

to the fierce guard  
in the Assyrian Saloon

the first book  
of poems of Lee Douglas

by  
Howard W. Robertson

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# Introduction

## REMEMBERING HOWARD ROBERTSON

Howard Robertson was never perfectly clear to me, and so it is that as I think back upon him after the passage of several years certain things remain vague and undecided in my mind. On the other hand, he becomes much more clear, achieving in my eyes a focus he never had. I am sure this is something I ought to try to explain.

I recall that we sometimes had lunch together in the cafeteria at the California Institute of the Arts, near Los Angeles. This was in the early 1970s. He had come to me by an indirect route, as people come—somebody wants to become a writer, as Howard Robertson did; so somebody who knows the hopeful writer refers him/her to someone who has actually become a writer, on the grounds that the innocent hopeful writer can somehow improve his spiritual situation if only he can sit in the cafeteria awhile with the tried and tested writer and absorb vast quantities of knowledge in a short period. I did the same thing myself more than once so it must be natural.

It was Howard's then mother-in-law who suggested that he see me. Once I met her in the hallway of our art-like college and asked her where she was going and she said, "To watch the boys swim nude." That made an impression on me, but it's all I remember of her. I apologize. Her husband was a liberal member of the Board of Trustees of our school. We had many Trustees, but only a few were liberal, and I was therefore eager to please him, too.

As for Howard, he was working toward the idea of becoming a librarian. That struck me as certainly a sensible thing for a writer to be, partly because of the milieu of books and partly because the work is not profit-seeking. Relieved of the need to sell anything, one has a fair chance of becoming oneself, which appeared to be Howard's intention.

We lunched several times. I think the last time I saw him—not later than 1975—was at his little apartment in Los Angeles, near the University of Southern California, where I was now teaching, having lost my job at the school of the arts. Howard's wife was there, and a child, I believe, and we ate a dinner of fish (I know we didn't eat the child), and I hurried back afterward to my class at U.S.C. and soon out of California.

And so I lost track of his person. He has not even sent me a photograph.

However, I had a favorable impression of him because I saw that he was going on with his writing. Better than his photograph, here came manuscripts over the years, which I read and commented on, and referred to my agent. Thus you can see what I mean when I say that Howard Robertson became both more and less clear to me. As I lost all memory of his features (no

photographs) I gained a sense of him as writer (the manuscripts). He was writing work and completing it. He had learned the lesson of the cafeteria—you can do nothing sitting here at this table; you must go home and write your work. He was doing exactly as I had told him to do in the cafeteria at the California Institute of the Arts. I take all the credit. He was going forward. He had no guarantee of anything, no publishers lined up, no agents phoning frantically with deals, nothing to sustain him as a writer, really, besides the library, except the one thing every writer must have: the need to write. Without that need you are nobody as a writer.

Hints are embedded here in *to the fierce guard in the Assyrian Saloon* of the novel Howard Robertson is writing, so enticingly entitled “Dracula’s Oregon Divorce,” which, he tells me in one of his characteristically long and readable letters, is “funny, horrifying, tightly plotted.” I can believe it. Writing poems or novels, Howard has always merged plot, humor, and horror. Plot is the writer’s way of seeing life. Alas, that may be how life is. I could do with less horror and more humor in the world, but that’s just my opinion, my personal taste, and you can’t condemn me for it. My opinion also is that Howard Robertson is a most unusual and worthwhile writer whose work I have enjoyed as I have watched it develop. I think many readers will share my opinion. I wish us all well.

*Mark Harris*  
Tempe, Arizona  
September, 1986

to the fierce guard  
in the Assyrian Saloon



I picked up that club on the way back in case the neighbors' dog got crazy which made sense at the time

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Anne's lawyer friend had been shot four days before in downtown Seattle by the husband in a divorce case in daylight in a broad lobby of a tall office building and she'd just been to the cathedral where her father had gone far out of his way to show sympathy for the murderer and then I had to notice absent-mindedly the gunman was Black I suppose because I'd been so afraid living in married student housing at USC but we were calm again just sitting there on the beach at Whidbey Island where her mother's cabin was the night before we hit I-5 for the long haul home to New Geneva in deepest Oregon . . .

and the moon was rising alone the sea  
whispering like Walt said hoarse and I felt its  
presence pulling archaic under past those  
eighty July degrees and rubber rafts the splashing  
and tanning by my two daughters and their new  
friend and her posh mother the last few days into  
a rhythm of moonpull unlike the coruscated passing of  
rivers more eternal and inhuman and five thousand  
years like this ago or even a couple centuries  
the scattered tribes not having gotten like we  
the upper hand over the dwindling other creatures  
there are so I guess that is civilization so  
complex a web others did and do the dark work  
that we sit safe at midnight where the forest meets  
the sea and then I asked Anne what she thought  
because she obviously was stirring in there and things  
were so hard to pry out of her sometimes but she  
was reluctant to tell though did finally of the  
wondering what was in there in the sea and of  
whether you could see a ghost and the remembering  
when she and her brother Tod who now fishes on  
commercial boats from Puget north to Alaska had  
hooked into something big here that towed the  
boat around awhile until at last it broke the  
line.

I made no move to stop them Susan eight and Eleanor five being moved last month from the August clouds this year here to the temperature there in Sacramento by their mother for a couple years she says while lovely Anne has just gone the weekend to try a llama trip fairly far into the Elkhorn Wilderness in the volcanic range so young to me thirty six southeast of here and alone in the apartment the aloneness kind of lounges in around the pillows like some kind of very empty place without precious five and eight year old daughters and a very so young good friend that so much memory with I seem to keep mentioning dad dead a year and a half too since a month after I finally left Sarah and the girls because we could not take the fights any more no matter how much we loved the two of them or hated each other and there is the aloneness here and a kind of panic that has nothing to do with missing anyone at all a sort of terror at nothing other at all than just being with no one else to veil the intense being just there and I gladly would dust off the old terms from Handy's course on Literary Existentialism with Handy to explain or at least schematically describe this an anxiety a sort of banal excruciation or something so I go to sleep though it's only eleven thirty Saturday morning but I need a nap a dream of not being here of escaping from monomaniacal monsters I really love and chasing after fierce lovely midgets I don't care about at all and this just goes on a long time it seems when I see a very real sky with pure white motionless clouds quite a few curling into the letter ess in the purest most wordless azure and I wake up and do feel more comfortable where I am and can't really believe that was dreaming.

the night I went down during the longest full eclipse of the moon since 1857(?) to watch it with the tall old guy in the parking lot who I thought was from Texas but turned out to be native Fairfield name of McCoy and Bob Stevenson came down who worked 25 years with dad and has lived in Geneva Towers since it was built and the two young women came and set up a telescope and McCoy's wife showed up and he and Bob had already broke out the binoculars & Anne came down with the coffee & zucchini bread and so on

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I knew something would happen if I went down there. dad had been a lot younger than Bob though dead at 59 a year now. the moon in eclipse was a dim orange ball dark on top suspended glowing in space like a science exhibit or a memory suspended dim in the mind in time. Stevenson had hurt his knee hiking and had to go inside for a minute for a painkiller. McCoy was still down there after everyone left.

the barber did just what I told him

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the way to spot your car in a very big parking lot at River Valley shopping mall an enormous place when you've lost a big bright easy to spot red '71 VW camper in a divorce settlement and bought a little short brown '82 Honda Civic four-door sedan that you can't find even though the lot is not very full is to begin to wander but immediately bump into Dwight Wong your colleague at the International Studies Center on campus and enjoy smiling idly and ask a couple of cheerful inane questions and refuse to be impressed by a famous Soviet sculptor who's coming but be only interested in your own trivial everyday concerns and push this pleasant vacuity to the point that the car appears from behind the big fat green Plymouth and you and Wong laugh delighted that here you are now director-elect of the center and already making decisions on the hundred thousand dollar federal grant for next year and you find your car like some kind of zen madman or holy Russian fool or little kid or something.

probably he being a divine and ornery sensei he just pulled his cowboy hat down over his empty gaze and ambled off with his sweet smile into the deeper gloaming

---

it was one long sunset from Salt Lake City to Oregon from right when we took off and flew straight almost into its beginning with me sitting on the left so I saw the whole way as it was south a bit until just as it was finishing the red glow diminishing in the sky slowly deepening we touched down in New Geneva having flown so very low over Fairfield on the way in with everybody's lights down below already on that I could recognize everything the lumber mill the old neighborhood the big park by the riverside the old high school the watertower hill it all really was sort of transfiguring and very lovely and the whole trip had been that way or as good in a quieter way with the weather in DC very fine for October and the annual conference of the American Association for the Advancement of International Studies not keeping me from walking all over the Mall and into everywhere the National Archives the National Gallery the Hirshhorn the Smithsonian the Library of Congress the Lincoln Memorial and all the other great stuff which I hadn't had much chance to see very well the first time six years ago when I also stayed in the Capitol Hilton so that walking into that lobby again I could almost see Lana Waxman from U. Oregon sitting there or later in the hotel coffee shop Bob McTavish from Portland State just like it was those years ago when we three met at the librarian sessions of that year's AAIS conference and started the Oregon International Studies Library Cooperative and held our own meetings back home and published bibliographies and stayed over at each other's houses and became good friends until Lana foolishly left academic librarianship to try a mid-life career change into she wasn't sure what so now she does the books temporarily she says for a big foreign auto repair shop in Seattle and meanwhile Bobby has become preoccupied keeping track of the secondary literature on Walter Scott and other purely British stuff so I don't see them much any more but back then

we were thick as thieves and I went right up to my room that first time to call Sarah because we were going to stay married forever and I had to tell her I was all right and Susan was too young to understand talking on the phone and Eleanor wasn't even born yet so Sarah and I just talked like the demons would never come and I would never file papers on her and she and the girls would never move to Sacramento where I would visit last April and take Susan down to see Sutter's Fort and the Indian Museum behind it with the red-ochre man yelling with the bottle in a paper bag in one hand at his two friends not to call him a drunk or he'd whip their ass and Susan loved the baskets and costumes and beadwork inside and the redwood canoe with the head and heart and lungs and liver and kidneys carved on the inside to make it strong and Eleanor on the way to Raley's to buy hubba-bubba gum would say she didn't know why God made the divorce but God made everything so there must be a good reason but she sure couldn't see any reason how come so six months later I just walked down that airport deboarding ramp in New Geneva in the gloaming and went straight over to see Anne at her high-rise and she let me put on her tape of the bagpipes playing "Amazing Grace" and other hymns and curl up on the couch with her awhile and hug and sort of imagine what one might hear old boddhisattva say in a spot like this.

the party begins innocently enough the ornaments the  
guests hang them on the dying tree the scent of cut  
fir changing the room the cheese the cookies bread  
and the wine we all eat brought break or swill in the  
flow of business of communion of nailing balls panes  
robing chains lights tinsel onto the upward green doomed  
limbs the paint and glaze bright in amongst the masses  
of dark needles and our words in the dim air like scent  
bright like more ornaments in a kind of magical way:

new city budget manager Beth talking to mom  
they're both from Texas and mom's brother-in-  
law in Fairfield chairs the city council and  
Anne of Seattle I just moved in with talks to  
Jim of San Francisco her friend who's nervous  
for his lover silent beside him as pale as cream  
in this white straight room and mom's glad at  
my finding Anne after the divorce and I'm talking  
to Birch my friend since grade school who's  
marrying Nikki that we fought over one night  
there at his place by Walden in the Coast Range  
and the city lights now out the window shining  
from the hills south of New Geneva where Rufe  
Douglas back five generations settled and I'm  
still living here and all the while Nikki's  
kid Craig is hanging back by the walls while  
the grownups chat and eat and decorate and  
daddy is telling uncle Lee about Con Thien  
again quietly you know and I sort of listen  
but intensely enough so he stays after and is  
last leaving with her and Craig who grabs the  
plastic Virgin Mary from the Nativity scene  
on top of the stereo speaker and runs away  
down the hall of the seventh floor from Anne's  
condo and exits by a fire door and scales the  
last six floors to the top where he rears huge  
in the floodlights and screams defiantly and  
Birch and I follow and Birch looks up and just  
shakes his head indulgently and says look at

King Craig up there the crazy fool just like  
we were Lee.

and then it's down the chimney

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they call it a quad but really it's more kind of a modern cliff-dwelling like our very own local version of Mesa Verde that you climb the ladders of short, steep sections of stairs spiralling around square, brown corners up to not a cave or adobe home but this white-walled cell like our own local version of I'm not sure which secluded Orthodox monastery on which barren mountaintop in the Near East or Hellas itself with the monks' cells high up over the world like this place high up on the third floor looking out east over the surrounding at most two-story buildings of the campus area of New Geneva, Oregon, to see these same hills and mountains as from Anne's place on the seventh floor now that I stopped living with her after twelve months but still friends it's just I couldn't write in her world of lots of good friends and eating out and seeing plays and going on group hikes and doing church committee work and watching favorite TV shows and talking about new movies and seldom reading anything certainly nothing old or essential just like it was when I finally couldn't write any more living with Sarah so I had to divorce her not that I blame her either of them it's just I need to learn how not to let a beloved do that to me when she doesn't even know she does and you can't possibly explain it to her so it makes any sense and it's a shame because Sarah was a wonderful, visionary painter and we could share being artistic types together and we both loved the two daughters and could share that so I lost all that and with Anne besides the wonderful, savage fucking I suppose I liked best the hikes and camping trips to the Coast or the Cascades like that one last September with her and her gay friend Jim where we hiked-in eight steep miles including across creeks without bridges to Diane Lake and met on the way the three guys from Spokane with the fishing poles who told us about the frogs and sure enough as we neared the lake the trail was covered with thousands of tiny, clumsy, feeble, swarming frogs and before that the marvelous white fungus that bled red tears when Jim poked it and I called it

Our Lady of the Fungus shrine and we laughed because he was a renegade ex-Catholic unbeliever and next day at the lake the heron rising by surprise off the lake in the morning and the water beetles dancing their crazy underwater ballet of circles in the afternoon but Jim explained everything away whether frogs or fungus or birds or beetles by the purposefulness of the action as if that were all there was to it which caused me to engage him in conversation by the campfire the second night with the strange moon gibbous and rising across the lake and the thought of those bear or were they cougar tracks we'd found in the shore mud that morning lurking now in the darkness at the edge of the firelight and despite the rivalry Jim and I had going for Anne's attention and the fight I'd had with the two of them the first night because they objected when I peed behind a log within fifty feet of the lake while they had both that very same day dived into it to rinse off the trail grime and sweat which is something they wouldn't even let you do at a public swimming pool loaded with chlorine yet the two of us got past all that there in the beautiful, primeval starlight and discussed the nature of nature which he thought to be always purposeful yet felt to be miraculous and didn't put the two together into the mystery as I believed since I perceived so much gratuitous beauty to no particular purpose and gratuitous evil for cruel that such magnificence include the constant, ruthless snuffing out of lesser by greater amongst all the forest's creatures plant and animal and stone for I do not believe natural evil to differ from moral evil since the nature of the divine nature is revealed as much in either the human thus not containing appreciably more of it than the being of Mountain or stand of hundred foot fir or swarms of absurd, doomed frogs and Jim said I talked like a book he just read by a mystical naturalist lady which I took to be a compliment as I believe it was so we left it at that and he went into his tent leaving me with nature from the Enlightenment to date is reason or irrational or deterministic or absurd indifference or my mystery up until I recalled Walt's advice and by myself in the mystical moist night air looked up in perfect silence at the stars awhile then crawled into Anne's tent and slept and the next afternoon we went back down

and met a group coming up and I told them about the miracle of the frogs and the little Black kid among them exclaimed wow and raced on ahead and now here it is December and I'm alone in my room with my work the only thing I halfway believe in as a religious observance and I laugh to remember the one good corny joke Anne ever told me about how Mrs. Claus never had any children because Santa only comes once a year.

the day after that week in March when the weather had been so nice and everything had started blooming in earnest

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Catherine came back in the bedroom with the news about the traffic light you could see through the windows of the house next door where the neighbors were seldom around and rarely seen whenever they did come home, and she had observed that from our. I say our because I was moving in with her on April first and practically haunted the place even as it was, that from our kitchen window when you were standing at the sink you could see through their bathroom window and through the whole dim house in the grey morning light and out some window or other on the other side to the traffic light at 24th and Henderson which she stood there long enough to watch turn green from red and to red again before she came back to bed with the news and we snuggled up for a blessed little while.

One of those early  
moments on a summer  
evening when grace  
rings out to true  
lovers

---

her stockings were  
driving her  
bananas Kate  
said with  
the mineral  
water cherry  
essence hers  
and lime mine  
under our  
arms on the  
way back from  
the health  
food place  
called Genesis  
where the lady  
behind the  
counter laughed  
and asked,  
“Two long  
straws, right?”  
as she rang  
us out.

London turns out unexpectedly to be a good place to clean your toothbrush, just sort of stop everything and stand in one spot and do nothing but use your fingernail to chip out all the white gunk and dried crud you've let build up there in the States without finding time to do anything about it or time even to just go out and buy a new one for God's sake!

But then this kind of thing is happening to me a lot these days since leaving Sarah and with the divorce long since final, sort of like that lazy thunderstorm over Moscow last summer that somehow made clear for me, watching it from the fifth floor of the Hotel Kosmos, just what were the three main intellectual problems, or subjects rather of my existence, or sort of like that camping trip to Savage Creek Falls up the South Fork of the Kalapuya past Blueridge those few weeks ago with Catherine Howard where somehow the high forest and the fierce, white water let me know Cervantes, Rousseau, Hoffmann, Pushkin, Whitman, Heidegger, and Faulkner were the people some day or other I had to read absolutely all of in order to think about Oregon, theodicy, and the Gothic tale.

So that you see, as a consequence, I know out of all those scrambled eggs I've so to speak made in that kitchen, or rather getting into that courtroom, now the destined forms, or yellow and white lumps, appear, emerge really, from this fluid chaos in the iron pan, and my divinely scrambled eggs are done, are finally just so and ready, these the scrambled eggs of my authentic being!

And it does surprise me to say that the first thing I do after I get into my pleasant London room in the Kingsley Hotel on Bloomsbury Way, which room is my introduction to the way things tend to be subtly just right in England, nothing too much, nothing too little, and better err toward too little if one must err here (though even as I say this I now recall, as I loafe here in Paris in the Hotel California near Musée de Cluny, that there is this great, big, fat contrast between this London, the tasteful, understated London with its decent intentions

and good humor, and that other London, the world capital of weird haircuts where tribal madness ambles amok along every sidewalk, and where I go around insufferably smiling to myself and saying bizarre and grotesque and literally fantastic half the time at first, but then I really have always found too much pleasure in being démodé and perversely provincial); so anyway, it surprises me that even before I give supernally lovely Kate, with whom I now share an address back in New Geneva, Oregon, our first transatlantic and -continental call, as reclining with the phone in my hand I simultaneously watch the first cricket game for me ever, televised or otherwise, England in this instance losing to the West Indies, and I soon get the hang, if not the details, of this gentlest amusement which I maintain definitely derives from this England, the decent, Imperial one, not that England, the exuberantly absurd, Dickensian one, and tell her, Catherine, that I made it and it's fantastic, literally, and that I love her a lot and miss her already; even before doing that, I'm surprised that the very first thing I do instead is unpack the toiletry bag and clean out this blue toothbrush with unexpected relief.

These important things all done and the late afternoon still with us, I stroll down New Oxford Street and have a chance to bump hard into one of a bunch of glamor punks who purposely tries to get in my way, and I can feel how under that fierce garb and savage Mohican he hasn't much substance really, though one male punk says to a female punker after I go by that I was lucky, yet no one has moved a muscle, not even the one I creamed, in fact especially not him even though his girl friend is looking at him strangely, but having gotten the ever-recurring juvenile delinquency out of my system, I settle back down into middle age and avoid trouble and have a nice stroll, then eat some, what else?, roast beef and chips with stout bitter, and watch in the evening a BBC-2 movie called **Middle-Age Spread** about jogging, infidelity, alcohol, aging, and overeating in suburban England.

The following morning, my first in England and hot even for July, I wind up sitting in the Assyrian Saloon of the British Museum surrounded by the meanest-looking stone friezes you'll ever want to see, and I'm thinking about the beautiful

Willamette Valley idling between the volcanoes and the ocean and how it looked from the window of the tiny Horizon Air turbojet when I flew out, and about how the thing about cooking scrambled eggs is to know how much to stir and when to stop, but there's this fierce guard there in the saloon who asks everyone when they come in, though he didn't ask me, in a thick African accent why they're there?, and what are they doing there?. to which the people nonplussed sort of stammer that, uh, they want to see the stone pictures. yes, you know, the ancient sculpture, to which the guard grunts and resumes his immobility and his stony silence, which causes me to think, in the immortal words of Mae West concerning God, that he's a living doll, and I really do kind of like him because he truly belongs where he is, so I go on daydreaming there a nice, long while before I get up and move along to the room full of Egyptian mummies where the pretty, audibly English woman with the bizarre, red flat-top keeps staring at me, though I never do decide exactly why.

again I'm astounded how all connects not really the way one expects or realizes as how strange for instance to sit by green Charlemagne in front of Notre Dame with Zolotov at sunset talking there in Paris this summer about campus politics here in Oregon whence I'd just flown and he four months ago on an exchange and we both were happily agreeing how colleague Dwight Wong would live to be a hundred because of that bright laughter of his,

or how for instance in Munich when the monster hailstorm bashed in cartops and windows and put holes in airplane wings the evening after the sweltering afternoon Günther von Schmidt of Bücher Zumwalt had been telling about the aerial bombing (in planes made in Seattle and flown by guys like my dad I remarked in the belief dark ironies were okay over there) and dad maybe did pilot one of those B-17's over Munich since that's the kind of thing he did during the war and strange how that forty-year-old twin-engine ex-military plane cruising over the little park on the north side of Musée de Cluny in the Quartier latin had somehow made me imagine the horror dad would never describe to his fascinated sons,

or how I stayed on the rive gauche in the Hotel California near the Sorbonne and then finally fixed my tape deck when I got home so that when I went to pick up my two young daughters in Sacramento the next Christmas we listened to the Eagles sing "Hotel California" a dozen times driving back north on I-5 and I had to laugh remembering old Théodore Delarue of Monde du livre opining in Montparnasse over lunch, after he'd pinched his standing wife's bottom before our table of seated males, that American women were like "squi-ri-i-ique" he said grimacing and twisting his fists in opposite directions one on top the other but Sarah didn't win she can't

stop me from seeing Susan and Eleanor and now she has to grant me joint custody and twice as much visitation the California court says,

or how I walked past 65 rue Richelieu by chance on the way back from talking with Madame Avril at the Bibliothèque nationale and a little blue plaque said Stendhal had lived there while writing **Le Rouge et le noir** about which work I'd once presented a paper at a regional foreign language conference in Las Vegas after having been urged to the task by Professor Garnier who ended up dying in spring eighty-one in his late fifties the same time dad did,

or how the Andean flute-players in front of the Centre Pompidou had entranced several dozen of us and a middle-aged French lady with a flowing scarf had towards the end begun to dance like something out of eternity and I'd remembered those enchanted six months Sarah and I'd had in gringo-haunted Jalisco when it was just the two of us and we were in love though next Friday Kate and I move into the charming two-story and everything's different,

or how when Zolotov finished telling me all about the architectural triumph of the medieval facade before us in the subtlety of the gathering twilight and after the sublimest session of sweet silent thought I told him what fascinated me most there on that square was the manifold private fictions everyone had followed to come together here from all corners of the earth and do this fantastical, magical, outrageously touristical, ineffable thing with one another and that it was all there, dwelling, latent, invocable in the power of the word Paris.

the fatal starfish

---

time is both the healer and the disease is  
what Acorn says when I'm visiting him in his  
hospital room in Immaculate Heart after the  
quintuple bypass and he likes the card I sent  
him with the purple and orange starfish on  
the wet black rocks and tells me he sent the  
same card precisely to his young daughter in  
Boston where her mother lives and I think of  
my two young daughters with their mother in  
the foothills near Sacramento and of when I  
met her in Acorn's colleague's Wong's class  
those incomprehensible years ago

and now Anne  
I lived with for a couple years after the  
divorce has married a nice boy her own age  
and recently mothered a perfect daughter so  
I sent her a starfish card before Acorn's  
which I sent because I'd liked the one for  
her so much with the two big pink starfish  
and the little purple one on the rocks with  
the oceansurf in the background

and Acorn tells  
me about the dream he had the night before  
the operation where a Black woman scolds him  
for telling her she can escape her folk's  
story and a white horse comes for him but he  
won't mount which brings Mexico oddly to mind  
and the women washing clothes on the shore  
of Laguna Chapala and the friendly caballero  
who went riding with the young American  
women

so I wish Acorn well and leave by the  
corridors I left by when dad was dying here  
in the same building where I was born and  
I sit down a block away at the campus bus  
kiosk not waiting for a bus but remembering  
how Kate I live with now and her son Nate  
and I went the merry three of us for the  
second straight year to the tidepools on

the coast near Beulah in a steady April  
drizzle to see the many orange and purple  
and pink starfish in the dark clear water.

a glimpse into the heart of  
time and sex before making  
toast

---

I walked into Ernie's  
the night after I  
left Sarah and before  
meeting Anne pretty drunk  
and got pretty drunker  
and sitting at the bar  
was trying to score  
you know, impress the  
whatever off some nice  
person or other and  
forget the middle of  
the muddle of the  
divorce I was in  
so there was she  
gracing her stool like  
Nefertiti the throne or  
Basho's frog her rock  
and we got into a  
discourse and such and  
she agreed to drive  
me home but then I  
tricked her up into  
the Bowdoin rhodies and  
stole a sweet kiss  
which enraged her only  
a little and so forth  
O mature and merciful angel!  
but just asked me to  
cut it out and tell  
her where she should  
take me which I  
did because I really  
wasn't a creep but  
before we'd left Ernie's  
she'd said what even  
after I did transgress  
the tulips of her mouth

and receive forgiveness  
remained as the utterance  
of the prophetess. I  
hoped:  
    “You're gonna please  
a few ladies, my friend,  
before you're through.”

almost good-bye at Haystack Rock

---

I haven't written about her much I realize now.

I do not blush to say it was love at first sight the only time ever for me that April at the welcoming party for her at Emily Gordon's house and two years eight months later she left with little Nate in early January to take a better job in Ohio but there's not much written about those nearly three years we had which for me is strange.

We met at the welcoming party in the big white house and the moment our eyes met we knew though she would only admit it on rare occasions but she did she knew we both did at the same moment the first our eyes met that we were one as if in some other more ideal world we had always been one.

We weren't very compatible in this less ideal world.

The love was so compelling that two months after meeting I was sleeping more nights at her house than at my own apartment though sleeping maybe doesn't exactly cover it but it wasn't until a year later that she asked me actually to move in which I did and then seven months later we moved to the nice two-story white house on Rose Street where we lived over a year until she got the offer and took off for Columbus.

Leaving Oregon for Ohio wasn't my idea of a good idea going against the grain as it does reversing the trek of the pioneers undoing the deed of great-great-grandpa Rufe Douglas besides which having myself been in Columbus one summer and seen it the idea did not appeal but so

great was my love for Kate I probably would have gone with her to her better job if things hadn't been so difficult between us if in fact it hadn't seemed we'd split up even if she stayed.

The love we had was so strong and overriding yet we fought so often and hard about everything two people living together can fight over like about who pays how much for what, who gets how much of the living space, whose kids get what priority, who does which chores, whose pictures hang on what wall, whether blue jays in Oregon should really be called scrub jays, whether it's bad or good there are more insects in Pennsylvania where she'd come here from, whether I showed I cared about her enough, whether she confused me by wanting to be both an independent professional woman in a fifty-fifty relationship and a dependent Southern belle which she'd been raised to be growing up affluent in Virginia whose man would cater to her and be the soul of chivalry, whether she should tell me when something was bothering her instead of growing incomprehensibly cold and resentful and blowing up about it two weeks later, whether I should stop drinking alcohol altogether because it turned me into a brute a Mr. Hyde, and so on we never ran out of things to feel estranged about which made life together deeply in love but ever rubbing each other wrong a slow torture and Nate didn't help with his intense jealousy of the attention his mom gave me and his anger at her for taking him away from his daddy so that he and I could never get past a certain point and I have to confess the urge to strangle was difficult to suppress about the sixteenth time he interrupted me when I was trying to tell his mom something and it all kind of almost came to a head there that end of August last year after we'd taken my Susan eleven and Eleanor eight to the Portland airport for the flight

back to Sacramento and ten-year-old Nate was still out East with his daddy and Kate and I went to spend a week in the Norseman Motel just outside of Cannon Beach where we had a second story room with a view of the surf and Haystack Rock the third largest monolith in the world the place where we nearly said good-bye.

The wind was warm off the sea the moon full the beach magical in the starlight the mountains like Mexico like Laguna Chapaia only thick and dark with trees and the next day hiking along Tillamook Head we could see for miles and the abandoned lighthouse was right in front of us the one Kate had read a book about and had told me how dangerous it was to build it or get a man onto it sitting as it does on a rock away from shore in the violent waves and it was there she said she wanted to move out to split up end it all she couldn't take any more it was too hard I wanted love the way I needed it not the way she could give it she said and I said she polarized the whole thing into our relationship versus the rest of her life her job child extended family past future but I cast away all pride and reason and pleaded with her not to go I'd do anything not do anything be whatever she wanted only just please don't leave me and she hadn't the heart to do it so we just barely didn't part.

The rest of that week was supernaturally seamlessly effortless fluid gliding we woke each morning to the clamor of gulls on the rooftop outside our window and went into town to eat where every other place was named after someone Fred's Food Donnie's Market Elaine's Gallery Mary's Cafe Bill's Gas and we went into a few art galleries and strolled on the beach next to Haystack Rock the striking color of which turned out to be bird poop and made the rock best beheld from a distance and gaggles of kids on rented three-wheel recliner bikes

with bright little flags flapping from high poles fastened to the seats wandered aimlessly and joyfully over the eternal beach and we stopped at the public library where I read about Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the Durants' **Story of Civilization** and we climbed Neahkanie Mountain which was the reason Kate first wanted to come to Cannon Beach when she read about this mountain rising straight up from the sea right after she got to Oregon and over two years later we had made it just before she would leave as it turned out and later in the week we drove up to Seaside and walked along the Prom and to Astoria and stood on the hilltop in the middle of town from where we could see the mouth of the Columbia and Kate was disappointed that the town was not a more impressive or charming place because she had fantasized about Astoria and the mouth of the great Western river ever since U.S. history classes in high school in Virginia and at night every night the whole week the moon like over Santa Fe on the beach in front of our motel and the wind warm off the ocean like I'd never before known it to be on the Oregon Coast and one night we watched oldies on TV Bob Cummings George and Gracie Allen Dobie Gillis where Maynard turns into Mr. Hyde and we made the sweetest love the most complete sex just as if all the tension had never been and never would be again.

Two or three days of this existence were sufficient to render me philosophical I had climbed Neahkanie not to conquer it but as a gesture of love for the mountain the flotsam along the edge of the Pacific the flow of the world the uncertainty of events in our lives not destiny versus freedom but accept destiny consciously to have freedom to change it Susan had said she accepted her destiny Sartre said you are what you do Eleanor said what Frank Sinatra said dooby dooby doo modern science

climbs the mountain but doesn't love it is dedicated to serving man not the whole of Being and there was always death dad was dead four years now from cancer though he'd always seemed invincible and that twenty years ago when I made the doctor do a biopsy on a tiny not very dark mole because I was so afraid of death this fragile consciousness built in the void live towards death and live truly there is divinity in the world despite death and evil because I need for there to be though I have no idea what the truth is and no way of knowing what it is and even the tiny things of this week seemed significant and auspicious and perfect like even how the instructions on the towel machine in the men's room at Fred's Food were in English and French everything conspiring to encourage the exercise of that spiritual faculty in us that responds to and creates Bibles Sutras Upanishads Korans Shaman sayings and other images of the unimaginable.

The week of course ended and we went back to New Geneva and kept on living together and going to work together to the University Library where she was a cataloger and I was a bibliographer and Nate came back from Pennsylvania and we limped along together through the fall until December when the offer from Ohio State came for her twenty five percent more pay supervisory responsibility chance for advancement she couldn't refuse and I didn't try to make her and wouldn't have even if our relationship had been working great because I won't stand in the way of the growth of anyone I love and it was funny how once she had mailed in her acceptance all the tension between us went away all the love found a place in the everyday world like she could relax because she was sure the love wouldn't trap her strand her way out here on the Western rim of the world and I could ignore irritations because I knew they weren't precedents would soon be gone and our love was so simple then

so constantly sweet why couldn't it always be so?

My girls flew up for Christmas like they always do or at least have always done since the years ago their mother moved them to Sacramento and then Auburn and so they got a chance to be with Kate and little Nate for over a week before we all left for Ohio or California on the same morning and all of us exchanged gifts on Christmas and danced and sang on New Year's Eve and there were strange signs magical psychic incidents that said there were forces disturbed that all this was breaking up like the way the two hand-painted china cups fell off the bric-a-brac in my mom's dining room and broke at the same instant as Nate yelled when Susan walked in on him by accident in the bathroom down the hall or how late at night I saw the weird lights flitting around the bedroom like ghosts in the house on Rose Street and Eleanor screamed downstairs where she'd woken up which she almost never does and said the window was weird and scared her or how my key got strangely stuck in my ignition when Kate went with me to rent my new place in the southwest hills with the great view and we had to call the locksmith but there were good signs too like how the air was clear and clean on New Year's Day after the violent storm the night before which ended two weeks of extreme inversion and terrible air quality or how my new apartment was number thirteen and I had \$77.77 in checking three days before Kate left or how Kate got the same message from the **I Ching** four times in a row that we were doing the right thing which was hard and it would turn out well if we proceeded in a spirit of endurance humility and mutual sympathy and it has it mostly has turned out well she's very happy in her new job and Nate's happy he gets to see his daddy more and I'm much happier and more productive in my new place which is not far from where great-great-grandpa

Rufe's old cabin was and Susan and Eleanor are happy they have their very own rooms with their very own beds in their daddy's very own place with a pool room a swimming pool a tennis court and a million dollar view of the city and the mountains and the whole deal really is okay like the oracle kept telling us it would be.

Last weekend I called her Memorial Day weekend being literal-minded I was remembering and phoned and we caught up and the magic was still there the crazy lovely magic that still defies the facts the impossible circumstances that still fills our hearts I can feel hers filling it resonates in her voice suffuses our hearts with joy and longing the wonderful stubborn magic that tells us somehow we haven't yet really said good-bye.

when Emily Gordon asked me out to that  
movie it was the call back to life

after

almost eleven years with Sarah and almost  
three years with Anne and now just ended  
the almost three years with Kate I'd been  
feeling afraid of the world of women of  
any and all entanglements

Basil was telling  
me he didn't want me sticking his nose into  
anyone else's business that he couldn't  
get up for it

then Emily took me to see

***Journey to Bountiful*** and I began to feel  
motivated I started jogging again lost  
weight reached out to people and Basil  
began standing up straight when I talked  
to him

even going to that wedding with Emily  
and her girls Nora and Margaret couldn't  
scare Basil off

and even though Emily and I  
are just friends waiting to see since she's  
mired in the middle of the classic messy  
divorce and neither one of us should get  
very involved right now still it was she who  
breathed the life back into this storm-zapped  
body electric of mine

and I remember when she  
told me on the phone after I said there was  
a huge rainbow out my window to hang onto  
that rainbow but now there are lots of rainbows  
this place is good for rainbows and deer out  
the kitchen window a young buck with two  
velvety points a doe standing on her hind legs  
to eat the wild cherries and I jog with Vuk  
and Leylah by the Willamette River and sing  
"Good-Night Irene" at the top of my lungs and  
make them laugh at this exotic Oregon wild  
man and his great notions again.

Howard W. Robertson is a poet, novelist, librarian, and father. Three of his great-great-grandfathers arrived in Eugene City, Oregon, in 1853, two by covered wagon and the other by undetermined means. Mr. Robertson was born in Eugene in 1947 and by some pleasant oversight of destiny has ended up living most of his adult life there. He began writing poetry at the age of seventeen while teaching himself to type, though that was the first and last time he has ever successfully composed on a typewriter. Over the years, he has made many apparently foolish decisions motivated by the need to find his own poetic voice. Receiving two degrees from the University of Oregon and one from USC has failed to open his eyes to the palpably misguided nature of his existence; he persists in believing he is following a straight course of steady development as a writer. Visits to Mexico, Western Europe, and the Soviet Union, and time spent in Colorado and Southern California, have been important experiences for him, but the Oregon experience remains central to his work. His poems are not actually his but rather those of Lee Douglas, who resides in New Geneva, Oregon, together with a number of personages about whom Mr. Robertson and he write. The essential theme of their work is that living is a beautiful and terrible mystery that is best faced with humor, endurance, and love. They are currently working on a novel entitled **Dracula's Oregon Divorce**.



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