-brush. In the side mirror I watch him roll my chair around to the back and lift it. He doesn't slam or bounce it. Two feathers hang from Wiley's rearview, one black, one grayish white. Instead of butts there are jellybeans in the ashtray. There's more smell of sage.

"Take a left on red, and Dunkin Donuts is on the right." I tell him. We pull into the only available space between a police cruiser and a tow truck. A cop sits in the passenger's seat and you can hear the radio crackling. Another policeman lumbers out of Dunkin Donuts. He's bald as a door knob and carrying two coffees and a

donut bag along with his fat-ass citation book. His stomach wraps over his belt while he gives Wiley the twice over. The cop's eyebrows lift as he hurries over to circle around the blue Ford checking out its yellow hood, the University of Wyoming sticker, and finally the bed of the truck. Spotting the wheelchair, he really looks. This time at me. I pretend to pick my nose. "Geez, that's quite a sight!" he bellows to his partner. Wiley grips the steering wheel, the nerve in his cheek twitching. The clouds have turned to dirty soapsuds and dishrags. I tell Wiley I changed my mind about going inside. I don't want the cops to bother him. The police in South Dakota don't like Indians. You'd think it was their people who got corralled into reservations.

"Okay," Wiley says, tapping the dash, "so if you don't want coffee I'll take you back to Crippled Children's." His fingers remind me of creek water and smoke since they don't stay long in one place. But his eyes do. They keep looking at my face. I want him to think I'm pretty. People always tell me I am, but who believes them. They patronize.

I stare back at him. "You promised you'd take me for a ride. Are you really going to Pipestone?"

He watches the cop taking down his license tags. "No, Crooks, South Dakota. If you blink you miss it."

"I want to go too."

"I can't take you out on the highway," he says.

"Yes, you can. How far is it from here?"

"An hour."

"You mean you can't take an hour out of your life to drive me there and take another hour to drive me back? Rose would want me to see your house so I can tell her about it. I bet your sister never visited it." I look down at my hands, and then up at him as if beseeching, although JadeDragon_77 would never beseech or beg or say the bad word please. The real bad word is MD. Muscular Dystrophy. Onset in childhood. Muscle wasting. Shortened life span. Loss of ability to walk. The bad word is Father. Who suffered from invisible MD never telling my mother until he had to—the day I was diagnosed.

He makes a turn in the seat, reaches into the ashtray for the red jellybeans, offers me some. I take two. I like him. "Listen, I usually don't carry passengers. I brought you here because it's not far."

"Why? Because you were driving around while your fiancé got killed?"

There's a flash of lightning in his face, a clenching of his jaw. "I guess my sister told you that."

"No, she didn't," I lie. "I read minds."

"So you're clairvoyant?"

"I am."

But I'm not and Rose didn't tell me much because that subject is off-limits. I only know Wiley gave a friend of his a ride somewhere and when his fiancé finished shopping he wasn't there to pick her up. That's when the man stepped out of his nothingness and pulled his knife and forced her into his car.

The snow is about to fall into the noon twilight and stir up the wind. The sky holds its breath. I feel free in Wiley's truck, being this high up, the wheels under me. I like how he drives, his left boot stepping on the clutch, his right hand shifting. First, second, third gear. He never pops the clutch. I show Wiley a photograph of my family. It just happened to be forgotten in my jacket pocket. We're stopped at a red light in a tiny town. A grain elevator and a beer tavern, a four-way stop sign. There's my parents. My black-haired brothers look almost as Lakota as Wiley except they're seated on a couch surrounded by pale blue carpet instead of stuck in a camper heated by propane. "Was this you?" he asks, pointing to the unsmiling girl sitting on the carpet. "You were a prim little thing." I chuckle.

The town disappears and we drive into more country. The early afternoon light is sinking into the ramshackle fields. Soon dark will creep up from the ditches. Winter light is more vivid than summer light. It knows when it's about to die. The heater doesn't work well and the windshield keeps icing over. The temperature must be dropping.

"How many kids are you eventually going to have, Wiley?" I ask.

"Zero," he tells me and then pulls over onto the shoulder and gets out with the ice scraper to clear the windshield wipers. His breath is white when he jumps back inside. "Remember I almost was married," he says, his strong jaw clenching, "and I won't go near that again." He owns a little house in the woods where South Dakota almost becomes Minnesota. He and his fiancé Liliane bought it when they were in college with leftover student aid money. An eyesore, they'd worked hard fixing it up. They never lived in it together. His fiancé was killed the summer after their junior year. At first he thought she'd come back, that she'd just forgotten herself and somehow disappeared. He hoped, prayed to his ancestors for Liliane to still be alive. Then police revealed that a man's face captured by mall security cameras the afternoon she vanished was of a recently paroled sex offender. Video showed the man lighting a new cigarette from the old one like the cigarette was his air and he had to keep one going to breathe. Joe Hawk. Age 40. His jerky hands, his entire body had a confused, startled look. Joe Hawk denied having anything to do with Liliane. There was no real evidence. The police questioned whether Liliane was even dead. Wiley drank too much after that. Then one day while driving his Toyota he was broadsided

by a woman living in her car with her vodka bottle and eighty-year-old mother. She'd barreled through the red light into him. "They were homeless. I wanted to hate them. I hated everyone for a while," he admitted. "But that crash woke me up. Hating only hurts the hater."

"Yesterday I hated my father, but most days I don't." When he asks me why I hate my father I shrug, changing the subject. "Does your gas gauge work? It says Empty. It has the whole time we've been driving. And the clock says 10:10. Is that the last time you bought gas?"

He laughs and I like his face even better. "Yes, it always reads Empty. We have plenty of gas to reach Crooks. There's an old guy who runs a gas station. I like to give him business."

If we run out of gas, that wouldn't be so bad. When I see the first snowflakes drifting down like torn Kleenex I scoot against the door and roll down the window to catch them. Cold soft. I taste it from my cupped hand. "Want some?" I ask him, extending my hand.

"You shouldn't be asking that of grown men, 77," he says, the laugh disappearing.

"You're putting on a disapproval face," I tell him. "Draggy teachers always wear them." I lean my head farther and farther out the window and wait for him to tell me to roll it up but he doesn't. I look into the side mirror wondering how my wheelchair is faring with cold falling through its spokes. The chair has powers. It doesn't exhale atomic fire like Godzilla, although its hide is tough and snakes can't swallow it. And it's like a horse too. The wheelchair wants to be cared for and remembers mistreatment. Here the cab's seat smells like brown leaves lying on damp earth streaked with clay. I roll the window up on my own.

"Your face is Lakota you know." He keeps looking at me, even the angles of his cheeks look.

"What's it to you?" I say, feeling goosebumps in my stomach.

"It isn't anything to me. But you look like Liliane."

Like the dead girl who was native. I've always been told I look Indian by white people. But I don't, not really. Not my cheekbones or the color of my skin. I have brown almost black hair and brown, almond-shaped eyes. And I can't smile so I look solemn. Some of the kids think I'm stuck up. "Does your radio work?" I ask. It would be nice to watch the trees and fences go by and listen to music. The light might fade into the roofs of barns and the abandoned orchards in time to drums.

When he answers me his eyes are black snowflakes melting in the windshield. "It does but I like to hear myself think. I like to hear the thoughts of whatever is around me." Then almost as an afterthought he adds, "It took a year before Liliane's body was found by a boy digging for arrowheads."

Her death stayed silent like those of goats and sheep and cows. Her bones marked by a hunting knife and teeth. The hunger of small animals. I'm wondering about Joe Hawk and what happened to him after Liliane's body was found. The kind of stuff Wiley thinks seem to have a good deal to do with either his fiancé or his bar examination and how he expects to practice as a legal aid lawyer too. He studied on a scholarship set aside for a Lakota Sioux. He made his peace with Liliane's spirit. Do I know the Lakota have the shortest life expectancy of any peoples in the world? When native women go missing the authorities don't really look for them. Liliane would want him to help their tribe. He's going to pass the bar exam for her. That's one more reason he's going into the woods—to study and meditate. I'd like to make each moment I live in expand.

Is he trying to hear my thoughts? Probably not. He's not thinking about me at all. And why should he? I'm a kid. His sister's age. He's tolerating me like an older brother does. There's a funny light coming from the stubble poking through the old snow and from the farmhouses that look like no one has ever lived in them. I light a cigarette. A Virginia Slim or Virginia Slimes as I like to call them. They are the brand of cigarettes Godzilla smokes. I crack the window.

Wiley's head jerks to look at me. "What are you doing?"

"Relaxing."

"Put that thing out. That's death you've got in your mouth. Are you crazy?"

I toss the cigarette out watching it spark behind the truck. I think he cares about me like a little sister. He might not let Rose smoke either.

"You're quite the rebel," Wiley remarks, lifting his eyes into the rear view. "Liliane was too." He reaches into his jellybean ashtray and chooses the black licorice ones. He tells me nothing happened to Joe Hawk because the trail went cold after a year. The police even questioned him. Wiley took a lie detector test and passed. He took time off before law school to dig into the sex offender's past, following him around to bars and shopping malls, to rivers and fish houses. He had to let it go. Joe Hawk was part Oglala but never lived on the Res. Instead his white mother took care of him and still does. Wiley came to understand the sex offense on Joe Hawk's record came from his having had relations at age seventeen with his fifteen year old girlfriend. The rest of his trouble came from drugs. If Joe Hawk didn't do it, whoever killed Liliane was still out there.

Wiley reaches for a bottle of water, offers me a swallow. I take the bottle, swigging. "Do you mind me asking why you can't walk?" he asks.

I cough on a mouthful of water and a black jellybean. "Sure, I mind. Why would you think I wouldn't?"

"Because you look tough. Mysterious. Like the trees."

I wanted to ask what Liliane was like but he spoiled it with the same old question. The one everyone asks, although I like being compared to trees.

"I've got muscular dystrophy," I say, pressing my thumb into the cold of the window. "My father gave it to me although I don't blame him."

Crooks, South Dakota. Finally we're in Wiley's town, what there is of it. Chuck's Hideaway and the U.S. Post Office share space with a Happy Chef café. Snow is starting to blow sideways across the highway. We turn into Buck's Filling Station & Snacks where a haywagon collapses next to the storefront. The one Phillips 66 pump is fat and round and the sign says ADD \$2 TO EVERY GALLON. Wiley gets out of the truck, walks with his arms straight down and close to his sides, his hands clenched. The wind takes the store's screen door and slams it.

I roll my window down when an old man shuffles out wearing a shabby brown cap with earflaps. "Sorry, partner, they retired me," he says. "Phillips 66 won't deliver gas. Nothing in the pump, Wiley." The old man's lip wrinkles, showing creases like a farmer's hands. "Maybe I've got one can of gas I can give you. I'll siphon it from my station wagon." Old Buck does his best but the gas in his car doesn't fill a quarter of the red can. Wiley thinks that might be enough to get us to his place. Then he'll hitchhike to Pipestone and fill two cans. "You kids be careful," Buck says, holding onto Wiley's door. "There's a blizzard coming. It's about on top of us."

A blizzard. I'm thrilled. The wind blows even harder once we're back out on the two-lane highway and rattles the truck. It takes both of Wiley's hands to keep the vehicle on the road. The snow gives off a peculiar yellow color. It pings against the truck. All at once, everything blurs. Goes white. A white-out, the clouds spewing snow. The wind vulture starts to sing. Wiley hits his high beams. "Okay, 77, you're my navigator. We're about a half mile from the turnoff for my place. I can't see the road. If you spot the ditch getting close call out. We're running on fumes. Let's hope we make it."

Sure, let's hope.

In the blowing snow the telephone lines strung between poles start to swing. Like jump ropes. I was good in elementary school at double jump rope. Skip. Hop. I liked the sound of rope smacking the ground. Another blast of wind shakes the truck. The windows vibrate. Wiley works the clutch, shifts us into high gear, and tries to ride it out. I tried to ride it out too when I started to fall down in seventh grade. I kept getting up. Are you all right, Miss Genevieve asked. I didn't answer. Another wind blast rocks us and the truck starts to sputter. We're going to try coasting. Gradually, we lose

speed. We make the turn onto a gravel road. Barely. Then gravel catches the tires. Wiley steers us toward the shoulder. The truck is wounded. We stop.

"We're less than a quarter mile from my place," Wiley says in a rushed voice. "We can't stay here. We'll freeze. I'm going to carry you." There's fear in his voice, something I haven't heard before. He'll carry me on his back. I can hang on, can't I? Sure, I can hang on, but it will be easier to push me. Just get my wheelchair out of the back. I can help with my feet. The wheels will stick in the snow. No, you have to take my wheelchair or else leave me here. "Look your socks are so thin as to be nonexistent," he says. We argue. I don't want to be without my chair. If there's enough road I'll make it.

"That's not a warm coat. You're going to wear my hat." He buttons my suede jacket, and then he reaches behind the seat for a bag that holds old clothes. Stuff he donates to the Res. He ties a spare, long-sleeved shirt around my neck like a muffler and pulls a stocking hat on my head. I watch him tie another shirt around his neck and put on gloves.

"Try to keep your head down when the wind hits." He shoulders his door open.

It takes all of him to keep it ajar and slide himself out. I think of Crazy Horse. A Sioux too. I strap my purse over my shoulder. I feel happy. Far away from the house where I grew up. I don't see Wiley until the passenger's door swings wide and he jams my wheelchair against the seat. Somehow I slide out and he catches me and I land in my chair. The bite of the wind takes hold. My next breath is pulled from my nose. JadeDragon_77, a female warrior from the Temple of Godzilla, arrives. He pushes me into the stinging needles. I pull with my feet while snow flies into my mouth, sticks its fingers up my nose. I almost can't breathe. The chair sticks, won't move. I try to help more with my feet, but they're far away. I kick at the snow. I can't feel my feet. The wheels of my chair keep getting stuck in the snow. He's shouting into the wind of white ravens. "Not much farther! Doing okay?"

I'm trembling like the day I couldn't climb the stairs to my tap dance class. More white ravens. I hear wings beating and in the snow are the steps to Mr. Sells' practice room. He lived in a big old Victorian house in Pierre with a flight of stairs, and then a curve and up another flight. Beautiful wooden banisters carved with ring-necked pheasants, the state bird. My mother signed me up for ballet and tap lessons. That was before the X-link dominant gene derailed my future. I had just seen my first Godzilla movie.

Another shock of wind. I can't see anything. I can hear Mr. Sells talking about living in Paris or Barcelona, how soon he wanted to

fly away, migrate to a soulful alive city. Pierre was isolated. Backwards. He filled his house with antiques and chairs you didn't dare sit in because the French Revolution was about to break out when they were built and the wood had rotted into green worms. And he had photographs of the most interesting woman in the world. Her face perched on the wall like a garishly feathered bird. Her eyes were mouths. Her lips looked as if glass had ripped them. She posed in a coat of leopard spots and walked two leopards on leashes. Mr. Sells wanted to live grand like that, but he'd studied dance at the University of South Dakota. He gave dance lessons in his mother's house. Her clutter everywhere except the practice room with its pristine floor.

The snow burns and in the wind Mrs. Sells' doilies and salt and pepper shakers tumble. I can't see. I don't know if we're moving, but I'm trying to help. My eyes tear and my lashes freeze together. Mr. Sells keeps calling from inside the wind. Gay and very nice, he's in his tap shoes on the hardwood floor buffed to a blond gloss. The snow hisses, "Slide leg forward, drop heel." Intermediate tap. Mostly white girls. I stand by the one Sioux girl who's been adopted by a wealthy couple. I stare at us in the mirror and see girls more alike than different. Then I'm at the bottom of the steps again. Class has already started. I grasp the banister to climb the stairs that a year ago I didn't have to think about. I shake, each step makes my legs quiver. Shaking, I hang on, and then lift my leg with my hands and set my foot on the next step. Mr. Sells has already closed the door; the taps are sliding over the floor, like tiny hammers, hitting hitting.

"77!" someone shouts.

Last stretch. He carries me through the snow into the gingerbread house.

Wiley's long fingers massage like they are soothing hungry spots. He's kneeling next to the couch and my feet are in his hands. My teeth chatter. He keeps rubbing my feet. I don't feel them. A candle is the only light and shadows left by other people creep over the ceiling. Wind howls. I still have feet. I just can't feel them, and then I do. He's looking over my head at the wind. The snow hitting the house sounds like rocks.

Wiley lets go of my feet. He stands. "This is what happens to a bad idea, 77. It gets worse. I knew I shouldn't have brought you along."

Where is it? I don't see it. He didn't abandon my chair, did he? Please. I lift my head. My wheelchair is next to the couch. Safe. He walks into the next room, and comes back with blankets. He wraps me in one, covers me in another. I still feel the bitter cold. The candle's flame shivers.

"Can you feel your toes yet?" he asks, worried. "I've started a fire in the stove. I'm going to have to cut more wood to get us through the night. Then I'll make some tea." Smoke from burning wood fills the room. Through the haze the knotty pine walls look on. It feels like the dark eyes of deer are staring. Wiley's searching for a blanket to wrap himself in. He has to keep feeding the fire. "You could be frostbitten," he tells me when he returns.

I think about my feet in his hands.

He pulls a little table over and sets the cups down. There are fruits and vegetables painted on the pot. He seats himself in my wheelchair and we drink tea that tastes like rainwater. I know at this moment that I want him to love me. We stare at each other. Without saying anything we're playing the silence game. Who will look away first? The candle flickers in his face. A wick in each eye. "You're the first girl since Liliane in this house," he informs me, beckoning by not moving at all.

I can almost touch the little picture inside the frame on the end table. The murdered Lakota girl with dark mournful snowdrifts for eyes. The cold is too cold. Snow keeps rattling the windows. The wood-burning stove burns hot only for a few minutes. Like its smoke could curl down our throats and choke us, yet leave us ice-covered. My body shakes, the thin blankets aren't warm enough. He sits on the floor wrapped in a blanket with his back against the couch. I could touch his hair. Outside is the frozen world without leaves; the trees creak like attic stairs. Outside Godzilla fights the Snow Behemoth.

He hunches his shoulders and makes a pallet on the floor. "Are you cold, Jana? I like that name better than 77."

"Please, I'm freezing." I ask him to lie next to me on the couch. I'm so cold. Please. Will it hurt for him to put his arms around me? I turn my back to him and he fits himself against me. He takes me in his arms. We lie against each other fully clothed holding the other's body heat close. Later, I'll remember dreaming of snow and Mr. Sells and the snow hitting like tiny hammers. I'll shake in Wiley's arms as Mr. Sells has me sit; he'll sense my whole body trembling and my fingers looking for a hand railing, a wall, anything. He wants to call a doctor. No doctor. No doctor. I'll be all right. I slip off my flats and wiggle my foot into my tap shoes. Wiley breathes on the back of my neck, buries his nose in my hair. I'm a cold pane of glass iced over and where he breathes the ice melts. The snow is angry and I like it howling.

"If we take our clothes off we'll be warmer," I stammer, rolling over to face him. He pushes the hair out of my eyes, brushes my cheek with his knuckles, and tells me it's not a good idea. I'm a kid and he's a man. "I am expected to live only six more years," I say with a catch in my throat. "I heard the doctor tell that to my mom."

They're my six years and I'll never do anything again I don't want to. But I want good things to happen too." I want him to kiss me, more than I want to wake up in the morning. More than I want to walk again. I breathe in his skin's smell of sagebrush. Won't you take me far away from the world?

"Sleep, Jana. Just sleep. I don't want you to come to harm."

"But I'm already harmed." I think of his fiancé's killer Joe Hawk, his footsteps in the snow. The bringer of harm. Then, miraculously, his footsteps shuffle away. I listen, following them into the snow, the footsteps dragging something. The Big Dipper is spilling tiny drops of snow onto me, tickling my belly.

"You just don't want to kiss me because I'm a gimp," I accuse. Then I feel his lips on mine. Like a place you're ready to be stranded forever.

When he stops kissing me, he strokes my hair. "I think you're beautiful. But you're too young. Now go to sleep."

South Dakota, the law says the age of consent is 16 and that's not exactly my age. When he asked me how old I am I lied. I'm fifteen going on sixteen.

I'll know later what I don't know now. I'll wake up, the wind still blowing, the twilight of day without sun, a day of eclipse. Wiley's not beside me. He's out in the storm cutting wood. I'll need to pee, to wash, I'll need to eat. He's pushed my wheelchair against the couch. I'll roll into the kitchen, reach up and open one of the cupboards. I'll pull the silverware drawer and use a wooden spatula to push down some noodles. Finding a spoon of butter, I'll fry the butter and mix in the noodles. Lots of pepper, it'll be good. The package cost 65 cents. I'll wheel into the bathroom. One of those old tubs with black-pink tile. I'll turn on the taps and wash my face with the last of the cold water in the pipes. I'll brush my hair with Wiley's brush and imagine JadeDragon's green horse with a long mane of cornsilk, a braid of green from her chin, her neck longer than a horse's but shorter than a giraffe's. It will be hard to turn around in the bathroom. Yet I won't want to leave ever. Wiley calls my name. Jana. I'll roll toward him, toward my name. He's at the door. His arms full. He needs me to open it. The knob takes a long time to turn, but I get it open. He carries in an armload of wood; wood chips settle in his loose hair that falls over his shoulder. Maybe I'll say, "My clothes are dirty. Can I wear some of yours?" He'll try the noodle gunk. "This tastes good. So you can cook." He points to an upright closet. It latches with brass. I choose a silk shirt, white and brown like a leopard only striped. I ask if he has any jeans. Of course he does, except he's 6 feet tall, and I'm 5 feet two. But that doesn't count anymore, because he'll never see me standing up. This is perfect, a blizzard, snowed in. I'll think of it always as Godzilla's blizzard.

After two days, a pure white morning appears. Silence. Everywhere drifts of snow and Wiley's gingerbread house half-buried. A grove of pines and oaks. A little brown driveway. I'll see the house in daylight. A pale tangerine. I'll recognize the police when they show up. The very policeman who bought coffee a million years ago in Dunkin Donuts. The one with a door knob for a head. The cruiser's red police bubble will bleed into the snow. They'll come to arrest Wiley. For kidnapping. You likely escaped a bad fate, the wind will say. Look what happened to Liliane. You're crazy, I'll curse the wind. I'll see Wiley in handcuffs.

I'll fight to free him. I'll swear leaving Crippled Children's was all my idea. Godzilla with the help of JadeDragon_77 will get the charges dropped. But I'll never see Wiley again.

JadeDragon's theme song likes to play in my sleep; a music that is almost beyond hearing from a sound track found in Destoroyah. It's a song that sounds like the sun and moon are shining at the same time or a watery melody that guitarfish thrum.



Stephanie Dickinson has lived in Iowa, Texas, Louisiana, and now New York City. Her novel *Half Girl* is published by Spuyten Duyvil, as is her recently released novella *Lust Series*. *Corn Goddess* and *Road of Five Churches* are available from Rain Mountain Press. Her stories have been reprinted in *Best American Nonrequired Reading* and *New Stories from the South*, *Best of 2008* and *2009*. She is an associate editor at *Mudfish* and struggles mightily with a cubicle day job. Her website is www.stephaniedickinson.net.

Mark Aiello

Mourning the dinosaurs

My son mourns
the sudden passing
of the dinosaurs, never
noticing the past tense in his books,

until now.
The nature special
shows a meteor crashing
down, and he turns from the tv, stunned.

He delays
bedtime ten minutes
to ask why we can't see them
at better zoos than those we've visited.

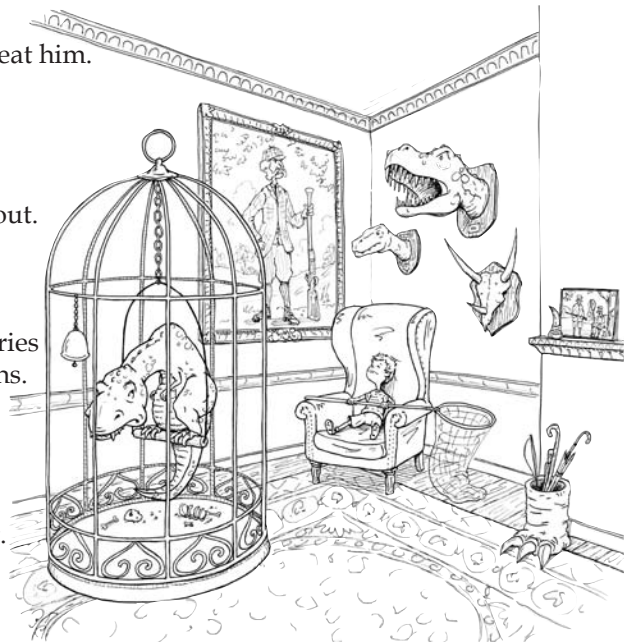
He wants one
for a pet, and thought
he'd get it when he turned six.
Just a small one, that wouldn't eat him.

Next, he asks
if there are pirates —
real ones, for us to battle.
I can see he wants to curse me out.

I can't say
that these are all lies,
of a sort, but they are, these stories
about fighting robots, or dragons.

We never see
bears or sharks at school,
on the subway, or in our tub,
so it's like they don't even exist.

A new world —
poorer for its lack
of witches, so I promise monsters
under his bed and kiss him goodnight.



Keith Robinson
www.keith-robinson.com

Calling card

It was so good to talk to you tonight—
not just the words themselves, though
it's true there was poetry in what you said.
But in the spaces between them, in the lack
of sound within the catch of your breath,
I heard something I had lost since I was a boy—
that void that filled my ears when the surf
would catch me and tumble my small body under
and cast me up on the beach, my father
frantic to find me wherever the waves had brought me.
Or in the sound of the big oak
outside the window above my bed, with the wind
gathering to turn every branch back, and then
back again—I heard those very pauses in your sighs
tonight on the phone. You called out my name
at that moment, three times,
like no one ever has, like I wanted
my father to as he ran up the beach looking for me,
like I wanted the oak to call me out and ask me to sleep
like a child in a nursery rhyme, inside its turning boughs,
and though I knew your breathing would start again
in just a second, I pressed my ear closer to the phone
so that I would hear nothing
but the ringing and chambered silence
you had placed between those words.



Mark Aiello's poetry has appeared in such publications as *Poetry*, *The Southampton Review*, *Nimrod*, *The Cortland Review*, and *The Atlanta Review*. Mark lives in New York City and works as an operations manager for a Fortune 250 organization.

James Balog

Extreme Ice Survey



James Balog, Iceland, Jökulsárlón, March 2005. Icebergs that originated in the vast expanse of the Vatnajökull icecap decay and melt in a tidal lagoon.



I believe photography is one of the most powerful mediums of communication ever invented. Too much of the time, it's squandered on trivialities. I'd like to see us aspire to the angels of our higher nature. If we can pull our minds and hearts together to use the medium to its full power, we can make an important impact on the world.

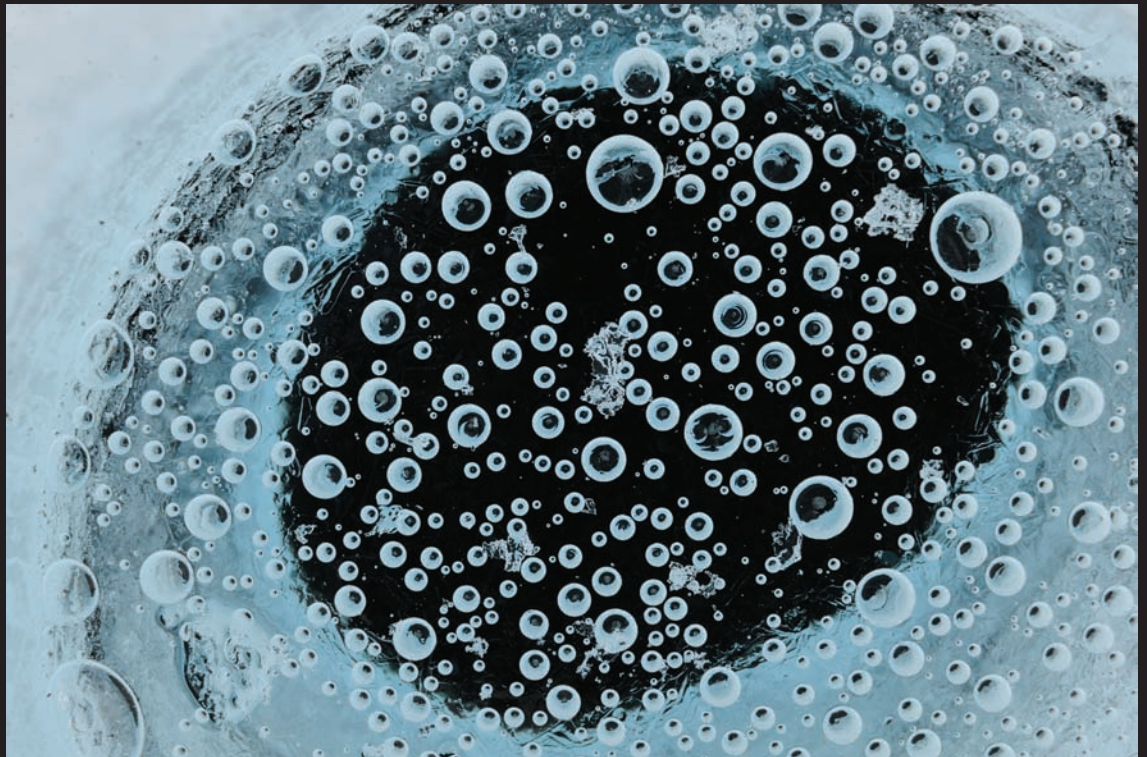
— James Balog



James Balog, Greenland, August 2007. Icebergs 200 feet tall, formerly part of the Greenland ice sheet, float into the North Atlantic Ocean, raising sea levels as they melt.



James Balog, meltwater lake and cryoconite, the Greenland ice sheet, July 2009. "The black splotches mingled with ice and meltwater, above, are cryoconite—powdery debris blown to Greenland from often-distant deserts, fires, coal plants, and diesel engines. Cryoconite reduces the ice's albedo, or reflectivity, allowing increased absorption of solar heat."—*National Geographic Magazine*, June 2010



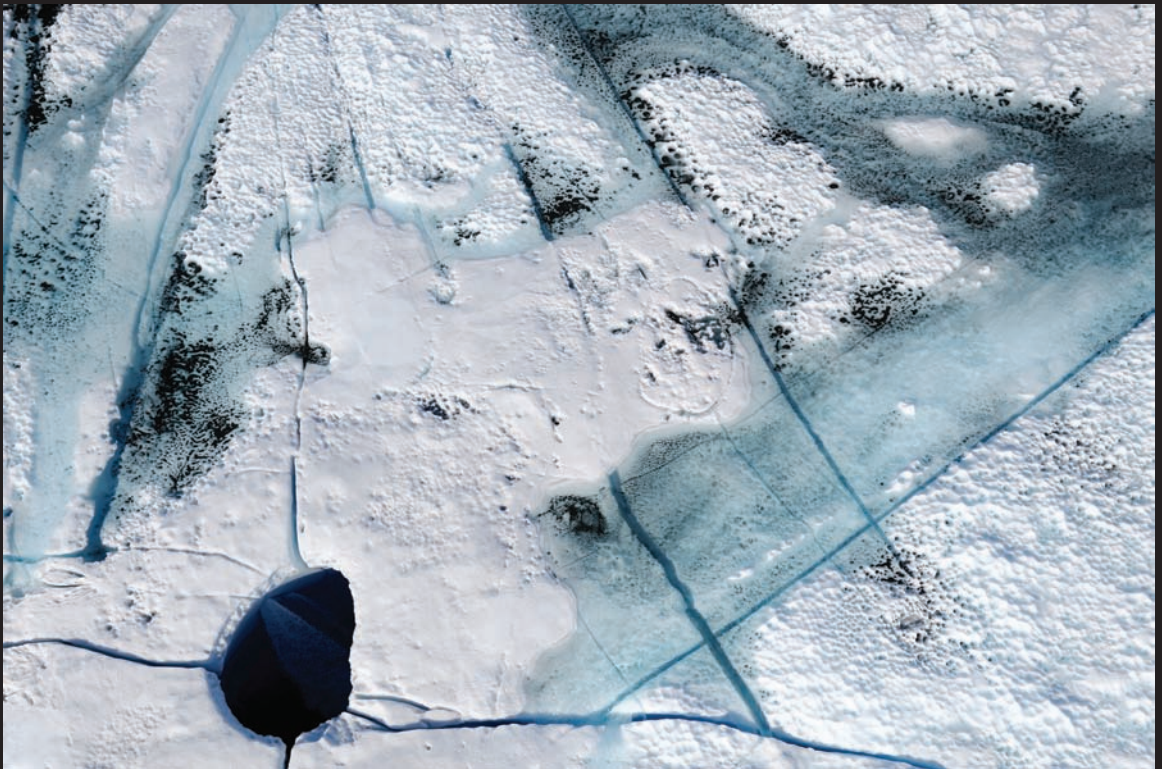
James Balog, cryoconite deposit, the Greenland ice sheet, July 2008. The cryoconite deposit, the 6-inch black circle, absorbs heat and melts into the surface of the ice sheet. The process releases bubbles of ancient air trapped in snowstorms 5,000-10,000 years ago.



James Balog, Switzerland, Rhone Glacier, August 2006. Once a tourist attraction for its reach into the Rhone River, the Rhone Glacier may attract another kind of tourist in the future: boaters. The glacier is now melting and forming a lake at its base. Experts estimate that most of the glaciers in Switzerland, like this one, will be gone by 2100 A.D. if the melting rate continues at the current pace of three percent per year.



James Balog, Survey Canyon, Greenland, July 2009. James Balog rappels into Survey Canyon on the Greenland ice sheet.



James Balog, the Greenland Ice Sheet, July 2008. Aerial photo of meltwater and moulin. Black deposit on the ice sheet is cryoconite.



James Balog, Store Glacier, Greenland, August 2007. Chunks from the Greenland ice sheet in the process of being flushed out to sea by Store Glacier's spring calving. These bergs are the tangible manifestation of the process by which the ice sheet is thinning and raising sea level.



James Balog, French Alps, Mer de Glace, August 2006. A tourist walkway is a graphic indicator of the glacier's thinning. In 1988, the platform on the top right touched the glacier's surface. During the next 18 years, officials added downward extensions of the walkway so that visitors could still touch the glacier.



James Balog, Jökulsárlón, Iceland, February 9, 2008. Wind-driven snow peppers an "ice diamond" on the beach.



James Balog, Columbia Glacier, Alaska, June 2006. Since 1984, the glacier has retreated over 10.5 miles, rapidly dumping vast amounts of ice into the sea. Glaciologists consider Columbia to be a worrisome indicator of what Greenland and Antarctica's gigantic tidewater outlet glaciers might do, and may in fact already be doing.



James Balog, Columbia Glacier, Alaska, 2006. As glaciers retreat, they also get thinner. The demarcation line between the green vegetation high on the ridge and the bare soil and rock below marks the "trimline," the highest level the glacier reached in 1984. The depth of deflation is greater than the height of New York's Empire State Building (approx. 1200 feet).



James Balog, Greenland ice sheet, July 2009. Extreme Ice Survey field assistant, Adam LeWinter on the northeast rim of Birthday Canyon, atop a feature called "Moab." The black deposit in the bottom of the channel is cryoconite. Birthday Canyon is approximately 150 feet deep.



James Balog, near the Ilulissat Isfjord, Greenland, March 2008. A massive iceberg broken off the Greenland ice sheet, surrounded by lily pads of sea ice, in the process of breaking up at the edge of Disko Bay.

Most of the time, art and science stare at each other across a gulf of mutual incomprehension. Art, of course, looks at the world through the psyche, the emotions – even the unconscious at times – and of course the aesthetic. Science tends to look at the world through the rational, the quantitative – things that can be measured and described – but it gives art a terrific context for knowledge and understanding.

-James Balog



Svavar Jonatansson

Julie Rich

Glacial Speed, Global Warming, Global Warning—

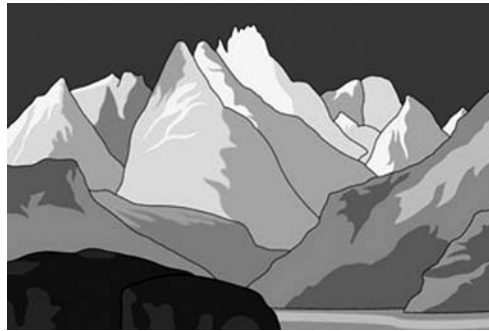
A Conversation with James Balog



Andrea Rounkles

PRELUDE

For nearly 3 decades, internationally acclaimed nature photographer James Balog has created stunning images that move the viewer beyond the photograph into a mindset of reflection on the dynamics of nature. His work has been shown at over a hundred museums and galleries throughout the world. Balog's innovative photographic work has earned him several honors, including the prestigious 2010 Heinz award that recognizes extraordinary achievements and the 2010 Missouri School of Journalism's Honor Medal for Distinguished Service. Other awards include Aspen Institute's Visual Arts & Design Award, The Leica Medal of Excellence, a premier honor for nature and science photography, and the International League of Conservation Photographers League Award. In 1996, Balog became the first photographer commissioned by the U.S. Postal Service to create a full set of stamps. Balog has authored seven books, including *Extreme Ice Now: Vanishing Glaciers* and *Changing Climate: A Progress Report*, *Tree: A New Vision of the American Forest* and *Survivors: A New Vision of Endangered Wildlife*. He is the subject of two documentaries: *A Redwood Grows in Brooklyn* (2006) and *Chasing Ice*, shown at the 2012 Sundance Film Festival. His work on glacier dynamics has been highlighted in the *National Geographic* magazine in June 2010 and June 2007. Many other major magazines, including the *Audubon*, *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and *Outside* have also published his work. His latest project, the *Extreme Ice Survey* (EIS), is an innovative approach to studying glaciers using time-lapse video and photography creating a visual record of climate change and its impact. The EIS is part of a larger mission called the *Earth Vision Trust*, which uses a variety of media to illustrate the anthropogenic impact on the Earth. Balog's new book, *ICE: A New Vision of Glaciers in a Changing World*, will be released Fall 2012.



In the following interview Balog discusses his background and the transformation he went through upon discovering that graduate school had placed him on a path that disconnected him from his true passion, nature. He gives us a glimpse of a scientist and artist who is committed to his work no matter the odds. Balog provides insight into the genesis of his *Extreme Ice Survey* project, which is helping to enlighten both the public and polar scientists on the dynamic nature of glaciers and how quickly they respond to climate changes. He discusses in detail the idiosyncrasies of glaciers and the hidden costs of market economies, and why it is so difficult for governments to respond to anthropogenic activities that negatively impact our environment. This interview took place at the Student Union Senate Room at Weber State University in Ogden, Utah, on November 19, 2010.

You have a master's degree in geomorphology from the University of Colorado?

Yes. I was actually in the geography department, but I refer to it as geology and/or geomorphology because people have a better fix on that. It was the geologic and physical side of geography that interested me.

So you went from physical geography/geomorphology to your chosen profession of photography. Why did you make that transition, or did you blend the two together?

I wasn't clever enough to actually plan on blending them together. I was working on my master's thesis on the Big Thompson River Flood, a flash flood that came down the Front Range of Colorado in 1976. I had completed my field work, done all the measurements, had my big stack of data punch cards, and was doing multivariate analysis correlating one element of the flood with another element. I was writing up the analysis, pouring over the numbers day after day and suddenly I decided that quantitative science was not the way I wanted to engage with nature. It was pretty clear to me that the future of modern science was going to have a heavy quantitative component and probably a lot of computer modeling, which I couldn't care less about. I had gone into graduate school thinking I would do environmental impact work and consulting. This was fresh and exciting to me because back in the seventies the NEPA [National Environmental Protection Act] was in its infancy so that seemed like a lot of fun, but I thought, "Oh to hell with it! If I'm going to end up being a statistician, I'm out of this."

Since the quantitative science didn't exactly excite you, what was your next course of action?

I had been doing photography relatively seriously and was an amateur, but thought, "I could be engaged with nature and exploring the environment a lot better with a camera than I could with computer statistics." So I decided while working on my thesis that I would become a photographer instead.

But you consider yourself more than a photographer, correct?

I realized years ago that my core activity was the creation of ideas. It wasn't the creation of pictures. The pictures are the secondary product, if you will, but in any case they are the manifestation of the ideas. I start with an idea then determine how I want to tackle it, which of course evolves over time. The beginning, middle, and end of these big projects often look very different. Nevertheless, I start with some

I believe that photography has a unique role to play in helping the human animal frame its perceptions of the world and in revealing the world around it. I think that a lot of the power of photography, as a medium, is squandered on frivolous activity.

creative ideas, some intellectual ideas, some understanding of the landscape and ecology, and then the photographs grow out of that. I feel quite strongly that I am a producer of ideas rather than a photographer. In fact, I'm engaged right now with a prospective business opportunity with some other nature photographer friends, and the more we are talking about this, the more I realize these photographers are still immersed in the mindset of producing rectangular images that hang on walls and are then sold to people. That's not the core of what I do. I believe that photography has a unique role to play in helping the human animal frame its perceptions of

the world and in revealing the world around it. I think that a lot of the power of photography, as a medium, is squandered on frivolous activity, just as the vast majority of words that have been typed in the world have been squandered on frivolous activity.

Let's discuss your latest project, the Extreme Ice Survey. Can you give us some background on this endeavor?

It really came about because of a 2005 story in *The New Yorker*, authored by Betsy Colbert who was writing the piece and I was asked to be the photographer. I wound up in Iceland looking at a glacier. The

Icelanders have a unique connection with their landscape. For about 75 or 80 years there has been a whole cadre of Icelanders who keep a written and pictorial record of how the Icelandic glaciers are evolving. There are many dozens of glaciers around Iceland and each one essentially gets adopted by a family or a person. Someone's ancestor might have been the original glacier spotter for glacier X; that tradition is passed down

to the son and then the granddaughter and so on. Record keeping comes out of the ancient saga tradition of the Vikings, who first settled Iceland. They have been keeping written records of Icelandic history—the sagas—ever since they first landed in the late ninth century AD. Their little Lutheran churches have these big leatherbound books that record births, marriages, and deaths, demonstrating that they are very attached to their sagas. As part of this attachment to sagas they started keeping record books in the 1920s and 30s in the form of families that were glacier spotters.

Give us more insight into these Icelandic glacial records and the spotters.

The ones I've seen are bound as loose-leaf volumes with pictures of what the glacier looked like in a particular year, measurements of where the glacier was, measurements of how the glacier changed or didn't change since the last year. In October, at the end of the summer melt season, people go out to the glacier they're responsible for and record that year's saga of visuals and measurements. At the Sólheimajökull glacier, I was standing on a hill looking down at the glacier below. I looked across the valley and saw these big

gray poles hammered into the soil where the glacier spotters had marked the terminus position each October in preceding years. I stood there amazed. The poles started way down the valley and every year the poles were marching back up the valley 25 meters, 50 meters, or 100 meters. I was thinking, "Are you kidding? That's how much the glacier has changed in just ten years?" I've been around many glaciers for a long time, both as

a mountaineer and a photographer, but had never seen a place where glaciers had been systematically measured and marked, and where you could get a sense of the landscape changing so much in such a short time.

What further insights on glaciers did this dramatic scene provide for you?

We humans are programmed to think of glaciers as big enduring features of the landscape. The term glacial pace means that they don't do anything; they just sit there like big icy blobs. Well, they are actually dynamic fea-

We humans are programmed to think of glaciers as big enduring features of the landscape. The term glacial pace means that they don't do anything; they just sit there like big icy blobs. Well, they are actually dynamic features with a life of their own, and a response to the forces of the world around them.

tures with a life of their own, and a response to the forces of the world around them. So when I am seeing all of this in 2005 it was really a revelation, and I carried the idea in my head for a better part of a year and felt I had to do more.

Were you able to find a forum for your idea of portraying glacial dynamics?

I called an editor friend at *National Geographic* and told him what I had seen and said, "You know, we really ought to do a story that traces how a glacier looks in the spring versus how it looks in the fall." With repeat glacial photography, as it had been done for many years, an image, say, from 1910 would be put side by side with one taken 50 or 75 years later. You might look at it and say, "Yeah ok, it changed a lot, but big deal, that's what glaciers do over the course of time." What I suggested to *National Geographic* was, if we could do it April to October, within a very short timeframe, and see this landscape change in that block of time, that would be much more arresting because everybody can remember what they were doing in April, more or less. You remember going to the little league games with Johnny, and then you remember in October you were going to the soccer games. Then you think, "Wait a minute, that just happened in my lifetime." It changes the whole perception of the viewer's connection to geologic time and history; history would not be happening in some remote pe-



riod in the past or future, but right now in your own life. So the *National Geographic* editor, Dennis Dimick, thought it was a great idea. He sent me to Iceland. I spent two weeks nailing down all these different repeat photography positions around the edge of the glacier. When I came back home he said, "You will still be going back in the fall to do the repeat shots. But we have a much bigger idea now; we are going to do a whole global feature on changing glaciers and we would you like to shoot it." The project took me to Greenland, Bolivia, the French and Swiss Alps, Montana

and Alaska. I would only be at each site for days or weeks and would only be getting a single snapshot in time. Halfway through the assignment I realized that somehow I would have to return to many of these same places in the future. So I started to systematically mark my camera

positions. Even so, when we began editing the pictures in the fall of 2006, I thought, "I'm through with glaciers, I don't want to do glaciers anymore, the entire year was spent doing glaciers, that's enough." But the more I looked at them the more I realized that I was in the midst of a tremendously pivotal historic moment. It offered an incredible opportunity, as a photographer, to say something about time, history, mortality, and human impact on nature. I couldn't let it pass; I would just have to keep pursuing the glaciers, somehow, some way.

So, how did this play out and what was your next move?

Well, the editing was done, the layouts were done, we already had all the sample spreads on the wall, and one morning I saw John Francis. John is in charge of *National Geographic* grants for field research and I asked if we could talk about this idea I had to re-visit all these glaciers. He wanted to know how I was going to shoot it, and I said, "Mostly I just want to go back and do single frame annual repeat photography, but I think I should do some time lapse too." He wanted to know how many time-lapse cameras, and I responded that I figured it would be just two or three. He said it was a great idea and that he could help fund the project. So I went home happy. Within about three weeks, two time-lapse cameras in my head had turned into 25 and I thought, "What's the big deal, I'll figure it out." (Laughter) I knew it was no trivial plan, and I knew I needed Nikon to come on board and donate a truckload of cameras and lenses. It's a lot to ask for—a donation of 25 camera bodies and 45 lenses—especially since I had no idea how the pictures would actually turn out. They rose to the challenge, though, for which I am eternally grateful. When certain ideas catch me I just have this blind optimism that it's all going to work out fine. So in my mind I said, "All right, I'm going forward and I'll worry about the details later." Then there was the minor problem of cash—a few hundred thousand dollars worth—and then there was the minor problem of how we would actually build systems that could sit out in 150 mph winds and temperatures of 30 to 40 degrees below zero (F). There was an endless, endless, endless procession of technical details that I had to deal with. Each one seemed to get harder

and harder. Some seemed impossible. But with every passing day I realized that I was committed, that too much was on the line, that I somehow had to make the whole thing work. I couldn't turn back. I had told too many people I was doing it, Nikon was committed and I still didn't have enough money to fund the fieldwork, but I just kept going, somehow believing it would work out—and incredibly, it did.

Great ideas force us forward. The idea takes on a life of its own and we become the facilitator. So, moving on to your experiences you've had with the Extreme Ice Survey, what has been your most amazing experience or discovery that you've had with this project?

The single most amazing thing that happened almost right away was how much these glaciers changed in a short period of time. I am still amazed even to this day. When I cobbled the first time lapse sequences together, I kept thinking, "Is this real? Is this

possible? How can so much ice just go away?" It was a real revelation. By combining the pictures with measurements some of our team members made, particularly Jason Box of Ohio State, we discovered that these glaciers respond to weather on a very short time scale. They are not sitting there for centuries waiting to react slowly to climate. They react daily to weather—and the accumulated impact from the climate can be seen on a yearly, decadal, or century scale. Glaciers are very dynamic, active creatures. I've come to see them as almost like living animals, responding to the light and cold and heat around them.

Glaciers respond to weather on a very short time scale. They are not sitting there for centuries waiting to react slowly to climate. They react daily to weather. . . I've come to see them as almost like living animals, responding to the light and cold and heat around them.

As you have been going out talking to various groups about the Extreme Ice Survey, have your efforts changed perceptions about climate change?

Over and over again I find people captivated by the evidence. You know, the visual evidence grabs people's hearts in a very powerful way that the quantitative evidence doesn't. You can write scientific reports until you're blue in the face, and talk to specialists in the scientific world, and occasionally there will be a press release that a university will put out, and it will result in a small Associated Press article that is six column inches long. But that's as far

as the public awareness goes. The pictures can go further, perhaps last longer, and can really impact people's hearts and minds. In part it's because the eyes are the most powerful sensory organs we have. But it's also because if you anchor the emotional expression, which is what art is, in a context of rational understanding, which is what science is, and you meld those two things, you are actually harvesting from both sides of the human brain. You are putting both parts of our psyche together.

I've met many scientists who are frustrated that their scientific knowledge has gone as far as it can go. They are not persuading society by doing more science, at least not for the moment. Many are very aware that more convincing evidence is necessary. That's where the Extreme Ice Survey comes in. We are bringing a different way of talking about climate change, and the art and science together can have a great impact.

I haven't seen anything as powerful as what you've been doing to get the message out to the general public on the impact we are having on the planet with regard to climate change.

I knew we would be doing outreach as a major part of this project right from the beginning. But I really couldn't have imagined its heart-stopping, emotional, arresting quality. I just started doing what I had to do and good things happened.

Getting into some of the dynamics of the glaciers themselves, could you describe the process at work that is speeding up Greenland's ice cap movement? From what I've read, meltwater finds its way to the bedrock and lubricates the seaward advance of the glacial ice, which then breaks off and melts in the ocean. Is this what you've observed in the field?

Our crew is observing parts of that. When you knit together the research of different field workers with our efforts, yes, that's the basic story. The changes in the global atmosphere have created Arctic-wide warming,

which affects the amount of meltwater on the Greenland ice sheet. That in turn transfers heat down through the ice, changing, to some degree, the flow characteristics of the ice and lubricating the glaciers where they touch the bedrock. The other thing that is going on is the change in ocean circulation, with a lot of warm water now bathing the southern part of Greenland. When you have that warm water

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bathing the underside of these glaciers it speeds up the ice flow as well. So these two things together, atmospheric warming and the increased sea surface temperature, are the big agents driving the accelerated movement of Greenland's ice cap.

Could you talk about glacial moulins for our readers? Comment on what they are, how they are created, and the impact they are having on the ice.

Moulin means grinding mill in French. Imagine old-fashioned windmills with a big grinding wheel turning to pulverize the grain, that's what "moulin" is meant to suggest. Meltwater flows over the glacier's surface in drainage patterns that are imprinted into its topography. These drainage patterns go back a long time. The Danes mapped out a section of the Greenland Ice Sheet in the early eighties; the surface imprint or pattern of little lakes and drainage channels is still pretty much the way it was almost thirty years ago. Meltwater collects in the lakes and flows through channels across the surface of the glacier. Eventually it reaches a weak spot in the ice structure, such as a crevasse, and drops down into it. The weight of the water—more or less what engineers call the "hydraulic head"—can force open the base of the crevasse. So the meltwater might drop through the crevasse, meet up with a pond or a river, travel laterally for a bit, and then drop again down another shaft. It continues travelling toward the bedrock and might descend 3,000 vertical feet or more until it gets there. The big moulins stay in the same place year after year. The meltwater runs over the surface and crashes

down into the hole, eroding away the sides of the moulin, creating huge sinkholes that get bigger and bigger.

What evidence do you have that indicates this type of network or maze of channels exists in the glacier?

A couple of summers ago a friend of mine dropped a camera on a float held by a Kevlar line down a moulin and let this little video camera bob down through the rapids. It created a hard picture to look at due to its motion and you have to love ice to really see much charm in this sort of thing. But he had placed little flashlights on it, and you could see the camera going down these rapids through the chamber and down through little tubes and channels where it opened up into a huge cavern and then dropped down into another hole again.



Andrea Rounkles

Another question regarding global warming: could the increased global

temperatures be causing some of the ice sheets to thicken as this relatively warmer air, holding more water vapor, brings greater precipitation and heavier snowfall on the ice?

In some places, yes. According to the computer models it probably is going to happen in Scandinavia. With Greenland there is sort of a continental divide where you find the high point of the ice that's been receiving an increase of accumulation, but the changes in the flow rate of glaciers off Greenland is definitely not connected with this increased accumulation. Maybe over time they will be, but that is some time in the future.

Could you talk about the difference between the glaciers and ice sheets in the northern hemisphere versus the southern hemisphere with regard to their physical aspect or their rate of retreat?

The Antarctic Peninsula is one of the fastest warming places on the planet. Its temperature has gone up somewhere around 5 to 7 degrees Fahrenheit in the past 50 years. That seems to have caused the collapse of ice shelves up and down the Antarctic Peninsula. The next section of Antarctica as you go south from the peninsula is called West Antarctica. To the uneducated eye, this region looks to be a few mountains sticking up above the ice sheet with solid ice everywhere. In fact, it's a vast archipelago of islands coated with ice that is floating on water. One of the huge issues in modern polar science is whether or not these glaciers are being undermined by changes in the water temperature. Late breaking research says that, yes, they apparently are. The huge question mark, which will decide the fate of coastlines around the world, is how much glacial de-stabilization is happening, and how fast. If there is a doubling, tripling, quadrupling or more of the ice outflow, because of an inherent basal destabilization, that's a vast amount of ice that will pour out of Antarctica. The estimates of sea level rise would change with acceleration of the ice flow out of Antarctica, and it could occur over a shockingly shorter period of time. That's why there is a lot of money being spent on carefully watching that part of the world.

Please explain to our readers the concept of Arctic amplification and why global warming is not equally distributed throughout the earth.

Research from NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] demonstrates how much warming is concentrated in the Arctic region. When you have this big cap of ice sitting on top of the world, it reflects away 90% of the incoming heat from the sun. When you take that ice away, instead of reflecting 90% of the heat, the sun is now looking down on dark sea water that absorbs 90% of the heat.

The less ice you have, the more absorption of heat you have. The more absorption of heat you have, the less ice you have. That feedback loop affects the warmth of the air above the sea water and ice, creating a phenomenon called Arctic amplification, which is making this region

warm much faster than the rest of the world. Greenland, for example, has warmed 4.5 degrees (F) just in the past two decades. That's a tremendous change.

Back to the climate change issue. Scientists talk about sea level rising roughly 3 feet by 2100, yet for the vast majority of people that is such a long way off and politicians are presently grappling with short term problems of nearly double digit unemployment and a sagging economy, which pushes climate issues off their radar screen. Then you have other people saying they do not believe in climate change or that it is just part of a natural cycle, or that warming is due to sun spots. What is your response?



Andrea Rounkles

Well, my first response is to emphasize over and over and over again that we are now beyond the range of natural variation in terms of atmospheric chemistry, and the temperature of the atmosphere is in the process of also going way beyond the range of natural variability. The only way that you can explain how we got to where we are is through burning fossil fuels. No climate change skeptic, whether it's some harebrained senator in Washington, and there are some from certain states that I could easily name but I won't (*Laughter*), or a paid lobbyist, nobody ever comes up with a credible explanation for how and why we got so beyond the range of natural variation. They will bob and weave and try and twitch and turn every possible way except to deal with or explain that one fact of being at 390 parts per million of CO₂ right now compared to a natural peak of 280 parts per million. They have no way to make that difference of 110 ppm go away. It's fossil fuel burning, period. And the physics and chemistry of the atmosphere are such that it will inevitably change the distribution of heat on the earth and in so doing change weather patterns. It can't be avoided. It can't be negotiated away, it can't be willed away, it can't be lobbied away, and it can't be wished away.

So this vitally important issue is something that should be at the head of our government's agenda.

Yes, it should be at the first part of our agenda, but faced with short-term crises, typically economic ones, long-term thinking gets shuffled aside and that's a mistake because today's long-term problems become tomorrow's short-term problems, but in a much larger sense. What we are not very good at doing in profit-driven democracies is thinking long-term. That is due partly to the fact that

we are conditioned to short-term financial profits, which is tied to our political planning cycle, which is oriented very short-term, and here in the United States we just don't have a good way of thinking very far over the horizon. It's actually one of the tragedies of our time, and I don't think we've got the systemic structural capability of thinking long-term, but that's what we've got to do. One way we will succeed at this is with entrepreneurs, scientists, and engineers who are presently creating new, green technologies that can create profits and in so doing are reducing the carbon load out there in the world, and when it's in somebody's short-term profit interest to do X and Y and Z, then good things will hap-

pen that can have these wonderful long-term benefits. Look, we've got a terribly uneven playing field economically and the free market tries to pretend that it's all level. Bullshit. The hydrocarbon industry is subsidized half a dozen

different ways; the people that are prone to be griping about government subsidies and government favoritism are the same ones getting it.

Oh, we can go on about this forever, but another point is that the energy in our economy is not properly priced. When we pay the price at the pump and pay for the cost of electricity, we are not paying prices that represent the true costs of that commodity. We are paying prices at the pump that do not reflect the military, environmental, and health costs of burning fossil fuels. Because those costs are not attached to the price at the pump, we have a flawed impression of what energy sources truly cost. We pay for those costs through *externalized* costs—economists call them externalized. They are not in the price of the commodity. They are distributed at large throughout society and they are paid for through income tax, and that's too

Greenland, for example, has warmed 4.5 degrees (F) just in the past two decades. That's a tremendous change.

bad. I think if those externalized costs were compressed into the commodities we'd say, "Oh, we're not really paying \$2.79 a gallon for gas; we are actually paying \$4.25 and, oh my god, that's really expensive—we ought to look for alternative fuels!" The fossil fuel industry is very keen to mask that and keep us focused on the fact that we can't go for any other energy sources because it's too expensive, that it's not in our best interest, when in fact it is. We are already paying those higher prices—we just don't know it because we are getting bad market signals. So it's a big complicated can of worms. You keep pulling these worms out of the can and realize all of this stuff is connected; none of these components of this entire mess are separate and individual. They all weave together and it keeps me awake at night thinking about this stuff, but that's the way it is. I was awake last night instead of sleeping, thinking about all kinds of things (*Laughter*).

*I can tell (*Laughter*). How can people support your cause? As this interview is published and goes out to the various schools and readers, they might think, "What can I be doing?" How can they support your great cause?*

Well, we can frankly always use donations.

And that's through your website [www.extremeicesurvey.org]?

Yes, the website. The Extreme Ice Survey has a mechanism for making donations. But what really matters is people saying, "How can I help?" Even if it's something as banal as turning off a light switch and pulling a laptop charger out of the wall, good, do that. Change light bulbs. Do what you can with your cars. Go to your electric bill and check the box that says, yes, I want to pay an extra tiny little premium for renewable energy supplies. All that stuff counts. It helps to set the markets, and whether we like it or not we are in a market economy. It's not a free market economy the way people like to pretend, it's a manipulated market economy, but it's still a market economy. So when you check off that box that says, hey, I'm willing to pay another eleven dollars and fifty cents a month for my home electric bill, then that utility company says, "Okay, fine, we'll build another wind turbine." If enough people do it, they build volume in the market place and that eventually will turn our Titanic in a different direction, which is otherwise in the process of a slow motion catastrophe. Don't just do one thing. Take one step and then another and another and keep on going—and make sure everybody you can influence in your world does it too.



Julie Rich is Associate Professor of Geography at Weber State University, in Ogden, Utah, where she teaches natural environments, weather and climate, arid lands, Utah studies, and advanced regional field studies. Dr. Rich earned her D. Phil. in Geography at St. John's College, University of Oxford, Oxford, England. Her current research interests include arid environments and environmental change with research concentrating on Quaternary paleoclimates, paleoenvironments, and geochronology using optical (luminescence) dating methods. Her research has been included in journals such as *Quaternary Science Reviews*, *Aeolian Research*, *Zeitschrift für Geomorphologie*, *Radiation Measurements*, and *Current Research in the Pleistocene*.

Eric Paul Shaffer

Maybe

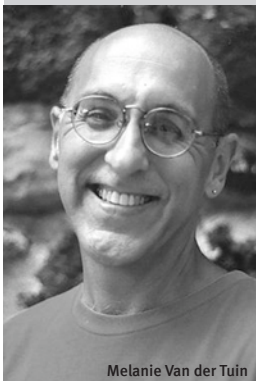
Every second upcountry Sunday morning, she cuts
my hair in the tilting driveway beneath our little piece
of sky: it just must be done. Gray above, wet grass.

Rain fell all through the night, and when I dressed
to lug trashcans to the street, I saw not a single light
in any direction. Fog muffled my steps and the stars

and all beyond gray haze. Ours was the only light
in the world. The little hair I have falls to the grass
and concrete like scales from weathered stone, darker

on the ground than on my skull. Now, the rain starts
again. A few drops rattle the roof. Then, all at once,
the tin rings, and the horizon shrinks to a silver circle

girding the house, the car, and us. A butterfly passes,
bobbing through the downpour as though the rain
means nothing, and maybe it does, maybe it does.



Melanie Van der Tuin

Eric Paul Shaffer is author of *Lāhaina Noon*, *Portable Planet*, and *Living at the Monastery*, *Working in the Kitchen*. His poetry appears in *Slate*, *North American Review*, *Sun Magazine*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, and *Poetry New Zealand*. *Burn & Learn* (2009) is his first novel. He teaches at Honolulu Community College.

Tom Miller Juvik

Salmon Feed

Steven found his father-in-law in the workshop unwrapping a pair of good-sized, half-thawed salmon swaddled in white paper and masking tape. Surrounded by woodworking equipment and shelves laden with rusted paint cans, Thor Torgenrud's butcher-block seemed a baleful place for food preparation. In a nearby corner, an ancient stand-up freezer clunked and wheezed. This was where the old ferryboat captain stored the fish he reeled in from the waters of the Pacific and the venison he murdered in the cold emerald forests of the Olympic Mountains. The freezer was always full; the butcher-block indelibly stained.

"Sorry I'm running late." Steven remained in the doorway as he took a theatrical glance at his watch. "If we leave now, we can still make it to the airbase by five."

The older man squinted at the bright rectangle of sunlight framing his bearded, bespectacled son-in-law. "Hey, hey, how's ol' Steve-a-Reno doing today?"

"Nothing like Seattle gridlock to cheer the soul. Ready to roll?"

Thor Torgenrud took a long swallow from a tumbler filled with ice and whiskey, leaving his son-in-law to twist in the wind. Steven hated it when the bastard played him like this, and he hated being called "Steve-a-Reno." But it was better than facing the alternative. In private, his wife's family referred to him as "Professor Know-It-All." Whenever Thor was feeling particularly contemptuous, he addressed Steven as "Perfesser," a knife between his ribs.

The old man emerged from his whiskey with a gasp, slapping the half-empty mug down on the counter. He ripped open the



butcher paper, and his bulging Nordic blue eyes put Steven in mind of Captain Ahab—that moment when lightning flashes through the old whaler’s skull, his brain consumed by megalomania.

Believing that his question must have drowned beneath a sea of Jack Daniels, Steven gave it another shot. “Lars is still scheduled to arrive at five, right?”

Thor began dressing out the salmon, a pungent stench beginning to inundate the workshop. “Last report, he’s running a little late.”

Steven bit his bottom lip, teeth scraping the edge of his graying goatee as he watched his father-in-law trim away a layer of pale, green-gray flesh from a filet. Flies formed a hungry tornado above the old man’s white, wispy hair. Steven could not help but wonder if these salmon weren’t the tainted result of one of Thor Torgenrud’s notorious forays to Westport. Steven had heard the scandalized whispers of his wife and her sister often enough to know that Thor’s well-known lust for the wily King Salmon provided cover for an ongoing affair with a middle-aged cocktail waitress.

“Bottom line, Thor, you don’t really know what time we’re picking up Lars, do you?”

The old man sliced another layer of necrotic flesh from the fish. “That’s the military for you. Hurry up and wait.”

Steven’s shoulders filled with a sigh, and for a moment he more closely resembled the defensive end who lettered at Pacific Lutheran University than an associate professor of American literature at Seattle Pacific. The huge breath he took turned out to be a major mistake as the fish stench burned a path deep into his sinus cavities. He covered his nose with a cupped hand. “Jesus, Thor, are you certain about those salmon? They smell a bit...off.”

“Trim away the freezer burn, she’ll be fine.” He slashed at the flies with his filet knife. “No one puts on a salmon feed like Thor Torgenrud. Nossirree, buddy. Say, there, Steve-a-Reno, how about fetching me the marinade from the kitchen.”

When he stepped out of the shop, Steven paused at the top of the steps and pulled in a full breath of Puget Sound air. A dozen cars belonging to three generations of Torgenruds lined the curb and filled the bottom half of the triple-width driveway that separated the workshop from the house. A massive charcoal barbecue smoldered and fumed next to a portable, fold-up camp table in front of the garage. Two picnic tables shaded by umbrellas were set up on the lawn. Thor’s thirty-four-foot Winnebago was parked in the breezeway between the garage and workshop, a beached whale on wheels. Once, when Steven’s wife Lynn was helping her mother clean the RV, she found a used condom beneath the bed. Lynn had shoved it into her pocket to prevent her mother from seeing it. Now, as Steven trudged toward the house, Torgenrud grandchildren scampered in and out of the Winnebago whapping each other with plastic, inflated baseball bats as though the thing were an amusement park funhouse.

When he reached the porch, Lynn was just coming out the door. "Do not, I repeat, do *not* touch the fish," he said in a hush. "Make sure the kids eat ham."

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, Steven. No, Steven. Anything you say, Steven."

Despite her Norwegian roots, Lynn was a heavy-set woman with milk chocolate eyes and a faint cinnamon hue to her skin. The joke around the fair-haired Torgenrud household was that when she was a newborn, a nursery attendant at Tacoma General Hospital mistakenly sent the family home with a Puyallup Indian child.

"Believe me, Honey, that salmon is on the verge of turning to fertilizer." Steven shook his head. "There ought to be a law against octogenarians owning freezers."

Their six-year-old ran out the door and hugged her mother's leg. "Is Uncle Lars here?"

Lynn smoothed her daughter's strawberry blonde bangs, lips budding with tenderness. "Soon, Marta, soon."

"Listen, your old man is so blitzed..." Steven began, but when Lynn pressed a finger to her lips, he lowered his voice to a harsh whisper. "I don't think Lars is flying in from Andrews at all."

"My God, Steven, why would my father lie about a thing like that?"

A silver Acura eased up to the curb, and Marta went scampering across the lawn with arms spread in anticipation of a hug. "Auntie Holly!"

"Ever since your folks drove their RV back to Virginia to visit Lars and Susan, your old man's been acting more deranged than ever. I put nothing past him. Nothing."

"You're the one who's deranged, Steven."

"Just call Susan, that's all I ask. Find out if your fly-boy brother will be arriving before or after we all succumb to E. Coli."

Lynn pushed past him and rushed into the open arms of her platinum-haired sister. Holly's most recent boy-toy looked on from just behind her, tugging at the curved bill of his black, omnipresent Oakland Raiders baseball cap, a thirsty smile creasing his face.

Steven entered the house and immediately found himself caught in a maelstrom of Torgenrud relatives, including an uncle he had thought was dead. All of them seemed to be slurping hard liquor and slugging down pickled herring in celebration of the imminent arrival of the decorated Gulf War fighter pilot, Lieutenant Colonel Lars Torgenrud. Steven wended his way across the house, nodding greetings to one in-law after another as he followed the sweet scent of smoked ham.

In the kitchen, he found Aunt Elvina rapping her knuckles against maple cabinets and muttering to dead relatives. Steven had picked her up at the Lutheran Home in Tacoma on the way in, Lynn surrendering the front seat and sitting in back with their two daughters. Halfway across the Narrows Bridge, Aunt Elvina announced that she was going to walk the rest of the way because Steven was driving too fast. She

opened the passenger door of the Blazer and had one foot braced on the running board before he pulled her back inside. Lynn had promised she would talk someone else into taking her back to the Lutheran Home after dinner.

A saucepan half-filled with thick red liquid simmered on the stove—Thor’s legendary marinade. Steven hoped it contained some ingredient that would render them immune to botulism. As he searched for a basting brush, something whispered against his elbow—Aunt Elvina’s fingertips.

“Why won’t you answer me, Harold?” Her eyes seemed to spin behind inch-thick glasses. “Say *something*.”

“I’m Steven, Lynn’s husband.” He averted his eyes from the gray whiskers that peppered her chin, focusing on the window over the sink. The lowering sun glinted against the wake left by a yacht churning toward the mouth of the Harbor. “Sorry to break it to you, Aunt Elvina, but Harold’s been ‘sleeping the Big Sleep’ for about eight years now.”

She opened the cupboard and began rearranging water glasses. “Shhhh.”

Saucepan in one hand and a can of Rainier in the other, Steven made his way out of the house, leaning forward as though battling his way through a fierce windstorm. By the time he reached the workshop, Lynn’s father had trimmed away the discoloration and was now cutting rivulets into the red-orange filets to allow the marinade to permeate. Steven set the saucepan on the butcher-block, then retreated to the doorway. He popped open his beer.

“Really, Steve-a-Reno, I don’t understand why you waste your time drinking beer when we got plenty of hard stuff in the house. Mix yourself a highball and be somebody.”

Steven took a long sip, emerging with a gasp.

“Guess my liquor ain’t good enough for you.” The older man grunted to himself, brushing marinade into the flesh of the salmon. “What do you and your perfesser pals prefer? Chivas Regal? Maker’s Mark?”

Steven rolled his eyes toward a corner of the room as though sharing a joke with someone hiding in the shadows. “Mainly we shoot heroin.”

When Steven returned to the house, he decided that it would be wise to do some mingling. He did not want to spend the entire journey back to Seattle listening to Lynn itemize the various charges of rudeness her family inevitably lodged against him. Conducting himself like a foreign diplomat, he made certain to touch base with each and every relative. He had almost run out of amiability by the time he noticed his sister-in-law’s prospective third husband/victim standing by himself on the deck studying the shoreline. Steven headed outside to put the icing on the cake he was baking.

“So, Ted, the family hasn’t scared you off yet?” He fished a Coors Light out of a nearby cooler.

"No way, Dude." He tossed his empty beer can over the railing and popped open a new one.

Suddenly an eagle came swooping over the shallows. A flock of ducks flapped low over the water, and when the great bird rose skyward, its talons grasped a plump mallard. The duck's webbed feet paddled against the thin air as its predator spirited it into the treetops.

"Dude," remarked Ted.

Steven found his wife sitting at the dining room table with her sisters and aunts while Lynn's dough-faced mother held court. Aunt Elvina paced the edges of the room, wringing her hands and clucking to herself.

"We have to go back next month for the trial," Lynn's mother was saying.

"But it wasn't Daddy's fault, right?" Holly asked. "I mean, this other guy...you're pretty certain he pulled out in front of the R.V."

"I was napping until right before we crashed." Maggie Torgenrud dabbed at her nose with a handkerchief. "But the police were so certain this Mr. Durfee ran the stop sign, they closed the case by the time the Winnebago was repaired. We headed home thinking the whole thing was behind us. Now, the man's family is suing us for a million dollars in damages. A million dollars, can you believe it?"

"But if the police didn't have enough evidence to file criminal charges, there you are." Holly flung her hands into the air. "The judge is going to throw the case right out of court."

"A small town in Texas? *Uff-da*." Maggie waved away the thought. "Everyone's related to everyone else."

Steven caught Lynn's eye, then held his knuckles to his cheek, thumb against ear as he pantomimed a telephone. Shoulders rising with a sigh, she excused herself from the coterie of women.

"How come we're just now hearing about this accident?" Steven asked as he followed her to the far end of the house.

"Daddy was pretty broken up about the whole thing, so he didn't want anyone to know. Now, I guess the best thing we can do is just be there for him."

They entered the solitude of her parents' bedroom, where Lynn dug the cell phone from her purse and began punching numbers.

Steven shook his head, lips motor-boating. "Maybe if your old man didn't start drinking before breakfast, that guy in Texas would still be alive."

Lynn held up a finger to shush him, and he leaned against the door-frame sipping beer while she spoke with her sister-in-law regarding the arrival of Lars. He attempted to decipher the "un-huh's" and the "re-ally's" until, finally, Lynn dropped the phone into her purse as though it had become too heavy to hold any longer.

"What?"

"Lars took off with his Pentagon buddies to do some golfing in Florida. He's not coming out this way until Christmas."

Steven swished around a mouthful of beer. "I suppose we can all hang out here until then." He headed down the hall.

"Don't you dare say anything," Lynn called after him. "Promise me, Steven."

He found his father-in-law in the driveway tending barbecue. A phalanx of male Torgendruds surrounded the old man, each of them sipping a highball and blinking against the smoke that engulfed them.

"Hey, hey, Steve-a-Reno. Won't be long till we have us some good eatin', here."

"Look, Thor, I need to ask you something." Steven could not keep his eyes from wandering toward the Winnebago. "In private."

"Sure thing, Perfesser." The old man gave the others a wink. "You boys keep an eye on them fish, now. Don't let 'em jump back into the bay."

Steven led the way past Aunt Elvina, who seemed intent on communing with cracks in the concrete. Inside the workshop, flies moiled above heaped fish scraps congealing on the butcher-block. Steven spun around to face the old man, bringing him to a halt a few feet inside the doorway.

"How long have you known Lars wasn't coming? Days? Weeks? Months?"

Mouth clamped shut, the old man plopped down on a sawhorse.

Steven's eyes began watering as the fish stench resumed its assault on his nasal passages. "I suppose that in an hour or so, you'll pick up the phone and pretend to speak with him. 'What? Your flight's been cancelled? Well, that's the military for you. Hurry up and wait!'"

The old man's hands parted as he studied the sawdust layering the floor.

"Just what the hell were you thinking, Thor? Tell me. Please. Satisfy my morbid curiosity."

His voice was a quiet thing Steven had never heard before. "Why is it such a crime for a man to want his family around him during times of trouble?"

A moment's empathy threatened to weaken Steven's resolve, but then he remembered the night his wife pulled her father's condom from her pocket with a latex glove and tossed it in the garbage can outside their garage. Although she immediately threw her blue jeans in the laundry hamper, he had found himself unable to tolerate the thought of them. After she fell asleep, Steven tossed her pants into the fireplace, watching them burn down to ash. Still, this did nothing to dispel the old man's hypocrisy, let alone her part in it.

"You know, Thor, all your lying and scheming and womanizing... I'm not certain you even know the truth anymore." Steven drained his beer and smacked the empty can down on a workbench.

"You want truth?" The old man leaned forward and grasped his arm, marble eyes glinting beneath the fluorescent shop lights, every bit the demented Captain Ahab Steven had always imagined. "I killed a man."

"Listen, I heard about the accident in Texas. A tough break, but if you're trying to play some sort of sympathy card..."

"It wasn't any accident." Thor spoke between gritted teeth. "When the dumbshit pulled out in front of me, I could have stopped. Instead, I hit the gas."

"You missed the brake and hit the gas? Is that what you're saying?"

"Read my lips. I flat-out killed him."

Flies swarmed, drawing the walls toward the center of the butcher-block. The fetid workshop swirled. The old man's talons tightened against his arm, preventing escape.

"This guy, he'd been tailgating me on the highway for maybe five miles, see. Finally, he passes me in his pissant little Ford Escort. When I glance over at him, he gives me the finger and swerves in on me. My front tire catches the shoulder, and it's everything I can do to wrestle the Winnebago back onto the road." A predatory grin spreads across Thor Torgenrud's face. "Like they say, what goes around comes around. A half-hour later, guess who pulls out from a side road right in front of me? I plow the bastard into a frigging light pole, and that's all she wrote."

Steven stared at him for a long moment, then tore away from his grip and headed for the door.

"Hey, hey, not so quick." The old man grabbed his elbow. "You're the Perfesser. Suppose you tell me the moral of this story."

"Let me go."

"Do not *fuck* with what you do not understand, that's what." Thor shook a gnarled index finger in his son-in-law's face. "You got it? Do you?"

Steven stumbled out the door and halfway down the steps before doubling over, fighting the nausea clenching his gut.

Aunt Elvina hobbled toward him. "Harold? Harold, are you alright?"

Thor stepped out of the shop and glanced toward Steven with derision before he announced to everyone gathered around the barbecue, "Looks like the Perfesser had himself one too many soda pops."

A burst of laughter from the family faithful, and Steven forced himself to stand upright, intending to face them with the truth. But something in their eyes told him not to bother, that whatever he said would just give them another reason to despise him. He pulled in his breath, then sat on the steps, wishing he still smoked so that he would have something to do with his hands.

Clucking her tongue, Aunt Elvina settled in beside him and began picking flecks of lint, real and imagined, from his shirt.

"Who's ready for Thor Torgenrud's special recipe Bar-Bee-Q?"

Laughing with huckster heartiness, the old man waved his spatula. Smoke wreathed his head and the orange glow of hot coals seemed to ignite his blue marble eyes. "Step right up and get her while she's hot."

Lynn glanced at her husband, then grabbed a paper plate from the stack on the picnic table. She stepped into the old man's lengthening shadow, and he gave her a one-armed hug.

"There's my girl."

A sudden grease-fire erupted from the belly of the barbecue, and when Steven closed his eyes, he envisioned the flames engulfing Lynn's blue jeans as they did that night he threw them in the fireplace. Only this time, the blaze rose from the grate in massive waves of red and yellow that roared over the fireplace screen, spilling onto the carpet, torching the walls, bursting through the ceiling of their home—everything devoured by the inferno his wife called "father."



Tom Juvik teaches in Port Orchard, Washington. A graduate of the University of Washington writing program, his work has appeared in *Soundings*, *Water-Stone*, and *Bryant Literary Review*. He is a recipient of the Hackney Literary Award. In a previous life, he wrote for Comedy Central's *Almost Live!*

Maria Marsello

Some Say

Nonna left the motherland
With her baby and little money.
One coin she carried not for passage
Or commerce; not currency,
But divining device.

It couldn't tell futures or
If a boy or girl would be.
Even the weather was sheer mystery.
Rather, the coin could read the minds
And motivations of mushrooms.

This seems a lackluster power,
Except to cooks stalking
Fresh baubles in the moonlight,
Sautéing and simmering them in blood
Red sauce, with sugar to cut the acid.

That baby grew to manhood
And cooked his own sauce.
He sang the woodsy notes,
Took to the rubbery bite, but forgot
To consult the coin, so the poison steeped.

The children went to bed early
After passing on the sauce. Father's chills
set in first, then fever, sweats, lockjaw.
Just a virus, he hoped. Wishful thinking,
Useless as a penny in a fountain.

Yard mushrooms swelled with pride.
Heedless and hoodwinked, father cried.
He smashed numb lips to the smooth
Foreheads of his children, their hair
Sweet hay in his pitchfork hands.

On the way to the hospital,
His face burned like ice melt,



His feet flapped on tremoring legs.
 He welcomed the black snake
 Come to save his tarry soul.

Now father cooks only Bolognese sauce.
 Temptation rises here and there
 To pick an easy harvest, but mother
 Has hidden his coin in her sewing notions,
 Forseeing such emergencies.

Death by Chocolate

First, discard the epidermal ganache.
 Excavate the steam tunnels riddling the
 spongy baked dermis. Turn rich, loamy earth,
 darkest roast cocoa turf. Keep digging. Stop.
 Subcutaneous mousse drags heavy tines
 deeper. Suckle the spit-pitted silver.
 Quit before the cracker-butter bottom
 because underneath is bone china and
 your fork will clang as a spade on a vault.
 Female companions will stare at your plate,
 victorious. They'll sip demitasse cups,
 twist the bright wrappers of hard candy shards
 of menthe, anise, and passion fruit, then
 commence eating your heart out with panache.



Maria Marsello (MA in English, Weber State University) is a full-time special education teacher and part-time poet. She has published in *The Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, *Chiron Review*, *The Chaffin Journal*, *Waterways*, *Avocet*, *Flyway*, and *Aelurus*. She shares a loving home in Eden, Utah, with her favorite physicist and her 4th grade legoist.

Jerry Eckert

Requiem for the Night Sky



Kerry Ann Lecky Hepburn

Above, the sky radiated points of white fire. So many flickering stars – it seemed as if the whole sky were alive and dancing. The Khoisan drew creation myths from among those stars, from that giant arch of light. But the constellations up there, those they might have named, were lost to me among a million gleaming pinpoints.

Flames from desert-dried acacia wood pushed back the night, enfolding those of us there on the sand in succulent warmth. Flaming coals quivered orange and blue. This fire whispered softly, exhaling resins trapped long years ago. A strenuous day hunting in the Namibian sun and wind had left my body drained. The hunt now over, my friend Helmut, the game ranch owner, and a few of his closer friends reclined around this campfire under a towering camel thorn tree. I watched their bonds renew by firelight, bonds so vital when friends live scores of miles apart across an unforgiving desert. We spoke softly of antelope and leopards, cattle and grass, recalled hunts of prior years, and in this sere yet somehow nourishing land, we talked of rain. Spirits of Khoisan Bushmen, a part of this landscape for unnumbered millennia, seemed to swirl around us. They would have also gathered around family fires beneath camel thorn trees, their click-tongued language softened by kinship and a fire's warmth. And they, too, would have talked of rain, the metronome of desert life. A night bird passing overhead might have seen our fire, its glow, our little circle of friends as an orange nipple on the vast black breast of Africa.

Conversations in German eddied around me; my tired mind struggled to keep up. I needed to get up and move, to shake out the kinks, to breathe some cooler air or succumb to lethargy and sleep. From upwind, a jackal's scent drifted across our group. Wild desert lay just beyond the firelight. Stiffly, I rose from the sand, turned my back to the fire, and walked away. Sharp, late fall air stung my cheeks. It would freeze before dawn. Warmth leaked from my

jacket. The chill dragged me from my stupor, into the brilliance of a savannah night on the edge of the Great Namib Desert. My feet found ruts—an old ranch road leading out into the thorn bush—and I followed them, mostly by feel.

As I meandered along the ruts and away from the fire's glow, savannah emerged from darkness. Forms of gray and shadows replaced the black. Then came more subtle shades. Some leaves, the waxy ones, winked back at me in lighter grays while others quivered in the breeze, just silhouettes. Something small, but darker than the sand around it, scuttled away from the track into taller grasses. Now with retinas fully bathed in visual purple, my eyes replaced my toes at searching out the path.

Above, the sky radiated points of white fire. So many flickering stars—it seemed as if the whole sky were alive and dancing. The Khoisan drew creation myths from among those stars, from that giant arch of light. But the constellations up there, those they might have named, were lost to me among a million gleaming pinpoints. I wandered through that crystalline night stunned with the enormity of the southern sky, alone with my insignificance. And I found the creation story I had come to understand, anchored and shaped anew by the mysteries of that teeming firmament overhead.

I watched the night sky a lot after that. Back home in Colorado, we moved to a farm ten miles outside Fort Collins. My cigarette breaks took me out into the night every hour or so for years until I quit that lethal habit. Lunar phases became my metronome, marking off the seasons in 29.5-day intervals. I timed my hunts, my camping trips, by

whether I wanted a full moon or darkness after sunset. One year, I watched a rare event, twin dog stars chasing the moon for a couple of nights. As I did, I recalled the Apache legend, so parallel to the Christian story. They say the Moon as virgin goddess mated with an omnipotent Sun-god, and conceived the Dog Star as their precious offspring. Another native people had found a divinity among the stars.

Then came View Point, a clot of tract homes just across the road from our farm, planted five to the acre, all uniformly painted in neutral grays and fenced so they needn't view each other's back yards filled with dog poop and plastic children's gyms. My hayfield of luxuriant, hip-high Brome grass, with voles and hawks and bull snakes and a resident momma fox, gave that cookie-cutter subdivision its ironic name. I planted 40 Austrian pines up by the house to screen them out. That should have been enough. However, someone felt they needed street lights over there and someone else decided they could save some money by not shielding them. When they finished, I could count, from my front door, 52 mercury-vapor, 300-watt bulbs glowing down, and out, and up. Although View Point lay half a mile away, I could almost read a newspaper at night using View Point's public lighting. Above these glaring blots, my eastern sky disappeared, replaced by a sickly orange glowing. The moon got through. Jupiter also made it. But Mars struggled. Most of everything else, if it

lay to the east, is now only a suggestion or a memory.

As we lose our darkest skies, we have finally come to value them. But rather like endangered species, only when they face extinction do we gather the force of public will and pool our treasure to protect them. Even then, most likely it will not be enough, nor in time. Those who care rail against the creep of "skyglow," that dome of light seen ever more frequently over cities, rural shopping centers, sports stadia and elsewhere.

Their rallying cry has become Dark Skies!, their efforts given focus through the International Dark-Sky Association (<http://www.darksky.org>).

The unfathomed night sky first captured a part of me on a family camping trip in early August

As we lose our darkest skies, we have finally come to value them. But rather like endangered species, only when they face extinction do we gather the force of public will and pool our treasure to protect them.

1953, some 16 years before our moon landing gave everyone a new celestial perspective. In those days, camping with Dad meant hauling a trailer full of mattresses out into the Arizona desert, laying them on tarps between the cacti, and cooking hot dogs, black beans and stick bread over a mesquite fire while coyotes sang in the distance. As we snuggled into our blankets, the Perseid meteor shower exploded across the heavens. I'd never seen anything like it and I couldn't sleep. Next day, the newspaper called it the most intense shower of the 20th century. For hours, it seemed, I watched, entranced as the sky fired tracer bullets. I must have slept at some point because I woke around 2 a.m. looking up from my



Wally Pacholka, TMAN

A Perseid meteor flashes through morning skies on August 12, 2008.

mattress at the underside of a curious javelina's snout. For a split second, I saw a bristled nose twitching, and some short razor tusks. Then I moved, recoiled perhaps, because my startled visitor exploded through the middle of camp, knocking over our cooking gear. "What the heck was that," came from Dad's mattress. Perseus, the first of the Twelve Olympians of ancient Greek mythology, still blazed away, once or twice a minute.

About this time, Boy Scouting taught me the major constellations of the northern sky and some basics of celestial navigation. The Big and Little Dippers led to Polaris in the north, just as surely as the sun rose in the east and moss grew mostly on the northern side

of pine trees. Knowing these and a few other pointers, we could never get lost in the woods. And if we could navigate the wilderness, why not life's trickier pathways as well? Scouting's biggest lesson, "Be Prepared."

My 1948 Boy Scout Handbook taught only the barest rudiments of navigating by the stars. Certainly the Spanish, the Portuguese or the Vikings had a vastly more complex knowledge of the heavens under which they sailed. But then, they also had an unadulterated night sky to guide them. Today we build our telescopes on the highest mountains, or in underdeveloped countries, or we send them into space to escape our artificial lights, the lumen waste of living.

Just how much natural light is out there in those dark skies? The answer depends on what we mean by "light." Interstellar dust and detritus block out much of the visible spectrum. Light that does reach us has often bounced around the universe, diffused by impacts, bent by gravity, or refracted through spatial aerosols. It arrives as a background haze, as glows and glimmers of different hues, or other subtle differences from a jet-black nothingness. However, when I see a star, its bright pinpoint fixed at some celestial coordinates, I know that bit of light came straight through the entire maze, unobstructed. There is a special bond between us, in a way, to know that my retina is the first opaque substance that tiny shaft of starlight has found in the millions of years and miles of its journey. It will also be the last. That glimmer is mine alone.

Even before the stars finally slip behind pollution's curtain, more subtle cosmic lights will long be gone. Besides the stars, other lights we see at night form a rare brotherhood. "Airglow," for instance, keeps the night sky from ever being completely dark. Scores of miles above the Earth, the sky teems with cosmic rays tearing through the upper atmosphere, knocking molecules apart, leaving surplus bits adrift as fractions of their former selves. The energy released by all these ions and electrons

as they find new homes, reuniting with others of their kind, appears to us as light; yellow-hued for oxygen ions or blue for nitrogen.

"Zodiacal light" arrives on the bounce. Sunlight ricochets off interplanetary clouds of cosmic dust, reaching us in much the same spectrum as it left its source, but dulled and diffused by whatever light the dust absorbed. It doesn't take much dust to bounce

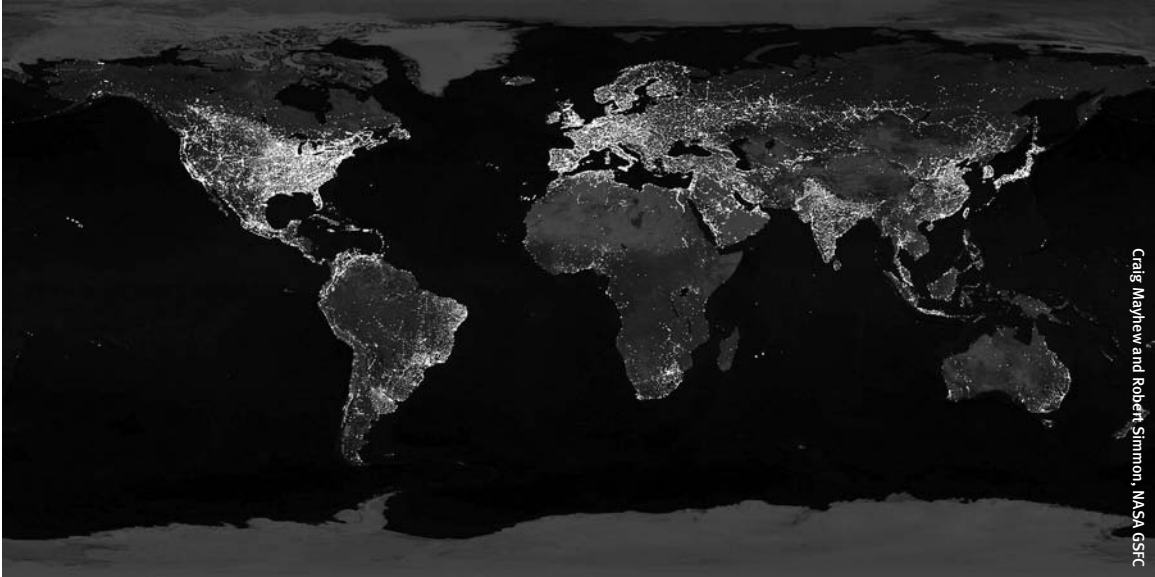
this light our way. Single particles, just one millimeter in diameter, scattered every 8 kilometers throughout space, would produce our zodiacal light. It must be dusty up there. Zodiacal light is more than half the total light that reaches us on a moonless night.

"Gegenschein," literally "the shine against" or "counter-shine," now there's a special case. Gegenschein also bounces off of cosmic dust,

but not just with a glancing blow. These dust motes lie on the other side of the earth, directly opposite the sun. The sun's rays hit them in full phase before bouncing back for our delight. Just as the light from a full moon outshines other lunar phases, Gegenschein is zodiacal light at its brightest. We see it as a hazy, softly lit circle moving across the moonless sky.

"Auroral light" draws its power from the solar wind. Incoming charged particles are snagged by earth's magnetic field which sucks them in, spiral-

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Craig Mayhew and Robert Simmon, NASA GSFC

This image of Earth's city lights was created with data from the Defense Meteorological Satellite Program (DMSP) Operational Linescan System (OLS). Originally designed to view clouds by moonlight, the OLS is also used to map the locations of permanent lights on the Earth's surface. NASA, The Visible Earth, <http://visibleearth.nasa.gov/>.

ing down along magnetic field lines. Collisions in our upper atmosphere excite these electrons causing quantum leaps from one state to another. Then, reverting to their former state, they lose their kinetic energy gained in those collisions and it becomes shimmering light. Greens and red arise from oxygen, a pink or blue-violet tinge from nitrogen. On rare occasions, atmospheric neon throws out a waving orange curtain with rippled edges. Is it any wonder that the Cree people call the Aurora Borealis the "Dance of the Spirits"?

Vexed with the imprecision of the dark sky dialogue, the astronomer John Bortle created the Bortle Dark Sky Scale in 2001, calling attention to the growing threat of light pollution. He defined nine classes, ranging from Class 1 – "Excellent Dark Sky Site" – to Class 9, "Inner City Sky." In Class

1, zodiacal light and gegenschein are both visible. Airglow is readily apparent. He rejoices, "If you are observing on a grass-covered field bordered by trees, your telescope, companions, and vehicle are almost totally invisible. This is an observer's Nirvana!"

Bortle's Class 9, however, is a frightening portent of where we are likely headed as a civilization. His definition speaks of loss: "The entire sky is brightly lit, even at the zenith. Many stars making up familiar constellation figures are invisible, and dim constellations like Cancer and Pisces are not seen at all. – The only celestial objects that really provide pleasing telescopic views are the Moon, the planets, and a few of the brightest star clusters (if you can find them)."

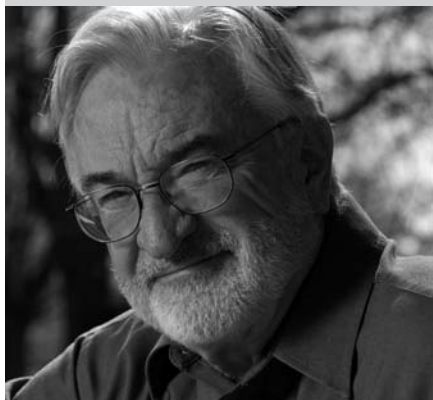
Responding to public awareness of our vanishing dark skies, the National Park Service recently surveyed the night sky in all our parks and

monuments. Natural Bridges National Monument in Utah emerged the winner, scoring 2 on the Bortle Scale. The Park Service then bestowed the name, "The World's First International Dark Sky Park." I camped there during the dark of the moon in March 2009. Just as in Namibia, I took an hour's walk at midnight. And as in Namibia, the constellations were lost within the brilliant scatter overhead. Again, I was struck dumb by the enormity of it all, by the mysteries of the sky's inner workings driven by cosmic laws so far beyond my comprehension.

But I wonder. Like an old Siberian tiger pacing out his final years in a zoo, we may have already lost something forever when we have to put it on display. The title "World's First International Dark Sky Park" is perhaps more lament than honor.

As we lose our night sky, when Polaris slips from view, it's more than just a Boy Scout memory flickering out.

Polaris is one constant in our life, a tent peg in the firmament, a welcome friend that anchors travels through our darkness. Thus directed, we find a sense of self assurance, and find ourselves within the landscape. Without Orion, young boys won't dream so easily of slaying beasts, and in that dream find an inner strength to face their monsters. When we have mapped the last piece of *terra incognita*, turned the seabed into a commodity, and waved a final farewell to Orion and Cassiopeia, king and queen of the night sky, we will have lost more than just the view. If we never stand, wide eyes cast upward, awed by the incalculable vastness out there, we are unlikely to sense what minuscule motes we really are. And if we can't, will we then conclude our universe is bounded by a skyglow dome, and leap to the arrogant presumption that we control it all? If we do, we will truly have lost our way.



Jerry Eckert is an emeritus professor returning to an earlier love – literary nonfiction. As an academic, he published over 200 papers, including two award-winning journal articles, a research monograph that sped apartheid's demise in South Africa, and the first economic policies of the Mandela government. His literary nonfiction appears in *Matter*, *Pilgrimage*, *The Superstition Review*, *Ruminate*, and *Memoir Journal*. One of his African stories won the Northern Colorado Writer's 2011 essay contest. Jerry lives in Colorado and Arizona, writing of wild places and a common global humanity.

James Grabill

From **Double Helix**

— a long poem in progress

&

As clockwork in a ruckus
brings along its own

membranous tortoise sea-crawl
up-hatchings within massively
buoyant future imaginings,

most long for the next steps
to glide ahead under any
untaxed long hair, enough

to benumb the sealevel prime
or admit strategic climactic
accumulations grow.

Tackling wildness in the bewildering
practices within high-pitched chambers,

impregnation can elk out
medieval endlessness, denial
beyond propensity, until it forgets

what becomes or always was:

an oceanic gravity-spun coronal broth
of blanket action covering light
while revealing it, merging in turns
of horizon, where rounding off
accentuates the original vastness

that out of hunger stays
behind in pods and pools

that glistens along the rims
and in feathering tufts.

&

Diesel engines keep racing
in great limbo, as soft
as the unnamed dust may be

that lies on the slim shoulder
of speeds, close to the burn

of petroleum scents of disgust
for the train always heading off
to hell, that always comes undone

in taken-over pastures, that for many
years have been—how do you
say?—at risk for so many years

that the changes may be fast
or slow, but time crawls, lamp-lit,

where antiquity zeros
salts for the ovum
mind and tabla
rings within cells.

We know how a nerve-thread eye
will take in what glaring acts,
or facing moss-drop shocks become
a future of extinct jungle and lost

polar ice, maybe over decades
of a snow in which no one sees
whether paychecks work.

But say a paycheck works,
where a ruby king's starting
to amass enough rubies
to have ruby clothes,
taking in unusual bone-center
hauls of thermo-luminous crimson
daylight and violet-black shade
in a thousand red scarlet
nighttime clearings in parts

of the brain which still belong
to antique solidness set in gold;

that is, where a paycheck works,
you can count on seeing light

that splinters by the pound,
and where it strikes
a compass point, it'll be one
the lethal starfields burn, all

for the bidding of wealth,
with its rare nineteenth
century light that specializes
in strung-out rubies
rather than cabbage beds,

in implosive swims behind
closed-down draws,
and not solar
ports in a storm.

&

Faces out of the future
generation in a flash
can show up in the street

windows of the house
of knives, the downtown soup

spoons and baby-blue neon
Pabst scrawl burning in primordial
embers of their long past

furnace flames. Like a dozing uncle
on a dark afternoon of water,
magnetic resonance haunts
the gravitational moss-haired stone

walls in the gorge close
behind us, and also before us

as regulated work days wash
sleep with their gardens
and tower bells rust in metallic
equations, the bare bulb
hung from the ceiling of atoms.

The offshore roiling boom, broom
of sweeping afternoon strafes
and composes through industrial
corn rows, the yellow-orange white

sunlight in hallways of ears,
the clear blue bowl
of the pre-Cambrian

in the yard, the sun of hard
old corn in hairy joists
and lumbered
trunks of family.

&

You can sit for hours in the summer

by the red blossoms in back,
near the blackberries that grew
through, and still miss seeing her.

She may have spotted the red
in the distance, and watched it go
almost ultraviolet, drenched in sunlight

in the immensity, before she flew in
from the nest she made earlier,
by tying strips of tall grasses and debris

into knots with her beak, fixing them
with spider filaments, then padding
the bed with lichen. And yet it's sudden,

when she shows up at a flower, drinking
red, and in a flash already she's
finished, her body pivoting mid-air,
as if she weren't doing anything

making the sound you can't hear
as much as sense within the chest,

the hum of her invisible wings,
a shudder nearly gone in the ruins

of light, the whole of her turning
emerald, into a piece
of ceremonial jewelry
escaping the Pharaoh.

In time, she flies in as she has before,
and faster than trying to see her
living at the speeds she does, already
she's gone into the vulnerable

atmosphere, having left behind
everything in a color
the opposite of hers.

&

In the roaring of blast

furnaces still of 19th century
assumptions, fuming overhead
where conveyor drive axles scrape,
squealing from the works, the belief

in subservience especially of unlike
others, the warehouse forests and hills
seen for the taking in darkness
of day, where antique torque reaches

for lips and the private jaw, in the rise
and fall, to be delivering any fresh
upwashes and iterations of symmetry
over and above any longer-term procreative

presence as may arc over, multiply
conceived or not within the complexity
of stallion lines in a face, crimson-clear
nuclei in the churns, the ongoing
transnational externalizations of spoils

as leave behind mathematical avalanching
brightness of melting antiquity, the stone
thighs losing focus in fast-forward brushes
with the invisible prairies in each molecule,

then with hydrogen prophecy as it has been
wailing from the North Atlantic breakers
where buoyancy stops, filling in from the root,
what lifts with the cardinal compass periphery,

wheeling in Himalayan sky from far back,
the brilliant yogic healing at dawn
with its wing of dust from cries
along tracks of the absolute
risk, not only for the lyred
Majorcan angels going silent,
after uncertain prediction
out of dreamtime Celsius

as in Anchorage which has rocked
on a skull of magma, in a ruin
toward the end of global extraction,
where undersea Tetons are still
taking a further chance
on their moths' wings.



James Grabill's poems have appeared in numerous periodicals such as *Harvard Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Stand* (UK), *New York Quarterly*, *Poetry Northwest*, *The Oxonian Review* (UK), *Ur Vox*, *Re Dactions*, *The Bitter Oleander*, *East West Journal*, *Willow Springs*, *kayak*, *Caliban*, *The Common Review*, and others. He has had four Lynx House Press books, books from Holy Cow! Press, and Sage Hill Press, among others. He lives in Oregon, where he has been teaching writing, literature, and sustainability.

John Norris

Decoy

Already I regretted letting Ben Webster come along on my duck hunt to Six Mile Lake. In the car, he smoked nauseating cigarette after cigarette, listened to raucous pop and rap music on his Walkman, and practically leaned over me to scrutinize, through the rear view mirror, any cars he imagined trailing us.

At Six Mile, after we loaded my sacks of decoys, shotguns, the blind, and me, manning the oars, into the old green skiff, Webster dug his toes into the soft sand of the shoreline and propelled us onto the placid surface. Seated on the stern, he yelled in a gruff, husky voice, "All aboard, Captain!"

"Quiet!" I whispered. "No unnecessary noises. That includes your Walkman. If any ducks are in the bay already, they'll hear us coming and fly off." I steered the bow toward a secluded alcove far to our right.

Halfway out, Webster craned his neck over my shoulder. "Can't see much in this bloody darkness, Bishop. Did we have to come out this early in the morning?" He glanced at his watch. "Six bells, 'ol boy. I'm still snoring one off this time of day."

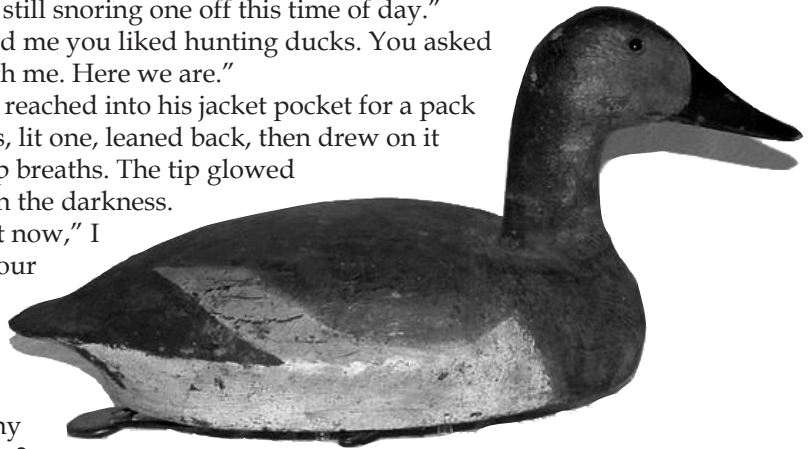
"You told me you liked hunting ducks. You asked to come with me. Here we are."

Webster reached into his jacket pocket for a pack of cigarettes, lit one, leaned back, then drew on it in long deep breaths. The tip glowed bright red in the darkness.

"Enjoy it now," I said. "It's your last till after the kill."

"Don't you have any vices, Bishop?"

They tell me you don't smoke. You don't drink booze. You don't chat on line with thirteen-year-old girls. Or do you? Come on. Tell the truth now." He leaned forward and patted me on the shoulder.



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"Think what you like."

"Ah, you're a goody-goody, Bishop" replied Webster. He puckered his lips and blew wreaths of smoke at me.

I scanned the horizon, alert to whatever sounds I could discern on the lake or shore. All I could hear was the lap, lapping of the oars sweeping through the depths and the rivulet of drips tumbling off their ends and plopping into the black, still water. Light from a full creamy moon rippled like a writhing snake in front of the bow, a beacon silhouetting the tall leaning pine which marked the bay ahead.

When Webster finished his cigarette, he flicked the butt into the water, raised his arms to his sides, level with his shoulders, and began flapping them up and down. He chuckled softly. The cold mist rising from the lake rushed to envelop his limbs. "Damn freezing out here!" he said, and jammed his hands into his pockets. "I hope this camouflage outfit'll warm up my chilled bones by day's end."

"I use old quilts to wrap my decoys. Help yourself," I suggested.

Webster opened a sack at his feet, unraveled a multicolored tattered crazy quilt from around some birds, then crammed the decoys back into the sack. Their thick cedar bodies thudded against each other.

I winced. "Go easy on the decoys, Ben. I spent hours carving them and painting them just right."

"Where'd you find time to carve birds? I thought all a lawyer had time for between cases was other cases."

"A person can always find time to do what he wants to do."

"Hm! I guess it helps being a loner like you. No family. No ties. Me, I got a wife and a kid on the way." Webster wrapped the quilt snugly around him, rocked back and forth, and hummed off key. "Do I sound like that crazy homeless man always begging for spare change outside our office building? I'll bet he spends his whole take on smokes and liquor. Can't fool me."

I smirked. "Nothing fools you, does it? You think you have the whole world figured out. Trouble is, you see everything in black and white. No gray matter."

"Unlike you, ol' boy, I'm just your everyday lawyer. I see only facts. Say, who do you think's implicated in the Dobson case we're working on now?"

"Can't you leave work at the office where it belongs?"

"No."

"I think Dobson's just a fall guy for the CEO and some board members."

"Such as?"

"Carlson. Brewer. Maybe others. Whoever has the most to lose."

"How do you figure Carlson and Brewer?"

"When I was clerk for the prosecutor's office, I came upon their names in a case file involving fraud. Now they've moved up in the world — big time. They sit on the board of one of the richest, most powerful investment firms in the city."

"So what evidence have you?"

"Concrete."

"Like ...?"

"Repeated home phone calls between Carlson and Brewer late at night, especially after Dobson contacted the press. They panicked. They shifted immediately into damage control. Too much to lose."

Webster pointed an index finger at me. "No smoking gun there. Phone calls late at night they could claim were about urgent company business."

I chuckled. "They were."

"Just circumstantial evidence. No jury would ever convict."

"No, but they got careless, and careless people make mistakes."

"Anything else?"

"Yes, the smoking gun."

"Really?" he said, and leaned forward. "Why didn't you tell me? After all, I am your partner now."

"Not by my choice. You know, Ben, I never understood why the firm hired you recently to do the leg work with me. No offence. I could manage by myself. Always have."

I peered east above the maple treetops running along the shore. A faint blue light tinted the skyline, spotlighting the top red and yellow leaves. "We're coming to the small bay. Remember, Ben, no unnecessary noises."

I stopped rowing and let the forward motion of the boat drift us just into the entrance. Bones stiff and smarting with arthritis, I wobbled as I stood up, spread my legs slightly, faced the bow, cradled my shotgun, and listened. Then, when I heard the soft fanning of wings far to my right, I aimed high in the direction and fired ahead of a small flock of mallards silhouetted against the skyline. The blast reverberated in the expanse of wilderness. A bird plummeted dead into the water.

"Great shot!" said Webster. He rocketed to his feet and jarred the boat. "But you didn't bring your retriever."

"Deliberately left him at home. He'd only get in the way. I'll row to the bird."

When we reached it, Webster scooped it up and held it dangling by the neck. "Wow!" he said. "When do I get to shoot?"

"We got lucky some birds were here already. But that one shot may have scared off any other flocks from landing in the bay. We won't know till we wait it out in the marsh reeds over there." I pointed to the curve of the shoreline. "First we have to set out the decoys."

About twenty yards from the reeds, I opened my sacks of decoys and placed them carefully in pairs into small piles of the same species: mallards, blacks, redheads, canvasbacks, and goldeneyes. I also made piles of several single drakes of each species with brightly colored, detailed plumage. First, I set a pair of mallards over the side, made sure to face them into the wind, then rowed the boat farther out onto the lake. There I set out the rest of my decoys.

When I was satisfied with my rig's arrangement, I sliced the bow of the skiff into the reeds, pulled in the oars, grabbed bunches of stems like shocks of hair, and guided the skiff through the maze, bending and splitting, till I aligned it parallel to the lake and my decoys. Then I set up my homemade blind with a wide "V" gap at the top for the two of us to see through. "Now we wait," I said.

Webster glanced at his watch. "6:20. How much longer?"

"Ask the ducks," I said. "We sit here and wait for them to make up their minds it's safe to land. Meanwhile, enjoy the fresh, clean, northern air. Enjoy the silence."

Webster glanced again at his watch, chafed his arms, and drummed his feet.

"Why couldn't you have left your watch at home, Ben? You're not in court. You're up north, hunting ducks on a remote lake."

Webster peered through the gap into the dawn. "I don't see any ducks."

"Listen for them. Listen for the whistling sound a goldeneye makes as it flaps its wings. It's the loudest sound of any duck."

"You mean like this?" He raised his arms to his sides, flapped them wildly, then put two fingers between his lips and blew.

I shook my head.

"When do I get to shoot, ol' boy?"

"Here." I handed him a shotgun and two cartridges. "Make them count."

Webster loaded the gun, poked himself and the barrel through the gap of the blind, and aimed at the drake mallard decoy closest to him. "Bang! Gotcha! You're the meat on my plate tonight!" He plunked himself back down. The skiff rocked.

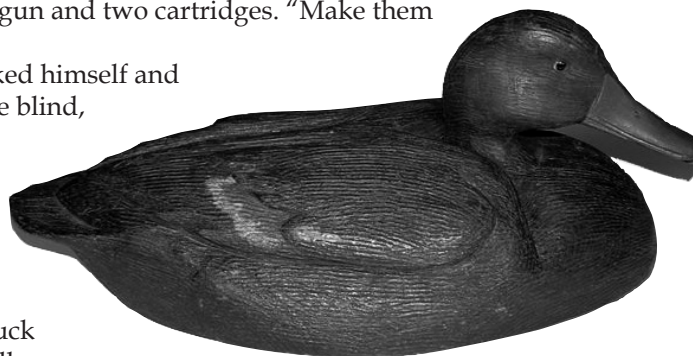
"If you want the sirloin of duck meat, you'll have to wait and kill a canvasback or redhead."

"Nah, I could care less what kind of duck it is as long as I get to shoot."

"Then be more patient like you're waiting for a jury to render a verdict. It's their call. And, please, keep your barrel inside the blind till the ducks land."

We waited. Webster fidgeted with the gun, caressed the curve of the trigger, and jerked the barrel up and down, steadily, rhythmically, like a wind-up toy robot. Several times he opened the barrel. "Are you sure these aren't blank cartridges, Bishop? Just teasing." He peered again through the gap.

Above us, soft gray clouds, flattened like long shreds of cotton bat-



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ten, streamed across a light blue sky. The top maple branches swayed gently like red and yellow feather dusters sweeping across table tops; and the reeds, locking us in a phalanx of spears, fluttered nervously, weaving in and out among each other. The skiff bobbed on a charge of small wave after small wave.

"Bishop ... in the Dobson case ... tell me, what's your smoking gun?"

"Carlson and Brewer decided to hammer it out face to face. I hired a private detective to follow Carlson. He met Brewer in what they thought was a noisy bar. The detective, a pretty woman, sat right next to them, photographed them, and even taped their conversation. I have the photos and tape."

"Where?"

"In a safe place."

"Where?"

"I told you."

"Come on, ol' boy. I'm your partner. Tell me where you hid the photos and tape."

I shook my head no.

"Having them could get you killed, you know. Tell me where you hid them."

My mind was toying with how to distract him, when I thought I heard the fanning of wings. I peered through the gap. "They're here!" I whispered. "Keep down!"

Webster crouched low and craned his neck to spy the birds. "You're crazy! I don't see any!"

"To your left," I said, and pointed to a clearing of sky and black flecks. "They'll circle around and come up from behind the rig. They'll land flying into the wind. Get ready to stand up. Remember, you have to lead the duck as it's coming in. Fire when I say so."

As the large flock neared the bay, we watched them wheeling, until, gradually, as one, they descended to the decoys below.

"Hear it?" I whispered.

Webster sat motionless. "No."

"You will."

A pair of black ducks arrived first, gliding downward like fluffy milkweed seeds drifting on air currents till, wings rearward, their feet splashed into the water. Some goldeneyes followed. One, a straggler, skimmed low across the water and zipped by the skiff.

"Ah!" said Webster.

I peered through the window at the pair of blacks that landed first, and waited till I saw them swimming together, their tails elevated. I eased myself up, aimed, and was squeezing the trigger, when Webster scrambled to his feet and jostled my gun. Startled, I dropped it. "Dammit!" I yelled. "Damn you, Ben!"

Webster swung the stock of his gun to his shoulder and fired twice

into the flock of landing birds. Feathers contracted. Wings beat madly against water. Teardrop bodies sprang up and out. "Jesus!" he shouted. "Can't wait to see how many I killed!"

I folded in the blind, pulled the skiff onto open water, and rowed towards the decoys.

Webster stood tall and straight, his gun pointed down into the water at the floating bodies. Near the rig, he spied a mallard drake on its side, flapping a light brown wing against the waves. He aimed, pulled the trigger. "Damn gun's empty!" he said. He held his hand out. "Gimme another cartridge!"

"No. I've always hunted with just two cartridges, Ben. That's all. If I miss my first shot, I have only one standby. You got your two shots. Now gather your kill."

Webster dropped the shotgun to the floor, stretched his arm over the side of the boat, tipped it slightly to one side, and pulled in the mallard. He grasped it, flailing, by the neck, and twisted its iridescent, emerald head till the neck bone snapped. The flapping wing folded slowly against the bird's body. "Dinner!" he said proudly.

I scanned the water for other possible kill, spied another mallard bobbing among the middle of my rig, and rowed towards it. "Fetch it, will you, Ben?"

As Webster leaned over the side to retrieve the bird, I swung the stock of my shotgun across his cap, just grazing his scalp and knocking him into the icy water. He floated prone, arms extended to his sides.

"Thought I didn't suspect you, eh?" I yelled. "Thought you could kill me!"

I let the swelling waves carry Webster's body to the reeds, while I rowed to my first pair of decoys and pulled them in. But as I leaned over the side, I felt

the skiff tip beneath me. Into the frigid water I plunged.

"Help! Help!" I cried out.

I glanced at the boat.

Webster was climbing

in. When he stood

up, he clasped his scalp where

I'd struck him. Blood oozed

between his fingers, trickled

through his hair, and down

the nape of his neck.



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"You missed, ol' boy! You got your one and only shot—and you missed!"

"Help!" I cried out, and flailed my arms. I gulped mouthfuls of water. "Help! I can't swim!"

Webster leaned forward. "I know. They told me. They told me everything about you, especially how you like to come way out here in the middle of the wilderness and hunt ducks by yourself. Couldn't've

asked for a more perfect place! You know too much, Bishop! You got too close to the truth! Your obituary will read, 'Death by Accidental Drowning.'"

The weight of my outfit and boots pulled me under again into the blackness. God help me! I thought. I struggled, shoved one arm straight up, high like a white flag, and broke the surface. "The office knows I'm here!" I cried out.

"What?"

Down again I sank, when Webster reached over, cupped me under the armpits, and dragged me aboard. I lay on my stomach, coughing, and spitting water out.

"I left a note."

He rolled me over and yanked me by the collar close to his face. His warm blood snaked down my chest. "What note?"

I hesitated.

He reached under my back, lifted me, and suspended me over one side of the skiff. "Over you go then!"

"No, no! I left a note telling where the photos and tape are ... and more. I really did."

Webster lowered me to the floor, and sat back on the seat of the stern. "Yes ...?"

"If I'm not back in the office tomorrow, whoever has the note will surely read it. That person will know you and I went duck hunting, at what lake, and when, and will contact the police. Listen, Ben. Work with me. You can tell your puppet masters we unexpectedly came upon a game warden, so you missed your chance this time to ..."

I had Webster row us to where my remaining decoys floated. I scooped them up, wrapped them in their quilts, and bagged them for the trip home.

John Norris is a retired teacher of English, French, and drama. He has reviewed books, art exhibitions, and antiques shows, and written profiles of artists and collectors, etc. for journals in North America, and in Britain. *Decoy* is his second published short story.

Naomi Zeveloff

Echoes of Jewish Back-to-Land Movement Under Utah's Big Sky



Clarion settlement, circa 1911-1912. The colonists lived in tents until they could construct permanent dwellings. Cultivation began at the completed section of the Piute Canal at the southern end of the settlement. Courtesy Robert Alan Goldberg.

On a sunny Saturday in September, Lillian Brown Vogel rolled her wheelchair to the brink of a small gravesite just outside the city of Gunnison in central Utah. She squinted at the two headstones before her, slabs of gray and brown rock etched with Hebrew letters. Each one was surrounded by a small pen of metal pipes to keep the cows at bay.

"I've been at this spot before," she said, "about 15 years ago."

This was Vogel's second pilgrimage to one of the only visible remnants of the Jewish farm colony in the Utah desert where she spent her early childhood. This time, the 102-year-old retired psychologist from Ukiah, California, was joined by nearly 80 other children and grandchildren of the original colonists, who descended on the site to mark its centennial anniversary.

The settlement of Clarion lasted a mere five years before disappearing into historical oblivion. It was a bold venture, meant to unshackle the Jewish spirit from the fetid confines of East Coast tenement life. Instead, the colony ended up as a blip in American history — an unlikely Jewish experiment in the unlikeliest of places. But for

the descendants visiting Utah, it was nothing less than a cornerstone of the family lore.

"It is the history of the Jews in this one small little place," said Janine Lieberman, whose paternal grandparents lived in Clarion. "To me, Clarion was the seed for my involvement in Judaism and Jewish life and wanting to raise the family Jewish."

The story of Clarion began with Vogel's father. Benjamin Brown, born Ben Lipshitz in 1885, near Odessa, immigrated to the United States at the age of 15. As a young man, Brown found work as a peddler and later as a farm laborer outside Philadelphia. Brown's time on the farm—he took the owner's last name—propelled him to seek a career in agriculture. But it wasn't until he came into contact with German and Scandinavian colonists in the Midwest that he formulated the idea for the Jewish settlement. "We Jews...have to and must create a new healthy condition here in this country that should serve as a model for our people everywhere—in the whole world," Brown wrote in a retrospective essay.

According to University of Utah historian Robert Goldberg, Brown initiated his project in Philadelphia, hosting a series of meetings with local Jews in which he proposed a Jewish farming settlement in the American West. The distance, he reasoned, would weaken any temptation to return to urbanity.

Brown's selling point was both practical and philosophical: by leaving the tenements for farm life, Jews could find dignity and prosperity. But they would also redefine what it meant to be Jewish in America, changing the image of the Jew from sniveling to robust. It was a domestic parallel to the rationale that propelled the Zionist farming settlements in British Palestine at the time.

Brown's charisma caught the attention of Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf of Keneseth Israel, a Reform congregation in Philadelphia. Krauskopf was a major proponent of the national back-to-the-land movement, which generated more than 40 Jewish farming colonies in the United States between 1882 and 1910—nearly all of which failed within the first few years. Brown's project, launched with Krauskopf's support, would be the last of the back-to-the-land efforts. By 1910, Brown had found his participants.

Two-hundred Jews—most of them Eastern European immigrants living in Philadelphia, New York and Baltimore contributed about \$300 apiece to the newly formed Jewish Agricultural and Colonial Association. They were anarchists, Labor Zionists and socialists, Orthodox Jews who sought to preserve tradition out West and Jews who simply wanted a better life for their families. Several people planned to gain experience at the settlement to farm in British Palestine. Out of the group of 200, 75 went to Clarion.

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"Brown got to a point where he didn't care who joined, as long as they had got the money to make this work," said Goldberg, whose 1986 book, *Back to the Soil*, tells the story of Clarion. "I don't think he ever worked through the idea of having a bunch of people on the land with different motivations. What would they do in regard to hard times?"

In 1911, Brown and his partner, Isaac Herbst, set out on a three-day trip to scout property in New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming and Montana. After fruitless inquiry in New Mexico, the men received a telegram from Krauskopf, urging them to travel to Utah, where Krauskopf had connections with influential Jews in Salt Lake City, including future governor Simon Bamberger. Krauskopf also reasoned that the Mormons of Utah would welcome the Jews, who, like them, had faced religious persecution.

Eager for settlers, the Utah state government was in the midst of constructing a 60-mile-long canal through south central Utah that would create arable farmland out of the chalky soil. A state official brought Brown and Herbst to Sanpete County — an area today known as a hub of turkey production. Brown fingered the dirt. This, he decided, was the place.

On September 10, the first group of settlers — 12 able men — arrived at the Gunnison train station from Philadelphia. Brown greeted them in Yiddish, and they made their way to the Clarion site,

singing Ukrainian folk songs as they went. The experiment had begun.

One hundred years later to the day, descendants of the settlers — representing more than 15 states, plus Israel — gathered in the lobby of the Marriot University Park Hotel in Salt Lake City.

Outside, two tourist buses idled in the parking lot as the tour guide, Mary Ellen Elgren, admonished the visitors to slather on sunscreen in advance of the trip down to Clarion. It was 9:30 a.m., and the Utah sun was already burning brightly.

Much like the Clarion settlement itself, the centennial celebration was initiated by one man and then carried forward by the Salt Lake City Jewish community and its Mormon counterpart

in Gunnison. Goldberg first visited Clarion in 1981 after reading about it in a book of Utah ghost towns. A Jew trying to stake his claim in Mormon Utah, Goldberg was moved by his visit to the Clarion site, with its two eerily beautiful Hebrew gravestones. In the early 1980s he began researching the long-forgotten settlement, placing ads in *The Forward*, *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books*, seeking Jews with ties to settlement. Goldberg eventually made contact with the children and grandchildren of 53 of the 75 families who lived in Clarion between 1911 and 1916.

"I realized that these people had stepped out of their rat mazes and ordinary lives and had become better



Benjamin Brown's cabin, Clarion settlement, circa 1911-1912. Courtesy Robert Alan Goldberg.

than their smallest intentions," he said. "They reached out to change the world. That had been communicated from father to son, mother to daughter, son to daughter, and on and on. It had been communicated through 50, 60, 70 years, through 1911 on. That was what so struck me as a powerful thing."

After the publication of his book on Clarion, Goldberg fell out of touch with most the families. In the ensuing years, he attempted to establish Clarion as a national or state historic site. Though the current landowners agreed to partner in such a project, the plans fizzled amid state budget woes. When the centennial began to draw near, Goldberg decided to honor the site in a different way, by bringing the descendants back to the land. The Mormons in Gunnison said they would participate, and so did the Salt Lake City Jewish community. In planning the centennial anniversary, Goldberg reconnected with many of the descendants he interviewed for his book, and he connected them to one another over Facebook and e-mail. "They just started bubbling up and bubbling over," he said.

The night before the centennial observance at the settlement site itself, Goldberg hosted an event at the Salt Lake City Jewish Community Center, where these connections played out in person. Dozens of descendants milled about, greeting one another like long-lost cousins. Just like their settler ancestors, the visitors represented a wide swath of American Jewry, from the highly observant to the secular. There were revelations aplenty: Benjamin Brown had fathered a love child at the colony, and this rent asunder his marriage. The boy, Eugene, later had children of his own—two of whom were in attendance. Lillian Brown Vogel, long thought to be the only surviving person who lived in Clarion as a child, found that she had company. This 98-year-old woman could not make it to the centennial; her daughter and niece went in her absence.

The next morning, the descendants filed onto the tour buses, each wearing a white card bearing the name of his or her settler ancestor. In less than an hour, the Clarion caravan had cleared Salt Lake City and its suburban rings, delving deep into the center of Utah as

it passed by Brigham Young University. Craggy brown hills covered in green scrub brush rose alongside the highway. Elggren spoke into a microphone at the fore of the bus: "This is the way your ancestors came."



Jewish settler plows a field, Clarion settlement, circa 1912-1913. Courtesy Robert Alan Goldberg.

"Everything is dwarfed by the mountains," Lynn Schlossberger said as she looked wistfully out the bus window. "Everything we do is small by comparison."

At around noon, the buses arrived in Gunnison, population 3,000, and parked at the Gunnison City Hall, where a local Mormon women's group had prepared a kosher-style lunch for the descendants—cold cuts on rolls with quinoa salad, chopped fruit, and homemade snickerdoodle cookies. The city of Gunnison had advertised the centennial celebration on its website as "Jewish Days," calling on interested residents to participate.

Outside the building, a thin man in a red shirt and oversized eyeglasses

waited with a folder under one arm and a white cowboy hat under the other. This was Bruce Sorenson, a local farmer whose grandfather and father had served as unofficial tour guides to the Clarion site over the years, collecting newspaper articles and artifacts that referenced the ghost town settlement.

Janine Lieberman remembered Sorenson and his family—the "keepers of the Jewish lore," as she called them—from a trip to Clarion she took in the late 1980s. Her grandparents, Sam and Rose Lieberman, lived in Clarion. Their son, Edward, died as a baby and was buried in the site's ad hoc cemetery.

"When my girlfriend and I came and we went to the field, we got out there and within minutes, your dad showed up," she said to Sorenson. "It was like magic. Someone takes care of you."

Sorenson bowed his head shyly. "I used to watch for people," he said.

The warm reception in Gunnison was just a taste of what the original Clarion settlers encountered upon their arrival in Utah. Mormons consider themselves a lost tribe of Israel, and they regard Jews with reverent fascination. They think of Utah as their own Zion, and even the state's topographical highlights are loosely named after sites in Israel, a fact that could not have failed to strike the Jewish settlers. Utah's Jordan River connects Utah Lake to the Great Salt

Lake—the state’s own salt-rich “Dead Sea.”

When the Clarion settlers arrived in 1911, they were met with both Mormon hospitality and \$500 in official church funds. Though a handful of Jews had prior farming experience out east, the large majority of Clarion colonists knew nothing of farm life. The local Mormons coached the Jews, instructing them on how to harness horses and plow fields.

In 1912, the Jews of Clarion invited Gunnison Mormons, Salt Lake City Jews and state leaders to a pre-harvest celebration to promote the fledgling colony. There, Gunnison’s Mormon bishop declared, “Let the Jews, gentiles and Mormons be one.”

The pre-harvest event, however, placed an illusory sheen on what was quickly becoming a dire situation. The promised central Utah canal was unreliable, delivering water infrequently. As a remedy, the colonists built a large concrete cistern to store water, but it burst with an ear-shattering crack the first night it filled. Working as a collective that first year, the colonists planted wheat, oats, corn and alfalfa, but the poor soil yielded little.

The problems did not stop there. The colony’s heterogeneity created a tense environment at times. The Jews consid-

ered faith a private matter, and some created minyans (prayer services) at home to worship. Many Jews worked on the Sabbath, and some even raised pigs. But questions over the nature of Jewish life at Clarion did surface with the proposal of a school. The Orthodox settlers wanted a teacher conversant in Hebrew liturgy to form a yeshiva of sorts. The Labor Zionists preferred someone who could instruct the stu-

dents in Yiddish and Jewish culture. The socialists wanted a secular teacher. In the end, the school hired a Mormon who taught a nonreligious curriculum. Unexpected tragedies further eroded morale. In 1913, one of the original 12 settlers, a 29-year-old man named Aaron Binder, was killed when his wagon overtook him as he was gathering wood in the mountains near Gunnison. He was

buried in Clarion; his Hebrew gravestone is the iconic Jewish marker of the unsung settlement.

Hungry, impoverished and hounded by the once lenient Utah Board of Land Commissioners to pay money owed for the property, Clarion’s settlers began a slow trickle from the colony in 1915, many of them returning to the eastern cities from whence they came. Others remained in Utah, married Mormons and raised Mormon families. Brown, for his part, moved to Gunnison and



A typical cabin, Clarion settlement, circa 1912-1913. Courtesy Robert Alan Goldberg.

began the Utah Poultry Association. By 1916, Clarion was all but gone. In his 1949 Yiddish novel about the settlement, colonist Isaac Friedland recalled how, that final year, “people waited for the inevitable end, as one waits for a dying person to die.”

After watching a musical rendition of the Clarion story at Gunnison’s Casino Star Theatre, the descendants traveled by bus to the Clarion site and saw firsthand the conditions that had forced their families to flee the settlement just five years after building it. The earth was rocky, gray and covered in prickly green shrubs and yellow flowers. Massive anthills dotted the earth. The school was nothing but a concrete base, the cistern a pile of rubble. Only the two headstones were perfectly preserved—twin testaments to hardship. Barbara Vogel picked up a rock from the site and vowed to place it on a family gravestone back home.

But what had been an utter failure for the Clarion settlers was a point of pride for the descendants. Back at Gunnison City Hall for a dinner of turkey steaks and homemade challah, Jeff Ayeroff

pondered what unified all these families so many generations beyond Clarion. Poverty was one thing, and the will to overcome it was another. His own grandparents resorted to eating the family cat to survive the Utah wilderness. Today, Ayeroff is one of the top Los Angeles music industry executives. But there was something else.

“This is not the stereotypical story of Jews stuck in a ghetto-ized situation,” he said. “They wanted the opportunity to redefine themselves.... They decided to go somewhere else. That was the freedom that Clarion afforded.”

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Headstone of Aaron Binder, a Clarion settler. Courtesy Robert Alan Goldberg.



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Nancy Takacs

How to Survive

Birth control,
back-up bifocals,
a deep well,
lots of wool.

Jewels for barter: "Here the vines are delicate trails
of gleaming 18kt gold vermeil and the fruit is an oh-so-sweet
mix of faceted glass and cubic zirconia."

The memory of Hagryphus giganteus: blue seven-foot bird,
and three-toed Utahraptor unearthed with its razor
dew-claw, the memory

of living underwater.
This long farewell. Be gentle
with the children who are different.

Buddha's truth: to be human
is to suffer. Mistakes
are necessary, welcome.
Let them laugh at themselves,
and accept a bit of healthy shame

for when we "protected an imperiled
individual of another species, we called it compassion,
when a humpback whale did so, we called it instinct."

Catch butterflies and mark wings,
write numbers on them, remember
all the eyes of Audobon's birds.

Raw dandelions, never grass.
String for the next lean-to.
Keep dogs, cats, hamsters, fish, iguanas, and parakeets. Keep
that energy.



Kiriko Moth

Offer zucchini, rosemary, tomatoes
from your victory garden to three neighbors
with no gold coins.

Old tv jokes will come to you like: the dingo ate your baby,
bullets should cost five thousand dollars apiece.
You'll remember how Lucy got caught in the freezer.

Hold vodka,
a thesis on the love of ships,
a metal squirrel with a feather tail.

Get nails, barrels of them,
a .22 at least. Gather
buckets, saws, sacks of rice,
some beehives.
Learn the many ways to start fires.

Losing Daylight

You want to get home before traffic and darkness.
But when you enter the dangerous canyon
a truck has already lost the centerline,
crashed the rail, spilling hills of apples.

No one's hurt. There's a wait. And after
it's a crawl through the bump and splash
as the harvest crushes under you, your open
window a hive for this orchard on asphalt.

One bee lights on the dash. You want to
get home before traffic and darkness.
But it's getting dark. You look away
from the undimmed brights. You climb

the Red Narrows to Soldier Summit
where it always snows, not slowing semis,
who go at least 60, slip their thunder in
as you pump brake, prepare for black ice

that could lift you to the other lane
like air. You gaze at shoulders for deer
as the radio balms in Bessie Smith's
thorny flowering throat. The amaryllis

will not rise out of its pot in your study.
You have never been to the Ural, Spain,
or Viet Nam. But you have been to Paris,
Guaymas. You want to get home

before traffic and darkness. You used to
want to travel, just travel. In fourth
grade you roamed far on Halloween
for stranger treats, rapped on doors

alone, once led two boys from your class,
one a ghost, the other Superman.
You remember their middle names,
one's love of anything sweet.

You kept your treasure separate.
You were a magician without any tricks.
All the way home, the traffic blossoms,
holds you in its glare. You smell of apples.

Amaranth, October

I finally rake what I left all summer,
pull and pile the grass called rattlesnake.
But when I come to the body of amaranth
that bloomed red and cocked its spiny
thumbs of seed that feathered and
grew to shadow my loyal French
lavender, clowning at the brown edge
of my bluestem lawn, I decide to keep
this weed for winter. Samshu shark,
stable wildwood, chimera to whirr
against my chain link. As the dark
swears on Mars now like
a dry pink moon.

Night Game: School

We loved the game with a stone.
From the angry neighbor's
rectangle of roses, we stole
a piece of slag to hold
through heat lightning
and pink skies.

One of us was teacher,
trading it from fist to fist
behind her back.

The other two guessed
right or wrong to slide up
the dozen steps to reach
the porch.

We all loved
how lucky we could be,
though we won nothing.

We were Patty, whose mother's
fingers had thinned to pencils
from a lingering leukemia,

each night calling her daughter
through the window
to buy a pack of Marlboros;

and Diane, in baggy culottes,
the middle child of seven
no one ever looked for,
landing on our block
from a divorce in some exotic place
I had never been to down the shore;

and me, whose mother ate ice cream
watching *I Love Lucy*, then news,
waiting for me to throw down the stone.

We were finally off our gold or silver
Schwinns that had winged us through
humidity and heat. We had
already jumped cement cracks,
and stepped on them to break
some mother's back.

Now we needed dark,
to defy anyone
who tried to call us in.

June through August
among the fireflies we no longer
cared to catch, and barely hearing horns
of nearby ships, or cars that thundered past,
we took turns to knock
on our friend's closed hands like doors,
to know which one was empty,
which one held the magic stone.



Nancy Takacs lives in Utah near the San Rafael Swell. Placed in her desert town of Wellington, her third collection of poetry, a hand-letter press chapbook *Juniper*, was recently published by Limberlost Press. An emeritus creative writing and wilderness studies professor at the College of Eastern Utah, she currently teaches writing workshops for the Utah Arts Council and conducts poetry classes for senior citizens in Price, Utah. She is a six-time winner of the Utah Arts Council Literary Competition. Takacs is originally from Bayonne, New Jersey.

G.D. McFetridge

The Little Bighorn

Over the years, I have found myself thinking about my great-grandfather and of the legendary battle at the Little Bighorn River that almost ended his life. After reaching a few curious conclusions regarding his survival, I decided to declare a celebration, one observed annually with a family get-together and a commendatory toast. On June 25, 2009, at three-thirty in the afternoon, I gathered with family and friends at my home in Montana. After serving a round of drinks, I asked everyone to join me in commemorating the newly declared holiday.

"This salute is for Private James Watson of the Seventh Cavalry," I said, raising my glass, "a man whose foresight and resourcefulness saved my great grandfather from death. Here's to you, soldier!"

"Here, here!" my brother said.

My wife smiled forbearingly, my two sons rolled their eyes, and our friends applauded. We enjoyed ribs, potato salad, grilled squash, corn on the cob, and more drinks. By sundown, everyone had gone home. My wife tidied the kitchen, while I cleaned up the yard, put away the folding chairs and collected the trash. When I had finished, I walked to the front of the house, sat on the steps, and watched the majestic Bitterroot Mountains fade into twilight. My brother understood the deeper meaning of my toast—he and I share an abstract, if not a philosophical, sense of life—but I'm not sure anyone else did. If not for James Watson, I'm almost certain I wouldn't be here. This makes me wonder about destiny and the delicate thread that connects the string of events linking the future to the past.

Private Peter Thompson, my great-grandfather, was at the Battle of the Little Bighorn, along with roughly seven-hundred other soldiers, scouts, and civilians.



Custer's Last Ride, Little Big Horn 1876, © Mark Churms.com 2000. All Rights Reserved

However, allow me to be clear: he was never *in the battle*, not in the sense that General Custer was, nor of the others who died that infamous day.

Less than a week after the massacre, Pvt. Thompson told an East Coast reporter that he had watched the troopers ride to their fate. It had been hot and Custer sat high in the saddle, in shirtsleeves, his buckskin pants tucked into his polished boots, his buckskin jacket tied behind the cantle. He had theatrically tilted his straw-colored hat, the wide brim turned up on one side and held to the crown by a brass hook and eyelet. This allowed "Old Iron Butt," a nickname given Custer, to sight his Remington sporting rifle while riding. Legend had it that he could stay in the saddle for twelve hours at a stretch.

Great-grandfather Thompson, aged nineteen, had joined the Seventh Cavalry in 1875, assigned to C Company under Captain Thomas Custer. Shortly before the campaign began, Thompson found himself reassigned to Company E. For those unfamiliar with the battle, General Custer was not the only one of the Custer family who died that day. In addition to brothers Tom and Boston Custer, there were also his nephew, Autie Reed, and his brother-in-law, Lt. James Calhoun. Boston and Reed had been hired as civilian packers and scouts. Suffice it to say, the Custer family suffered heavy losses on the dry plains of Montana, shot and hacked to pieces on the hills overlooking the banks of the Little Big Horn River.

Historians have never named the person who spotted great-grandfather and James Watson, but recorded testimony states they were seen climbing out of a ravine two miles from the grassy ridge where Indians had overwhelmed Custer and his regiment. From there, the two men made their way to the safety of Major Reno's defensive position on the high bluffs. Watson was quick to explain in detail how his horse had gone lame, and after falling farther and farther behind, he dismounted, continuing toward the developing battle on foot. That was when he came upon great-grandfather Peter Thompson, whose exhausted horse had also been failing. The two men, as they claimed in statements given at a military hearing many months later, attempted to rejoin their doomed comrades on the ridge.

Pvt. Watson put it this way: "Them savages was thicker than bees, and we had no means by which to infiltrate the main battle or any part of it."

Most historians discredit Watson's explanation, as well great-grandfather's carbon-copy account. Regimental records indicated that the two men were not the only defectors who failed to keep the deadly rendezvous at Custer's Last Stand. More than three dozen soldiers assigned to the General's battalion mysteriously appeared at Reno's position on the bluffs. After the dust had settled, with so many officers and first sergeants dead, it was impossible to know when and why or under what circumstances these men had managed to escape their fate.

For instance, twenty-four cavalrymen from Captain Yates' F Company showed up on Reno Hill, while the rest died on Battle Ridge

with General Custer. Historians generally agree that this large number would have been unusual, particularly under normal tactical circumstances, though it would have been less questionable had Yates' company formed the rear of the main column. That having been the case, it is reasonable to see how one man after another could have lagged behind before easing out of sight.

In contrast, other scholars and Custer buffs argue that Yates may have led the way into battle, or at least into an aspect of it. This scenario, however, creates difficulties and undermines precise explanations as to how so many men deserted under the iron-fisted command of General Custer. In any case, we are left with questions that will never lead to answers, at least not to the satisfaction of most historians. But having said that, adding yet another twist to the story, my father once told me that great-grandfather had, during his waning years, offered up a confession of sorts to my grandfather, which differed substantially from the crafted tale Watson and he had put together for the benefit of the military tribunal.

My mother's only brother, Donald – uncle Don – unlike great-grandfather Peter Thompson, was killed during his war, at the Battle of the Bulge. I never knew uncle Don. He died long before I was born. Based on several stories my mother told, his death haunted my grandmother until the day she died. Despite my grandfather's quiet acceptance of his son's death, I clearly remember the time he angrily explained that the U. S. Army had never recovered uncle Don's body. Grandfather showed me letters from soldiers who had allegedly witnessed my uncle's death, and they said a German machinegun had opened up on the platoon, killing my uncle and several others.

One letter noted that when the gunfire began, uncle Don ran for cover behind a pine tree. A burst of bullets splintered the narrow trunk, fatally wounding him. Although grandfather wasn't sure he believed any of the letters, he had heard that officers encouraged soldiers to write letters of condolence and explanation to help ease the suffering of relatives and hopefully to provide closure, particularly when bodies went unrecovered. Under such pretenses, it is conceivable that men embellished or made up stories to offer families when, in reality, those men knew little or nothing of how a particular soldier might have died.

In my uncle's case, the outcome was at once tragic and straightforward: the enemy had killed him somewhere in the shadowy forests of Europe. He was twenty-one. He had been a nice looking man, perhaps a bit naïve but with his life ahead of him. There's no grave to visit, no headstone, no way to know what his last moments were like. Had he suffered? Did he pass away quickly without too much suffering? Sometimes I wonder what thoughts ran through his mind as the final darkness closed in.

Great-grandfather Peter Thompson made a choice on his day of reckoning – he refused to follow Custer to the end of the road. General

Patton was indirectly in charge of the circumstances that led to my uncle Don's death, but at a very great distance, no doubt, for warfare was different sixty-eight years after the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Men rode in jeeps, tanks, and airplanes. Still, I sometimes wonder if my uncle could have made a different choice. Could he have saved himself, or was the inertia of his war so great that once swept into it there was no escaping destiny's grip? Beyond the obvious existential overtones, this question has bothered me for years, but after continued reflection and self-examination, I came to understand better how it mirrored my perceptions of life.

My father was old enough for military service during the Second World War. He turned twenty-three five months before Hitler's well-honed military machine trampled over Poland. Dad was an intelligent, well-read person, and I'm sure he recognized the warning signs. More than a few times over the years he had said to me that there was "no way in hell" he was going to fight in a European war, unlike uncle Don, who apparently felt it was his duty. My mother maintained that the army should have declared her brother 4F because of a heart murmur, and I recall watching as resentment hardened her face when she told me how her father had failed to do something to keep Don out of the army. In contrast to her position concerning her brother and his military induction—suffering as she was in a miserable marriage—she secretly hoped Uncle Sam would draft my father, thereby freeing her from his oppressive and sometimes violent domination. But my dad had a different strategy: get the wife pregnant in a hurry and find a job in a defense plant—a surefire draft deferment unless hell broke loose. So, making a long story short, my mom had two children before the United States declared war on Japan, and a third child in 1943.

Beyond my father's maneuvering and apparent instinct for self-preservation, I don't believe he cared much about his children. In my older brother's case, my father was physically abusive, and my older sister suffered another brand of abuse and tried suicide at age twenty-four. My oldest sister is a horror of a human being and cares for no one but herself. She's a lot like dad, and I think it's fair to say that my brother and sisters were little more than easy tickets out of a war. It is reasonable, if not judicious, to have reservations about going to war. Nevertheless, my father's use of his children as a means to evade the draft, without paying them back with a decent upbringing or parental love, is at the very least questionable. But that's another issue, one I'll return to later.

As far as great-grandfather Thompson's story goes, the Indian warriors were hacking Custer's five companies to pieces by late afternoon. Major Reno and Captain Benteen and their combined seven companies had cowered down on what historians call Reno Hill, a defensive position on a high bluff taken after Reno's abortive attack on the southern half of the huge Indian village. After bitter arguments between senior officers, Captains Weir and Benteen rode north to rejoin, or at least to discover what had become of, Custer.

A mile into this ill-conceived advance, troopers saw almost the entire valley swarming with Sioux and Cheyenne. Farther north on the ridge, with dust clouds and gunsmoke swirling over the battlefield, Custer and every man with him were mortally injured or dead. A continued clattering of gunfire came from hundreds of excited warriors, finishing off the last of the *wasichu* soldiers. Weir and Benteen retreated hastily when an estimated fifteen-hundred warriors left the valley and began moving toward them.

As for my great-grandfather, he wrote his sister that he had stayed at Reno Hill with the wounded, proving yet again he was a man with an odd knack for survival. At the same time, regarding the last story he told grandfather—"the confessional," as my father called it—it revealed a few curious details found in no history books. According to Thompson, plenty of soldiers and even some officers couldn't believe that Custer was willing to attack the huge village after he had taken its full measure from the hilltop on which he and another officer surveyed the valley. Great-grandfather Thompson was riding alongside Pvt. Watson when they noticed Tom Custer nearly chewing off his mustache after hearing his brother order the command forward. Watson glanced at Peter, leaned closer, and said, "Old Iron Butt's crazy as hell. I never seen a bigger Indian camp in my life."

Thompson, eight years younger than Watson, took seriously what the older man said. As the company prepared to follow Custer's lead, Thompson reined his horse closer to Watson's.

"I don't think I'm ready to die, at least not today," he said.

Half the men in the command had a look in their eyes. It was a blend of fear and disbelief, but at the same time these feelings were contradicted by an almost mystical faith that the General led a charmed life. He had never known defeat and likely never would. But Pvt. Watson had his own assessment, and he had been around long enough to know a deathtrap when he saw it. He motioned to my great grandfather. "Stay with me, Thompson. I got a plan."

Within a matter of minutes, the five companies had tightened up the formation, horses two abreast, two companies in front and two behind, with Custer's company in the lead. My great-grandfather and Watson were closer to the rear. Their horses broke into a trot as Custer led the command in the direction of Medicine Tail Coulee, a wide ravine joining the Little Bighorn River and providing access to the middle of the Indian village. About a mile southeast of the crossing, Custer ordered Capt. Yates and Companies E and F down Medicine Tail, while he led C, I, and L Companies through the foothills to strike the village from a second angle, creating a brand of pincher maneuver for which the General was famous.

If we can believe my great-grandfather's account, Custer was under the illusion that he had caught the Indians unaware and that many of the warriors were off hunting buffalo. In reality, the tribes had thrown a party the previous night, a social event for younger members, and

as a result, many had stayed up late and were sleeping in, giving the village the appearance of inactivity, if not of vacancy. Watson and my great-grandfather were assigned to E Company, which Capt. Yates ordered to the rear as the two companies entered the wide but narrowing coulee. In that moment, Watson saw his best, if not his only opportunity, and apparently, at some point, he had managed to lean sideways and with his long reach loosen the saddle's cinch. As the saddle slipped sideways, he reined his horse out of formation and called to my great-grandfather: "Thompson, hold my horse. My cinch is loose."

My mother always said uncle Don had been a sensitive young man, shy around girls. I thought he looked like the Beatles' George Harrison. He didn't seem the type to serve on the front lines; he wasn't big or strong or tough, and he wasn't experienced. Mom also mentioned how relieved the family was when they heard the army had assigned him to communications instead of to a rifle company. I don't know what communications did, aside from the obvious, and I don't understand exactly the nature of my uncle's job. Sometimes I've wondered why there hadn't been some way for uncle Don to extricate himself from his awful fate, the same way great-grandfather Thompson had. One of the several letters my grandfather received said that my uncle's platoon was walking on a dirt road through a pine forest, in advance of the battalion.

Apparently, a green second lieutenant—fresh out of college—foolishly led my uncle and the other men into a deadly situation, and there was no one like Pvt. Watson looking after my uncle Donald. He was butchered, riddled by 7-mm machine-gun bullets and left to rot or to be eaten by scavengers in a dismal forest thousands of miles from home.

I recall once asking my father about my uncle. My father's sentiments were similar to my mother's; he liked Don, said he always had, though he also mentioned a time or two that my uncle had a stubborn streak and held stiffly to his own opinions. But then, my father was a distant man, emotionally cold in certain ways, and I don't think he was close with any of my mother's family. He never offered an opinion about uncle Don's enlistment or his death, and he never commented on the contrast between his outlook and the decision my uncle had made. Never any sign of the troubled remorse psychologists refer to as "survivors' guilt," no indication that my dad had ever said to himself: I lived, and the Germans killed my brother-in-law. I renounced any sense of duty and he'd embraced it.

At any rate, I faced my own war—Vietnam—and admit my feelings were in many ways similar to my father's. No way in hell was I going into that politically manufactured disaster. When I reached eighteen, I was already planning how to evade the draft. My first line of defense was to hope for a medical deferment, although, looking back, it was a threadbare strategy. I had suffered a somewhat sickly childhood because of bad luck and emotional distress, but not enough to keep me

out of the military. My second option was Canada, and I'm certain I would have deserted my homeland had push come to shove.

However, by the time I was nineteen or twenty, with the introduction of the draft board's lottery, the government computer spit out a high number attached to my birth date. With that random piece of luck, the threat of Vietnam all but vanished. I never had a war forced on me, never had a war to call my own, no necessity to confront what my uncle and great grandfather had faced ... for better or for worse.

Watson fumbled with the saddle cinch as great-grandfather held the horse's reins. Troopers trotted by kicking up dust, heading downslope deeper into Medicine Tail Coulee. When the last two cavalrymen had passed, Watson pulled his carbine from its saddle case, took it in hand like a baseball bat and swung the heavy barrel into his horse's front knee. The animal threw his head left and right and reared, but great grandfather, though shocked by Watson's sudden and bizarre action, held tight to the reins. Moments later, the panicky horse settled down and gingerly lifted the bruised leg.

Sweat dripped from under Watson's hat, making muddy little trails on his dusty forehead and down the sides of his cheeks and jawbones. "Turn your mount loose," he said. Great-grandfather paused, as if confused. Watson lunged forward and snatched the reins from him, waving his hat wildly in the horse's face. The startled animal turned and bolted after the last of the cavalry column, then more than a hundred yards down the dusty ravine.

"If someone comes up on us, we say my horse went lame, and you stopped to help. Then your horse ran off. So we're following the command on foot. Got it?"

"But wait ... what if—?"

"There ain't no what ifs, Thompson. Only thing that matters right now is we don't go down there." Watson pointed a sun-darkened hand toward the valley and the Little Bighorn River.

It wasn't until late in the twentieth century that improved archeology more clearly illuminated what had long been the mystery of the Battle of the Little Bighorn. These recent excavations proved that assertions made by Watson and Thompson were accurate. Capt. Yates had in fact led two companies down the Medicine Tail Coulee as Custer and three other companies rode northwest through the hills. While Watson and my great-grandfather stayed back, Yates' command approached the riverbank and met fierce resistance, forcing soldiers to turn north to rejoin Custer as he arced west to escape hordes of warriors closing from three sides. Because great-grandfather's story is three generations behind me, I can't say with any certainty what happened after Watson battered his own horse. It's probable that the two men stalled for as long as Watson deemed prudent and then tentatively followed after the two companies.

By the time they heard repeated gunfire and were close enough to see what was happening, Yates had ordered his troops up another ravine toward the southeastern end of Battle Ridge and the position Lt. Calhoun was holding in a rearguard action. Realizing they had committed themselves to defection and a host of potential consequences, Watson and great-grandfather Thompson doubled back, heading on foot for what they hoped would be either Reno or Benteen's companies.

Once reunited with either commander, they would need a story as to how and why they had failed to follow Custer's command into battle. If the story didn't hold up, the worst-case scenario might include execution for the crime of desertion. Yet with ominous circumstances growing grimmer by the minute, such a fate may have proven preferable to death at the hands of the enraged warriors.

Watson's was a gamble wrought in the intensity of the moment, abandoning duty over the prospect of death. My great-grandfather was a lucky recipient who went along with an opportunity that he alone might never have conceived of or not found the courage to pursue.

There it is. Four generations of men in my family who either lived through or died during the ugly reality of war. Great-grandfather had been too young for the Civil War but came of age for the Indian campaigns. Grandfather escaped World War I because he was too old, though had the war lasted, he probably would have been called into it as the growing death toll exhausted the supply of younger men. My dad used an effective strategy to keep himself out of the World War II, whereas my uncle Don volunteered.

When it was my time, I was ready to do whatever it took to stay out of Vietnam. I guess that makes me more like my father, despite having spent much of my life trying not to be like him—another of life's ironies.

Perhaps war is the denominator and individuals are the numerators. In this way, the ultimate value of the fraction results from how the numerator expresses itself. My great-grandfather came from Scots-Irish immigrants. He was poor and joined the army to provide a roof over his head and in hopes of a better life. To his credit, he did go on to make a good life for himself and his family. He left the Seventh Cavalry a few years after the Battle of the Little Bighorn and used money he'd saved to buy land in Montana to start a ranch. Many years later he left the ranch to his two sons, and they built it into a major producer of beef, making themselves rich men.

Believing we are masters of our own fates is a tricky proposition, and my great-grandfather's life perhaps serves as a prime example. If we take stock in the propositions of free will, even to the slightest degree, it is clear that many decisions my great-grandfather made were predicated on a single day, an hour, a moment—the moment he decided to follow Watson's lead and not to follow General Custer's.

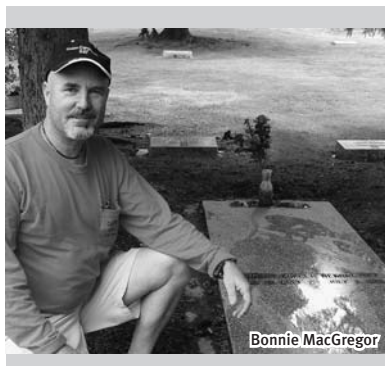
In that sense, we could argue that my great-grandfather was, indeed, master of his fate. He made a specific choice at a critical moment, and by all indications that choice saved his life. On the other hand, without Pvt. Watson as the catalyst, I believe Thompson would have dutifully ridden to his death in much the same manner my uncle walked into his.

To the best of my knowledge, within a month after the battle, my great-grandfather and Watson parted ways and never saw each other again. Each man, reassigned to other duties in other locations, maintained no correspondence with the other, at least none of which anyone in my family was ever aware. According to great-grandfather's letters, the army transferred him from the Seventh Cavalry into an infantry regiment in 1877.

Out of curiosity, I researched James Watson to find out what had become of him. His name appeared on census records on two occasions after the Little Bighorn, once in 1880 and again in 1890, at which time he was listed as a single man living in Oregon. After that, he vanished. I went so far as to telephone a couple dozen Watsons living in Oregon to see if by chance one of them might be related, but the trail had gone cold. Watson is a common name.

Life is a tapestry woven from a near infinite, if not truly infinite, set of possibilities. Picking out any part from the vast field of probabilities and outcomes seems meaningless. No one moment or action can be separated from the causal chain. In the deepest philosophical sense, no event has more or less meaning or consequence than any other; they are all inescapably linked. The infinite renders the astronomical commonplace, and as such even the most remote possibility is never quite as remote as it may seem. Just ask my great-grandfather, or in an oblique sense, my uncle Don.

Perhaps it boils down to what the existentialists have said: Destiny and freedom — as is true of light and dark — are opposite halves of a single reality, bound inextricably together, each depending upon the other for the foundation of their existence. Consequently, from within the collusions of destiny my freedom grows, and from my freedom grows my destiny. Yet the precise nature of choice remains paradoxical beyond words, leaving questions without answers and the interminable mystery of consciousness and the reality of being here.



G. D. McFetridge, iconoclast, philosopher, and occasional drunk writes from Montana's Sapphire Mountains. His home overlooks the beautiful Bitterroot Valley and the mighty Bitterroot River. His short stories and essays are published across America, in Canada and the U.K. He is the author of seven novels. His latest novel, *The Jesus Genome*, has been rejected by 33 NYC literary agents.

Michael Morris

Art Always Begins



Art always begins as a note whispering

a daubing brush shimmering
white along the edges of colors

It surprises like a violin note
played directly over one's shoulder

an alabaster whisper in the limpid ear

A rhythmic pattern syncopated
to the echoes of back-alley feet

where the bohemian song celebrates
lifting a glass and a skirt

up as high as they'll go
drinking deep as of unquenchable

thirsts. (At this bar start up
the dust-ups with unseen daemons

Inspiring entities neither good
nor bad.) An understanding of one's

own imperfections lofts the poetic
music into being, soft as pillows

sharp as knives, wild as Tennessee
Williams after thirty years drunk

drunk as Faulkner blistering into sentences
backwards. In lobelia there is intimate

salvation: all nature begs to be backlit
to be painted, all drama transported

on to the stage where the great
enabler unveils beneath the swaying

of the treetops above, those consuming
notes that enthrall the tale



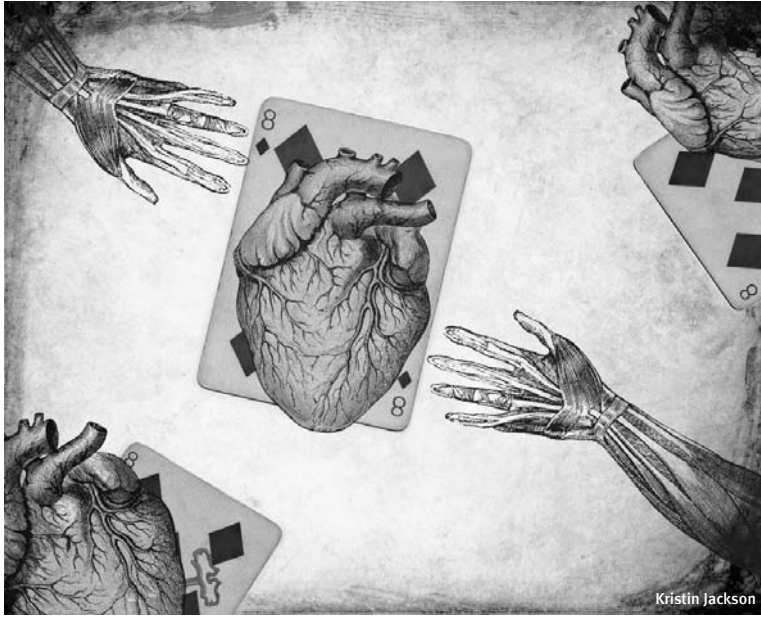
Cynthia Morris

Michael Morris has placed poems in over 80 journals such as *Plainsong*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Bayou*, *The Worcester Review*, *Chiron*, and *Writer's Bloc*. His chapbook *A Wink Centuries Old* was featured in Issue 51 of *Minotaur Magazine*. He is an Honorary Member of the IWA, and has won three distinguished writing awards from the University of Pennsylvania and the Dana Literary Society. Michael is also a nominee for the 2012 Pushcart Prize.

Casandra Lopez

Your Name: A Diamond Stolen From Our Mouths

For J.M. Lopez



Someone took it, swallowed it whole. Stole
it, a diamond from our mouths —

At the hospital you were hidden, cloaked
white curtains, pseudonymed. Your son
thinks you are a superhero, doesn't believe —

Nurses typed out: D A V I D D O E
plastic to wrist, you are renamed.

They said it was for your protection. How unsafe
the hospital felt, this world.

We are told in the afterlife our ancestors
will know our name, sometimes I believe —

We hid your assisted breath, your gun shot body,
We hid our shakes in clutched hands.

Metal and machinery bound

D A V I D D O E,

an investigation number,

a patient, a body, but not my brother

I wanted

to not have answered the door, to not have closed it.

to have lied, I wanted to blame instincts, fear. I wanted to give you

my lungs, my heart, my frenetic caged brain. Anything. To take
your place. Impossible –

I tried singing you on, into

the other world But I wasn't taught.

How throat should unravel into ancient
map, larynx branching into sky and trachea land.

Blood vessels spiriting you along. You will not get

lost—

Instead I held you tightly, weaving lifeline to life-

line. And

traced the curve of a J on the back of your thick

hand.



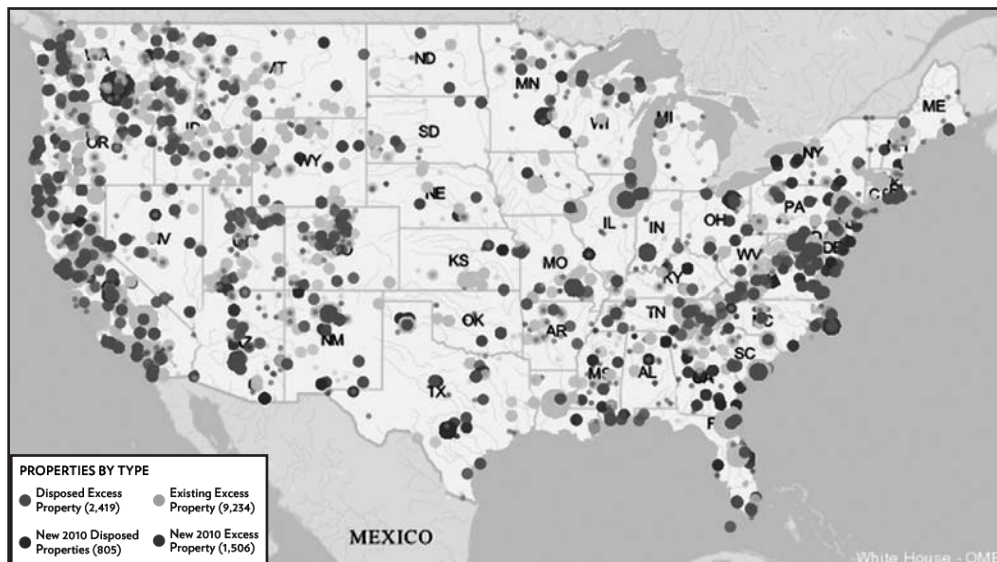
Casandra Lopez was raised in Southern California and holds an MFA from the University of New Mexico. She has been selected as the 2013 Indigenous Writer in Residence at the School of Advanced Research and is the recipient of scholarships from the Southern California Tribal Education Institute and the Squaw Valley Writers Conference. She is also an alumna of VONA. Her work has appeared in *High Desert Journal*, *Acentos Review*, *Caesura*, and *Sakura Review*.

READING THE WEST

read-ing [from ME reden, to explain, hence to read] – vt. 1 to get the meaning of; 2 to understand the nature, significance, or thinking of; 3 to interpret or understand; 4 to apply oneself to; study.

SURPLUS FEDERAL PROPERTY

In June 2010, President Obama issued a memorandum to heads of executive departments and agencies asking them to speed up the process of disposing of unneeded federal real estate in order to cut operating costs and improve energy efficiency. This unneeded real estate included land, buildings, laboratories, warehouses, coastal facilities, etc. Jeffrey Zients reported in October 2011 that the White House was stepping up efforts to unload \$3.5 billion in excess properties by launching a website with an interactive map visualizing a sampling of about 14,000 buildings and structures currently designated as excess. Many of those in the West are buildings in the national forests.



Source: Jeffrey Zients, "White House Steps Up Efforts To Unload \$3.5 Billion In Excess Properties," October 21, 2011, *AOL Government*, <http://gov.aol.com/2011/10/21/white-house-steps-up-efforts-to-unload-3-5-billion-in-excess-pr/>. Also see: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/presidential-memorandum-disposing-unneeded-federal-real-estate>

UTAH PUBLIC LANDS

In March 2012, Governor Gary R. Herbert of Utah, a Republican, signed into law a bill asking the federal government to give to the state more than 20 million acres. Bills patterned after Utah's are being prepared for filing next year in Colorado, Idaho, Montana and New Mexico.

Utah is also preparing lawsuits to reclaim thousands of sections of road that cross federal lands but that the state argues should properly be the province of the states and counties. As reported by Kirk Johnson in the New York Times, proponents of the law base their arguments on language under which states were granted their founding charters.

Legal experts said the problem for the new state claims was that Congressional authority over federal land had been upheld over and over by the United States Supreme Court. If property rights are the issue being raised, many experts said, proponents of the new land drive are facing traditions and precedents that run deep in the law and culture.

"The core of it is that if somebody said to you, 'You don't own your house, I do,' you would pull out a deed — that's what the federal government will do," said Professor Charles F. Wilkinson, who teaches federal public land law at the University of Colorado.

But Professor Wilkinson said the proponents have hit the nail on an issue that in many ways did create two different halves of the nation — the private-property states and the public-lands states — with tensions that have never really been resolved. "Should the United States government continue to own so much in this capitalist society?" he said. "That question has never gone away."

Source: Kirk Johnson, "Utah Asks U.S. to Return 20 Million Acres of Land," *New York Times*, March 23, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/24/us/utah-bill-asks-government-to-give-back-more-than-20-million-acres-of-land.html?_r=1

BLOW TO "SAGEBRUSH REVOLT"

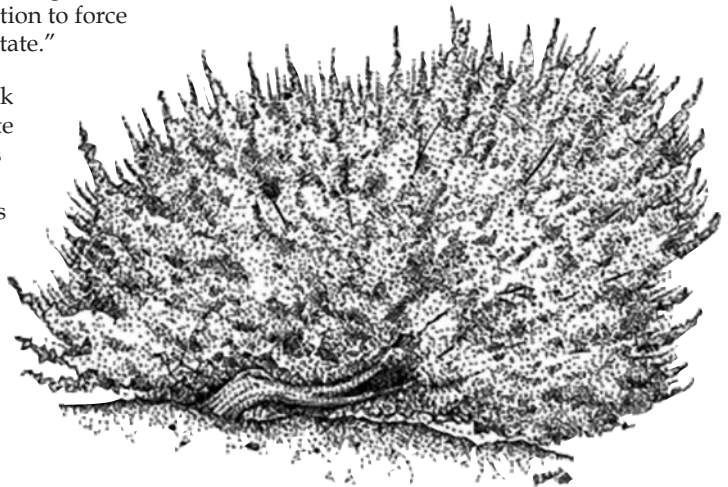
In May 2012, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer vetoed legislation very similar to that signed into law by Governor Herbert. As Reuters journalists reported:

The much-publicized measure, which cleared the Republican-dominated Arizona legislature last month, called for federal agencies to relinquish title to roughly 48,000 square miles (124,000 square km) of land they hold in the Grand Canyon state by 2015.

Brewer, a Republican and staunch conservative who had been widely expected to support the measure, said in a statement that the legislation failed to "identify an enforceable cause of action to force federal lands to be transferred to the state."

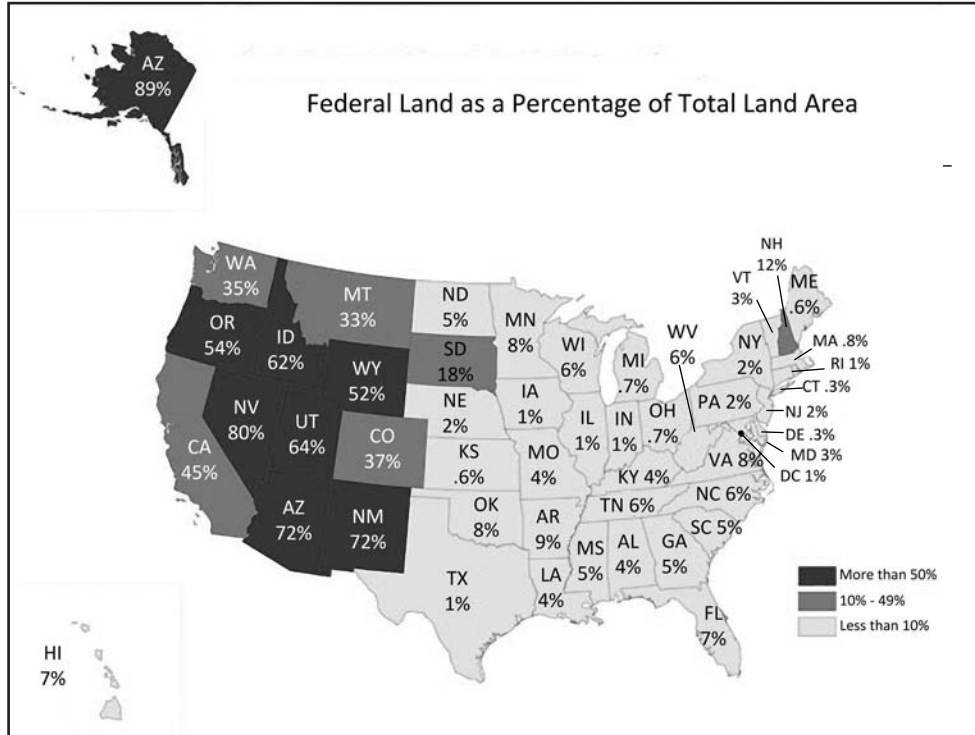
"I am also concerned about the lack of certainty this legislation could create for individuals holding existing leases on federal lands. Given the difficult economic times, I do not believe this is the time to add to that uncertainty," she said.

Source: Tim Gaynor and David Schwartz, "UPDATE 1-Arizona governor vetoes law demanding return of federal lands," Reuters, May 15, 2012. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/15/usa-arizona-lands-idUSL1E8GF0UD20120515>



FEDERAL LAND OWNERSHIP

According to a February 2012 report by the Congressional Research Service, the federal government owns roughly 635-640 million acres, which is 28% of the 2.27 billion acres of land in the United States. Four agencies administer 609 million acres of this land: the Forest Service (USFS) in the Department of Agriculture, and the National Park Service (NPS), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), all in the Department of the Interior (DOI). In addition, the Department of Defense administers 19 million acres in military bases, training ranges, and more.



Source: <http://maydamedia.com/Chapters/Chapter16/Inter8.html>

Federal land ownership is concentrated in the West. Specifically, 62% of Alaska is federally owned, as is 47% of the 11 coterminous western states. By contrast, the federal government owns only 4% of lands in the other states. This western concentration has contributed to a higher degree of controversy over land ownership and use in that part of the country.

Throughout America's history, federal land laws have reflected two visions: keeping some lands in federal ownership while disposing of others. From the earliest days, there has been conflict between these two visions. During the 19th century, many laws encouraged settlement of the West through federal land disposal. Mostly in the 20th century, emphasis shifted to retention of federal lands. Currently, agencies have varying authorities for acquiring and disposing of land, ranging from being very restricted to being quite broad. As a result of acquisitions and disposals, federal land ownership by the five agencies has declined by more than 18 million acres, from 647 million acres to 629 million acres, since 1990. Much of the decline is attributable to BLM land disposals in Alaska.

State	2004 Report	2012 Report
Alaska	69.1%	61.8%
Arizona	48.1%	42.3%
California	45.3%	47.7%
Colorado	36.6%	36.2%
Hawaii	19.4%	30.3%
Idaho	50.2%	61.7%
Montana	29.9%	28.9%
Nevada	84.5%	81.1%
New Mexico	41.8%	34.7%
Oregon	53.1%	53.0%
Utah	57.5%	66.5%
Washington	30.3%	28.5%
Wyoming	42.3%	48.2%

Source: Ross W. Gorte, et. al, "Federal Land Ownership: Overview and Data," *Congressional Research Service*, February 8, 2012, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R42346.pdf> and http://www.gsa.gov/graphics/ogp/Annual_Report_FY2004_Final_R2M-n11_0Z5RDZ-i34K-pR.pdf

NO FREE LAND

In 1976, Congress abolished all remaining traces of the Homestead Act of 1862. The Federal Land Management and Policy Act declared that "the public lands be retained in Federal ownership, unless as a result of the land use planning procedure provided in this Act, it is determined that disposal of a particular parcel will serve the national interest." The Bureau of Land Management oversees the use of some 264 million acres of public land, representing about one-eighth of all the land in the United States. The BLM has charge of "the management of the public lands and their various resource values so that they are utilized in the combination that will best meet the present and future needs of the American people." Lands are sold at fair market value.

Source: <http://www.blm.gov/flpma/>

MINING LAND RUSH

The mining law of 1872 has not been updated. Some fear that even the national park lands are being threatened.

A new Environmental Working Group analysis of government records shows that in 12 Western states, the total number of active mining claims has increased from 207,540 in January 2003 to 376,493 in July 2007—an increase of more than 80 percent. Between September 2006 and May 2007 alone, companies and individuals staked more than 50,000 claims (BLM 2007).

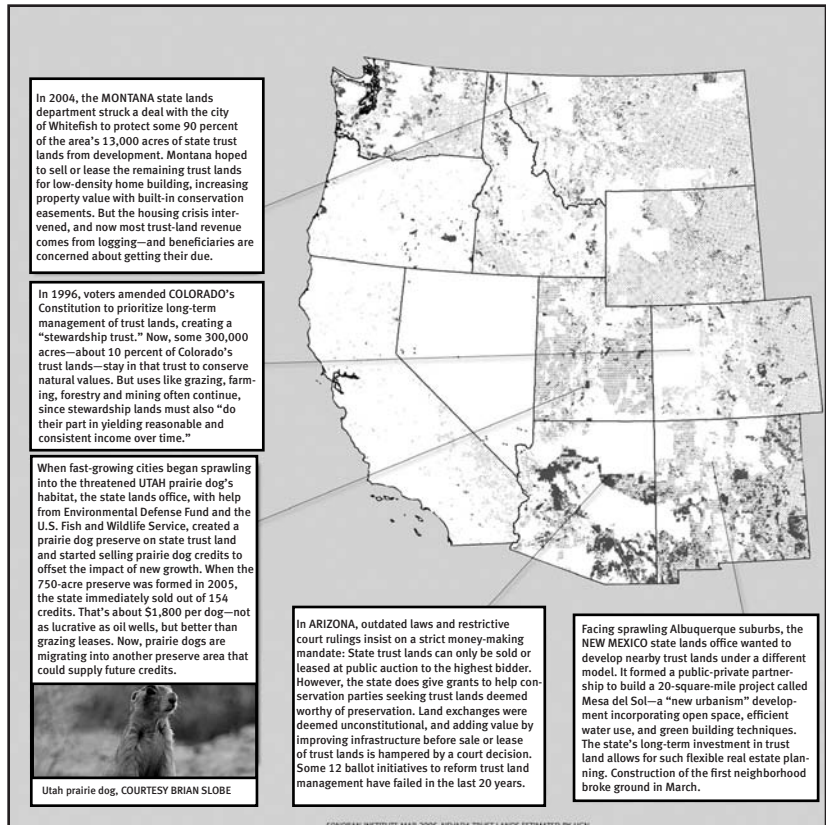
Many of these claims are for uranium, sparked by global demand for nuclear power. Government data from just four states (Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming) reveal an ongoing surge in uranium claims, from an estimated 4,300 staked in fiscal year 2004 to more than 32,000 staked in fiscal year 2006 (BLM Uranium 2007). Mining interests have also staked tens of thousands of claims for gold, copper and other metals, reflecting a worldwide demand for minerals.

Source: http://www.ewg.org/sites/mining_google/US/analysis.php

ABOUT STATE TRUST LANDS

State trust lands were first granted by Congress following the Revolutionary War to support essential public institutions in newly organized states as they entered the Union. It has been up to each state to decide how to dispose of their state trust lands. Most of the original public land grants have long since passed into private ownership. The remaining 48 million acres, however, are concentrated in the West. The Lincoln Institute of Land Policy has published a number of reports concerning these lands, including a 2005 report:

Unlike other public lands, most state trust lands are held in trust for designated beneficiaries, principally public schools. State trust land managers lease and sell these lands for a diverse range of uses to generate revenues for the beneficiaries today and for future generations. Proceeds are distributed into a state's permanent fund and used for many purposes — ranging from school loans to teacher salaries.



Source: Nathan Rice, "State Trust Lands at a Glance," *High Country News*, June 12, 2011, <http://www.hcn.org/issues/43.10/states-work-conservation-into-trust-lands-management/state-trust-lands-at-a-glance>

<http://www.lincolnst.edu/subcenters/managing-state-trust-lands/>

EDITORIAL MATTER

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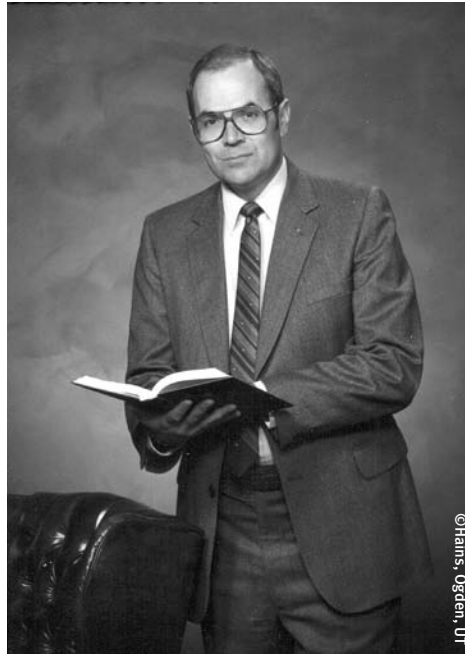
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the 2012
Dr. Sherwin W. Howard Poetry Award**



to
Karla Linn Merrifield
for
"From KLM to GO'K: Santa Fe Watercolor Abstraction
on Paper: *Juniper, Titmouse,*" and other poems
in the Spring 2012 issue

The Dr. Sherwin W. Howard Award of \$500 is presented annually to the author of the "best" poetry published in *Weber* during the previous year.

Funding for this award is generously provided by the Howard family.

Dr. Howard (1936-2001) was former president of Deep Springs College, dean of the College of Arts & Humanities at Weber State University, editor of *Weber Studies*, and an accomplished playwright and poet.

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