



sonder magazine

Volume 3

FEATURED STORY

The Giant

by John Hood

A Different Kind of Land Acknowledge- ment

by Tom Weiss

Interview with David Weber & Phillip Pournelle

by Bob Arrington

Did Liberal Artists Truly Set the Table?

by Jen Rynbrandt

The Artist

by Sharon Dunn

A Rough Rider in Oz by Bob Arrington

Excerpt from *The Sikarikin*

by Harry Steven
Lazerus

Review of *Downton Abbey* and *The Gilded Age* by Bob Arrington





Masthead

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From Our Publisher

It's Sonder's third issue, and we have published some remarkable work thus far. Lots of stories, great interviews the mainstream folks would never do, some features and reviews. But we are a long way from complete. Sonder wants to curate conservative culture—that means we want to publish work by you, the reader. What's your thing? Fiction, nonfiction, line drawings, painting, sculpture, acting, music? Submit your work, and if it's good, it's conservative culture, and there's a way to publish it online, we will do that.

The cover image is a stylized Janus (generated with Midjourney AI), the Roman god of beginnings and endings, doorways, transitions, and time. He is usually depicted with two faces—one looking forward, the other looking back—and is the source of the name for our month of January. It seems like our American culture is in the throes of just such a change. We stand where we can see our beginnings and how rich and beautiful our culture has been—yet we can also see the future, with its myriad possibilities, many of them bleak and frightening. We also live in an age of miracles. Many of us have spouses who would have died years ago were it not for modern medical technology—heck, I'd be in a wheelchair if I had not gotten an artificial hip three years ago. We have more young men coming back from the field of battle than ever, alive, if injured; how many would have died in Vietnam only fifty or sixty years ago? Compared to where we stood when I was a child during the Reagan years, we have effectively NO pollution—only a few spots where, generally due to industrial malpractice or governmental idiocy, water or land or air have been corrupted beyond safe use. Every person in America has access to the Internet—and to nearly every book in existence, hundreds of thousands of classes and tutorials, and easily-located experts who can help you solve problems. We have telemedicine. We can group-call our family and friends and display everyone in real time on our large flat-screen televisions.

In short, we stand at the pinnacle of—something. And that's the scary part, isn't it? We have all these wonderful possibilities, and it would be so easy to lose them all to some unnamed threat: government overreach, terrorism, the dying out of expertise, an economic crash. Worse, the largest political party that represents those of us to the right of center, the Republicans, seems engaged in internal pugilism, cartoonishly laying waste to the land all around them, to—to what end? I sure can't tell.

This is not the time to be fearful, though. This is the time to reach out to those of other generations, ensuring our culture is passed down. We can't count on the schools to do it, nor can we count on libraries or the publishing industry or any of the other once-reliable preservers of our way of life. We have to do it ourselves. We have to curate those stories and wisdoms, either gather them from our elders or share them with our grandchildren and young people, and define our own culture. If we don't, it will surely be taken away from us, along with all the good things it's brought not just our nation but to the world.

The good news: we're really, really good at doing things ourselves, as with the victory garden pictured on the masthead page. Let's rediscover that in ourselves and keep our culture strong.

Jamie K. Wilson
Publisher, Sonder
Executive Editor, Conservatarian Press



A Different Kind of Land Acknowledgement

- by Tom Weiss

*Editor's Note: Ubiquitous in Australia, and mandatory in Canadian Federal Court, land acknowledgements are becoming more prevalent in the United States. They generally take the form of recognizing indigenous peoples who inhabited the land before the current government was established. Some view this practice as important and respectful. Others say it's ridiculous. This imagined speech—which was **not** given to the 2024 graduating class of Southern Cross University in Queensland, Australia—takes a different view.*

I want to begin by talking about the land acknowledgements you've heard from every speaker at this podium today. They've become a bit cliché in Australia, haven't they? Often perfunctory and boilerplate, they're usually not expressed with the proper level of sincerity or respect.

I want to change that.

So it is with the deepest regard for truth, and

for the history of this land, that I say the following:

I wish to acknowledge the unknown peoples who lived here, including those whom the Yugambah speaking conquered to take ownership of the land and waters. I also acknowledge and respect the elders, past, present, and emerging, but with the understanding that some of their customs and traditions are hopelessly outdated.

Now, I reckon you've never heard an acknowledgment quite like this before, and if you missed it because your brain stops working when someone recites a statement of belief you've heard a million times, don't worry. I will spell out my thinking in detail.

But before I do, let's take a step back. Westerners in general, and Australians specifically, have been brainwashed by the media and our fine institutions of higher learning—institutions like Southern Cross University—to believe that we are somehow responsible for the actions of our ancestors. Who those ancestors are, why they made certain decisions, and why we're responsible for them, is never much discussed.

But I think those details matter, and with that in mind, I want to explain in detail the experience of some of my ancestors.



They were common German peasant farmers who left Europe just over a hundred years ago—after the First World War, but before Hitler—and moved to the United States. They settled in a state called North Dakota some decades after the Native Americans there had been conquered, and after the Civil War ended slavery in that country, so they didn't directly participate in either atrocity.

Yet, somehow, as an American, and more specifically a White American, I'm supposed to feel somewhat if not entirely responsible for:

- the Native American genocide,
- the colonization of the New World,
- the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and
- because of my German heritage, the Holocaust.

I'll also add, because I'm an Australian resident, I'm meant to feel shame for the colonization of this land, too.

For a long time, I felt that shame. I was raised Catholic. It's not hard to make me feel shame about anything, and I was brainwashed—like you—into believing that I bear some responsibility for those historical atrocities.

But, do I? Do you?

Show of hands—how many people here know the name Catherine Parr?

The historians probably do, but for the rest of us, she's a rather obscure figure.

The sixth and final wife of King Henry VIII, Catherine lived for only 35 years and was the first Queen of England to simultaneously hold the title of Queen of Ireland. She was married four times, the most of any English Queen, and is reported to be the first woman to publish an original book in England.

She was quite a powerful woman. In fact, you



could argue she was the single most powerful woman of her day.

Catherine died days after giving birth to her only child in August of 1548. She became the third Tudor woman to succumb to an illness almost unheard of today, called childbed fever.

It's a bacterial infection that, in the 16th Century, generally afflicted wealthier women who could afford expensive doctors. Doctors who did not change their clothes, wear gloves, disinfect their hands, or clean their tools in-between patients or even after performing an autopsy.

Sounds grotesque, doesn't it? If a doctor tried to examine me with blood-soaked hands, I'd jump off the table and scream at them get the hell out. But no doctor in their right mind would do that today. It would be so out of place as to be unthinkable.

Five hundred years ago, it was commonplace, because no one had any understanding of the germ theory of disease. They didn't even have a way to conceptualize it. If you went back in time to try to save Catherine Parr, you *could not* convince her doctor that he—and he almost certainly was a man—would kill her. Do you know how I know this? Because the man who did figure it out, three centuries later—his name is Ignatz Semmelweis—was thoroughly rejected by



his colleagues and driven mad by their refusal to even consider the evidence he had amassed for his theory.

Queen Catherine Parr, like tens of millions of women before and after her, was killed—murdered—by a doctor, one of the smartest people alive at the time, and someone who was paid handsomely to keep her, and her baby, safe and healthy.

Show of hands—how many people here are in the medical profession or are related to someone who is? Keep your hands up if, after listening to this description of Catherine Parr’s murder, you feel personally responsible for it? No one? How many of you feel that your ancestors—our ancestors—should have done more to prevent doctors from murdering millions of women throughout history in what today we would call a genocide?

If you don’t feel guilty about the genocide of Renaissance women from doctor-induced childbed fever—and for the record I don’t believe you should—I would ask why you feel guilty for slavery, or the Holocaust, or the settlement of the Australian continent by European peoples. They all represent the exact same phenomenon.

Before I describe it, let me be clear about one thing. Whether you’re black or white or something else, whether your ancestors were Aborig-

inal or Torres Strait Islanders or whether they were born anywhere else on the planet, you, the 2024 graduates of Southern Cross University had *nothing whatsoever to do* with Catherine Parr’s death, or any of the events of two or three or five hundred years ago.

Let me say that again. *You are not responsible* for anything your ancestors did or didn’t do.

For a minute, let me speak only to the white people here. Everyone else, put your fingers in your ears, like this. Okay? Am I talking to the oppressors now? Great. Listen up.

Your ancestors were *idiots*. They did really stupid stuff. They didn’t know about germs. They thought people in remote parts of the globe were primitive because they didn’t think the same or have the same technology or culture. And they thought they could enslave or kill or rape those people without any consequences.

Alright, let’s switch it up. White people, stop listening. Fingers in your ears. I want to talk to everyone else now. Are we good? Only the oppressed on the line now?

Here’s the thing. Your ancestors were idiots, too. They did really stupid stuff. They didn’t know about germs, either. They committed infanticide and started wars and conquered land—almost certainly including the land we’re on right now—just like white people.

And with that out of the way, I want everyone to listen again, and I want you all to recite after me.

“My ancestors were idiots.”

Don’t be shy. Say it with me.

“My ancestors were idiots.”

One more time. Louder.

“My ancestors were idiots.”

If there is one thing we all have in common, it is this. Our ancestors believed some really, really stupid shit. And if you walk away from this talk thinking you're either the perpetrator or the victim of events centuries old that were a direct result of those antiquated beliefs, then congratulations, you're an idiot, too.

The myth of an idyllic past is just that: a myth. Life wasn't better two or three or five hundred years ago. You know how I know?

Because *our ancestors were idiots*.

In all seriousness, our ancestors were people. Humans. Homo Sapiens. We are all the same species and we all have the same sickness. All of our ancestors fought and murdered and raped and stole and conquered and experienced a life that was, in the famous words of Thomas Hobbes, “nasty, brutish, and short.” This was the universal experience of mankind until not that long ago.

If you think I'm wrong, if you think there is something to be said for the way our ancestors lived their lives, if you think the past is in any way superior to the present, I want you to try the following thought experiment:

Would you rather be Catherine Parr, Queen of England and Ireland, living in the year 1548? Or would you rather live in Australia, in poverty, in 2024?

I won't ask for a show of hands this time because the evidence is overwhelming. On almost every conceivable metric, a poor person today is far, far richer than Catherine could have ever imagined. On this there's no dispute. Medicine. Public health and safety. Food choices. Access to information. Travel. Connectivity. Entertainment. You name it, and someone just struggling to survive today is in objective terms light years ahead of the most powerful woman in 16th Century England.

Now, at this point, astute listeners might have noticed a contradiction in the two claims I've made thus far. If our ancestors were idiots, how could we be so much better off than they were? To me, the answer boils down to two

things vastly underrated and misunderstood by our culture today: our ancestors were progressive, and they were humble.

Let's tackle that first word. Progressive has a political meaning today completely at odds with what the word used to mean. Popular media tells us 'progressives' are forward-thinking risk-takers who come up with new ideas and plow through Chesterton's Fence with reckless abandon to help the poor and downtrodden.

That's wrong.

The reality is that the progressive vanguard is Marxist and anti-colonialist, two of the most regressive, backward-looking ideologies one can imagine outside of religion. And in some ways, progressivism is a religion all its own.

Think back to the other acknowledgements of country you've heard today. They all assume there were people who magically appeared on this land and lived in a utopian garden of peace and tranquility until Europeans arrived. Aside from being completely at odds with the historical evidence both in Australia and around the world, it is the very definition of a religious creation myth. The book of Genesis tells the same story.

And it's not true.

All of humanity are either colonists or settlers. My grandparents farmed land the United States purchased from France after Napoleon took it back from the Spanish, who'd taken it forty years earlier from the French, who'd colonized the land well after the Spanish explored it.

Did you follow that?

As all those exchanges were happening, Native American tribes fought each other for control of the same land. The Mandans, who might have been the original settlers, fought with the Arikara and they were both pushed out by the Sioux, whose battlefield prowess was held in such high esteem that the nickname for the University of North Dakota, until 2012, was the “Fighting Sioux.”

Can someone—anyone—tell me who, in 2024, are the “traditional owners” of the land my grandparents farmed?

These territorial exchanges and disputes are

not unique to North Dakota. They've happened throughout the world, throughout history. Here is just a small sample:

The Franks conquered Gaul—what is now France, Belgium, and Luxembourg—and settled there. The Angles and Saxons, and later the Danes, settled in Britain. The Scoti, an Irish tribe, settled in Scotland and gave it its name. Hebrews settled in Palestine, which derives its name from the Philistines, who were also... settlers. Back in North America, the Comanche expelled the Apaches from the Great Plains and the Aztecs settled Toltec areas, which were Toltec only because they'd driven out the Zapotecs. In Africa, the Bantu expansion pushed out or assimilated everyone who inhabited the southern part of that continent.

Where we are, on the Gold Coast, nobody knows who the Yugambeh conquered to take ownership of this land. Their names have been lost to history. And if you acknowledge only the penultimate in a long, long list of former landowners, you implicitly deny that anyone else ever lived or farmed or hunted here.

Why don't the Sioux acknowledge the Mandan as the traditional custodians of North Dakota? Why have we frozen history for aboriginal Australians, but not for Celtic Gauls? Is it because the Franks successfully erased the Celtic Gaul identity, and there aren't any of them around anymore to complain? Were the Australians more merciful in allowing the Ngandawal and Minyungbal cultures to survive?

If these questions make you uncomfortable, it's likely because you've been brainwashed to internalize the progressive premise on colonialism, which isn't progressive at all. It's entirely *regressive* in its outlook and this is not the meaning I have in mind when using the word.

When I say progressive, I refer to those people who look to the future, searching for ways to improve the lives of their children. Not even their lives, necessarily. For many of our ancestors, the thinking went something like this: "I may have grown up in crushing poverty, but I'll only be a failure if I let my children grow up the same way."

What do people with this mentality do? They

look for better opportunities in distant lands, or they invent more efficient methods of farming and hunting and cooking and cleaning and defending what's theirs. What my dirt poor grandparents *did not* do, after seeing their first self-propelled combine, was think, "The way our ancestors farmed is the only correct way. We reject these newfangled inventions because they are not part of our culture."

If this had been their thought, I might not be here today.

Instead, what they *did* think was this: "If I can farm more efficiently, then I can provide a better life for my children."

That's progressive thinking. And it isn't just confined to technology. Every facet of the human experience has progressed dramatically throughout history.

Including our morals.

Our ancestors did not have the same moral code we do today, and perhaps the best example of this is slavery, or what I like to call, with apologies to Kipling, the 2nd Oldest Profession.

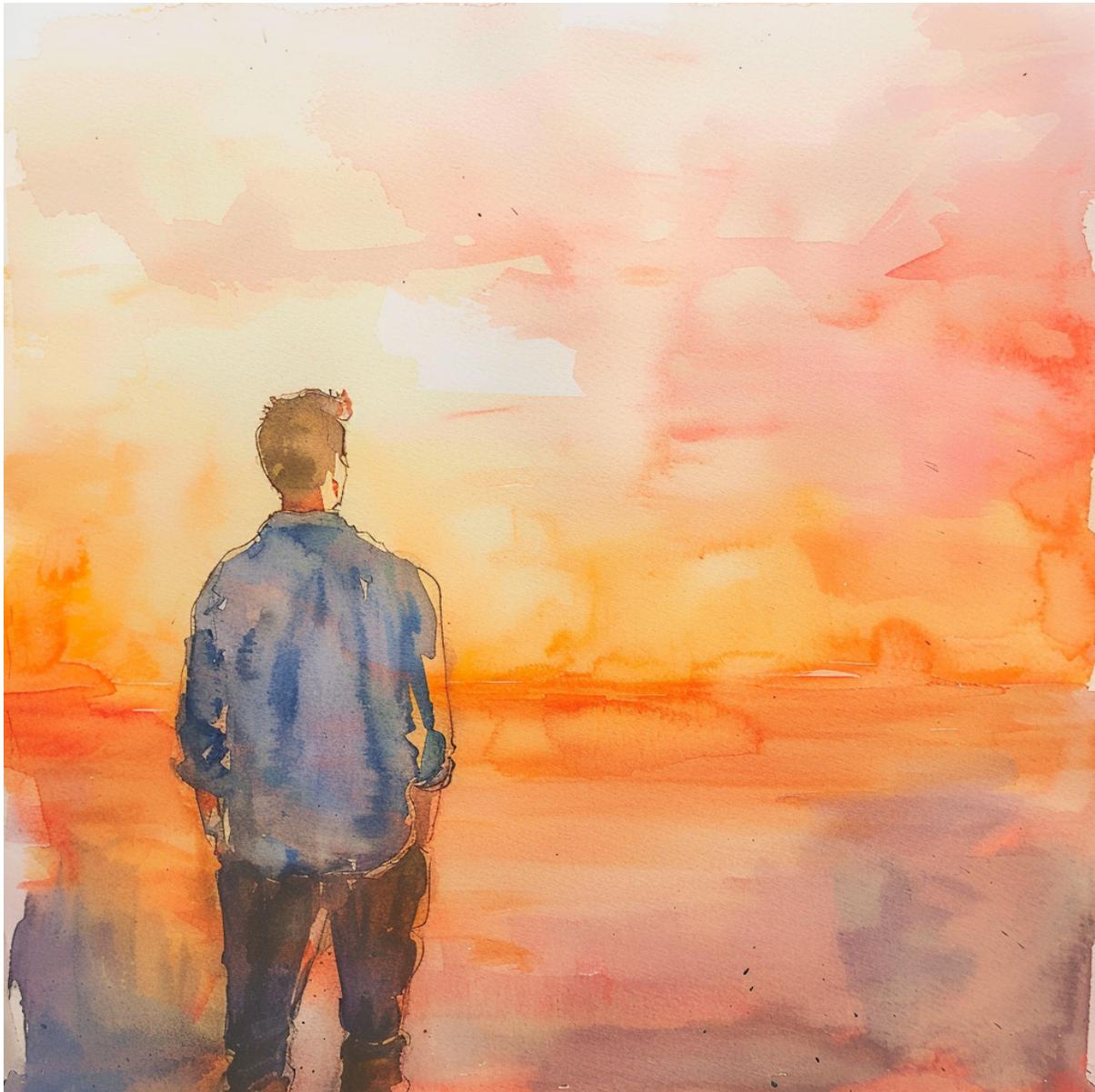
In 2024, we think of slavery as perhaps the worst, most immoral institution ever created. But in Catherine Parr's time, every major world religion condoned it. Jews, Muslims, Christians, and Buddhists all held slaves. Jesus Christ went to Jerusalem and expelled the merchants and the money changers from the temple, but he *did not* free the slaves from their shackles.

To the contrary, Ephesians 6:5 says this: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ."

And it's not just slavery. Our ancestors—all of them—had some pretty horrible ideas about:

- women
- foreigners
- the environment
- medicine
- science
- religion

The list goes on. In fact, the list is almost infinite. But the progressive engine that is the human race has never been satisfied with the



status quo. Our ancestors may have been idiots, but they worked tirelessly to improve their situation in order to make a better life for their children.

Which brings me to the second word: humble. It wasn't all about them. Most of you are too young to have already had an existential mid-life crisis, but once you do, once you fully understand that the time we're granted on this earth is fleeting and can pass in the blink of an eye, you start to lose your ego. *You* become less important than *your legacy*. Why do you think Bill Gates spends most his time now trying to give away his fortune?

Is it because he's an old person trying to get into heaven now?

That's one way to think about it. Another is to imagine that he wants to leave the world a better place than he found it. He knows that, just like Catherine Parr, even the richest and most powerful people on the planet will one day turn to dust. And he also knows - or should know - that in five hundred years, the world's poor will be vastly richer than he is today as long as we remain humble and do everything in our power to progress.

Which brings us to this moment, the moment when you, the 2024 graduates of Southern Cross University, begin this cycle anew. Up to this point, you've been loved and supported and encouraged by old people who've already had their mid-life crisis and know they're going to

die soon.

You have been immortal. Until now.

Your mortal clock starts ticking the moment you cross this stage and accept your diploma.

At my graduation, a friend told me, "Some-day we'll look back and say these were the best four years of our life." 30 years later, I'm happy to report that this is true only in one, narrow, narcissistic sense. They were the best four **self-indulgent** years of my life. I didn't worry about anything or anyone except me.

But the instant I left the university and matriculated into the real world, life wasn't about me anymore. It was about service to others. Service to my family. Service to my community. Service to my customers. Service to my country. These last thirty years have been the richest, most rewarding, and indeed, happiest years of my life by far. Because in my small way, in my small corner of the world, I've used that time to help my family succeed and did my level best to leave the world a better place than I found it.

I'm not Bill Gates. I don't have his money and didn't have the same level of impact. And I wasn't always successful. I made stupid mistakes along the way, mistakes that hurt me and others. But I did my best to atone, and steadfastly refused to let my mistakes define me.

I learned from them, and I moved on. In other words: I progressed, just as you must do from this day forward.

Before I close, I want to make it clear that I do acknowledge and respect the Yugambeh speaking people in the same way I acknowledge and respect the ancestors of every single person here today.

They were all idiots, every single one, but without them, and without their hard work and sacrifice, there would be no us.

I want to leave you with this thought. Hundreds of years from now, as the class of 2424 graduates and glides across this stage - probably on hoverboards - some descendant of the group that conquers Australia between now and then will be able to stand here at this podium and say with 100% certainty that their ancestors - meaning us - were idiots about X, Y, and Z.

If you think you know what X, Y, or Z is,

you're wrong. You can't know. You will never know. And that's okay.

Keep progressing. Look forward, not back, with the understanding that while it may be your life, it's much better lived by spending your time and energy in service to others, doing what you can to make this world better for future generations.

Just like our ancestors did.

Thank you.

-end-

eds. - In the spirit of the item you just read—the very first Land Acknowledgement that tells the truth—we would like to present this classic poem, also often read at Land Acknowledgement ceremonies in the United States. We believe, though, that it does not quite mean what the activists think it means.

The great thing about good literature, though, is that it can be understood differently by every reader—but in the end, it comes down to the eternal truth,

The Gift Outright

by Robert Frost

The land was ours before we were the land's.
 She was our land more than a hundred years
 Before we were her people. She was ours
 In Massachusetts, in Virginia,
 But we were England's, still colonials,
 Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,
 Possessed by what we now no more possessed.
 Something we were withholding made us weak
 Until we found out that it was ourselves
 We were withholding from our land of living,
 And forthwith found salvation in surrender.
 Such as we were we gave ourselves outright
 (The deed of gift was many deeds of war)
 To the land vaguely realizing westward,
 But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,
 Such as she was, such as she would become.

The Giant

A Folklore Cycle Tale

By John Hood

From Publisher: If you liked this story, John Hood has two other books published in the same world with some of the same characters: [Forest Folk](#) and [Mountain Folk](#). Both are available on Amazon.com.

May 1840

The lieutenant colonel's eyes and ears told him different tales. With the former, he saw moonlight streaming through open sky and dancing across a gently rippling stream. With the latter, he heard an ominous thunder.

Both tales were true. It *was* a clear, cloudless night. And at this place on the Niagara, well upstream from the falls, the river's smooth surface revealed little of the mighty current flowing beneath. Yet the sheer volume of blue-green water plunging more than a hundred feet to crash into the brownish pool beneath Niagara Falls produced a continuous roar that, even two miles east of the cataract, seemed to announce the coming of a terrible storm.

Footsteps on the trail made the officer turn his head away, however reluctantly, from the glistening river. A figure in sky-blue jacket and white-striped trousers trotted up and saluted. "All quiet, sir," the smooth-faced corporal announced.

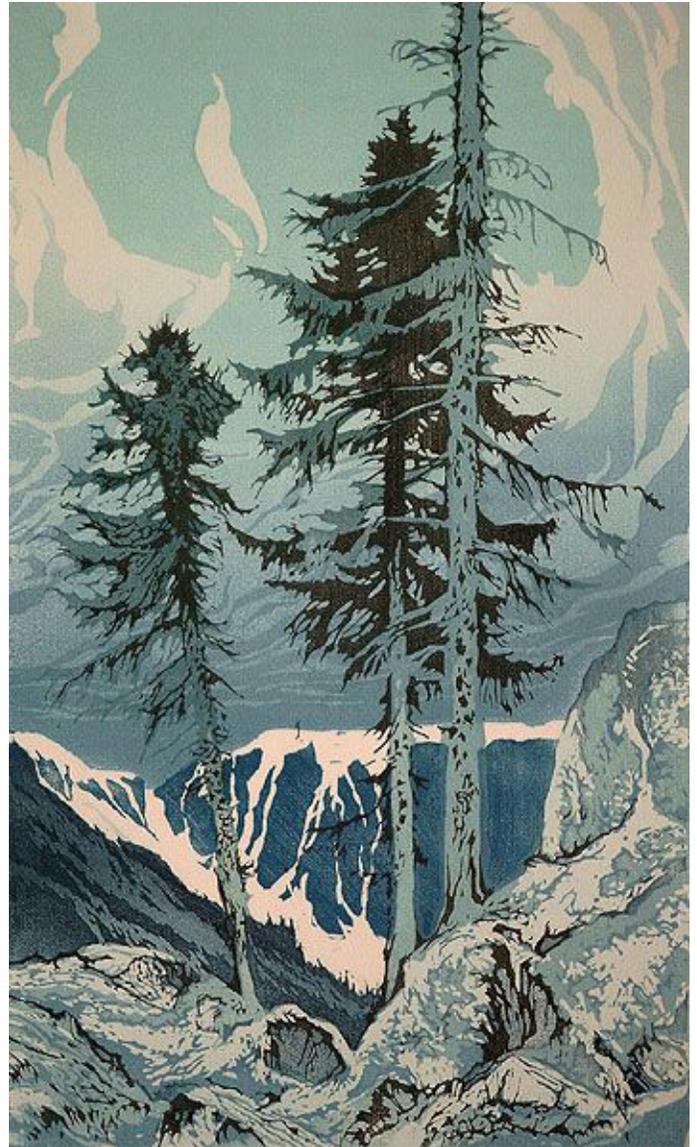
The lieutenant colonel nodded. "And the boats?"

"All accounted for," the corporal replied. "Two fishing vessels and a rowboat."

"Very good. Prepare to return to camp."

The lieutenant colonel felt drained. It wasn't from physical exertion. He'd ridden most of the twenty miles up from Buffalo, and done little more than make bored young men do boring things. Perhaps it was the very monotony of the assignment that had sapped his energy. Or the decades of military service that preceded it. Or the memories.

Giving the reins a gentle tug, he directed his roan mare off the trail and approached the wa-



ter's edge. The Niagara River was nothing new to him. He'd encountered its cryptic tales long before arriving here five months ago with elements of the Second Artillery Regiment to garrison a new post in Buffalo.

It was more than a quarter of a century ago, in the spring of 1813, that he first saw the river. His company then was part of an American army intent on capturing both banks of the waterway separating British-controlled Upper Canada from the United States. The Americans succeeded in taking Fort George, the enemy stronghold at the river's mouth on Lake Ontario. Their control of the region proved fleeting, however. Within weeks of seizing the fort, hundreds of soldiers were killed, wounded, or captured during foolish forays into the Cana-

dian countryside. Forced to take refuge in the cramped and poorly provisioned Fort George, the surviving troops were eventually evacuated back to New York.

It was a frustrating moment in a frustrating conflict that came to be known as the War of 1812. Still, for the aging officer, his return to the Niagara this year had brought back fond memories. It was where he first met Winfield Scott, under whose command he'd serve many more times, and his friend Oliver Hazard Perry, who'd become one of America's greatest war heroes.

That first deployment to the Niagara frontier had also occurred one year before his chance meeting with a young writer inspired one of America's best-known literary characters.

Before Ichabod Crane, distinguished officer of the United States Army, became Ichabod Crane, namesake to a fool.

It had been nearly an hour since the squad marched east towards their camp at Tonawanda, about halfway between Buffalo and the falls. Their commander wasn't with them. Ichabod felt compelled to stay behind, though he couldn't quite say why.

Fatigue?

Still astride his mount at the water's edge, he stretched out his arms and shook them vigorously. It didn't work. They still felt numb. His mind felt even number.

Nagging doubts?

Ichabod looked across the Niagara at the small collection of docks and houses that constituted the Canadian village of Chippewa. Slipping his hand into a saddlebag, he withdrew a spyglass and lifted the visor of his dark-blue forage cap so he could peer through the lens.

A few sailboats and a small steamer were docked at Chippewa, but nothing resembling a warship. Ichabod's two prior reconnoiters of the area proved equally unremarkable. While recent rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada had sparked tensions along the border—since the Canadian rebels had received aid from sympathetic Americans—Ichabod had found no evidence of British preparations to reenter Ameri-

can territory.

A little over two years ago, a British force *had* crossed the Niagara to capture and burn an American steamship the rebels used to supply their short-lived Republic of Canada. The British should have requested intervention by American authorities instead of taking the law into their own hands. The incident nearly started another war between Britain and the United States.

Ichabod's primary assignment—and that of his fellow officers deployed at cities and forts along the border—was to maintain a peace, however uneasy, between the two former belligerents. That meant keeping a wary eye on British ports and military installations. And it meant investigating any reports of Canadian exiles or American sympathizers plotting new attacks on British territory.

His horse snorted, as if expressing disapproval. Ichabod glanced down at her withers. White hairs grew over much of the mare's dark undercoat, yielding the blue-gray color that inspired Ichabod to name her after an old friend.

"It's not so bad an assignment," he said, tousling her short, dark mane. "Better than chasing Seminoles through swamps or carting Cherokees over mountains, eh, Dela?"

No, not an old friend, he corrected himself. *Just a friend. Only I am old.*

Such was the uncanny nature of Dela's kind—the blue-skinned woman, not the blue-skinned mare named after her. When he'd first met Dela and her friend Goran in 1812, Ichabod Crane was all of twenty-five years old. The two fairies had looked just as youthful as he. If Dela and Goran suddenly appeared before him now, twenty-eight years later, they'd look about the same but might well struggle to recognize Ichabod.

After all, Washington Irving had gotten one thing right in his silly "Legend of Sleepy Hollow" story. As a young man, Ichabod Crane was rail-thin and awkward, all skinny arms and knobby knees. Then came responsibility, and battle, and marriage, and children. Over the years, the real Ichabod Crane's tall body grew stout. His spindly limbs thickened. His belly protruded.

His hollow face turned jowly.

Now that jowly face formed a wistful grin.

Is the Water Maiden the real reason I linger here? To reminiscence about Dela?

The Niagara River wasn't where they first met, but it was where the blue-colored woman first fought by Ichabod's side, during one of his unit's doomed expeditions out of Fort George in 1813. Dela had thrown herself between Ichabod and his foe, parrying the Mohawk chief's enchanted war club with her own enchanted trident.

It was here, decades ago and just across the river from where he now stood, that Ichabod first realized the truth about the inhuman creatures populating the myths, legends, and bedtime tales of his youth. They were real—or, at least, the make-believe creatures in the stories were distorted versions of magical creatures that truly existed. There really were savage beasts prowling the countryside and shapeshifting monsters living unrecognized among humans. And there really were fairies, whole nations of Folk like Dela's blue-skinned Gwragedd Annwn, who waged constant war against the monsters—and each other. Among the fairies were mages, who could manipulate physical objects, and rangers like Dela whose magic allowed them to manipulate the perceptions and moods of humans and monsters alike.

It was here, on the banks of the Niagara, that Ichabod began to understand how large a role magical creatures really played in the affairs of humans — and how valuable it was to have a fairy for a friend, even if she stood only two feet tall.

What was that?

Still lost in thought, Ichabod had ridden his horse half a mile down the riverbank. At the sound of rustling leaves he whirled, eyes instantly alert and seeking its source. A dozen paces back from the river was a line of oaks and walnuts. He thought he spotted wings in the trees, but he couldn't be sure.

He waited in silence for several moments, suddenly very much aware of his solitude. If a threat arose, he'd have to rely on his pistol, his

sword, and the fleetness of his roan mare. Of the latter, at least, Ichabod had little doubt. Still, he couldn't help but long for the comforting presence of the *other* Dela, the fierce Water Maiden, or her friend Goran Lonefeather, expert archer of a winged Folk called Sylphs.

No more leaves rustled. Ichabod sighed in relief.

After years of rigorous service under Winfield Scott in Florida and Tennessee, he'd welcomed reassignment to New York. Although pacifying the northern border might be challenging, it was surely less complicated, and more honorable, than carrying out the government's Indian removal policies. That the assignment also promised to place him in less physical danger had appealed greatly to his wife Charlotte—and to himself, if Ichabod were being honest.

He was no coward. He'd overcome dangerous foes in his life, only some of them human. But that was many years, and pounds, ago. Ichabod glanced down at his blue uniform coat, stretched tight over an ample midriff, and smiled ruefully.

The roan mare issued another loud snort. Trusting her instincts, Ichabod reached into the holster hanging from the pommel of the saddle and withdrew his pistol. A few seconds later, he heard what she had, a series of faint slaps behind them.

Oars striking water.

The lightest of kicks was enough to send the horse off the trail and into the woods. Dismounting, Ichabod led her behind a tree and turned back to the river. Ample moonlight revealed the approaching rowboat and the two figures inside it. One was big and broad-chested, propelling the boat with powerful sweeps of the oars. The other, sitting astern, was so small that only the top of his head was visible over the boat's gunwale.

A child?

Or could he be—Ichabod's pulse raced—a fairy? It wasn't yet possible to tell.

When the boat reached land, the rower stood up. The watching officer sucked in a breath. Ichabod was of above-average height himself, and over the course of his army career had met many tall men. During the War of 1812, in fact,



he'd served alongside a sailor named Bull who was so huge and thickly muscled that Ichabod suspected he must be something other than human.

It seemed to Ichabod, however, that the rower now dragging the boat onto the riverbank rivaled Bull in height and build. Hatless, he was clad in a red work shirt and light-colored trousers. Walking beside him was the other newcomer. Short and slight, he wore a checkered shirt, dark cap, and baggy blue pants so oversized that only a tightly cinched belt of rope kept them from slipping off his narrow hips.

The two companions stood by the water for a moment, conversing in what Ichabod immediately recognized as French. The big man bent down, collected several objects from the boat, and handed one to the other. Then they walked briskly into the woods, choosing a path to Ichabod's left that was far enough away for him to avoid detection but close enough for him to get a better look.

The means and timing of their river crossing were curious. That they headed into the wild forest rather than following the established trail along the river was telling. And what Ichabod saw as they passed only confirmed his sus-

picious. The rower, truly a giant of a man, had slipped a wicked-looking knife into his belt and hefted an enormous double-bitted axe over his shoulder. The boy carried a double-bladed tool of his own, a mattock with a well-worn vertical edge on one side of its head and a hoe-like horizontal edge on the other.

French-Canadian lumberjacks, Ichabod surmised, perhaps father and son. That the latter was a boy, he was also now sure. Ichabod was one of those rare humans blessed with the Sight. Like the fairies themselves, Sighted humans were immune to the temperamental magic wielded by rangers. They could resist fairy spells and see through fairy disguises. That's how Ichabod had come to meet Dela and Goran so many years ago. That's how he knew this boy was no fairy.

Why had the Canadians crossed the border by rowboat, in the middle of the night, and headed inland with weapons in hand? Ichabod could think of at least two possible purposes. Neither was innocent.

One was vengeance. Although most of the logging camps of Canada were in the far north, it was now the off-season. Many loggers came south to Kingston or other settlements along Lake Ontario to spend their earnings. He'd met enough of them to know they liked to brawl and that some of their feuds could last a long time. Perhaps the father had lost a fight with an American and had come across for revenge, though Ichabod struggled to imagine so large a man losing a fight.

Another, more troubling possibility was that they'd slipped into New York to solicit assistance for the rebels, most of whom were French-Canadians. After all, the path they chose would take them to Lockport, a town some twenty miles to the east. During the rebellion, Lockport was a haven for Canadian exiles and their American allies. Perhaps a delegation from the town was riding out to meet the pair.

Ichabod felt conflicted as he watched the man and boy disappear into the trees. If he hadn't stayed behind when his soldiers left for camp, the arrival of the Canadians would have gone unnoticed. On the other hand, if he followed

them now to determine their purpose, he'd have to do so alone.

The mare grunted. He chuckled softly, thrust his pistol back into its holster, and pulled her reins. *Well, not entirely alone, Dela, but so much for this assignment posing no dangers.*

It was when Ichabod reached Cayuga Creek, after following the Canadians for about an hour, that he began to reconsider his mode of travel. Riding would have elevated him above the underbrush and put him at greater risk of detection. So Ichabod had trudged after them on foot, leading Dela behind him. She seemed as annoyed by the arrangement as he was.

Upon the crossing the creek, the Canadians stopped to rest beneath a sycamore tree. Ichabod seized the opportunity to rest his own sore feet and water the horse, moving a bit downstream to keep from being spotted. "I know I've stolen your job," he whispered to Dela, "but I promise to give it back."

As he rubbed the mare's flank, Ichabod couldn't help remembering another chase through the woods, with the original Dela. It was back during the war. Injured in battle, Dela had been carried off to a healer by another fairy, a Goblin ally. Once she rejoined Ichabod, the two rescued a terrified young woman, Ichabod's future wife Charlotte Rainger, from what she described as a "headless horseman." After a lengthy pursuit, Ichabod and Dela discovered that their quarry was a winged fairy, Goran's own brother Kaden, who'd lost his mind and no longer remembered who or what he was. Short of stature and wearing a heavy cloak, he'd only looked headless to Charlotte.

"Where are you?"

The shout shocked Ichabod out of his musings. Grabbing the reins, he led the mare up the shallow stream.

"No, Joe! No!" The shout became a high-pitched shriek.

The boy's in trouble! Casting caution to the wind, Ichabod pulled himself up onto Dela's back. They splashed across the creek and galloped into the forest.

"Please stop!"

The child sounded desperate. Had he simply lost his way in the woods? Or had the older man intentionally left him behind?

"Help! Someone help me!"

Ichabod decided it was the latter. His face flushed with fury at the lumberjack, who evidently wasn't the boy's father. Ichabod's own children would never call him by his first name. And he'd never abandon them in the wilderness.

He turned Dela left, then right, dodging oak trees and cranberry bushes. Soon he came upon a clearing of low grasses and sedges. It was ringed by trees on the near side and, on the opposite side, a tangle of thorny vines and prickly brambles. The child was sitting in the middle of the clearing with his back to Ichabod, weeping and wailing. His mattock lay discarded a couple of feet away. Dismounting, Ichabod rushed to his side and held out a hand. "Don't cry son. You're not alone."

"He never was."

The words were English, though spoken in a heavy French accent. The voice was level, calm, confident. Glancing back at his roan mare, now grazing nonchalantly on sedge sprouts and wild rye, Ichabod instantly regretted stowing his pistol in its saddle holster. He left his hand drop slowly to the hilt of his sword.

"Do not try it, monsieur."

Ichabod glanced over his shoulder. The big man held his axe to one side, as if prepared to swing. Moonlight glinted off its iron blade. When Ichabod turned his head back, he found the boy staring up at him with steel-gray eyes.

"Someone help me!" the boy repeated, smirking.

"The knife is buried, Jean-Paul. No need to twist it."

The boy scowled, his lowered eyebrows matching the dark-brown color of the curly hair poking out from beneath his cap. "Blades drew blood. Don't see none."

"Enough." With two heavy steps, the lumberjack strode around Ichabod and entered his field of vision. "Why do you follow us, Yankee?"

Ichabod opted for audacity. "I am an officer of the United States Army. You may address me as Colonel Crane. I ask the questions here, not

you.”

Jean-Paul seemed shocked. “Better not talk like that. Don’t you know? He’s Joseph Montferrand. Mightiest man you’ll ever meet!”

“That so?” Ichabod recognized the name, though it wasn’t on any of the lists of rebels he’d reviewed. It was more the talk of shopkeepers and fishwives than of soldiers and diplomats. “I’ve heard many a wild tale about a brawler with that name.”

“It’s true!” the boy insisted. “He once beat all seven McDonald brothers with nothin’ but a barge pole! He beat a whole mob a’ Shiners by grabbing one by the ankles and usin’ him to swat the rest right off the Bytown Bridge!”

Ichabod shook his head. “Now, lad, I’ve met many a strong man in my time, but your friend—”

“Not just strong,” Jean-Paul interrupted. “You should see him leap. Why, there ain’t a tavern from Kingston to Mattawa that don’t have his boot mark on the ceiling!”

“I see.” Ichabod exchanged looks with Montferrand, whose expression conveyed more bemusement than pride. “Are you truly the one called Big Joe Mufferaw?”

“He’s Joseph Montferrand to you,” Jean-Paul snapped.

The lumberjack shrugged. “Is true, though. They do call me Big Joe.”

“The same ones call me Little John, blast ’em.”

The huge Canadian lowered his axe and let one hand drop to the other’s shoulder. “You are not little to me. You are my good John, my Bon Jean.”

Sullen, the boy crossed his arms. “Petit Jean! Petit Jean!” he repeated bitterly.

Joe shook his head. “I tell you many times, son. In the old French stories, Petit Jean is no butt of jokes. He is a hero. Makes kings curse and giants topple.”

“Just made-up tales,” Jean-Paul replied. “Not true like yours.”

You’d be surprised, boy. Ichabod recalled the bedtime tales Charlotte told their own children, tales about clever Jack, bellowing giants, and magic beans. Were these stories merely concoct-

ed by storytellers long dead? Or were they accounts, however addled and confused, of real actions by the fairies and monsters Ichabod knew to exist? A little of both, he knew.

After all, a “headless” horseman and I really did have a chase through a dark forest.

“I ask you again,” Ichabod began. “Why did you and the boy cross the river? Where are you going?”

The Canadian’s amiable expression vanished. “None of your business, monsieur.”

“I command the American garrison in this part of New York, sir. It is very much my business, particularly if you seek to entangle my country with the unrest in your own.”

“Entangled? When have Canadians and Americans not been?” Joe jerked his rugged chin toward the twisted bramble at the edge of the clearing. “Our seeds took root on different ground but the branches grow together.”

Now we’re getting somewhere. “It is the policy of my government not to intrude in the internal affairs of the Canadas.”

“I did not come to meet your government.”

“Who have you come to meet, then?”

Joe didn’t reply. He glared at the lieutenant colonel, one hand still on Jean-Paul’s shoulder and the other gripping his axe handle with a white-knuckled intensity.

Ichabod didn’t flinch. “Are you a rebel against your government?”

The broad-shouldered lumberjack suddenly lifted his hand from the boy’s shoulder and thrust it forward. Startled, Ichabod took a backward step and reached the hilt of his sword. “What do you—”

“Silence!” Joe’s fist loomed, melon-sized, just inches from Ichabod’s face.

Don’t take the bait, he reminded himself. “Let’s not be—”

This time Joe interrupted him not by word but by opening his fist into a spread-fingered warning. A moment later, Ichabod heard what Joe had: a crunch of leaves and twigs.

He froze, listening. Across the clearing, his horse had stopped grazing and was standing alert, ears stiff and nostrils flared. Three more crunches came from the forest to his right, each

progressively closer. Then came a long, guttural growl.

Ichabod had heard its like before. A bear!

The boy scrambled to snatch his logging tool from the grass. He looked up at Joe, excited. The big man's face, ruddy and defiant during his argument with Ichabod, now looked pale and distraught. His blue eyes darted from the boy's gray ones to Ichabod's green ones, then to the forest.

Ichabod found it the most surprising revelation of the night. Could the fabled Big Joe Mufferaw be, in reality, a coward? Slowly, watching Joe for any sign of objection, Ichabod drew his sword. The Canadian merely gave an anxious nod.

Within seconds, his surprise at Joe's panicked expression gave way to utter astonishment. For what stomped out of the trees and into clearing was no ordinary bear of the northern forests. It was gigantic—twice the size of the largest black bear he'd ever seen—and its head wasn't just oversized but oddly shaped. Its blunt snout and wide mouth prompted Ichabod to recall a picture he'd once seen of an African hippopotamus. And its slanted eyes glowed dark red, like garnets formed of crystal flame.

Strangest of all was its skin. Black bears had black fur. This creature was dark, to be sure, but it was almost entirely hairless, save for a few long strands bristling from its chin. It was the hide itself that was black as charcoal, and so smooth and lustrous it shone in the moonlight.

"A monster!" Jean-Paul cried, brandishing his mattock and running forward.

"Non!" With two enormous strides, Joe caught up with the boy and grabbed him by the shirt collar. "Back!"

With a single bound, the furless monstrosity closed the distance and swiped at the lumberjack with gleaming claws. Yanking Jean-Paul behind him, Joe swung his axe to deflect the blow. Allowing his own momentum to spin him like a top, the Canadian grabbed the axehandle with his other hand and drove the blade with tremendous force at the creature's front paw.

It bounced off.

"Mon Dieu!" Joe cried. Before he could ready

another swing, the beast smacked him in the chest so hard it sent him six feet through the air. Joe's back hit the ground with a dull thud—unaccompanied, miraculously, by any sharp cracks.

Ichabod had circled to the left of the monster. With its attention fixed on Joe, the American rushed in and chopped downward at the creature's hairless neck. His blade bounced off its shiny hide. Recovering quickly, Ichabod tried a stab at its flank. The point made only the faintest of dents.

He backpedaled and shot a look at Joe, now back on his feet but looking groggy. "My gun!" Ichabod yelled, hoping the other man would understand.

He did. As Ichabod dropped his sword and pivoted, Big Joe Mufferaw lived up to his reputation. He ran straight at the monster. It snarled and raised a paw to strike. When he was within two strides of his target, Joe sprang so high that its claws raked the air merely inches below the Canadian's passing chest. Vaulting palms-first onto its broad back, Joe completed the somersault and landed on his feet on the other side of the bewildered creature.

Such an acrobatic feat couldn't subdue their foe. That wasn't its purpose. As the distracted monster turned around to renew its attack on Joe, Ichabod reached Dela and yanked the loaded pistol from its saddle holster. He retraced his steps, closing to point-black range, and fired at the back of the monster's head.

The ball ricocheted off its black skin and struck a nearby pine tree.

Ichabod lowered the smoking weapon, mouth agape. Now what?

As if in answer, the behemoth turned its nearly hairless head to glare at Ichabod. Then its garnet eyes peered over his shoulder at the roan mare, which was snorting and bucking in agitation. The monster's jaws formed a ravenous leer, baring its jagged, blood-red fangs.

No!

If it had been a race between Ichabod Crane and the monstrous bear, the latter would easily have emerged the victor. Fortunately for the horse, she was quick-witted and fleet-footed. A

split second after the monster began its charge, Dela turned to flee. Barreling past Ichabod, the bear not only knocked him out of the way with its massive shoulder but sent him careening to the ground. Then it continued its pursuit of the roan mare.

It almost caught her. When Dela reached the thicket of brambles at the opposite end of the clearing, she hurdled it gracefully and dashed into the woods. The monster prepared to follow—then stopped short and backed away, shaking a paw as if to dislodge a thorn.

Guessing it was only momentarily stymied by the bramble, Ichabod scrambled over to pick up his sword. Joe was already charging ahead, axe lifted over his head. Neither was closest to the monster, however. That position belonged to little Jean-Paul. He stood before the creature, mattock raised, screaming at the top of his lungs.

That got its attention. The enraged monster fixed its smoldering eyes on the boy. Then it charged.

“Run!” Joe and Ichabod shouted in unison.

Jean-Paul dropped his logging tool on the grass and fled, still screaming. The bear bounded forward, bellowing in triumph.

A moment later, its bellow became a squeal.

Instead of pouncing on the little boy, whose saggy pants had fallen down and caused him to trip, the monster stopped short and began hopping around. Soon Ichabod figured out why. The horizontal blade of Jean-Paul’s mattock was embedded deep in the bear’s foot. Without as much as a glance at its erstwhile foes, the beast hobbled into the trees, groaning in agony.

Still holding his drawn sword, Ichabod ran after the monster, worried it might work the weapon free of its foot and return to the battle. Joe hurried to join him at the edge of the clearing, axe in hand. They listened as its grunts and whines grew faint, then disappeared entirely.

Meanwhile, the boy rose from the grass and retied the rope belt around his waist. “Is it gone?” he called.

“I think so,” said Ichabod, looking away from the woods to see Jean-Paul brushing himself off.

“Did I do good?” the boy asked.

Joe turned and placed a quivering hand on his hip. “Good? You almost got yourself killed!”

He doesn’t understand the question, Ichabod mused. *The boy’s embarrassed about losing his nerve*. “You did all right, lad. There’s no shame in running away from a beast like that.”

“Oh, nah, I didn’t run away.” Jean-Paul scampered over to them and looked up at Joe, though he kept talking to Ichabod. “It was strategy.”

“Uh—strategy?”

“Yeah. Don’t you know? You saw it, too.”

“Saw what?”

The boy waved a dismissive hand. “The thing with the bush, of course. Couldn’t hurt the monster with axe or sword or gun, but it got a thorn stuck in its paw? Shucks.”

Understanding dawned on Ichabod. Virtually all the monster’s magic must be concentrated in its smooth black hide! No lead ball could pierce it, and even with iron weapons it might take more blows to break it than the monster’s victims would ever have time to deliver. But its feet were vulnerable. That’s why it didn’t follow Dela through the prickly brambles.

The officer couldn’t contain a smile. “So, you got the monster to chase you, then dropped your mattock in its path.”

Beaming from ear to ear, the boy was still looking up at Joe. “Did I do good?” he repeated.

“Bon,” the lumberjack agreed. He reached down to tug playfully on the boy’s cap. “My Bon Jean.”

Sheathing his sword, Ichabod considered letting the two companions savor their triumph a while longer. It was already late in the evening, however, and he couldn’t count on his horse returning on her own. “Monsieur Montferrand, I still have questions for you.”

Joe groaned. “My business in Lockport. Well, colonel, you see—”

“I already know your business in Lockport, sir. Your earlier evasions served only to uncover it. You seek aid to restart your rebellion.”

The Canadian grew defiant. “And why not? Did not your own country get help from France in your fight for liberty?”

“Yes, but the French were repaid in their own blood,” Ichabod pointed out. “Their debt-ridden

government collapsed into chaos, revolution, tyranny, and war.”

“We ask no great sums. Only a fair chance to win our freedom, as you Americans did.”

Ichabod thought of his father William Crane, who fought in George Washington’s army and lost a leg at the battle of Brandywine. He recalled his own men killed and wounded during the War of 1812. He remembered the Seminole warriors and Cherokee families he’d been ordered to drive from their homes. Again Ichabod felt tired, bone tired, as if the weight of the world rested on his narrow, aching shoulders. “Freedom is never fully won,” he finally replied, “and the consequences of war never fully foreseen.”

“We have no choice. Parliament abuses our rights and overrules our assemblies. Taxation without representation—a just cause, no?”

“It is not for me to judge. My job is to keep my country neutral, Monsieur Montferrand.”

The Canadian sighed in frustration. “Joe.”

Ichabod arched an eyebrow.

“You and I have fought side by side. Call me Joe.”

“And you may call me—”

Ichabod stopped short, but not because the lumberjack shot him another spread-fingered warning. He’d heard the same sound Joe had, a sound the American had last heard more than a quarter of a century earlier, in this very same state of New York.

Spellsong!

Somewhere nearby, a fairy ranger was using magic.

No, he realized. Rangers. There were at least three distinct voices casting the spell.

The American and the Canadian locked eyes as they listened. Much passed between them, though no words were spoken. Ichabod hadn’t yet gotten the chance to ask him about their battle with the monster. Now, Joe’s expression told him what he needed to know. The lumberjack had clearly encountered magical creatures before. No doubt, he’d drawn the same conclusion about Ichabod.

Both knew multiple spellsingers meant a troop of fairy rangers was near. Both knew the only way the other would be able to hear the

spell—rather than simply succumbing to its power—was if he was a Sighted human, possessing a resistance to fairy magic. And because little Jean-Paul was skipping through the grass, pretending to smite imaginary enemies with his mattock, it was clear the boy was not so gifted.

He couldn’t hear the spell. He could be controlled by it.

We should go, Ichabod mouthed.

Joe nodded. “Jean-Paul, time to leave.”

The boy stopped and jabbed a finger at the American. “With him? Don’t want to.”

“Help me find my horse,” Ichabod suggested, “and I’ll let you ride her.”

“You mean that?” Jean-Paul whistled. “She’s a beaut.”

The spellsong grew markedly louder. “Of course I do.”

“Never seen a blue animal,” the boy continued. “Only blue birds and blue fish. It’s my favorite color!”

“Mine too.” Ichabod thrust his pistol into his belt, then began to walk in the opposite direction of the approaching spellsingers—which happened to take him back the way they’d come, toward the Niagara.

Joe hesitated. Jean-Paul noticed and didn’t move, either. The fairies were so close it was possible to distinguish individual voices, some low and husky, others high and shrill.

“The horse probably went for a drink in the creek,” Ichabod explained.

The lumberjack sighed and nodded. “We follow, my Bon Jean.”

What happened next was entirely unexpected. The men knew they weren’t alone but had expected the spellsingers to emerge from the woods. The boy was unaware of their presence. And there was no fluttering of wings. So, when ten diminutive figures dropped from the sky and surrounded them, brandishing bows and guns, the American and Canadians were taken by surprise.

As were the fairies, when they realized both Ichabod and Joe could see them. One round-faced man, clad in green, began jabbering in Folktongue to one of his companions, a bearded man in yellow tunic and tan trousers. The latter

made no reply. He just stood in the clearing, his eyes studying Ichabod.

The American officer did some studying of his own. The fairies exhibited a wide assortment of clothes, weapons, and equipment, but all wore the same odd apparatus on their backs. At its core was a brown pack secured by crisscrossing straps. Extending from each pack were two translucent membranes that were, in turn, attached to the fairy's arms by thin ropes sparkling with evident enchantments.

Artificial wings? Ichabod had never heard of such a thing, though his experience was admittedly limited. He'd only ever talked to three Folk rangers: Dela of the Gwragedd Annwn, Goran of the winged Sylphs, and Betua, the crimson-faced Goblin who'd rendered aid to a wounded Dela so long ago.

The newcomers were none of these. The bearded one scratched behind one pointed ear and cleared his throat. "One human with the Sight is an oddity," he said in English. "Two are a conspiracy."

Ichabod crossed his arms. "What do you want of us?"

"Right to the point, eh?" The fairy's dark eyes flicked to Joe, then back. "No subterfuge. No clever chatter. No curiosity upon finding Elves in your territory."

"Is that what you are, Elves?" Ichabod tried to look uninterested.

The fairy's eyes narrowed. "Hmm. You exhibit no shock at the appearance of a flying Folk, yet you claim not to recognize us as Elves. Either you are lying or we are not the first winged Folk you have met."

When Ichabod didn't reply, the green-clad Elf jabbed a scrawny finger at him. "When Guildmaster Konna asks you a question, human, you best answer."

The American didn't blink. "I heard no question."

"Quite right." The guildmaster waved off the other Elf. "Besides, there will be plenty of time to interrogate our prisoners later."

Ichabod's hand darted to the hilt of his sword.

"No!" Joe exclaimed. "The boy!" He shot the American an anxious look, then tossed his axe

onto the grass. His knife followed a second later.

A coward? Or just overprotective? Ichabod couldn't tell. He also couldn't take on the Elves alone. He unbuckled his sword belt and let it fall.

He wasn't angry. He wasn't afraid. He was just tired.

Joe and Jean-Paul made it to their original destination after all.

For many hours, they and Ichabod were forced to march in a northeasterly direction, crossing two more creeks and passing several farmhouses. Night became day. Though they lost the cover of darkness, the group drew no notice from the farmhands and travelers they passed. That was thanks to the Elves' concealment spell, which also hid the grim-faced fairies from the view of Jean-Paul. The boy didn't know he and the two men were captives. He just thought Ichabod had lost the argument over which direction to travel.

When the town of Lockport came into view, the American officer shot an inquiring glance at Joe. He merely shrugged. As it turned out, whatever the big man's goals for coming here may have been, he had no chance to pursue them—for the Elves guided them not into Lockport but underneath it.

The entrance was magically embedded in the wide trunk of an ancient oak tree on the outskirts of town. Dela had told Ichabod about such magecraft but he'd never actually seen it before. Once through the portal, the Elves saw no need to maintain their concealment spell. Jean-Paul cried out when he discovered himself in a dark tunnel, surrounded not only by the two humans but by ten figures pointing weapons at them and standing less than three feet in height.

"J-J-Joe?"

"I see them, my Bon Jean. Do not fear. I am with you."

There was a pause. "Oh, I ain't scared."

To Ichabod, Jean-Paul's conduct during the battle with the bear monster lent credence to his claim. *Joe really ought to give the boy more credit.*

One of the Elves pulled a small lantern from his pack and touched a sequence of gemstones on

its handle. A milky white light appeared. Down they went, following the tunnel as it twisted and turned beneath Lockport. Presently it opened into a large cavern filled with numerous enclosures and alcoves. There were two other tunnel openings on the far side of the cave.

Konna led the way to a wood-paneled chamber furnished with a table and several chairs. Two Elves deposited the captives' confiscated weapons on the table. Ichabod cast a skeptical eye at the tiny chairs.

The guildmaster noticed and snickered. "You misunderstand. I do not interrogate prisoners here. Take them to the pens."

As the rangers escorted Ichabod and the Canadians towards one of the other tunnels, the American was struck by the absence of other Elves in the cavern. The underground village was clearly designed to accommodate a much larger population of fairies.

The pens proved to be in a second, smaller cave at the other end of the tunnel. It consisted of two rows of stalls equipped with heavy wooden doors secured by ropes and pegs. The round-faced Elf in green led them to a stall in the center of the first row and began fumbling with a knot.

"What does your master want of us?" Ichabod demanded.

"Information." The Elf untied the rope and opened the door, nodding to his companions. They raised their weapons. "And obedience."

"Too bad," snapped a gruff voice from inside the cell. "Your foolish master should be used to disappointment by now."

The snarling Elf drew a knife and bounded into the room. "You will pay for that!"

There was a loud crack, followed by the thud of something hitting the stone floor. Before Ichabod could react, he felt cold metal against his back. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the bronze barrel of an Elfish musket. Two others had their weapons trained on Joe and Jean-Paul. The rest waiting by the door. After several moments, a blade appeared in the doorway, followed soon afterward by the face and form of its new wielder.

The creature was short and squat, standing

six inches lower even than the Elves and clad in a dark-blue shift, cinched at the waist, and light-brown leggings tucked into boots of boiled leather. A fur-lined cloak of light blue hung from wide shoulders. The fairy's head was broad, crimson, hairless, and framed by two floppy ears. Above the bulbous nose, sharp red eyes—a shade lighter than the rest of the face—took in the Elf rangers and their captives.

Ichabod blinked. "Betua?"

The outnumbered prisoner sighed in resignation and dropped her stolen blade. "Ah, Captain Crane. I remember you. You were once friend to the Water Maiden."

"Yes," was all the astonished Ichabod could manage.

"How came you here?" Betua asked.

"No more!" growled one of the Elves. "What did you do to—"

"Brained me with a rock," said the round-faced Elf now staggering from the cell. He picked up the knife. "You have earned yet another death at my hand."

"But not today," she muttered. "Only I have the answers your master seeks."

The Elf's reply was to shove the crimson-faced ranger hard against the doorframe. "His patience nears its end."

Recovering her footing, she sneered at him. "Yours has already exceeded mine."

Without another word, the Elves prodded Ichabod, Joe, and Jean-Paul into the cell and closed the door. Waiting until their footsteps receded, Ichabod tried the door. Its ties held.

"Enchanted rope," Betua explained, eyeing Joe Montferrand with interest. "Not even that one can break it, I wager."

Jean-Paul's eyes were round as teacups. "What are you? A Demon?"

"Of course not, boy." Though her eyes were red, their icy stare made Jean-Paul shiver. "Demons are monstrous and ugly. I am Folk—and fair."

Joe stepped in front of the boy. "He meant no offense, madame."

"Mademoiselle," she corrected, giving the Canadian with a sly look.

Ichabod waved a hand. "She's a Goblin,

Joe. A friend—and a notorious jokester.”

Betua cocked her head. “Well, I was a friend to Dela anyway. You I met only once, so I have yet to decide what I am to—stop that!”

Curious, Jean-Paul had reached out to pinch one of the Goblin’s dangling earlobes. She smacked his hand, prompting the boy to back quickly away, followed by Joe.

“What are you doing here?” Ichabod asked.

“Not much of anything at present.” Betua sank to the ground, looking frustrated. Ichabod followed suit. “I came to parley with the native Folk who once inhabited these caves. I found them long departed—and Konna’s buzzards picking at the carcass of what was left. I tried to slip away but five of them surprised me from above. Curse those magic wings of theirs.”

“We met the same fate from the same Elves.”

“No, from only three of them.”

Ichabod frowned. “There were many more of—”

“I felled two of the five who ambushed me.” Betua flashed a wicked grin. “How many did you kill?”

“None.” The American pointed across the cell to where Joe was speaking rapidly to Jean-Paul. “He insisted we surrender. Didn’t want to endanger the boy.”

The Goblin pursed her lips disapprovingly. “His son?”

“More of a ward, I think.”

She looked back at Ichabod. “And you?”

“I, uh, I have two sons and a daughter of my own.”

“No, I mean, how did you come to fall into their clutches, Captain Crane?”

“It’s Colonel Crane now. I command the army



garrison in Buffalo. Joe and the boy crossed the border into New York, so I followed to discover their intentions. Together we fought some sort of bear monster with impervious skin, after which—”

“A dangerous beast,” Betua interjected. “The Indians call it a Niagwahe. How did you escape?”

“It was the boy’s doing, actually. He figured out it was vulnerable on the soles of its feet.”

“Impressive.” The Goblin gave Jean-Paul a more respectful look. “Then the Elves appeared, I take it.”

Ichabod nodded. “What do they want? What are they trying to get you to tell them?”

“They would plant an Elf colony here, and wish no other Folk to contest their authority.”

"I thought your people lived far away from here, in the caves and grottos beneath Detroit."

"It is not Goblind they see as a threat to their new colony, though we and the Elves are, indeed, bitter foes." Betua scratched the side of her nose. "And they have already driven the native Folk from these shores."

"The Elves waged war on them?"

"Not directly, no. The Elves used trickery and spellsong to sow discord and war along the frontier. Some Indians moved west of their own accord. Others were forced. Most native Folk decided to follow them, abandoning magecrafted strongholds from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico that the teeming masses of Elfkind are only too happy to occupy. I am surprised Dela did not tell you all this. You were her friend, after all."

"I remain her friend," Ichabod insisted, "though I have not seen her for many years. That's the second time you've described our friendship as past. Why?"

The Goblin stared at him with cold, red eyes. "You do not know."

A chill ran up Ichabod's spine. "Know what?"

"I helped Dela and her companion Goran assemble a great army to attack the Elf capital down in Georgia," she began. "Goblins, Dwarfs, fierce Folk from the lands of the Cherokee—all fought together against our common foe, Prince Veelund and his Elfish host. It was there we first learned Elves had flying warriors of their own, using wings magecrafted by Veelund himself."

As he listened to Betua's tale, Ichabod felt a sense of foreboding. It was as though the Goblin were running frosty fingers along his chest, looking for an opening.

"Though our armies ultimately prevailed, Veelund made off with Dela and Goran as hostages," she continued. "The Sylph broke free but was unable to save the Water Maiden."

The phantom fingers broke the skin.

"Just before I left Detroit to range eastward, news arrived via message spell: Dela was killed while trying to escape Veelund's prison."

A frigid hand closed over Ichabod's racing heart.

Some time later, when he'd sufficiently recovered his composure, Ichabod crossed the cell to where Joe and Betua were conversing. Jean-Paul lay beside the Canadian, napping.

"I must get back to my regiment in Buffalo," he said. "I cannot allow such villains to settle here."

The Canadian nodded. "That is what we discuss. Not just Americans are in peril."

"Your big friend has learned much in the past few minutes," Betua explained. "Much about his own cause he could not guess."

Tamping down the rage he felt at Dela's murder, Ichabod tried to focus on the import of the Goblin's words. The Elves operate out of Lockport. Of course! "You mean Konna and his spellsingers have bewitched the local humans. They are behind the unrest in the Canadas."

"Non!" Joe's huge brow was deeply furrowed. "Our cause is righteous, Colonel Crane. We deserve to govern ourselves, same as you."

Betua raised a stubby-fingered hand. "The Elves did not cause the dispute, Ichabod, but they have used spellsong to inflame, provoke, and harden hearts on both sides of the border. Violence is what they want. It is in their interest."

"Are they so cruel?"

"Many are," Betua allowed, "though that is not just true for Elfish Folk. Konna's objective is more specific, however. He believes if humans go to war along the frontier, the reclusive Folk he seeks will have no choice but to reveal themselves."

"Allowing the Elves to destroy them, establishing dominance over the whole region." Ichabod removed his cap and ran unsteady fingers through unkempt gray hair. "An ingenious scheme, if evil. Would that work, Betua? What do you know of this mystery Folk?"

She shut her red eyes. "Your friend also asked me that question. I will answer you the same way: with silence."

Ichabod started. "You don't trust me?"

"No, I do not trust Konna. He has yet to make me talk. He might succeed with you."

"Joe and I have the Sight. We are no more vulnerable to spellsong than you are."

Betua opened her eyes and glanced at the boy. "He is. And magic is not the only tool at Konna's disposal to compel prisoners to talk."

Recalling Joe's protective feelings about Jean-Paul, Ichabod acknowledged her point with a brief nod. He'd do almost anything to spare the boy from harm. "That makes the need to escape even more urgent."

"That attempt you witnessed was my third." The Goblin looked appraisingly at Joe. "Your arrival adds a certain muscle to the endeavor, but brute force alone will not succeed. Konna has many more than ten rangers at his disposal. Elves constantly come and go. And now that they hold four captives rather than one, they will be all the more careful to approach our cell in large numbers—until they separate us, that is."

"Separate us?"

"It will make us easier to handle. I suspect Konna had you brought to this cell first to scare you—or perhaps in the hope I would share my secret with you."

As if on cue, they heard the sound of boot-ed feet striking the earthen floor of the tunnel. Raucous voices followed. Ichabod raised a finger to his lips, then pointed to the near wall. The Goblin smirked and moved to the center of the cell, obviously relishing the theatricality of the American's simple plan. Ichabod flattened himself against the wall on one side of the door. Joe did the same on the other side.

"We have come for the American officer," said a voice Ichabod recognized as belonging to the round-faced Elf in green. "Konna is ready for his interrogation."

"You come too late," Betua retorted. "He tired of Elfish hospitality and took his leave."

"Nonsense. I will cut the lying tongue from your homely head, Goblin."

"You are welcome to come inside and try."

"Don't fall for it!"

Jean-Paul's plaintive wail took everyone by surprise. Unnoticed, the boy had stood up and now sprinted across the floor to the door. "They only mean to trick you, Mister Elf!"

Joe reached for his arm. "Quiet, boy," he hissed. "You but awoke from a bad dream."

Jean-Paul began beating his fists against the back of the door. "Help me! I'll tell all. Just get me out. The red-faced Demon scares me!"

"He knows nothing!" Joe insisted.

"No, I heard you." The boy wrenched his arm from the lumberjack's grasp. "I heard 'em talkin', Mister Elf! About a secret fairy place. Now the Demon wants to take me there and eat me!"

Betua and Ichabod exchanged looks of exasperation.

"There are many armed rangers here," the Elf captain announced. "When I open the door, all four of you must be standing in full view. If not, we will shoot whichever prisoners we can see."

Reluctantly, Ichabod walked to Betua's side. Joe followed, dragging the boy along. When the door opened, the torches of the Elves illuminated all four captives.

"Wise choice." The round-faced Elf held a gun of his own, a musket fashioned of brass and bronze. He pointed its muzzle at Jean-Paul. "Change of plans. We take the boy first."

"You will not." Joe pushed the struggling lad behind him. "I will not allow it."

"Stand aside, you oaf of a human, or we shoot."

The Elves stood beyond the door in two ranks, each with guns raised or bowstrings drawn back to their chins. Their dour faces wore expressions of contempt and determination. Ichabod caught Joe's eye and shook his head.

The latter balled his giant hands into gargantuan fists. "He is just a boy!"

"Stand down," Betua whispered. "You cannot help him from the grave."

Joe dropped his hands. His massive shoulders slumped. Keeping his eyes averted, he shuffled to the side, allowing Jean-Paul to hurry through the door.

"If you harm one hair on his head," Ichabod warned, "you will answer to me."

The Elf captain rolled his eyes. "I rather doubt it."

Then, just before the Elves shut the door, Jean-Paul glanced back over his shoulder and winked.

For a long while, no one said a word. Joe backed into a corner and plopped down, head hung low. Seemingly out of respect, Betua moved to the opposite corner, sat, and began gnawing on a bone, presumably the remnant of whatever modest meal the Elves served their prisoners. As for Ichabod, he couldn't stomach sitting still. Pacing back and forth before the door, he let his mind wander far beyond it.

Dela was gone. Though it had been many years, Ichabod always thought he'd get another chance to talk to her again. To tell the Water Maiden how much he learned from her, how much the leader and father he became was due to Dela's faith in him and the confidence she always felt in his abilities—even when Ichabod felt only feckless and inadequate.

He also ruminated on what Betua told him of the Elves' meddling in American-Canadian relations and their plans of a new colony in the abandoned Folk village beneath Lockport. If he could somehow escape and make it back to Buffalo, would his few companies of soldiers—none of them Sighted, as far as he knew—be sufficient to overcome Elves with the power to cloud their vision and fill their hearts with terror? Even if the Goblin stayed to cast counterspells, she was only one. The Elves were numerous.

As for the boy, Ichabod had guessed he might be play-acting before Jean-Paul's wink made it obvious. But what did the lad hope to accomplish? He was the weakest member of the company, and vulnerable to fairy magic.

Presently, Betua cast aside the dry bone and approached Joe. "Tell me of him," she said in a low voice. "How did Jean-Paul come into your charge?"

The Canadian lifted his tear-streaked head. "As you guess, I am not his father. It was two springs ago. I was hunting up north of Fort Coulonge and found the boy naked and alone in the forest. He remembered nothing of who he was or how we got there. I could not just leave him, so I wrapped him in a blanket and took him to the trading post. No one recognized the boy, though I did meet a thin woman in ragged clothes who refused even to look at the boy's face. That made

me suspicious, so I followed her to a small cabin in a remote valley."

"You figured she was his mother," said Ichabod, who'd walked over to join them.

Joe nodded. "But the boy had no memory of the place, and when I demanded she come out of the cabin, she insisted she didn't know him."

"So, you adopted him."

"What else could I do? Abandon him in the woods, as she had?"

"There must be places for such children," Ichabod said. "Missions. Workhouses."

The Canadian met his gaze for a moment, then shook his head. "Non. Not for him."

"An audacious one, to be sure," said the Goblin. "He interests me."

"He is not your concern," Joe replied, suddenly springing to his feet. "Only I can protect my Bon Jean."

Betua looked up at the lumberjack with a puzzled expression on her crimson face. "I meant no offense."

"Monsieur Montferrand is just worried about his ward," Ichabod assured her.

Joe said nothing more.

Some minutes later, when the door swung open, they were unprepared. Unlike the prior occasion, there were no approaching footsteps, no raucous voices, no warning of any kind.

The boy stood in the doorway, alone and quaking. His shirt and cap were missing. His hand clutched a rope, but it was the enchanted rope that served as the door's lock. He'd managed to work its knots free. His rope belt was also missing, so his other hand held up the top of his baggy pants.

"Jean-Paul!" Joe rushed forward. The lad fell into his arms. "My poor boy."

"What happened?" Ichabod asked. "Did the Elves do this you?"

"And how did you elude them?" Betua added, poking her head through the doorway to scan the cavern.

"I...I don't know." Jean-Paul seemed more dazed than fearful. "When we got to the big cave, I, uh..."

"You what?"

“Somethin’ attacked us, I guess.” He looked up at a Joe, face reddening. “I musta fainted. Fainted like a wee baby. I’m sorry, Joe. I’m sorry.”

The lumberjack pulled the boy closer. “No need for that, my Bon Jean. You did well.”

Betua had waddled down the row of cells on her stocky legs. “Got back here by yourself, then? No Elves followed you?”

“Couldn’t.” The boy closed his eyes tightly. “The ones guardin’ me—they ain’t no more.”

“What?”

“Found three next to me when I woke up. Bodies broken. Heads smashed in.”

Betua blew out a breath. “No invading Folk did that. Perhaps the Elves brought in a monster and lost control of it.”

Joe’s head snapped around, eyes wide. Ichabod raised a hand. “Fairies often capture monsters, Joe. They keep them in pens like these so they can—”

“I know,” the Canadian said.

“Gentlemen, I suggest we run now and speculate later,” Betua interjected. “Whatever might be loose in these caverns, its rampage aids our cause.”

No Elves accosted them as they made their way through the tunnel to the other cavern. Soon they came to the spot Jean-Paul said he’d fainted. The three dead fairies still lay there, undisturbed, their bodies contorted into unnatural shapes. Betua bent over and began yanking a woolen coat off one of them.

Joe waved a hand. “What are you doing?”

“The boy will need clothes when we get outside.”

Jean-Paul turned away and gagged, as if the notion made him ill. Betua straightened and studied the boy for a moment. Then, with a surprisingly graceful motion, the Goblin unfastened the clasp of her cloak and swept it over one arm, offering it to the lad. He accepted the light-blue garment with a wan smile.

Ichabod found Konna’s chamber. Their weapons remained on the table. He buckled on his sword belt and tucked the pistol in it, but the latter would be of little use without the powder and ammunition in Dela’s saddlebags.

Thinking of the mare triggered a wave of

sorrow about her fallen namesake. Not now, he told himself. Returning to the others, he handed back the lumberjack’s axe and knife. Sharing none of Jean-Paul’s qualms, Betua had confiscated a lantern, shortsword, bow, and quiver of arrows from one of the fallen Elves. Ichabod stooped to pick up a musket and searched its former owner until he found an ammunition pouch. “Functions like ours, I assume?”

The Goblin curled her upper lip. “I would not know.”

Thus armed, Ichabod felt more hopeful as they entered the upward sloping tunnel that led to the surface. Betua took the van, holding the lantern to light their way, while Ichabod covered their rear, hoping he’d properly loaded the Elfish musket.

Again, they encountered no foes. Either the other Elves were in pursuit of the captives’ unwitting liberator, the monster, or they’d already left the Folk village on some other errand. When the party reached the end of the tunnel, Betua stopped in front of the portal and began to hum.

“Must keep going,” said Joe, taking Jean-Paul’s hand and striding quickly forward.

His foot struck solid wall. Wincing, the big man stepped back and tried poking his hand through the portal. It fared no better.

“Patience,” the Goblin muttered. “It has been some time.” She resumed humming. Joe shot a questioning look to Ichabod, who gave no answer. After a few moments, the Goblin tried another melody. Nothing happened.

It was her fifth try that did the trick. Beams of green and yellow light streaked across the portal. Betua nodded to Joe. “After you.” The Canadians passed through the portal, followed by Ichabod and the Goblin.

“Humans, monsters, and invaders cannot just wander into fairy realms invited,” she explained. “Magic has many uses. Unlocking barriers is one of them, but you have to know the proper song.”

They emerged from the old oak tree. It was evening. Lanterns and flashes of firelight in window panes dotted the otherwise dark houses of Lockport. “We head south?” the lumberjack asked.

Ichabod shook his head. "That would be the fastest route to my unit in Buffalo, but we can't assume Konna is ignorant of what my uniform represents. He may expect us to head south. I propose we go north."

Betua raised an approving eyebrow.

"We'll follow Eighteen Mile Creek up to Kempville, on Lake Ontario," he continued. "Most of the way is forested, giving us cover from flying pursuers. From there, we can head down the coast to Fort Niagara. It has a small garrison of soldiers."

"Lead on," said the Goblin.

The journey took nearly five hours by foot. Joe and Ichabod managed it well enough, but Jean-Paul and Betua had trouble keeping up. The boy was exhausted, hungry, and far from recovered from his ordeal in the cavern. And Goblins just weren't built for rapid marches over rough ground. "I prefer to skulk and stalk, not go on walks," she insisted more than once. It was when she set the phrase to music that Ichabod suggested she ride on his back—purely in the interest of stealth, of course. Joe had long since taken to cradling the boy in his arms.

On several occasions, Ichabod saw winged figures framed against the moonlight sky. Whether they were geese, gulls, or flying fairies, he couldn't tell. They flew northward, in the same direction he and Joe trudged along the creek, but seemed always to keep their distance. If it was their pursuers, why wouldn't the Elves swoop down and attack? Ichabod couldn't think of a good reason, though that didn't mean there wasn't one.

It was just after sunrise when they reached the little village of Kempville and stopped to rest by the mouth of the creek, beneath a pair of pine trees. Though Ichabod was relieved to see no flyers in the sky above the town, relief gave way to distress when he realized he and his companions were in no condition to continue west along the lakeshore. It was still some twenty miles to Fort Niagara. And if they tarried here eat and sleep, that would give the Elves more time to find them before they reached the comparative safety of the fort.

As they lingered for a while, watching the gently flowing creek feed into Lake Ontario, a solution presented itself. To their east, Ichabod spied a small, single-masted sloop moored to a short pier. Workmen were carrying crates onto the ship.

"Betua," Ichabod whispered, pointing to the dock. "We have need of a spellsinger."

The Goblin understood instantly. Her broad mouth formed a toothy grin. "In truth, I would rather bounce lightly on the water than heavily on your back."

It was a simple matter for her to convince the sloop captain and his two crewmen that they'd always planned to sail west to Fort Niagara that morning, and that there were no weary passengers crowded onto the deck. Jean-Paul fell asleep shortly after they left Kempville, followed soon afterward by Joe Montferrand. By all rights, Ichabod should have joined them. It had been a long, strenuous, and tumultuous couple of days. And he'd begun them as a weary veteran of a dozen lackluster campaigns, not a vigorous youth in search of his first adventure. Still, he found it impossible to rest. As the sloop danced gracefully across the blue-green water, he found it impossible not to think of blue-green eyes, turned delightfully up at the corners, and the graceful, winsome creature to whom they belonged.

"You think of her." Betua covered Ichabod's rough hand with her own. "I was sorry to be the bearer of such tidings."

"The world is bleaker without my Water Maiden in it."

The Goblin hesitated. "You...you loved her."

Ichabod fumbled absent-mindedly with a loose button on his uniform coat. "Yes, though not in the way you mean. My wife is the love of my life. Indeed, Dela was present when I met my dear Charlotte. Dela's was the love of a mother, a sister, a singer of praises and salver of wounds. She saw something in me I did not. I was a resentful, awkward boy ever in the shadow of a famous and popular brother. I longed to become a great hero in the eyes of my peers and my country. With Dela's help, I learned to value service over notoriety, virtue over heroics.

I learned that the only witnesses to my actions who truly matter are my God, my friends, and myself.”

“A wise and valiant woman.” Betua bowed her head. “And blessed with a great love of her own.”

Ichabod smiled. “Goran Lonefeather. Yes, I know. Whatever loss I feel, his is ten times greater.”

“Made deeper because he is an exile from his Folk.” She turned to peer over the ship’s bow with cold red eyes. “One day, perhaps, he will find his way back to the Sylphs of Iris Isle, and they to him.”

“Iris Isle? I don’t recognize the name. Where is this—”

The Goblin’s clawed hand clamped down so hard on his that he nearly cried out. Believing he’d posed an impertinent question, Ichabod turned to apologize—and discovered Betua staring with a shocked expression on her crimson features. He followed her gaze upward.

There was a blazing streak across the sky.

“Great Maker!” the Goblin breathed.

Ichabod gulped. “What is that?”

There was no answer. Betua no longer sat beside him. She was scurrying across the sloop’s deck, her hands stretched towards the captain at the wheel, her gruff voice singing a spell Ichabod didn’t recognize.

He redirected his attention to the heavens. The column of fire was still there, though brilliant yellow had faded to burnt orange. His eyes swept the nearby sky. They found a tiny, winged figure, though it bore no resemblance to those he’d spotted during their flight up the creek to Lake Ontario. It was long and thin, its flapping wings so comparatively short that it made no sense for the creature to be aloft at all. Yet it rose still higher, from the tip of the smoldering streak into a bank of clouds, then reappeared, with wings held straight out to each side as it swooped toward the water below.

No bird was shaped like that. And as the flier approached, Ichabod realized it had been great distance, not substance, that made the creature appear so tiny. It was far too big to be some sort of winged fairy.

Another monster!

Ichabod hurried to Joe’s side and shook his broad shoulder. The Canadian’s eyes opened a crack, then stretched wide as saucers as he glimpsed what was now skimming toward them along the surface of the lake. “Mon Dieu!”

He vaulted to the American’s side, long-handled axe clutched in brawny hands. For his part, Ichabod lifted the small Elfsh gun to his shoulder. His left hand wrapped entirely around the bronze barrel, so he was forced to rest the maple stock on just the tips of his fingers. Incredibly, the boy still lay fast asleep on the deck.

What soared over the billowing sails of the sloop was no bedtime-story beastie made flesh. It was the stuff of nightmares. An enormous, undulating trunk of scales exhibiting the color and luster of turquoise. Three sets of indigo-striped fins rippling from its flanks. A serpent’s head, though rounder, with two bulging eyes of blue streaked with gold and with two great horns jutting incongruously from each side of its fearsome maw. A pair of leathery, blue-gray appendages that more closely resembled the wings of a bat than a bird. And, some thirty feet down the trunk from the head, the base of a sinewy tail that tapered twenty more feet into a tip, which was flicking and cracking like a bullwhip.

Ichabod squeezed the trigger. Whether the ball struck the monster as it flew past, he couldn’t tell. Whether it could do it any damage, he couldn’t guess. He hurried to reload the weapon, even as Betua rejoined them from the stern.

“I cast illusion spells on the crew,” she said quickly. “They believe we battle a sudden squall, though the effect won’t last long unless I reinforce it.”

“What—” Joe began.

“The Indians call it Gaasyendietha,” she replied as she fitted an arrow to her borrowed bow. “The meteor snake.”

“Can we defeat it?” Ichabod asked.

As if in answer, the monster revealed the origin of its name. Rising above the bow of the sloop with several mighty sweeps of its wings, the Gaasyendietha turned its head, thrust open its terrible jaws, and spat a stream of fire down



at the mast.

In seconds, the headsail was aflame. “Tis a dragon!” Joe thundered.

Betua growled as she loosed her arrow. It bounced off one of the creature’s scales. Ichabod lifted his own reloaded weapon and fired. This time he was sure he couldn’t have missed.

“Keep it up!” the Goblin said. “The musket balls are likely infused with sleep spells. They will weaken it, at least.”

Jamming a hand into his ammunition sack, Ichabod noticed that one of the sailors had climbed up the mast and was cutting away the burning headsail’s rigging. It was already too far gone to save with water buckets, he guessed, so the crew was trying to keep the mainsail from going up, too.

The Gaasyendietha began another dive. Ichabod had an inspiration. “Aim for its wing!” he suggested.

Betua complied. Her next bronze-tipped arrow punched a small but noticeable hole in the approaching monster’s right wing. Still ramming his next shot into his barrel, Ichabod ducked for cover behind the ship’s rail. The third warrior on the sloop was, however, ready with his own attack.

The man they called Big Joe Mufferaw stood boldly on the deck, straight as a mast himself,

hands at his waist, and hurled at the beast the foulest curses Ichabod had ever heard—that that was saying a lot, for a career officer who’d actually begun his military service as a lieutenant of marines in the U.S. Navy. The words meant nothing to the monster, of course, but it seemed to sense the lumberjack’s defiance. Screeching a furious challenge of its own, the Gaasyendietha banked his wings and headed straight for the impetuous human. The gold streaks in its blue reptilian eyes flared and crackled. Its great fangs parted, revealing an orange glow at the back of its hideous throat.

“Look out!” Ichabod shouted.

Unnecessarily. For as the leading edge of its inferno passed the monster’s lips, Joe leapt aside, with surprising agility for so hulking a man. His right arm snapped to a straight line, releasing the knife formerly tucked in his belt. Unerringly it flew, end over end, striking the dragon’s wing only inches below the wound scored by Betua’s arrow. The iron blade carved a slit that became a gaping gash as it reached the bullet hole.

Startled, the Gaasyendietha spat its blazing stream wide of the ship. Hissing with frustration, the monster banked left and then beat its wings to gain altitude.

“Any more tricks up your sleeve?” Ichabod

called to Joe.

“Perhaps,” the Canadian replied.

“Look there!” the Goblin shouted.

The men obeyed, and gasped. The Gaasyendietha was no longer alone in the sky. Half a dozen winged figures were forming a circle above the ascending beast. Several more fliers were approaching from the south.

Joe turned to Betua. “The Elves?”

She shrugged.

“Do they fight with us or against us?” Ichabod asked.

A hailstorm of arrows was the reply. They pounded the dragon’s head and breast. It retaliated with an eruption of fire. Two archers, engulfed in flame, fell from the sky. Even at so great a range, their screams made Ichabod’s skin crawl.

Undeterred, the rangers loosed a second volley. Having jumped to the same conclusion as Ichabod, they directed their shots at the unarmed wings of the Gaasyendietha. Its shrieks and hisses confirmed the precision of their aim. Rolling over, the monster dropped like a stone.

It possessed its own tricks, though. Spreading its now-ragged wings, the beast managed to adjust the angle of its descent sufficiently to swoop diagonally into the lake rather than smashing into it head-first. The force of its dive threw up a high splash of white-capped water.

A few seconds later, Ichabod spotted two shiny horns and a line of turquoise scales glistening in the morning sun. The task of propelling the Gaasyendietha had passed from its wounded wings to its powerful fins. It shot forward, as if fired by a cannon, headed straight for the sloop.

They remained in mortal peril.

Ichabod glanced up at the flying rangers. They showed no signs of coming down to continue the battle with the Gaasyendietha. Had Konna and his Elves chosen merely to contain the monster, redirecting the threat away from themselves but allowing it to vent its fury on their escaped prisoners?

Their motives didn’t matter. Nothing mattered except making the right choices in his final few seconds.

“Abandon ship!” he yelled to Joe.

The big man hefted his axe. “I can fight.”

“You can die. Or you can save the boy!”

Joe’s face softened. His eyes searched the deck.

“Go now!” Ichabod insisted, aiming his musket at a spot between two glowing, rapidly approaching eyes.

“I cannot!”

Ichabod fired.

The armored snout of the Gaasyendietha struck the hull of the sloop, close to the stern. The impact was like a child playing with a bathtub toy. The ship pitched back at an extreme angle and spun clockwise with such force that rudder snapped off. Ichabod and Joe managed to keep from being thrown from the deck, though Betua wasn’t so lucky. Ichabod heard her stout body hit the water somewhere beyond his field of vision.

Roaring like a wild beast, Joe Montferrand charged past and jumped from the deck, holding his great axe above his head. Ichabod scrambled to the rail in time to see the lumberjack land on the Gaasyendietha’s head. The axe blade struck down once, bounced off, then came down again. Propelled by corded muscle and untethered rage, the blade bit through stony scale and leathery skin. A spray of purplish blood was Joe’s first reward. His second was a blow to the back from the monster’s shiny horn. It knocked the wind from Joe’s lungs and the rest of him from the serpent’s back.

There was nothing left for Ichabod to do but sell his own life dearly. Dropping the gun, he drew his sword and rushed forward. Before him floated a vision of Dela’s heart-shaped face. It quickly dissolved into a vision of his wife’s rounder, fuller face—no stunning beauty, perhaps, but his most-cherished companion in life and, now, in death.

The Gaasyendietha’s serpentine head rose from the choppy water. Ichabod saw sparks rising from its smoking nostrils and an orange glow between its teeth. He also saw, to his satisfaction, that his parting shot hadn’t missed after all. The musket ball had struck an eye. It no longer glowed blue with streaks of gold. It no longer saw him.

He reached the rail—but rather than springing forward to battle the beast, he was bowled aside and sent sliding down the deck. Ichabod’s flailing hand brushed a rope. He grabbed it, arrested his momentum, and lifted his head from the deck just as another giant leapt onto the monster’s head.

Joe was tall. The newcomer was taller. Eight feet? Ten? Ichabod couldn’t say, not just because of the distance but because the figure seemed to be growing as he watched.

Joe was broad-shouldered and well-built. The newcomer was a colossus, his chest as wide as most men were tall, his arms and legs thick as tree trunks and muscled like some impossibly gargantuan ox.

Joe was clean shaven and wore a red shirt. The newcomer’s dark, shaggy hair bristled from his head, his eyebrows, his chin, and much of his bare chest, arms, and the calves of his legs, which extended beneath a bundle of blue rags that might once have been pants.

Joe had attacked the beast with roars of fury. The newcomer was laughing.

“Slimy snake!” he said between guffaws, in a voice that boomed over the water. “I’ll show you!”

The Gaasyendietha hissed and thrashed its head, trying to dislodge its attacker. It failed. The giant wrapped his own monstrous hands around one of the serpent’s horns and ripped it off. Then he bent over and smashed it into the hissing mouth of the beast, breaking several of its long, jagged teeth.

The creature’s second attempt to dislodge the giant was more successful. Bucking its head back, it sent the hairy man hurtling into the air, then caught him with its whip-like tail. Coiling it around the giant’s chest and arms, the Gaasyendietha dipped its head and then, with great ripples of its indigo-striped fins, shot downward into the depths of the lake. The last Ichabod saw of the giant, he was straining against the ever-tightening coil—and giggling.

Ichabod’s astonishment yielded to action when he heard Betua’s call. “Over here!” He saw the diminutive Goblin struggling with an object in the water. It was Joe. Remembering the rope

in his hand, Ichabod found one end tethered to the deck and tossed the other to his comrades. Soon Joe and Betua had clambered aboard the drifting ship.

There was no need to wonder about the identity of the second giant. “How long have you known?” Ichabod asked.

Joe looked dazed but strangely calm. “Almost from the start. The first time he turned, a band of Shiners had jumped me. They got one look at him and ran, swearing off liquor for good.”

“Why do you bandy words?” Betua looked indignant. “They still battle below!”

“How can we reach them?” Ichabod asked.

The Goblin offered no reply, other than to seethe.

Ichabod looked back at Joe. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“I know about fairies,” he said. “Seen them all my life. I know what they do to monsters. I will never let that happen to my Bon Jean.”

Ichabod understood. “And he doesn’t know.”

“Memories go when he changes back.”

The ship lurched. The three companions rushed to the rail. Ichabod and Betua still had their blades. Joe picked up a plank from a broken crate. They waited, for what must have been only seconds but felt like days.

Something white and slender broke the surface. It was the Gaasyendietha’s sole remaining horn. Its head soon followed. Ichabod looked at the eyes. Both were dull, cold, lifeless. He released the breath he held.

The dragon’s scaly body didn’t break the surface behind the head, for it had been torn off. What did surface was the Frost Giant, or the Sasquatch, or whatever monster Jean-Paul was when he became his true self. He swam toward the sloop, kicking his enormous legs and treading with one beefy arm while the other curled tightly, perhaps even affectionately, around his prize: the Gaasyendietha’s other horn.

It took a while for the sloop’s crew to repair their broken rudder and rig a new headsail. “What a devil of a storm,” said the captain. “A real monster she was,” agreed the first mate.

When they reached Fort Niagara, Ichabod

found not only the squad of soldiers he expected but another key member of his regiment. Dela, the roan mare, had returned on her own to the right bank of the Niagara, then followed the river all the way down to its mouth, as if she always knew she'd find her master there.

You do your namesake proud, Ichabod thought when he saw her chomping on oats in the barn.

When Jean-Paul woke up on the ship, he again remembered nothing of his transformation or battle with the dragon. The soldiers scrounged up a few ill-fitting clothes for the boy—though given his true nature, a loose fit was probably best—and the two crossed over to the Canadian side of the river on a barge. In exchange for Ichabod and Betua keeping Jean-Paul's secret, Joe promised not to participate in any more armed rebellions against his government.

"I won't stop pressing for our liberties," he'd insisted as they parted.

"Nor should you," Ichabod replied, "but violence isn't the only weapon at your disposal. Try another."

As for Betua, she asked his leave to linger in Fort Niagara for a while. "I have a history with this place," was her cryptic claim. She refused Ichabod's repeated requests for a lengthier explanation.

As he rode his horse south from the fort, Ichabod found it comforting to know that the Goblin would be staying in the vicinity. The tensions along the border were far from quelled, and he might have need of a spellsinger again if Konna and his Elves continued their meddlesome schemes.

It was night again on the Niagara, though very little moonlight could penetrate the dark bank of clouds in the sky. Ichabod had much to ponder. It would be a long ride to Buffalo.

The visitor didn't arrive unannounced. This time there was a loud fluttering of wings, giving the lieutenant colonel sufficient notice to draw his pistol before the fairy ranger landed on a stump next to the trail.

"You are a Sylph," Ichabod stated matter-of-factly.

"I am."

"You are not the Sylph I know, however."

The fairy's small eyes, round cheeks, and tapered chin reminded Ichabod of a barn owl. "I am not, but I can guess his identity. Goran Lonefeather was a student of mine, a lifetime ago."

"What would you have of me?"

"Information."

"You sound like someone I met recently. An Elf called Konna."

The Sylph's small eyes blinked, as befitted his owlish appearance. "You will never meet again."

"Oh?"

"He is dead, along with the rest of his troop."

Ichabod raised an eyebrow. "How do you know?"

"I was among the rangers who killed them."

"Then you know they were—"

"—Trying to find the location of our village, yes." The Sylph looked away from the human to admire the roan mare. "A magnificent steed."

"She is, indeed. Her name is Dela."

The fairy blinked again, this time in apparent surprise. "I knew the Water Maiden, too. An impressive woman, though sometimes misguided."

The American deemed it best not to respond.

"There is news of her," the Sylph continued, "news you may not—"

"She was killed by Elves. I know."

Both men were silent for a time. Then something clicked into place in Ichabod's mind. "Konna's rangers were not the fliers who pursued us during our escape from Lockport."

"That is not quite true," said the Sylph. "They did give chase for a time. Then they found us, and did not survive the encounter."

"So it was you and your Sylphs, not Elves, who fought the Gaasyendietha above the lake."

The fairy nodded. "And it was you and your companions who finished the beast."

"Why didn't you come down and help?"

"I am not in the habit of rescuing Sighted humans. I generally see your kind as a threat. It is one of many disagreements I have with my former student, Goran."

"Is that why you've come now," Ichabod asked. "To confront a threat?"

"No, to assess a potential threat." The Sylph



gazed into the human's green eyes. "Did the Goblin or anyone else tell you the location of our village?"

"No."

"How can I be sure you speak the truth."

Ichabod smiled. "Because while no one told me its location, I freely admit that I have figured it out for myself. Your village, your Iris Isle, lies at the great falls of the Niagara. You make your home on the boundary of two great nations, refusing to choose between them."

The other's small eyes bulged. "You tell me this, knowing what your confession may mean?"

"I tell you this because I have already judged your character, Sylph, as you presume to judge mine. You are a man of honor, though perhaps sometimes misguided."

The Sylph couldn't help but smile at hearing his words flung back at him.

"You could have simply let the Gaasyendietha destroy our ship." Ichabod continued. "You did not. Your archers wounded it, giving us a fighting chance to prevail. Now you come to me alone, without escort, to parley rather than to murder. I choose to trust you. You should do the same."

The two stared at each other for several moments. Then the fairy broke the silence. "Ceredan."

"Eh?"

"I am Ceredan of Iris Isle. Farewell, Ichabod Crane of Buffalo."

The Sylph flapped his wings and rose into the trees. Ichabod watched him go, then looked out over the rippling water of the Niagara. A whole world lay just beneath its surface, a world filled with wonders a creature of land could never fully see or appreciate. So it was with Ichabod's world. There were secrets and lies, and hidden lands, and hidden hands, and heroes and villains, and little boys who turned into towering giants. There were old friends to cherish, and new friends to make.

And old men whose hearts were young.

He climbed down from the saddle and stood next to the roan mare. Dela snorted, as if to urge him on toward home.

"I'm feeling restless," said Ichabod Crane, grabbing her reins. "I think I'll walk a while."

-end-

Completing a Legacy: Interview with authors David Weber and Phillip Pournelle

Editor Bob Arrington was able to interview popular author David Weber and author Phillip Pournelle, son of the legendary Jerry Pournelle, regarding their collaborative work to continue Jerry Pournelle's unfinished stories. David Weber is the author of many military and adventure science fiction novels, including the Honor Harrington series, the Safehold series, the Hell's Gate series, the Out of the Dark series, and others too numerous to catalogue.

Phillip Pournelle is a science fiction author, war game designer, operations analysts, and military strategist. He served in the United States Navy as a surface warfare officer, operations analyst, and planner for 26 years. He has written and spoken on the ethical use of Artificial Intelligence in warfare. He is currently a senior war game designer and operations analyst at Group W, a defense and analysis, modeling, and research company, and he teaches war game design for the Military Operations Research Society. He has had several short stories and articles published on the themes of future conflicts. Most recently, "The Rules of the Game" was published by Baen Books in its *Robosoldiers* anthology.

Together, Phillip and David finished Dr. Pournelle's novel *Mamelukes*, which is the fourth novel in the *Janissaries* series.

BOB ARRINGTON: My first question is, will there be a *Janissaries V*? It seems to me that there were a few loose ends that could be pursued in yet another book. Is that in the works, gentlemen?

DAVID WEBER: I would say yes, there were quite a few loose ends there. Phil has jer-

ry's notes on where he was planning on taking the series.

One thing that we have discussed is that we want to be very respectful of the characters that Jerry established in detail in the earlier books. It's very probable that they'll step back a bit from being on the front lines so that we can develop other characters without stepping on what Jerry had in mind for people like Rick and Tylara.

PHILLIP POURNELLE: So I have turned in the first draft, and have received editorial guidance, and am working on the next draft with that guidance in hand. As for the notes that Dave is referring to specifically, there's a cryptic note at the end of *Mamelukes* that said there's a rogue on the planet.

I took that and ran with it. So there is a rogue on the planet and all hell's breaking loose and Rick and his team are facing essentially a global war on Tran with opponents who are getting help. He's gonna have a challenge.

BOB: Off-world help?

POURNELLE: Let's just say there's a rogue on the planet.

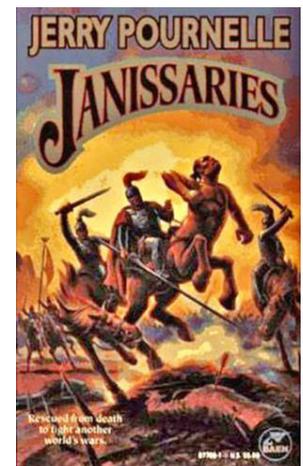
BOB: All right, I seem to also recall a reference that there is something worse beyond the Westmen in the novel somewhere.

POURNELLE: You're gonna meet them. As I said, it's a global war.

BOB: Well, I'm so pleased to hear about this. By the way, are you two collaborating again? Or is it gonna be your baby, Phil?

POURNELLE: We've gone back and forth to develop some general guidance on it. I've done the first draft, I'm gonna do some more work on the next one to make sure we're using David's time at maximum value, before turning that over, turning over the next draft.

WEBER: It's really kind of funny. I was in North Carolina at Baen, our



offices, and Toni [Weisskopf, publisher at Baen Books - ed.] and I were having a conversation about one of my books, and we started talking about unfinished series, because she was hinting that I was getting a little long in the tooth kind of thing.

And I said, "You know, there were two series that I really would have loved to have written in." And one of them was H. Beam Piper's *Lord Kalvan*, which I would have done, I think, somewhat differently from the extension books that were done. But the other I said, you know, I really would have loved to have finished up *Janissaries*.

And, and Toni said, really?

I said, Yeah. And she said, "Well, we have his manuscript for the final novel that his son Phil has been working on, and how would you like to be involved with that?"

And I said, "Oh, hit me, beat me, make me write bad checks."

And it was an honor, frankly, to be allowed in. That was one of my favorite series. I mean, I loved all of Jerry's collaborations with Larry Niven. You know, I loved them. But this somehow was the one that resonated with me the most, I guess, maybe because of when I first encountered it. I was in college at the time, and my area of study was military diplomatic history, so it just sort of was in my wheelhouse.

But I was very, very pleased to be given the opportunity to be involved with it. And the note that really resonated with me, the note that Jerry had left, was that the only unforgivable sin was despair.

That resonated with me on a lot of levels. But also, it truly was the core of the entire *Mamelukes*, in a way. And I was grateful for the opportunity to show Rick persevering through all of this crap that has come down on him, and yet needing the people around him to get him over that hump. That moment where he thinks, "I can't do this anymore. The cost is too high." That's something that Jerry was always good about showing in the earlier books. But I think we got to bring it into a finer focus in this one, because Rick was the everyman who stepped up and found the strength and the

competence to do what needed to be done.

And yet, he wasn't a Superman. He was a human being. And he's a human being who has to be asked to perform beyond what we normally expect out of human beings. My favorite passage that I actually did was the one where Baker explains to his junior officers, when they say that he gave in pretty easily there, Baker says this man has been on constant combat operations for 14 years, and he's wise enough to listen to those who are offering good advice and to take it, because to me that sums up so much about who Rick is.

BOB: Very interesting. Phil, you had collaborated with your father prior to his passing on at least one work of fiction, had you not?

POURNELLE: I had written a short story for the War World novel series. Again, Dad and I had been in discussions about the *Janissaries* series, off and on for years. But obviously, he was very much engaged with it. And then he had the stroke. And made it his mission in life to get his way out and then get back into writing. And then even before the stroke, he had the...we're not sure exactly what it was, was likely cancer in his brain. And they had used hard X rays to exorcise it. And he said it was it was like having a sunburn on your brain.

So he fought through that. And he fought through the stroke. And he was working on the novel, he got it through about 70 to 80% complete.

And then when he passed away, I picked it up from there.

BOB: Do you two collaborate pretty much the way that Jerry Pournelle wrote about his collaborations with Niven, where one would write a segment and send it to the other for editing and rewriting and back and forth that way, or, how do you go? How do you go about your collaborations?

WEBER: It's a little more freeform.

All right, when I came into the project, okay, and work with me remembering stuff here, Phil, because I've done concussions and Covid and all kinds of stuff since then.

But as I recall, what really remained to be written when we came in was the actual de-

fense against the attack on the city.

And I think that Jerry hadn't resolved in his own mind how he wanted to do that. And I think part of that was that his area of expertise wasn't naval warfare, and certainly not galleys and galleasses. So that was really the heavy lifting from my end, doing that part of it because it was right in my wheelhouse. Now, the scene where Publius explains to Rick why Rick can't give up? Okay, that's 80-90% Phil.

What I did with that was I moved it, because Phil had inserted it at an earlier point in the novel. And I wanted to bring it to the end after we had put Rick through the wringer. We hadn't figured out exactly how he was going to lose a close friend, someone really close to him. But we knew that there had to be a major, individual personal loss for Rick, for this to be the tipping point that finally broke him. It had to hit him really hard, and the way we finally came up with was a military decision — a necessary decision — he had to make which killed his friend. And when I saw what Phil had done in this passage, I needed to move it to a point after we broke him, if you see what I'm saying?

And I think one of the things that I brought to the project that Phil is still in the process of developing is that storyteller's or writer's ear for when how you have to manage the sequence to make the impact of the story be what you want it to be. We had to drive Rick to the point where anybody would have despaired, before Publius came to him and said, I understand what's happening to you, but we need you.

And I tweaked what Phil had done some because of where I'd moved it to. But the core, the essence of that entire scene is his. I think the main thing that I did was I added the proclamation of Imperator later on to the end. We couldn't have done that in its original position, because it was in a private conversation with Rick and Publius before they departed for the city and actually fought the battle.

And so, I thought that, you know, it was a fantastic scene. It just needed to be at a different place to really carry the weight that it deserved for the story as a whole.

BOB: That's, that's very interesting. David,

did you know Dr. Pournelle prior to his death?

WEBER: Well, we had had maybe a half dozen conversations, we would pass one another at airports, going to and coming from cons and that sort of thing.

But I actually have had more time with Larry [Niven] than I did with Jerry, [it was] that just, you know, we were just in different places at different times.

BOB: Would you say that Jerry Pournelle's writing influenced your own work?

WEBER: In some ways. I think everybody that I've ever read has influenced my work one way or another.

It's hard to pick out specific influences. Every writer's voice is the product of every writer that he's ever read. Even if it's, "Well, I'm never gonna do that crap."

I have a book I used to take around — it's by an Australian author who shall remain nameless at this point — that I used as an example to say, this is how you don't write a techno thriller. That's certainly one way another writer can influence you!

The formative writers for me, I think, are obviously going to be the ones who I met when I was younger. And that would be people like Heinlein. Asimov, not so much. For some reason. I never cared for Asimov. I think it was because I was a historian and he wrote *Foundation*.

Actually, I read a lot of Murray Leinster when I was younger. But there's a bunch of folks in that list. I put Jerry into that category, but he came much later in the process.

I think it was probably his Codominium series that was most compatible with me, along with Janissaries, of course, because of where I was in terms of military, diplomatic history, and so forth.

And I think that he and I were probably fairly simpatico on a on a political ideological basis, if you will.

But yeah, it's hard. It's always hard for me to parse out which writers had the most the most impact on me because I read so many of them. I will tell you that I'm positive that E.E. Smith had an enormous impact on me, since

my father had everything he'd ever written in the Wizard World Fantasy press hardcovers — numbered autographed copies of his entire works. Wow, the autograph in *Children of the Lens* ran to a page and a half handwritten by "Doc" because my dad was at the same bookstore whenever each book came out to get it signed.

So yeah, that's definitely in the mix.

BOB: Switching gears just a little bit. I understand that some of Jerry Pournelle's work has been optioned, I believe, for television. Phil, Can you tell us more about that?

POURNELLE: The only work that I am aware of is that the Landmark Entertainment Group has an option on the first Janissaries novel...between my brother and I, we will look after my father's intellectual property rights. And we're not aware of [anything other than] the Janissaries first novel... If I was to pitch this to your show runner, I'd say this is *Game of Thrones* meets *X Files*. And --

WEBER: Yeah, alien abduction and then all hell breaks loose on a medieval planet. Yeah, it's it was like, it was really something when I read it, I will tell you that. Well, the cool thing about it is that they can make the movie without changing the time the novel begins. Because it's all taking place off Earth.

And that would be one of the strengths. I think of this as a project. You'd have to make some minor changes. You'd make minor changes

in the storyline later.

POURNELLE: The impact of the fall of the Soviet Union was significant in *Mamelukes* as a motivating factor behind Rick, kind of gave a boost wind to his sails, so to speak, for what was coming.

WEBER: But you could still work around that. But you wouldn't have to work around it, really. Depends on how quickly you want to get to them. I mean, you know, you've got so much material that you could already do on Tran.

You know, you could even do a, you know, 20 years later, jump at some point if you really wanted to, but I don't think you'd have to. I think the timeline could be left exactly where it is, especially for the first book.

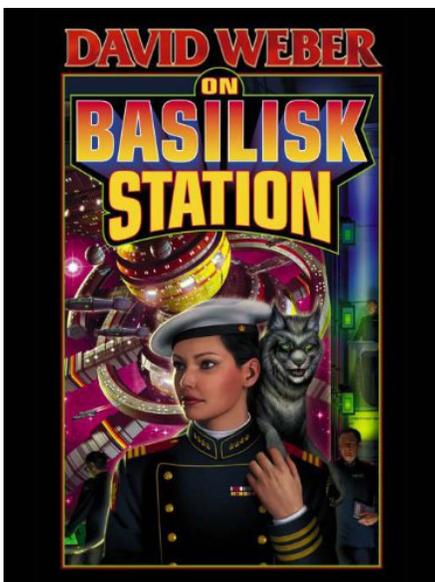
BOB: I was not aware of that was even a possibility. And I want to register my firm vote in favor of seeing it happen. I think I've got that novel memorized. I've read it six, seven times. But let's switch gears to you, David. Is there any chance of seeing Honor Harrington on the screen?

WEBER: I don't know. There was a project underway with Evergreen Studios. The studio went bankrupt, and so that project died. We are currently looking at a possible anime of not the Honorverse, but the Mutineers Moon series, the Dahak books, that's being worked on in Japan. One of the issues right now is that there are no Japanese language editions of my books currently in print. So they're working on a possible manga treatment of the novels to build readership in Japan before doing the anime. That's been grinding along for a while. I don't know what's finally going to come of it.

But my personal view is that the Honorverse is not a good fit for the big screen. That's because of the characters and because of how the plot works. It would lend itself much better to a high quality television treatment with an ensemble cast that you can rotate characters in and out of as the storyline progresses.

POURNELLE: John Carr said it best. A movie inherently is essentially a short story. And you're trying to cram or distill a novel into a short story. Something has to give.

WEBER: The last movie that I'm aware of that actually completely followed the book was like the 1938 or whatever it was version of *The Prisoner of Zenda*. And the reason it did was that one of the guys who did the screenplay, was one of the guys who'd done the stage version of Prisoner, and the author of the book



had helped to do the stage version. And it was a 35,000-word “novel.” So you could fit that into a two hour format a lot better than you could, say, a 220,000 word book by some yahoo named Weber. I mean, you know it’s just the way it is, and I think that the opportunity to do it [my novels] as TV exists today and didn’t exist when I started the books 30-plus years ago. I think my personal view is that *Babylon Five* did more for TV science fiction with a plot strand that runs through the entire series than anything that had come before it. *Star Trek* had always been episodic. Okay, and *Space 1999* was just a mistake.

POURNELLE: But we all watch that mistake.

BOB: While we’re talking about film, I’ve noticed that the idea behind *Lucifer’s Hammer* has been used a number of times. And nobody’s ever given your father or Larry Niven any credit for writing what looks to be the seminal story for that type of disaster. Did your dad ever talk about that? Did he ever grouse about some of those films that seemed to be piggybacking his and Niven’s concepts without anybody willing to give him any credit for it?

POURNELLE: Yeah, we had some conversations about it. You know, there are many who emulated but never replicated [that story]. Let’s just put it that way. But my dad, his attitude was “How much do you want to be a plaintiff? How much do you really want to sit in court for all that?” The best line about it was when we saw I think it was *Deep Impact*. And the [tidal] wave’s coming in and he says, “If there’s a surfer on it, we sue.”

BOB: The follow-up story that was in *The Best of Pournelle* about what happened to the surfer I thought was really clever and a good read. I enjoyed that, too. In [that anthology] John Carr writes that some people didn’t like your dad and that some of the dislike was politically motivated. David, I don’t find your novels particularly political, but the stories are not exactly woke. Have you run into any opposition to any of your stories that you thought were based on ideology? And if so, how have you handled it?

WEBER: Well, I think, there’s a strand of readers who criticize my work that says, you know, his right wing politics come through, etc. And that’s fine. I mean, I am...How do I put this? I see myself more as a historian than an ideologue when I write. Okay? And if you look at my Honorverse, for example, you know, I have a very low opinion of the Liberal Party of Manticore. In the beginning books, the original Liberal Party is where Houseman, an idiot of the far left, comes from. But the politician who absolutely does the most damage to the Star Kingdom is Baron High Ridge, who is a totally self-centered, right wing, aristocratic, conservative. So I kind of have equal opportunity political stupidity in in the books. It’s like, you know, I’m not a big fan of socialism, because I think it’s never worked and because I think that giving that much control to a central authority is always a bad thing. Like I said, Jerry and I were probably politically simpatico. I also don’t much care for oligarchies, I don’t much care for corporate internationals, or in my novels, Trans-stellars, that manipulate nations and people. My basic belief is that human beings deserve to make their own decisions, they have a responsibility to make their own decisions. And that’s what most of my good guys, if you will, are really focused on. That I think is probably -- and this was not something I deliberately thought about; this is looking back and analyzing my own work rather than saying, this is what I set out to do—but I think probably the central characteristic of most of my good guys, my heroes, is a sense of responsibility. The sense that any adult’s responsibility is to fix the problems that he finds, whether or not he’s responsible for them, to the best of his ability. And the central characteristic of my villains is a complete lack of empathy, which puts them in the position of looking out solely for themselves and seeing others as tools to get what they want. That’s about as ideological as I think I get, really. Although I obviously have views on how best to accomplish those ends, I try to play fair with the warts of any political system, any ideology, I’m dealing with. But I see myself essentially as a centrist in a world

in which centrism is not in enormous vogue at the moment. It's kind of like wherever I am, people assume I'm from somewhere else. That's, that's pretty much it.

POURNELLE: I understand what you are getting at. It was interesting. I think there's a great statement that Larry Niven said about readers. He said, "I have a very technical description of readers who believe that I believe what my characters in my story do. They're called idiots."

BOB: You know, Steve Stirling had to put in the front of one of his novels something like "idiots beware" It was the novel about where they found an alternate universe. And the guy who had discovered it was an old fashioned Southerner, and he didn't bring any black people to the alternate universe and so on like that. And he had to put a kind of a warning. "Don't think that what my characters are thinking is what I think."

WEBER: Well, Steve is a friend of mine, and Steve wrote the Draka novels early on. Oh my God. The people who decided he must be a Ku Klux Klan guy or whatever, because the Draka were the focus of the books, etc, etc, etc. What Steve was doing was he had taken the most awful society that that he could think of. Okay? And he played fair with it. And [some people thought] that meant that obviously, he agreed with the Draka. Because when you develop characters, when you develop a society, when you need to develop a culture and a book, you have to be able to see that culture in its own eyes. Whether you agree with it or not, you have to be able to see it in its own eyes. And you have to show it through his own eyes as far as the people in that culture are concerned.

Steve had simply done too good a job of playing fair with his characters, and people were making some very unjustified assumptions. Especially if you looked at the subtext about who was opposing the Draka. Do you see what I'm saying? But he got hammered on that. And I think undeservedly, but you cannot control what people are going to decide you, the author, think. Especially if or when they have blinders of their own on. I tell people that no

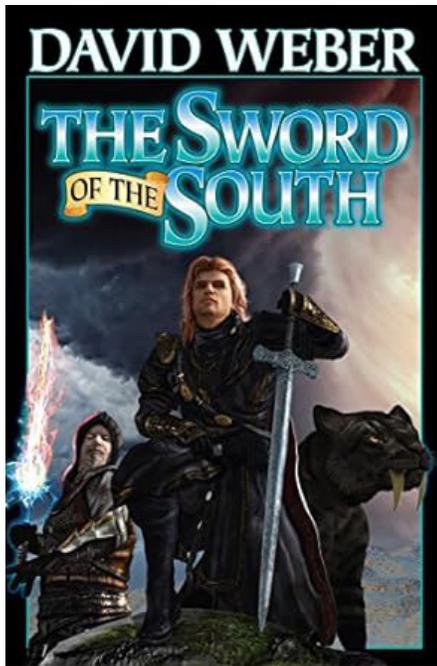
one has ever read a single book I've written. They've read what I've written from their starting point, from their perspective. And every character in the book is a different person to every person who's ever read the book. And every person who's read the book has a different flavor of construct for all of the social institutions and the motivations in the book. It's a collaborative effort with every single reader in that respect. And that's—I think every writer has to recognize that that's going to happen, and that you just can't prevent people from going places where you never intended to go and never went, as far as you're concerned.

BOB: Phil, how do you balance working with your writing and working with your brother on your dad's IP rights?

POURNELLE: Well, sometimes it makes the writing slow. But Alex has taken on the burden for the whole family regarding my parents' estate, including the IP.

BOB: David, what are you working on at present? Can you tell us?

WEBER: Well, actually, I'm still working on digging out of a really deep hole. There have been health issues, mine and Sharon's. I gave myself a concussion in Atlanta by face planting into a cement floor. It took me about two years to get over that. Then I did two books that I really liked. And then I had COVID. My GP told me I had long duration COVID. I said nonsense. When my cardio guy told me, I said nonsense. Then my neurologist told me I had it, and I had to say, okay, fine. But it has put a crimp in my in my productivity. I am in the process of finishing the next collaboration with Jane Lindskold for the Star Kingdom novels. And my next immediate project after that will probably be a section I'm doing for for Chuck Gannon, in his next Caine novel. And after that, I've got two or three collaborations out there, but I also have two solo novels that I have to write. One would be the next *Safehold* novel, and one would be the sequel to *Sword of the South* in my fantasy universe. Those are the two next two solo projects and I hope to get to them both sometime fairly soon. Now, by the same token I have been looking to the future



as it were, and I'm at a point where I'm in "Pay It Forward" mode in some respects right now. And I have a couple or three writers that I'm working with, who probably are going to be carrying on, like, the Honorverse

and whatnot, when I'm no longer around or no longer doing my best work. And I'm hoping we can work together over the next several years. and let me pass on to them some of the skill set that I've acquired in the last 50 years. Because I realized one day, and really, this is part of what came home to me when I had the COVID, that I have certain skills, but they have an expiration date. When I'm gone, they're gone. If I can help pass them on to somebody, and if I can find some of these folks who I think have the potential to be outstanding writers on their own, and maybe help platform that a little bit earlier on, then I see that as a win-win situation. It's a funny thing. You know, when I wrote the first two or three Honor Harrington novels, I knew I was going to do a series. But I hadn't really begun to remotely envision how big the Honorverse would become, not just in terms of books, but in terms of the 2000 years of history in the Diaspora [from Earth] before you even get to Honor Harrington's lifetime. So right this minute, Jacob Holo is going to be doing with me—with him as the as the first draft author and me to fill in chunks where needed and do the final edits—an Honorverse trilogy. Of course, it's for Baen, so for all I know, it'll end with nine books, but it's planned as a trilogy. So there's a lot of that kind of stuff going

on, and there are still two series that I definitely want to finish myself, one of them being *Safehold*, and the other one being the *Norfressa* books. But I do intend to leave detailed notes on where I expected them to go in case I don't get around to finishing them, because I don't want the fans of the series to be in the situation we were in waiting for *Janissaries* for so long. Feeling like "I know that there's more books to be written in this; where are they?" I will say that I feel like I did wrap up the *Honor Harrington* series in a sense in *Uncompromising Honor*. That was kind of the end of that story arc—of her story arc. There are more books to be written that *Honor* may be part of, but I actually did, folks, I finished the story I initially set out to tell about her.

BOB: I've got one more question for both of you. But first, Phil, do you want to put in a plug for *Chaos Manor* and the work that you and your family are doing to keep your Dad's legacy alive?

POURNELLE: Well, the key is, yeah, you can still go to my Dad's website [www.JerryPournelle.com] and read all the old *Chaos Manor* postings that he had. The best advice I received from Toni was if you want to keep the legacy alive, then write more books in that series, and then people will want to go back and read the older works. As I said, I'm, you know, fully employed and writing on the on the side part time. So, I've written a couple of essays that are posted on the *Chaos Manor* website, my indictment of the of Yoda and the evil Jedi, you know, those? Those are fun little essays now and then but I'm working full time trying to defend the country and or at least support those who actually do it. And then writing on the side. I do have that short story in *Robo Soldiers*. It's an anthology of stories on artificial intelligence in warfare. And I have a story in there about artificial intelligence, a competition in the US and China, regarding Taiwan, and somehow I got it past the censors in the Pentagon. Colleagues said you'll never get this through, but I did. So I hope people enjoy reading that. That one is called *Rules of the Game*. And reflects my experience working with artifi-

cial intelligence in DOD.

BOB: As I hope you all are aware, *Sonder* magazine is dedicated to giving exposure to conservative, libertarian and traditional writers. We're not overtly political. But we'd like to be a site for people who might get arbitrarily turned down elsewhere.

So what advice do either of you have for new writers who are bent in those directions? If any?

POURNELLE: So, Baen Books, you know, has proven that they're bold enough and brave enough to print just about anything. And that's good. And if you read through their catalogue, you'll see many writers in there, who, let's face it, Toni does not agree with politically, and yet, she's quite happy to publish anything that's good. And if other publishers are going to pass on good works because it doesn't fit a political band, well then, Baen is there to pick it up.

WEBER: And I think there are other publishing houses out there that would do the same. It's—you know, it's a shame that people will pass on good stories because of some kind of litmus test. And, unfortunately, if they're applying certain filters, then they're going to publish less than the best.

And so, Baen can pick it up. My advice is always that you write the kind of story that you would read. Because if you write that kind of story, then you're going to do it better than you will [if you write] a different type. And if your characters are going to have a political bent or whatever, then write that story. And I believe that even today, if it's if it's good, it will find its publisher. If you are persistent enough. I agree with Phil, that Baen has a much better track record for diversity of political views of the people that it publishes. I would say this, though—I believe that strident political writing in fiction carries the seeds of its own destruction. One of the things that is a part of my writing is that there are good guys on both sides, in almost all of the conflicts that I fight, that it isn't a case of my saying, okay, because you are left or because you're right, you're automatically evil. Because there are qualities that transcend whatever your ideology may be.

Because if you can regard the other person as another human, as another human to interact with and not just an enemy, then there's always common ground somewhere. The problem is that we get into our ideologies to the point where anybody on the other side is not in our category of people that we're willing to interact with. And instead of discussions, we have quarrels; instead of arguments we have diatribes. That is the death knell of a coherent society.

That is what I think we're looking at, in some respects right now, or at least the threat of it, and that is one of the things that I am against, that I think shows in what I write. The instant that any writer starts writing, he steps up onto a soapbox whether he wants to or not, because his views, his values are going to infuse how he builds the characters, how he builds a sympathetic character, an evil character. Even if like Steve, he's treating the Draka fairly, if you look at what he built into the villains, you can tell what his actual values are, because he gave the antithesis to the villains, if you see what I'm saying. And I think we all have to be aware of that. And we also have to be aware that I can make a concept that you would normally reject accessible to you by giving it to a character you like and who you think is a rational human being and having them look at it rationally. So there's sort of a gentle persuasion kind of element involved in doing that.

But I think ultimately, the writer has to keep faith with himself or herself in what's written in the stories they tell. And if they have the storyteller's voice, and if they are true to themselves and play fair with their characters and the reader, I think that's the element for success. That's the recipe for success. And those are the qualities that we need more of, rather than less of, in publishing today, I also think self-publishing offers a way to sidestep some of the ideological gatekeeping that may be going on. But unfortunately, a lot of indie publishing gets lost in the in the underbrush, because there's so much of it, and they don't have the marketing support of a traditional publisher. I tell people that the best thing about the inter-

net and independent printing and whatnot, is that we get to see bunches of stuff we never would have seen otherwise. And the worst thing about it is we get to see bunches of stuff we never would have seen otherwise. And, and that's just, that's just the way that it is, unfortunately.

I know some people who are doing really good stuff that they're publishing independently, they're self-publishing or publishing with one of the indie houses. And that's still shaking out. I don't know where it's gonna wind up. But I can tell you that Honor Harrington was born two years before Al Gore invented the internet, so I'm definitely straddling that line between electronic publishing and traditional hardcopy publishing. The changes that I've seen in the 30 odd years that I've been in print are just kind of mind boggling. If you actually sit down and look back, rather than just kind of riding the crest—like your dad's surfer, Phil, you know—of where we are right now. I don't know where it's gonna go. But I do know that. There will always be a market for people who tell stories about characters that people care about. That's the key. And the more strident a character becomes, the more that character becomes an obvious vehicle for political expression, the less readers are going to empathize with that character, even if they totally approve of that character's views. Do you see what I'm saying? Yes, of course. And I think that's, that's the key for any writer of any political persuasion to bear in mind.

POURNELLE: But let's, let's face it, two dimensional villains are kind of boring. Unless you have a short story. You don't have time to build that out? Yeah. In the "Rules of the Game," I made an effort to try to convey the perspective of an admiral in China's People's Liberation Navy. You know, why does he do what he does? And if you read Chinese literature, and you look at his history, you can see a real strain of "it's the party or chaos." Yeah, so he's looking at over the cities in his in his household compound. He's with his daughter and his grandchild, he's looking at over the over the city of below him, and he's like, "it's

the party or chaos." And that makes him both the more interesting and also more challenging opposition to the, to the other side.

WEBER: Yeah. Well, I remember when I was teaching, as a graduate assistant, I was teaching Western Civilization. And I would tell my students, okay, if you can actually get inside Adolf Hitler's mindset, everything he did make sense. You can follow why he made every decision that he made, if you can actually get inside his head. Now being inside his head is a scary place to be. But the mistake that everybody makes—and I think, in some ways, I think Americans may make it more than anybody else—is to assume that everybody else in the world is just like us, because they're not. They have different worldviews, different value sets, different religions, different political philosophies. And it's a serious mistake to think that you can enforce your views that you can export your views automatically. I mean, we've we've seen that often enough.

POURNELLE: It turns out mirror imaging is the bane of my existence [in DoD wargaming]. I deal with that all the time in books looking at geopolitical military conflicts, and near imaging and not really understanding what the other side does. Oh, that's not rational, they wouldn't do it. From whose perspective are you saying this is rational? What's the "rational factor" that you're assuming they're going to follow?

WEBER: I have a friend whose father was an Imam during 911. He was an immigrant from Turkey, but Kemal was born here. And immediately after 911 Kemal and I were talking and he said, "There's a lot of talk about whether or not Islam is the enemy. I'm here to tell you it is and you better watch your back." Because, he told me, the fundamental Islamists, the right wing, IslamISTS, are totally committed to and totally believe in what they're telling you they believe. And he said we see too many people in the Western world who are assuming that Islamist leaders must be doing this just to motivate their uneducated followers or whatever. And he said that being an American-born Muslim, raised in a country

which respects and venerates religious freedom, plurality and a separation between religious law and civil law, gives him a very different worldview from that. He said, “You have to understand that in the countries they live in, there is no separation between civil and religious war, and they don’t think there should be one.” And I think Americans by and large, don’t grasp that. And that’s an example of our assuming that they must be just like us.

BOB: Well, what about Vladimir Putin? It seems to me that if you look at him historically, he’s not acting like a commie or a Soviet; he’s acting like a Russian. I think of him like Peter the Great and Catherine the Great.

POURNELLE: And all the czars did. You know that he’s a Greater-Russian nationalist and anti-democrat. Putin has been telling us his motivation for decades; people just didn’t bother believing and when he told him.

BOB: That’s true. Gentlemen, I have to end the interview. I will say you were both a delight because I didn’t have to ask most of my pre planned questions, because one of you told me anyhow. We will eventually get a transcript or a copy of the interview. If there’s something you want me to leave out or something, you can certainly tell me and I will. I had a lot of fun listening to you. And thanks again to both of you. Thank you.



A Rough Rider in Oz

by Bob Arrington

Jack Kincaid decided to take a shortcut. He knew the road he was on would intersect the road west to Colorado a few miles ahead, but he figured he could cut across one of the farms to hit the road he wanted a mite quicker. Besides, the wind was picking up, gusting at times, and if he could take a path through an orchard, or even a cornfield, he and his horse might get just a little shelter from it, and there might not be so much dust. He already had his neckerchief over his eyes.

He had passed a wagon loaded with vegetables to sell in town a mile or so back, and the farm hand driving it had said the Gale farm had a gate in the fence up ahead, and that the Gales kept their dirt tracks through the fields in pretty fair shape.

“Don’t reckon Henry and Em Gale’ll mind you crossin’ their land, so long as ya don’t steal nothin’ an’ be sure to close the gate when you go through,” the man had said. “Their farm road ain’t no wider than a wagon, and it’ll take you right up to the barnyard. The main road’s right past the Gale House. I’d take that way myself, but my boss tol’ me not to.”

Kincaid found the gate. He dismounted and inspected the leather loop used for a latch. He could just slip the loop over a post, and the gate should open easy. It did, and he remounted, rode through, and dismounted again to fasten the latch behind him. Once more on the horse he’d bought in Kansas City, a dun gelding he’d named Teddy in honor of the man who’d led Kincaid and the other troopers of the First Volunteer Cavalry up San Juan Hill a few months ago, he clicked his tongue to move on.

The man in the wagon had been right. The road he traveled between the cornfields was in good condition. Not true macadam, but clear of weeds, and ditched on either side. The wind had



died down to a brisk breeze for now, and today wasn't too hot. He'd heard that it got so hot in Kansas that popcorn would pop in the fields. But it wasn't high summer yet, and the temperature today was comfortable.

The corn growing in the fields to either side of the narrow farm road was not yet mature, and it wasn't long before he could see the outbuildings of the Gale farm ahead. Beyond that, he could see dark clouds gathering. That didn't look good. He might ask to be put up in the barn for a spell if there was a storm.

Jack Kincaid was twenty-one years old. He'd been brought up on a farm in Missouri not far from St. Louis. Mom and Dad had seen to it he got through grammar school and had wanted him to go on to high school. But even though he'd done well enough in school – he liked to read – he wanted no part of more of it. He had been captivated by the dime novels about the Wild West he'd been able to pick up at the local general store and ran away when he was thirteen. They'd had horses at the farm, and he could ride, he thought. He finally worked his way to Arizona and finally found employment on a ranch. He'd discovered he really didn't ride so well, but he learned. He learned a bunch of other stuff, too, like herding and roping cattle.

The owners of the ranch had been good to work for. The work was hard, but he liked it. He liked going up into the Mogollons to hunt deer and antelope better. He'd become an excellent shot with a rifle and could handle a six-shooter passably well. He'd realized there wasn't any real future for him punching cows and was thinking of picking up and riding north and west to the Rockies when the Spanish War broke out. The Volunteer Cavalry looked like a good place for him.

Except that when they got to Cuba, they weren't horse cavalry at. All the fighting had been on foot. Jack had made it through San Juan Hill and the rest of it without being shot. Then the regiment was disbanded. Thanked for their service, and paid off. He was able to take his uniform and had managed to lift – that is, steal -- a Krag carbine and a service revolver from storage on his way out. He didn't feel guilty. The

government wouldn't miss the weapons.

He had saved his pay and could afford a train trip to Kansas City, the price of his horse and tack, and the price of spare clothes. Now he figured he'd go the Rockies after all. Maybe get a job on another ranch for a while. What he really wanted to do was learn the country and become a guide. Colonel Roosevelt said rich people would pay good money to someone who could show them good hunting.

So here he was, somewhere in west central Kansas, on his way to Colorado. He wore his cavalry khakis and campaign hat, now somewhat threadbare, but clean. (He'd put up at a farm the day before, and had been able to trade splitting wood and doctoring a horse for a bed, clean, clothes, and hot water for a bath and a shave.) He had a change of clothes and a slicker in one saddlebag, and a coffee pot, frying pan, and some bacon, rice, and beans in the other. He was riding Teddy toward adventure, the carbine in a boot at his right stirrup and the revolver holstered at his right hip, balancing the Bowie knife on his left.

As he neared the farm, he looked at the sky ahead. The wind was now picking up and sheet lighting lit the black clouds in places. He frowned and nudged Teddy ahead toward the sound of voices. He passed a chicken yard, what looked like a bunkhouse for farm hands, and a smokehouse, and reined in next to the barn. He could smell manure and heard a "moo" from inside. The Gales had milk cows.

Across the barnyard, there was a white clapboard house surrounded by a white picket fence. The road he was seeing was just beyond that. Something was going on in the small yard inside the picket fence. He could hear raised voices but couldn't make out the words. Curious, he touched his heels to Teddy's flanks and walked his horse closer.

Just ahead of him, he saw three young farmhands who had paused in their chores to watch what was going on outside the farmhouse. All were dressed in blue or checked shirts and bib overalls. Two were tall and skinny; the third was shorter and more robust. One had deposited two wooden pails at his feet, another leaned on

a rake, and the third pushed the tines of a pitchfork into the ground in front of him. They saw him as he steered Teddy past them and gaped at the uniform. Jack smiled and touched the brim of his campaign hat.

"Afternoon, gents," he said. "Just passin' through." They nodded back, appearing to accept the explanation.

"What's goin' on?" Jack asked, turning his eyes to the argument at the houseyard.

"Ahh," the man with the pitchfork said, "that old bitch Almira Gulch is tryin' to take Miss Dorothy's dog from her. Says she's got papers from a Judge."

Jack was now close enough to hear some of the conversation, and pulled Teddy to a halt to watch and listen.

A dark-haired girl with pigtailed who looked about twelve years old was crying. She held a wriggling and whimpering Cairn terrier against her breast and stroked it.

"Don't let her do it, Auntie Em...Uncle Henry," he heard the girl say.

"I showed you I have a warrant to take this animal as a public menace." The shrill, hateful voice was from a scrawny woman with a pinched, unattractive face and dark hair piled on her head, wearing a long dress and a prim straw hat, who stood on the other side of the fence, against which she had leaned a bicycle with a wicker basket behind its seat. "You give me that dog or I'll be back with the Sheriff."

"Uncle Henry...please," the girl wailed.

She was looking at a gray-haired man of no more than average height, who wore work trousers with suspenders above scuffed boots and a pale blue shirt. He stood next to a woman in a long brown dress who wore her gray hair in a bun and regarded the girl with sorrowful eyes.

"I'm afraid we must do as she says, Dorothy," the man said. "We can't go against the law."

The girl started crying again, and the gray-haired woman said to the woman with the bicycle, "Almira Gulch, I would so like to tell you what I think of you, but as a Christian woman I cannot!"

The woman with the bicycle made a noise like a snarl, and said, "Now give him here." She

held out her arms, palms open.

"Dorothy," the other woman, evidently the girl's aunt, said, her voice gentle. "You must do as she says."

The sobbing girl stepped slowly forward and held out the little dog. Hard to believe, Jack thought, that this was some sort of vicious animal.

"Toto," he heard the girl moan as the Gulch woman took the dog, placed it in the hamper, and fastened the lid with a leather loop. Without another word, she turned the bicycle toward town, adjusted her skirt, and took off down the road at a brisk peddle.

Jack clucked to Teddy to move ahead and road up to the picket fence. He reined in and doffed his hat to the woman.

"Howdy, folks," he said. "Name's Jack Kincaid. I've been out of the Army for a little while and I'm on the way West. I just used your road to cut across. I re-latched the gate; don't worry about that. Much obliged for the shortcut."

The gray-haired man answered, "Mebbe we ought to charge a toll, so many want to do that." His smile said the comment was mostly in jest. Then he gave Jack an appraising look, and asked, "Colonel Roosevelt's regiment?"

Jack smiled back and nodded. "Sure was," he said.

The pig-tailed girl stopped sobbing and looked up at Jack with wide eyes, still blinking tears, her dog forgotten for the moment.

"Are you really a Rough Rider?" she asked.

"I was," Jack said, "but we didn't do much riding. Our horses never made it to Cuba."

"Mr. Kincaid," the woman said, "My husband didn't think to introduce us. I'm Emily Gale and he's Henry. Our niece is Dorothy. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Ma'am, thank you." Jack said, "but I can't spare the time. This wind keeps gustin', and I'm fearful there's gonna come a storm. I'd like to get into town before it hits. But I will take a dipper of water. My horse could use a drink, too."

"Of course you may have water," Mrs. Gale said. "Hunk, you got water in them pails?"

"Yes'm," one of the taller hands said.

"Well, bring 'em here and let this horse drink."



And Hickory, go get this soldier a dipper from the well.”

“Yes, Mizz Gale,” the other tall farmhand said, and dropped his rake and loped off.

Jack dismounted and stood holding Teddy’s reins. He heard the girl start crying again.

“Sorry I happened by at a bad time,” he said, nodding at the girl. “How did that little dog get to be a menace?”

“H-he bit ol’ Mizz Gooch when she hit him with her umbrella last week in town,” the girl said. “Now she’s gonna have him shot, she says.”

“Da-darned shame,” Jack said, catching himself in front of the woman and child. At that point, the man they called Hickory came up with a battered metal dipper and handed it to him. He drank the whole contents dipper and handed it back to the hand, thanking him.

By this time Teddy had noisily had his fill of water, and Jack remounted.

“I’d better be gettin’ on to beat the storm,” he said. The wind wasn’t gusting at the moment, but there was still a brisk breeze from the north, and the black clouds continued to mass from the

same direction.

“Better look out for a twister,” Henry Gale said. “We get ‘em here this time of year.”

“Yessir,” Jack agreed. “We used to get twisters back in Mizzou where I grew up, too....Well, y’all take care of yourselves. Thanks for the water.” He looked down at Dorothy, who was no longer crying but looked as though she was about to start again. “I-I’m sorry about your dog, miss.”

That set her off again, and he almost regretted expressing sympathy. He clucked to his horse again and walked him to the road, where he turned west. He turned in the saddle, doffed his hat, and waved back to the Gales before urging Teddy down the road at a trot. He really didn’t like the look of the weather.

At that pace, it wasn’t long before he saw Amira Gulch’s bicycle in the road ahead. He slowed Teddy just a little because he didn’t want any interaction with the woman. There was a gentle hill ahead, and the Gulch woman had to work to maintain her speed. When she was about a third of the way up the hill, with Jack no more than fifty or sixty yards behind her, she hit a small bump in the road.

Jack saw the latch on the basket pop open, and the lid bounce. Then it bounced again as the dog – Toto, wasn’t he? – popped out of the basket and on to the road, where he immediately started running back in the direction from whence they’d come. Gulch apparently didn’t notice, because she kept peddling. Jack slowed Teddy to a walk. When the little dog reached them, he stopped and looked a question up at Jack, who reined in and spoke low.

“Now get along back to your mistress, little fella. Get on back to Dorothy.”

The terrier’s ears pricked at the sound of his mistress’ name, and he obediently resumed running back down the road toward the farmhouse. Jack was glad that fate had given the dog a reprieve and hoped he made it back to the farm

before the weather grew worse. He turned his head forward and urged Teddy back to a trot.

As he rode, the wind began gusting again. Almira Gulch was soon within sight. She was peddling furiously. No doubt she is scared of the storm, too, he thought. Still, he kept Teddy well behind her. He just wanted to avoid her. Not that he was afraid of her, but – there was just something about the woman.

The wind continued to pick up, and Jack grew more and more concerned. There was no sign of shelter close. He stopped at the top of a rise and studied the skyline. Sure enough, he saw a funnel cloud ahead and to his left. The way it was moving, it looked as though the twister was headed straight for the Gale farm. He hoped everyone there would be all right, and that the dog had made it back to them. He kicked Teddy to a canter, now not caring about avoiding meeting the Gulch woman. With any luck, they could

avoid the tornado.

But he'd forgotten one thing: Tornados jump around.

Jack didn't see the jump. One moment, he and Teddy were trotting down the road. The next, they had been lifted into the air and were circling the funnel. Somehow, Jack kept his seat in the saddle. Teddy may have thought about bucking, but he didn't. He just trembled beneath his rider. Jack was trembling, too. He had been scared at San Juan Hill, but he'd managed. This...this was terrifying.

Everything was surreal. Jack could no longer hear the wind. Breathing was difficult, but not impossible. The funnel seemed to be rising higher and higher into the sky. There was an odd greenish glow. He didn't know what was causing that. From time to time he could see other shapes in the funnel – an uprooted tree, a cow that came close enough for Jack to see her terror, and then two men in a slowly turning rowboat. Then, right alongside them at partly in front, there she was, Almira Gulch peddling along. Or maybe that was an illusion, because Almira transformed from a woman on a bicycle to a witch in a black robe and cone hat riding a broomstick and cackling. Jack blinked in disbelief, and the witch disappeared in front and below him.

The funnel was dropping. Jack was sure death was near.

He landed, still mounted on Teddy, with a jolt no harder than if the horse had jumped a fence. They landed on something soft. He heard a shriek, and Teddy bucked, but Jack managed to stay in the saddle. Teddy reared again, and his fore hooves came down with a crunch that cut short another scream.

He could see again. The funnel had dropped them and disappeared. Jack got control of his mount and turned to look at whatever it was they had come down on. He saw a black robe, a conical hat to one side, and a woman who once had looked like Almira Gulch leaking



blood from a crushed skull. They really had seen a witch, and Teddy had killed her.

But where the hell were they?

He brought Teddy under control, and looked around. There were trees, green grass, and graveled or paved walkways through flowerbeds filled with bright blooms. Nearby, he saw miniature houses, neat and thatched, some with smoke pouring from chimneys. He didn't think he could get through their doors. Who lived in them? A race of midgets?

He was still blinking when he saw a bright mist forming in front of him, slightly to his left. He turned the still trembling Teddy and watched as the mist coalesced into a woman. A fully grown woman, he noticed. She wouldn't fit in the miniature houses. And...and she was a beauty.

Her face was sweet and fresh, her features regular, her mouth wide, her eyes electric blue and her cheekbones high. Her ash-blonde hair curled about her shoulders, which the form-fitting iridescent blue gown she wore left bare. Her figure was slender but curved and womanly.

Jack gawked at her and whispered, "Teddy, I'm pretty sure we ain't in Kansas anymore."

Then the woman spoke. In English. At least he heard it in English, even if her lips seemed to be forming words in something else.

"Are you a good wizard, or an evil wizard?" she asked, her voice musical and in its tone kind if a bit amused.

What in the hell was she talking about?

"Huh?" he managed to get out, then, "What?"



The woman smiled and repeated the question.

"Are you a good wizard or an evil one?" she asked.

"Lady, I ain't no kind of wizard," Jack said, continuing to stay mounted and patting Teddy's neck to calm him. The horse had again been spooked, this time by the apparition that had appeared before them. He didn't blame the horse; he was spooked, too.

"Back where I come from, there ain't no wizards. Ain't no witches either. They just don't exist."

He heard the tittering of laughter from somewhere close by.

"What's that?" he asked. "Who's laughing?"

"The Munchkins are laughing," the woman explained, "because I am a witch myself. I am Glenda, whom people call the Witch of the North."

"Well, I thought witches were supposed

to look like that,” Jack said, pointing to the corpse on the ground, which continued to leak blood onto the turf. “And what the h—what are Munchkins?”

The laughter again.

“What’s so funny?”

“They’re laughing because only wicked witches are ugly,” Glenda said. “I am not a wicked witch. I am a good witch.”

“Glad to hear it, Miss Glenda,” he said. “I’m Jack Kincaid. From...all over, really, but most recently in Kansas. But who or what are Munchkins?”

“The folk who inhabit this country, which is called Munchkin Land,” the self-proclaimed witch said. “I’ll summon them, so they can thank you for ridding them of the Witch of the East.” She raised her voice and called out, “You come out now. It’s perfectly safe. Come meet the hero who fell from the sky. He comes from a star called Kansas, he says.”

Jack dismounted and continued to pat Teddy as dozens of brightly dressed dwarfs – men, women, and children – emerged from the tiny houses or out of the trees and approached where he stood with his horse. Glenda walked to him and stood beside him.

Everyone wanted to talk at once, and Jack had trouble understanding most of the babble. He gathered that these Munchkins had lived under the dead witch’s thumb for many years and that her rule had been brutal.

Finally, a portly middle-aged man wearing a swallow-tailed coat, cravat, and waistcoat stepped forward and introduced himself as the Mayor. He thanked Jack profusely for slaying the witch and said that Munchkin City would throw a feast for him that evening. While he talked, another dwarf dressed in black and carrying a black bag walked past Jack to the body of the witch and made a great show of examining the body. Must be a doctor, Jack thought.

Finally, the man stood and pronounced his coroner’s verdict – the witch was dead. Jack could have told them that.

As soon as the doctor made his announcement, the crowd broke out in wild cheering. The mayor, escorted by two uniformed men carry-

ing what looked like old-fashioned muskets, led Jack, who still led Teddy by the reins, down a path to a stone-paved plaza. Glenda followed, smiling.

When they reached the plaza, a band started playing and the Munchkins started dancing and singing. A pretty but diminutive girl danced giggling up to Jack holding a big-people-sized mug into his hands. He took a sip and found it to be a very good and surprisingly cold beer. Two boys arrived with a bag of oats for Teddy, who calmed down enough to eat.

Glenda watched and smiled.

“They are overjoyed,” she said. “Let them have their fun. We will talk later.”

“I want to go home,” Jack said, draining the mug.

“I understand,” the witch said, “We can...”

She was interrupted by a burst of flame and a cloud of black smoke in the center of the plaza. When the smoke cleared, there stood another witch, black robe, conical hat and carrying a broom. Like the corpse they had left just outside town, this one was a dead-ringer for Almira Gulch. For a moment, he thought the dead one had come back to life.

“I thought she was dead,” he whispered to Glenda, as the crowd backed away, gasping and muttering.

“She is,” Glenda whispered back. “This is her sister, the Witch of the West. She’s worse than the other one.”

“Who killed my sister?” the witch demanded in a shrill voice that sounded like that of Almira Gulch. “Who killed the Witch of the East?”

No one answered, and looking around, the witch saw where Jack stood with Glenda, two boys having taken Teddy to be rubbed down. She glided over to them and stopped just short of Jack.

“Was it you?” she demanded again.

“Well, I...that is...” Jack groped for words that eluded him.

“It was you!” the witch screamed. She raised her broom and began a chant. The air around Jack grew cold immediately.

He reacted without thinking. He had replaced the military holster with its retaining flap with

a cross-draw holster like the one he'd used at the ranch. Within a blink of an eye, the Colt was in his hand and he'd pulled the trigger twice. The plaza echoed with the sound of his shots.

He later learned that a spell, once complete, moves fast. But bullets move faster. The force of the bullets that crashed into at point blank range threw the witch over onto her back. She lay twitching and then was still. One of the .38 caliber slugs had pierced her heart.

The Munchkins slowly approached, wary of Jack as well as the witch. The mayor yelled for the coroner, who trotted up and knelt over this new body. Within seconds, he pronounced her dead. Wild cheering broke out again. When it subsided, Glenda turned to Jack.

"Two wicked witches dead in one day," she said. "I've never seen anything like it."

The mayor, who was standing close to them, heard her.

"This is amazing," he said. "This is historic."

"Yeah, it's great," Jack said. "But how do I get home?"

"I don't know," Glenda confessed. "But perhaps the Great Wizard can tell you."

Jack noticed the crowd suddenly grew quiet at the mention of the Wizard.

"Well, where can I find him?" Jack asked.

"He rules the Emerald City," the mayor said. "The main highway that connects our land to the City begins here. We call it the Yellow Brick Road."

Jack turned to Glenda. "Will you come with me?"

Her smile was dazzling, but she said, "I must return home. But I'll be watching you from a distance. You got the worst two, but there are other vile magicians about."

"Oh, that's just lovely," Jack said. "More witches."

The self-proclaimed good witch reached out and patted his hand.

"I think you will win through," she said. "And" – her eyes seemed to twinkle – "I'm sure we'll meet again. Perhaps on the way. Perhaps in the Emerald City."

"But I'll need a guide," Jack protested.

"Not really," she said. "Just stay on the road...But stay alert. There will be danger."

"From what?"

"Oh, a troll or two. A few lions. And bears...And when you reach the Emerald City, be wary of the Wizard."

"Why?"

"He might not like the competition," she said. "You seem to be a potent wizard yourself." She shook her head in wonder before continuing.

"Two wicked witches slain. In one afternoon. Imagine that."

##



The Artist

By Sharon Dunn

I could barely hear my sister's voice above the sputter and cough of the dirt bike. The grassy plains and dirt road of Eastern Montana stretched out in front of us. The leaves on the cottonwoods had already turned golden.

From the back of the bike, Olivia leaned close to my ear and shouted, "Don't go to Widow Gregson's house, Julie. She won't buy anything; she's poorer than dirt."

Olivia wrapped her arms around my waist as I jerked the bike into third gear and lurched up the hill, speeding past the turn off for Widow Gregson's house. I had to sell at least three magazine subscriptions for my school's fund raiser to get any kind of a prize. I'd talked my mom into getting a gardening magazine and got myself a subscription to a horse magazine. If I could just sell one more, I could at least get the poster of the monkey in a tutu.

As we descended the hill, Olivia tapped my



shoulder. "Stop here. Stop here."

She pointed to The Artist's house, which used to be a barn on the Larson homestead before they gave up farming. The Artist had painted the barn a bright yellow with a huge mural on one and a half sides of it. The mural was of mountains and a river, only the mountains were pink and the river was kind of a silver gold color. In the year since The Artist had moved in, I'd never seen how she had done up the inside of the barn to make it livable. I only knew that Papa had had to pull his old International to the side of the narrow road to allow a truck load of building supplies to go by more than once. Every time that happened Papa would say, "Thank God she's got lots of her daddy's money to spend."

As I shifted down, I made the turn up the dirt driveway. Piles of metal, some of them welded into spiraling shapes, cluttered the yard. Building supplies, sheet rock, plywood, empty buckets of paint covered most of the area around the barn.

"I guess she doesn't have to clean up." I commented on the mess as I killed the engine and waited for Olivia to hop off the bike.

Olivia nodded wisely, "Cause she's an artist." Her blond hair glittered briefly as the sun slipped behind a cloud. She was ten, two years younger than I was. She patted her behind. "Does yours hurt too?"

"A little." The town kids had an advantage over me, the houses were closer together; they could just walk from house to house. Olivia had ridden with me every Saturday and every Sunday after church since the fundraiser started. This would be the last Saturday and I was running out of neighbors' doors to knock on. I had to turn my order form in on Monday. I didn't want to be the only kid that didn't get called to the front of the room to get a prize.

Unzipping my jacket, I pulled out my order form and the catalog. The sky darkened and the temperature dropped noticeably. Unless the storm passed quickly, this would have to be our last house today. We approached the barn with its huge sliding double doors.

My sister stared at the big doors. "Do you think we knock here?"

I shook my head "There's got to be a smaller door. How could a skinny woman like The Artist even get that open?"

Before we could go searching, another door, which was hard to see because it was part of the mural, opened up.

The Artist stepped in the doorway and we trotted toward her. She crossed her bare arms, "Thought I heard something out here."

She wore coveralls with only a bikini top underneath. The coveralls had holes in them and were stained with paint splotches. Her curly brown hair was pulled up into a loose bun with two chopsticks poking out of it. Huge silver triangles dangled from her ears. The earrings had little teardrop shaped pieces of metal all around the edge and through the middle an oval blue jewel dangled from a separate strand of silver wire. The breeze picked up, making the earrings tinkle like tiny wind chimes. Even though I didn't know her first name, she was the most fascinating person I'd ever stood this close to.

The approaching storm made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I needed to get to my sales pitch. "My name is Julie and this is my sister Olivia." Olivia stood beside me craning her neck to see inside the barn. I jabbed her with my elbow. "I'm raising money for my school selling magazine subscriptions. We have artist's magazines." I held the catalog out for her to take.

Her arms remained crossed, and she tilted her head sideways, her thin lips curling up slightly. Behind her, I could see white walls and a pulley hanging from the massive ceiling.

I took a step toward her and folded the catalog open to the page that showed a magazine about watercolor painting. With a glance at me and then at Olivia, she took the catalog and flipped through it.

"What's your name kid?"

"Julie, ma'am."

"Don't you know you contribute to an evil system when you sell this stuff, Julie." She handed the catalog back to me. It felt cold in my fingers. "The school uses your labor for financial gain. Don't contribute to the pockets of the bourgeoisie elite, kid."

With that she stepped back inside and closed

the door, causing it to disappear. I stared for a long time at a pink mountain that looked like a lady's Sunday dress wishing the tight feeling in my chest would go away.

"It's okay," Olivia patted my shoulder. "We still got a little time tomorrow after church."

I hung my head just as a stinging drop of rain hit my ear.

Olivia continued, "Who cares about the verbose elite anyway."

We trudged back to the bike as the raindrops multiplied. "I just thought someone who painted such pretty pictures would be nicer." Swinging my leg over the bike, I jumped down on the kickstart. The bike sputtered and I twisted the accelerator.

While Olivia got on the back, I put the catalog and order against my chest and zipped up my jacket. I had that awful sinking feeling, like when I stood at edge of the diving board and knew I wasn't going to be able to jump. I wasn't going to get a prize.

I didn't pay much attention to the wind whipping around the little bike as we turned onto the lumpy dirt road.

"It's getting cold," Olivia yelled in my ear as she wrapped her arms tighter around my waist.

Just as we passed the turn off for Widow Gregson's little house, the bike engine froze up. I was propelled forward, nearly sailing over the handlebars. Without a word, Olivia jumped off, so I could try to get the bike going again. It had done this before. Sometimes I could get it restarted.

My sister crossed her arms and jumped up and down as the rain stained her windbreaker.

Pins and needles of raindrops danced on my cheeks. I locked my knees and jumped down hard on the kickstart. Nothing. I tried two more times. My heart pounded in my chest as I tried to take a deep breath. It wasn't going to start for me this time. Papa needed to fool with the engine to make it work right.

Olivia helped me push the bike into a ditch. I looked around and made distance calculations from the road, to Widow Gregson's, to the clump of trees in front of us so I could find the bike tomorrow when Papa and I came to pick it up.

Olivia's blue coat had turned one shade darker and her lips quivered. I felt a chill seeping into my skin.

The road to Widow Gregson's was at least a quarter-mile from the turn-off where we stood. She might not even be home. It would be wasted energy.

"Let's make a run for home." Pulling my collar up around my neck, I grabbed my sister's hand and we took off across the grassy field. Our house was just over the top of the hill and down the other side, maybe two miles.

We ran with our heads down, our free hand sheltering our eyes. Rain pelted my head with sword-like jabs. Soggy braids slapped against my neck. A corner of the magazine catalog pushed against my chest, a reminder of my failure.

Olivia's hand slipped out of mine. Her lips were blue when she looked at me. "It's too cold. We won't make it."

When I looked toward Widow Gregson's house, I saw an old woman cutting across the field toward us carrying an umbrella.

"Look, Livvie."

My sister wiped her eyes and face clear of

rain and pushed her matted hair back from her temples. "She's coming to help us."

We ran toward her. The widow wore rubber boots that were manure stained and came up to her knees. She had on a man's black coat. Underneath the mushroom shape of the umbrella, I could just see a mass of curly white hair.

"You kids will catch your death. My truck's not workin', but you can come back to the house and get warmed up and give your folks a call."

She tilted the umbrella back indicating that we were welcome underneath it. Widow Gregson walked at a remarkable pace for someone her age. Olivia and I took big steps to keep up with her. I was grateful to not be pelted with rain anymore, but it also made me realize how cold I was. My soaked coat, glued to my back, sent a chill through my skin down to my bones.

As we approached the little white house, I saw the patches of gray where the wood showed through. The screen door was off its hinges and leaned against the side of the house. The flowerbeds still had some late blooming flowers in them and were neatly weeded. The yard was spotless.

The big wooden door creaked when she opened it. "Come inside, my dears."

We stepped onto the rippled linoleum floor of the kitchen. The table had metal trim around the edges and chrome metal legs. The top of it was a speckled gray, black, and white pattern. The vinyl covering on the kitchen chairs was so worn through you could see the wood base.

"You kids take those outer clothes off and go sit by the fire. Grab yourself some quilts from the bedroom, and I'll fix something to warm your bellies up." She had already taken off her coat and slung it over a chair. As we walked past her into the living room, she opened a cupboard that contained only two cans. One was string beans and I couldn't see what the other was.

I unzipped my jacket and pulled out the order form while Olivia went



searching for quilts. The ink had smeared from being wet. I couldn't make out Mama's handwriting or my own. I tossed the order form and catalog to the floor beside the fireplace. I wasn't going to get anyone else to buy a subscription. There was no one else to ask. I hated the bourgeois elite, whoever they were; they hurt my feelings, but The Artist had hurt my feelings even more. She had enough money to fix that barn up fancy, why couldn't she buy a magazine even if it was with daddy's money. My throat tightened and I sniffled.

Olivia returned and piled the quilts on the floor. As we stripped down to our underwear and undershirts, she noticed the smeared order

with three steaming mugs on it and a loaf of bread. "Bread is fresh, baked it this morning."

The half full mugs contained tomato soup. The warm liquid felt wonderful going down my throat and warming my belly. The widow Gregson sat down beside us on the floor cross-legged. The bread had a sweet melt-in-your-mouth texture.

Widow Gregson had performed a miracle similar to what our Lord had done all those years ago. She'd made a meal that made me feel warm and loved out of a single can of tomato soup.

"Now what's this here." She picked up the magazine catalog.

"It's nothing," I said.

"Look at those beautiful roses." She turned the catalog cover toward me. It featured an ad for a gardening magazine. The front cover had been resting against my chest, so it hadn't gotten too wet. She held the picture, which I had never noticed before, out at arm's length. "A person could do something with a picture like that."

"What do you mean?" Olivia asked as she stuffed a puffy cloud of bread in her mouth.

The widow pushed herself to her feet. "I'll show you." She ambled to a corner of living room and opened a hutch drawer, pulling out several large envelopes and then taking down a framed picture from the wall.

"I get magazines free from the library when they throw them out." She tossed the envelopes on the floor. They each had a handwritten label: "flowers" "people" "rivers and mountains" and "patterns."

She placed the framed picture in my hand. "I make collages. Something new from something old."

The picture had a three dimensional quality: a background of flowing shades of blue probably cut from clothing advertisements, and the foreground was of blue flowers: royal, navy, and pastel blue. Little flowers that might have been part of a china pattern and other larger flowers. Olivia's eyes widened and her mouth opened



form.

"Maybe you can fill out a fresh one on Monday."

"Doesn't matter," I said biting my lower lip. I sat my wet clothes by the fire to dry. The soft flannel of the quilt felt warm against my skin. The pattern of colors was beautiful. I noticed squares that looked like the flannel shirts that Mr. Gregson used to wear before he died.

The Widow Gregson came in carrying a tray

when I handed her the picture.

“When you’re done with this,” the Widow held up the catalog, “I could turn it into something pretty.”

“You can have it now. I don’t need it anymore.”

“But Julie,” Olivia protested. She turned toward the Widow. “I’ve been helping her sell magazines. She only needs to sell one more subscription, and she wins a picture of a monkey in a ballet costume.”

The widow did not pick up on Olivia’s hint that we needed to sell subscriptions. “You’ve been riding on the back of that bike helping your sister?” Bright eyed, Olivia nodded. The widow smiled at her. “That’s a prize right there, to have a sister to help you like that.”

Olivia beamed and smiled, wrinkling her nose. The widow was right. Olivia had nothing to gain by helping me. And yet, she’d endured a sore bottom for weeks without complaint. The widow Gregson was one smart lady.

The widow pressed the catalog to her chest and raised her eyebrows. “Tell you what. How

about I make a picture for you and your sister?”

I nodded and took a sip of the warm soup. All my shivers were gone.

When we got home, I told Papa about the widow’s broken truck. A few days later, he found time to go over and fix it. He came back with the collage the widow had made for us, pink and red flowers with a red background that faded into black around the edges.

It was more beautiful than any monkey poster I had ever laid eyes on. I hung it on my wall, and every other month I let Olivia hang it on her side of the room. I felt proud; I had managed to get something nice for my room without giving anything to the bourgeoisie establishment, whoever they were.

-end-

Sharon Dunn is an award winning writer of more than thirty books. Her Love Inspired romantic suspense books are frequently on the USA Today bestseller list. She spent her early years in a trailer court and then moved with her family

*to a house in the country that barely had running water. She wrote “The Artist” to portray rural life in an honest way and to uplift the kind of people she grew up with. You can learn more about Sharon and her books at www.sharondunnbooks.net. She also contributes to the blog *Suspense Sisters*.*



Kidnapped in Montana

Cross a case of mistaken identity with a woman in hiding from an abusive ex-husband, and FBI agent Ryan McCloud suddenly has a real challenge on his hands.

Catherine Reed must decide whether to trust this man who led killers to her previously safe, if remote, mountain hideaway. It doesn't help that he's ridiculously good-looking.

USA Today bestselling author Sharon Dunn's trademark blend of sweet romance and high-stakes action is at its best in this Love Inspired Suspense inspirational romance.

Abstract Art: A Visual Meditation on Free Speech

Part 1: Did Liberal Artists Truly Set the Table?

By Jen Rynbrandt

I've been a gallery-represented artist since 2004 but my interest in art and its evolution was bought and fostered at University of Maryland, College Park, starting the fall of 1993. Sociology and Art majors shared a building (ArtSoc). To reduce cross-campus hikes between classes—some buildings were nearly a mile apart—I would register for electives close by while getting in my major studies of Comte, Spencer, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and of course, my professor, George Ritzer, who coined the profound (in his mind) term, “McDonaldization”.

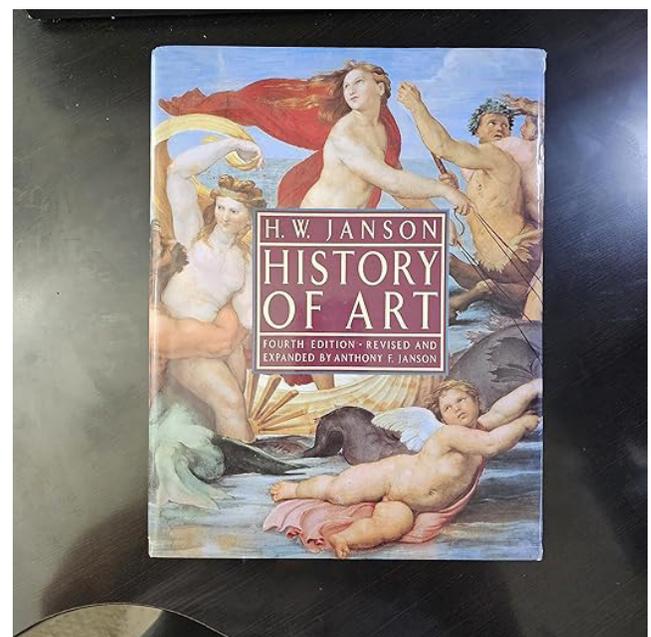
Professor Ritzer also made sport of fleecing hungry proletariat students, as his numerous books were course requirements at \$100 a pop. A Marxist capitalist? He wore cashmere sweaters and smart specs while the other professors looked so very plain and shabby. I remember Dr. Richard Brown, a wonderful Soc professor and all-around decent man, asked me once after class why Ritzer seems to be living above the paygrade of a tenured professor. “Because he makes us buy all his books, then puts out new editions each year so we can't sell them back” I supposed. Dr. Brown was deeply disappointed in his peer, apologizing to the other Soc students to no end.

Dr. Brown was a kind and generous Jewish academic. His wife, Ms. Brown, was the daughter of a famous Jewish Russian intellectual. Her father was snuffed out by Bolshevik revolutionaries when she was a very young girl. The 1917 Russian Revolution also did away with the remainder of her family, but she escaped to America, an orphan. When I met Mrs. Brown, she was in her late 70's, suffering from chronic fatigue, poor gait, and falls with no specific medical di-

agnosis. Mr. Brown asked me to share some balance exercises with his wife that I'd learned about in another class. When I arrived at their modest Adams Morgan row home in northwest D.C., I had unknowingly woken her from “a delicious nap.” Even sleepy-eyed and bedheaded, I found her to be one of the most elegant women I'd encountered. She didn't need to be fancy. She was inherently intelligent and confident. And in D.C., a city brimming with handsome but insecure female canines, Mrs. Brown was a cat.

The Russian revolution had much in common with the German Revolution (1918-1919) and the French Revolution (1789-1799) in that artists and intellectuals who had been quietly championing the underclasses, were often sacrificed to the gods of equality when commoners finally held authority, able to toss empathetic artists and other learned intellectuals into the bourgeois soup of suppressionists. Why do the artists and intellectuals lose their heads when communists come a-knocking? Because their minds are fluid, not easily tamed.

At UMCP, I registered for as many art courses in the ArtSoc building as I could justify to my advisor. But these electives, with their (not so) brilliant lectures and fuzzy overhead projector visuals were not the draw as much as the required reading for those courses. Specifically, *History of Art* by H.W. Janson. First published in 1962, long before Barnes and Noble mass-pro-



duced fine art books for urban coffee tables, *History of Art* ate up a big chunk of my bookbudget in 1994. But unlike George Ritzer's bedtime stories, *History of Art* was a living, moving memorial to creative, freethinking minds across the ages. And at \$150, it was almost worth working the extra hours at Shoe Town to pay for it. To this day I cannot tolerate someone (anyone) touching me with their feet.

History of Art is a beautifully stout reference on art through the ages until present and the volumes are updated often. It was in these pages that I learned not only of each artist's greatest work, but also failed work and the rationale of critics in those times. The commentary also offers insight into the artist's personal lives and societal barriers to expression. Plausible backstories that were just as primary in building the work as the medium, composition, and palette. *History of Art* provided the lion's share of informative information on artists, styles, movements, and innovation. Four years later, I would pick up that book again for inspiration to start

my own quiet artistic journey.

I was in graduate school, living with my parents again after breaking off a serious (but doomed) relationship a few days after Christmas. In lieu of unraveling in front of my family, I drove my little Honda Accord to Doug's Hobby Shop in Waldorf, Maryland, where I purchased a pine easel, three large canvases, a starter pack of approachable oil paint, and a handful of cheap brushes. *History of Art* was at my side, filling my head with inspiration and some basic skills as I spent the next two weeks creating some very ugly (but therapeutic) oil paintings.

How does one have a nuclear mental meltdown without making a sound? Through artistic expression. For me, that was painting. My mother could not understand why I was twenty-five and not married yet. "But that's why we sent you to college!" she scolded, dismissing my reasons for solitary living and more education over procreation. Apparently, my undercarriage, eggs, and incubator were also a concern at my parent's church, so I broke up with them,



too.

By the end of Christmas break 1998, I felt a new kind of lightness. My first three paintings were done, as was the mess I'd made of my poor mom. Married at twenty, she simply couldn't understand my need for independence. But those initial paintings provided a peace and a means to speak and be heard without a sound. As I reacquainted myself with *History of Art*, I found myself empathizing with artists with no voice on the pages of that timeless, ten-pound art book. Artists limited in what they could produce, particularly those boxed into styles and mediums dictated by their time, patrons, and rulers. Even in brighter works lie deeply imbedded protests of master artists of the past who lacked the free speech and artistic freedoms that we share here in "Merica", under the First Amendment.

Francisco De Goya (Spain, 1746-1828) is an artist I learned of in that first university art course and revisited at home while nursing that break-up. Goya has been called the first of the "modern" artists. His laborious work of a post-dated Spain tightly wedged between the exit of the Moors and the ingress of French Revolutionaries finds a dismal urgency that few other greats could fully translate to linen.

Goya, like many artists before and after him, was creatively inspired by but also terrified of war. Napoleon had led the French army into Iberia, yet Goya was in support of the French. Living in Madrid and forbid to speak his thoughts on the war, Goya instead teased of his political views in his paintings as he was already well known throughout the kingdom. He was firmly against Spain's bloody war with Bonaparte despite being the Spanish Court's resident painter and living very comfortably in the palace of Charles IV from 1799. As such, Goya protested carefully, exhibiting his distaste for the Spanish monarchy in commissioned paintings of the royal family, but in an unflattering light. The Spanish



family was so terribly inbred that they missed the hint, having no clue that they were the butt of his jokes, otherwise, he may have surely been killed. *La Familia de Carlos IV* (1800-1801) is a great example of Goya's cheekier works. The adults in the Royal Spanish family look anything but regal—more like stuffed sausages full of gossip and paranoia. Carlos IV, the King of Spain, dons the bored facial expression of an insecure and inadequate George Washington impersonator. This piece was also a nod to modern photobombers as Goya is seen clearly on the left of the canvas behind the family, with an almost mischievous grin.

Was Goya a Rococo libertarian pacifist or a common Marxist capitalist? Eschewing blood as currency or perhaps ruminating on his tedious job while sleeping in a gilded bed? Or was Goya, as he said, a "liberal", despite being funded by the public tax purse enforced by Charles IV's primitive IRS? NEA, anyone? Even more interesting is that Goya supported the French, led by Napoleon, who sanctioned the Neoclassical style of art. Although Napoleon was the son of the French Revolution, he was sure to keep France's art rational, traditional work taking precedence, in likeness and style of work produced by Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825).

As Goya aged and the war raged on, he became increasingly frail, mind and body, but

bold in his political views, an upside to knowing death is coming. One less conspicuous piece portrays a Spaniard setting his ax to the cranium of a bound French soldier. Another renders a priest affixed to a wooden post by a large knife through the gut, while grasping a crucifix. The not-so-subtle irony is in full sight of the viewer as Goya writes directly into the scene with his own hand. “The priest had been executed for carrying a knife.” Was it the very same knife that he was killed with? This is a brilliant illustration and first-hand account of an artist expressing the exasperating absurdity of law and governments in Spain at that time—laws made and enforced to protect the ruling class, but not the subservient populace.

His “knife” work might also suggest Goya’s support of bearing arms against an overbearing government. The Spanish underclass could not protect themselves and the government made sure of that. Although Goya was an acute liberal of his generation, his work offers a definitive nod to conservative pillars of freedom from government tyranny and the right to protect oneself from harm. Does Nancy Pelosi need armed bodyguards? Yes, but you as a commoner, do not.

Goya was in full support of the French Revolution that had been bleeding across Europe, proclaiming an end to Europe’s monarchies and to the ecclesiastical powers of the Catholic Church. Freedom from station assigned at birth? Separation of church and state? These are fundamental concepts that are unique to our republic and championed by many of the Founding Fathers, who have been cancelled, their contributions written away by revisionists.

Interestingly enough, the “liberal” French Revolution (1789-1799) was propelled at least in part by battles won by British colonists who were led by these cancelled American patriots (or patriarchs, if you prefer). The same men gave their lives and fortunes for the sake of freedom, laying down the foundation for freedom

of speech (including artistic expression) and religion here in America.

Goya’s life and collective work held similar propositions of the Modern (1860’s-1970’s) and Contemporary (about 1950’s-present) artists of today. Namely, creatives that support government recalibration of resources and power to be divided equally among citizens while opposing governmental interference elsewhere. This societal shift sprung Europe from feudalism to socialism and constitutional monarchies, but not without a price. Because everyone being essentially the same, fiscally, does not necessarily propagate ingenuity of mind.

Sameness also makes for some repetitive, uninspiring art. If one reviews the last hundred years of art produced, it heavily hints that liberty-based societies produce art that is both novel and unique, unlike countries or regions under the heavy hand of government that began under the guise of fiscal sameness, only to commandeer every other aspect of life among its citizens. Nazi Germany is a good illustration of why sameness is not something to covet.

Have you seen Hitler’s paintings? By age eighteen, he’d been rejected twice from attending the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. The faculty at the school described his architectural sketches and bland copies of other’s style/work as “utterly devoid of rhythm, color, feeling, or



spiritual imagination.” Hitler spent the following year frequenting artist cafes in Vienna, hoping to find a master artist to apprentice under. Is it any surprise that no one raised their hands given his worked aped the traditional paintings of the day rather than a foray into something new, original, and fresh? Hitler was thoroughly rejected. His anger and resentment later birthed Nazi Germany, where he would initiate a hyper-organized society rooted in sameness, and, like the Russians Revolutionaries, do away with the abstract thinkers and intellectuals who might stand in the way of his backward progress. The fuhrer was a rigid as his art.

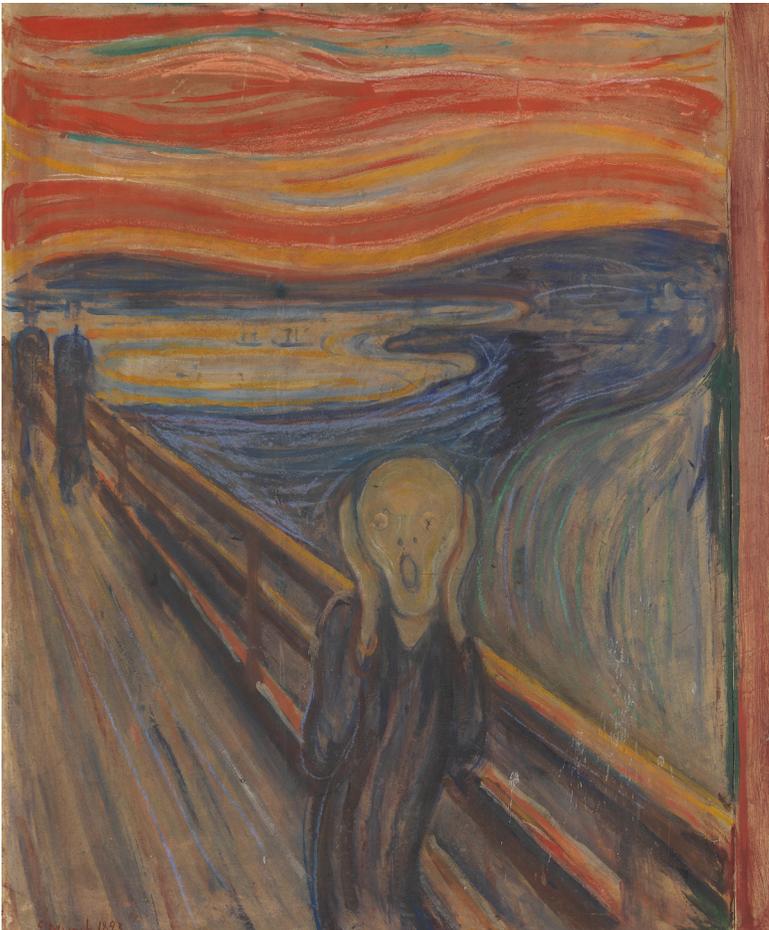
There is a reason Hitler abolished the modern art which he called “degenerative”. It simply did not convey the order and consistency he aspired to showcase the fundamental excellence and infallible might of the Third Reich. But in purging this new art that he deemed “trash”, he also removed fluid, unbridled unconscious innovation from Germany, yielding a creative atrophy that

later spread to the U.S.S.R. after WWII.

It was communist thinking that stood in the way of artistic expression—communism that was lauded by liberal thinkers/artists of Goya’s time as well as in WWII, the Cold War Era, and today. Although seemingly fairer and more balanced, this government-mandated sameness is debilitating to the creative mind, as seen in the restrained art of reticent cultures like Nazi Germany, North Korea, China, or current dictatorships and regimes claiming to be “for the people.” Do these heavy-handed governments allow artists to make fun of their own creative restrictions? No. Can a Thai artist paint their King as a feminine blow-up doll, or a cartoonist in Europe make jest of Mohammad or the Koran? What if they all had the same freedoms as Jim Carey, who painted President Trump poking a bimbo in the Executive Office (something that liberal Hillary Clinton’s husband actually did)? Or Kathy Griffith’s prosthetic severed Trump head in her hands for a social media stint which she regretted and then didn’t? Although both in poor taste, neither artist was convicted of a crime against the U.S. government because free speech is an inherent right *absent in every nation but the U.S.*, a right that continues to push American art and innovation farther and faster than anywhere in recorded history.

In a curious paradox, the artistic movements of today that speak and express freely are woven into a liberal American art landscape that was birthed in freedoms enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, which modern conservatives meditate on with ardent devotion. Artistic protests are welcome and even encouraged here in America. Our creatives continue to move further beyond the unconscious, beyond the rigidity of sameness. Art and artists can be and say anything without reflexive penalty from our government.

Modern creators such as artists routinely benefit from the Freedom of Speech described by the ACLU as a broad protection of artistic expression of books, theatrical works, paintings, posters, television, mu-



sic videos, comic books—whatever the human creative impulse produces. Despite pushback by religious traditionalists (Murphy Brown, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and Robert Mapplethorpe all come to mind here), the American artist has been privy to nearly all-encompassing freedom when letting their right free minds run free.

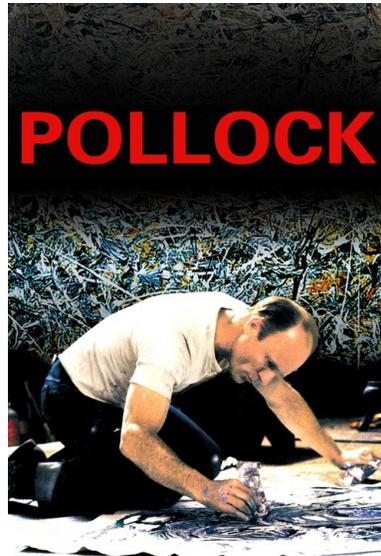
Is *Piss Christ* (1987) a work by Andres Serrano, art? As a devout Christ-follower, the piece personally offends me, but it is still art? Yes. What if I told you that Serrano was a lifelong practicing Roman Catholic? Could the hype that preceded *Piss Christ* have missed Serrano's point all together?



Robert Mapplethorpe's *Polaroid Untitled* (*Whip*, 1972) features fit and furry male glutes next to a whip.



Again, not my thing, but Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs of outie bellybuttons are strangely intriguing. As are his black and white photographs that chronicle 1980's snapshots into gay culture that was still unsafe to identify with, particularly after the onset of AIDS. Was his art his cultural history? Mapplethorpe ultimately died young of an AIDS-related illness at aged



42, but was Mapplethorpe worth all the hype he created? It doesn't matter what I think, because freedom of speech allows creatives to "give form to the formless" by deploying the unconscious. This applies equally to bellybutton art and fuzzy butts, a street artist putting finger to can in a graffiti-

friendly borough, and the fine artist signing a monumental canvas, bathed in one solitary hue—a ballsy yet compelling exercise in abstract art. And as we pivot from traditional art to these new movements once declared "trash" by Hitler, we also see value thresholds surpassing records as these new forms integrate into open societies.

Just ask Sotheby's. Abstract art is murdering previous records reserved for classical and representational painters at auction. In 2021, Mark Rothko's "transcendent masterpiece" *No. 7* (1951) fetched \$82.5 million via phone bid. The identity of the buyer is a secret but my money's on the CIA.

Does Jackson Pollock's work *Untitled (Green Silver)* look like a detail shot of his similar works, *Number 18* and *Alchemy*? Perhaps, but what he was doing—spreading expansive canvas sheets on the floor and dripping paint seemingly haphazardly—was new. He also used his body and brushes to move paint on the canvas. It was groundbreaking, a reflection of the creative energies that U.S. artists were producing, piggybacking on the work of explorative artists who preceded them in deconstructing representational art. Rivera and Picasso, ambassadors for Cubism, come to mind here, but also Cezanne for his loose brushwork and soft, unbound impressionistic hues, a break from the confines of darkness, lines and tidy composition, with a focus on color and form through an abstract-esque lens. Artists born after these masters from



masses with limitation and idealism through government sameness and closed societies.

But when sales came a-callin', even these most celebrated socialist abstract artists willingly became Marxist capitalists. Would Jack "the Dripper" have founded Abstract Expressionism without a (postcoital) grant from Peggy Guggenheim? To be fair, Peggy famously bedded a thousand men—an entire generation of would-be artists have her to thank for their happy endings, and not just the career ones. If you haven't seen the movie *Pollock*, Ed Harris was superb. Jackson Pollock, one of Guggenheim's most famous partners, also unknowingly helped fight communism during the Cold War before his death in 1956. During the Cold War, the CIA, always game for flexing, stepped up to counter communist rigidity and boxed ideas of beauty with a simple game of jousting.

Only, with a paintbrush.

To be continued.

about 1850 on both benefitted from and expanded the foundations of art that is now classified as Abstract. And although many were living what were considered alternative lifestyles at the time (cohabitation and even having children without a marriage license) or were leftist/socialists/communists, they were either living in the land of the free or working in Paris (France, not Texas), a city well known in the 1800s/1900s for freedoms in artistic expression.

Despite initially being snickered at by curious onlookers, rather stuffy (and uneducated) political commentary and staunch traditionalists (like my fella), abstract art, pure abstraction more specifically, finally made its long journey from American and European schools of thought and art houses, into Western mainstream culture in the 1950's. That collective effort was yet another blow to the totalitarian Axis regimes who had fought to dominate the

Excerpt from *The Sikarikin* by Harry Stephen Lazarus

In the years after Jesus was crucified and resurrected, the Romans tried hard to tighten their grip on the Judean people. A hundred or more factions arose as a result, all of a different mind as to how to deal with the Roman repression, and the Romans watched with growing impatience as Jewish rebellious spirit swelled. *The Sikarikin* is a historical novel about those dark days of the Great Jewish Rebellion, and how one young man was caught up in the tides of history.

The Sikarikin is available in June from Conservatarian Press and on Amazon.com.

Chapter Seven

19 Jun 66 CE / 8 Tammuz 3826

Reuven was swallowed up by the crowd still forming in the Xystus Plaza. A smell of sweat emanated from the men around him, men who were murmuring angrily, some of whom carried weapons. Tension swept in waves over the crowd, like the motion of water in a large pond disturbed by the random throwing of stones.

Reuven felt the tension in his gut. He was angry, too, but he tried to push that anger away and keep his mind clear. He wanted to give his uncle, Rabbi Moshe ben Avraham, an objective hearing. He knew basically what his uncle was going to say but he wanted to hear how he would handle the hecklers.

The truth was, Reuven was not sure what to believe. He felt like he

was on a high, thin ledge, and the slightest breeze could push him to the right or left, into one kind of abyss or another. Reuven admitted that his father and uncle's arguments for avoiding rebellion were reasonable and perhaps correct, but deep down he felt something had to be done to stop Roman depredations. And today's speech would clarify; only yesterday the Roman procurator Florus had committed a new provocation. His uncle Moshe would be asked about that from someone in the crowd.

Reuven raised his head and looked around him. He noticed a strange looking woman on the outskirts of the crowd. She was very tall, perhaps as tall as his father, perhaps taller, and moved almost like a man. She wore a large gray dress and seemed to be edging deeper into the crowd.

Rabbi Moshe ben Avraham arrived. Reuven turned his attention from the strange woman to his uncle.



Chapter Eight

19 Jun 66 CE / 8 Tammuz 3826

As he ascended the fifteen short steps of the platform that faced the Xystus Plaza Rabbi Moshe ben Avraham felt his excitement dimmed by anxiety. He had enjoyed the challenge of the last several days turning hostile crowds friendly with his rhetoric and his commanding voice. Today, though, the stakes were higher; he was caught between two opposing forces that had the same goal: to provoke a war. No longer was it just Rabbi Zechariah ben Abkulas and Judah ben Ezra, revolutionaries who wanted to goad the people to rebel against the Romans. The Roman procurator Florus only yesterday had committed a fresh outrage by removing seventeen talents from the Temple treasury, on the pretext that the emperor needed the money. Without doubt Florus also wanted to goad the people to rebel to cover up the crimes for which one day he was sure to be charged before Caesar.

Moshe wished now that his brother Aaron was with him. Aaron had offered to go but Moshe, knowing how much his brother hated crowds, told him it was not necessary. Indeed, any gathering of more than a few people made Aaron uncomfortable.

It would be hard to take the two for brothers, much less the twins that they were, though they had similar features and the same deep voice. Aaron was born first, and he was big and strong. Aaron spoke slowly, sometimes hesitantly, and if he was speaking to more than two or three people his voice would become so soft it was almost inaudible. Often during the rabbinical discussions Aaron talked at such a low volume that he would be interrupted by another who didn't realize Aaron was speaking. The interrupter would be shushed by those sitting near Aaron for what he had to say was valued by all the other rabbis. And while Moshe was considered a great speaker, perhaps the greatest among them, Aaron was considered the greater Torah scholar of the two.

The differences between the brothers did not

stir envy; they only drew Moshe and Aaron closer together.

"Ah, Aaron," Moshe thought. "I should have told you to come. Your presence would have given me strength."

The plaza was beginning to fill with people. The mood was angry. Some carried clubs, a few spears or swords. Two rows of Syrian auxiliaries commanded by a Roman officer were arrayed in the portico behind him and the one to his left. They were there to keep order and prevent any disturbances from breaking out.

Moshe was facing the massive wall of the Temple complex that stood high above the Xystus Plaza. The wall consisted of large rectangular gray blocks of Jerusalem stone. To his left, beyond the white portico with its carved colonnades, was the northern portion of the first wall that defended Jerusalem. Time and kings had added two more protective walls to guard the City. West of the portico behind him was the Palace of the Hasmonean kings, the descendants of the Maccabees and their non-Maccabee spouses. King Agrippa II, whose realm was to the north and east of Judea, and his sister Berenice, stayed at the palace when they came to Jerusalem. The palace sat at the eastern edge of the Upper City with its broad streets and luxurious houses of the rich. To Moshe's right, spreading south, was the warren of small houses of the Lower City.

The crowd had grown so large that it spilled out beyond the plaza, onto the walkway before the Temple walls, and even onto the short stairway that led to the wide bridge that connected the Temple Mount with the Upper City.

Jerusalem's morning cool was rapidly giving way to an early summer heat under a clear sky and bright sun. Rabbi Moshe wiped the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his cloak.

"Hear me citizens of Jerusalem and those who have come from throughout the land to our holy city, hear me my fellow Jews, hear me out, for these are dangerous times and we are at a perilous crossroad!"

Rabbi Moshe's words boomed over the crowd and seized its attention.

"There are those who counsel rebellion

against Rome. That way lies folly!” Moshe cried.

“Enough is enough,” someone near the front of the crowd staid.

Moshe pointed to the heckler.

“My friend here shouts ‘Enough is enough,’” Moshe repeated, for the benefit of those who could not hear the heckler’s words.

“Indeed,” Rabbi Moshe went on, “when is enough too much? Surely Florus provokes us. Is it enough to risk a ruinous war with Rome, a war we cannot win?”

“The Romans rule everywhere. Their legions are undefeated. They have conquered lands larger than ours, nations more numerous than ours, and kingdoms with more wealth and resources than we have in Judea. From beyond the Euphrates to the east, to Libya and the deserts to the south, to Cadiz to the west, and even as far as Britain—”

“We defeated Antiochus and his armies,” someone interrupted from the crowd. “We’ll defeat these uncircumcised Romans.”

Moshe raised both hands, palms out.

“Another fellow here reminds me that we defeated Antiochus and the Syrians, and says we can do the same to the Romans. Ah, my friends, I see

no Judah Maccabee here! But perhaps you say, one will rise when the need comes. Perhaps. But consider. Judah Maccabee had the support of the Torah sages in the days of Antiochus. Do the Torah sages of today support war against the Romans?”

Moshe lowered his hands and leaned forward. His eyes scanned the crowd, gauging their reactions. Then he noticed something peculiar. There were mostly men in the crowd, and a few women, but one woman in particular caught his attention. She was tall, taller than all the men, maybe even bigger and taller than his brother Aaron. He had never seen a Jewish woman so large. Perhaps she was a convert? She was ungainly, too, for she had a most unfeminine way of walking. And that was the other strange thing about her. While everyone else in the crowd was staying in place, this



odd woman was constantly moving, making her way along the outskirts of the assembled throng.

Moshe realized that he had been distracted and silent for too long and was in danger of losing his audience.

"No!" he thundered. "There is a very important difference between Antiochus and Caesar. Antiochus wanted to stamp out the Jewish religion. He forbade the study of the Torah. He forbade circumcision. The Romans do not interfere with us. Indeed they make offerings to our Temple. And yet there are those who would insult Rome and Caesar by refusing their offerings!"

"Nero is a madman!" someone bellowed.

Rabbi Moshe did not repeat those words for the benefit of those who had not heard.

"When Emperor Nero, not knowing our laws, wanted to set up an idol in our Temple, he relented when we petitioned him," Moshe said.

"We don't need Nero's permission to keep our Temple pure," came a shout from the man who had called out against Nero. "Shut up, you coward, and go back to your mansion in the Upper City with the other traitors."

Rabbi Moshe responded immediately.

"Now here's another fellow that had something to say. He called me a coward and a traitor. He told me to go back to my mansion in the Upper City." Rabbi Moshe smiled broadly. "I wish I had a mansion in the Upper City. I live there," he said, pointing to the southeast, "with the rest of you. I'll tell you a secret. My wife is constantly nagging me to get her a better house. The one we have isn't good enough for her. She says it's not fit for a Syrian's pig!"

Laughter swept through the crowd.

Moshe saw the strange woman again. She was no longer on the outskirts of the crowd but was moving through it, getting closer to the speaker's platform. Moshe felt his attention being pulled away from his task at hand, and stopped following the woman with his eyes.

"My friends, let me share another secret. A few days ago my wife told me that she was not going to accept my advances until I get her that bigger house."

"Divorce her!" someone shouted.

"Someone said 'Divorce her'," Moshe repeated. "I'll tell her you suggested that."

Again there was laughter.

"I tell you this, my friends, if I thought war with Rome would get me that mansion in the Upper City, as small and puny as I am, I would take up a sword and fight Rome!"

Gales of laughter greeted Moshe.

The strange woman in the gray dress was now at the front edge of the crowd. She was staring straight up at him.

Rabbi Moshe deliberately looked over her head.

"But the truth is," he went on, "if there is war with Rome it will be long and bitter, and at its end there will be no Upper City mansions, no Lower City houses, and no Temple! Why make war with Caesar and Rome when our quarrel is wi—"

A disturbance in the middle of the crowd cut Moshe off. Two men had started fighting, and like ripples in a pond, a disorganized wave of pushing and shoving, of men tripping over each other, moved outward. In response, the auxiliaries came pouring from the porticoes and moved forcefully into the undulating mass of people.

"Calm down, my friends, calm down!" Rabbi Moshe pleaded over the rising din.

And then Rabbi Moshe saw, out of the corner of his eye, that woman rushing up the steps, rushing toward him.

What could she possibly want?

He turned to face her.

She sprang like a leopard upon a hapless gazelle, a mother leopard eager to feed her hungry brood. She spun Rabbi Moshe ben Avraham around and clamped a strong hand over his mouth.

Rabbi Moshe struggled valiantly. In vain.

A sharp blade sliced deep into his throat.

(Continued in *The Sikarikin*, by Harry Stephen Lazerus)

Conservative-Friendly Conventions and Events

Once again, we are publishing a list (updated) for conservative-friendly conventions and events. While magazines and books have their place, there's no place to share culture like an in-person gathering.

Libertycon

June 21-24, 2024 – Chattanooga, Tennessee. Known for its iconic convention book covers themed after the Statue of Liberty, this famously sold-out con is worth the trip. Hundreds of attendees are also published authors or recognized artists, while dozens more visit from the nearby Oak Ridge facility – you'll brush arms with real nuclear physicists and rocket scientists who are SF geeks just like you. And the politics – let's just say you will feel welcome. <https://www.libertycon.org>

Imaginarium Convention

July 19-21, 2024 – Holiday Inn Louisville East, Louisville, Kentucky. Anyone can have fun at this young convention, but it's designed especially for writers and artists – lots of workshops, networking, and heavy attendance of professionals. Best of all, the focus is on art and entertainment, not bean-counting or politics. entertheimaginarium.com

Dragoncon

August 29-September 2, 2024 – Atlanta, Georgia. There's no point in telling you which hotel to choose – Dragoncon's 50,000+ attendees basically take over the heart of Atlanta every year (they peaked at 85K just before Covid and are still rebuilding.) You can find anything you're interested in at this five-day con, including lots of celebrities and cosplay and a dealer's "room" that spreads through multiple stories of a nearby office building. Their fan-voted Dragon Awards have featured a number of right-leaning artist over the years, and when staff have been approached to "cancel" attendees or guests, they just blow it off. <https://www.dragoncon.org>

P-Con.us

September 15-17, 2023 - A North Texas convention near the Dallas/Fort Worth airport, this convention is so nonwoke that LawDog was a special guest in 2023.

Basedcon

September 2024 – Grand Rapids, Michigan. This relatively new convention is the brainchild of award-winning author Robert Kroese, and was first imagined as a networking event for authors; when non-authors asked to attend, Kroese expanded it into a full-fledged convention, and it's growing fast. Politics? It's in the name – "based" as in "in touch with reality". If you're a SFF fan and you think men can't be women, socialism fails, and truth is the only way forward, you will feel at home here. This year it's sold out, but you can check their website for next year's event. <https://www.basedcon.com>

Son of Silvercon

October 2024 – Las Vegas, Nevada. Organized by Wombat-Socho, this brand-new convention aims to give folks in the western part of the US a home similar to Libertycon. There's a lot of energy at work here, so let's hope it does well. <https://fission-chan.org/son-of-silvercon/>

Marscon.net

January 17-19, 2024 – Holiday Inn Virginia Beach in Norfolk, Virginia – This mid-size con feels like a relaxacon, but the programming and guests easily compete with any professional con out there. When I attended, I heard not one whisper of politics - and I was wearing political shirts. <https://www.marscon.net/wp/>

FenCon

February 14-16, 2025 – Doubletree by Hilton Hotel Dallas Near the Galleria, Dallas, Texas. This relatively relaxed event is a traditional literary SF&F convention with a short story contest and a writers' workshop. Toni Weiskopf, publisher of Baen Books, is the toastmaster this year. <http://fencon.org>

NTRPGcon (NTRPGcon.com)

June 6-9, 2024, or the first Thursday in June. Westin DFW Airport Hotel, Irving, Texas. If you're just in it to play the games, this is the con for you. All old-school tabletop gaming with a focus on D&D and pre-2000 games, there's just no room for politics when you're immersed in the storytelling.

Sonder Magazine Call for Submissions, Issue 4

Conservatarian Press wants to create an apolitical conservative cultural home for creators and fans alike—one that elevates all voices, especially those rejected by traditional media outlets because of their beliefs—even if that means reinventing what a magazine is. Hence, Sonder.

Sonder features everything: fiction (up to 15,000 words), poetry, reviews, cultural essays, comics, photographs, spoken word, video, and other mediums of storytelling and culture. We are seeking to record the voice of real conservative culture, both mainstream and not, and especially the emerging conservative counter-culture. Because we are currently digital only, we can include forms that standard magazines might not even consider. If you have something fresh and new, please query. Culture is more than just visual or literary work; it defines how we live.

The word “sonder” was coined by John Keonig in 2012 for *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*. It stands for the realization that every person on the planet pursues a life as vivid and complex as our own. They each have hopes and dreams, virtues and vices, moments of sanity and craziness interwoven in an epic story perpetually playing out around us like Shakespeare in the park, or the café, or the bowling alley, or even in church. We may appear only once, as an extra tossing breadcrumb to ducks in the background. Or we may command the stage as a tragic hero, a complex villain, or even the plucky comic relief.

Each of these stories are uniquely ours, uniquely human, and our mission at Sonder is to ensure they are told. Whether you are a passionate writer frustrated with traditional publishing outlets or a TikTok all-star looking to make a name for yourself, we want you to be a part of Sonder.

Submissions deadline for Issue 4 is August 1, 2024. All text-based work should be submitted to submissions@conservatarianpress.com as attachments in Word format with the email header “Sonder Submission: [name of piece]”. Please include a brief cover letter introducing yourself and your submission. One submission per query. Visual work should be 8 megapixels or higher and can be submitted as a jpg, png, or tif file. Query about other forms of art.

Published Writers and Other Professionals: we want to support your work too! For selected writers and for a limited time, we will run **FREE full-color advertisements** in our digital versions. For information, please query submissions@conservatarianpress.com with the email header “Sonder Ad Query”.

—Thomas Weiss
Editor, Sonder Magazine

— Jamie K. Wilson
Executive Editor, Conservatarian Press
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About Conservatarian Press

We want to make fiction great again – get rid of the bean counting and virtue signaling, the artificial emphasis on gender awareness and sexuality, and the evisceration of tough topics by overly sensitive sensitivity readers. Our books are here to tell good stories, in whatever manner the writer intends them. We aspire to publish superversive books – stories that uplift by inspiration, stories that build ideas and character rather than tear them down. We seek heroic heroes and strong heroines, stories that approach important topics from angles considered toxic by the mainstream publishing industry, and stories that make you fall in love with reading again.



