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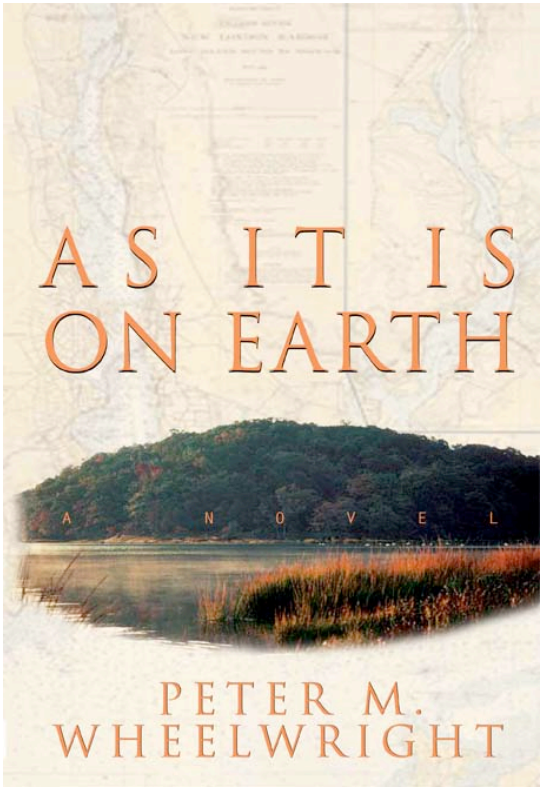


As It Is On Earth, a novel by Peter M. Wheelwright to be published by the Fomite Press, September 15, 2012

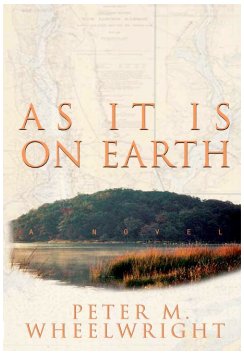
Fomite Press has announced the release date of September 15, 2012 for Peter M. Wheelwright's debut novel, *As It Is On Earth.*

As It Is On Earth is set in New England over seven days leading up to Columbus Day at the end of the Millennium, 1999. Narrated by Taylor Thatcher, an irreverent young university professor from a fallen family of Maine Puritans, the story follows his ruminative quest to escape from history.

Along his errant way, Thatcher is swept by Time through the "family thing" – from the tangled genetic and religious history of his New England parents to the redemptive birthday secret of Esther Fleur Noire Bishop, the Cajun-Passamaquoddy woman who raised him; and, finally, from love in the ruins of the Mayan Yucatan to his own last stand of Columbus Day at a high-stakes gambling casino, rising in resurrection over the starlit bones of a once-vanquished Pequot Indian Tribe.

Old New England, its landscapes, rivers, and tidal estuaries are also casualties of history in Thatcher's story of Deep Time and the wayward collision of nature and civilization.

"The activity of art is based on the capacity of people to be infected by the feelings of others."
Tolstoy, *What is Art?*



Praise for *As It Is On Earth*

"A family wound is at the center of *As It Is On Earth*. Peter Wheelwright is a natural born writer with a scholar's deep thoughtfulness and a gift for seeing the links, often obscure, elusive, and contradictory, that connect and hold one generation fast to another."

– Alec Wilkinson, author of *The Ice Balloon*

"With a Yankee tap root breaking through layers of granite guilt and miscegenation, Taylor Thatchers' family tree is a challenging climb. From its branches overlooking New England's old farms and old colleges, author Peter Wheelwright peers compassionately at a world inhabited by young survivors of extinct tribes and inherited griefs. Fascinating and absorbing and forgiving."

– Meryl Streep

"There is no lack of ambition or artistry in Peter Wheelwright's *As It Is On Earth*, a complex tapestry of the collisions between civilization and nature, and science and religion, among other minor topics. But its heart is "the family thing", and the pleasure of this book is watching Wheelwright's sensitive and skeptical protagonist unravel decades of secrets and lies. A remarkable debut."

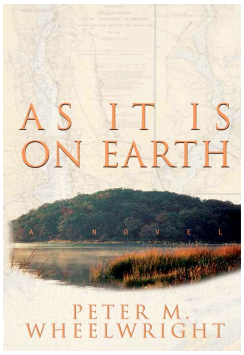
– Helen Schulman, author of *This Beautiful Life*

"Unlike his character Miryam, whose photographs of absent bridges depict only the supporting embankments that connect two sides of the earth, Peter Wheelwright, in this rich and moving debut, attempts to fill in those ghostly, empty polarities of space and time that we call family history -- and, in the doing, offers up a bit of America's history, as well. Like a great bridge-builder, Wheelwright connects past and present, choices and consequences, hope and despair, fantasy and reality, all the while, like Miryam's sturdy embankments, remaining anchored firmly into the land. A masterful balancing act; a beautiful, unpretentious, elegiac novel."

– Joseph Salvatore, author of *To Assume A Pleasing Shape*

“One of the deep pleasures in reading Peter Wheelwright’s gorgeous debut novel *As It Is On Earth* comes from the dizzying journey through the constellations of his protagonist’s life as he attempts to untangle the Gordian knot of his family legacy. His world is messy and contradictory, saturated with desire and utterly intoxicating; it’s a place where ideas about science and art and nature and history combust until secrets are laid bare. As in the best of novels, Wheelwright both broke my heart and gave me great faith in acts of forgiveness and in the tenderness of our hearts.”

– Lisa Fugard, author of *Skinner's Drift.*



"As It Is on Earth may be situated in New England with sojourns to Mexico, but its true territory is the topography of family life with all its obscure borders. Positioned at the moment when one millennium becomes another, Wheelwright's powerful narrative of two brothers looks to all those ways history and landscape give shape to our lives; and to all those forces, both intimate and universal, that bring us together and drive us apart."

– Akiko Busch, author of *Nine Ways to Cross a River: Midstream Reflections on Swimming and Getting There from Here*

"Peter Wheelwright's tale is full of mystery and family transgression, anecdote and the oddest facts imaginable, a tale of despair shot through with unexpected wonder. Wheelwright's oddball cast of dreamers and alcoholic holy men, stargazers and crack mystics, naturalists and sidetracked philosophers, will linger in the reader's imagination long after the last page."

– Andrea Barnet, author of *All-Night Party: The Women of Bohemian Greenwich Village and Harlem, 1913-1930*

"With great insight into his fascinating characters and the New England landscape they have inhabited for generations, Peter Wheelwright illuminates the Lives of the WASPS as they reckon with the multicultural world grown up around them. The Thatchers of Maine, their aspirations, longings, triumphs and failures, will live on in the reader's mind long after this novel is closed."

– Heidi Jon Schmidt, author of *The House on Oyster Creek*

To read more visit: http://www.fomitepress.com/FOMITE/Earth.html

Peter Matthiessen Wheelwright is an architect and Associate Professor at Parsons The New School for Design in New York City. He received his M.Arch degree from Princeton University and BFA degree from Trinity College. His design work has been widely published in both the national and international press. *The Kaleidoscope House*, a modernist dollhouse designed in collaboration with artist Laurie Simmons is in the Collection of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art.

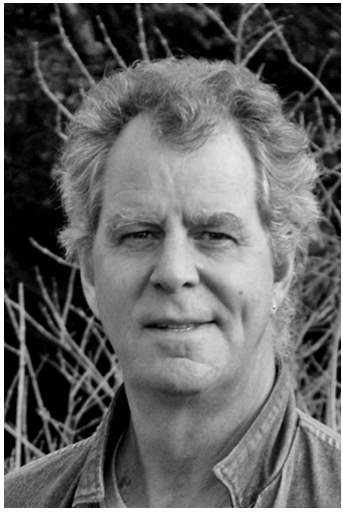
He comes from a family of writers with an abiding interest in the natural world. His uncle is three time National Book Award winner, Peter Matthiessen, and his brother Jeff Wheelwright's third book of non-fiction, *The Wandering Gene and the Indian Princess* was published in 2012.

As It Is On Earth is his first novel.
The Door-Man, his second, is in progress.

As It Is On Earth

Peter M. Wheelwright

Fomite
Burlington, Vermont



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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For Lily

Most men live in relation to their own self as if they are constantly out, never at home…

S.K.

There is an old story that a bible was found in a wall cavity at a former Dominican Nunnery in San Cristobal de las Casas, State of Chiapas, Mexico. The Latin Vulgate Bible was dated from the early sixteenth century. In the margins, before each of the Seven Days of Creation, a postulant had inscribed the days of her own week in the Temple of Carmen:

Dies Martis
Dies Mercurii
Dies Iovis
Dies Veneris
Dies Saturni
Dies Solis,
Dies Lunae

However, above the first verse in Genesis, she had written *'Antequam Dies' – Before Days* – within a small drawing of a six-pointed star burst. Thinking better of it, she'd then drawn a line through her first words and wrote instead: '*El Octavio Día'*. It is believed that she placed the bible inside the wall not to hide the heresy, but the apostasy.

Soon I am leaving Hartford and I will either say goodbye to Bingham or bring him out with me. There is not much more I can do. Much depends on the girl. And the history of things...in days ahead.

* 0 *

Antequam Dies

Hartford, Connecticut,

1999, Beginning of the End, End of the Beginning

...The Void

A few months ago, shortly before Nicole and I finally separated for good, my brother began sleeping on the fire escape. I am not yet sure how these two things are connected. One day, Nicole phones from the Chiapas' highlands to say that I do not love her, and the next day, one of Bin's neighbors calls to tell me my brother is hovering five stories above State Street, curled up asleep on the rusty metalwork outside his kitchen window in downtown Hartford. What am I supposed to make of this?

At first, I was not particularly concerned about Bin. He said that he had simply fallen asleep while observing the stars. I believed him; it would be typical, easy to imagine how absorbed he might become in the challenge of seeing any stars at all through the radiating din of city lights. These are the kinds of problems that appeal to Bin. It's a matter of science. It's not that he's particularly concerned with discovering solutions to the problems of science, he just likes collecting natural phenomena in the way others collect stamps or rare coins. He has been inclined

this way since the beginning. Since before the stigmata.

But there is more than an interest in stellar optics at work here. He is up to something. It seems to me that he is looking at the stars in a way that I have never seen before, as if he is searching for something missed…making a second run through original research…testing it from a different point of view. At least, this is how it strikes me.

Another thing.

Last week, he fell asleep while focusing on Orion's Belt. More precisely, he was trying to locate a gaseous nebula called M42, a smudgy patch of proto-stars emerging from the Sword. That *did* surprise me…*Xibalba*, cradle of the Mayan Heaven…the Beginning of Time.

My brother and I know the stars by different names; perhaps that's what distinguishes us most. Either way…or either one…I wondered if he had really seen that cluster. Even back at the farm in Maine where M42 drifts high in a disturbingly black winter sky, it's very difficult to see it without binoculars. Nevertheless, Bin told me he found it just before falling asleep. Very low in the sky. On the horizon. He'd had to turn his eyes about 15 degrees away to catch a flickering glimpse. But he was certain of what he'd seen. This is something else new and unusual about my younger brother – his interest in seeing things without looking right at them. Perhaps that's why he has me thinking about Esther again. She has that tendency…but with a difference: she has an artificial eye that never seems to close and her good eye wanders like a ball bearing.

...Mount Vernon, Maine

First Days

I had just turned three when the proud and wounded young woman from Simmesport,

Louisiana came to live with us twenty-seven years ago; Bingham was still dangling a scabbed umbilical cord. My father, widowed for a second time, was a country physician with a small community to watch over…Esther Flournoy Bishop was assigned to oversee Bingham and me.

In this, Esther's eyes were an advantage. She told us early on that she had a glass eye but, for a long time, we were never quite sure which was which. "Guess," she'd say.

Once, when my grandparents – the Careys, Steamer and Mooty – came up from Mamacoke, I had to sleep in Esther's room. I was still quite young and not happy about sharing a bed with her. The sheets had that strange familiar smell of unsolicited intimacy – the lived-in smell of someone else's home. I was glad that she slept facing away. She was not big, but she was filled out and shaped in ways I did not like thinking about. Not on her. Fighting the edge of the bed to stay clear of her presenting bottom, I watched the moonlight on the back of her nightgown until I fell asleep. At some point during the night, she rolled over and I awoke eyeball to eyeball with that glistening marble of hers. She was sound asleep but I was as alert as an owl's prey until the sun came up.

Even with that bad eye, Esther was pretty in a kind of inattentive way. Every morning, right out of bed, when most people appear disheveled and dream swollen, she came fresh to the downstairs kitchen. She saw little point in make-up and would cut her own hair, just to avoid the fuss – coffee-grounds dark, falling straight and easy from a middle part to the shoulders, it framed her lopsided and piercing look like a finely crafted oval mirror. Tucking loose strands behind the ear that was cocked our way, she'd have one eye scanning a frying pan while freezing us at the breakfast table with the other. It was hard for me to know when to make a move. "I can see everything that needs seeing," she'd warn.

I learned her blind side soon enough. It was the dimple. She had only one. Formed from a

small chevron scar that pointed to the lost eye, it tucked deep into her cheek when she smiled. Bin and I leaned up to it like saplings to the sun.

My father was slowly drawn to her as well, although I believe he was only comparing scars. The unexpected love they later shared was a desperate one.

Despite her slight bayou twang, Esther found herself right back home in Maine. The details could change with each telling, but she claimed to be the descendant of a French trapper from Casco Bay who had been part of the Acadian Diaspora during the French and Indian Wars. Dragged away from his Algonquin-Passamaquoddy wife and daughters in the dead of winter, Lajeunesse FleurNoire had been placed on board a British frigate along with his two sons and some other hapless Normandy men where they were scattered to the North American winds. Like lost milkweed seeds floating off course on their snowy tendrils, Lajeunesse and his boys landed in steamy Louisiana, germinated, and produced the first passel of Jesuit Cajuns that still crop up today. Esther said he was never happy away from his home up north and drowned one Christmas Eve at the frozen border of Maine while trying to cross the Piscataqua River. That particular detail in the story was memorable and, for years, haunted me each December on the ice of Walled-In as I tried to get into the spirit of the season; but I think Esther was just trying to make a point about the importance of family. Ours that is,…her own family life had followed the broken trail of Lajeunesse. Lucky for us, she made it across the Piscataqua.

Trained as a nurse at Tulane, she had returned home flush with her degree and conjugal feelings for a young lieutenant in the Army Corps of Engineers whom she met when he'd been transferred to run the Old River Control Structure on the Louisiana side of the Mississippi River at Simmesport. The new dam was top of the line; designed to keep the bad-weather Mississippi from bursting its banks like an aneurysm and draining away the economic heart of Louisiana

down at Baton Rouge and New Orleans. But Esther said that during flood season that part of the Mississippi was like a bitch in heat – *Eh!...chienne dans la chaleur* – trying to beat a path overland where it could hook up with the Atchafalaya and elope to the Gulf of Mexico way the hell west of Head of Passes. The pressure turned out to be too much all the way around. After the dam was nearly washed away during an El Niño year, the lieutenant was relieved of duty and became a nasty and abusive alcoholic scowling around Simmesport. A bad match from the get-go, Esther said. He ended up blinding her in one eye, spent a brief spell in prison and, after the divorce, moved to Pyramid Lake, Nevada, where the closest thing to a river was an irrigation ditch. She came home to Maine, went back to school in Radiology, and met my father while sharing a moment over x-rays in the corridors of the Augusta General Hospital.

And Esther knew bones. She had a way of squeezing an arm, rolling the muscle and tendons between her fingers, working her way deep down toward the marrow itself. She would do this to get our wandering attention and her irritation with us could always be measured by the depth of her probe.

"You have sturdy bones, Taylor," she would say, kneading me like a pastry chef. "Your little brother will not be as strong as you, his bones are more delicate. Keep your eye on him."

It seemed to me that this would not be necessary so long as Esther was around. She hovered over Bin like a guardian angel. They had an understanding. Where I imagined an inscrutable kinship between Esther's interest in skeletal anatomy and that supernatural glass eye of hers, Bin saw only the wondrous workings of biotic science: living vertebrate cells embedded in white calcium compounds and a small, but particularly inventive, prosthetic device.

I don't know whether Esther planted the kernels of Bin's interests or simply fertilized his genetic seedbed. Either way, he'd fallen under her wing and she tried her best to protect him from

the devil on mine.

Sometimes, down at Walled-In Pond, when I thought I had slipped Esther's attention, I'd go after him. Teasing, a bit too rough, a bit too sharp-edged. He'd be standing there on those skinny sway-backed legs with his little boy pot belly hanging over his swimming trunks; his hands would be on his hips in a way that made his shoulder blades – which Esther called "angel wings" – stick straight out. He'd be lost in thought, analyzing the algae or some other life form in that thick soupy water, and I'd get the urge; a tongue curled under clenched teeth. *Whack*! I'd give him a flat open hand right in the middle of his back. Not too hard, but hard enough to startle him badly and cause him to fling his hand to the target of my ambush. Reaching behind himself like that made his angel wing stick out even further and he'd spin in circles chasing the sting of that slap. As the pink tattoo of my palm and five fingers slowly formed on his pale skin, I'd bounce from leg to leg in a war-dance, circling his spinning like a double star, and crowing like an indian warrior, "You, Little Red Hand, Big Sachem of Passamaquoddy."

Out of nowhere, Esther would sweep down, scolding me with her good eye as she drew Bin into her lap. It would not take long before she'd have him calmed down with a gentle discussion of Indian handprints, the petroglyphs of China Lake Basin, and the swell of blood through dilating capillaries and arterioles.

It was hard not to be impressed by Esther's ability to divert Bin's attention to the science in a situation. Secretly, I enjoyed the science as well and teasing Bin was often a way to pick up some interesting facts. At a young age, he came to know a lot about a lot of things – rocks, bird skeletons, the weather, you name it. If it was in one of the spheres: litho-, atmo-, or strato-, he was interested and if, by chance, he could get his hands on it he would collect it. I am the same...but different. My interest was in the connections, the relationship of the parts that might show the

sense of things; what things add up to, how they connect. Even back then, I was looking for answers, not facts. I knew they were not the same. Like Walled-in Pond…it was a *fact* that there were no walls around that eponymous body of water but I was feeling hemmed-in by Thoreau and Old New England nonetheless. At a young age, I have also come to know a lot about a lot of things.

Our farm in Mt. Vernon, Maine wasn't a real farm. My father only called it one because we had land and were surrounded by farmers. Two hundred acres of thick shaley fields, seasonal streams and white pine forest, our less arable property pushed apart the corners of three working farms, the result of Abenaki land-clearing, colonial border disputes and bad surveying. My father had figured it both ways. He preferred his land as it was now, untouched and wild, only growing things seeded by breeze and "God's winged creatures." On the other hand, by association with his neighbors, he felt a farmer with all the honorable virtues that came with working the land. The fact that he was commuting, every other day, twenty-three miles overland to the hospital in Augusta, was incidental. He made his living in Augusta, but the patients he cared for most were in Mt. Vernon.

In the Spring, when the newly-thawed fields were swollen and stirring, he'd call Bin and me out to the front porch and have us stand quietly with eyes closed, just to listen and smell our fine agrarian life: the distant moans of McMoody's cows, wafting in on the same breeze as the musty manure from Bogdanffy's chicken farm and pierced by the intermittent *clang* of Renault Thibodeau stubbornly readying another piece of over-worked farm equipment for the season. It was during these times that my father looked content to me, not particularly joyful, but at least peaceful. Sneaking a one-eyed peek at him, I used to hope there was still a chance that he might burst forth in new life just like his land. But as much as he loved his place on earth, he was

already preparing for the life thereafter.

My father's hair had turned early, long before I was able to recognize how misfortune makes its marks. Esther would usually cut it for him after tending to her own, and he would wear it with a part high up on the side of his head like I'd seen in old photographs of his father. Only the thinnest remains of black streaked through the smooth white hair when Esther ran a wet comb through it. It made him look dashing in an old-fashioned way. Tall, straight-spined with wide shoulders always held back and a determined jaw like an icebreaker, my father, despite everything, cut an impressive figure right up to the end. But it was difficult to look him in the eyes. Unlike Esther, he could see just fine; never needed glasses and prided himself on it. But I knew, like her, he had seen bad things. It was mostly out of childish fear that I avoided meeting his glance, and maybe some awe as well; they were not unkind, his eyes, I just never felt they provided much of an opening. Esther said that most men's gaze stops at the horizon but our father could see right around the curve of the earth. That didn't make me feel much better.

Our neighbors never quite knew nor cared where the "courthouse" property lines of their farms lay. Nor did my father. "You can deed over the land but not the landscape. That's what's important and worth fighting for," he would say, staring out at the rolling sweep of countryside from the front porch like old Samoset, the doomed Abenaki sachem who'd strolled into Plymouth from the Maine woods to lecture the Pilgrims on their limits. But although the neighbors were lax about boundary lines, they sure as hell knew where a trespass could occur. A few years after my father died and we were putting the farm up for sale, I met with old man Bogdanffy and suggested we split the cost of a survey. As I tried to point out the antiquated references to chains, links and rods in our deed, Bogdanffy, who looked to be well into his eighties – as he had for as long as I could remember – scuffed the ground with his boot, nodded patiently at the dislodged

thatch of old manure, and then proceeded to walk me from one colonial pile of moss-covered fieldstone to another as if they had been assembled to mark our home on earth by the Lord Almighty himself.

"The men in my family could find these cairns in the dark and so can I," he said. "They've been here long before any surveyor and, I suspect they'll be here long after – deed or no deed. As I see it, what was…still is." I let the matter drop right there.

My father spoke highly of Bogdanffy and, although I later learned the chicken farmer descended from Pennsylvania Palatine German-Hungarians, he considered him the best New England had to offer. Some offering.

Men like Bogdanffy confused me. Even today, a conversation with this kind of old New Englander leaves me feeling as if what was spoken was not what was said. Like a stuck tune, I'll end up re-hashing the exchange for the rest of the day. Much of the problem stems from their hawk-eyed scrutiny – neck forward, head turned twenty-odd degrees, ear-cocked, all the while trying to harvest your true intentions from the furrows of your face. It was exhausting, and although I learned to stand my ground with these fellows, I never felt that my ground was very solid – despite the fact that my family was descended from Mayflower Pilgrims.

Sometimes I think it was their hands that unsettled me most.

It's not that I don't appreciate farmers. I do. How could one not? Determined bodies, wrestling with the surface of the earth, braced against an unyielding biotic juggernaut. In an everyday life of digging, cutting, hauling, slogging, they acquire in their very bones and muscles a knowledge of the natural world that is one of a kind. But, like some skewed Lamarckian form of heredity, this knowledge always seems to emerge most clearly in their hands. Browned like clay-dirt and hard-boned, they display the same topography as their land, gnarled ridges, eroded veins

on crisscrossed wrinkled flesh – the trace of each attempt to get a grip on a recalcitrant ground. And always the missing fingers. Esther referred to them as "agricultural accidents" but I felt this put too much emphasis on the technology of farm equipment. I suspected something more intentional and animistic, as if the land lurked in wait to suddenly yank the offending piece of machinery from the inattentive hands of the farmer and turn it back on him, grinding up his grasp, a few digits at a time. Thibodeau, for instance, he was a good example.

Renault Thibodeau was a distant cousin of my father and the least friendly of the neighbors. Another waylaid Catholic Acadian, he did not like to fraternize with his Protestant relatives unless he had to, intimated there had been a bad marriage way back. We usually avoided him as well.

He had a troublesome mongrel dog that he named “Calvin” to remind him of the “Protestatio” and his dispossession at the hands of the French Catholic turncoat, John Calvin. Despite the insult and Thibodeau’s irritability with him, that dog would never leave his master’s side. I couldn’t help feeling queasy watching one of his hands rise to the sweat-soaked brim of his Agway hat, grasp it between a stump of thumb and index knuckle and, with remarkable grip, use it to whack poor Calvin in the tail end. I am usually not bothered by a missing leg or arm; an asymmetrical human body is not a problem for me. But there is something unsettling about a pair of hands with less than ten fingers. Thibodeau had adjusted but it still seemed like a real disadvantage. Farmer or not, my sense is that we need all ten to reach out at the world just to feel our way along.

There were times, at night, when I would become especially aware of my hands touching Nicole. Searching. With just the right pressure and path across her back, it would strike me how much and how magnificent my hand could feel; thousands of synaptic sensors registering each

swell and cupping across membranes of smooth and soft skin. The Holy Grail. Then I would remember Thibodeau, still stubbornly cleaved to the Society of Jesus, and wonder what he felt when he reached for his wife in a loving night with clawed and calloused hands.

Of the two of us, Bin was the more at home on the farm. Oddly enough, with Mother Nature all around, things there never quite felt…well, natural to me. But the good earth of our farm cradled my brother to its bosom from the very beginning. It was *his* world. As soon as he could walk, Bin went to work on that land, exploring and collecting. It was a big place in which to study natural things – one could spend a lifetime analyzing that terrain – but with Esther's help, Bin had it well covered.

It was Esther who had the idea to convert one of the run-down sheds behind the house into a Wildlife Museum. No longer square and plumb, the former chicken coop had begun to lean westward and had taken on the shape of a crudely built boat – a sun-bleached and rough-sawn wood trapezoid adrift in the years of weather and abandonment. Bin's Ark.

He painted a sign over the door announcing the museum-to-be and his proprietorship. At the time, he was still afflicted with an odd form of dyslexia that caused him to spell his first name backwards – as if he was reading it in a mirror. Any other word, he could knock out like a spelling bee champion but his own name was a stumper.

NIB'S MUSEUM

OF

GEOLOGY ZOOLOGY AND COSMOLOGY

I wasn't much help with this, calling him 'Nib' whenever I wanted to distract him from his

work in the shed…*Hey, Nib, let's go swimming.* Bin would ignore me as if I was addressing someone else. Even when I would try to run him around in circles about spelling 'Dad' backwards on his hand-made Father's Day cards, he would pause to double check and then look at me with filial concern before returning to his coloring. In those days, Bin's responses to my cleverness tended to be brief and utterly lacking in irony. It made me uneasy; as if he might have been on to something I was missing.

By the end of the first summer, his museum had been filled with pinned insects, pressed flowers, snake skins, turtle shells, bones and teeth arrayed beneath maps of the stellar constellations and labeled on the old hen shelves, still stained from impacted chicken shit and straw. It was a remarkable collection he put together, although one had to be particularly watchful when inspecting the shelves – his display often included the extensive wildlife which was alive and which also inhabited the old coop. Every insect, rodent, and most reptiles known to the farm passed through Bin's museum, flying, scurrying, or crawling through the open knot holes and weathered gaps in the coop's walls to nest among the less fortunate specimens. I was bitten and stung more than once handling his collection, but what really got my attention was the cozy relationship the living creatures had with the dead ones – snakes coiled under dry bird nests, wasp combs tagged to turtle shells, and field mice giving birth in deer skulls after a meal of chloroformed moth wings, each creature utterly indifferent to its kinship with its new-found habitat. It reminded me of a photograph I had seen in one of my father's magazines. It was from Egypt: poor families living among the tombs and mausoleums of Cairo's graveyards, small colonies of life weaving their homes out of rows of the dead.

As his carefully crafted sign indicated, Bin's interests were not limited to carbon-based life forms. He had a Deep Time perspective as well – the primordial spewing of magma and the

crushing of continents. Just inside the museum's door, a shelf had been reserved for the planetary crust. Large Mason jars filled with soil samples sat alongside neatly arranged assortments of small stones and fractured rocks. The glacial tills responsible for the Nassau channery silt loam in the upper fields and the riparian lacustrine clay that he would muck out of the stream were as vital and present to Bin as the flora and fauna…Nature from the ground up, Esther would say.

Indeed and beyond. Bin had a sense of scale and, the truth is, his museum could only hold a small part of what was actually on his mind.

For his seventh birthday, Esther gave Bin an amateur meteorological kit. Run on batteries, the prized apparatus was a hodgepodge of conductive wiring, bulbs, and funnels nailed in a lopsided tangle to the outside of the shed and attached to a small scrolling meteorograph set on a shelf by one of the museum's windows. Each morning, Bin would analyze the printout of his weather station as if it was a cosmic lie detector. The jittery ink-etched peaks and valleys drawn by the vibrations of the meteorograph's spindle registered the barometric pressure, moisture content and temperature of Mt. Vernon; but Bin wasn't studying the data to make plans for his day. It wouldn't even have occurred to him to think of it in such a utilitarian way. As it sat clicking and whirring on the shelf, graphing the atmosphere in mathematical language, Bin's machine was just passing along the "Good News", making another rendering, a different picture of what was all around him – the world, on earth, under a sky sketched anew each beautiful day by the capture of momentary weather formations. His own private Evangelium.

And then there was this business of the stars.

One day, around this time, he came home with a map of the world he'd made at school. Molded from clumps of newspaper soaked in wet flour, the map was mounted on a large piece of warping brown cardboard, which he carried like a fully loaded tray up our long dirt driveway.

Nearly all the countries of the globe were splayed flat across straightened latitudes and longitudes and carefully painted in different colors. Bin had been very careful to maintain respective borders. Although I was three grades ahead, I had seen my brother, rapt in cartographic precision, laboring on this project as I passed the open door of his classroom. But I missed the last detail. In a final unsupervised moment before heading for the school bus, he made one addition to the map. Across what he considered to be the bottom of it, he wrote in bold green letters: *The United Nations of Earth by Nib Thoreau Thatcher.*

Plunking his map down on the kitchen table, Bin knelt on one of the chairs, propped his folded arms on the table and made his presentation. He had arranged things so Esther, who was sitting across from him, could read his title.

"Well, Bingham, this is quite a thing you've made here," she said. She put on her glasses with one hand and began to rotate the cardboard with the other. "Every country in its proper place? Let's have a look." Warped up at the edges, the cardboard spun on its convex bottom like a lazy susan.

The map's title was now in front of Bin and he was staring down at the big green letters. He began to spin the map back. He wanted Esther to read the title.

I was leaning against the refrigerator with my hands in my pockets, trying to appear disinterested, feeling irritated by...*Thoreau*. Often felt it, and it was getting worse – it was not his middle name. Then I noticed what was really wrong with the map. Shooting to Bin's side, I reached across him and pinned the twirling earth to the table. The map's authorship was perfectly legible as it ran across the lower edge of the cardboard, but the world itself was drawn upside down, strange unfamiliar shapes of land mass, hovering above Bin's carefully written words. I had never imagined the world this way and, for a brief moment, I felt as if my gravitational field

had lost its hold – like I was falling out of a tree, upward.

I haughtily pointed out my little brother's blunder. "Gee, Nib, the last time I remember, Maine was in the Northeast not the Southwest. It's ass-backwards, just like you. Hah!"

I should have known what to expect. Bin did not flinch. Looking up at me with concern, a child of the cosmos, he answered in Einsteinian terms which even I could understand, "But Taylor, this is what we see from Polaris. Don't you know what Maine looks like from outer space?"

I did not, of course. And perhaps Maine does not look anything of the sort; however, I rarely challenged him about such things. Returning to my vertiginous state, I quietly retreated from the kitchen.

And so it was. In all matters of natural science, Bin left me far behind.

I was thinking of this little backfire with Bin, when Nicole and I visited the farm after the closing of the sale three years ago; it was her first and my last trip. Bin's museum was still there, thanks to "cousin" Thibodeau who, by then, was reunited with Saint Peter.

It was during the museum's first winter when Thibodeau's dog, Calvin, had finally turned on him and bit him badly. He was grudgingly having my father stitch up the gash, swearing about taking his gun to the dog, when he suggested off-handedly that we buttress the prow-like west wall of the museum with pressure-treated 2 x 6's before the snow brought the whole thing down on someone. As I recall, he actually did the work without telling anyone – his way of paying off the unbilled debt after healing up – and for years we could measure the slow fall of the other outbuildings against the withheld collapse of Bin's museum. Twenty years later, it was still standing, leaning comfortably on its crutches in a flattened neighborhood of rusty galvanized metal and rotten lumber planks, blackened-gray in the purple thickets of invading Canadian

Thistle. Inside, a tattered and threadbare Maine flag was hanging from its last remaining thumbtack. Nicole joked about the dozing figure of a moose sewn into the state emblem. But I was thinking about the small radiant star stitched above it – Bin's polar star – hovering watchfully over the antlers and the white pine, offering to set compasses everywhere. *Dirigo*. *I Direct*. I am still lost in the stars over Mt. Vernon.

I love my brother. He should be lying on the bosom of some full-bodied doctoral candidate at M.I.T., sorting out the mysteries of the universe. Instead, he's sleeping alone on a fire escape in downtown Hartford. In *my* world.

Although there is a lot of weariness in my love for Bin, I have a chance to make things better. To restore his heart. There, I've said it. It sounds silly right out of my mouth; but, then again, of the two of us, I was always considered the romantic. Bin collected dead bugs in empty shoeboxes; I collected love letters.

That was a long time ago.

...The Province of Mayne, New England

Last Days

Most people in Mt. Vernon think of Bin and me as only *half*-brothers. It's more complicated than they imagine, and so I rarely consider it worth explaining when it comes up. Strictly speaking, they're both right and wrong. One could also say we're half-cousins and they'd be close enough...The Theory of Relativity...it depends on point of view.

My mother, Lily, had spent most of her life on the water – salt water – boating the Connecticut rollers off Long Island Sound when they ran up the Thames River from New

London. She was born there, upriver, at Mamacoke. My father would not discuss the details of her death, and I soon stopped asking in light of the dark turn in his face. Even Esther could not offer very much. It took a school field trip to the Public Library in Augusta to finally learn what little I know. Sometimes I wish I'd stayed home.

After getting an introduction to the Dewey Decimal System and a tour of the stacks, the Head Librarian walked us down the long marble hallway to a hammered glass door. The Research Room. She said that anything we needed to know could be found there. She meant 'anything' about Maine history, but I took her at her word. I was already after the bigger picture. While my classmates dutifully followed our guide out of the room and down the echoing hallway to the antiquarian collection, I stayed behind and fastened myself to an old microfiche machine, scrolling for a death notice in the archived *Kennebec Journal*. Just as I was getting my ear pulled for leaving the group, I was able to skim what I'd come for. I held tight to the knurled knobs.

Lily Thatcher (Carey), formerly of Mamacoke, Connecticut, dead in a canoeing accident…Drowned. Swept away in the white water of the Androscoggin River. Husband, Dr. George Thatcher of Mt. Vernon, and child watch helplessly from shore…A lobster boat coming up from Merrymeeting Bay recovered the body three days later at Fogg's Corner, hooked under an old log-jam drifting its way to the Atlantic.

I didn't tell anyone what I'd learned but, among other things, the swimming in Walled-In changed for me after that day – I knew where that pond water went after it passed through the eroded spillway.

Walled-In seeps into Androscoggin Lake, and then drains into my mother's river on its run southeast to Merrymeeting and Casco Bay. I imagined, from there, the water of our pond turned southwestward, flowing like a freshwater silk ribbon above the heavier salt along the New

England coast, picking up other watersheds – maybe even Thoreau's pond out of the Merrimack – before being drawn by the moon up the Connecticut tidewaters to Mamacoke. The end of the beginning, the beginning of the end. Same difference.

I never once saw my father swim in Walled-In, but I can still see him standing at the edge. On shore.

Esther was around for the second coming. After the loss of his first wife, my father buried his grief deep into his medical bag. With a stiff upper lip and grim determination, he turned to the needs of his patients. Heads shook with respectful pity and admiration for his stoic effort; people said my father was a man to be measured by. But Esther said he could not hold up. Within a year, he had collapsed in mournful exhaustion, square into the waiting embrace of his wife's identical twin sister, Roseanne. Bingham was born nine months later, but poor Aunt Rose; she had gestational diabetes and was dead of a massive embolism before she even had a chance to breastfeed him. Esther said that my father, like all the other doctors, had missed the signs. He had been just down the hall. Out of reach again. On shore. Bad luck all around.

I do not remember much of either one. Too young. They're like distant relatives.

Although sometimes I think I have a true memory of my mother, it could easily be her sister that comes to me. Vague, diaphanous. Hard to hold in mind. But nice. Maybe with a dimple. And insistent. Either way, I did not experience much of that time other than a curious confusion about all the coming and going: hospitals, funerals, weddings, hospitals, funerals. It seemed to me I had been born into a pretty fast-paced but solemn world…with a lot of black and white and the sense that I'd better start paying attention.

So there we were. Half brothers on paper, yet biologically bound to each other in full brotherhood like the double helix of our mothers' identical DNA. I think I was already heading

off to college when our maternal grandparents stopped giving us matching birthday shirts. The shirts were always the same color and always my grandmother made sure that *Bingham* was sewn to the left breast of his and *Taylor* to the right breast of mine. Grandma Mooty said it had been a tradition with her girls but I think she was just making sure she would never lose what was left of them. Regardless of where we stood for our birthday pictures – together, side by side, left or right – there was a noticeable symmetry about the empty space between us.

The Birthday. *Our* Birthday. That's the flukiest part. Same day, same month, three years apart. How odd is that?

Well,…the analysis of random events always came easy to Bin, and he could tell you the odds when he was still wetting his bed. I was in my fourth year of graduate study at the University of Hartford before I finally understood Probability Theory and, by then, I had stopped caring; moved on to other things – forgetting about all that I knew to make room for what I wanted to know. All I need say is that the likelihood of having the same birthday as my younger brother depended on what's called a "mathematical collision." Somehow, that made enough sense of it for me.

There is another thing that binds my brother to me. It too is in our blood. On our father's side. His world. Bin and I belong to the twelfth generation of Thatcher "Saints" still searching for Protestant Grace in the New England Confederation.

Like Thibodeau's dog, Thatchers do not move around much, rarely straying from the proving ground of John Calvin's 'reformed' devotion before God – the "Unspeakable Comfort" he found in "*…the godly consideration of Predestination, and our Election in Christ.*" Separatists in the Old World, Congregationalists in the New, Thatchers have been preparing for the Millennium in the 'gathered' churches of Maine since landfall. We are rusted right into the

state.

Outsiders misunderstand.

An objectionable colleague of mine from the University helps to remind me why this is so. He's a rumpled historian from the South and will complain, accusingly to me, that despite the fact that four of the first five American presidents came from Virginia, everyone tends to think of the United States as just an expanded version of New England – as if we were all bred from Reformation Protestants On the Run. Maybe he's right to feel upset about this. He's down the germ-line from Lord Calvert's Chesapeake Catholics. But since I actually *do* come from Puritan stock and am as irritable as he is about the whole thing, I have a right to complain. For different reasons.

My father told us we should be proud of our heritage. Our pilgrim ancestors had demonstrated a kind of steadfastness; like Plymouth Rock itself, forged from the chthonic pressures of the Lord's finest creation; the mighty earth. *In the Beginning, etc.*

I was not so sure. Even before I began crawling inside of books, it seemed like a lot of dumb luck and reckless pyrotechnics.

I'd have been sent to the front porch 'dog house' for some brimstone of my own if I'd ever suggested what I know now – that even with their holy attachment to hellfire, witch burning, and a torched back wilderness, our jumpy, god- and devil-fearing relatives had no more idea where things would end up than the death-dealing viral hitch-hikers stowed in their guts. Dumb luck. A blazing call to Heaven and a scorched earth policy. When the smoke cleared, they'd not only survived Satan's heathen landscape, but ended up owning it lock, stock, and barrel. At least, some of them did – *southern* New Englanders.

Whenever I get a disapproving finger wagged in my face for being a White Anglo-Saxon

Protestant, I am unnerved. Even though I am increasingly uncertain what they mean by it, or to whom, exactly, they are referring, I am unsettled nonetheless. I wonder if they're upset with my bad biology, bad behavior, or both. Either way, I don't think I deserve it.

I get it from all sides, ethnic and religious; even from some of the women faculty these days. I try to be disarming – just a well-meaning white guy, twelve generations in New England with an Old England surname that stands for a mediaeval roofer. Besides, I'm from Maine, I say, *the upside-down state*. The only spoils we inherited from old New England were a hardscrabble seat in the continental corner and a chronic dose of unmentionable soul-sickness.

Sometimes this works, but I still feel like I'm being accused of having gotten away with something unseemly. Personally.

I'm just one of you guys, I protest feebly,…even to the women.

"You got no dog in *that* fight," says my colleague from the South, "It's a booger you can't thump off." He is not amused that I grew up in *Mt. Vernon*, Maine, nor by my attempt to distance myself from the havoc that came down from my gene pool. But I think the professor is less put out by my ancestors' making off with the American landscape than he is by their having absconded with American history – driven by their Lord's wind to an unsuspecting shore where they could spread the "Good News" however they saw fit...from sea to shining sea.

Okay, I say, backing away with a little theater, hands up and head down. *Just don't blame me for it.*

And I'm not kidding about Maine. Too roughshod to be quaint, and hanging too far into the cold Canadian Atlantic, Maine is just not that cozy. My father was right in one sense: our ancestors had been more steadfast than most.

Fog-shrouded and wolf-infested, its dark impenetrable hemlock forest set hard to an endless

and unchartable granite coast, the Province of Mayne must have seemed a nightmare to the first Europeans. Even after the crossing. I imagine them clinging uneasily to the gunwales of their leaky caravels, as they bobbed with nervous curiosity offshore – one eye on the gloomy palisades that rose up before them, the other on the swaying mats of kelp that tangled rudders and hid the countless rock ledges lying beneath the frigid waterline like drifting pods of huge whales. To make matters worse, whenever they got the nerve to sail up a river, they'd find themselves staring down a devilish band of tall silent men covered in red ochre body paint and shining with bear grease. Better to go down with the ship.

Even when the first English entrepreneurs from King James' Charter braved the shore at the promising freshet of the Kennebec River, they slipped badly. Stunned by the black howling nights, punishing winter cold and equally frosty reception by the Abenaki Indians, the whole lot of them jumped an icy tail wind back to England by the end of the year.

Onward Christian soldiers.

The Reverend Littlefield, Mt. Vernon's Pastor of the Mount, never missed an opportunity in his sermons to point out the stronger Faith of the few radical English Saints that had finally cleared a path into Maine. *For all of us*, he would admonish from his high pulpit, arms spread like a victory eagle, but thin neck rising from his collar like a vulture that had spotted carrion. They had been called by a higher spiritual grace than either the Church of England or the lesser Separatists of the Massachusetts Bay Colony: forty Antinomian Elect – *including your ancestor Zerviah Thatcher (*a discrete nudge in the pew from Esther on behalf of…family) – banished from Boston for apostasy and cast once again into the hands of Providence.

Clinging to the rough edge between the northern forest and the ocean, my forefathers, the last straggling pilgrims, hacked their way "down east" – Governor Winthrop at their backs and

French papists from the Bay of Fundy up ahead – before finally settling in worship between the Ogunquit and Kennebunk rivers just north of Portsmouth. It was not much of a Promised Land, but it was good enough to get Maine and the Thatchers up and running.

Whether I like it or not, if Zerviah hadn't gone wandering with his lord, further than most, into the New England wilderness, I too would be elsewhere. I dwell on this thought.

It was Galen McMoody who first made me realize that I was just another casualty of history…of histories. A hammered pin-ball in an endless play of historical levers, plungers, flashing lights, and tolling bells; all chance, played out by others – other people, in other places and times, over other events, other Gods.

Galen was the prodigal, pot-smoking, non-church-going, son of one of our farm neighbors. He was in his late twenties and had a young daughter out of wedlock. Jemma. Bin's…best friend. Galen had left home as a teenager; no one had a clue where he'd gone other than as far away from the McMoody farm as he could. Esther said she'd always known that he'd be back. "You can run," she said, "but the past will always keep up, step for step." Sure enough, in his attempt to escape his family, Galen ended up doing a two thousand year back flip right into the pantheistic web of his Gaelic roots. He wandered back home to Mt. Vernon with hair below his waist, a pregnant earth-mother named Gaialissa, and the skill of an accomplished, albeit unconventional, luthier. His little girl could play any instrument he could make: Uilleann pipes, citterns, Irish bouzouki, dulcimers, dobros, whatever...but Jemma was born to the Celtic harp. Galen told Bin that the first Celtic harp was actually a long bow that had been thrummed into a melody while being strung for battle against Caesar's invading centurions during the Gallic Wars. My brother rarely took his eyes off Jemma when she played. Drawing her arms back over the strings, she shot him right in the heart.

I liked being around Galen because he swore a lot and would tell us stories that no one else would. I was impressed by how much he seemed to know; how easily he could poke fun at all the things I had been taught were precious.

My father liked the dad, but he was not much for the son. They couldn't have seen things more differently. To my father, Maine was a tale of sainted discovery. To Galen, it had been a rout.

Galen had the longest hair I had ever seen. On a man or a woman. He kept it cinched back at the forehead with a thin leather band like an Indian, but the pony tail falling down his broad back was redblonde and made him look like a Viking. That was fine by him. He liked the Vikings and would go on and on about Odin, Frigg, Brunhild and Loki, Bifrost the Rainbow, and all the Scandinavian animal spirits, thunder gods and earth goddesses. "They blended right in with the American Indians when *they* were here," he would say, "Kindred spirits. No problem. Fuckin' shame." Galen would lean on the fence-line, staring down at the piss-filled hoof prints in the manured muck of his father's cow pens, and shake his head, still upset that the earth-worshipping pagans from Valhalla had given way to pox-ridden Reformation adventurers under their banners of Heaven, "It all could of been fuckin' different."

According to Galen, it wasn't quite true that beaver trappers had settled Mt. Vernon after "discovering" an unusual clearing in the dense forest of the Wabenaki Confederation. What they had come across was the ghostly foundation of a deserted Indian village. The few native "People of the Dawn" who had survived the grim European contagion that had come sailing in with the sunrise, had faded away into the sunset; dead or gone west. But their fields, once woven with corn, beans, yellow squash, and melons like an arabesque tapestry – and here, Galen, usually stoned out of his own ripened gourd, would weave his arms about like a swami – were as fertile

as ever and leapt right back to life for the newcomers. "…Mt. Vernon's first farms?…shee-yit!"

"And the town fathers? Get this,…they called it '*Washington's Plantation'*, 'bet you didn't know that? It's true! Made the President nervous, like he'd used the northern front to increase his landholdings. '*Mt. Vernon'* was a compromise. Not many around here even know that…no fuckin' way."

Galen told us about the saw and gristmills, running off the waterpower of the upland streams and dammed up lakes, how they were soon girdling "and pollutin' the crap outta" the patchwork settlement. And about the solitary pioneers wandering cautiously into the bright open fields from the dark fringes of the Wabenaki forest – weary from having to have eyes in the back of their heads, how they began to see the advantage of being a bit more sociable.

"…'course, this meant being more agreeable about just whose God was gonna run things," Galen winked, surprising me with a conspiratorial grin. How did he know God was on my mind?

He told us how deals were struck. Arminians and Scots-Irish Presbyterians on the run from Cromwell; Anabaptists and French Huguenots, hidden flint-locks close at hand, mingling with German Lutherans and Mennonites. Even tough-minded Jews in league with lapsed Catholics from Charleston and Savannah came north, mostly to beat the heat; but, all of them, every last one, were 'gathered' up in Mt. Vernon's Congregational embrace.

"The rest,…as they say, is history. In a nutshell." Galen McMoody would leave off here, as if the two boys and the little girl, sitting Indian style at his feet with their mouths catching flies, knew what he meant by this. Like most kids in Mt. Vernon, the "rest" we got at school, and it was a nutshell I, for one, had trouble cracking.

The gist of it was…by the time its namesake died, the town was ready for pavement. Supported by a modest but stable farm-lumber economy, it boasted a two story basket-weave

brick meeting hall, a co-educational school, and, at its center, a broad greensward anchored by the largest First Congregational Church west of Bangor. A new Post Road emanated straight from the church altar, splitting the town commons like the Red Sea before turning toward the coast where it linked up with the lucrative West Indies trade and the expanding world of industrial New England. Pilgrim's Progress had found its way to Mt. Vernon, thanks to Calvin's Predestination and the hard, holy labors of the men and women 'elected for Grace.'

Our farm lay just off the Post Road and I came to know that church only too well. Every day and twice on Sundays...that is, if you counted Sunday School, which I did.

Shepherded by Esther into the church basement after Morning Service, Bin and I, along with a few other uneasy kids, were left there in a kind of evangelical day-care run by her best friend, the young, skeletal, Felicity Littlefield.

Felicity was married to The Right Reverend Samson Littlefield, the formidable and disquieting minister of the Congregational Church. For as long as I could remember, she'd been 'blessed' with the sacred mission of explaining to the children what her hell-firing husband had blow-torched from the pulpit. This took some doing because the sermons were confusing; the biblical verses of unintelligible syntax and unsettling imagery from an inconceivable past would either send us to bed doubling-up on our night lights, or could just as well have been spoken in tongue.

Despite her affection for her young charges, Mrs. Littlefield always seemed nervous. She wore smock dresses haltered at the shoulders – the type of shapeless drapery worn by pregnant women or those who want to hide from view. Her eyes darted about like Bogdanffy's chickens and made her wan smile look neither comfortable nor reassuring. But she tried hard as she sat with us at the low children's table, knees high and jittery as a marionette, passing out paper cups

of warm cranberry juice and comic books while trying to arrange her long thin legs so I couldn't see the mystery between them.

I remember my great excitement when I saw the stack of comics. Eagerly springing up from my small ladder-back chair opposite Mrs. Littlefield's hemline, I stretched across the table to see what we would be reading. I was not looking for Bugs Bunny. I was hoping for Veronica and Betty – high-breasted and sweet-assed, gazing out of those pages come-hitherly, right past Archie and straight at me. I slumped back into my seat and frowned at the edge of the table when I realized the "comics" were just badly drawn tales from the scriptures. Issued by American Scholastic to Congregationalist churches everywhere, the cartoons were full of camels, sandy deserts and incomprehensible words hovering in bubbles over men in middle-eastern headdresses. And the pictures of Jesus – the coy placid expression that suggested everything but gave away nothing,…the raised index finger: "Now Taylor, I'm feeling benevolent at the moment, but I will rain down all hell in a hail of frogs on your sorry head if you ever give Mrs. Littlefield a hard time."

I've always confused my Old and New Testaments – the mixed signals. Law or Love…or the bad blend. And even though the frogs never came, it wasn't for my lack of trying.

Mrs. Littlefield seemed very glad when Esther took her suggestion that I might not be a "good fit" for Sunday School. She also thought it best for Bin to join me in my unacknowledged fall from grace. "He's too young to be there without his brother," she said. I think she just did not like him always leaning against her shoulder, spilling cranberry juice on the Bible and interrupting her with difficult questions about miracles.

But we still had to go to the Morning Service. My father was a Deacon.

Sitting between my father and Esther each Sunday, I would try to appear relaxed and

attentive in the sea of grim faces, listening to Reverend Littlefield's talk of Original Sin and the impossible responsibility to pay out for Christ's gruesome Sacrifice. The appeals to Gospel duty, Virtuous conduct, and the righteousness of Discipline struck me as pointless given the bad odds for Redemption. But what made matters worse was the feeling that I was boxed-in on a sinking ship. Picking away at the velvet ticking of the pew cushion, I sensed a Lost God.

Jews have the End of the Diaspora to look forward to and Catholics have the Gates of Saint Peter, but for the descendants of millennialist New World Protestants the promise of Last Days has been one disappointment after another. They're stuck with the Here and Now…and adapting badly. I could see it in the toiling ministry that climbed the rickety pulpit stairs of my father's church and I pretended, for years, not to see it in him. The Protestant Ethic – even leavened with an acoustic guitar or two in the church aisle – was just not enough for Salvation. *Kumbaya, my Lord. Come by Here*. Good luck.

When my father would join the other deacons to pass the offering plate, I'd often sneak a glance at Bin on the other side of Esther. I could never quite tell what was going through his mind, but he always seemed content enough – like he might as well be there as anywhere.

Quietly swinging his feet back and forth over the kneeling cushion, he sat relaxed, absorbed, head down, slowly flipping through each page of the hymnal as if looking up a word in the dictionary.

Bin was elsewhere, but I bucked mightily in that pew, with its otherworldly smells of musty velvet, decaying psalm books, and aged oakwood rails polished to a radiant sheen by the oily hands and elbows of two hundred years' worth of penitent parishioners. Holding tight to the harness of old New England Reformation Protestantism, Samson Littlefield's faithful flock could rein in the world all they wanted; but I was determined to swing one of my girlfriends up into its

saddle and run with it. *Yippee-kai-yay*.

Esther often said both "her boys" had rich interior lives. She warned me about mine; that, if I was not careful, it would make for some bumpiness on the outside. A Cajun finger wag. *La Maison de Chien*. She was right. I was not one for Revelation but I could conjure up some pretty transcendent thoughts about alternative worlds – an alternate "here and now" – to get myself in trouble. Immanence was Bin's thing. He was…grounded. But I was preoccupied with Olympian feats of heroism, grateful Rubenesque women, and self-propelled flying high above Mt. Vernon; only too happy to follow where my scatter-shot imagination took me, even when it took me straight to the Deacon's "doghouse." The solemn hand of New England Calvinism had little hold on me, but it gripped my father to the last and, although it was squeezing the very life out of him, the Deacon was quick to charge me with a lack of self-discipline.

The "doghouse" was where my father dispensed family justice. The front porch.

Depending on whether you were coming or going, the deep-set covered porch framed either the front view of our stolid Dutch gambrel or the broad decline of uncut meadow that spread down to the Mt. Vernon Post Road. I preferred the view going.

Indifferent to the dirt driveway snaking its way to the house, the front field of poverty oat-grass and little bluestem seemed to run wild right off the porch steps. Following the slope to the old split-rail fence and the road that cut rudely across it like a horizon line, the meadow slipped under both and just kept going – down between the two pastures of McMoody's farm and into the far drainage of Minnehonk Lake before rising back up in the distance to an old tossed stone wall where it paused for a last look back, and then disappeared, for good, into the forest.

Although any visitor had to pass through the porch before entering the house, it was always spare and not very inviting. Two green wicker chairs with fading floral cushions sewn by Esther

flanked both the front door and the small braided hook rug of Mt. Katahdin that served as our welcome mat. Down at one end, Bin's and my unraveling Cape Hatterras Hammock hung like a large graying macramé between two of the porch columns while, at the other, around the corner of my father's study, an old raw wood Adirondack sat alone, its flat wide arms increasingly pickled with water-stained circles from Jim Beam highballs. The Deacon's Chair. Neither quite part of the domesticated house inside, nor of the spirited landscape outside, our front porch served other purposes. Bin and I had secret moments out there with Esther, looking for shooting stars – *our* shooting star – the one…*gone come 'round again every October 11th*. But my father lived under a different heaven.

Galen McMoody said that my father's porch reminded him of The Royal Banqueting House at Whitehall. I had no idea what he was referring to, but I knew it meant a bad business, far away, and a long time ago. He explained.

"They marched King Charles I out onto the balcony and leaned him over the railing – Cromwell and his army of axe-wielding Puritan Roundheads. They said he was in league with the Beast. Satan. His severed head bounced down the steps like a soccer ball and rolled clear across the square…Apostates, beware of doghouses everywhere," he teased. Tucking a Napoleonic hand into his shirt, he'd pull out a joint and call forth England's Lord Protector: "*The Lord hath done such things amongst us as have not been known in the world these thousand years*." I was right. A bad business. My head rolled off our porch plenty of times.

Once, a few weeks before the Thanksgiving recess, I was sent home from my 4th grade biology class for blowing up a bullfrog.

"Taylor!…to the porch…March! For God's sake…!" My father's voice was sharp and exasperated, with both the stern sense of New England purpose and the frustration of someone

still trying to figure out how to be a father in the wake of all that had passed. “I don’t know what I’m going to do with you…”

I sat before him, slumped in one of the porch chairs, picking nervously at the arm wicker and thinking of the Roundheads. I knew what came next. It was a ritual.

He slowly removed the dark suit jacket that he wore on his medical rounds and placed it on the other chair. Loosening his tie, he rolled up his white shirtsleeves tight above his elbows as if he was preparing for a brawl; he was getting down to what he called “business.” He folded his bare arms firmly over his chest and took a seat on the porch rail, leaning slightly sideways against one of the columns; a suspender slackened. He looked me over in silence. Then, casting his voice into the air, he called for Esther.

This was how my father preferred it, Esther doing the pre-diagnostic work. I heard her before seeing her push through the front screen door.

"Oh Taylor, not again…what happened this time. Exactly.” she said, leaning in between my father and me. Her glasses dangled before me from the small metal chain around her neck. I caught my face in both lenses. “Taylor!…look at me.”

"I didn’t do it,” I exclaimed, perching myself on the edge of truth, “It wasn't my idea. It was an accident. Somebody else…"

Esther straightened up, put her hands on her hips and exhaled at the porch ceiling as if the peeling white paint and small brown spider egg cases above her were just too much to bear. I focused on a knot with rabbit ears on a floorboard.

"Okay, let’s start again…where did you get the firecrackers?" she asked gently, using her second chance voice.

"From school. All the kids got 'em. It wasn't just me," I looked up at her as innocently as I

could, hoping to spread out the crime a bit, maybe get over-looked in the fray. But there was no escape. Esther eyed me. I was silent. The wicker creaked loudly and held me faster.

Strictly speaking, I had not lied. Once again, it depended on point of view. Lots of kids *did* have firecrackers and it *wasn't* just me who'd caused the trouble. Randy Cooperman, an unpopular boy in my class, eager to please, had brought a box of illegal fireworks back from vacation somewhere down south. He'd been buying short-term friendships all week long in exchange for sparklers, ash cans, and roman candles, not to mention the small fused "banger" which, on a dare, I inserted in my lab frog's mouth. "*You gotta dissect it anyway, Thatcher, you chicken shit*."

The frog was pinned, spread-eagled, on its back and gagged badly on the firecracker. It had not been properly chloroformed. Watching that slick white belly lurch against the restraining pins, I lost my resolve. But before I could back out altogether, Cooperman had lit the fuse with a Bunsen burner. The frog disappeared; all but one leg, which twirled like a pinwheel before coming to rest with a couple of spasmodic post-mortem twitches. My ears rang as I stared at the small clumps of frog viscera clinging to my shirt. Trouble ahead. Cooperman slipped quietly onto his lab bench and I was sent to Principal Oakes.

From there to The Porch.

"Your father doesn't care about *all* the kids," Esther continued, "We are talking about *you.* This is not fitting for a Thatcher, and you know it!"

This was the call to my father and the generations. *You're a Thatcher…and as long as you're in this family and on this earth…or, for that matter, in heaven above*...He stood up slowly, his suspenders taut again on his stiffening shoulders, and stepped forward. Esther stepped aside, and I was given the family coda of self-discipline, quiet duty and honorable behavior before God and

Man. These lectures were gently given for the most part, but he appeared less sympathetic than weary.

I knew there was no use trying to explain things to my father. Although he would always speak about the importance of "getting to the bottom" of things, to the nub of truth and responsibility, the world did not seem reducible to me. Still,…I felt sorry about the whole thing. Thinking back on it, I don't know whether I felt worse for having let my father down, or for not convincing him that it was possible to be an honorable son of New England while having a little fun in the bargain.

In those days, “fun in the bargain” came in the form of a sweet-smelling girl, a classmate named Cindy Smithwick. She played the big part in the frog episode that I couldn’t share with my father. Tall but soft jointed, with dark hair curling out from under a robin’s egg blue beret, Cindy was a forming beauty even to my inexperienced eyes. She and I had been making passes at one another all that year, trying to sort our private and public relationship. Discretely exchanging coy love letters under our desks while making a loud show of each other’s “cooties” above them, we were getting nowhere until, one day, we found our way behind the thick trunk of an oak tree that stood at the far corner of the schoolyard.

The tree was wide enough to hide us both if we wrapped our arms around each other; which we did,…and then shared our first kiss. Cindy tasted like peanut butter and oranges. I was smitten and, cooties be damned, we spent lunchtime behind that tree kissing and licking one another’s face for the rest of the year, winter included. But that fall, on the same day that I blew up the frog, the heat was turned up a notch.

Another girl coaxed me behind the same tree.

Rachel Rubenstein was giggly and confusing. She liked playing with the boys, but always

came to school wearing a dress and white cotton socks that started the day slumped off her ankles and ended it inside her shoes. I could never understand why she would want bare legs in the rough and tumble play of 4th grade, but she had something in mind and her dress allowed her to tend to it more quickly. With the offer to show me her private parts, Rachel coaxed me behind the big oak. This was new territory, far beyond the boundaries of my relationship with Cindy. I followed her like a stray dog.

Rachel insisted that I unzip my fly to make it a fair trade. I did not hesitate. Riveted before Rachel's pulled up skirt with my small penis in hand, I never saw Cindy coming.

She swung in suddenly from behind the oak with one arm clinging to its trunk for support. Tilting off that tree, her eyes gone wide and uncertain, she looked first at me, then at my penis, at Rachel's spread legs, and finally at Rachel, squaring us up in a kind of perfect and prescient symmetry. But her next move was the most unexpected. Stepping alongside Rachel, she unbuckled her pants and, catching her underpants with her thumbs, pulled down both in one quick bend of the waist. What I had seen between Rachel's legs had been unremarkable, a smooth bulge of pink skin like a freshly placed keystone above the arch of her legs; in an odd way it seemed both secretive and familiar, like the back of someone's knee. But Cindy was already maturing; the full crease and tiny protruding labia peeking from a wispy triangle of dark hair signaled another world altogether. Rachel giggled, the band of her underpants snapped back to her belly, and her dress fell back into place as she ran off. I barely noticed; I was reaching down to touch Cindy. I was surprised to find that she fit perfectly, as if my cupped hand had been the very mold from which she'd been cast. That was it for Adam's Rib; I was Called.

Later that afternoon, in the biology lab, all I could think about was what I'd felt between Cindy's legs as I slipped the firecracker into that poor frog's mouth. Breathless and flexed with

anticipation at the sparking fuse, I guess I just needed to release some energy into the void and was still a little too young to know how best to do it.

In time, I learned that the Calling had not been mine alone. Cindy and Rachel had been called as well. Even further. I still shake my head, thinking about it.

When I told this story to Nicole during her one and only visit to Mt. Vernon, she muttered that I had probably killed the prince in *me* as well as that frog. We were driving north with the windows open, and she was poring over the road map trying to figure out exactly where we were most likely to drop off the edge of the earth. I laughed and, feeling playful, reached under the wind-blown map flapping on her lap and put my hand between her legs. At the time, I was still trying to keep the heat alive in our relationship and running into Cindy Smithwick again was the farthest thing from my mind. But I knew right away that she was on to something that did not bode well. I could feel it.

I have come to rely on the cup of my hand to measure how things stand with me and the women I think I love. I try not to feel guilty about this; it's all I have left. This, and a very secret hope – the one promised and disappointed in the Garden – that, against all odds, the wayward man, feeling lost to himself and forgiveness, can be raised from his knees at the edge of the abyss by the compass-love of a girl who has spotted him in his wilderness, and knows the way out.

* 1 *

Dies Martis

Hartford, Connecticut, The University,

Tuesday Morning, October 5, 1999

...Light

I am a Professor now. At least, for a while longer. University of Hartford. My office is in Ward Hall Tower. Top floor. *My* world. People tease; it's where I "hide out." Ivory Towers. I don't mind.

My students like me. I am glad for this. But, as I have said, things have not been going well recently. I have been distracted from my work. Bingham's odd behavior on the fire escape and Nicole's final dismissal of my professed affections – called in through a crackling phone line *(a snickering mexicana operator palming her mouth piece?)* from San Cristobal de las Casas, of all places – are only a part of it. There is something else, something missing. Both else and missing…there and not-there…I don't know how better to put it.

Today, for example.

In my afternoon class, I gave one of my better lectures. I could see it in the students' faces. It began as one of those moments when I found myself lecturing while trying to think of what to say. This is an acquired skill and some believe it's the mark of a good teacher. I am not so sure. It's not that I don't know what I'm trying to teach. I think I do. One could say that I was just collecting my thoughts – as if they were simply sitting around like loose change on the bedroom dresser, ready to be swept up and cashed in during the rush to a good day's work. But it often

doesn't feel that way. I have begun to wonder whether that tiny gap between thinking and speaking is where universes fall apart. A black hole.

Nevertheless, whatever was happening inside my head this afternoon, I put a great face on it. I felt reckless. I'm not certain whether it was because I intend to leave the University soon and so have nothing to lose…or, simply, that I was being affected by the thrilling lunacy of the matchmaking I have in mind for Bin (…an "Old Testament Shidduchim," the girl called it; my mitzvah…Ashkenazi Yiddish). In either case, what was unusual was that I felt…well, almost telepathic…as if I could have just stood there and willed my thoughts out from behind tightly closed eyes and have them hover like holograms for all my students to see. Back and forth I paced, probing the floor with seamless and well-constructed arguments. Then, rearing back, I would thrust irrefutable conclusions into the ceiling. Chalk crumbled in my hand and flew through space as I struck broad decisive strokes across the lecture hall slate – Gutenberg in a monastery vineyard, toying with a wine-making screw press; Einstein, trying in frustration to coordinate European clocks in the Swiss patent office; the young lab clinician Sigmund Freud, dreamily poking a dissected frontal lobe, looking for brain damage…The March of Progress?…or Accidents Waiting to Happen. At one point, I felt as if I was twirling in front of that blackboard like a ballet dancer, snapping my face to the class with each emphatically punctuated revolution. When the class ended, my students applauded and pounded the table like parliamentarians. I walked from the room, pleased with myself and my own pounding heart.

Heading back to my faculty office in Ward Hall, I strode across the Quad full of good will. I was thinking about the class, smiling to myself and nodding my head approvingly as I replayed the best moments. I hailed my fellow faculty members like long lost friends and smiled with affection at students that I had never seen before. The cool evening air was descending rapidly

along with the sun but I was glowing, hunkered down in the thick warmth of my father's old canvas hunting jacket with its smell of aged waterproofing and quilted cotton duck. That was it. The smell. I was yanked right back into the Maine Woods. The Deacon and Thoreau. Things turned.

By the time I reached the door of Ward Hall, the class replays had begun to fade. Like scenes from an old videotape, worn and torn, the afternoon's highlights no longer seemed very sharp. I was beginning to second-guess, troubled by the way mulling over anything changes it beyond recognition.

And I am still here; now, still standing at the door. I stare at the thumb-latched Plymouth handle – forged black iron on old wood. Oak. It is a University door. Thick, heavy with somber purpose. Unmistakable. Even in the late afternoon light, I can see my shadowy reflection in the layers of hi-gloss urethane embalming the old wood. My hands remain fixed deep within the wool plaid lining of my pockets. I scratch the lint into my fingernails, trying to convince myself that perhaps mulling is not so bad – that otherwise, we'd run out of new ways to look at old stuff. Students break warily around me to get into the building. I don't mind.

My father, had he lived longer, would have been surprised that I'd stayed on at the University of Hartford as a faculty member in the College of the Sciences. He would have thought Bin the more likely one; he was the boy of the natural sciences, after all…and much less trouble in the classroom. But Bin had other plans. Originally three years behind me in school, Bin received his undergraduate diploma a week before I did. "Pre-human Studies." No one was quite sure what that meant, but no matter, he was done with school and back in Mt. Vernon with Jemma, working first for the Soil and Water Conservation District and then at *DawnTime*, the

new farm that had risen up from our family fields. He was home; different house, same land. I moved into the University of Hartford Library.

"Your father would have been so proud!" Esther had tried to be reassuring. She probably knew all along where I was headed, that I'd end up 'hiding out.' Still, she would have done her best to convince the Deacon that I would find my way someday. But as it was, he only got the chance to see me start my freshman year in college…three times. Maybe Esther was right when she said that bad students make good teachers.

Things had begun slowly for me as a student and even I was surprised when they began picking up speed. I was held back in the sixth grade to allow for a little "maturing," but stalled again after high school and spent a year getting stoned with Galen McMoody in the workshop behind his father's cow barn, the cannabis and cow shit nicely canceling each other out. My father eventually teased the smells apart and put his foot down, but by then my childishness had turned to pointed indifference and I enrolled for a single uninspired semester at the University of Maine in Orono. The next fall, with Esther's secret encouragement, I transferred to the University of Hartford in Connecticut for a second start and a change of air and family. My grandparents were still living at Mamacoke, a half-hour away in New London, and were tickled; but the long reach of my father, of Maine, of John Calvin and Reverend Littlefield, all got a hold of me. A bad surprise from Esther and my former Sunday School teacher didn't help much either. I dropped out of college in my first semester and ran off to the Yucatan. Sounds romantic, but I was a lost pilgrim.

It took a few years to get back on track. When I did, I was determined to outrun the field.

The Deacon died. Badly, and unexpectedly to most everyone in Mt. Vernon. A Sickness unto Death in a cold hell. I was not surprised.

Despite the drinking, he died looking as strong and fit as any man his age; but inside, he'd been disappearing for awhile. To me, with all his soul-sickness, he'd been like a cancer victim in a long lingering decline – moved first to a lower floor to get around with less trouble; then into bed, maybe an armchair with a blanket once in a while; then no more chairs; a rented gurney bed with a side gate; and the drip, morphine, to ease the pain, the howling at angels and devils. Then…gone. Rest easy; relief all around. I felt guilty.

The odd part was that, in his death, I suddenly saw my way, how to get my answers. It had been in the Augusta Public Library, but I had missed the sign. The Dead.

Galen McMoody would laugh about it. *Pick a library…any one, anywhere…ninety percent of the books…at the very least…they're by dead men, lecturing ghosts…libraries, shit, nothing changes...they're just fuckin' oracles…Delphi, shit.* A long deep toke for emphasis.

Maybe. But for me the rows and stacks of the library recalled the shelves of Bin's museum – the Cairo graveyard: life woven from Books of the Dead. I was Thoreau's older "brother" – R.W. Emerson, young and love-lost, then reborn, Adam at the Tree of Knowledge, *I dreamed that I floated at will in the great Ether, and I saw this world floating also not far off, but diminished to the size of an apple. Then an angel took it in his hand & brought it to me and said 'This must thou eat.' And I ate the world…*

I got my undergraduate degree. In fact, I got two degrees. One in the "Sociology of Engineering Science" and the other in the "Science of Social Engineering." I crafted them both in an interdisciplinary tour de force, right under the nose of the faculty. I was smarter than even I thought. I outwitted my professors, spinning the same papers from one academic degree to the other, all the while, having sex with as many ethnic classmates as I could get my hands on.

Hey, I'm just one of you guys.

Then, on to the Graduate College of the Sciences for more.

Strictly speaking, my doctoral work at the College of the Sciences had nothing to do with becoming a scientist. I did not want to be a physicist, a chemist, or a biologist. None of the Big Three. In fact, I rarely calculated a formula, never memorized the periodic table, or touched a molecular microscope. But I spent a lot of time thinking about why scientists did these kinds of things, wondering what they thought they were up to, *really* up to. There was the usual talk of advancing science, predicting nature, gaining knowledgeable ground on the cosmos by peeling back the mysterious layers of the vast and timeless universe. All well and good, but it made me edgy. I would look deep into the eyes of my scientist colleagues and could not see a trace of irony, no hint of what had been left out of their equations. Their pupils were Black Holes and they hadn't noticed. Piss holes in a snowbank.

I had my own ideas about the space-time continuum, a different Theory of Relativity. I wondered if the heavens were only being re-shuffled in order to fit circumstances better here at home, in the moment, on the ground. Trithemius' "discovery" of inter-stellar transmissions between angels, Newton's "formula" for alchemic transubstantiation, Darwin's quagga "theory" of telegonic birth – looking at the Big Picture, they all seemed as significant as Quantum Mechanics. It's all good. Part of the…*Ensemble*. And that's where everything belongs I suspect…in the "mysterious layers" of the Big Picture, full of endless tricks and hidden just out of sight.

Esther used to say that whatever we find on our minds, our minds will surely find everywhere else. But the Mystery is always there; it always remains. The most certain Uncertainty Principle, more reliable than a rising sun.

I had learned early that God was a question, and not The Answer…In the Beginning was the

Word. Fine, what about before…that?

Have Faith,…or get your ass across campus to the Nordencross Science Labs.

It was not helpful. It was all Faith to me. Faith in a Triune God or Faith in the Holy Trinity of Science, little difference – they're just chasing the same tail, trying to make the implausible…plausible. *I believe in one Physics, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible…And in our lord Chemistry, begotten son of Physics before all worlds and whose Kingdom shall have no end…And in Holy Biology the Lord and Giver of life, which proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified…until The Unified Field Theory Come. Amen.*

Amen, indeed. I figured I'd try sorting out why everyone wants so badly to get to "the bottom of things." The Real Bottom…below which, *nothing*…no *Thing*…not even a word for it.

When the University's Center for Science, Artifacts, and Social Systems offered me a Fellowship, I went right to work in the belly of the inscrutable beast.

I can only imagine what my father would have thought of my faculty appointment at *SASS* – he probably would have understood my good fit from the acronym. But I am feeling less amused by that thought. I went to the Library to slough off my past. I did not intend to slough off myself as well.

"Are you feeling alright, Dr. Thatcher?"

It is one of my students leaving Ward Hall. I do not remember her name – Melody, perhaps? I have taken notice of her in class. I become present. Although I wish she would not call me "Doctor" Thatcher, I understand it is the safe address given the circumstances. I wonder if she has been told about me…*He's just standing down there.*