

EXPLORING A NEW NARRATIVE INQUIRY APPROACH:
“NARRATIVE AS RESEARCH (NAR)”

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THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENT OF THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In the
Faculty of Education

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

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Simon Fraser University
Spring 2012

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Abstract

Narrative is an ancient practice still woven throughout our modern society in a myriad forms ranging from novels to computer games, yet the field of narrative inquiry is among the youngest of research approaches, and hence among the most swiftly evolving. This dissertation explores a newly emerging form of narrative inquiry in an education context, “Narrative as Research (NAR).”

The dissertation first examines the familiar form of narrative inquiry in an education context, which draws upon standard research instruments (e.g., interviews, journals), engages with collaborative participants, and subsequently restories the participants’ experiences via narrative composition. I term this approach, “Research as Narrative (RAN),” and examine it in terms of: Dissemination and Audience; Data Collection and Analysis; Purpose Statement and Themes; Narrative as Experience; Language and Narrative Form; Subjectivity and Generalizability; Evaluation Criteria; Companion Academic Document (CAD).

I then explore the newly emerging NAR approach using the same discussion topics (i.e., Dissemination and Audience, et al.), juxtaposing NAR against RAN. In contrast to RAN, in which the narrative composition process is secondary and collaboration with research participants is vital, NAR foregrounds the narrative composition process as the primary means of knowledge gathering and does not rely upon collaborative participants.

After this exploration of NAR, I engage in NAR via three novellas of my own composition. These novellas involve my entwined fields of academic interest as a researcher: education, art, and fiction.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is with deep gratitude that I acknowledge that this dissertation could not possibly have navigated its way safely to port without the wisdom, understanding, and patience of two people: my supervisor, Doctor Heesoon Bai; and my committee member, Doctor Carl Leggo.

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A Note to the Reader

Practitioners of narrative inquiry face a decision in the presentation of their work regarding whether or not to present the fiction portion of their research before any accompanying theory sections or afterward. I examine considerations associated with this issue of fiction placement in a narrative inquiry context within my dissertation section “CAD Placement,” wherein I also provide examples of other narrative inquiry practitioners’ approaches to the relative positioning of their theory and fiction sections. In “CAD Placement,” I furthermore express the reasons why I chose to situate my narrative inquiry’s fiction component within this dissertation’s Chapter 2.

The reader of this dissertation, however, should consider their own motivations and tastes and decide for themselves whether to read this dissertation in the sequence it is presented or to jump to Chapter 2 and read the fiction component first.

CHAPTER 1: THEORY

Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2)

Narrative is not only woven throughout our modern society in a myriad forms ranging from novels to computer games, narrative is the ancient loom on which humans originally wove human culture itself, for narrative aided humanity in organizing our experiences in order to make sense of the worlds around us and within our consciousness (Bruner, 1986). Yet, despite narrative's modern ubiquity and ancient roots, the field of narrative inquiry is among the youngest of research approaches, and hence among the most swiftly evolving. Working within this young field of ancient roots, I shall explore a new narrative inquiry approach, one which is centered more fully in the fiction composition process as it is experienced by the fiction writer. I term this newly emerging form of narrative inquiry "Narrative as Research" or NAR, contrasting it with the more common approach to narrative inquiry in an education context, which I term "Research as Narrative," or RAN.

Narrative inquiry as a distinct research approach did not spring fully formed from the mind of any particular theorist; instead, narrative inquiry gradually coalesced, a child of many parents. The forebears of narrative inquiry span a vast chronological range, from remote antecedents such as Aristotle, who analysed narrative theory in *Poetics* (Aristotle, trans. 1967); to pioneers of modern education research such as Dewey (1916, 1938), who believed that life

itself constituted an act of education and who advocated analysing human experience in both individual and group contexts; to contemporary theorists such as Connelly and Clandinin (1990), who first used the term ‘narrative inquiry’ in an educational research context. Even as they minted the term ‘narrative inquiry,’ Connelly and Clandinin (1990) noted that narrative inquiry “has a long intellectual history both in and out of education” (p. 2) in the sense that the basic concept of narrative inquiry had been discussed in other fields under other names. These other names include: narrative unity (MacIntyre, 1981); narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1988); literary ideas of narrative (Coles, 1989). In keeping with its diverse heritage, narrative inquiry now manifests in diverse forms within a variety of disciplines, such as anthropology, hermeneutics, phenomenology (Josselson, 2006), psychology, sociology, medicine, literature, and cultural studies (Riessman, 1993; Mishler, 1995); organizational theory (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000); and within a wide range of humanities and other fields as “narratology” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 35; Ricœur, 1980). And narrative inquiry continues to advance, enjoying a “remarkable, meteoric rise... still dazzling as it races into new fields and disciplines” (Lyons, 2007, p. 600).

The modern entry of narrative into the domain of research reflected the shifting of tectonic forces in the world of scientific inquiry. Clandinin (2007) declares that narrative has historically been viewed as a legitimate means of gaining knowledge, but that

inside the university, narrative ways of knowing fell from favour early in the 20th century and have only in the past 30 years begun to reemerge as a legitimate field of study, means of communication, and orientation toward truth. Their reemergence is due to several key trends—a mounting critique of the enlightenment philosophies that underlie positive epistemologies, close studies of

scientific practice and its relationship to scientific rhetoric, growing attention to the histories of the social sciences, and a more robust debate about who owns the stories that have traditionally been the raw material of social science research.

(pp. 25-26)

This recent emergence of narrative as a field of inquiry, and its attendant nascent popularity as a form of doctoral dissertation (Duke & Beck, 1999), also reflects a frustration with the limitations of paradigms such as post-positivism, which is “focused on gaining a consensus about human reality, and thus doesn’t deal with hate, love, personal meaning etc” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 44), and a revolt against twentieth-century education approaches such as those of Thorndike, who popularized the attempt to observe and represent human behaviour numerically (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In contrast, “Narrative unity gave us a way to think in a more detailed and informative way about the general construct of continuity in individuals’ lives” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 3); and as Eisner asserts, “you [can] say in a novel what you cannot say in a set of integers” (cited in Saks, 1996, p. 403). Moreover, narrative inquiry accords well with post-structuralism’s focus upon “the linguistic and narrative structure of knowledge” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 52). Post-modernism concurs that narrative is a means of knowledge validated by history and yet scorned by certain scientific viewpoints to the detriment of understanding in general:

In the first place, scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to, and in competition and conflict with, another kind of knowledge, which I will call narrative.... I do not mean to say that narrative knowledge can prevail over science, but its model is related to

ideas of internal equilibrium and conviviality next to which contemporary scientific knowledge cuts a poor figure. (Lyotard, 1984, p. 7)

Although I agree with the spirit of what Lyotard is asserting, I note that although narrative may be regarded as standing apart from science, narrative is nevertheless not intrinsically external to the pursuit of research, per the logic expressed by Eisner: “I do not define research as a species of science. I define science as a species of research.” (cited in Saks, 1996, p. 409). In keeping with Eisner’s logic, narrative in specific (and art in general) can be seen as siblings to science in the family of research.

On a personal level, I became interested in narrative inquiry due to my engagement in two professions, writing and education. My eventual desire to engage in the innovative narrative inquiry approach that I have now named ‘NAR’ arose from the intersection of three related but distinct observations I made as a writer, writing student, and educational scholar.

I drew the first of these observations as a creative writing student and as a writer engaged with the writing community, when I discovered that many persons presently writing fiction possessed only a wan or non-existent desire to publish their fiction writing, even though many of these people were writing quite avidly. This seemed odd to me, this phenomenon of the writer who does not seek to share the product of their love and labour with readers, and yet I have come to find that it is a widespread one—so much so that I have come to suspect that these persons who pursue writing beyond the spotlight of the publishing scene may actually constitute a majority of the people presently putting the idiomatic pen to paper. During my M.Ed. research on creative writing education techniques, I discovered that several of the fiction writing students who served as my volunteer research participants possessed this seemingly incongruous desire to write fiction but not to seek to share their fiction with a readership via publication, and I was

moved to explore their motivations. Eventually, I distilled a motivational portrait of such student writers, in which I differentiated these fiction writers from other fiction writers based upon whether or not they sought readers for their writing. The first of these types I labelled “Reader Role Viewpoint 1” writers, since they sought an audience of readers for their fiction; the second type, I termed “Reader Role Viewpoint 2” writers:

Reader Role Viewpoint 2 (a.k.a Type 2): The [creative writing] student does not seek readers because the student writes to satisfy personal needs, e.g., personal exploration and growth. The student does not craft their writing to suit the tastes of others.... Writing is practice, e.g., a self-exploration discipline. (Young, 2003, p. 127)

These non-publishing writers were not only to be found within creative writing courses, they were numerous within the public writing groups I patronized. And indeed, several professors in the education faculties of both my graduate education universities were engaging in fiction writing for their own personal purposes.

I observed that this sort of writer often had a familiarity with two famous individuals who had written bestselling books about fiction writing: Natalie Goldberg, author of several books, including *Writing Down the Bones* and *Wild Mind*; and Julia Cameron, author of *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*. Goldberg's and Cameron's approaches to writing, I discovered, focused upon fiction writing not as a means of publishing, but as a personal learning process involving exploring one's self through creativity in general and writing in specific (Goldberg, 1986, 1990; Cameron, 1992). Although I had—and continue to have—reservations about many of Goldberg's and Cameron's theories (particularly about the correctness of fit between these theories and the needs of writers who aim at publishing), I came to recognize that

utilizing writing as a means of personal exploration and growth constitutes a very fine use of the art.

Intrigued by the notion that fiction writing could be a means of personal exploration, I became interested in the burgeoning educational research field of narrative inquiry, which draws upon fiction writing as a means of exploring both the self and others. As a writer and educator, I found myself intrigued by narrative inquiry's ability to explore a topic both *as* narrative and *using* narrative. Yet, my studies revealed that the most common approaches to narrative inquiry in an educational research context tend to be inquiry first and narrative second, in the sense that the researchers utilize traditional data collection methods such as interviews and document analysis (albeit with an eye toward narrative elements such as character and conflict), and only afterward produces a narrative, primarily as an instrument of disseminating their findings. ('Primarily,' though not totally, as I shall later discuss.) This 'inquiry first, narrative second' approach accorded with the majority of narrative inquiry practitioners, given that they are typically researchers foremost and fiction writers secondarily. In contrast, my full-time grounding in the profession of fiction writing predated my entry into the educational research field, my educational research field focuses upon creative writing, and I remain a full-time professional ghost writer and a writer of my own fiction—I am a writer first and a research secondarily.

These three factors—my awareness of the burgeoning modern practice of utilizing fiction writing as a means of personal learning and exploration; my research exposure to the new and evolving field of narrative inquiry; my personal orientation as a fiction writer foremost—intersected within my imagination to inspire thoughts of a new approach to narrative inquiry: a narrative inquiry approach directly grounded upon the fiction composition process as a writer

experiences it (i.e., fiction composition as a *primary* means of learning), as opposed to the fiction composition process as an education researcher typically experiences it (i.e., fiction composition as a *secondary* means of learning that supplements traditional research techniques such as interviews and textual analysis). Metaphorically expressed, standard narrative inquiry represents the research world taking a step into the writing realm, but the new approach to narrative inquiry metaphorically constitutes the writing realm taking a step into the world of research. This new form of narrative inquiry observes most aspects of the more familiar narrative inquiry form, but features several key differences, e.g., the decoupling of the researcher's inquiry and voice from the experience and voice of collaborative participants. Through my research, I discovered that this evolved approach to narrative inquiry has already been tentatively pioneered by others, and I shall discuss examples, e.g., Leggo (2005) and Sameshima (2006); yet, this form of narrative inquiry remains in its infancy.

The purpose of this research dissertation is to explore and help delineate this new form of narrative inquiry which foregrounds the fiction composition process, in contrast to more established styles of narrative inquiry in an education context, which draw upon standard research instruments (e.g., interviews, journals) and utilize narrative composition secondarily, mostly as a means of disseminating findings. I term this newer approach as "Narrative as Research (NAR)," while I term the familiar narrative inquiry approach as "Research as Narrative' (RAN)." I shall first outline the typical format of RAN, then examine select research issues as they manifest in a RAN context: Dissemination and Audience; Data Collection and Analysis; Purpose Statement and Themes; Narrative as Experience; Language and Narrative Form; Subjectivity and Generalizability; Evaluation Criteria; Companion Academic Document (CAD). This examination of RAN shall include observations of its opportunities and challenges,

and an alternative conceptualization of certain elements of the most familiar RAN approach. Subsequently, I will explore the NAR research approach by examining NAR in terms of the same research topics I examined vis-à-vis RAN, hence juxtaposing NAR against RAN. After this outlining of NAR's structure, I will engage in a personal trial of NAR featuring three novellas of my own composition (which will explore topics in my field of educational interest: education, art, and fiction).

This dissertation offers the promise of helping delineate the characteristics a new method of narrative inquiry—one intended not to replace the traditional forms of narrative inquiry, but rather to add a new hue to the spectrum of narrative inquiry approaches. I believe that NAR would be a particularly useful research approach for educational researchers with a creative writing background, given that they would be more likely to have developed the fiction composition skills that are key in fulfilling the promise of NAR.

Qualitative research in general, and artistic inquiry and narrative inquiry in specific, are very flexible in form and manifest in many contexts. This thesis cannot hope to list all the chimeric manifestations and contexts of narrative inquiry, let alone examine them, and hence this thesis's examination of narrative inquiry must be understood to be focused solely upon the education research context. Furthermore, the educational research field itself encompasses a wide variety of narrative inquiry approaches, and hence this thesis will sometimes qualify its assertions as being focused only on the most familiar narrative inquiry forms in an educational context; however, such qualifying allusions to the protean nature of narrative inquiry in an educational research context could prove tiresome, and I have hence been strategic in deploying them. Accordingly, I urge the reader to bear in mind that (unless otherwise noted) this thesis's allusions to the extant form of narrative inquiry do not presume to encompass all the

manifestations of narrative inquiry within an educational research context, but only the most familiar form of narrative inquiry used in education research (which I shall describe and label as ‘RAN’).

Furthermore, my personal observations about the familiar RAN approach are not criticisms in pursuit of reform, I am not suggesting that the NAR approach should supplant any other narrative inquiry approach, and my outline of the innovative NAR research approach is not intended to be rigidly prescriptive. Rather, in the spirit of qualitative research, I feel that my observations and assertions constitute suggestions which can be (and should be) adapted by other researchers to accommodate their idiosyncratic, ever-evolving research goals.

This thesis’s comments regarding narrative composition and other forms of art assume that the art being discussed is executed with a reasonable competence and is reasonably representative of its art form. Perpetually qualifying my statements by pointing out the potential existence of atypical instances would prove tiresome, and hence the reader should be aware that this thesis’s statements allude to typical manifestations of art and not to all art at all times and in all places.

This dissertation uses the terms “qualitative research” and “quantitative research.” The author’s use of these terms is intended to access their widely recognized meanings. An illustrative chart of qualitative research and quantitative research follows.

Table 1. Characteristics of Quantitative and Qualitative Research. (McMillan, 2000, pp. 10-11)

	<i>Quantitative</i>	<i>Qualitative</i>
Other terms or phrases associated with the phrase	Positivist Experimental Hard Data Statistical	Naturalistic Field Research Ethnographic Phenomenological Anthropological Ecological Case study Interpretive Constructivist
Key Concepts	Variable Operationalized Controlled Reliable Valid Statistically Significant Replicated Hypothesized	Meaning Understanding Social construction Context
Academic Affiliation	Agriculture Psychology Political Science Economics Basic Sciences	Anthropology History Sociology
Goals	Test theory Establish facts Show relationships Predict Statistically describe	Grounded theory Develop understanding Describe multiple realities Capture naturally occurring behaviour
Design	Structured Predetermined Formal Specific	Evolving Flexible General
Sample	Large Representative Random selection Control groups Stratified	Small Nonrepresentative Purposeful
Data	Quantities Counts Measures/instruments Numbers Statistics	Verbal descriptions Field notes Observations Documents Photographs People's own words Narrative
Techniques or Methods	Experiments Quasi-Experiments Structured observations Structured interviews Surveys	Observation Participant Observation Open-ended interviewing Review of documents and artifacts
Role of researcher	Distant Short-term	Close Long-term

	Detached Uninvolved	Involved Trusting Intense
Data Analysis	Deductive Statistical	Inductive Ongoing Stress models, themes, and concepts

Narrative Inquiry Fundamentals

Arts inquiry in general and narrative inquiry in specific are research approaches so new and so eclectic that an exploration within these fields requires key operational definitions for clarity. I shall hence examine the concepts of ‘narrative’ and ‘narrative inquiry’ to establish research boundaries.

Narrative

Defining narrative is such a difficult task that Riessman and Speedy (2007), taking up the challenge, nevertheless warn, “We caution readers not to expect a simple, clear definition of narrative here that can cover all applications” (p. 428), and they further lament, “the term has come to mean anything and everything” (p. 428). Indeed, the task of defining narrative is paradoxically complicated by the potential simplicity of the denotative definition: narrative is the telling of a story (Narrative, n.d.). But this definition’s simplicity risks being profitlessly all-encompassing; for example, the famous photograph of a napalm-burned child fleeing a bombed Vietnamese village is rightly said to tell a story, so should we consider that image a narrative? Indeed, by this simple standard, a deer hoofprint in the forest could tell a story and hence qualify as a narrative. As pleasant as the implications of such a holistic definition of narrative are in contemplation, this definition is too general to be useful in a research context.

One of the keys to refining the concept of narrative as it is typically used in a qualitative research context lies in the chronological nature of the story told: a narrative expresses a story in a chronological sequence. This concept was expressed by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, as he described an ideal narrative as possessing a beginning, middle, and end (Aristotle, trans. 1967), and modern narrative inquiry theorists have further embraced the notion of narrative as a chronological sequencing, “A narrative recounts a story, a series of events in a temporal sequence” (Cohan & Shires, 1988, p. 1).

Another potential differentiating characteristic of narrative involves a focus upon humans: “narrative is composed of unique sequences of events, mental states, happenings involving human beings as characters or actors” (Bruner, 1986, p. 43). Yet, the mainstream fiction canon does indeed include books that feature no human characters, such as the rabbit society of *Watership Down* and the spirits and talking animals of humankind’s mythological storytelling heritage. Nevertheless, I consider a human-centric focus to be a viable defining characteristic of narrative, if we consider that there must either be human characters or *human-symbolizing* characters, as are the rabbits in *Watership Down* and the animals and spirits in the ancient myths.

To further locate the operational definition of ‘narrative,’ the term can be understood in its historical context as one of the four traditionally recognized rhetorical modes, the other three modes being: exposition; argumentation; description (Connors, 1997). ‘Exposition’ means “providing information on, describing, or explaining a subject to a reader” (Marshall, 2012, p. 104). ‘Expository writing’ is “any form of writing that involves exposition, that is, providing information on, describing, or explaining a subject to your reader” (Marshall, 2012, p. 104). The differentiation between the four rhetorical modes is widely observed in academic rhetorical

writing pedagogy, and it includes a further defining characteristic of narrative: narrative is fiction, not a mere recapitulation of events.

Even in light of these qualifying characteristics (i.e., tells a story; is chronologically ordered; has human characters; is fiction), our definition of narrative remains quite broad, for it would still encompass “novels, short stories, films, television shows, myths, anecdotes, songs, music videos, comics, paintings, advertisements, essays, biographies, and news accounts” (Cohan & Shires, 1988, p. 1); and this list will continue to grow with the advance of new media forms such as computer games and internet webisodes. But whereas identifying characteristics of narrative is possible and pointing out specific examples of narrative in culture is extravagantly easy, precisely defining the term ‘narrative’ remains nearly impossible—so much so that Clandinin and Connelly (2000), in their keystone work *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, explicitly refuse to tilt at that particular windmill, “we wish to make clear that we are *not* setting out to define narrative” (p. 49), while Clandinin and Murphy (2007), after discussions with Mishler, Polkinghorne, and Lieblich, affirm, “we cannot police the boundaries of narrative inquiry” (p. 636). And so, I shall join them in leaving the parameters of narrative generally indicated and not precisely delineated.

Narrative Inquiry

By undertaking narrative inquiry, I entered into a research field known by several names and demarcated by loosely defined boundaries that encompass multiple art forms. Cole and Knowles (2001) use the general term “arts-informed research” or “arts-informed inquiry”:

Most of the research we now conduct we define as ‘arts-informed inquiry’ and a good portion of it is life history research. By this we mean research that seeks to

understand the complex relationships between individuals' lives and the contexts within which their lives are shaped and expressed. (p. 214)

Citing the widespread usage of the terms 'arts-based research' and 'arts-informed research,' de Mello (2007) notes that these two terms are typically viewed as synonymous, but then she suggests that a useful differentiation could be made: the term 'arts-based research' could be applied when art is the foundation of the entire research project, including the field texts of the data-gathering process (e.g., arts-based research might involve having students compose stories or create paintings about their experience, which are subsequently analysed); in contrast, 'arts-informed research' would draw upon art to analyse field texts or artefacts that are themselves not art (e.g., transcripts of interviews with students could be analysed in terms of narrative considerations such as conflict and character). By this standard, the two narrative inquiry approaches that I shall term as RAN and NAR could be viewed as 'arts-informed' and 'arts-based,' respectively, since RAN typically uses non-artistic field texts that only subsequently generate fiction, whereas NAR is based more fully in the art of fiction composition.

Richardson (2000) categorizes writing as inquiry as a form of the qualitative research practice of ethnography, which she terms as "CAP ethnography." The acronym CAP stands for "creative analytic practices," and it encompasses endeavours such as "poetry, drama, conversations, readers' theatre, and so on" (Richardson, 2000, p. 929). Others have advanced the terms "artful research" "writing as inquiry" and "narrative inquiry" (Connelly and Clandinin, 2000; Creswell, 2008).

It is the latter term 'narrative inquiry' that I shall draw upon, because this term is most widely recognized and most often used in the specific field of literary arts-informed inquiry. Despite this term's relative acceptance, scholars still disagree on the precise definition of

‘narrative inquiry’ and even the term’s origin (Riessman & Speedy, 2007). (Schwandt, 2007) defines narrative inquiry thusly:

Narrative inquiry is the interdisciplinary study of the activities involved in generating and analyzing stories of life experiences (e.g., life histories, narrative interviews, journals, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, biographies) and reporting that kind of research. (p. 204)

This ‘reporting’ typically takes the form of a ‘restorying’ of the analysed life experience (the field text) in the form of a work of fiction (the research text) composed by the researcher.

Narrative inquiry is reliably categorized as qualitative research (Creswell, 2007), yet, as with many young and hence quickly evolving fields of social sciences research, narrative inquiry is otherwise nebulous in the sense that it can take on many forms (Chase, 2005), e.g., narrative inquiry may take the form of life history research (Cole & Knowles, 2001) and ethnographic research (Richards, 2000). Indeed, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) assert that narrative inquiry is so adaptable in form that each narrative inquiry research endeavour “has its own rhythms and sequences, and each narrative researcher needs to work them out for her or his own inquiry” (p. 97).

Despite the recognition of narrative inquiry’s mutability, there appears to be at least one commonality in narrative inquiry approaches: “The point of constancy... is the observation that narrative inquirers study experience” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 37). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) draw upon Dewey (1916, 1938) in developing a line of logic for the importance of experience in educational research: “Educators are interested in life. Life, to borrow John Dewey’s metaphor, *is* education” (p. xxii); “The social sciences are concerned with humans and their relations with themselves and their environment. As such, the social sciences are founded

on the study of experience.... For Dewey, education, experience, and life are inextricably intertwined” (Ibid., p. xxiii). Narrative inquiry is an innovative means by which education can explore experience.

In addition to the study of experience, there are certain other characteristics widespread within narrative inquiry. According to Creswell (2008), narrative inquiry focuses upon individuals or a few people rather than upon large populations; the researcher explores the life experiences of its participants by describing and analysing these lives as stories; the researcher codes field texts such as transcripts and letters from the participant, to identify themes; the researcher expresses their findings about the subject individual using a story, effectively restorying the original stories that the researcher gathered from/about the participant(s); this restoried narrative combines views from both the participant’s life and the views of the researcher, and hence narrative inquiry is a collaboration (or even negotiation) between the researcher and the participant(s); the focus upon the participant’s life experience takes precedence over traditional literature reviews; narrative inquiry is a literary form of research in which researchers often seek to elicit a sympathetic understanding by the reader of the focus participant via an engaging literary style of writing.

Hoogland and Wiebe (2009) draw upon Creswell (2007; 2008) to create a table depicting the basic characteristics of qualitative research as they typically manifest within a narrative inquiry context, and I shall reproduce this table here as a reference. This traditional form of narrative inquiry in an education context is the research approach that I term as “Research as Narrative (RAN).” At the climax of this thesis’s examination of RAN and its delineation of NAR, I will produce a complementary table (Table 3) that sums and juxtaposes the

characteristics of RAN and NAR. Table 3 is located in the section “RAN Versus NAR Research Process Summary,” which culminates the theory chapter.

Table 2. The research process, the characteristics of qualitative research, and the characteristics of narrative inquiry. (Hoogland & Wiebe, 2009)

<i>Phases of the research process</i>	<i>Characteristics of qualitative research</i>	<i>Characteristics of narrative inquiry</i>
1. Identify a research problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A qualitative problem requires exploration and understanding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrative researchers seek to understand and re-present experiences through the stories that individual(s) live and tell.
2. Review the literature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The scholarly literature plays a minor role. • Qualitative researchers use the literature to justify their research problems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrative researchers foreground the participant's story and background the scholarly literature. • For example, they may find direction or underlying structure for their research reports through the participant's story rather than through a conventional literature review or theoretical framework. • The scholarly literature may offer guidance for how to interpret the participant's stories (i.e., find deeper meaning or new understandings through them).
3. Develop a purpose statement and research questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The qualitative purpose statement and research questions are broad and general. • The qualitative purpose statement and research questions seek participants' experiences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrative researchers seek to explore the meaning of the individual's experiences as told through a story or stories.
4. Collect qualitative data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative researchers collect data following protocols developed during their studies. • Qualitative data collection involves gathering text or image data. • It also involves studying a small number of individuals or sites. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrative researchers collect field texts that document the individual's story in his or her own words (e.g., interview transcripts, letters, journal entries).
5. Analyze and interpret qualitative data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative data analysis consists of text analysis. • Qualitative data analysis consists of describing information and of developing themes. • Qualitative interpretations situate findings within larger meanings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrative researchers analyze the participant's stories by retelling or "restorying" them into a framework that makes sense (e.g., chronology, plot). • This often involves identifying themes or categories of information within the participant's stories (e.g., time, place, plot, scene). • Researchers may then rewrite the participant's stories to place them within a chronological sequence (beginning, middle, end) and/or a plot that incorporates a main character who experiences a conflict or struggle that comes to some sort of resolution.

“Research as Narrative (RAN)” and “Narrative as Research (NAR)”

Now that the basic characteristics of literary narrative inquiry have been established (or, at least, the basic characteristics of the most familiar form of narrative inquiry in an education research context), I shall demarcate the differences between the familiar form of narrative inquiry and the newer form of narrative inquiry whose promise I intend to explore within my thesis. This demarcation will involve two new terms of my own coinage: “Research as Narrative (RAN)” and “Narrative as Research (NAR).”

“Research as Narrative (RAN)” is the well-established form of narrative inquiry in an education context described in the preceding “Narrative Inquiry” section. I term this approach “research as narrative” since: a) so much of its data gathering and analysis methods are familiar qualitative research tools (e.g., interviews, letters, journals); b) the narrative composition aspect is secondary. Notably, I shall use the term RAN when discussing the theories of other narrative inquiry researchers, but this should not be misinterpreted as meaning that these researchers use the term RAN themselves.

In contrast to the well-established RAN approach, “Narrative as Research, (NAR)” is a newer narrative inquiry method that I intend to explore. Instead of collecting and analyzing its data using traditional research instruments (e.g., interviews, letters, journals) focused on the life experience of collaborative participants, NAR collects and analyzes its data primarily through the composition of narrative. Thus, whereas RAN conforms to the Cole and Knowles (2001) definition of “arts-informed” research being “informed by arts rather than being based in them or

even, perhaps, about them” (p. 219), NAR is based directly in the arts, i.e., in literary fiction. Ergo, it constitutes ‘narrative as research.’

To best illuminate the NAR approach, I shall first trace out select key considerations of the more traditional narrative inquiry approach, RAN, in order to: a) highlight promising and problematical aspects of RAN; b) create a juxtapositional framework for NAR.

Select Considerations of “Research as Narrative (RAN)”

The following examination of the traditional “Research as Narrative (RAN)” approach is not intended to be exhaustive, and it will focus on select issues that will inform my subsequent exploration of the “Narrative as Research (NAR)” approach. My examination of RAN will depart from the chronological order that its components might otherwise suggest; for example, whereas data dissemination would chronologically occur last in a research context, I discuss it first because RAN’s approach to data dissemination is one of its most unique features. Similarly, the “Data Collection and Analysis” section informs the “Purpose Statement and Narrative Themes” section more fruitfully than vice versa, and so I present the former first.

The select considerations of RAN that will be discussed are: Data Dissemination and Audience; Data Collection and Analysis; Purpose Statement and Narrative Themes; Narrative as Experience; Language and Narrative Form; Subjectivity and Generalizability; Evaluative Criteria; Companion Academic Document (CAD).

RAN: Data Dissemination and Audience

A discussion of RAN's opportunities and its challenges can usefully begin with the issue of data dissemination and audience because this topic is central to the fundamental question: why would education researchers choose to engage in RAN? To a great extent, the answer to this question involves the quest to convey information both compellingly and clearly, particularly if the potential audience is not confined to the traditional academic readership.

RAN's fiction approach to dissemination offers a new means of communication that researchers can draw upon to discuss certain aspects of human experience, for as Eisner asserts, some aspects of human behaviour simply cannot be conveyed effectively using standard academic disseminative form:

The structure of a work of art—a novel—can disclose what facts cannot reveal. Some things can only be known by feel, by innuendo, by implication, by mood. Good novels traffic in such features... you [can] say in a novel what you cannot say... in propositional language, in literal discursive form. (Eisner, cited in Saks, 1996, p. 403)

Dunlop (1999) concurs, adding that the commonplace situations conveyed within fiction concretize the otherwise difficult-to-interpret abstractions of academic theory, making clearer “patterns connecting theory and practice” (p. 18), e.g., a story about the life of a dropout forced into homelessness expresses the dangers of withdrawal from education more concretely than would a mere statistical chart correlating income levels with schooling. On an even more basic level of communication, whereas, “Traditional research texts have for the most part been exclusionary, that is, comprehensible only by the educated elite” (Dunlop, 1999, p. 17), the language used in fiction can typically be readily understood by even a non-academic audience.

This latter notion, that of a non-academic audience reading research, touches upon perhaps the most intriguing promise of the RAN approach: the potential of RAN to interest an audience. Richardson (2000) suggests that narrative inquiry arose, to a large extent, as a reaction to a quite basic drawback of extant qualitative research:

I have a confession to make. For 30 years, I had yawned my way through numerous supposedly exemplary qualitative studies. Countless numbers of texts I abandoned half read, half scanned.... Undergraduates, graduates, and colleagues alike say they have found much of qualitative writing—yes—boring. (p. 924)

This problem of the tedious nature of qualitative research (at least, in its consumption) has particularly deep ramifications given that educational research—like education itself—has traditionally served a transformational function. When traditional qualitative research is so tedious in consumption that even a friendly audience of undergraduates, graduates, and researchers ‘yawns through it,’ the research’s transformational promise is clearly unlikely to be actualized. However, the often tedious nature of qualitative research could potentially be addressed by presenting such research’s findings as a narrative, since the narrative storytelling approach possesses an intrinsically greater power to interest readers, which has implications for transformative power:

Stories... are often credited with changing us in ways that have relatively little to do with knowledge per se. They leave us with altered states of consciousness, new perspectives, changed outlooks and more. They help create new appetites and interest. They gladden and sadden, inspire and instruct. They acquaint us with aspects of life that had been previously unknown. In short transform us, alter us as individuals. (McEwan & Egan, 1995, p. 9)

Such a narrative dissemination of research findings is one of the key aspects of RAN, and narrative's ability to interest readers confers upon RAN an enhanced transformative potential.

The intrinsically interesting nature of RAN's narrative dissemination approach suggests another intriguing possibility vis-à-vis audience. Richardson (2000) asserts that "Qualitative work could be reaching a wide and diverse audience" (p. 924) as part of a contention that narrative inquiry holds the promise of transcending the traditional academic readership and interesting audiences within the mainstream of society. Coles and Knowles (2001) agree, declaring that narrative inquiry can have "resonance for audiences of all kinds" (p. 216). RAN research that successfully interested a mainstream readership would dramatically increase the transformational potential of its findings on both an individual and institutional level, i.e., research read by a wider audience has the opportunity to transform more individuals, and the more individuals impacted by a given research endeavour increases the ability of that research to transform society and institutional policy. Dunlop (1999) illustrates this potential advantage of RAN by referencing Skinner, who "realized that his work was not being perceived in terms of its broad social significance" (p. 11) and hence decided to express his views in a novel, *Walden Two*, to great success: "Written for the general reader, unlike Skinner's technical scientific articles and books, the novel surpassed even the best-selling later work *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, as the most popular introduction to his philosophic, political and scientific thought" (p. 10).

Naturally, for RAN to realize its promise of attaining a wider audience based upon the engaging nature of its narrative presentation, the quality of the narrative must be high enough to appeal to non-academic readers. However, RAN's ability to produce a narrative that will interest a wide audience of readers is complicated by two challenges: the use, in some RAN contexts, of

a narrative construction that remains overtly research; the challenge of composing fiction at an advanced artistic level.

The first of these challenges to RAN's ability to interest an audience, the problem of a narrative that remains overtly research in structure, is not universal in RAN, but it is frequent. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) give several examples of such RAN narratives, including one that examines the experiences of three Chinese teachers shuttling between Canadian society and Chinese society. The chapter construction of this RAN narrative directly alludes to elements of research design:

The Prologue gives over to Chapter One, "The Story of How We Began Our Search for Our Landscapes.".... In Chapter One, He¹ uses stories told through conversations to fill in the ingots of plot that she introduced in the Prologue. She also includes descriptions of how her work is positioned in the literatures of *acculturation*² and *enculturation*. She briefly sketches out the argument for the thesis.... In Chapter Two, 'Search for a Path to Narrativize the Landscape: Methodology and Theoretical Backgrounds,' she crafts a personal journey... of her attempt to locate and make sense of literature related to the inquiry as she understood it.... Chapter Three, "Narrativizing the Landscapes in Which We were Brought Up...." tells the school stories for each of the three participants.... (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, pp. 156-158)

This framework in which chapters overtly serve research functions such as literature review or methodology constrains RAN's ability to attract a mainstream readership, since composing a chapter that performs an academic literature review function and yet somehow still holds the

¹ This is the female researcher's name.

² Throughout my paper, all italics in quoted material are the original author's italics.

interest of non-academic readers is a very difficult artistic challenge. Indeed, such overtly research-oriented narrative may even fail to resonate with the traditional academic readership, who might prefer that research either be completely devoted to a traditional expository academic structure or be wholeheartedly devoted to a narrative structure. When RAN attempts to overtly examine research issues such as methodology via narrative, RAN risks the double failure of an elderly priest who dresses up like a gangster and raps out a sermon on sexual abstinence—the overt sermon agenda of the song may fail to interest the mainstream hip hop audience, and the traditional sermon audience may be repulsed by the hip hop medium.

A second even greater challenge to RAN's ability to attract a mainstream audience lies in the difficulty of composing narrative at the level of professional fiction. Indeed, RAN's proponents assert that its narratives cannot be expected to rise to the same level of quality as professional art: "my purpose is not to turn us into poets, novelists, or dramatists—few of us will write well enough to succeed in those competitive fields" (Richardson, 2000, p. 936). This represents a clear contradiction: proponents advance RAN as a way to interest a wider readership, yet assert that a RAN narrative cannot attain the professional level of artistic quality associated with the mainstream literary marketplace. Clearly, a RAN narrative *must* compete with mainstream fiction if RAN intends to garner the interest of a mainstream readership, particularly given that even polished professional fiction is engaged in a desperate struggle for audience against mass media forms such as film and television, and against new media forms such as computer games. Hence, when Richardson (2000) charges us to question "Who is your audience? What are your purposes? Understanding how to stage your writing *rhetorically* increases your chances of getting published and reaching your intended audiences" (p. 937), we can only surmise that she is speaking of audiences within the relatively narrow confines of

educational research. Unfortunately, by asserting that RAN does not need to (and typically cannot) attain the level of professional fiction, the proponents of RAN tacitly acknowledge that the ‘wider audience’ promise of RAN is not realistic, calling into question a major argument for RAN’s unique appeal as a research method.

To this juncture, the discussion of dissemination and audience has focused upon the ability of a RAN narrative to interest a wide audience and hence enhance transformative power, but I suggest that there are two other important considerations of audience interest: a) the RAN narrative’s ability to transformatively impact readers deeply; b) the RAN narrative’s ability to transformatively impact readers reliably. In terms of (a), the ability to impact readers deeply, a piece of fiction can potentially be interesting enough to attract a wide readership, yet fail to impact its readers’ views in any profound way. For example, within the mainstream fiction context, the *Twilight* series of books succeed in garnering a massive readership, yet they do not impact their readership’s viewpoints on any deep level, since no deep-seated assumptions about issues such as human relationships are challenged, let alone altered, in the transformational sense, i.e., the *Twilight* books may provoke a frenzy among its fans, but these books advance only long-accepted mainstream themes of romance, eroticism, and fidelity, thus transforming no deeply held views. Hence, a RAN narrative that seeks to be transformative must not, in the struggle to attain a wide readership, overlook the need to impact readers deeply by using intellectually and emotionally engaging fiction to motivate the readers to re-examine their key beliefs about fundamental issues such as self, culture, and learning.

In terms of (b), the ability to transformatively impact readers reliably, a narrative may indeed possess the potential to affect readers deeply but not reliably. Such a counterintuitive instance may occur if a narrative challenges deeply held views, but fails to do so in a convincing

manner. For example, the *Left Behind* fiction series placed several of its volumes on *The New York Times* Bestseller's List and sold forty-two million copies (Alleman, 2005), and this series' fundamentalist end-times narrative did indeed challenge deeply held views of religion, culture, and politics; yet the books merely appealed to people who already believed in a specific fringe interpretation of Christian eschatological dogma, and were reviewed as "wacky" (Goldberg, 2002) and "fatuous" (Dreyfuss, 2004) by the mainstream, and hence failed to *reliably* impact the viewpoints of the non-faithful (and faithful), making these books' transformative potential rather feeble. Hence, a RAN narrative that seeks to be transformative must not, in the struggle to gain a wide readership and impact readers' views deeply, overlook the need to impact readers reliably.

These three considerations of audience appeal (the narrative's ability to attract a wide readership; the narrative's ability to affect its readers' deeply held views; the narrative's ability to affect its readers' views reliably) interact in the sense that a narrative that possesses one of these abilities is naturally more likely to possess one or more of the other traits, given that all flow largely from the compositional excellence of the author. However, the presence of any one of these traits does not necessarily signal the presence of any of the other two. All three of these factors must be considered when composing a RAN narrative or evaluating RAN's transformative power.

Summary

RAN offers researchers advantageous and innovative avenues of communicating research findings with clarity: fiction can disclose what literal discursive expositional language cannot, e.g. by feel, by innuendo, by implication, by mood; fiction can concretize abstract ideas, bridging theory and practice; fiction's language can be more approachable to readers, and hence less

exclusionary, than the language typical of research texts, which is comprehensible only by an educated elite.

One of the key considerations that make RAN attractive is the inability of educational research's traditional expository dissemination approach to interest even a traditional academic audience, which negatively impacts that research's transformative potential. RAN offers the promise of addressing this shortcoming via its more interesting narrative dissemination approach, potentially even extending research's readership beyond the academic world into the mainstream. However, RAN faces difficulties in extending its readership into the mainstream due to: the overt research structure exhibited by some RAN narratives; the difficulty of composing professional level fiction.

If RAN is to compete for a mainstream readership, RAN must exhibit a professional level of narrative quality. Those proponents who claim that RAN researchers cannot be expected to exhibit a professional level of writing skill cannot realistically then claim that RAN can interest a mainstream audience. In the absence of professional-level writing skill, RAN can only hope to interest the traditional academic readership.

The transformational power of a RAN narrative can—and should—be contemplated in light of three considerations: the narrative's ability to attract a wide readership; the narrative's ability to affect its readers' deeply held views; the narrative's ability to affect its readers' views reliably.

RAN: Data Collection and Analysis

In addition to RAN's unique means of disseminating research via narrative fiction, RAN draws upon narrative as a unique means of gathering and analysing data. In the standard

conceptualization of this process, a single data gathering and analysis stage occurs, comes to an end, and then a restorying stage of disseminating findings begins. However, RAN can also be conceptualized as possessing not one but two different data collection and analysis stages, the latter being the restorying dissemination process.

In the traditional conceptualization of RAN, RAN possesses a single data collection procedure that superficially appears similar to that of many other qualitative research approaches in the sense that it draws upon commonly used data collection instruments, e.g., interviews and field notes. For example, Dunlop (1999) interviewed teacher volunteers over a period of two and a half years (p. 14). However, RAN also embraces an eclectic variety of other data sources that have a narrative quality, such as stories, autobiography, journals, letters, conversations, family history, photos, and life experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). For example, Crook (2001) “conducted focus groups with students in grades nine to twelve at one secondary school over two years, recording and reflecting upon their stories about their own education” (p. ii) and she also conferred with native elders. Bach (1998) gave students cameras so that they could create narratives via photography. Even more uniquely, narratives not only constitute RAN’s data source, narrative serves as a means of analysing data, since data is analysed by the researcher in terms of narrative elements (e.g., conflict, character) as the researcher seeks to identify concepts, motivations, trends, and so forth. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) assert, in narrative inquiry, one should consider “narrative as both phenomena under study *and* method of study” (p. 4). A third distinctive feature of RAN’s approach to data collection and analysis is that the researcher and the participant, or participants, under study are narrative collaborators (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007) in the sense that the meaning that the researcher derives from the participants’ various narratives is not unilaterally determined; rather, the researcher draws upon the participants’

opinions about the meaning of these narratives, and hence the analysis of the data is a negotiation between the researchers and the participants (Creswell, 2008).

The next step of the RAN procedure is the narrative composition process, in which the researcher, having collected and distilled knowledge from their participants, proceeds to restory the participants' experiences in the form of a narrative. This narrative can take several fiction forms, often a novel. As the researcher composes this narrative, they may elect to extend their collaboration with the research participants by negotiating the narrative's assertions with these participants. This narrative composition constitutes RAN's disseminative process (apart from any associated companion academic document).

Additionally, the RAN narrative composition phase offers a rare opportunity for self-study since the RAN researcher themselves becomes a focus of the research: "I consider writing as a *method of inquiry*, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic" (Richardson, 2000, p. 923). In keeping with the philosophy of self-reflective learning and personal growth that is a traditional aspect of qualitative research, the RAN researcher:

- a) Learns about themselves relative to their research topic, e.g., a researcher writing about the struggles of immigrant students to adapt to a new culture's style of learning will likely find themselves reflecting upon the learning styles they themselves encountered in Canadian culture.
- b) Learns about themselves as persons, e.g., a researcher writing about immigrant students' struggles will likely have to confront their own views on immigrants.

Additionally, I suggest that the RAN researcher, by undertaking a narrative-based research endeavour, gains knowledge both about the art of narrative composition and about themselves as narrative artists. This migration of the researcher into the research's spotlight starkly

differentiates RAN from quantitative research, but represents a logical outgrowth of qualitative research's traditions, e.g., the tradition of immersing the researcher within the societies and lives of people under study during ethnographic research (Lewis, 1985, p. 380).

The RAN approach to data collection and analysis that I have described thus far is typically viewed as two discrete phases, as represented earlier in Table 2's tracing of narrative inquiry's phases:

4. *Collect qualitative data*: Narrative researchers collect field texts that document the individual's story in his or her own words (e.g., interview transcripts, letters, journal entries).
5. *Analyze and interpret qualitative data*: Narrative researchers analyze the participant's stories by retelling or "restorying" them.... This often involves identifying themes or categories of information within the participant's stories.... Researchers may then rewrite the participant's stories....

This is a valid conceptualization of the process, but I submit that there is an alternative also-valid conceptualization of the RAN process in which these two stages are seen as each containing both a data collection process and an analysis process.

The phase presently conceptualized as being merely devoted to data collection actually also incorporates an ongoing data analysis process since the collaborative participant is reviewing the researcher's work and helping to identify and clarify commonalities such as concepts, motivations, and trends even as the researcher continues collecting data. This is a collaborative process is clearly a data analysis endeavour. And indeed, the researcher themselves inevitably begins the distilling of their data long before the data collection ceases,

further buttressing the view that the data collection phase is actually a data collection *and analysis* phase.

Just as the ostensible ‘data collection’ phase also features analysis, the ostensible ‘data analysis’ phase also exhibits data collection. As Richardson (2000) claims:

writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of “knowing”—a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. (p. 923)

Since RAN’s narrative composition phase includes ‘discovery,’ it is imperfectly accurate to label the narrative composition stage as solely data analysis. This new data being discovered within RAN’s narrative composition phase includes, in part, the researcher’s gleaning of knowledge about themselves relative to the topic, about themselves as people, and about themselves as writers: “I write fictionally as a way to know myself and others in words and in the world” (Leggo, 2005, p. 97). A researcher’s learning about themselves as writers, in particular, is a topic about which the researcher gleans basic observations (data) almost entirely within the ostensible ‘data analysis’ phase, since the researcher learns about themselves as writers primarily via the narrative composition act. Thus, the narrative composition process traditionally viewed as a data analysis stage, as depicted in Table 2, can also be viewed as a secondary data *gathering* and analysis process.

I note also that the forms of data gathering exhibited in these two stages are unique in the sense that the first stage derives data from traditional research instruments such as interviews and journals, while the second stage derives data from the narrative composition process. Similarly, the data analysis that occurs in the two stages differ in nature, for the first stage analyses the

participants' narratives to distil concepts, motivations, and trends, and so forth, while the second stage uses narrative to explore these distillations.

In sum, since these two stages *each* feature *both* data collection and data analysis functions, and since the approaches to these two functions differ from one stage to another, I submit that the two RAN stages that are presently conceived of as:

4. *Collect qualitative data*: Narrative researchers collect field texts that document the individual's story in his or her own words (e.g., interview transcripts, letters, journal entries).
5. *Analyze and interpret qualitative data*: Narrative researchers analyze the participant's stories by retelling or "restorying" them.... This often involves identifying themes or categories of information within the participant's stories.... Researchers may then rewrite the participant's stories....

could also be legitimately conceptualised as:

4. *Primary data collection and analysis*: Researcher derives data from traditional research instruments such as interviews and journals, and analyses this data from a narrative perspective to distil concepts, motivations, trends, and so forth, which constitute preliminary conclusions. (In this stage, the researcher also experiences learning about themselves relative to the topic and themselves as persons.)
5. *Secondary data collection and analysis*: The preliminary distillations from the last stage become preliminary narrative themes, which are explored through the "restorying" process of narrative composition. (In this stage, the researcher experiences further learning about themselves relative to the topic and themselves as persons, and now experiences learning about themselves as writers.)

Notably, my reconceptualization of these two phases goes beyond refining their names. The original demarcation between these two phases located the preliminary distillation of the data derived from standard research instruments (such as interviews and journals) as occurring in the second phase (the original analysis phase). I now place this procedure fully within the first phase (primary data collection and analysis) and reserve the second phase for the narrative composition procedure.

This reconceptualization of RAN's stages will be reflected in a revised table comparing RAN and NAR (Table 3), at the culmination of this theory chapter. Also, throughout the rest of this thesis, I shall make use of these two new terms, 'primary data collection and analysis' and 'secondary data collection and analysis phase.' Also, the 'secondary data collection and analysis phase' will sometimes be referred to as the 'narrative composition phase.' These two terms are synonymous under the new reconceptualization of RAN. (I draw upon both of these terms rather than just use one, because the former term 'secondary data collection and analysis phase' is very useful in discussions in a RAN context, but it will lose its meaning later in the dissertation in a NAR context, when the narrative composition procedure becomes the sole data collection and analysis phase. At that time, the phrase 'narrative composition phase' will become more useful for clarity.)

I note that this alternative conceptualization of RAN's data collection and analysis procedure suggests a further consideration: both of the two phases include the production of a set of conclusions. The primary data collection and analysis phase identifies concepts, motivations, trends, and hence produces what is tantamount to a preliminary set of conclusions about the research topic. The secondary data collection and analysis phase draws upon this preliminary set of conclusions to derive preliminary fiction themes that will inform the ensuing narrative

composition. These preliminary themes are then explored via the narrative composition process; this analyzing of the themes via the narrative composition process produces a final array of fiction themes that constitute a second set of conclusions about the research topic. Notably, this suggests the possibility that the conclusions about the research topic that are derived at the end of each of RAN's two data collection and analysis stages may actually disagree with each other, and this possibility will be explored in the section "RAN: Purpose Statement and Narrative Themes."

Summary

RAN utilizes narrative not merely to disseminate findings, but also as an instrument of data collection and analysis, in the sense that: narratives are collected from the collaborative participant (e.g., as interviews or journals); these narratives are analyzed with an emphasis on their narrative elements (e.g., conflict, character). The researcher collaborates with their participant in gathering and analysing this data to identify concepts, motivations, trends, and so forth. Next, the researcher draws upon the collected and analysed data to restory the participant's experiences in the form of a narrative, potentially doing so in consultation with the participant. This phase serves not only a disseminative purpose, it is also a secondary data collection and analysis phase, since the gathering of knowledge continues via the composition process. This new knowledge includes learning about the researcher themselves, i.e., the researcher gains knowledge about themselves relative to the research topic, themselves as a person, and themselves as a writer.

Given that these two stages each feature both data collection and data analysis functions, and since the approaches to these two functions are unique to the two phases, these phases can also legitimately be characterized as the "primary data collection and analysis" and "secondary

data collection and analysis” phases. This alternative conceptualization suggests a revised demarcation of the boundaries between the two phases in which the latter phase becomes synonymous with narrative composition, and hence this second phase can also be referred to as the ‘narrative composition phase.’

Both phases arrive at a set of conclusions about the research topic. The conclusions of the primary data collection and analysis phase are used to generate the preliminary themes of the secondary data collection and analysis phase, which are further explored during the narrative composition process, potentially evolving further.

RAN: Purpose Statement and Narrative Themes

The term ‘theme’ means: “a subject or topic of discourse or of artistic representation” (Theme, n.d.).

A hypothesis is a tentative guess or an expectation about a scientific problem, descriptions, possible relationships, or differences that is subsequently evaluated (McMillan, 2000). Qualitative research, however, typically eschews a specific focused hypothesis in favour of a broad and general purpose statement and attendant research questions and explores this purpose statement via inductive logic (McMillan, 2000). This exploration tends to identify multiple themes, in contrast to quantitative research’s narrow focus upon evaluating a singular hypothesis. RAN, as qualitative research, typically observes the qualitative approach of a broad purpose statement that is explored rather than tested, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) cite:

One of the methodological principles we were taught in quantitative analysis courses was to specify hypotheses to be tested in research. It does not work like

that in narrative inquiry. The purposes, and what one is exploring and finds puzzling, change as the research progresses. (p. 73)

Some researchers, however, believe that qualitative research can indeed perform a hypothesis-testing function (Mittman, 2001), so the question should be considered: could RAN be practiced in a hypothesis-testing mode?

Using a hypothesis-testing research approach in a RAN context is not impossible, but it would constrain RAN's strengths. The task of evaluating a predetermined hypothesis using narrative would likely yield merely a terse to-the-point narrative whose knowledge claims would be tightly focused upon a single theme (this theme being the evaluative manifestation of the hypothesis within the narrative context); and this narrowly focused hypothesis-testing theme would inevitably be of a simple binary nature (i.e., 'hypothesis supported' 'hypothesis not supported'), precluding the narrative from eliciting or expressing an understanding in depth of a topic, which would otherwise constitute one of RAN's strengths. Of additional concern is the possibility that the deductive logic used to construct the narrative would create an impetus for confirmation bias, since once the researcher has framed the hypothesis in terms of certain concepts, the ensuing narrative will tend to be composed along plotlines suggested by these concepts and hence tend toward hypothesis confirmation in a manner analogous to a motorist's tendency to aim their car toward whatever their eyes are focused upon (a psychological syndrome that underlies the driving instructor admonition to never stare at the headlights of an oncoming vehicle). The hypothesis-testing approach to research is simply an ill fit with RAN.

In contrast, the more traditional qualitative research approach of advancing a broad and general statement of research purpose and then exploring this statement via inductive logic fits well with the nature of narrative. This research approach and narrative both seek an

understanding in depth; moreover, both endeavours seek out knowledge as yet unconceived (in contrast to the hypothesis testing approach, which evaluates a possibility already conceived of and encapsulated within the hypothesis). Within RAN, the broad statement of research purpose and the use of inductive logic create a context in which a narrative can take whatever form flows naturally, which offers a better promise of actualizing narrative's potential. Indeed, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that in a RAN context the initial target focus of the research is so general and so mutable that it should not be viewed as 'research question' at all:

Narrative inquiries are always composed around a particular wonder, a research puzzle. This is usually called the research problem or research question.

However, this language and wording tend to misrepresent what we believe is at work with narrative inquirers. Problems carry with them qualities of clear definability and the expectation of solutions, but narrative inquiry carries more of a sense of a search, a 're-search,' a searching again. Narrative inquiry carries more of a sense of a continual reformation of an inquiry than it does a sense of problem definition and solution. (p. 124)

RAN's approach to exploring the issues—the 'wonder' or 'research' puzzle—identified within the purpose statement is unusual in the sense that these issues undergo two separate stages of data collection and analysis, and this may potentially spawn an unusual dilemma regarding theme. As expressed in the section "RAN: Data Collection and Analysis," the primary data collection and analysis stage is one in which the researcher gathers data via traditional research instruments (such as interviews) and analyses this data, all in collaboration with the research's participants. In the context of most qualitative research, this would be the end of the exploration of the research topic. In RAN however, the ensuing narrative composition process serves as a

secondary data collection and analysis stage, since the researcher is continuing to glean new knowledge and to further distil the gathered data, via narrative. This unusual two-stage exploration of the research topic lays the ground for a rare dilemma of theme: what if the two data collection and analysis stages generate conflicting views of the research topic? This possibility that the two discrete data collection and analysis stages might generate conflicting themes is conceivable, given two basic aspects of RAN's approach to exploring the research topic:

- a) In the primary data collection and analysis phase, the researcher explores the research topic and distils concepts, motivations, trends, and so forth. This is done in collaboration with the research participant. The researcher ends this stage by distilling preliminary conclusions vis-à-vis the research topic.
- b) In the secondary data collection and analysis phase (a.k.a., the narrative composition phase), the researcher uses the previous stage's preliminary conclusions as initial themes. However, these initial themes are then further examined through the narrative composition process and hence may evolve during this process. Given this evolution, the themes that exist at the conclusion of the narrative composition process may disagree with the original initial themes.

This evolution of theme within the composition process is far from unheard-of in fiction writing, and it occurs in writing for many reasons, one of the more prominent of which is simply that the 'lived life' experience within the narrative (a concept that will be examined in the section "RAN: Narrative as Experience") has enriched the writer's insight into a topic and hence altered their views.

Conversely, however, this disagreement between the conclusions that existed in the wake of the primary data collection and analysis phase and the final themes advanced by the narrative in the secondary data collection and analysis phase may potentially signal a conflict between the researcher's views of the research topic and the views of the research's collaborative participant. The preliminary conclusions of the primary data collection and analysis stage are derived by the RAN researcher in collaboration with their participants, so if the RAN researcher subsequently derives differing views on the research topic during the narrative composition stage, they have likely entered into a disagreement with their collaborative participants. For example, a researcher studying classroom bullies may collaboratively derive from interviews with bullies the conclusion that bullying reflects a desire to be safe by being intimidating; but when the researcher subsequently composes a narrative that further explores the lives of bullies, the narrative's 'lived life' experience may instead convince the researcher that bullying also flows from a bully's desire for aggrandizement. Indeed, the researcher may even conclude that the self-aggrandizement motive for bullying is central, and that their collaborative participants who claimed that their bullying behaviour was primarily rooted in a need for personal security were engaged in a deceptive rationalization. When RAN's two data gathering and analysis stages generate contradictory conclusions about the research topic, the resulting dilemma is all the more vexing because it can be construed by critics as being a struggle between observed reality (i.e., as observed by the researcher and the collaborators in the first data collection and analysis phase) and imagined reality (i.e., the reality that flows from the researcher's mind during the act of composing the narrative); and this tension between observation and imagination touches ticklishly upon the fault line between objectivity and subjectivity, an issue upon which qualitative research in general and artistic inquiry in specific has oft been criticized.

‘Objectivity’ means: “striving as far as possible to reduce or eliminate bias in the conduct of research” (Objectivity, n.d., A); “expressing or dealing with facts or conditions as perceived without distortion by personal feelings, prejudices, or interpretations” (Objectivity, n.d., B).

‘Subjectivity’ means: “peculiar to a particular individual” (Subjectivity, n.d., A); “modified or affected by personal views, experience, or background” (Subjectivity, n.d., B).

I do not intend to suggest any solutions to this dilemma, partly because this section only aims to highlight key RAN issues that will inform my intended NAR approach, and partly because I am not convinced that such thematic disagreements between the two data collection and analysis phases actually do constitute a failure of RAN research design. Rather, I find myself of the belief that, in such an instance of thematic dissonance, the narrative composition phase may simply have enriched the researcher’s viewpoint about the research topic and that hence the evolution of themes is both valid and desirable. Indeed, in such an instance, RAN’s double examination of themes via its two distinct data collection and analysis phases has proven its value. (RAN’s collaborative participants may disagree, however.)

In terms of research topic and theme, the RAN researcher must contend with the threat of a rare form of confirmation bias. In quantitative research, holding too firmly to one’s hypotheses makes a researcher susceptible to confirmation bias (Plous, 1993), but RAN’s general, broad purpose statement helps insulate it from this error, in the sense that a general purpose statement does not advance ideas that are active and concrete enough to seduce a researcher’s loyalty. RAN is only insulated from confirmation bias in this way in the primary data collection and analysis phase, however. The RAN researcher begins the ensuing narrative composition stage with preliminary themes of their own devising, and these themes may indeed tempt the researcher toward confirmation bias. Indeed, the RAN researcher embarking on the narrative

composition phase faces a dilemma between: a) holding too firmly to their initial themes and hence engaging in confirmation bias by crafting characters and plot events that are certain to confirm their themes; b) not holding firmly enough to their themes and hence losing a sense of direction when crafting characters and plot events. If the RAN researcher engages in confirmation bias by crafting characters and plot events that justify their themes, the researcher will fail to properly explore their themes via naturally flowing plot events and may advance false themes; hence, the RAN researcher should view their initial narrative themes as preliminary and mutable. However, the RAN researcher's need to view their preliminary themes as only tentative may conflict with their authorial need to have a relatively firm notion of their narrative's thematic directions as they write. Richardson (2000) characterizes this tension:

I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I did not know before I wrote it. I was taught, however, as perhaps you were, too, not to write until I knew what I wanted to say, until my points were organized and outlined. (p. 924)

Such pre-composition outlining of the narrative is a standard suggestion for writers because such formal forethought helps guard against compositional disorganization, diffusion, and drift—problems which very well may beset a RAN researcher during their narrative composition phase. Hence, a RAN researcher faces two contending needs, each with their own risks: holding to their themes at the risk of confirmation bias, or keeping their view of the themes flexible at the risk of compositional disorganization, diffusion, and drift. Given these two contending needs, the RAN researcher must adroitly walk a narrow middle path in which they formulate their preliminary themes with as much clarity as possible, yet view these themes as flexible and subject to refinement and even repudiation. To wander from this metaphorical middle path too far in the

direction of vague themes is to court that fate common to many writers who begin writing without a clear theme, that of composing scene after scene that have no unified purpose and that may ramble onward for hundreds of pages to no useful effect; yet, to wander from this metaphorical middle path too far in the direction of clinging too firmly to one's initial themes is to court confirmation bias, in which case the narrative composition simply disseminates what the author has predetermined to be correct.

RAN's unusual nature generates another unusual consideration of confirmation bias, due to the entry of the researcher themselves into the examination spotlight. As established earlier, the narrative composition stage serves as a context for the researcher to engage in personal learning about themselves relative to the research topic, themselves as a person, and themselves as a writer. However, this self-examination also creates an opportunity for confirmation bias, since: a) the researcher-writer inevitably possesses very firm opinions about themselves; b) any confounding of these opinions has intimate psychological ramifications. Given this, the researcher must remain aware that RAN's self-exploration is a prime context for confirmation bias.

Another key consideration of theme in a RAN context involves the problematic specificity and certainty of knowledge claims, a concern common to both qualitative research and fiction. Modern fiction typically eschews espousing themes directly, choosing instead to observe an ambiguity of themes that allows the readership to contemplate the narrative and derive their own interpretations; in this way, a single narrative can legitimately support many interpretations of theme, some of which may actively conflict with each other, e.g., the two main interpretations of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* are that the governess narrator is a heroine haunted by ghosts or that she is a mentally unbalanced woman who terrorizes her young

charge to death (Reed & Beidler, 2005). This ambiguity of themes increases the transformative power of a narrative by facilitating a multiplicity of potential themes, including themes that the author might not have considered. Hence, modern authors recoil from explicitly explaining their fiction's themes not only in the narrative, but in supporting textual works (e.g., prefaces) and in other contexts (e.g., authorial interviews). Qualitative research observes a similar philosophy, one in which knowledge claims are to be advanced "with sufficient *ambiguity* and *humility* to allow for multiple interpretations and reader response" (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 217). It seems logical that since two of RAN's parents, fiction and qualitative research, both strive to avoid advancing explicit themes that constrain their respective readership's ability to derive their own conclusions, RAN itself must naturally do so as well.

Yet, disagreement does indeed exist as to whether ambiguity of theme is always a liability in the context of RAN. Eisner worries that RAN that is too ambiguous can create a context for what he termed "the Rorschach syndrome" (as cited in Dunlop, 1999, p. 17), in which the reader could interpret a given piece of fiction in any way at all. But Leggo (2008) declares that limiting the potential interpretations of a piece of fiction is neither feasible nor desirable:

I also challenge any notion that in writing stories about experience we can contain the multiplicity of interpretations. Instead, using a reader response orientation, I recommend that we present our representations, and invite readers to make sense out of our stories. In other words, let readers contribute to making meaning out of the stories, as they inevitably will anyway. Instead of trying to close down understanding, we should be opening up possibilities for wide-ranging connections, questions, and insights. (p. 6)

Indeed, the concern that RAN may be undermined by the multiplicity of its fiction's interpretations seems to run contrary to RAN's approach to research purpose. Whereas traditional quantitative research seeks to systematically eliminate false possibilities, RAN seeks to inspire an awareness of the spectrum of potentially true possibilities: "Rather than scientific modes of research which seek to reduce uncertainty, arts-informed inquiries such as mine seek to enhance uncertainty" (Gosse, 2005, p. 198).

I submit that this tension regarding ambiguity of theme in narrative inquiry can be productively contemplated, and a general rule derived, via the examination of two very different instances of narrative inquiry: Sameshima (2006); Crook (2001). These two narrative inquiry dissertations observe very different approaches to ambiguity of theme, and I suggest that each of these two differing approaches is nevertheless successful because these two narrative inquiry projects possess two quite different research agendas.

In her narrative inquiry doctoral dissertation, *Seeing Red: A Pedagogy of Parallax*, Sameshima (2006) advances a piece of fiction that takes the form of letters, poems, and paintings. This narrative inquiry project, I believe most readers would agree, suggests a very large number of potential themes, but insists upon very few definite conclusions. Indeed, in her epilogue, Sameshima expresses that her research is focused upon abstract considerations:

My intentions in *Seeing Red* are multi-fold. I seek to envelop dichotomies within a storyline, in spaces of contradictions, in duplicitous interlocking and entangled threads, in multiple figurative meanings in an attempt to connect theory to situation—to demonstrate theory in practice.... I attempt to sound the silent spaces between eros and love, thought and feeling, mind and body, asceticism and

moral duty, teaching and healing, fiction and nonfiction, objective and subjective, and myth and real. (Sameshima, 2006, pp. 223-224)

I submit that Sameshima maintains a high ambiguity of theme in both her fiction and its accompanying academic document (including the epilogue cited above), and that this ambiguity of theme well-serves her focus upon aesthetic issues, which tend to be personal, abstract, and worthy of ever-continuing debate.

In contrast, the doctoral dissertation of Crook (2001), *Moving the Mountain: The Story of One Student's Struggle to Graduate from High School*, has a different agenda and a correspondingly different approach to ambiguity of theme. Crook's fiction is a novel about native teens struggling in a Northern BC school system, and its themes are relatively easily discernible, e.g., it is hard to overlook the author's theme in a scene in which a Fine Arts program is cancelled by a school board who denigrates art, leading a student who yearns to act to declare, "Somebody... decided that Fine Arts wasn't important. My plans are so much garbage" (pp. 63-64), especially when this lamentation in turn leads to the narration, "Her words hung in the air. We were silent. She was right" (p. 64).

Crook is even more non-ambiguous about her themes in her epilogue. Crook (2001) declares, "The concerns of the students centred around several themes which I discuss in the following pages" (pp. 258-259), and she then proceeds to express the students' concerns (and hence her dissertation's themes) quite starkly: "Students protest the lack of input into decisions that affect their choice of subjects and their career preparation" (p. 259); "Communities could hire a curriculum planner to work with the students, parents, the principal of Native Education, elders and representatives from the Band Office to look at ways that high school students could be more academically successful" (pp. 259-260). Indeed, Crook cites in the ensuing pages many

more such very specific diagnoses of educational problems and recommendations for solutions. Thematic ambiguity is hence very limited. Why has Crook chosen to almost completely eschew ambiguity of theme? I submit that she has done so because ambiguity of theme does not suit her RAN project's research focus, which is to help ameliorate the 54% high school drop-out rate (Crook, 2001, p. ii) of students in Northern BC by encouraging educational reforms. These problems and their solutions are not intrapersonal, abstract, and ultimately inconclusive in the way of Sameshima's aesthetic themes; rather, they are societal, concrete, and immediate. Hence, Crook is non-ambiguous, for an ambiguous stance is less likely to impel reform. And less likely to impel right-minded reform, at that—Crook's specificity of themes makes it more difficult for her fiction to be misread, e.g., to be misread as asserting that the high drop-out rate of aboriginal students reflects a genetic ill-disposition toward learning. The stance of 'humility' often associated with the desire for thematic ambiguity (as we shall see in the section "RAN: Evaluative Criteria") is similarly eschewed by Crook; after all, Crook's multi-year engagement with students appears to have made her very well-informed about the issues under examination, and hence adopting a stance of thematic 'humility' might be tantamount to unduly under-representing the stolidity of her knowledge base in terms of these topics. In sum, the thematic ambiguity that gives power to much of fiction would be inappropriate for Crook's research agenda, and non-ambiguity of theme better serves her purpose.

I submit that this comparison of the starkly contrasting, yet ultimate successful, approaches to thematic ambiguity in Sameshima (2006) and Crook (2001) suggests that considerations of ambiguity of theme in a narrative inquiry context should observe a flexibility; i.e., in keeping with the spirit of qualitative research, a researcher has the freedom to adjust the relative ambiguity of their fiction to accommodate their research's idiosyncratic needs, though

their research will be judged, in part, upon the goodness-of-fit of their level of thematic ambiguity. I suggest, therefore, the following rule: “The extent of thematic ambiguity appropriate in a narrative inquiry context can legitimately range from very little ambiguity to very great ambiguity, and the appropriateness of a given narrative inquiry endeavour’s level of thematic ambiguity can only properly be gauged with an awareness of that endeavour’s idiosyncratic research aims.”

Summary

A hypothesis-testing research design marked by deductive logic would ill-fit RAN, since this approach would likely yield knowledge-gathering results that were meagre in scope and binary in nature (i.e., ‘hypothesis supported’ ‘hypothesis not supported’), precluding the narrative from attaining an understanding in depth of a topic. In contrast, qualitative research’s traditional approach of a general, broad purpose statement explored in the context of inductive logic helps actualize narrative’s ability to explore a topic in depth and without presuppositions. The purpose of a RAN endeavour undergoes a continual evolution through the project.

RAN’s unusual two-stage approach to data collection and analysis may create a situation in which the themes generated by the primary and secondary data collection and analysis stages disagree. This may create a dilemma in which the researcher enters into a topical interpretative disagreement with their collaborative participant. It is uncertain whether such a disagreement would signal: a) the subjective narrative composition process has confounded the better-grounded observational knowledge gathered in the primary data gathering and analysis stage; b) the narrative composition stage has enriched the researcher’s knowledge base and hence improved the accuracy of their views on the research topic.

A RAN researcher faces another dilemma during their narrative composition, in terms of reconciling the contending needs to: keep their themes very flexible to avoid confirmation bias, but at the risk of compositional disorganization, diffusion, and drift; hold to their themes, at the risk of a form of confirmation bias in which the researcher crafts characters and plot events that are specifically designed to prove their themes, rather than explore them. The RAN researcher must adopt a narrow middle path in which they formulate their preliminary themes with as much clarity as possible, yet view these themes as subject to evolution.

In the narrative composition phase, the researcher themselves becomes a focus of study, but this self-focus courts confirmation bias, since the researcher-writer cannot help but possess firm opinions about themselves. The RAN researcher must hence remain vigilant against such confirmation bias about themselves.

In terms of thematic ambiguity, one viewpoint common to both fiction and qualitative research is that themes should be advanced with an ambiguity that supports multiple interpretations; and, hence, by advancing themes with such ambiguity, a RAN narrative would presumably enhance its transformative potential by allowing for multiple reader interpretations (which some observers feel is inevitable). But some RAN observers, such as Eisner, worry that too much ambiguity of theme will impair RAN's ability to advance knowledge clearly and hence undermine RAN's credibility as a research form. Utilizing a comparison of the starkly contrasting, yet ultimate successful, approaches to thematic ambiguity in Sameshima (2006) and Crook (2001), I derived a goodness-of-fit rule of narrative inquiry thematic ambiguity, in which the level of thematic ambiguity appropriate in a narrative inquiry context is evaluated based upon that endeavour's idiosyncratic research aims.

RAN: Narrative as Experience

As expressed earlier, one of the distinguishing characteristics of narrative inquiry is its focus on the study of experience. However, there are two related yet distinct forms of experience associated with narrative inquiry. The first form of experience is familiar daily life experience, but the second form of experience is the ‘lived life’ experience contained within—indeed, created by—the fiction composed by the researcher.

As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) express, “Experience happens narratively. Narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience,” (p. 19). This narrative experience constitutes an immersive reality for the reader, and this reality confers upon RAN an educative and transformative power because the events and characterizations that the reader experiences within the narrative reality convey knowledge about the research topic, serve as supporting arguments for the themes, and confer an emotional immediacy upon the narrative’s themes. And it should not be overlooked that the writer of the narrative lives the narrative as a form of life experience as well, creating a context for authorial learning and transformation.

When properly composed, a narrative conveys a sense of reality such that the reader engaging with the story undergoes a ‘lived life experience’ (a term of my own coinage, synonymous with the ‘lived experience’ term used by others), and evidence for this lived life experience could not be clearer: a reader who seeks to recall a novel that they have engaged with for many hours typically can recall very little of the book’s sensory form (e.g., the texture of the book’s cover in their hand or the visual manifestation of the book’s pages), but they possess a clear memory of the sensory experience of the narrative reality itself (e.g., the visual images of the characters faces, the sounds of battle, the touch of a lover’s hand, the taste of blood in the mouth, the scent of incense in the temple). Such narrative sensory details engage the reader in a

way that expository writing typically does not: “fiction provides immediacy—an artfully strategic evocation of sights, smells, sounds, and other contextual factors—far beyond what conventional writing conveys” (Banks, 2008, p. 161). A reader engaging in this narrative reality attains knowledge by vicariously experiencing life as the narrative’s characters, in the narrative’s settings, faced with the narrative’s conflicts, engaging in the narrative’s events; and hence, the lived experience of a narrative extends beyond its sensory manifestations into the narrative’s emotional realms as the reader *feels* the emotions incited by the story, such as the desperation that drives the *Les Misérables* protagonist Jean Valjean to steal bread to feed his starving kin and his rage at being imprisoned for this crime. This emotional connection with the characters makes the reader more receptive to the narrative’s themes, enhancing transformative potential. The lived experience of a narrative therefore not only suggests themes, it serves as the themes’ supporting evidence in the sense that the plot events and characterizations demonstrate why given thematic assertions are true—all in accord with fiction writing’s most famous axiom: “Show, don’t tell.” Indeed, if narrative is experience, then narrative is a fine method of learning, because all experience is active by nature and—as Dewey (1916) declared—learning takes place by doing.

A narrative’s immersive lived life experience stands in stark contrast to the experience afforded by standard academic expository writing. Such expository writing conveys information and analysis, but not sensory details—at least, not in such a rich array as to constitute an immersive lived life experience. Whereas a reader of a narrative may recall being within the narrative, the reader of the expository text recalls only the ideas expressed (assuming that the expository text managed to hold their attention at all). The expository text’s lack of an immersive lived life experience makes its assertions less memorable and less emotionally

affecting, and this has implications for transformative potential. It is for this reason, I submit, that the texts that impel successful religions are typically narratives in form: the story of Jesus's life and ministry inspires people to follow the Christian faith much more effectively than does Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*.

At this rhetorical juncture, there is a temptation to issue a qualifier that, "The experience of life contained within a narrative is immersive and compelling but cannot, of course, compare with the more concrete experience of daily life," and that narrative's lived life experience hence serves as a pleasant, yet no more than secondary, species of experience. While this assertion has merit, it is also true that the lived life experience a reader encounters within a narrative has characteristics that give it certain advantages over day-to-day life experience in terms of advancing themes clearly and compellingly. For example, a reader engaging with fiction famously enters into what Samuel Coleridge termed a 'willing suspension of disbelief,' an unspoken agreement in which they agree to overlook the intrinsic impossibilities of a narrative (Engell & Bate, 1985). Whereas such a suspension of disbelief is typically considered to focus upon overtly implausible elements, (e.g., the flying broomsticks in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*), I submit that the suspension of disbelief also extends to literary conventions (e.g., pathetic fallacy's assertion that a protagonist's funk can spawn doleful rainy weather) and elements of narrative form (e.g., that setting can switch from one country to another in the span of a sentence). Given the reader's tradition of suspending disbelief in all of these areas as part of an artistic conspiracy with the fiction writer, it is hard to imagine that the reader will not also tend to reflexively be more likely to leave disbelief on the shelf when evaluating the themes advanced by the fiction writer. Such suspension of disbelief may confer upon narrative research writing a transformative advantage over standard expository research writing because

the reader traditionally contemplates expository research writing in a mindset very much the opposite of a suspension of disbelief: a mindset of dialectical suspicion. Such dialectical suspicion complicates standard research's attempts to be transformative.

Narrative experience's transformative potential is further enhanced by the dramatic nature of the events a reader experiences within narrative. The reader's real-life daily routine typically involves a predictable breakfast, an unvarying commute, a repetitive and often uninspiring job, the same prosaic places, the same familiar people, the usual conflicts over humdrum issues—everything predictable, with little of consequence immediately at stake, and hence little interest invested. However, within a narrative's reality, the reader experiences heartache, triumph, tragic accidents, wars, vendettas, betrayals, love affairs, rescues, miracles, astonishing revelations—everything fluctuating, fast-paced, dramatic, strange—and the stakes are often life and death, the fall of nations, the attainment of perfect love. Such drama rivets the reader's interest in a way that daily life typically does not, making the narrative's assertions of knowledge more memorable and its themes more compelling (and hence convincing).

Moreover, narrative experience is more attractive to the reader than daily life experience because narrative experience more reliably aggrandizes the reader in the sense that the protagonist with whom the reader identifies is typically an exemplar triumphant, whereas real-life daily experience so often insists that the person is just another anonymous citizen of meagre accomplishments. Similarly, narrative experiences are devoid of concrete negative consequences (e.g., narrative adultery is not punishable by real-world divorce), allowing the reader to boldly (albeit vicariously) engage in novel behaviour that would otherwise be too fraught with risk. Narrative experience can even transcend daily experience's possibilities altogether to provide the reader with otherwise unattainable learning situations; for example, a reader of Anne Rice's

Interview with a Vampire may find their view of life's priorities being informed by unique considerations indeed as they contemplate the existential *ennui* of an immortal vampire. Thus, although real-world experience has an advantage over narrative experience due to its inherent concreteness, narrative experience possesses informational and transformative advantages due to its multiple potent dramatic events, the attractiveness of the narrative experience, the risk-free wholeheartedness with which a reader can embrace these lived life experiences, and the novelty of these experiences.

An additional advantage that narrative experience shares over daily life experience in terms of its learning potential and its transformative potency is that narrative reality is distilled down to the most resonant and meaningful of information, with events and characters that are banal or meaningless being typically omitted from the narrative. This contrasts with daily life experience, which bombards a person with countless dull and uninformative details that diffuse the person's attention, impairing their ability to discern and contemplate the truly informative and compelling aspects of daily life. In fiction, the author has carefully pre-selected which details to include within the narrative experience, and profitless distractions are hence mitigated; as a result, the narrative reader is both less distracted by details and more confident that the details they encounter in their narrative experience possess significance (even if this significance is not immediately apparent). Thus, the writer's attention to detail reaps a harvest of the reader's attention to detail, enhancing learning potential and transformative potency.

Such authorial distillation of the narrative down to only those details that are informative and resonant echoes narrative's ubiquitous presence of themes. In real life experience, significant life lessons are not necessarily present in all experiential contexts—there is simply no significant learning to be attained by the act of urinating (at least, certainly none that requires the

tens of thousands of repetitions of the experience that we must endure). In narrative experience, however, all events and details are significant in the sense that all events and details advance either character or plot, and character and plot in turn always advance theme. Theme underlies everything. Even in an escapist narrative in which the events seem to be merely entertaining acts of violence or sexuality, there is typically a bedrock of theme—the fantasy hero is victorious over the dark knight not due to a heavier bicep in his sword arm, but because he fights on behalf of the welfare of many people, whereas the dark knight fights on behalf of only his individual venal desires; the heroine of a romance does not actually marry the man of her dreams due to her spectacular bosom, but rather because she has demonstrated (or, at least, ultimately attained) peerless emotional fidelity. Such ubiquity of theme gives narrative experience a transformative advantage over daily life experience because daily life experience typically exhibits themes that are either diffuse in the absence of a sentient authorial hand's distillation, or are overly familiar, or are to no purpose; indeed, the themes of daily life typically assert *What Is* rather than *What Should Be*, the latter of which is the ur-motto of fiction, making narrative theme intrinsically transformative.

Moreover, narrative's lived life experience is a particularly valuable species of learning and transformative experience because it offers the reader an opportunity to reflect upon the themes at a useful distance, allowing them to more calmly and deeply consider the implications of events happening to a character than they could if those selfsame events were happening to the reader in real life. A person reading about a brawl sparked by racism has the luxury of contemplating the brawls' causes and consequences, whereas a person embroiled in such a brawl in daily life is aswirl in a whirlpool of pain, anger, fear, and hatred, and can hence spare very little attention and objectivity for an efficacious contemplation of racism and violence. Even

after the end of such a fight, their reflections upon the brawl will likely tightly focus on what happened to them at that time and place and what they intend to do about it tomorrow, rather than upon what happens to people in such circumstances throughout the world and what society should do to address racism and racism's attendant violence.

Just as the reader is usefully distanced from the events of the narrative, so too is the reader usefully remote from the author. Were an author to sit in room with a person and assert to them a set of themes, the listener would likely react to the presence of the author by recognizing them as a fellow human being of potentially competing motivations and would hence evaluate the author's assertions with a typical mix of interest and doubt. But when the author is separated from the audience by the medium of a textual narrative, they take on the abstract persona commonly associated with authors: that of the objective authority. Authors are traditionally viewed by readers as being wise people who have studied their topic extensively and arrived at insightful viewpoints so well-informed that the publishing community has judged them to be people whose thoughts are worthy of being widely disseminated to the public—as people worthy of being believed. The non-immediately-present author is not as reliably viewed by the reader as a fellow human full of personal desires who wants something from the individual reader, for the situation *seems* to be one in which a writer is proclaiming truth to the sky, and the reader is only listening in; whereas were the writer and reader seated together face-to-face in the way of a conversation in typical daily life experience, the reader would be more conscious that those words, those eyes, that *person*, likely wants something from them. The useful remoteness of the author from the reader hence confers a transformative advantage upon narrative experience when compared to real life experience.

Notably, if it seems to this dissertation's reader that all the elements of narrative that I am describing, from suspension of disbelief to selection of detail, appear suspiciously perfectly aligned toward the conclusion that narrative experience is transformatively potent, I submit that the reader's suspicion is quite warranted: narrative experience's transformative potency is not chance at all—it exists by design. But the convergence of evidence on the conclusion that narrative experience is transformatively potent does not represent a rhetorical sleight-of-hand by myself, rather this evidence flows from a fact of artistic evolution: the elements of narrative that empower narrative experience's transformative power became commonplace elements of narrative over the centuries specifically *because* they proved themselves to be transformatively potent. Narrative was historically often used as a means of moral education (Dunlop 1999; Nussbaum 1995), and I submit that narrative design hence evolved to enhance transformative power in a 'form follows function' dynamic.

As described thus far, the lived life experience of narrative provides an excellent context of learning and transformation for the RAN reader; however, narrative experience is also a potent lived life experience for the RAN researcher-author as well. The researcher-author's experiencing of the narrative reality may even be more immersive than that of the reader in some ways, because the researcher-author vicariously lives the experience of *all* the characters of the fiction, not merely that of the protagonist. Moreover, the researcher's experiencing of the narrative spans all the narrative's many drafts, in contrast to the reader's experience of the narrative, which focuses only on the text's final disseminated draft. Indeed, in terms of sheer number of hours immersed within a narrative, the writer of a given narrative spends a hundred hours immersed in that narrative during its composition for every hour that a reader spends immersed in the narrative during its consumption. Thus, even though the reality of the narrative

is a bit more transparent to its author, the gauze of this reality lays a hundredfold deep over the writer's eyes.

Summary

One of the key differences between the expository writing style typically used in standard research and the narrative writing style that is typically used in RAN is that narrative serves as form of lived life experience. The sensory immersiveness of the narrative and the dramatic potency of its plot events enhances the narrative experience's educative and transformative potential. The suspension of disbelief that the reader traditionally observes within a narrative context makes them more amenable to authorial themes than they would be in the dialectical context of standard research writing.

The reader focuses more on the thematic agenda of the narrative experience because these details represent a distillation of a myriad potential details down to only those details that have resonance and pertinence, and particularly those details that have thematic implications, in contrast to reality's many distracting and insignificant details and events.

The narrative reader has a distancing from the narrative events that allows them to reflect more carefully on those experiences than they ever could on real-life experiences.

The mediation of the text gives the author the persona of an objective authority, empowering their credibility and hence their themes, and preventing the reader from viewing the author as a fellow person who might hence have weaknesses and a personal agenda.

The elements of narrative tend to facilitate the convincing advancement of themes since narrative has historically frequently served a moral education function, and hence its elements have evolved to do so effectively.

The writer of the narrative encounters the text as a form of life experience as well, and this has implications for their personal learning and transformation.

RAN: Language and Narrative Form

Another reason that RAN serves as an invaluable tool of knowledge gathering is that RAN provides the researcher a more intense connection to the very language that they are using (Richardson, 2000), a connection that transcends the merely utilitarian engagement with language typically experienced by researchers reporting their findings in a standard expository mode. By engaging with research in the context of a narrative, the RAN researcher experiences “language-in-use” and the process by which we “word the world” into existence (Richardson, 2001, p. 35). This latter term reflects the linguistic theory that language does not merely serve as a medium of communication, it organizes our perceptions of the outer and inner worlds: “Language is a constitutive force, creating a particular view of reality and of the Self” (Richardson, 2000, p. 923). Thus, the researcher is not just learning about the world and about themselves and expressing their learning through language, they are creating and recreating the world and themselves through language.

Elements of narrative form similarly influence and inform the reader (and the writer). Nussbaum (1995) celebrates the

sense of life [novels’] form themselves embody: not only how the characters feel and imagine, but what sort of feeling and imagining is enacted in the telling of the story itself, in the shape and texture of the sentences, the pattern of the narrative,

the sense of life that animates the text as a whole. [I ponder] ... what sort of feeling and imagining is called into being by the shape of the text as it address its imagined reader, what sort of readerly activity is built into the form. (pp. 3-4)

This connection between a narrative's form and the readership's view of reality has strong implications. For example, fiction structurally requires conflict in every scene, and hence narrative conveys a view of reality in which people engage in constant strife with one another. Exposure to this sort of narrative reality can alter the world view of the reader by suggesting to them that they live surrounded by ubiquitous conflict, in defiance of the day-to-day reality the reader sees around themselves, in which human cooperation of varying degrees is standard and significant conflict is the exception. This conflict-heavy narrative world view also informs the world view of writers themselves, who craft the form of their narratives based upon it; and, given the art marketplace's tendency toward competitive escalation, these writers may intensify the frequency and nature of conflict in their narratives, creating an escalating feedback cycle in which both literature and society become more and more filled with worse and worse conflict.

Hence, the RAN researcher must remain cognizant that a narrative's form can organize the reality of both their readers and themselves in both positive and negative ways. In the primary data collection phase, the researcher engages with the participants via interviews, journals, and so forth, by evaluating these data sources in terms of narrative elements (e.g., plot, character); but the elements of narrative form may indeed begin to shape the researcher's interpretation of this data by, for example, encouraging the researcher to look for, and focus upon, sources of conflict (ubiquitous in fiction) rather than instances of cooperation (frequent in real life), or by encouraging the researcher to distil participants' multiple, complex, and obscure behavioural motivations (as the motivations of real people typically are) into relatively few,

discrete, and clear motivations (as the motivations of fiction characters typically are, at least compared to those of real persons). This tendency for the researcher to allow narrative form to shape their view of reality can be termed a ‘bias of narrative form,’ and such bias is even more potentially damaging in the context of RAN’s narrative composition stage, wherein the RAN researcher has an opportunity to utilize elements of their own narrative to shape the reality of their readership. Wielded correctly, elements of narrative form allow the RAN researcher to use their narrative to improve their readership’s understanding of human behaviour; wielded incorrectly, elements of narrative form will allow the RAN researcher to pass along inaccurate themes (including those that arise from ‘bias of narrative form’) to their readership.

Summary

Composing a narrative facilitates a close connection to language, a consideration that is all the more important because language does not merely serve as a medium of communication, it organizes our perceptions of the outer and inner worlds.

Narrative form impacts the RAN researcher’s interpretation of reality in both the primary and secondary data analysis and analysis phases and may distort the researcher’s view of human behaviour if they are not cautious. This would constitute a ‘bias of narrative form.’ An incautious RAN researcher may then use elements of narrative form to pass along this inaccurate understanding of human behaviour to the readership via the RAN fiction.

Optimally, however, in the narrative composition phase, the RAN researcher may draw upon narrative form elements to improve their readership’s understanding of human behaviour.

RAN: Subjectivity and Generalizability

As a method of qualitative research, RAN is subject to the criticisms levelled at other forms of qualitative research, including that its openness to subjectivity may impair the generalizability of its findings (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). McMillan (2000) defines ‘generalizability’ in an educational research context as: “whether the findings and explanations are useful in other situations and with other subjects, times, procedures, and measures. In other words, can the conclusions be generalized to other people in other contexts” (p. 8). Within the context of RAN, these criticisms of qualitative research are compounded by the distrust shown to literature, which has been viewed as the domain of fiction, rhetoric, and subjectivity, and hence has been viewed as lacking in plainness, objectivity, and truthfulness (Clifford, 1986, p. 5).

De Freitas (2003) characterizes the fear of those critics who view RAN’s subjectivity as a sign that RAN is intrinsically advocacy rather than descriptive:

Emphasis on writing and research that aims to do more than *describe* the world, that aims, indeed, to transform and even construct the world, sends tremors through the minds of those social scientists who fear *vanity research* and poetic monsters will only harm our shared understandings. (p. 13)

The counterarguments mounted by RAN proponents have two main rhetorical thrusts, one defensive and the other more assertive. The ‘defensive’ retort to the accusations against RAN’s subjectivity—which is associated with emotionality—denies that emotions are inherently negative in a learning context, as Eisner declares: “I don’t in my own epistemology regard the emotions as something that contaminates human understanding” (cited in Saks, 1996, p. 408). Moreover, others note that subjectivity is inescapable in a RAN context (Gosse, 2005). The more assertive counterargument is that subjectivity and emotionality are not merely acceptable,

they are actively required for RAN to actualize its unique promise, as Eisner goes onward to argue:

I don't in my own epistemology regard the emotions as something that contaminates human understanding, but as something that is absolutely essential in order to understand some things. And if the writing does not have the capacity to generate that form of reading, then that form of knowing is simply not going to be possible in the first place. (Eisner, cited in Saks, 1996, p. 408)

And indeed, art in general and narrative in particular do not strive to be objective—a conscientious fiction author strives to ensure that their depiction of human behaviour is insightful and accurate, but not objective per se. Literature is starting to come into its own as a recognized form of research (albeit with critics) only now in the postmodern era, in part because of postmodernism's validation of the personal micronarrative (Lyotard, 1984) and postmodernism's related belief that no single “method or theory, discourse or genre, tradition or novelty, has a universal and general claim as the ‘right’ or the privileged form of authoritative knowledge” (Richardson, 2000, p. 928).

The debate concerning subjectivity and objectivity is entwined with the need to preserve research's generalizability. RAN, by its nature, focuses on individuals and specific contexts, but research that dwells on the individual has historically raised the fear that “concerned with individuals, not aggregates, research can never be generalizable” (Donmoyer, 1990, p. 182), while research focused on specific contexts has sparked a corresponding fear that the impact of the idiosyncratic particulars of a given research project's specific setting must somehow be removed for that research to be generalizable (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Yet, RAN's proponents counter that RAN's focus on the ‘particular’ (e.g., upon individuals, upon specific

situations) represents a powerful means of learning and of sharing knowledge in which the particular is extrapolated to examine and express the general. As an example of this process, Pinnegar and Daynes cite the way that Geertz (1983) advanced “the narrative of the Balinese cockfight as a particular case for understanding the Balinese culture” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 22).

Another issue of RAN generalizability foregrounds considerations of researcher presence. Objectivity longs to exclude the influence of the researcher’s distinct individuality from the research context; indeed, *ad absurdum*, objectivity would render a researcher non-present, allowing the research to somehow proceed in a pristine state unsullied by the individual, and hence its results would theoretically attain a quality of perfect generalizability. This is impossible of course, and art inquiry (including RAN) recognizes that the researcher presence is both inevitable and necessary given art inquiry’s grounding in art (Fordon, 2000) and its self-reflexivity. Art inquiry must hence include the discernable presence of the researcher, which is characterized by Cole and Knowles (2001) as the researcher’s signature or fingerprint. The evidence of the researcher’s presence allows a clarity about the ways that the researcher intersects with the participants under study, and this understanding supersedes qualms about subjectivity: “Notions of subjectivity give way to evidence of intersection” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 215). I submit that the RAN researcher’s interactions with the text itself should be clear, for such clarity of interaction allows arts inquiry in general, and RAN in specific, to be generalizable—whereas objectivity seeks to preserve research’s generalizability by removing the researcher’s influence or at least standardizing this influence, arts inquiry preserves generalizability by recognizing that the researcher’s influence cannot be removed and hence striving to make the researcher’s influence visible, so that this influence can be understood and

taken into account by anyone who seeks to extend the research's findings into other contexts. To apply a ballistic metaphor to researcher presence and generalizability, objectivity seeks consistent accuracy by removing influences that might impair a bullet's straight flight, while art inquiry (and hence RAN) seeks consistent accuracy by understanding the factors that influence the bullet's flight path.

Any attempt to remove subjectivity from RAN is all the more misguided given RAN's assertion that the researcher experiences learning about themselves during the research process. Such gaining of self-knowledge is intrinsically subjective as all personal reflection and growth must be, and hence the RAN researcher cannot by definition strive for objectivity without de facto striving for a wilful lack of inward-oriented insight and a personal inertness that are anathema to personal discovery and growth. Indeed, Kilbourn (1999) argues that a RAN thesis should be passionate, though he cautions the faculty of judgment must remain in force.

But it must also be recognized that any RAN research that embraces subjectivity utterly without restraint can indeed become an instrument of advancing personal prejudices, leading to a RAN narrative that is mere propaganda. Conversely, a RAN researcher who attempted to be completely objective would probably produce thematic assertions so riddled with qualifiers and hedgers as to be diluted beyond usefulness, and such themes would likely remain safely within the realms of social mores and hence fail to constitute useful additions to human knowledge. Hence, the RAN researcher—unsuited to a stance of objectivity, but needing to avoid extremes of subjectivity—should instead strive for the golden mean between objectivity and subjectivity that is the stance of the conscientious fiction writer: a fidelity to expressing accurately the nature of human behaviour.

Summary

RAN, like so much qualitative research, is subject to the criticism that its subjectivity impairs the generalizability of its findings, particularly because narrative is traditionally viewed as lacking in plainness, objectivity, and truthfulness. Some critics view RAN's subjectivity as a sign that RAN is intrinsically advocacy rather than descriptive, and is hence not to be trusted. But RAN's proponents counter that subjectivity and emotionality are not enemies of understanding, and that they are indeed a vital avenue of learning.

RAN focuses on individuals and specific contexts, and critics charge that such small-scale focus negatively impacts RAN's generalizability. But RAN's proponents counter that RAN's focus on individuals and upon specific situations represents a powerful means of learning and of sharing knowledge in which the individual or the specific is extrapolated to examine and express the general.

RAN achieves generalizability in part by ensuring that its researcher's presence is visible as a metaphorical fingerprint or signature. Thus, the researcher's interaction with the participants can be tracked by persons attempting to generalize RAN's findings into other contexts.

Though subjectivity does not mark RAN as an invalid research approach in the postmodern era, a RAN researcher cannot stray toward extremes of subjectivity for fear of producing mere propaganda. Conversely, a RAN researcher who attempts to be completely objective is at risk of producing thematic assertions so riddled with qualifiers and hedgers as to be diluted beyond usefulness, and such themes would likely remain safely within the realms of social mores and hence fail to constitute useful additions to human knowledge. Moreover, for a RAN researcher to seek objectivity is to risk stagnation in their personal discovery and growth.

Hence, the RAN researcher must strive for that golden mean between objectivity and subjectivity observed by a conscientious fiction writer: a fidelity to expressing accurately the nature of human behaviour.

RAN: Evaluative Criteria

One of the notable controversies in arts-based inquiry involves the difficulty of evaluating research that is innovative, subjective, and abstract—and RAN is clearly all three. What criteria of evaluation would suit RAN? Narrative inquiry's proponents suggest certain criteria of evaluation, and I submit that other implicit criteria of evaluation also exist.

Expounding upon the difficulties of evaluating arts-informed research, Cole and Knowles (2001) opine that “the criteria of validity (internal and external), reliability, and generalizability (to populations)... are simply inadequate for judging the goodness of research that falls outside academic convention” (p. 213). Indeed, applying traditional standards of evaluation to narrative inquiry is problematic because narrative inquiry arose, in part, due to perceived limitations in traditional ways of knowing: “For some researchers, an understanding of the limits of validity within a quantitative paradigm precipitated a move toward narrative inquiry” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 25).

The difficulty of applying traditional evaluative criteria in a RAN context does not mean that these standard criteria are entirely useless, however, for many of these evaluative criteria can be adapted to a RAN context, e.g., the criterion of generalizability commonly associated with objectivity in quantitative research becomes associated with considerations of discernible researcher presence within RAN. Other commentators concur that the classical criteria of research evaluation are problematical in the context of arts-based research, and they instead offer their own criteria. For example, Richardson (2000) suggests the criteria of: substantive

contribution (“Does this piece contribute to our *understanding* of social life?”); aesthetic merit (“Does this piece succeed aesthetically?”); reflexivity (i.e. “Is the author cognizant of the epistemology of postmodernism?”); impact (Does this affect me? Emotionally? Intellectually?”); expression of a reality (“Does this text embody a fleshed out, embodied sense of lived experience?”) (p. 937). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Denzin and Lincoln (1994) suggest that narrative inquiry be judged according to authenticity, resonance, and trustworthiness.

Cole and Knowles (2001) offer eight elements intended to “serve as standards or criteria by which arts-informed life history research might be evaluated” (p. 215), and these eight points constitute a strong basic foundation for a discussion of RAN evaluation criteria, so I shall cite them at length:

- 1) Intentionality: ‘Good’ arts-informed research has both a clear *intellectual purpose* and *moral purpose*....
- 2) Researcher Presence: The researcher is present through an explicit *reflexive self-accounting*... the research clearly bears her *signature* or *fingerprint*.
- 3) Methodological Commitment: Sound artful inquiry reflects a methodological commitment through evidence of a *principled process* and *procedural harmony*.
- 4) Holistic Quality: From purpose to method to interpretation and representation, arts-informed research is a holistic process and rendering.... A rigorous research account that is arts-informed is imbued with an *internal consistency* and *coherence* that represents its seamless quality. Such an account also evidences a high level of *authenticity* that speaks to the truthfulness and sincerity of the research....
- 5) Communicability: Foremost in arts-informed research are issues related to audience and the transformative potential of the work. Arts-informed research accounts are

written, performed, or revealed with the express purpose of connecting, in an holistic way, with the hearts, souls, and minds of readers.

- 6) Aesthetic Form: In research that has an artful quality, attention to the aesthetics of form is paramount. Here, we are concerned both with the *aesthetic quality* of the research and its *aesthetic appeal*. By the former we mean how well the form adheres to a particular set of artistic processes and conventions. For example: Does the chosen form say, of the novel, follow the conventions of that genre? ... [Yet] judgments about the quality of the art form cannot take precedence over the inquiry's purpose.
- 7) Knowledge Claims: Research is about advancing knowledge however 'knowledge' is defined. As researchers, we make claims about what we have come to know through our work.... Any knowledge claims must be made with sufficient *ambiguity* and *humility* to allow for multiple interpretations and reader response.
- 8) Contributions: Sound and rigorous inquiry has both *theoretical potential* and *transformative potential*.... We are not passive agents of the state, the university, or any other agency of society. We have responsibilities towards other humans. As scholars and artists we seek to bridge the academy and community.

(Cole & Knowles, 2001, pp. 215-217)

These criteria of evaluation for arts-based research for the most part echo: a) familiar guiding principles of educational research as a whole, e.g., principles of transformative potential, internal consistency, methodological commitment; b) familiar principles of art, e.g., aesthetic quality. I shall not try my readers' attention by methodically tracing out certain straight-forward points with which I agree for the most part (e.g., Intentionality) or criteria that I have already examined elsewhere (e.g., Researcher Presence was discussed in "RAN: Subjectivity and Generalizability,"

and the issue of ‘ambiguity and humility of findings’ was discussed in “RAN: Purpose Statement and Narrative Themes”); instead, I shall focus upon those areas in which I feel tensions arise.

One of the inherent tensions of RAN research evaluation involves the issue of narrative form, as expressed within the Cole and Knowles (2001) criterion of Aesthetic Quality, in which they ask, “Does the chosen form say, of the novel, follow the conventions of that genre?” (p. 216). Bearing this criterion in mind, what verdict should an evaluative jury render upon a RAN narrative which observes an overt research structure (e.g., in which Chapter 1 serves a literature review, Chapter 2 delineates methodology, and so forth)? Clearly such overt research narratives do not follow the form conventions of their respective fiction types, so should they hence be evaluated as a failure? Coles and Knowles (2001) declare ‘no,’ for their Aesthetic Form criterion includes a qualifier, “judgments about the quality of the art form cannot take precedence over the inquiry’s purpose” (p. 217). This tension between the main Aesthetic Form criterion and its “inquiry’s purpose” qualifier rhetorically decodes as: *RAN expressed as a novel must be hence judged as a novel—except when that would be inconsistent with the researcher’s purpose*. This notion of the “researcher’s purpose” renders the RAN Aesthetic Form evaluative criterion vulnerable to the error of evaluative logic that Blackburn (2005) terms the “moving bulls-eye”:

Suppose you shoot arrows at a barn door, and every time an arrow lands, you paint on the door a target with the arrow at its centre, and claim thereby always to score a bull’s-eye. There is no success or failure in this game. But that does not mean that you score 100 per cent... It only means that ‘scoring a bull’s-eye’ has lost any meaning. Its meaning in normal archery comes along with the idea of an *attempt* to do something that can easily fail, and that can sometimes, but only sometimes, *succeed*. But here the possibility of failure has vanished. (p. 37)

The “moving bulls-eye” fallacy may manifest in the context of the Aesthetic Form evaluative criterion since the criterion’s qualifier about “researcher’s purpose” tempts a RAN researcher to characterize shortcomings in their narrative form as a necessary accommodation (or even a happy product) of their research intent. Hence, such a qualifier might expose RAN to criticism that its narratives may lack a rigour of aesthetic form. No easy solution to this problem exists, since many of the adaptations to this problem would place prescriptive restrictions on aesthetic form that would constrain RAN from being a flexible instrument of self-expression; for example, removing the RAN Aesthetic Form criterion’s “researcher’s purpose” qualifier might force RAN researchers to compose narratives that include standard elements of mainstream fiction that were entirely divorced from their research aims, e.g., a RAN researcher composing a narrative about a principal’s attempt to reform a troubled school might feel pressure to include a romantic subplot, which is *de rigueur* in mainstream fiction. Yet, the Aesthetic Form evaluative criterion is too useful to forgo (in part because eschewing this criterion would open the door to lamentable narratives that could bring RAN into disrepute with their poor form), but reconciling the twin needs of Aesthetic Form and research flexibility is a bedevilling challenge.

Another evaluative tension lies in the criterion that Cole and Knowles (2001) term as ‘Contributions,’ in which they declare, “We are not passive agents of the state, the university, or any other agency of society” (p. 217). Fair enough, we are active agents then—but of whom? If we are not agents of any agency of society, then presumably we are free agents. This may arguably represent the nature of the famously individualistic artist (especially the artist as writer), but does it accurately describe the researcher? Not according to Cole and Knowles (2001) themselves, for soon after their assertion that we are not the agents of others, they advance the contradictory qualifiers, “We have responsibilities towards other humans” and must “bridge the

academy and community” (p. 217). Given this contradiction (i.e., we are not agents of the state or university, yet we work to bridge the academy and the community), let us consider the dilemma of a RAN researcher who pursues a creative vision through their narrative, but realizes during the compositional stage that the narrative they are writing will not meet the ‘Contributions’ criterion by bridging the academy and the community, e.g., the researcher’s theme will assert that the parents who blame teachers for their children’s poor academic performance are typically the actual primary culprits in their children’s failure to apply themselves. Such a theme, the researcher may realize during the composition stage, will introduce negativity into the relationship between the academy and the community. Should that RAN researcher divert their composition onto a thematic path that will satisfy the contributions criterion, even if to do so would be to divert their narrative away from their personal artistic vision of the truth? If they failed to do so, would the resulting RAN narrative be deemed a failure? I suggest that the answer to this dilemma lays in the researcher-writer’s duty to the truth: as long as the RAN researcher’s narrative improves the knowledge base of their society, they have met the Contributions criterion.

The discussion of RAN evaluative criteria has thus far focused upon criteria of evaluation that have been advanced by RAN researchers explicitly, but I submit that the nature of RAN suggests other implicit evaluative criteria, such as the need to actualize RAN’s promise of a greater readership appeal. One of the central arguments of Richardson (2000) is that traditional qualitative research is tedious and that RAN research could “be reaching wide and diverse audience” (p. 924), while Cole and Knowles (2001) talk of narrative inquiry having “resonance for audiences of all kinds” (p. 216)—an issue with fundamental implications for the research’s transformative power. Thus, we must conclude that one implicit criterion for evaluating RAN is:

the narrative produced by a RAN researcher must be so interesting to the public as to expand the readership of the research beyond the traditional academic readership into the mainstream. However, as I described in “RAN: Data Dissemination and Audience,” (and as Richardson herself acknowledges), RAN’s refusal to commit itself to achieving a high level of narrative professionalism undermines RAN’s hope of expanding into the mainstream, as does its occasional overt research structure. Given this, I suggest that ‘reaching a wide and diverse audience’ must remain merely a desirable goal of RAN, not a mandatory one. Furthermore, I earlier advanced two additional implicit evaluative criteria involving audience interest: the narrative’s ability to affect its readers’ deeply held views; the narrative’s ability to affect its readers’ views reliably. Drawing upon all these considerations, I submit that the implicit evaluative criterion of audience interest in a RAN context can be distilled as follows:

- a) RAN’s transformative potential is at its best when a RAN narrative transcends research’s traditional academic readership and interests a mainstream readership (assuming that RAN also reliably affects the readership’s deeply held views).
- b) If a RAN narrative does not earn the interest of a mainstream audience, RAN’s transformative potential remains potent if it succeeds in interesting an audience within the academic community (assuming that RAN also reliably affects this readership’s deeply held views).
- c) If a RAN narrative fails to interest both a mainstream readership and research’s traditional academic audience, RAN’s transformative potential focuses only upon the researcher themselves.

Another implicit evaluative criterion of RAN focuses on the researcher’s personal growth in writing skill. Although Richardson (2000) denies that RAN will turn researchers into “poets,

novelists, or dramatists” (p. 936), she promises, “Writing as method does not take writing for granted, but offers multiple ways to learn to do it, and to nurture the writer” (p. 924), and she further asserts that growth in writing skill will occur, “through experimentation with point of view, tone, texture, sequencing, metaphor, and so on,” (p. 936). Therefore, another implicit evaluative criteria of RAN is: the researcher’s skill in narrative composition should increase as a result of their research. This is true whether the researcher intends to be fiction writer or not.

Another implicit criterion of evaluation must be acknowledged, I feel, and it involves the lowered expectation of quality placed on many hybrid innovations that combine two extant fields of endeavour. Many such hybrid human endeavours demonstrate poor results in both of the hybrid’s individual pursuits, including hybrid endeavours in an education context (e.g., an educator attempting to express long division via tap dancing will often produce a poorly entertained audience of students who have learned little about dividends, divisors, and quotients); yet, these hybrids are often judged successes out of a benevolent suspending of judgment in the context of hybrid innovations. But I submit that RAN should avoid the lowered expectations associated with hybrid endeavours. RAN’s nature as a hybrid of research and narrative should not be viewed as a valid excuse for a lack of rigorousness of standard practice in any of its originating fields. RAN must not be inadequate research, and RAN must not be inadequate fiction writing, and any inadequacies in either of these endeavours must not be thought to be excused by the parallel presence of the other endeavour.

Finally, I suggest that qualitative research’s ability to be flexible to accommodate the idiosyncratic purposes of researchers can also extend to evaluative criteria. Gosse (2005), for example, proposes a set of evaluative criteria for his RAN dissertation *Jackytar* that draws upon not only theorists such as Cole and Knowles (2001), but also upon his own personal formulation

of certain evaluation criteria that he considers pertinent to his RAN endeavour. While I generally concur that a RAN researcher should be able to propose distinct evaluation criteria of their own, I suggest that this act must be subject to two basic considerations: a) such criteria must be communicated clearly to any reviewers; b) such criteria must not seek to lower the standards expected of the research (e.g., by creating the “moving bulls-eye” fallacy of evaluation described earlier).

Summary

Establishing evaluative criteria for so innovative, subjective, and abstract a research pursuit as RAN is challenging, particularly since RAN arose in part due to perceived limitations in those traditional methods of research for which standard evaluation criteria were designed. Traditional criteria such as internal and external validity typically do not suit an arts inquiry context, but they often can remain useful if successfully adapted to arts inquiry.

Cole and Knowles’ (2001) eight criteria for arts-informed life history research (Intentionality, Researcher Presence, Methodological Commitment, Holistic Quality, Communicability, Aesthetic Form, Knowledge Claims, Contributions) can serve as a basic foundation for evaluating RAN research, but RAN’s unique nature creates tensions even within these arts-informed criteria. For example, the criterion of Aesthetic Quality creates a tension between the need to adopt traditional fiction forms and the need for the RAN researcher to possess the flexibility compose a narrative whose form reflects their idiosyncratic research goals.

Similarly, the Contributions criterion evokes a tension between the agency of the researcher and their duty to bridge the academy and the community. When such tension arises, the researcher must foremost maintain a fidelity to advancing accurate knowledge.

One implicit research criterion arises from RAN's promise as a form of research that will better interest readers. This audience-interest criterion suggests that RAN's transformative potential: is at its best when RAN gains a mainstream audience; remains high if RAN only interests the academic readership; focuses primarily on the researcher themselves when RAN fails to interest even the academic readership.

Since RAN also seeks to advance the researcher's narrative composition skill, a growth in this skill must be recognized as an implicit evaluative criterion of RAN.

RAN's nature as a hybrid of education research and writing may tempt evaluators to excuse the shortcomings of a given RAN narrative by citing the presence of RAN's parallel research agenda. This would be a fallacy: both RAN's research agenda and its narrative agenda must succeed based upon their individual merits.

I suggest that qualitative research's ability to be flexible should also allow a RAN researcher to propose distinct evaluation criteria suitable to their individual research project, subject to two basic considerations: a) such criteria must be communicated clearly to any reviewers; b) such criteria must not seek to lower the standards expected of the research.

RAN: The Companion Academic Document (CAD)

The narrative does not constitute the totality of a given RAN research project's textual manifestation, since RAN research typically also features a companion academic document (which I shall refer to as the CAD). This CAD serves as a context for basic research elements such as title, abstract, table of contents, and citation list, as well as for more involved elements, such as the introduction. A RAN CAD, in keeping with the flexible nature of arts inquiry in

general, does not have a prescribed form; it may be placed before the narrative as an introduction or foreword, or after the narrative as an epilogue, and it may even manifest both before and after the narrative. Similarly, a RAN CAD has no rigidly prescribed agenda, and it may: establish the research problem; convey a sense of the study's necessity; identify the major issues to be examined by the research; delineate boundaries of the research; provide definitions of key concepts; provide a synopsis of the fiction.

The CAD also typically includes the researcher's literature review, though this may take a variety of forms, given RAN's de-emphasizing of a traditional scholarly literature review. Since RAN typically draws the researcher themselves into the spotlight of examination, the RAN researcher's personal background and motivations are considerations worthy of potential inclusion within the CAD. Also, the CAD touches upon the methodology used in RAN's primary data collection and analysis stage. Indeed, the CAD could also discuss in general terms the narrative composition process that occurs in the secondary data collection and analysis stage, e.g., Gosse (2005) describes in his RAN dissertation's CAD the writing texts that informed his style (*On Writing, A Memoir of the Craft* and *The Elements of Style*), and he details his approach to issues such as adverbs, dialect, and plotting.

But the RAN CAD should not, despite its flexibility of form and content, explicate the ensuing narrative's themes to a level of specificity that is inconsistent with the researcher's purpose. In the section: "RAN: Purpose Statement and Narrative Themes," I suggested the following rule regarding ambiguity of theme: "The extent of thematic ambiguity appropriate in a narrative inquiry context can legitimately range from very little ambiguity to very great ambiguity, and the appropriateness of a given narrative inquiry endeavour's level of thematic ambiguity can only properly be gauged with an awareness of that endeavour's idiosyncratic

research aims.” I now submit that this rule encompasses not only the RAN narrative, but the RAN CAD as well.

If the knowledge gleaned about the research topic must be conveyed with a measured level of ambiguity and humility, what about the personal learning that the RAN researcher gleans regarding themselves relative to the topic, themselves as persons, and themselves as writers? Must the RAN researcher similarly observe the ‘ambiguity and humility’ stricture regarding knowledge claims even in the context of their own learning and hence not express their personal learning directly? I suggest that this is not necessarily so. Whereas the knowledge claims regarding the main research topic must feature a carefully calibrated level of ambiguity and humility so as to support multiple interpretations of the narrative or so as to specifically restrict the multiplicity of interpretations in keeping with the research’s purpose, the researcher’s personal learning is so intrinsic to themselves and so focused upon the researcher’s individual learning agenda that the readership has little need of being able to form ‘multiple interpretations’ about the topic—after all, the topic in question is the individual researcher. Thus, I submit that the RAN researcher can directly express their personal learning within the CAD with as much candour as they desire.

If we accept that the RAN researcher *can* directly express their personal learning about themselves relative to the topic, themselves as persons, and themselves as writers in the CAD, we should next consider: *must* the RAN researcher directly express their personal learning in the CAD? After all, the knowledge claims made about the primary research topic manifest in the form of the narrative’s themes, but where except within the CAD can the researcher’s personal growth be made visible to the research readership? Ergo, it can be argued that the RAN researcher must directly describe their personal learning about themselves as writers (and their

personal learning about themselves relative to a topic and themselves as persons) in the CAD, since this learning would otherwise be completely invisible to the readership.

However, I submit that the RAN researcher does not actually have an onus to directly express their personal learning relative to the topic, themselves as persons, and themselves as writers. RAN's transformative potential vis-à-vis these issues focuses primarily upon the researcher themselves, and the researcher's idiosyncratic learning about themselves as individuals does not, by nature, need to be generalizable to others (though it may be).

Furthermore, given the intensely personal nature of such insights into the self, a RAN researcher who was pressured into describing their personal learning would experience a strong temptation to misreport their findings (e.g., so as not to reveal embarrassing information, so as to conceal shortcomings, or to self-aggrandize), and formalizing such a temptation to misrepresentation within research is undesirable. Given these considerations, I submit that the RAN researcher can express their personal learning within the CAD if they wish, and may do so with as much candidness as they desire, but the researcher should only do so if their personal learning can potentially be generalizable to other people, and only if the researcher can express their personal learning without explicitly or implicitly explicating the RAN narrative's themes to a level of specificity that is inconsistent with the research's chosen level of ambiguity.

I suggest a final caveat about the use of the CAD in a RAN context: the researcher must remain cognizant that their narrative must speak for itself, and hence the researcher should not attempt to use the RAN CAD to compensate for fiction that is inadequate in exploring or expressing knowledge. In discussing CADs as they are used in the context of RAN doctoral dissertations, Eisner cautioned that a CAD "is not intended to replace the core of a dissertation that was written as a novel, it is intended to amplify it" (cited in Saks, 1996, p. 413). Hence,

though the RAN CAD can clarify and perhaps expand upon the RAN fiction's themes, it must never be pressed into service as the ventriloquist to the hollow dummy of poorly written fiction.

Summary

In RAN, the companion academic document (CAD) is flexible in form, and it serves as a context for expressing: basic information (e.g., title, abstract, table of contents, and citation list); larger topics typically expressed within a research introduction (e.g., research problem, the study's necessity, major issues, research boundaries, definitions of key concepts); the literature review; details of the researcher's personal background and motivations; research methodology; and narrative composition process observations.

Per my earlier formulated rule about the level of ambiguity of theme appropriate to a RAN project, the RAN CAD should not explicate the RAN narrative's themes to a level of specificity that is inconsistent with the research's purpose.

In terms of the researcher's personal learning, the RAN researcher can express their personal learning within the CAD with as much candidness as they desire, but only if this learning can potentially be generalizable to other people, and only if the researcher can express their personal learning without explicitly or implicitly explicating the RAN narrative's themes to a level of specificity that is inconsistent with the research's chosen level of ambiguity. Expressing such personal learning is purely voluntary.

The RAN researcher must not attempt to use the CAD to compensate for fiction that is inadequate to exploring or expressing knowledge. The RAN narrative must be able to perform these functions by itself.

Considerations of “Narrative as Research (NAR)”

To this point, this dissertation has examined the familiar form of narrative inquiry in the education context, which I have termed “Research as Narrative (RAN),” in order to both highlight promising and problematical aspects of narrative inquiry in general and create a juxtapositional framework against which to consider a recent new narrative inquiry approach. It is to this new narrative inquiry approach, “Narrative as Research (NAR),” that this thesis now turns its focus.

In this new approach, the researcher engages in a process of learning founded more primarily on the act of narrative composition, an approach to learning very much that of a fiction writer. Whereas RAN engages with collaborative research participants using traditional qualitative research methods (e.g., interviews and journals) and undertakes narrative composition only secondarily, the NAR approach does not feature collaborative participants and instead engages in narrative composition as the primary means of data collection and analysis. This process is supplemented by background research, such as a fiction writer normally undertakes when approaching a fiction project.

Notably, NAR should not be confused with the narratives that Richardson (1977) terms as “writing-stories,” which are narratives about the writing process itself, since a NAR narrative could focus on any of an immense multitude of topics pertinent to the educational researcher’s field, not just the topic of writing.

Exploring the NAR approach in terms of the same pivotal research issues already examined in a RAN context will illuminate strengths and challenges of NAR. As in the RAN

section, the sequencing of the topics under examination will not proceed chronologically, and will instead proceed based upon which topics best inform other topics (e.g., in the NAR section, unlike the RAN section, the topic of “Data Collection and Analysis” better informs “Dissemination and Audience” and hence precedes it).

This exploration of NAR will culminate in a chart (Table 3) that delineates the NAR research procedure, juxtaposing it against the reconceptualized view of the RAN procedure that I advanced in the “Select Considerations of ‘Research as Narrative (RAN)’” section.

NAR: Data Collection and Analysis

Their differing approaches to data collection and analysis demarcate the most central difference between RAN and NAR, and these divergent approaches reflect the two approaches’ distinctive roots: RAN is research that draws upon writing, while NAR’s roots lie in the art of writing, now repurposed for research.

As expressed earlier, RAN gathers its data in the primary data collection and analysis phase via traditional qualitative research instruments that have a narrative aspect (e.g., interviews, journals) and which are analyzed by the researcher with a focus on their narrative elements (e.g., conflict, character); and this data collection and analysis process is a collaboration between the researcher and their participants. Then follows a secondary data collection and analysis phase, which is synonymous with narrative composition.

In NAR, however, the research process is more directly grounded upon the fiction-writing process. Thus, whereas the composition of the narrative in RAN constitutes the secondary data collection and analysis phase, in NAR the composition of a narrative is the primary data collection and analysis phase. Whereas RAN focused directly on research

participants who collaborate with the researcher, NAR would not rely upon collaborative research participants. This does not mean that the NAR researcher simply ‘makes up’ the reality of the narrative in the childish sense. Rather, the NAR researcher draws upon the knowledge they have gleaned from past personal experience and from pre-composition prefatory research; and then, armed with this knowledge, the NAR researcher enters into the narrative composition process and therein extrapolates further knowledge using that engine of innovative knowledge production that has made authors synonymous with intellectual clarity, epiphany, and the progression of society’s knowledge base: namely, the informed imagination. For example, my novella “The Wrong Breed of Dreamer” drew upon: my own past personal experience (e.g., as a resident of an isolated northern town and as a schoolmate of native Canadians); my pre-composition prefatory research (e.g., in realms such as aboriginal mythology, cell phone coverage in the Arctic, aboriginal drop-out rates, and the biology and psychology of sleep); and my own informed imagination (e.g., I envisioned how a drug that removed the need for sleep would impact society).

This dissertation has earlier noted that the concept of using fiction composition as a means of learning about human behaviour and about the self has already been established within the education research sphere, e.g., “I write fictionally as a way to know myself and others in words and in the world” (Leggo, 2005, p. 97), and “Writing is also a way of ‘knowing’—a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it” (Richardson, 2000, p. 923). And, of course, fiction writers throughout history have always known that the act of composing narrative is not merely a regurgitation of the known, it is also a means of learning: the written page informs the reader, but the blank page informs the writer.

The NAR approach to narrative inquiry is a relatively new development in formal research, however, and examples tend to be rare and recent, but they do exist and do demonstrate NAR's promise. Leggo (2005) represents an example of NAR, since this narrative inquiry endeavour's fictional depiction of an educator struggling to teach within the constraints of a fundamentalist religious school draws not upon the experiences of collaborative participants sifted via formal research instruments, but rather upon "the author's autobiographical remembering and understanding of personal experience" (p. 85).

Murphy (2004) serendipitously stumbled onto the NAR learning-via-composition dynamic while pursuing a RAN project. While he was undertaking field research, creating the field texts typical of a RAN primary data collection and analysis phase, he decided to temporarily set aside these field texts and instead examine his topic via the composition of fiction, producing fiction which he labelled 'fictional interim texts':

I was trying to get at my understanding of experience through the work of writing and in this, writing fiction, something different from rewriting field texts. Writing fictional interim texts allowed me to step back from the field texts. This helped me see my research in a new way. (p. 44)

The latter statement is key: writing fiction allowed a unique means of viewing a research topic that differed from that view afforded by the RAN field texts. For example, my NAR novella "The Pain Stain" examined issues such as art and spirituality from a viewpoint that could not have been achieved had I utilized a RAN approach, e.g., my first-person narrator is a supernatural being, but RAN's reliance on field texts would make problematical (though not impossible) the incorporation of the viewpoint of a supernatural being in the resulting fiction text.

The narrative inquiry dissertation of Sameshima (2006) represents another instance of NAR. Her narrative inquiry eschewed RAN's initial data collection and analysis phase featuring standard research instruments (e.g., interviews), her fiction flowing instead from the fount of her own informed imagination. Hence, Sameshima's dissertation is an instance of NAR—and a very successful one, as her dissertation mentor explains:

[Sameshima's dissertation] has won four dissertation awards: 2007 CSSE, Arts Researchers and Teachers' Society Outstanding Dissertation Award; 2007 CSSE, Canadian Association for Teacher Education Dissertation Award; 2007 AERA, Arts-Based Educational Research SIG Award for Outstanding Dissertation; and the 2007 Ted T. Aoki Award for Outstanding Dissertation in Curriculum Inquiry. Moreover she won the Gordon and Marion Smith Prize in Art Education....

(Irwin, cited in Sameshima, 2007, p. 2)

The accolades afforded Sameshima clearly suggest that the NAR approach, for all its youth, can indeed elicit quite positive acceptance within the education research field.

In keeping with fiction writers' varying approaches to pre-compositional prefatory learning, the background research that a NAR researcher would undertake in preparation for their narrative composition can be as extensive, eclectic, and formal as the researcher desires. Such prefatory learning could include activities such as consulting books, consultations with knowledgeable persons, visits to sites, and experiential learning (e.g., a NAR researcher who intended to write about spiritual education might elect to try meditating on a mountain or two). For example, my prefatory research for "The Pain Stain" included researching antique tattooing equipment on the Internet, discussing tattoos with tattoo bearers, and visiting tattoo parlours. Indeed, a NAR researcher might decide to so heavily invest their time in prefatory learning that

their background research process becomes as extensive as the more formal RAN primary data collection and analysis phase. The NAR researcher could even gather knowledge from persons with direct experience of the research topic and do so by drawing upon instruments of knowledge-gathering such as interviews, echoing RAN primary data gathering and analysis procedures.

This begs the question: if a NAR researcher chooses to engage in extensive background research, does their research process become tantamount to a RAN pursuit (i.e., because it now has a data collection and analysis phase that precedes the narrative composition phase, as in RAN)? I submit that the answer to this question is: very nearly indeed. RAN and NAR are not dichotomous—they enjoy a flexibility of form that is one of the strengths of qualitative inquiry, and they may indeed overlap in their research approaches. I suggest, however, that even in the presence of an extensive background research process that includes gathering knowledge from persons with direct topical experience, NAR will remain distinct from RAN because: a) NAR does represent such persons as being intrinsic and central to the NAR process; b) NAR does not view such persons as collaborators with the researcher, and hence does not view them as ‘research participants’ per se; c) NAR will tend to engage with such persons more informally, e.g., a RAN interview of a participant will result in a methodical distillation of participant responses in search of concepts and trends and so forth, whereas a NAR interview with a topically knowledgeable person may simply be an informal discussion that is not recorded, let alone methodically analyzed. For example, my discussions with tattoo bearers regarding tattoos in preparation for the composition of “The Pain Stain”: a) did not mean that these persons were intrinsic and central to my composition of the novella; b) did not render these persons research participants, let alone collaborators; c) were conducted informally.

This issue of pre-compositional background research illuminates the differing nature of RAN's and NAR's strengths in terms of the grounding of their knowledge claims:

- RAN, by virtue of its intense engagement with collaborative participants, tends to be immediately grounded in a human experiencing of the topic. In the absence of a collaborative participant, NAR may tend to be less grounded in an immediate human experiencing of the topic. (Though the latter is not true if, say, the NAR researcher writes about a topic with which they have extensive personal experience.)
- RAN, affixed closely to its participants' experiences, and conducted collaboratively with these participants, is constrained in some degree from gleaning and reporting new knowledge that extends significantly beyond these participants' experiences and opinions. NAR, however, is not constrained by any collaborative participant experience, and its reliance on the imagination confers upon NAR a greater freedom to advance more boldly into new frontiers of knowledge.

Thus, NAR can fly farther than RAN into new realms of knowledge, but can hence potentially fly farther afield from an accurate depiction of human behaviour.

Notably, NAR's pre-composition background preparation may also include the consulting of fictional works focused on similar topics in similar genres. This would aid the NAR researcher in ensuring that they are advancing new knowledge and in locating their proposed narrative within the extant fiction marketplace.

In RAN, the secondary data collection and analysis phase (a.k.a., the narrative composition phase) serves as a context for the researcher's self-learning about themselves, about themselves relative to the research topic, and about themselves as writers. In NAR, the narrative process would continue to serve this purpose. Indeed, the absence of the RAN collaborative

participant in NAR would foreground the NAR researcher's personal odyssey of learning. An example of such personal learning would be my discovery, during my composition of "The Storyteller," that as a writer I am particularly fond of the distinct storytelling rhythms of fables, e.g., progressive repetitions such as the instances of squinting in the tale of Jack Miller the Demon.

Given that NAR eschews the formal RAN primary data collection and gathering stage and heavily emphasizes its narrative composition process, the question could be asked: what keeps a NAR research endeavour that produces, say, a novel, from simply being a novel? For example, the novel *Regression to the Mean: A Novel of Regression Politics*, written by an education professor who specializes in evaluation issues, focuses upon issues of evaluation in science and education, yet its author, E. R. House, did not undertake formal research in tandem with the composition of the novel. Nevertheless, he has clearly drawn upon his extensive personal experience in the composition of this novel. So, is *Regression to the Mean* an example of NAR? (And could any novel hence be considered an act of NAR?) I suggest that NAR differs from fiction that is solely fiction in a concrete sense because NAR also features a companion academic document (CAD). For example, in addition to this dissertation's theory section, my novellas all have afterwords. Furthermore, in a more theoretical sense, NAR can be differentiated from fiction that is solely fiction using a test suggested by Richardson (2000): the claim made by the author regarding the function of the narrative.

Despite the actual blurring of genres, and despite our contemporary understanding that all writing is narrative writing, I would contend that there is still one major difference separating fiction from science writing. The difference is not whether the text *really* is fiction or nonfiction, but the claim the author makes for the text.

Claiming to write “fiction” is different from claiming to write “science” in terms of the audience one seeks, the impact one might have on different publics, and how one expects “truth claims” to be evaluated. (p. 926)

Richardson’s assertion that the difference between fiction as research and fiction that is solely fiction revolves around the claims made by the author is a key distinction, without which *all* narrative potentially could be deemed a source of narrative inquiry, which would stretch the definition of the narrative inquiry so broadly that it would metaphorically fade into nothingness (or, at least, it would merge with the field of literature). Since House never claimed that his novel *Regression to the Mean* is research, it is neither research in general nor NAR in specific. In contrast, I do indeed make the claim that the three novellas in this dissertation constitute research.

Summary

Their differing approaches to data collection and analysis demarcate the most central difference between RAN and NAR. Whereas the composition of the narrative in RAN is only the secondary data collection and analysis phase, in NAR the composition of a narrative is the primary data collection and analysis phase.

However, NAR does not “make up” the reality of the narrative. Rather, the NAR researcher draws upon the knowledge they have gleaned from past personal experience and pre-composition prefatory research and then extrapolates further knowledge via the narrative composition process, using their informed imagination.

Recent examples of NAR include Leggo (2005) and Sameshima (2006), two narrative inquiry research endeavours that eschew a data collection and analysis phase marked by the use of formal research instruments and instead draw upon their authors’ informed imaginations.

Murphy (2004) describes ‘fictional interim texts’ which also reflect the NAR approach to learning via the act of narrative composition.

The background research that a NAR researcher would undertake in preparation for their narrative composition can be as extensive, eclectic, and formal as the researcher desires. Such prefatory learning could include activities such as consulting books, consultations with knowledgeable persons, visits to sites, and experiential learning.

Whereas RAN, by virtue of its intense engagement with collaborative participants, tends to be immediately grounded in a human experiencing of the topic, NAR may be less grounded in an immediate experiencing of the topic. NAR’s eschewing of a collaborative participant gives NAR greater freedom to more boldly advance into unexplored frontiers of knowledge, albeit at the risk of flying further afield from an accurate depiction of human behaviour.

In NAR, as in RAN, the composition of the narrative serves as a means for the researcher to gain new knowledge about themselves relative to the research topic, themselves as a person, and themselves as a writer. In the absence of RAN’s collaborative participant, the NAR researcher’s self-learning is foregrounded.

When determining whether or not a NAR endeavour actually is narrative inquiry or is simply a piece of fiction, the claim made by the author regarding the function of the text is a vital consideration. The presence of a CAD is also a concrete expression that a NAR narrative is not mere fiction.

NAR: Dissemination and Audience

Many of the advantages that RAN enjoys over traditional academic writing in terms of communicating innovatively and clearly are also advantages enjoyed by NAR. NAR fiction can

disclose what a literal discursive expositional language cannot, e.g. by feel, by innuendo, by implication, by mood; NAR fiction can concretize abstract ideas, bridging theory and practice; NAR fiction's language can be more approachable to mainstream readers than the language typical of research texts, which are comprehensible only to an educated elite.

One of the key premises advanced in support of the RAN approach is that typical qualitative research is often too boring in its expository dissemination approach to interest most academicians, let alone a mainstream audience. In response to this concern, RAN's proponents cite RAN's promise of being more interesting in dissemination due to its narrative form. However, RAN's proponents admit that RAN narratives cannot be expected to rise to the level of artistic quality attained in the mainstream fiction market, and RAN further struggles to interest readers in those incidences when its narrative observes an overt research structure (e.g., chapters devoted to issues such as Literature Review and Methodology). NAR, however, offers a greater hope of fulfilling RAN's promise.

In terms of audience interest, just as RAN seeks to improve upon traditional qualitative research using narrative, NAR's even greater focus upon its narrative would seek to improve upon RAN. RAN divides the researcher's attention between the demands of two different data collection and analysis phases, only one of which focuses upon the composition of the narrative; NAR, however, focuses more fully upon the narrative composition process, and this greater investiture of the researcher's efforts in the narrative will tend to yield a narrative of a superior quality. By 'narrative of a superior quality,' I mean to suggest fiction that possesses an array of characteristics that include (but are not limited to): greater insight, fewer weaknesses of style, a greater disposition to the successful use of a wider variety of techniques, a greater disposition to demonstrating successful innovation. Such superior fiction will naturally tend, on average, to

more deeply interest a readership and to interest a wider readership. It is my hope that this dissertation's novellas demonstrate the high level of narrative quality requisite to interesting a wide audience, though that judgment will ultimately belong to the readership.

NAR would enjoy additional advantages over RAN in terms of garnering readership interest because NAR: a) would not have to accommodate the views of collaborative participants, potentially to the detriment of the narrative's artistic quality; b) would never observe an overt research structure. NAR could hence more wholeheartedly adopt traditional aesthetic elements that have historically evolved (in part) to compete for audience within a competitive fiction marketplace. These considerations are true in my novellas. None of them were written in tandem with a collaborative participant, and it is my personal belief that these novellas' often dark tone and risqué musings may well have incurred resistance in a collaborative participant, which would in turn quite possibly have created a pressure during the composition phase for a moderation of tone, character, and plot that would have restrained my fiction's ability to advance bold themes. And, of course, none of the novellas observe an overt research structure.

Though NAR would possess advantages over RAN in terms of interesting an audience, the NAR researcher would still face an extraordinarily daunting task in composing a narrative that could succeed in garnering an audience beyond the traditional academic audience, since the NAR researcher faces two sources of competition: a) professional writers contending within the mainstream fiction marketplace; b) other media forms, ranging from movies and computer games to the internet, that compete with literary fiction. The NAR approach would hence demand that the researcher possess (or develop) a high level of writing skill (an issue which I will explore further subsequently). I recognize that my future attempts to publish my novellas

will face competition from other professional writers and other media forms, and it took a significant amount of faith in my personal writing expertise to undertake my research in a NAR format.

But if a NAR narrative could not successfully appeal to a mainstream audience, would it still be considered a success if it appealed to the traditional academic readership? I believe that the answer is: yes, but it would possess a transformative power that was lessened in proportion to the narrowing of its audience. And as with RAN, if NAR failed to interest even an academic readership, its transformative power would focus upon the researcher themselves.

Summary

Like RAN fiction, NAR fiction: can disclose what a literal discursive expositional language cannot; can concretize abstract ideas, bridging theory and practice; can be more approachable to readers, and hence less exclusionary, than the language typical of research texts.

NAR can potentially improve upon RAN's audience appeal because: the NAR researcher's attention is more fully focused upon the narrative composition task; the researcher would not have to accommodate the viewpoints of a collaborative participant; the narrative would never observe an overt research format. NAR could hence more wholeheartedly adopt mainstream narrative aesthetic elements, which will aid it in the fiction marketplace.

The goal of competing for readers in the mainstream marketplace places a heavy onus on the NAR researcher to possess (or develop) a high degree of writing skill.

As with RAN, NAR's transformative potential: is at its best if NAR interests a mainstream readership; remains significant if NAR only interests the traditional academic readership; focuses on the researcher alone if NAR fails to interest even an academic readership. The potential audience for NAR research may include the traditional academic audience (e.g.,

undergraduates, graduates, and researchers), plus perhaps a mainstream readership, plus the researcher themselves. NAR research that succeeds in interesting a wide audience, deeply, and reliably will have enhanced that research findings' transformative power. The distinction that I am making between RAN and NAR is of the species versus species type.

NAR: Purpose Statement and Themes

NAR is similar to RAN in terms of its goodness-of-fit vis-à-vis the hypothesis-testing research approach versus a broad purpose statement approach. In the "RAN: Purpose Statement and Themes" section, I concluded that a hypothesis-testing research design marked by deductive logic would ill-suit RAN, since applying such an approach in a narrative context would likely yield knowledge-gathering results that were: meagre in scope; binary, in the sense of merely affirming or disaffirming the hypothesis; prone to confirmation bias; and primarily disseminative, rather than exploratory. And that, conversely, qualitative research's traditional approach of a general, broad purpose statement explored via inductive logic would help actualize narrative's ability to explore a topic in depth and without presumptions, making this approach a good fit with RAN. For all these same reasons, I submit that a general, broad purpose statement vis-à-vis a research topic that is then explored via inductive logic would best suit NAR as well. For example (as more fully described in the novella's afterword), I began composition of "The Wrong Breed of Dreamer" with only the broad purpose of exploring a related series of binaries (which included: right brain versus left brain; aesthetics versus science; qualitative versus quantitative; subjectivity versus objectivity; logic versus imagination) that I was encountering in my graduate education courses.

Although NAR and RAN are both suited to a general, broad purpose statement vis-à-vis a research topic, NAR and RAN inevitably differ in their exploration of a research topic and in the generation of their preliminary narrative themes given their distinctly different approaches to data gathering and analysis. In RAN, the primary data collection and analysis phase produces preliminary conclusions about the research topic that hence serve as the preliminary themes for the ensuing narrative composition stage. NAR, however, does not feature a formal data collection and analysis phase, and the NAR researcher instead forms preliminary themes for their narrative composition based upon their personal experience and their background research, e.g., based upon my personal experience and my background research, I began my composition of “The Wrong Breed of Dreamer” with a preliminary theme (one of several) that both the realm of sleep and the future were tantamount to a land discovered but not colonized. Given that the RAN primary data collection and analysis phase and the NAR background research procedure differ in scope more than they differ in nature, the actual differences between the RAN and NAR preliminary theme generation procedures is modest, and it revolves primarily around the collaborative participant’s input into theme that RAN features and that NAR eschews.

The absence of RAN’s primary data collection and analysis phase and RAN’s collaborative participants in a NAR context removes one of the dilemmas faced by the RAN researcher—specifically, the dilemma faced by a RAN researcher who concludes their primary data collection and analysis stage conducted in collaboration with their participants by distilling tentative conclusions that become themes for the ensuing narrative composition stage, only to find during the ensuing narrative composition process that their themes undergo further evolution that evolves these themes away from the views of the collaborative participants. Indeed, the presence of the collaborative participants which is a hallmark of RAN may place a narrative

inquiry researcher in a dilemma not only when the researcher disagrees with the participants, but also even when they agree with the participants. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) relate the distress experienced by a researcher, Jean, forced to self-censor herself in RAN's primary data collection and analysis phase when dealing with her collaborative participants:

Frequently, one of the girls told a story of home or school that resonated with one of Jean's. Jean wanted to burst in with stories of her own experience of herself as a teacher, as a mother, as a girl. And yet she held back, partly because she felt her inquiry task was to faithfully record what her participants said.... in the field she felt silenced and voiceless. (p. 75)

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) continue onward to assert that though the RAN researcher had to self-censor herself in the primary data collection and analysis phase, she would be freer to express herself in the secondary data collection and analysis phase: "in the writing of the research text... her voice could be present" (p. 75). However, I submit that the RAN researcher may experience a related form of self-censorship in the writing of their fiction text as well, because they have to privilege the input of their collaborative participants. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) themselves acknowledge this problem when they describe the experience of another RAN researcher whose collaborative participants appeared oppressed to the researcher yet self-reported contentment with their lot in life; the researcher hence felt "a great deal of tension in this because she wishes both to honor her participants and to critique social structures" (p. 141). This tension to 'honor the participants' cannot help but constrain the RAN researcher during the deriving and expressing of new knowledge. In contrast, NAR, freed of RAN's collaborative participants, can more boldly explore and express new knowledge. Again, as I expressed earlier, the lack of a collaborative participant allowed me greater freedom in the

composing of my novellas. The plot of “The Storyteller,” for example, was designed to elicit discomfort and revulsion in the reader and to explore potentially unpalatable themes. I consider that there is a significant chance that a collaborative participant might have felt this discomfort when the story explored the theme that some reports of sexual abuse are stories fabricated out of a motivation for self-aggrandizement, and that the collaborative participant might have requested that that particular theme be removed or diluted. The issue of NAR and RAN’s differing approaches to collaborative participants further buttresses the rule of thumb that I suggested earlier: NAR can fly farther than RAN into new realms of knowledge, but can hence potentially fly farther afield from an accurate depiction of human behaviour.

If NAR’s pre-composition preliminary themes and NAR’s post-composition finalized themes do indeed differ, this is an entirely legitimate research finding which may denote a very desirable advance in the researcher’s knowledge about their research topic. Yet, such an evolution of NAR’s themes suggests a new consideration: if a NAR researcher arrives at the end of their fiction’s preliminary drafts and discovers that their view of their research topic (and hence their themes) has evolved during the composition stage, should the researcher:

- a) Rewrite the narrative in ensuing drafts so that its final form fully reflects the author’s altered views of these themes?

or should the researcher:

- b) Leave the original (inaccurate) themes intact within the narrative, but describe in NAR’s companion academic document (CAD) how the researcher’s view of these themes evolved during the narrative composition?

Option (b) is attractive when considered from the viewpoint of traditional research design, since demarcating in the clearest possible way any movement between initial expectations and final

findings is desirable. However, this approach's examination of the difference between an original stance and a final conclusion reflects a hypothesis-testing research structure, which is not the research design that best fits NAR. Option (a) better reflects the traditional qualitative design marked by a general, broad purpose statement that is explored rather than tested, and which is ever-evolving throughout the research process. Moreover, from the standpoint of art, option (a) is more attractive, because the artist foremost strives to disseminate themes in which they believe, and hence the NAR researcher-writer should recoil from allowing their narrative to be shared with the readership while it still contains inaccurate themes, as would be the case were option (b) to be used. Moreover, option (b) would require an explicating of theme in the CAD, and such explications of theme may be inconsistent with the researcher's chosen level of thematic ambiguity. Thus, the evolution of themes within the NAR composition process will remain invisible to the readership, unless the researcher chooses to chart these changes in a CAD. For example, the reader of "The Pain Stain" has no real way to gauge the evolution of that story's themes from its initial conception to its final draft (and there was indeed a marked evolution), since I did not choose to chart the evolution of its themes in a CAD. (Such mid-stage invisibility of evolving findings is not unique to NAR. Even in qualitative research, the statistical vagaries of the incoming data during a data collection process may suggest a reality that will later be ultimately disproven when the data collection is complete; such transitory mid-stage mirages are typically invisible to quantitative research's readership, and only the final conclusions are disseminated.)

When the NAR researcher sets about conceiving their preliminary themes in preparation for the narrative composition stage, they face a challenge similar to that faced by a RAN researcher in terms of the contending needs to: keep their themes very flexible to avoid

confirmation bias, but at the risk of compositional disorganization, diffusion, and drift; hold to their themes, at the risk of a form of confirmation bias in which the researcher crafts characters and plot events that are specifically designed to prove their themes, rather than explore them. As in the RAN context, the NAR researcher must adopt a narrow middle path in which they formulate their preliminary themes with as much clarity as possible and yet view these themes as only preliminary and hence subject to change during the composition process. Indeed, NAR's greater ability to venture farther into new thematic frontiers requires the NAR researcher to be all the more cognizant of their themes' ability to continually evolve. I remained cognizant during my writing that my themes needed to remain flexible. For example, one of the end themes of "The Storyteller" differs quite a bit from the original corresponding intended theme—and, indeed, from the endings of its mid-stage drafts—in the sense that the effect of Viviane's climactic act of storytelling was originally unambiguously positive. This changed during the long composition process, and the effect of her storytelling became ambiguous.

The NAR researcher, like the RAN researcher, faces a high danger of confirmation bias during the narrative composition process as they engage in self-learning (i.e., as they gain knowledge about themselves relative to the research topic, about themselves as persons, and about themselves as a writer), since: a) the researcher-writer inevitably possesses very firm opinions about themselves; b) any confounding of these opinions has intimate psychological ramifications. Therefore, the NAR researcher must remain as vigilant against this species of confirmation bias as the NAR researcher.

In an earlier section, "RAN: Purpose Statement and Themes," I derived a rule regarding ambiguity of theme in a narrative inquiry context: "The extent of thematic ambiguity appropriate in a narrative inquiry context can legitimately range from very little ambiguity to very great

ambiguity, and the appropriateness of a given narrative inquiry endeavour's level of thematic ambiguity can only properly be gauged with an awareness of that endeavour's idiosyncratic research aims." I submit that the dynamics that made this rule appropriate in the RAN context also make it applicable to the NAR research context as well. In my novellas, I chose to maintain a relatively high level of thematic ambiguity, partly so that the reader could derive their own interpretations from the events of the novellas, and partly because I feared that being non-ambiguous about a given theme in a novella would risk suggesting that the entire novella centred around that particular theme, which would have been inaccurate—each novella explored multiple themes.

Summary

NAR, like RAN, would be constrained by a hypothesis-testing research structure. A general, broad purpose statement about a research topic, explored in the context of inductive logic, would best suit NAR.

Whereas RAN uses its primary data collection and analysis phase to produce preliminary conclusions about the research topic that hence serve as the preliminary themes for the ensuing narrative composition stage, NAR eschews this preliminary data collection and analysis phase and instead derives preliminary themes for the narrative composition phase from the NAR researcher's personal experience and background research.

NAR's lack of collaborative participants removes the potential for a dilemma that exists in RAN wherein the researcher may feel a need to self-censor themselves in both the primary and secondary data collection and analysis phases in order to 'honor the participant.' NAR, lacking collaborative participants, can hence more boldly explore new realms of knowledge.

A NAR researcher who, upon finishing preliminary drafts of their narrative, discovers that their preliminary themes have become significantly altered, is faced with two potential courses of action: rewrite the narrative in ensuing drafts so that its final form fully reflects the author's altered views of these themes; leave the original (inaccurate) themes intact within the narrative, but describe in NAR's subsequent companion academic document (CAD) how the researcher's view of these themes evolved during the narrative composition. I suggest that the former option is superior, because to leave inaccurate themes intact in the narrative would be to disseminate inaccuracies to the readership. Moreover, the latter option would require the researcher to explain their themes, which would be inappropriate given the need for an ambiguity of knowledge claims.

A NAR researcher must reconcile the contending needs to: keep their themes very flexible to avoid confirmation bias, but at the risk of compositional disorganization, diffusion, and drift; hold to their themes, at the risk of a form of confirmation bias in which the researcher crafts characters and plot events that are specifically designed to prove their themes, rather than explore them. The NAR researcher must adopt a narrow middle path in which they formulate their preliminary themes with as much clarity as possible, yet view these themes as subject to evolution.

Since the NAR researcher themselves will be a focus of study in the narrative composition process, they will be especially vulnerable to confirmation bias vis-à-vis their view of themselves, and they should thus remain vigilant against this danger.

NAR should observe the same rule regarding thematic ambiguity that I proposed for RAN (i.e., the extent of thematic ambiguity appropriate in a narrative inquiry context can legitimately range from very little ambiguity to very great ambiguity, and the appropriateness of

a given narrative inquiry endeavour's level of thematic ambiguity can only properly be gauged with an awareness of that endeavour's idiosyncratic research aims). I feel that the dynamics that made this rule appropriate in a RAN context also make it appropriate in a NAR context.

NAR: Narrative as Experience

As explored in the section "RAN: Narrative as Experience," narrative serves as a form of 'lived life' experience that confers upon narrative inquiry educational and transformative advantages over research that utilizes standard academic expository writing, and narrative experience even shares certain transformative advantages over daily life experience. These educational and transformative advantages arise from: narrative experience's sensory immersiveness; the frequency of dramatically potent plot events, which may even include otherwise impossible events; fiction's traditional suspension of disbelief; the ubiquity of themes within narratives; the distillation of narrative experience down to reliably pertinent and resonant details; the useful distancing between the reader and the narrative events, which facilitates effective reflection; the authorial persona of an objective authority. Indeed, all the elements of narrative form have evolved to enhance thematic power because literature has often historically fulfilled a moral education role. If all of this is true of narrative experience in a RAN context, it is true of narrative experience in a NAR context as well.

Moreover, NAR will possess several advantages over RAN in terms of creating a vivid and compelling narrative experience. As discussed earlier, RAN and NAR, although similar pursuits, nevertheless vary in two fundamental ways: the RAN researcher must divide their attention and effort between the extensive primary data collection and analysis phase and the ensuing narrative composition process, whereas the NAR researcher can focus their attention and effort more fully on their narrative composition; similarly, the RAN researcher must negotiate

their themes and their fiction with collaborative participants, whereas a NAR researcher need not do so. These two key differences between RAN and NAR will not produce dramatic differences in the quality of the narrative experience in all instances, but I suggest that such pivotal differences will tend to give NAR, on average, an advantage in crafting a narrative experience that is vivid and compelling, two vital components of literary transformative power.

The RAN researcher's need to negotiate with their collaborative participants may potentially create a tension between narrative detail and a narrative's dissemination agenda, to the detriment of the narrative experience. In such an instance, a RAN researcher who is acutely conscious that they must, in composing their narrative, honor their participants views per Clandinin and Connelly (2000) may actually believe, consciously or unconsciously, that including a wealth of sensory details in their narrative would distract the reader from the collaboratively derived disseminative agenda that they are trying to convey. I contend that this would be an error, since properly employed sensory details promote clarity and resonance of theme rather than detract from it, but nevertheless the RAN researcher may indeed feel a need to mitigate fiction detail (which belongs to them, solely) so as not to obscure the elements of their dissemination agenda (which they derived in collaboration with their participants). In contrast, a NAR researcher, freed of the collaborative participants, will be less likely to view sensory details as being a distraction from their dissemination agenda, and will hence be more likely to successfully employ sensory details in the creation of an immersive narrative experience. The resulting narrative will therefore tend to be more vivid and resonant, two vital considerations of transformative power. Similarly, the NAR author will have a greater flexibility in the exact nature of the sensory details that they choose to include in their story. In "The Pain Stain," for example, the tattoo parlours I visited in preparation for composing the text tended to be diligently

hygienic, but this did not suit the artistic themes I chose to incorporate into my story. Were these tattoo parlours' employees or customers my collaborative participants in a RAN context, I may have felt constrained to portray the tattoo parlours as clean, well lit, and tidy, to the detriment of my story's chosen themes; however, since the novella was written as a NAR endeavour, I felt a freedom to make the tattoo parlour of "The Pain Stain" a squalid, dark, crumbling place, which better conveyed my intended themes.

The heaviness of the burdens associated with fiction composition also favours the NAR researcher's ability to produce, on average, a more successfully vivid and compelling narrative. Writing a fully fleshed narrative requires: a monumental effort of imagination to visualize a story in fine detail; a psychologically onerous and humbling act of self-honesty, in which the author must dislocate their own viewpoint from the story that exists so vividly in their mind and force themselves to see the narrative as the reader does, i.e., as it is suggested only by those details actually on the written page; a vast investment of hours in writing and rewriting the story that far surpasses the hours typically invested in a comparable education research endeavour; a full investment of one's own emotions both in the story and in the artistic journey of self-doubt and inspiration and despair and sacrifice and worry. These burdens are heavy ones for any writer, and they are likely to be all the more difficult to support for a RAN researcher for whom narrative composition is only the second of two vital research tasks—it's all harder to carry a heavy burden on only one shoulder. In contrast, the NAR researcher's ability to more fully focus their attention and effort on the narrative composition process will better enable the NAR researcher to undertake with the burdens outlined above—metaphorically, the NAR researcher can use both shoulders to carry the burden of fiction writing. This will tend, on average, to give

the NAR researcher an advantage in crafting a narrative experience that is successfully vivid and compelling.

Though the RAN researcher can invest only divided attention and effort into meeting the burdens of writing fiction, the RAN researcher has the potentially pyrrhic reassurance that their primary data collection and analysis phase may compensate in some measure for potential shortcomings in their research's narrative. I do not contend that this is true in all cases, of course, but I do suggest that RAN researchers, being humans, must in some instances be influenced to some degree by the rationalization that the merit of their research endeavour's left hand (the primary data collection and analysis phase) in some way reflects on the merit of their research endeavour's right hand (the composed narrative), and that hence their RAN narrative does not need to stand entirely upon its own merit. Such a researcher possesses a lesser motivation to maximize their narrative's quality. Conversely, given the absence of the primary data collection and analysis phase in NAR, the NAR researcher will naturally not be tempted by this potential pyrrhic hope (i.e., that a primary data collection and analysis phase will compensate for shortcomings in their narrative). The NAR researcher's awareness that their fiction must most certainly stand on its own as the nearly the full measure of their research's merit will, on average, tend to motivate the NAR researcher to more vigorously invest their attention and effort in their narrative's quality, which will in turn tend to create a narrative experience that is more successfully vivid and compelling. When I was composing my novellas, my awareness that these novellas had to bear the entire burden of conveying my themes (apart from any supplementary explanation that I chose to include in my CADs) motivated me to refine the quality of my fiction via draft after draft.

Also, since NAR is judged more fully on its narrative than is RAN, I suggest that the NAR approach will tend to more often attract practitioners who are more confident in their writing ability. Again, it will not be true in all instances that NAR practitioners will be more accomplished writers than RAN practitioners, but I submit that the relatively greater proportion of evaluative focus on the narrative product in NAR will tend to demand, on average, that a prospective practitioner possess a greater confidence in their fiction compositional skill, and that such confidence will tend, on average, to be more reliably found in people who actually *do* possess a greater compositional skill. And greater compositional skill must surely tend to produce to a narrative experience that is more successfully vivid and compelling.

Summary

As in RAN, the NAR narrative serves as a breed of immersive reality tantamount to lived life experience for the reader, which confers increased educative and transformative potential upon both RAN and NAR.

NAR will possess several advantages over RAN in terms of creating a vivid and compelling narrative experience.

The RAN researcher's need to negotiate with their collaborative participants may potentially create a tension between a narrative's level of sensory detail and the narrative's dissemination agenda, to the detriment of the narrative experience. A NAR researcher, free of the need to disseminate collaborative participants' viewpoints, will tend to be better able to attend to their fiction's sensory details and hence create a more vivid and resonant narrative experience. Similarly, the NAR author will have a greater flexibility in the exact nature of the sensory details that they choose to include in their story.

A RAN researcher, for whom narrative composition is only the second of two vital research considerations, can devote only part of their attention and focus to crafting their narrative. A NAR researcher, freed of the initial data collection and analysis phase, can devote much more attention and effort to crafting their narrative. This will tend to result in a narrative experience that is more successfully vivid and compelling.

Conversely, the RAN researcher has the potentially pyrrhic reassurance that their primary data collection and analysis phase may compensate for potential shortcomings in their research's narrative. The NAR researcher, aware that their narrative represents nearly the full measure of their research's merit, has a greater motivation to create a narrative experience that is more successfully vivid and compelling.

The relatively greater proportion of evaluative focus on the narrative product in NAR will tend to demand that a prospective NAR practitioner possess a greater confidence in their fiction compositional skill. This confidence will be more reliably found in people who actually *do* possess a greater compositional skill. Such greater compositional skill will tend to produce to a narrative experience that is more successfully vivid and compelling.

NAR: Language and Narrative Form

As discussed earlier, the narrative nature of RAN gives its practitioners an intense connection to language, and this would clearly be true of the connection between a practitioner and language in NAR narrative context as well. Similarly, as in RAN, the narrative elements of form are prodigious sources of learning for the NAR researcher—and even more so, since NAR by its nature demands of its practitioners an even deeper communion with language and narrative form, due in part to the typically increased expectation of artistic quality associated with the NAR approach.

Moreover, as expressed in the previous sections, the NAR researcher focuses more fully on the narrative composition process than does the RAN researcher, whose attention and effort must be divided between the primary and secondary data collection stages. Just as NAR's fuller focus on narrative composition has positive implications for narrative theme and narrative experience, it will also tend to drive the NAR researcher into a more intense communion with language and narrative form.

One of the impetuses behind the rise of RAN was the hope that fiction could interest readers in a way that standard research academic writing could not; and, as detailed earlier, one of the hopes of NAR is that its greater ability to focus the researcher's attention and effort on the narrative composition act would tend to yield fiction even better able to interest readers—particularly, the hope goes, readers beyond the traditional academic readership. If NAR is indeed to fulfill this promise of attracting a mainstream audience, then the level of proficiency in language and narrative form required to compete in the brutally competitive mainstream literary marketplace constitutes an inspiration for NAR researchers to engage very energetically with language and narrative form indeed.

Yet, acquiring a marketplace-competitive level of skill in language and narrative form poses a huge challenge, given that merely discussing narrative requires an extensive knowledge base, as seen in the enjoinder of Leggo (2008):

Any discussion of discourse needs to begin with a careful consideration of the elements of narrative.... For example, the elements of narrative writing include: action, allusions, anticlimax, atmosphere, balance, bathos, borders, change, characters, chronology, cliffhangers, climax, closure, coherence, communication, conciseness, conflict, constraint, continuity, conventions, denouement, desire,

details, detours, dialogue, distance, drama, emotion, emphasis, endings, events, exposition, fantasy, fiction, flashbacks, flow, foreshadowing, games, gaps, glosses, heart, humour, imagery, intrigue, irony, jeopardy, jokes, journeys, joy, keenness, keys, kinaesthesia, language, limits, linearity, memory, metaphor, mimesis, mood, motifs, movement, narrator, naturalism, order, organization, pace, parody, plants, plot, point of view, precision, problem, quests, questions, quotidian, reality, resolution, rhythm, satire, scenes, secrets, selection, series, setting, signs, silence, structure, summary, surprises, suspense, symbols, tension, theme, time, tone, understanding, undertone, unity, verisimilitude, vigour, vitality, voice, wisdom, wit, wonder, words, yearning, zeal, and zigzags. (p. 10)

Indeed, this list of narrative form elements still represents only a fraction of the issues that a person must understand merely to be able to discourse knowledgeably about narrative convention—and the difficulty of discoursing about narrative form pales beside the difficulty of wielding narrative form to compose market-competitive fiction. This challenge is further complicated by the individualistic nature of writers and the nebulous and mercurial nature of fiction composition: “The pressing challenge with advising a person about the craft of story-making is that much of the process defies guidelines and rules. Instead, the process is idiosyncratic, always changing, culturally conditioned, creatively organic” (Leggo, 2008, p. 10).

The overwhelming difficulty of mastering the elements of language and narrative form suggests a conclusion: a researcher who does not already possess the knowledge and artistic skill necessary to produce professional-level fiction will be hard-pressed to attain this knowledge and skill within the timeframe of a single NAR research project. This suggests two immediate implications for the practice of NAR:

- 1) NAR that seeks to transcend the traditional academic audience and appeal to a mainstream readership can typically be undertaken only by persons already possessing a professional level of narrative compositional skill. Since these people would also necessarily possess a desire to undertake education research, the population of persons who will undertake this form of NAR (i.e., NAR that aims at a mainstream readership) will likely be comprised of creative writing educators.
- 2) A NAR researcher possessing a competent level of narrative compositional skill but not a professional level of such skill will realistically be limited to appealing to the traditional academic readership.

I would be an example of the first case above, being a creative writing educator.

Notably, a NAR practitioner who eschews the goal of interesting a mainstream audience and aims only at a readership of fellow academics should nevertheless strive for a professional level of proficiency in language and narrative form, for though narrative is more interesting to read than exposition, incompetently written narrative is typically more unpleasant to read than competent exposition. This leads to a third implication regarding the issue of narrative compositional skill:

- 3) A researcher who does not possess a laudable skill in narrative composition will not likely be able to compose a narrative that will hold the interest of even an academic audience. Such a researcher should hence consider undertaking a form of research other than NAR (or accept that their NAR research's transformative potential will be focused primarily upon themselves).

And I further suggest a fourth rule, one that would manifest only among a certain rare population of researchers:

- 4) A researcher whose narrative compositional skill is very close to the professional level can indeed undertake NAR with the hope of advancing their skill to the professional level within the context of the NAR research process. Their resulting narrative might subsequently attract a mainstream readership.

This fourth observation highlights an opportunity for self-learning that NAR offers the researcher: the ability to grow as a writer. RAN researchers also enjoy this opportunity, but NAR's more devoted focus upon the narrative and the higher demands of quality associated with a NAR narrative will tend to drive its practitioners to engage all the more intensely with language and narrative form, creating a richer opportunity for growth in their personal knowledge.

Summary

As with RAN, NAR affords its practitioners a chance to engage closely with language and narrative form. Moreover, NAR's single-minded focus on narrative and the greater frequency with which NAR will aim at interesting a mainstream audience will often drive its practitioners into an even deeper communion with language and narrative form.

However, the level of proficiency in language and narrative form required to compete in the mainstream literary marketplace constitutes the single greatest challenge facing a researcher who wishes to undertake NAR. The overwhelming difficulty of mastering the elements of language and narrative form has implications regarding the researchers who can undertake NAR:

- 1) NAR that seeks to expand beyond the traditional academic audience and appeal to a mainstream readership can typically be undertaken only by persons already possessing a professional level of narrative compositional skill, probably creative writing educators; 2) A NAR researcher possessing a level of narrative compositional skill that is competent but which

falls short of the professional level will be realistically limited to appealing to the traditional academic readership; 3) A researcher who does not possess a laudable level of narrative compositional skill will not likely be able to construct a narrative that will hold the interest of even an academic audience, and such a researcher should consider not undertaking NAR, or accepting that their NAR research's transformative potential will be focused primarily upon themselves; 4) A researcher whose level of narrative compositional skill is very close to the professional level can indeed undertake NAR with the hope of advancing their narrative knowledge and skill to the professional level within the context of the NAR research process, and they may potentially attract a mainstream audience.

NAR: Subjectivity and Generalizability

RAN, like qualitative research as a whole and artistic forms of inquiry in particular, is exposed to charges that it lacks objectivity and that its subjectivity mitigates its generalizability. NAR will not only face these same criticisms, it may even be more exposed to them, given its more subjective nature.

NAR eschews the conspicuous grounding in the experiences of a collaborative participant that is the hallmark of RAN's primary data collection and analysis phase, making NAR's narrative more wholly the creation of the NAR researcher and hence even more intrinsically subjective. Thus, the critics who complain that a RAN researcher is being subjective in interpreting and expressing the data they gleaned from, say, direct interviews with inner city youth are likely to be all the more suspicious of NAR research that potentially derived its foundational learning about inner city life via secondary background sources such as books. This suspicion will be redoubled since NAR's lack of a collaborative participant means that there is no collaborator to double-check the narrative's drafts and hence potentially identify thematic

inaccuracies. In “The Wrong Breed of Dreamer,” for example, I had no Métis collaborator who potentially may have pointed out inaccuracies in my portrayal of First Nations life in Canada’s far north. These concerns further underline a previously distilled rule-of-thumb: NAR’s lack of a collaborative participant means that NAR can fly farther than RAN into new realms of knowledge, but can hence potentially fly farther afield from an accurate depiction of human behaviour.

However, NAR does not need to seek generalizability through the pursuit of objectivity, for NAR (like RAN) can attain generalizability by ensuring that its researcher’s presence is visible as a metaphorical fingerprint or signature. In a RAN context, this fingerprint optimally allows observers to understand the researcher’s interactions with their collaborative participants and the text, and this understanding facilitates the generalizing of RAN findings to other contexts. NAR lacks a collaborative participant, however, and hence the interaction between NAR and the participant is no longer an issue; as a result, the researcher fingerprint must be all the more visible within the NAR narrative, to aid observers in accurately appraising the interaction between the NAR researcher and the text (and thus between the NAR researcher and the research topic). Happily, the NAR researcher’s fingerprint should indeed be visible in the narrative, given their authorship of the narrative; however, this issue of conspicuous interactivity with the text also suggests that a NAR narrative that fails to demonstrate an authorial signature (i.e., an artistic ‘voice’) suffers not only a blow to its artistic merit, it becomes problematic in terms of its research generalizability. In two of this dissertation’s three novellas, the point of view is first-person, a technique that helps impel a strong narrative voice; and in the third novella, “The Storyteller,” the first-person voice is again featured in the form of first-person stories and anecdotes told by several characters.

Though in the postmodern era NAR can indeed embrace subjectivity, the NAR researcher must not indulge in extremes of subjectivity. For example, to advance themes that are valid only in the eyes of the researcher, or valid only in a context very unique to the researcher, would be to impair the generalizability of the specific NAR endeavour's themes and to give credence to the criticisms levelled against arts inquiry in general. Conversely, a NAR researcher who attempted to be completely objective would probably produce thematic assertions so riddled with qualifiers and hedgers as to be diluted beyond usefulness, and such themes would likely remain safely within the realms of social mores and hence fail to constitute useful additions to human knowledge.

The NAR researcher must also not aspire to objectivity in terms of their personal learning, since this would court a stagnation in terms of personal growth, which must be inherently subjective if it is to exist at all. Hence, rather than strive for objectivity, a NAR researcher should strive for the golden mean between objectivity and subjectivity that is the stance of the conscientious fiction writer: a fidelity to expressing accurately the nature of human behaviour. I believe that I have done so in my novellas.

These considerations, in sum, suggest that the NAR researcher must walk the golden middle path between objectivity and subjectivity—though the NAR researcher might walk this path just a little farther toward its subjective edge than does the RAN researcher.

Summary

NAR will likely face criticism that it lacks objectivity and that its subjectivity mitigates its generalizability, particularly because NAR eschews RAN's conspicuous grounding in the experiences of the collaborative participants, making NAR's narrative more fully the creation of the NAR researcher and hence intrinsically even more subjective. This places an onus on a NAR

researcher to establish a clear fingerprint or signature in their narrative, so that their interaction with the text and the research topic is as clear to observers as possible. When this fingerprint is clear, the research is more likely to be generalizable; when this fingerprint is not clear, the text is less reliably generalizable.

Though NAR may embrace subjectivity, it cannot engage in extremes of subjectivity, or generalizability will be impaired.

Notably, the danger of excessive subjectivity does not mean that NAR should strive for objectivity per se, since NAR cannot ascribe to objectivity without being liable to advancing timid themes that may fail to constitute useful additions to human knowledge. A researcher who aspires to objectivity in a NAR context further risks courting a stagnation in terms of the researcher's personal growth, which is inherently subjective if it is to exist at all.

A NAR researcher should strive for the golden mean between objectivity and subjectivity that is the stance of the conscientious fiction writer: a fidelity to expressing accurately the nature of human behaviour.

NAR: The Companion Academic Document (CAD)

Though the narrative comprises a greater portion of the total research process in NAR than it does within RAN, the narrative cannot comprise the totality of a given NAR research endeavour's textual manifestation. After all, if it did so, then a NAR undertaking that produced a novel would risk simply being a novel, nothing more. NAR requires a companion academic document (CAD) to supplement its narrative and perform certain research tasks.

The NAR CAD shares many similarities with the RAN CAD. A NAR CAD, like a RAN CAD, does not have a prescribed form; it may be placed before the narrative as an introduction or foreword, or after the narrative as an epilogue, and it may even manifest both before and after

the narrative. For example, this dissertation's three novellas each have afterwords. Similarly, a NAR CAD has no rigidly prescribed agenda, and it may: establish the research problem; convey a sense of the study's necessity; identify the major issues to be examined by the research; delineate boundaries of the research; provide definitions of key concepts; provide a synopsis of the fiction. Moreover, the NAR CAD is similar to RAN's CAD in the sense that it should not explicate the ensuing narrative's themes to a level of specificity that is inconsistent with the researcher's purpose. Indeed, I touch upon my unwillingness to directly explicate my themes in the CAD afterword of "The Storyteller." Similarly, the NAR CAD echoes the RAN CAD terms of the researcher's personal learning: the NAR researcher can express their personal learning within the CAD with as much candidness as they desire, but only if this learning can potentially be generalizable to other people, and only if the researcher does not implicitly or explicitly explicate their narrative themes to a degree inconsistent with their research's chosen level of thematic ambiguity while doing so. Expressing such personal learning is purely voluntary. Also, as in RAN, the NAR researcher must remain cognizant that their narrative must speak for itself, and not attempt to use the NAR CAD to compensate for fiction that is inadequate in exploring or expressing knowledge.

To this juncture, the RAN CAD and NAR CAD have been similar in agenda, but the innovative nature of NAR suggests that some NAR CAD considerations will differ from those of the RAN CAD. Though the traditional scholarly literature review is underemphasized in RAN, the RAN CAD still typically incorporates some sort of a literature review, though this review may not take the form of a discrete section, e.g., the works being cited might be interwoven within the context of the CAD research purpose section. But NAR de-emphasizes the scholarly literature review even more than does RAN and instead focuses upon background research; this

background research ensures that the researcher's act of narrative composition is impelled by an informed imagination. This facet of NAR suggests a question: given that NAR's background research is primarily factual, is there any use in the NAR researcher detailing this research in the CAD? The answer is: potentially. If the researcher undertook extensive background research in, say, autism, to prepare for the composition of a narrative about educating an autistic child, they may find it useful to express this to the readership in general terms. However, extensively citing specific factual reading in the NAR CAD will heavily tax the reader's attention and provide little profit given that the narrative itself will advance pertinent and resonant factual details vis-à-vis the research topic. Thus, I do not express in detail the factual research I undertook for my novellas in their CAD afterwords, though I do provide a brief illustrative list of my background research for "The Wrong Breed of Dreamer" in this dissertation's theory chapter, in the section "Background Experiences and Background Research."

Since NAR also draws upon the researcher's personal experiences to inform their imagination, the researcher may deem it useful to characterize their topically relevant personal experiences in the CAD. For example, I note in the afterword of "The Storyteller" my experience attending a professional storyteller's workshop. Similarly, if the researcher undertakes practical training or learning endeavours in preparation for the composition (e.g., by enrolling in French classes in preparation for composing a novel about bilingual education), this too could be usefully shared within the CAD. I submit that the considerations relevant to whether or not the researcher should describe such personal experiences in the CAD should be:

- The author's willingness to disclose these experiences.
- Whether these experiences usefully comment upon the ensuing narrative.

- Whether these experiences usefully comment upon the author's motivations in examining the research topic.

Another interesting consideration vis-à-vis the NAR CAD is that of locating the place of the proposed NAR narrative within the mainstream marketplace. If a given NAR research project seeks to produce a narrative that can compete for readership within the mainstream marketplace, it is potentially useful for the research author to comment upon their decision-making process in terms of shaping their narrative to accommodate the marketplace, e.g., decisions about literary form and genre. Note that this does not suggest that the researcher must defend their decisions in light of marketplace realities; rather, discussing their market-conscious decision-making process is merely an opportunity that the researcher may elect to seize if they feel this would aid the readership's learning. Notably, when characterizing their compositional decision-making in the CAD, the NAR researcher should avoid the temptation to use this discussion as a means of convincing the readership of the merits of the narrative—the narrative should stand on its own merits. And again, the author should not advance any opinions that would implicitly or explicitly explicate their narrative themes to a degree inconsistent with their research's chosen level of thematic ambiguity.

This issue of locating the narrative's place in the marketplace in turn suggests another potentially useful function of the NAR CAD: characterizing the researcher's anticipated audience. Whether the NAR researcher is seeking mainstream readership for the narrative or merely an academic one is a piece of information that will potentially aid the readership in interpreting the NAR narrative. However, when characterizing their anticipated readership, the researcher should not try to inappropriately assert that their narrative *will* or *should* find a place

in, say, the mainstream fiction marketplace. The narrative either will do so or it will not, and that decision rests with the marketplace's jury beyond the chronological boundaries of the research.

Summary

NAR requires a companion academic document (CAD) to supplement its narrative and perform certain research tasks. The NAR CAD shares many similarities with the RAN CAD, serving as a context for basic information (e.g., title, abstract) and for discussing major issues (e.g., topic).

The NAR CAD must not explicate the ensuing narrative's themes to a level of specificity that is inconsistent with the researcher's purpose.

The NAR must not attempt to use the NAR CAD to compensate for fiction that is inadequate in exploring or expressing knowledge.

Whereas the RAN CAD still typically incorporates a de-emphasized form of a literature review, NAR further de-emphasizes the scholarly literature review and instead focuses upon background research; describing this factual background research in general may be useful in the NAR CAD, but citing it extensively serves little purpose and may tax the readership's attention.

Within the CAD, the NAR researcher may deem it useful to characterize their topical personal experiences and any personal endeavours they undertook in preparation for the narrative composition. The researcher should decide whether to describe this information based upon: their willingness to do so; whether these experiences usefully comment upon the ensuing narrative; whether these experiences comment upon the author's motivations in examining the research topic.

The researcher may care to comment about their anticipated readership. If this readership includes a mainstream audience, the researcher may care to comment upon the place of their proposed narrative within the mainstream marketplace.

NAR: Evaluation Criteria

The earlier examination of RAN evaluative criteria used as a focal point for discussion the eight evaluation criteria for arts-informed research suggested by Cole and Knowles, (2001) (i.e., Intentionality, Researcher Presence, Methodological Commitment, Holistic Quality, Communicability, Aesthetic Form, Knowledge Claims, Contributions), then suggested new or refined evaluative criteria for RAN. In the same manner that RAN required refined and new evaluative criteria that differed from those of arts inquiry in general, NAR demands new and refined evaluative criteria that differs from those of RAN.

NAR and RAN share the same hope that their narrative will prove more interesting than the expository writing mode of traditional research, hence increasing transformative potential. Given this, I suggest that NAR should be evaluated using the same criteria of audience interest that I advanced earlier in the RAN section:

- a) NAR's transformative potential is at its best when RAN transcends research's traditional academic readership and interests a mainstream readership (assuming that NAR also reliably affects the readership's deeply held views).
- b) If NAR does not earn the interest of a mainstream audience, RAN's transformative potential remains potent if it succeeds in interesting an audience within the academic community (assuming that NAR also reliably affects this readership's deeply held views).
- c) If NAR fails to interest both a mainstream readership and research's traditional academic audience, NAR's transformative potential focuses only upon the researcher themselves.

However, this audience-interest issue, coupled with NAR's lack of a primary data collection and analysis phase, suggests an interesting evaluative dilemma: what if a NAR research endeavour was regarded as a failure by the academic community, but its narrative succeeded in interesting a mainstream audience? For example, a given piece of NAR research might fail to advance the frontiers of knowledge because it offered no new insights vis-à-vis an oft-studied topic, yet its narrative might be such a 'good read' as to garner a mainstream readership. It is tempting to assert that a NAR endeavour which does not succeed as research but whose narrative meets the audience interest criteria (i.e., wider audience; deeply held views affected; views more reliably affected) could still be deemed successful if it has had a transformative impact upon its readership. However, this would be a false evaluative criterion, since research needs to advance new knowledge, not simply be transformative; after all, a narrative that is transformative without advancing new knowledge is simply art. (And, in the absence of bold new knowledge, such a narrative is not particularly august art.) I submit that a NAR project which meets the readership-interest criterion but fails as research in some fundamental way is an overall failure. If the NAR practitioner in such an instance wishes to advance their narrative as being a success, then let them remove it from the research context and promote it solely as a successful piece of fiction. Of course, whether or not my novellas are able to garner a mainstream audience readership remains to be seen, since any attempts to publish these novellas must wait until after my dissertation process is concluded.

If a given NAR research endeavour seeks to interest a mainstream audience, the question must be asked: must the NAR's companion academic document (CAD) also be of a nature to draw a mainstream readership's interest? While it would be desirable for the CAD to interest as wide an audience as possible, the CAD's agenda is primarily procedural and is hence ill-suited by the

nature of its content to interest a non-academic readership. Moreover, attempts to compose a CAD that could somehow interest a mainstream fiction readership would not only likely fail, they would also complicate the CAD's ability to fulfill its basic procedural functions in an efficient fashion. Thus, the CAD cannot realistically be evaluated based upon an audience-interest criterion. Indeed, it would be inappropriate to judge the NAR CAD based upon any narrative inquiry criteria specific to the narrative writing mode (e.g., aesthetic form) since the CAD simply is not narrative.

If the NAR CAD is not to be evaluated as narrative, should the CAD be judged using standard academic evaluation criteria? This, too, is problematic, for the NAR CAD remains part of an innovative and unconventional research approach, and hence the Cole and Knowles (2001) observation applies: "the criteria of validity (internal and external), reliability, and generalizability (to populations)... are simply inadequate for judging the goodness of research that falls outside academic convention" (p. 213). Moreover, the CAD does not constitute an entire NAR research endeavour, but rather is only a supporting component subordinate to the NAR endeavour's fiction component, and applying most evaluative criteria to merely a component of an entire research project is problematical.

However, if the NAR CAD can be neither judged as narrative nor as standard research, does the CAD stand entirely aloof from all evaluation criteria? This would be unreasonable. I submit that the NAR CAD should be evaluated in terms of two measures. First, the NAR CAD must be judged on its ability to partner with the NAR narrative in order to satisfy the evaluative criteria applied to NAR as a whole. Secondly, the NAR CAD must be evaluated based on its ability to perform those research functions specific to the CAD (as expressed in the section "NAR: Companion Academic Document (CAD)") such as detailing the research purpose.

The CAD can also be evaluated based upon its ability to avoid those pitfalls that I have identified as being inappropriate in the CAD, such as explicating the narrative's themes to a level inconsistent with a given NAR project's chosen level of ambiguity. For example, my CAD afterwords sometimes allude to the thematic tensions within the novellas, but they do not explicate the novellas' themes.

One of NAR research's strengths lies in the opportunity it affords a researcher to gain knowledge about themselves, themselves in relation to the topic, and themselves as writers. Hence, a given NAR endeavour may theoretically be evaluated based upon the researcher's successful self-learning in these areas. However, since an outside observer will typically not be in a position to evaluate such personal learning, the researcher themselves would likely constitute the only possible jury of such self-learning. Yet, given that the researcher should not be pressured to report self-learning in the CAD (since such learning is not generalizable, and since it is unreasonable to expect a researcher to share such personal details with reliable candour), this evaluation criterion will tend to be problematical and should not be considered mandatory. I, for example, find myself concerned that discussing the personal knowledge that I gleaned about myself while writing my novellas: a) might suggest interpretations of the novellas' themes that would in turn constrain the ambiguity of theme that I seek; b) risks injecting myself as a secondary character into the readership's experiencing of the novella, which I consider artistically undesirable.

As with RAN, NAR is a research endeavour so unique that one implied criterion of evaluation is: has a given NAR research project gleaned knowledge that would not have been attainable through standard research methods? NAR is at its finest when this is so. After all, the composition of fiction is such a time-intensive undertaking that, in a theoretical situation in

which standard research designs could have gleaned knowledge comparable to that acquired by NAR, it would typically have been more efficient to glean that knowledge from standard research methods.

As expressed earlier, one commonly cited criterion of RAN evaluation, Aesthetic Quality, asserts that the narrative should correspond to the conventions of its genre, and this creates a tension when the RAN narrative structure is overtly research-oriented in structure (e.g., Chapter 1 Literature Review, Chapter 2 Methodology). This tension will not be an issue in NAR, since NAR narratives will reliably conform to conventional narrative formats and will hence never observe an overt research format. Hence, a NAR narrative can be evaluated based upon whether it observes the conventions of its genre; and part of this evaluation includes a consideration of whether or not any departure from genre conventions (e.g., a reverse chronological order of plot) are artistically effective.

In terms of the evaluative criterion of Contributions, the RAN researcher was seen as a free-acting agent, yet was nevertheless under pressure to compose a narrative that built bridges between the academy and the community, and this could place the RAN researcher in a dilemma if their narrative themes would not serve as such a bridge, or even undermined the relationship between the academy and the community. This same dilemma may manifest in NAR as well. I submit that NAR (like RAN) cannot be evaluated as a failure simply because its narrative fails to serve as such a bridge. Instead, the NAR researcher's foremost duty is advance the truth as they see it; as long as the NAR researcher's narrative improves the knowledge base of their society, they have met the Contributions criterion. Whether or not my novellas have met this criterion remains to be seen, but I can say that in my composition process I did not specifically aim at bridging any communities—my goal was to attain knowledge and share knowledge, irrespective

of the effect that such knowledge would have on the relationships between communities. Indeed, “The Storyteller” depicts events that may suggest that teachers—the guardians of children—may occasionally poorly requite the trust placed in them by parents. Thus, “The Storyteller” may act to erode the relationship between parents and teachers. Yet, I suggest that if such a realignment of relationships is based upon a refined view of human behaviour that is more accurate than a pre-existing view, then my fiction has been worthy.

In an earlier section “RAN: Evaluation Criteria,” I suggested that qualitative research’s ability to be flexible to accommodate the idiosyncratic purposes of researchers can also extend to evaluative criteria, and hence the researcher had the ability to suggest idiosyncratic evaluation criteria for their RAN endeavour. This would hold true in a NAR context as well. However, the proposal of idiosyncratic evaluation criteria in a NAR context would be subject to the same basic considerations I mentioned earlier: a) such criteria must be communicated clearly to any reviewers; b) such criteria must not seek to lower the standards expected of the research (e.g., by creating the ‘moving bulls-eye’ fallacy of evaluation).

Summary

Cole and Knowles’ (2001) eight criteria for arts-informed research (i.e., Intentionality, Researcher Presence, Methodological Commitment, Holistic Quality, Communicability, Aesthetic Form, Knowledge Claims, Contributions) can serve as a basic foundation for a discussion of NAR research evaluation.

NAR’s promise as a form of research that will better interest readers and hence increase transformative power suggests that NAR is most successful if it interests a wider audience beyond the traditional academic readership; is still successful if interests the traditional academic readership; is of dubious success if it fails to interest any readership. Such an audience-interest

evaluation criterion must also consider a NAR project's ability to reliably affect its readers' deeply held views.

NAR's potential to transcend the traditional academic audience suggests an evaluative dilemma: what if a given instance of NAR research was regarded as a failure by the academic community, but its narrative succeeded in interesting a mainstream audience? I submit that NAR which meets the readership-interest criterion but fails as research in some fundamental way is an overall failure, though its narrative can be advanced separately as successful art (if the practitioner so wishes).

The NAR companion academic document (CAD) cannot be evaluated solely as narrative or solely as traditional research. However, it can be evaluated based upon its ability: a) to partner with the NAR narrative in order to satisfy all the evaluative criteria already discussed; b) to perform certain research functions specific to the CAD (e.g., express the research purpose) and to avoid certain inappropriate actions (e.g., explicating the narrative themes to a level inconsistent with the research's chosen level of ambiguity).

NAR research can be judged upon whether self-learning has occurred, i.e., did the researcher learn more about themselves, themselves in relation to the topic, and themselves as writers. But only the practitioner has the ability to judge such self-learning, and their reporting of such self-learning cannot be mandatory, given that: such personal learning is not generalizable; it is unreasonable to expect a researcher to share such personal details with reliable candour.

The NAR practitioner should also advance their writing skill.

One implied criterion of evaluation for NAR research is: has the given NAR research project gleaned knowledge that would not have been attainable through standard research

methods? If the answer to this question is ‘no,’ the efficiency of the research is called into question since the composition of fiction is a more time-intensive undertaking than standard research procedures.

In keeping with the Aesthetic Quality evaluation criterion, NAR narrative can be evaluated based upon whether it observes the conventions of its genre, and whether or not any departures from genre conventions are artistically effective.

The Contributions criterion evokes a tension in NAR if a given NAR narrative does not meet the perceived need for research to bridge the communities within society. NAR (like RAN) cannot be evaluated as a failure simply because its narrative fails to serve as such a bridge. Instead, the NAR researcher’s foremost duty is advance the truth as they see it. As long as the NAR researcher’s narrative improves the knowledge base of their society, they have met the Contributions criterion.

A NAR researcher could propose idiosyncratic evaluation criteria for their research endeavour. However, such criteria must be communicated clearly to any reviewers, and such criteria must not seek to lower the standards expected of the research.

RAN Versus NAR Research Process Summary

Table 1, produced by Hoogland and Wiebe (2009) by drawing upon Creswell (2007, 2008), delineated the basic phases of qualitative research in general and narrative inquiry in specific. Now that I have further explored both the RAN process and the newer NAR research approach, the differences and similarities between the two approaches can be usefully summed within the context of a new chart. In the following chart, Table 3, I present the RAN and NAR approaches side-by-side for juxtapositional purposes.

Table 3. RAN vs NAR research processes

Research Process Phases	Research as Narrative (RAN)	Research Process Phases	Narrative as Research (NAR)
Identify a research problem	* RAN researchers seek to understand and re-present experiences through the stories that individual(s) live and tell.	Identify a research problem	* The NAR researcher seeks to explore an issue using narrative composition.
Review the literature	<p>* RAN researchers foreground the participant's story and background the scholarly literature.</p> <p>* For example, researchers may find direction or underlying structure for their research reports through the participant's story rather than through a conventional literature review or theoretical framework.</p> <p>* The scholarly literature may offer guidance for how to interpret the participant's stories (i.e., find deeper meaning or new understandings through them).</p>	Background research (Prefatory learning)	<p>* The NAR researcher undertakes background research about their research problem as traditionally undertaken by a writer. This research may include: consulting resource materials such as books; interviewing knowledgeable persons; visiting sites; engaging in experiential learning.</p> <p>* NAR background research can include scholarly literature, but scholarly literature is not foregrounded.</p> <p>* The NAR background research may include previous fiction that focuses on the same topic and genre, in part so that the researcher can: ensure that they are advancing new knowledge; locate their proposed narrative within the extant fiction marketplace.</p>
Develop a purpose statement and research questions	* RAN researchers seek to explore the meaning of the individual's experiences as told through a story or stories.	Identify the research topic/puzzle and formulate preliminary themes.	* The NAR researcher draws upon their research problem and their background research to identify a general research topic or puzzle. The researcher forms clear preliminary themes about the topic/puzzle, but recognizes that these themes will likely evolve.
Primary Data Collection and Analysis	<p>* RAN researchers collect field texts that document the individual's story (e.g., interviews, letters, journal entries).</p> <p>* RAN researchers analyze the data to distil concepts, motivations, trends, etc., in collaboration with the participant. These constitute a preliminary set of conclusions.</p> <p>* This analysis often focuses on narrative considerations (e.g., character, conflict).</p> <p>* The stage serves as an opportunity for the researcher to experience learning about themselves, e.g. themselves relative to the topic and themselves as persons.</p>		NAR eschews this phase.
Secondary Data	* RAN researchers use the preliminary	Narrative	* Drawing upon their background

<p>Collection and Analysis</p> <p>(a.k.a., Narrative Composition)</p>	<p>conclusions to form preliminary themes for the narrative composition.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * RAN researchers retell and the participant's stories by "restorying" them within a narrative that they compose. * This narrative sometimes exhibits an overt research structure, e.g., "Chapter 1: Theoretical Background" "Chapter 2: Methodology" etc. * The composition of the narrative serves as an opportunity for the researcher to experience learning about themselves, i.e., themselves relative to the topic, themselves as persons, and themselves as writers. * The composition of the narrative serves to re-analyse the themes, and this may potentially lead to a refined set of conclusions, given that themes tend to evolve continually through the RAN research process. 	<p>Composition</p>	<p>research and their personal experience, the NAR researcher composes a narrative about the research topic/puzzle using their well-informed imagination.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * The composition of the narrative serves as an opportunity for the researcher to experience learning about themselves, i.e., themselves relative to the topic, themselves as persons, and themselves as writers. * The composition of the narrative serves as a means of exploring the preliminary themes. These themes will tend to evolve throughout the drafting process, perhaps drastically. * The final themes observe a level of ambiguity chosen by the researcher based upon their idiosyncratic research goals.
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CHAPTER 2: FICTION

The three novellas that comprise the fiction portion of this dissertation involve my fields of interest as a researcher: education and art, particularly fiction. Each of the novellas examines multiple issues of discovering and expressing knowledge, with a particular focus on the issues of the epistemology of identity (e.g., identity as a mutable knowledge construct) and artistic expression (e.g., storytelling, native art, tattoos). Each of the three novellas also possesses an awareness of the power of narrative, and the topic of narrative is explored and illustrated within each novella.

Each novella is an example of NAR research. They do not have collaborative participants, all flow from my informed imagination, and the prefatory research that I undertook for the novellas had the nature of a fiction writer's background research rather than a formal research data collection and analysis phase featuring standard research instruments such as interviews and case studies. Notably, the NAR background research phase and a RAN initial data collection and analysis phase share some similarities, e.g., a RAN researcher writing about tattooists and tattoo customers and a NAR researcher writing a story set in the tattoo demimonde both might engage in conversations with tattooists and tattoo customers. However, there are procedural differences between the RAN primary data collection and analysis phase and the NAR background research phase (e.g., the RAN discussion would observe formal interview procedures such as recording devices, whereas the NAR discussion could be as informal as the researcher likes). Moreover, there is a vital theoretical difference between the RAN data collection and analysis phase and the NAR background research phase: the RAN researcher who

engages with tattooists and tattoo customers in the RAN data collection and analysis phase does so by treating them as collaborative participants in some degree, and would then have an obligation to explore and express these participants' life experiences as a *focus* of the research, whereas the NAR researcher can engage with tattooists and tattoo customers in the NAR background research phase without making them a focus of the research.

Each of the novellas is followed by an afterword of modest length. Were any of these novellas to be presented as a standalone NAR project, I expect that they would be accompanied by a CAD of a length greater than these afterwords, because these CADs would have to address many issues (e.g., theoretical underpinnings, abstract) that have already been covered in this dissertation's theory chapter. Hence, these novellas' afterwords are not the sole component of their CAD; all the non-fiction components of this dissertation all serve as the novellas' CADs.

CAD Placement

NAR CADs can be flexible in format in order to suit the researcher's needs, so I found myself faced with the freedom to decide my CAD's placement. In making my decision, I first reflected upon other narrative inquiry researchers' approaches to CAD placement.

Other narrative inquiry researchers' approaches to CAD placement have taken a variety of forms. In discussing the possibility of a narrative inquiry researcher commenting upon their fiction, Eisner (cited in Saks, 1996) situates the appropriate locus for this commentary as being after the fiction, "I would not, initially at least, be adverse to the use of an epilogue that would follow the writing of a novel to explicate in more theoretical terms the ins and outs of features of the work" (p. 409). Yet, placing the CAD before the fiction also offers benefits, such as the opportunity to clarify the purpose and nature of the fiction for the reader before they read it; for example, without first reading the introductory matter that Sameshima (2006) places before her

NAR novel *Seeing Red: A pedagogy of parallax*, the reader would have difficulty understanding the nature of her dissertation's "epistolary *bildungsroman*" (p. ii), for it is innovatively comprised of letters, poetry, and even paintings. Conversely, CAD material placed before the fiction may foreground the reader's view of the fiction as research rather than as art, which may negatively impact the reader's immersion in the 'lived life' experience of the fiction and their overall enjoyment of 'the read,' and anything that undermines the fiction reader's pleasure acts against a text's transformative power. Dunlop (1999) feels this fear, for though she places her CAD entirely before the text of her novel, *Boundary Bay*, she suggests in her "Note to the Reader":

In order to experience the novel as an art form, it may be read independently of the theoretical introduction. Therefore, you may wish to read the novel... prior to the introductory section which provides some background, context, discussion of the novel as educational research.... (p. v)

Brown (2001) signals an outright antipathy to having the reader even engage with her CAD at all, for in her narrative inquiry dissertation she not only places her CAD after her fiction text, she entitles it "Epilogue: Read if You Must" (p. 243).

Hence, in an echo of the tension between specificity of theme versus ambiguity of theme, there exists a tension between placing the CAD before the fiction to privilege the clarity of reader awareness of the fiction's research agenda and placing the CAD after the fiction to privilege the reader's aesthetic experiencing of the fiction. In keeping with the spirit of narrative inquiry's flexibility, its practitioners have the ability to address this tension in idiosyncratic ways that best match their research's needs. Dunlop (1999) chose to place the CAD first (but with the "Note to the Reader" warning mentioned above), while Sameshima (2006), Crook (2001), and de

Freitas (2003) all chose an approach in which they split their respective CADs, positioning some CAD sections before their fiction text and the remainder after the fiction; and it is worth noting that they all reserved their discussions of theme for the section of the CAD situated after the narrative, potentially so as not to prejudice their readers' ability to interpret the fiction on their own.

This latter split-CAD approach seems particularly adroit to me, since it allows the researcher to establish the basics of their research but reserve any discussion that may negatively influence the reader's engagement with the fiction until after they have read the narrative at least once. My dissertation will de facto observe such a split approach to the CAD: this dissertation's extensive theoretical section constitutes CAD material that precedes the three novellas; each novella shall also be followed by a post-narrative discussion of that particular text. I had originally labelled these latter sections as 'epilogues,' per Eisner's usage of the term, but I eventually decided that this term risks suggesting that the post-fiction CAD elements are an indivisible part of the fiction (as an epilogue typically is in literature). This would be inaccurate, for I believe that these novellas can be published independently of their CAD elements as standalone fiction, as have been other narrative inquiry texts, e.g., *Jackytar*, Gosse (2005); *Seeing Red: A Pedagogy of Parallax*, Sameshima (2006). Therefore, I named my post-fiction CAD sections 'afterwords,' a term which I think better signals the demarcation between the fiction and the ensuing CAD materials.

Fiction Length

All the RAN examples I reviewed during my dissertation were of novel length; conversely, one of the two definitive instances of NAR I located was also the only narrative inquiry short story I encountered, i.e., the story of Caleb contained within Leggo (2005).

NAR, I submit, will tend to be a better fit with short fiction than is RAN. Longer fiction better balances the RAN researcher's typically lengthy investiture of effort in their primary data collection and analysis phase, in the sense that a researcher who has spent one year or even two years interviewing collaborative participants will likely possess a huge amount of field data (even once this data is distilled). Moreover, the RAN researcher's personal emotional investiture in such an extensive research process will likely be difficult to requite in any literary format short of a novel. In contrast, NAR's absence of a primary data collection and analysis phase allows NAR to manifest in the form of shorter fiction forms, such as short stories and novellas (though NAR can be of a novel length as well). I consider that this flexibility constitutes a strength of NAR.

Writing several shorter fiction pieces rather than one long work offers advantages to the narrative inquiry researcher. The three novellas that I wrote for this dissertation investigated similar topical areas, but they did so in three very different ways, in terms of genre, tone, voice, character, and so forth. In contrast, a single novel would typically have been more constrained to maintaining a single avenue of topical examination, e.g., a single novel would have had to remain faithful to a single genre, a single set of main characters, a single tone. Conversely, of course, a single novel's greater length would have constituted an opportunity for a wider and deeper examination of theme, compared to a single short story of equivalent compositional quality.

I personally have found novellas to be the literary form that best suits my goals in a NAR context, since I find that novellas are long enough for me to examine my research topics in depth, but short enough for me to finish each story in a timely manner and move onward to my next work. Notably, I wrote all three of this dissertation's novellas with no particular word count

target in mind; I simply attempted to tell stories that explored my topics in depth and yet remained swift-paced, and the resulting stories took on the length they are now presently.

Conversely, a fourth story that I intended to include in this dissertation was swelled by the organic pressures of its plot and thematic agenda into a full novel of 280 pages single-spaced, 165 000 words, even after a second ‘streamlining draft.’ That story simply outgrew the reasonable parameters of this particular doctoral dissertation and was not included.

Background Experiences and Background Research

In my theory section, I noted that since NAR draws upon the researcher’s personal experiences, the researcher may deem it useful to characterize their topically relevant personal experiences in the CAD; and I then suggested that the considerations relevant to whether or not the researcher should describe such personal experiences in the CAD include:

- The author’s willingness to disclose these experiences.
- Whether these experiences usefully comment upon the ensuing narrative.
- Whether these experiences usefully comment upon the author’s motivations in examining the research topic.

Based upon these considerations, there will be certain topically relevant personal experiences that I will share in the afterwords of my novellas, such as my participation in a storytelling workshop that helped inspire “The Storyteller.” There are other personal experiences that I have chosen not to share because of one or more of the above listed considerations. For the sake of theoretical illustration, I shall cite one here: I once had the experience of attempting to run a criminal background check upon myself (at the prompting of a landlord contemplating renting me an office), and this experience informed a plot point in “The Storyteller” in which a character seeks to run a criminal background check upon another character. However, citing this particular

personal experience in the novella's associated CAD would not usefully comment upon the narrative or the researcher's motivations, since my experience with the police bureaucracy vis-à-vis criminal background checks served only to inform the factual building blocks of the plot, not any particularly trenchant thematic observations of human behaviour. Hence, discussing this background experience would be a poor investment of time because it would do nothing more than assert that a secondarily important plot device had some factual basis.

In terms of background research, my novellas' afterwords will not cite my factual background research, since the evaluation of a fiction's themes is not typically based upon basic issues of factual accuracy. My research for "The Wrong Breed of Dreamer" included research into cell phone coverage in the Arctic, aboriginal drop-out rates, the length of the polar night at various times of the year, Canada-China trade, the Dempster Highway's route and composition, psychological dissociation, the biology and psychology of sleep, the geographic distributions of various northern native peoples, aboriginal art, aboriginal legends, poetry, explorers, lawsuit document formats, sleep drugs such as Modafinil, FDA certification procedures, the stock market, snow plough technical specifications—in truth, a full listing of the factual issues that needed research would be a long one. And yet, such a list would inform the reader of nothing more than, "I performed some research." Indeed, this listing would not even truly assure the reader that my research resulted in a stringent correlation of the basic factual elements of the fictional world with those of the real world, since I (like virtually all fiction writers) feel free to fudge unimportant factual details in service of my themes and my readability, e.g., the stretch of Arctic highway between the end of the forest line and the Mackenzie River probably could not be driven as quickly as depicted within "The Wrong Breed of Dreamer," yet the forest line and the Mackenzie River each had a symbolic agenda within the story, and the plot was tighter if the

story's events all took place within the span of a single night, and so I simply shortened the distance within the fictional reality. Such basic factual issues will not impact the reader's evaluation of my fictions' themes to any degree worth the investment of time required for the reader to review these issues, and hence I have not included a discussion of my factual background research in my CAD. Notably, though, if any of my background research had taken a truly exceptional form, e.g., a midwinter trip to the Arctic, I would have expressed this to the readership.

Some narrative inquiry CADs that I have reviewed have chosen to discuss issues related to the researcher's authorial composition approach, e.g., the author's approach to adverbs and characterization. After reflection, I have decided not to do so, because: my fiction must stand upon its own merit; I feel that foregrounding issues of composition will act against the reader's immersion in the 'lived life' experience of the stories; any readers interested in gleaning wisdom about fiction composition methods will turn to a myriad other sources rather than this dissertation.

Ambiguity of Theme

When composing my CAD, I faced the issue of the level ambiguity of theme I wanted to observe. As discussed in my "RAN: Purpose Statement and Narrative Themes" section, the amount of thematic ambiguity that a narrative inquiry endeavour observes in both the fiction and the CAD should reflect the researcher's purpose; and, as I discussed in that same section's comparison of thematic ambiguity in Sameshima (2006) and Crook (2001), greater thematic ambiguity may suit a narrative inquiry endeavour whose thematic focus is intrapersonal, abstract, and ultimately open-ended, whereas greater thematic specificity may suit narrative inquiry endeavours whose focus is societal, concrete, and immediate. My three novellas's topics are

mostly located within the realms art, narrative, and epistemology, and these issues tend to be abstract rather than concrete, theoretical rather than immediate, and individual rather than societal, and hence I decided to favour a greater ambiguity of theme in my fiction and CAD.

Expressing Self-Learning

As I discussed in my theory chapter, one strength of both NAR and RAN research is the opportunity they afford a researcher to gain knowledge about themselves, themselves in relation to the topic, and themselves as writers. However, such learning is not generalizable due to its intensely personal nature and is hence of questionable value to the readership, and I therefore suggested that expressing such learning is entirely optional.

In terms of expressing the knowledge that I gained about myself during the composing of my narratives, I found that I did not believe that this knowledge would be generalizable to the readership. Reflecting further upon this issue, I now discern another reason why narrative inquiry researchers might hesitate to disseminate their self-learning: the researcher, in reporting their self-learning about themselves, risks tinting the readership's views of the researcher, and hence the readership's views of the researcher's entire research endeavour, including its fiction component. For example, were I to report that my fiction composition process had helped me discover that I needed to be a more tolerant person, or that I had learned that my idealism had been blinding me to certain grim realities, the readership could not help being tempted to adjust their views of my fiction and hence of its themes. Such reporting of self-learning can therefore be distracting and counterproductive, and it may even be abused by the researcher, e.g., to self-aggrandize or to seek to encourage the readership to have a positive view of the researcher's fiction.

Moreover, when I contemplated expressing the learning that I had gleaned about my novellas' topics during my composing of the novellas, I realized that doing so would almost certainly act against my chosen high level of ambiguity of theme. For example, if I cited in any detail my gleaning of new knowledge vis-à-vis symbolic meaning versus symbolic significance while composing "The Pain Stain," my ambiguity of theme in regards that topic would be compromised. Given that I have already decided to maintain a high level of ambiguity of theme throughout all my novellas and their associated CADs, I believe that I must be very prudent in regards expressing the personal insights about my topics that I gleaned during my novellas' composition.

On the final issue of self-learning, that of my learning about myself as a writer, I find myself paradoxically open to expressing how much I have grown as a writer within the context of this research project and yet possessing very little information about this topic that would actually be useful to the readership. This is the irony of the experienced writer in the context of RAN or NAR: the deeper a writer's background in the art form, the smaller is the proportionate growth of their writing skill within the context of a single story, and the more advanced, self-specific, and esoteric is this growth, further limiting its usefulness to the readership. For example, the insights about writing that I gleaned during the composition of my novellas included: making a heavy philosophical agenda dance a little more nimbly via a first-person narrator who is both perspicacious and eloquent; modulating reader distress to support theme without repulsing the readership altogether; managing tenses in a narrative rife with reminiscences by drawing upon the present tense. If I intended this dissertation to educate the reader regarding either advanced narrative composition or my artistic biography, such self-

learning might be worth expounding upon, but since neither of these considerations represent a present research goal, I shall desist from discussing my compositional insights at any length.

The Storyteller

“Cric?”

“Crac.”

Frowning at the Telling Stick in his hand as though he suddenly doubted its grain, the Storyteller cupped a hand to his ear and repeated, “Cric?”

“Crac,” his listeners replied, slightly louder this time.

“Cric!”

“*Crac!*”

The Storyteller sighed himself huge: “Aaahhh. Maybe you *do* want to hear my story.” He settled the Telling Stick across his knee. ““Once upon a time, what happened *did* happen; and if it had not happened, you would never have heard this tale....””

The Faculty of Education’s multipurpose room was a place of childhood and for childhood. The utility pipes running along the ceiling were painted the vibrant colours of mustard and ketchup, and the no-slip rubber matting on the floor filled the air with the scent of a grade school playroom. In this room, education undergraduates studying to become teachers learned how to conduct finger-painting lessons that brought forth the individual creativity of every child and how to oversee a safe game of dodge ball. The art supply cabinets stocked only non-toxic paints and blunted scissors; the transparent wall was composed of heavy safety glass; and a laminated poster mounted beside a well-marked first aid cabinet described what to do in

case of choking, bee stings, burns, heat exhaustion, cuts.... Each such calamity bore the illustration of an unhappy child, and its set of instructions reliably ended with: *Summon aid*.

As Vivian waited for the afternoon's workshop to begin, she found herself reading this reassuring first aid poster compulsively, for her hairline had started to sting with incipient beads of sweat and her heaving lungs could not keep up with her racing pulse's demand for oxygen even though she had discreetly parted her smiling lips to suck in air. The poster's declaration of society's compassion reassured her. She had the best view of this poster of anyone in the audience, for she had arrived early for the day's special workshop and had selected for herself the farthest-aside, farthest-back seat in the three rows of stackable chairs set out for the workshop attendees. She also found reassurance in the other attendees of the workshop: fellow undergraduate pre-service teachers like herself (though tending toward either soft plumpness or extracurricular athleticism, whereas Vivian knew herself to be a tiny bony thing), a scattering of graduate students, and several education professors whom everyone addressed by their first names—all people with the knitwear personalities of those who choose a career caring for children. The room's intimations of childhood, the safety poster on the wall beside her, the gentling murmuring of the gentle audience—she let it all seep into her, calming her, until she finally felt ready to begin her act of extinction.

Extinction. A frightening word that described a struggle against fear itself. Vivian's therapist had explained the technique to her in neutral psychological language: 'extinction,' the confronting of a phobic stimulus to erode its potency with familiarity. But Vivian thought of extinction in her own terms: as the opening of a closet at midnight to prove that nothing was hiding inside, or as a child whispering over and over again to a ghostly shadow on a bedroom

wall, *You can't really hurt me*. She was that child of course, and she had come to the workshop to open up her closets, to defy her ghosts. To confront a magic word. A cursed word.

Vivian began the rite of extinction by forcing herself to acknowledge this cursed word's many manifestations. The word lurked at the multipurpose room's single exit atop a stand-mounted poster advertising the workshop: *The Faculty of Education's Visiting Artists Program Presents: A Series of Storytelling Workshops*. On this sign, the black silhouette of a spindly-limbed man in a top hat tap-danced along a forest path of bedrock boulders that spelled out the magic word: *storytelling*. The cursed word also haunted the display of the children's books arranged on a table on the other side of the room; it swooped in and out of audibility in the conversations of the attendees awaiting the beginning of the workshop, it even existed disembodied in the form of light and language within the spoken-word CDs propped on the ledge of a whiteboard. She was completely surrounded by the cursed word, *storytelling*—by it and its dark court of servant terms: *tales, myths, fables*.

As Vivian felt herself becoming more and more aware of the cursed word hemming her in on all sides, her breathing began accelerating and becoming shallower, until a voice in her mind warned, *You're entering a panic cycle*. This voice was her therapist's voice, and the helpful ghost was right: a hot billows of fear was swelling within her lungs, palpably lessening their volume and threatening to occlude her windpipe. But she had armed herself for the gauntlet of the storytelling workshop by avoiding all caffeine for days, by pumping up her serotonin with a double session of Pilates, and by drawing upon the resulting exhaustion to sleep a full eight hours the previous night. Forearmed with knowledge as well, Vivian straightened in her chair and began inconspicuously performing a breathing exercise designed to help break the panic cycle, hearing in her mind the voice of the therapist who had taught her the calming technique:

Exhalation first and most importantly, a slow and complete emptying of the lungs to remove bad air... a vessel cannot be filled until empty... breathe out... now breathe in from the very bottom of your stomach.... The cycle of panic began to ease, the hot billows of anxiety in her chest slowly deflating—not all the way, never all the way, but enough for now.

The Storyteller arrived out of nowhere on a woodwind carpet of music, so it seemed. No one in the chatting audience noticed him at all until seven startling-sweet notes suddenly sang out from a corner, seizing all attention. In that corner stood a man in a pied vest playing upon a wooden flute. His crinkled black hair, just-slightly dusky skin, and trim body gave him an appearance native to anywhere in the world. The tune he played had the simplicity of a prelude, so when the flourish ended on the seventh note, the ensuing silence said: *Now follows the song...*

In the silence, the Storyteller slipped his flute into a case on his belt and took his proper place at the front of the room, where a stool crafted from an elm stump awaited him. Propped against this stool was a strange stave, a gaily adorned staff covered with chiming bangles, tattered bits of colourful cloth, brightly hued feathers, sea shells, strange coins, exotic leaves, and other knickknacks all so interesting that they *had* to have a tale, each and every one. “This is the Telling Stick,” the Storyteller declared in a voice rich and deep in the way that tells a newborn who knows no words: *This is the voice of your father*. “Whosoever holds the Telling Stick must tell a tale, and everyone else must listen. As with all storytelling traditions, this tradition is ancient and true, everywhere.”

With this, the Storyteller took up the Telling stick, seated himself on the old stump, and told his first tale. The tale, a Navajo trickster story, began, “Back when the world was young, and the humans and the animal people could speak to each other...,” and ended an eternity later with, “... and so we shall exist as long as our stories are moist with our breath.” Afterward,

nobody broke the hush until the smiling Storyteller rose and set aside the Telling Stick against the elm stump stool; only at this click of wood on wood did the audience twitch, reanimate, and begin to clap. The Storyteller laughed at this, and everyone with him.

“Storytellers and teachers—we both plant seeds in the young,” the Storyteller declared to the workshop audience of educators. “Long ago in far-off Germany, someone told little Richie Wagner a simple bedtime story about a magic ring, and as he grew, the story grew with him into a whole darned opera. Who tells the stories in your family?” The Storyteller began murmuring this question over and over, his head wagging back and forth like a dousing rod as his eyes searched through the audience. “Who tells the stories... who tells the stories... let’s see....” Vivian knew that his gaze would settle on her, and it did; she knew that he would grin wolfishly when he saw her, and he did. “Ahhhh,” the Storyteller said to her. “Who tells the stories in your family?”

Vivian drew her heels up onto the edge of her chair, hugged her knees under her chin, and shook her head. *Not me.*

At the workshop intermission, Vivian edged near a display of the Storyteller’s books as the Storyteller stood nearby, talking with a professor who was eagerly describing to him the research into traditional folk stories that she and her late husband had undertaken in rural China four decades ago. “The elders were just *so* worried that their tales would be lost, but still they dared not stop working in the cornfield long enough to talk with us, you see. So, we just put on our Wellingtons and went out into the fields with them, our little tape recorders in hand....”

As Vivian examined the Storyteller's books (keeping her hands safely behind her back, as though the books might snap at her fingers), she noticed the cover illustration of a book embossed with a gold seal from a reading association. In this illustration, a corpulent sultan reclining on a heap of luxuriant pillows listened raptly to a veiled young girl who was almost certainly Scheherazade, the storyteller of the *Arabian Nights*. The sultan seemed entranced; the heroine, triumphant. But Vivian noted how the girl's kohl-thickened lashes seemed to be brutal stitches sealing closed her demure eyelids, and how the waft of perfumed words that she breathed out to enchant the smiling sultan seemed the very breath of her life that he was drawing out of her and into himself. Nobody else would see these ominous implications in the illustration, Vivian knew; and she firmly told herself that the illustrator would certainly not have intended to convey such a message. Vivian's therapist was trying to wean her away from a compulsion to see such hidden messages everywhere.

"I really should talk with this young woman before I lose her," the Storyteller said to the professor. "She's been very patient."

Vivian glanced up from the book display to see which of his listeners the Storyteller was scared of losing, only to discover that he and the professor were both looking at her. Vivian lost her nerve and protested with a fluttering gesture toward the display table that she only wanted to inspect the books, but the professor wrinkled her nose at Vivian with a hint of feminine conspiratoriness—*Go on, dear*—then left Vivian alone with the Storyteller.

"So you're the one who never, ever, tells stories," the Storyteller chided in his velvet baritone. "I can't believe that—and I believe in unicorns with all my heart."

"I've... told stories," Vivian confessed, suddenly helpless not to say to him what he wanted to hear. They were both standing with a hip against the display table of his books, and

this visceral connection increased the intimidation that Vivian always felt when speaking with people who understood things she only sensed. “I *do* have a story I want to tell.”

He smiled, his teeth coconut white. “I knew that you longed to be heard the moment I saw you hiding.”

“But I don’t know how to tell my story right.”

“Is it a true story?”

“Uh....”

The Storyteller pressed his heels together, fixed his nimble face in an expression most grave, and intoned, “Is it a *true* story?”

“Oh! Um....” Now understanding what the Storyteller wanted, Vivian cast back in her memory for a traditional tale-telling formula he had taught them in the first half of the workshop. ““It all happened long ago and, believe it or not, it is all absolutely true....”” Even this tiny taste of storytelling set her cheeks burning. “But if I did decide to tell my story, I’d need to tell it just right.”

The Storyteller thoughtfully stroked an imaginary beard. “Need to tell a tale just right, you say? First rule of storytelling: Know your audience. Would you tell your story to children?”

“God no. It’s definitely not a children’s story.”

“All stories are children’s stories, because everyone is some age of child. Hmm, I have an idea: at the end of my workshop series, we’ll be having a Campfire Finale get-together where all the pre-service teachers can try their hand at telling a story. Why not share your story there?”

At this, the moment had arrived, the moment that she had rehearsed on the humble stage of her imagination, the moment of the confession: she would quietly confide to him of her fear of storytelling. His kindly face would crumple in hurt at the thought of someone not enjoying

stories, and this hurt would surely transform into first a suspicion and then into a conviction that such a thing could surely not be true—she must be lying to him, fibbing for attention. But then she would speak a magic word, *mythophobia*, and this scientific name for her condition would transform her confession from a bizarre falsehood into a real medical condition, like a statue being transformed from mimetic stone into real flesh.

But now that this envisioned moment of confession had arrived, Vivian lost her nerve and merely jested, “We can *pretend* that I’ll tell my story at the Campfire.” She joined the Storyteller in chuckling at this ostensible confession to simple shyness, then she asked, “How would I go about it, the actual telling?”

“Let me think. Hmmm. Your audience at the Campfire Finale will be fellow teachers.” The Storyteller leaned so close she could see that his gums were raspberry purple. “Now if *I* were telling an especially important story to teachers, I’d start by announcing that there was absolutely nothing to learn in my tale. No lesson, no moral, no theme, not a single tiny cricket of truth chirping in the shadows.”

“That would be perfect. Then I could make it all true?”

The Storyteller answered with a coy shrug that began at his waist and rippled all the way to a mischievous rolling of his eyes. “Stay for the rest of the workshop and you’ll see how I tell a personal story. I’ll show you how it’s done.”

So Vivian did indeed stay for the rest of the workshop, though she had originally planned to make an excuse about a course to attend and then flee before the end of the workshop intermission. Throughout the second half of the workshop, she daydreamed pleasurably about how she would be able to report to her therapist that she had made it through all two hours and had even *spoken* with the Storyteller. *His breath smelled like raspberry*, she would fib for the

sake of veracity. (His gums had actually only been the hue of raspberry, but this version would be better). Maybe she would even attend the Campfire Finale, though she knew she could never stand up in public and actually tell a story (let alone tell *her* story).

In the second half of the workshop, the Storyteller taught them of the mesmeric power of repetition, of beguiling rhythms of voice, of descriptive gestures of the hands, and of other such techniques fit for the telling of stories or the casting of spells. When the end of the workshop drew near, the Storyteller announced, “Now, at the last, we come to the tale of how I became a storyteller. Maybe you don’t want to hear it. I may not even want to tell it—truth is, I’m rather tired.” He eased himself down on his elm stump stool as though he had become a weary old man in the past two hours. “In the West Indies, a storyteller announces his willingness to tell a story by saying ‘cric,’ and if the audience wants to hear his story, they call back ‘crac!’” With this, the Storyteller took up his Telling Stick and frowned at it as though he suddenly doubted its grain. “Cric?”

“Crac,” the audience answered, and some of them chuckled.

The Storyteller cupped a hand to his ear. “Cric?”

“Crac!” the audience responded more loudly.

“Cric?”

“*Crac!*” the audience roared, Vivian loudest of all, or so it seemed to Vivian.

“Aaahhh,” the Storyteller sighed himself huge, looking right at Vivian. “Maybe you *do* want to hear my story.” He set his Telling Stick firmly across his knee. ““Once upon a time, what happened did happen; and if it had not happened, you would never have heard this tale....””

The Storyteller shared his story then, the tale of how he had become a storyteller, and it was hideous.

Of all the people who heard his tale that day, only Vivian recognized its evil, for only Vivian knew the story already. It was a sunny, cheerful tale whose crimes were all hidden in secret messages, like a gingerbread cottage with children caged in its basement. Vivian yearned to flee the room, but she was rooted helplessly to her chair because everyone else in the audience was smiling and listening raptly, and she dared not flee alone any more than the only lamb who notices a wolf stealing closer to the flock dares flee the safety of the herd. This torment of being the only person to recognize such hideousness was a nightmare that Vivian had lived before, a waking dream in which a monster dwelled unnoticed among all the people meant to protect her—parents, neighbours, teachers—because a spell hid its hideousness from their eyes. The monster’s spell did not work on Vivian because she was guilty of a flaw, of a sin, of a nature that made her able to see secrets—to see such monsters. But if she admitted she saw the monster, people would have to either confront the monster or call her a liar, and she was just a tiny little thing compared to a monster.

When the Storyteller’s tale ended, everyone in the audience rose in an ovation. Only then did the spell break and could Vivian flee.

The signs on the walls of the community centre foyer had a secret, but you needed a special sort of eye to see it. Vivian had that eye. She noticed that the pink-and-blue sign for the *Lamaze Prenatal Class* posted on the foyer wall listed a time and a place (7:00 Tuesdays, Room 104). Similarly, a glossy marketing poster for a *Making Your First Will Seminar* had a time and place (Friday the 29th, 9:30-1:30, Room 204). *Introduction to Scrapbooking*, *Thai Cooking 101*, *Computer Job Search Fundamentals*—all the programs advertised on the foyer walls of the

community centre had a time and place. All existed in the identifiable world. But one poster, an unadorned white photocopy in institutional type font, simply declared: *Female Survivors of Childhood Abuse* and listed an anonymous email address—no time, no location. *Such things truly do happen*, this sign seemed to declare, *but perhaps only in places far away and in times long ago.*

Vivian had discerned this secret message while studying the posters in preparation for her act of invisibility. She had known that she would need such invisibility as soon as she had entered the unfamiliar foyer and discovered that she would have to take a seat among a crowd of people awaiting the start of the evening classes. She would have loved to possess true invisibility of course, but such things did not exist in the real world, so she had instead learned to merge with her surroundings using urban camouflage: indifference for stillness, lies for leaves. She plucked these lies from the wall posters, selecting a cover story in case anyone asked why she had come to the community centre that night. Sure enough, she had hardly seated herself among the crowd in the waiting area when a white-haired man wearing the dated flash clothes and aftershave of a lifelong cad still on the make flashed her a smile of old gold and sought to make eye contact. She pretended not to see him, personal blindness being a vital component of one's urban invisibility. The old wolf gave up on eye contact and tried another approach: he looked from Vivian to the wall's many program advertisements, as though comparing her face to a collection of wanted posters, then he made an accusation, "You here for the Youth Outreach program, miss?"

Vivian blinked and then located his face with flat stare, as though she hadn't noticed his existence until this moment. "My fiancé and I are taking Thai Cooking."

The cad mumbled something about how much fun that sounded, waited until he thought she wasn't watching, then examined the *Thai Cooking* poster to make sure this was the right night of the week and time. It was, of course, for Vivian had learned to be very meticulous about her lies. The old wolf of the gold teeth lost interest in her.

Even as Vivian performed her act of urban invisibility, she kept a careful watch on the community centre's door, vigilant for a certain set of secret messages. Low-income mothers picking up children from daycare smoked on the other side of the glass... their unattended kids *klumped* up and down the foyer in winter boots, trying to break the floor with every step... a day-shift worker called out a last joke to the centre's evening receptionist as he headed out the door into the night's blizzard... a pregnant couple entered, poppa pointing out the treacherously slushy floor to momma....

There. A woman in a shapeless khaki parka shouldered her way through the door, alone but muttering venomously about the weather as she flung back the parka's hood, stamped slush from her boots, and smacked snowflakes from her shoulders with conspicuous violence. Heavy cosmetics stained the woman's wrinkled face the hue of a rotten apple core, her eyebrows were thick cinnamon swathes, and her hair had been dyed autumnal auburn so often it had become wire stiff. Vivian had never seen this woman before, yet Vivian had been waiting for her—had been vigilantly awaiting that woman's constellation of secret messages. Vivian rose and followed the stranger down the foyer into an elevator.

The woman pressed the button for the third floor. Vivian did nothing, said nothing, until the doors had completely closed. "I'm looking for Doctor Jacklyn Berg's meeting," Vivian announced, her eyes on the elevator's ascending numbers.

The stranger eyed her and smacked twice at nonexistent snowflakes on her parka sleeve nearest Vivian: *Paff! Pow!* She was a heavy woman, mid-fifties maybe (her heavy makeup made it hard to tell for certain and easy to guess high). “You here for that meeting?” she asked in the raspy voice of a lifelong smoker. “Whatever it is?”

“Yes.”

“So how come you don’t know where it is, then?”

“Doctor Berg told me the meetings were Tuesday nights at the community centre, but she didn’t want to give out the room number unless I was sure I’d attend. I wasn’t certain until about ten minutes ago, out in the parking lot.”

“So what’dja do, just keep an eye on the door for someone who looked like they belonged in a survivors’ group?”

Vivian lowered her eyes and kept still, letting the silence say what needed to be said.

The woman winced, the cosmetics-laden skin of her saggy cheek gathering into an orange burr under her eye. “Shit.... Yeah, yeah, you guessed right. I’m Bernice. Bernie, Bern, whatever. Come on, we’re going the same place.”

The secret meeting place of the *Female Survivors of Childhood Abuse* support group proved to be a former home economics instruction room. Doorless cupboards lined a wall above a counter with a defunct sink parched with plaster dust. The student desks had gone, replaced by blockish orange vinyl chairs with armrests slashed open, bandaged by duct tape, and left sticky after compulsive fingers had peeled back the tape to pick craters into the exposed stuffing.

Vivian, of a habit, paused just inside the door when she entered with Bernice, eyeing the room (which meant the *people* in the room).

The only person who had already arrived was Vivian and Bernice's therapist, Doctor Jacklyn Berg. Doctor Berg was a wholesome tall brunette, a woman who Vivian imagined owned riding boots and swam smooth laps in a private pool to re-establish balance after a long day of helping less fortunate psyches. Vivian would have liked to have had a private pool so that she could swim without people staring at her bony body and bulging eyes. Someday science would announce final confirmation that everyone's bodies matched their emotions, and then strangers on the street would rush up to Vivian and ask, *What's wrong? What happened? Let's get you something nice to eat.* Not the right kind of strangers though—strangers who wanted something, the kind who only asked you if you were hungry because they wanted to eat you all up.

Doctor Berg looked up from unpacking a box containing an electric kettle, paper cups, and a box of chamomile tea, and hailed Vivian's appearance in a tone as delighted and soft as a bedroom voice. "Hello, you! What a surprise. I'm so glad to see you here, so glad you came. Bernice, this is...." She paused.

"Vivian," Vivian finished automatically, realizing too late that Doctor Berg's hesitation had been an invitation for her to choose a pseudonym.

"Hey, Viv." Bernice opened her giant macramé purse and produced a plastic container of potato chips the same colour as her makeup. "Barbecue. Dig in, knock yourself out."

Vivian took enough chips to make a respectable pile on one palm. "Thank you, Bernice."

“About names...,” said Doctor Berg. “Don’t press anyone in-group about their name, and don’t volunteer whether or not you’re using your actual name, or they’ll feel pressured to reciprocate.”

“I understand.”

With this, the three of them quietly began making preparations for the meeting. As Bernice set aside her coat, Vivian saw that the older woman wore beneath her parka an oatmeal-coloured cardigan over a work shirt monogrammed *Checkered Taxi*. A dispatcher, Vivian guessed, visualizing Bernice inside a dispatcher’s booth of opaquely dirty safety glass further reinforced with a grill on the outside and metal bars on the inside, growling into a microphone the dispatches that carried other people to restaurants, to theatres, to parks, to weddings, to homes, her voice growing hoarser year after year. Vivian’s own clothes (a woollen hat with ear flaps, a grey hoodie, a black padded vest, slightly oversized jeans, and high-top sneakers) would reveal nothing: not her occupation; not her university; not her personality; at a distance, not even her gender. More invisibility. She set aside the vest and her woollen hat, scratching at her inch-long red hair, but kept on her hoodie (though hood down, for now). As Doctor Berg arranged the circle of chairs—four places, plus one for herself—she set her hand on the chair immediately beside her own and announced, “This seat will be for another participant, named Ayesha.”

Bernice clucked her tongue. “Ayesha, she’s a story.”

“No, she’s not,” said Doctor Berg quietly, emphatically. “Nobody here is a story.”

“I meant it good, Jackie, you know how I talk,” Bernice protested. “Ayesha’s been there, been down the road, that’s all I meant.”

Doctor Berg nodded an acknowledgement and continued explaining the rules to Vivian. “Ayesha won’t talk, and please don’t try to make her do so. If Ayesha does whisper

something, I might lean closer to better hear her, but you shouldn't. If you do, she'll go non-communicative, perhaps for quite some time."

Soon after this, Ayesha herself arrived—walking in pain it seemed, her steps tiny and slow and so reluctant that Vivian imagined that someone must have escorted Ayesha all the way to the room's door and then nudged her through it. Ayesha was a pretty girl of middle-eastern or perhaps Indian descent, perhaps still a teen, surely not much older—save in the eyes, which were darkened with the aging that occurs when the count of one's days on earth is compounded by sleepless nights. The green and black 'Arctic Cat' snowmobile parka Ayesha wore was far too large for her body, and Vivian visualized someone male and boisterous draping their XXL coat over Ayesha's tiny figure as a joke and then forgetting about it, the parka lingering there forever because she never dared take it off. Ayesha walked a wide circuit around the outer edge of the room and only approached the circle of chairs at the centre when she was on the side of the room where Doctor Berg was waiting.

"Hello, Ayesha," said Doctor Berg, softly. "Ayesha, this is Vivian. She'll be with us in group today."

Ayesha raised her eyes no higher than Vivian's slush-stained sneakers and said nothing. She sank into her reserved chair immediately beside Doctor Berg's, hunched inward as though recoiling from the lining of her own coat, and retracted her hands out of sight up its sleeves.

Doctor Berg plugged in the electric kettle (warning Ayesha, "It'll make that sound in a few minutes,") and informed Vivian and Bernice, "We'll give Florianna until the tea is ready, then begin."

Bernice's chuckle bulged her throat bullfrog-style. "'Florianna.' Can I tell the new girl all of Florianna's names, so far? C'mon, Jackie, gimme some fun."

Doctor Berg smiled with only the corners of her lips: *no*.

As they waited, Vivian and Bernice nibbled potato chips. Music began somewhere deep in the building and a woman's muffled voice called out commands above the thudding beat; Vivian recognized the indistinct words by their rhythm: *Five more, four more, get those legs up, three more, go deep! Feet up!* Vivian had enrolled in an aerobics program five months earlier, as part of a program of self-reinvention she had undertaken in a burst of optimism when she had first moved away from her hometown to attend university; but in the very first session, the harsh shouted orders of the aerobics instructor had filled her with an anxiety that combined with her cardio-accelerated heartbeat to trigger an escalating cycle of panic. She had fled the aerobics studio within ten minutes, bolting for a bathroom where she had spent the rest of the class in a locked stall, gasping and quaking and shitting acidic diarrhoea with her brand new Danskins around her ankles. She had been too ashamed to even ask for a refund of her class fees. The very next day, she had registered for therapy with Doctor Berg.

The kettle boiled. As Doctor Berg served the chamomile tea, Vivian noted that the psychologist wore the only wedding ring in the circle. "All right, no Florianna this week, it seems," Doctor Berg announced. "We'll start. Locked or unlocked?"

Neither Bernice nor Ayesha spoke. Vivian, however, went to the door, eased it closed (but not before first peeking outside to ensure that nobody was lurking in the hall), and pressed the button on the knob. *Click*. Mercifully, the door sealed out the sound of the aerobics class for the most part, though the bass throb of the music remained audible: distant war drums.

"We have a new member of the group, today," Doctor Berg announced as Vivian rejoined the circle. "I gave Vivian a standing invitation to attend group because I feel she has

progressed through individual therapy to a stage where she can share her experiences. Clearly, though, Vivian might not want to share in her first meeting.”

“Thanks, I will though.”

“You will,” Doctor Berg echoed. “Are you sure? It’s all right to feel a little nervous.”

“I can feel nervous *and* sure.”

“Hah! What a peach.” Bernice held out the Tupperware container of potato chips to Vivian.

“Sorry!” Vivian said to Doctor Berg. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. I only meant I feel sure that I want to share. That’s all.”

Doctor Berg nodded at her reassuringly. “That’s what I understood, Vivian. So, maybe you should introduce yourself a bit. As much as you feel comfortable. Perhaps tell us what you hope to get out of group.”

Vivian exhaled. “This is my first group. As a teenager in... in my hometown, I tried to join other survivor groups, but they only accepted people eighteen or older.”

Bernice clucked her tongue. “Christ. I guess you hadn’t officially survived yet.”

“I guess. The Catholic Life Centre in my town had a group that would accept teenagers, but they had a rule: ‘To benefit, participants need to be able to talk about their abuse without experiencing extreme distress.’”

Both Doctor Berg and Bernice made wet sounds of dismay inside their mouths.

“You were probably better off not going to those groups, believe me,” said Bernice. “Half of the groups I’ve been to do nothing, and half of the other half were criminal, just effing criminal. Those religious organizations especially, you gotta stay away from them; they don’t really want to help you, they want to help themselves *to* you. Fuckers.”

“How long have you been in therapy?” Vivian said, then whispered to Doctor Berg, “Am I allowed to ask that?”

“Twenty-seven years,” Bernice volunteered before Doctor Berg could say no.

Vivian stared. Up close, she could discern that Bernice went days fixing her makeup by simply adding more and more. Spider legs surrounded Bernice’s eyes where mascara overburden had transferred from her lashes to the skin. “Why do you keep coming to these groups then?”

“Because I’m good at them.” Bernice grinned, her teeth nicotine gold. “I’m the life of the misery.”

“But you do find that they help, sometimes?” Doctor Berg prompted.

“Yeah, sure. You’re one of the better therapists around, Jackie. Least you’ve never hinted that you’re part of the victim sorority—‘me too, me too’—that’s my pet peeve. Wait, no!” Bernice wiggled in her seat in angry excitement. “My real pet peeve is people telling me to ‘open up.’ People say to me, ‘open up, open up,’ like I’m keeping some goody treasure all to myself, gypping everyone out of their share of my fantastic luck—I’m just so effing greedy.” Bernice pulled her cardigan’s halves together across her front and crossed her arms. “So nobody tell me to open up. There.”

“Vivian, you didn’t say what you hoped to gain in-group?” prompted Doctor Berg.

“I suppose I do want an audience, so that I can open up.”

“Hah!” Bernice uncrossed her arms, reached over to Vivian (ignoring her flinch), and patted her arm. “Good for you. You just tell me to go to hell anytime.”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” Vivian protested for the second time that night.

Ayeesha’s floor-fixed stare moved across the tiles to Doctor Berg’s leather knee-highs.

“Yes, Ayesha?” The therapist leaned closer to Ayesha. “Did you want to add anything?”

A mouse moved beneath the skin of Ayesha’s throat and a thread of space appeared between her lips, but Vivian heard no sound emerge.

“That’s fine Ayesha, that’s fine,” Doctor Berg reassured her. “Go on, Vivian.”

Vivian rubbed her knuckles along her stinging hairline. “I’m going to tell my story now.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I really do. Tonight.” Vivian licked her lips to begin, then rounded on Bernice. “Don’t...! Don’t interrupt me.”

“I’ll shut up.”

“I mean it. I planned exactly how I’ll say this, so don’t interrupt me. Please.”

“She won’t,” Doctor Berg promised. “But you can stop anytime you want.”

“No, I can’t. Here it is, my story.”

My family called me their little storyteller. Our neighbour Randal first gave me that name. While babysitting me, he would read me a fairytale from a storybook, and when my mother came home, Randal would tell her, “You should have heard the yarn Vivian spun!” as though I were the one who had made up the story. I would proudly recite as much of the fairytale as I could remember, and my mother would coo and say, “You’re such a great storyteller, Vivian!” So before I ever had a single story of my own, I believed that I was a storyteller.

After a time, Randal started reading me special stories without ever actually looking at the pages, watching me over the top of the book; and I thought: these must be the best stories if he knows them by heart. When my mother came home, I would tell her that Randal had read me a strange story about a princess kissing a prince while his pants were down. But Randal would sigh and give mother the storybook to read for herself, and magically the story on the pages had no such prince, no such princess. She would send me to my room for that, and I understood that I was being punished for telling the story wrong—for not being able to see the true story on the pages. Through my bedroom door, I would hear Randal tell my mother, “Having an imagination is a great thing in a child, she just doesn’t use it right, yet. It’s like running. They run, run, run, and bang into the walls.”

My mother often warned me that I’d be in so much more trouble if it weren’t for Randal taking my side all the time.

When I was alone with Randal again, he would tell me, “Your mother loves you very much, but she gets nervous because you’re so amaaazing at telling stories. Did you know that? Remember how Little Liar Annie was punished all the time, too?” Little Liar Annie was a girl in one of Randal’s not-really-looking-at-the-page stories. Annie could see ghosts everywhere: ghosts in the closets, ghosts in the bathroom, ghosts in her bed. But when she told people about the ghosts, they called her Little Liar Annie. Her favourite uncle eventually winked and told Little Liar Annie that everyone else actually could see ghosts too, but growing up meant that you grew scared of ghosts no matter how much they wanted to be your friend. To prove it, the uncle told Annie to peek through her mother’s bedroom keyhole, and she saw her mother laying on her back in bed as ghosts flew in and out of the lacy frills of her underwear, while she laughed,

“Shoo, ghosts, shoo.” So Little Liar Annie learned that it was okay to play with ghosts all she liked, as long as she didn’t tell anybody.

“Be like Little Liar Annie,” Randal urged me. “Don’t tell your mother anything that would frighten her (she already knows anyway!) and you won’t get in trouble.”

Once I agreed not to tell my mother stories, Randal taught me new stories using his fingers as actors and my stomach as the stage. Then he asked me to act out stories on his stomach. Then he acted out stories that took his hands down my stomach into my pants.

I *did* tell people about Randal—not at first, but eventually. I told my sandbox friends, I told my cousins, I told neighbours. And I knew all the words to use because Randal had taught them to me. The hole between my legs was a ‘cavern,’ the rod inside Randal’s pants was his ‘wand.’ Magic fountains, dark forests, potions, secret passages, resurrection kisses—Randal taught me a whole vocabulary. When I finally told my teacher Mr. O’Sullivan, I could see that he truly understood what I was saying, but he grew red in the face in a way that made me stop in the middle of my story and think, *Did I just accidentally say ‘Mr. O’Sullivan’ instead of ‘Randal?’* When Mr. O’Sullivan called my mother to the school for a talk, she explained to him what a little storyteller I was, and Mr. O’Sullivan pretended to believe her.

I felt I couldn’t hurt Randal with the truth, because people told me that he was better at the truth than I was, so I made up stories—terrible stories about Randal burning people and making them bleed. Randal kept a pair of my panties in his drawer, so I told people that Randal stole babies and put them in his drawer: “Go look!” They wouldn’t look though, so I knew I hadn’t told the right story. Next, I tried telling people that Randal stole things and put them in his drawer; and to make my stories more true, I stole things and said I saw Randal take them.

But I got caught a lot. Everyone called me a little storyteller, and Randal knew he could risk more and more.

And... that's my story. It doesn't really have an end.

Vivian had not been able to eat much that day, so the stream of her vomit didn't amount to much more than milky stomach acid and soggy scimitars of nibbled barbeque chips. After she had finished telling her story to the survivors group, she had raced to the community centre's third-floor bathroom to be sick.

After a time, Doctor Berg had sent Bernice to check on her. "I used to throw up after really good sessions too," Bernice called to Vivian from outside the bathroom stall. "I told people, 'Aw, that ain't puke, it's afterbirth!' I haven't had a good heave in years, though."

"The session isn't over yet, is it?" asked Vivian. "I have more I need to say."

"On your first night in group? Aw don't, eh. These sessions are like workouts: you really don't know how much you're straining yourself until afterward—that's when the pain really starts. Don't go crippling yourself the first time out."

"I don't want to talk any more, but I have to. Before Friday, I have to."

"Why? Randal coming to town Friday?"

"Shush about him." Vivian's throat turned hollow with renewed nausea, and she bent over the toilet bowl again. "L-let's not talk about me until we get back in-group. Saying things once is hard enough."

"Sure, you got it," Bernice promised.

They observed a silence together, and this was good—to be calm without the usual price of being alone. Yet the silence that was their refuge also made them extra sensitive to the world. Somewhere in the depths of the building, the aerobics class resumed, and the floor of their bathroom sanctuary trembled at the bass beat of the music and the stomping of many feet: the drumming march of the healthy who were many and who moved in unison. What would happen when the aerobics class ended? The students might flood into this very bathroom, careless in their health and joy, their laughter hurtful white light to those who lived in gloom.

Someone had to speak. “Now Ayesha, she’s got it rough, poor kid,” said Bernice. “She has this baby that she’s never taken a photo of, and she won’t let anyone else take a picture of him neither, I heard.” She dropped her voice further. “I figure maybe the kid looks too much like someone in the family.”

“God.” A bubble of acidic bile popped at the corner of Vivian’s mouth. “Have you met Ayesha’s family?”

“Oh Christ no. Don’t want to, neither. But you go to therapy long enough, you start to see the patterns. If it’s one person in the family who hurts you, you can maybe someday find the voice to speak up. But if it’s more than one person in the family, you grow up silent because you figure everyone in the world is somehow in on the conspiracy anyway.”

Vivian set her burning cheek against the cool metal of the stall’s toilet paper dispenser, gathered herself, then asked, “Did you figure out that my story was in the family?”

“Yeah, did. Usually I’d figure the father, but this Randal told you a story about a kindly uncle who went ‘wink-wink’ about Little Liar Annie, so there he is: Uncle Randal. Yeah?”

“Yes.”

“Did Uncle Randal ever get charged?”

“Nothing like that.” Vivian began pulling out toilet paper, ream after ream, sensing disease on every white square. “As I got older, my family realized that they might eventually be forced to publicly know what they already privately suspected, so they had a quiet talk with Randal and banished him—just like in a book, ‘banished’—all the way to the other side of town, a full fifteen minutes’ walk from my house. I still saw him everywhere. Still do whenever I go back home.”

Beyond the stall, Bernice was silent. And when she spoke, she said only, “I could go get your coat and purse for you, if you wanted to call it a session? Jackie and Ayeesha’d understand.”

“No, I can do this, I’m coming now.” Vivian finally tore off a section of toilet paper, wiped away bile and ruined lip gloss, and flushed the whole mess.

When Vivian emerged from the stall, she nodded at Bernice and went straight to the sink. “That’s it,” Bernice encouraged. “Just wash your face. You’ve still got good skin, just wash up and you’ll feel better.”

“I don’t want to tell my story so that I could feel better,” Vivian said as she splashed water on her burning face. “I want to tell it so that everyone else will feel sick. I want everyone who hears it to feel horrible.”

“Yeah, I hear you. People like us ain’t allowed to feel better.” Bernice began to yank reams of paper towel from a dispenser for Vivian, her voice jerking to the rhythm of her angry pulls. “*Because if we ever feel healthy again, what happened couldn’t be bad as murder—so you hurt like you didn’t survive!*”

As Vivian accepted a double fistful of paper towel from Bernice, she looked over top of the ruffled blossom of clean white paper at the older woman's cosmetics-caked face and heard Bernice's secret voice: *Get it off, get it off, get it off....*

When Vivian and Bernice returned to the room, Ayesha and Doctor Berg were seated in their chairs engaging in a whispered conference with their bent heads almost touching. Vivian didn't know what she would do if Ayesha decided to finally talk during the second half of the session. But at Vivian and Bernice's return, Ayesha drew back from Doctor Berg and again turtled down into the depths of her Arctic Cat coat.

Doctor Berg smiled in accomplishment, however. "Vivian, Ayesha says your story was sad. Somebody should have helped you."

"Thank you. Thank you, Ayesha—I think someone should have done more to help us all." Vivian seated herself and took a breath. "I have more to say, but first I feel that I have to admit that I didn't tell the first part of the story completely. Randal was my uncle. Bernice figured that out. And Doctor Berg, you're not really my first therapist."

"Really. Go on."

Vivian dabbed away the cool seed of a tear before it could take root. "When it was all still happening, my mother sent me to a child behaviourist because I was telling so many stories. That therapist didn't quite tell me the story of the *Little Girl Who Cried Wolf*—not exactly—but he made me understand that I would never be believed because I wasn't an adult. I took this message backwards, though: I *would* be believed if only I could somehow magically grow up. I was in such a hurry to grow up and feel safe that when I heard a psychiatrist on TV talk show say

that children really don't try to commit suicide, I swallowed a bottle of pills to prove that I wasn't a child anymore—that I was an adult. 'Listen to me now.' Second therapist. My second therapist taught me that children only turn to suicide as way of saving themselves—of escaping—then she ended therapy in triumph as soon as I convinced her I would not try to save myself again. You're my third therapist, Doctor Berg, so I really need you to come through for me, because I won't have the heart to try a fourth."

"I'm listening, I'm here."

"I hope so, because I need help, tonight." Vivian wiped her palms dry on her jeans. "Here I go. Everyone, I came to group tonight because I recently attended a storytelling workshop. At the end of the workshop, the speaker told a story, 'How I Became a Storyteller,' and... and I guess I heard a story that nobody else in the workshop heard. It was hidden in the details. Here's what he said. His story."

The Storyteller related to us that when he first decided to become a storyteller, he went to a bookstore and asked for a book on telling stories to children. The clerk told him, "Yes, I read stories to my eight-year-old son every night, out of the *Kama Sutra*." Everyone in the workshop audience gasped at this and the Storyteller shook his head at the scandal of it; but even as he did, I remembered how my Uncle Randal had once told my mother that he had found a pornographic magazine at the playground where he had taken me to play, and I remembered how Uncle Randal had shaken his head at the scandal of it, too. But the magazine had really belonged to Uncle Randal, and he kept it at his home; he only told my mother about the magazine because he had a compulsion to alibi himself for crimes even though nobody knew he had committed them.

You see, he had already rehearsed the story he would tell if anyone found the pornography at his home, and once this story existed in him, it became something difficult to keep restrained—to keep unspoken. So, he used little disguised confessions to help him hold in check the huge secrets always struggling to get free.

The Storyteller described to the workshop audience how he took a job working with children at a daycare. He said that all the kids in his daycare were tough kids, kids from the inner city who could take care of themselves, and that many of them were silent and all were amazing fibbers—all were natural storytellers. The audience shook their heads and nodded knowingly. Not me, though. I remembered that Uncle Randal had also told people about his tough little niece: silent when you wanted a straight answer, a look-you-in-the-eye liar when you demanded one. This made it harder for me to be believed, and easier for him.

The Storyteller told the workshop that a boy at the daycare had once soiled himself and had grown scared his mother would find out, so the Storyteller had taken the boy's underwear home and buried it in his backyard. "I don't even know why I did it," he told the audience, who nodded about how sometimes we all do strange things. Not me, though. I remembered that Uncle Randal had once taken a pair of my panties and then told his neighbour that I had given him my panties to clean after losing control of my bladder—and it's true that I once did wet myself all over my panties and his hand, but that was not the pair of panties he took from me. The pair he took from me had blood on them. Uncle Randal said to his the neighbour, "The little devil made me promise not to tell anyone she'd wet herself. I kept the panties, but I can't tell you why. Finally, I just burned them. You can still see the elastic waistband, out back in the fire pit. Come on back and have a look." Randal *needed* the neighbour to see that the panties had

been burned, had been destroyed, because... well, because those panties were haunting him. I can't explain it any better than that—not me, not Macbeth.

The Storyteller finished his tale of how he became a storyteller with the anecdote of his last day on the job at the daycare, when he had given 'his' children a special treat. He knew he was forbidden to take the children off the daycare property, but he snuck away with them anyway, to a forest on the edge of the school grounds. The Storyteller jumped over a small creek at the edge of the forest, then told the kids a tale about children trapped in a world where everyone grew big unless they crossed a magic stream. And he told the workshop audience, "Just like that, the children all jumped the creek. I never had to ask any of them, they just wanted to. And they were so happy that they all spontaneously took off their clothes. I could not even stop them, they just naturally did it. They played naked in the forest all afternoon." After that day, he knew beyond a doubt that he truly had become a Storyteller.

And after I had heard his tale, I knew what he was, too.

When Vivian had finished the story, the other members of the circle eyed each other, even Ayesha. At this, Vivian felt a pang of trepidation, for she recognized those guilty glances, recognized the sight of listeners gauging just exactly how much understanding they needed to confess. How much innocent ignorance they could dare feign. It was Bernice who spoke first, "What did the workshop audience do when they heard all of this?"

Vivian pantomimed applause, not actually touching her wet palms together. The sound would have been too obscene.

“Perhaps the rest of the workshop attendees didn’t interpret the story the way you did, Vivian?” said Doctor Berg. “You needn’t answer if you find that question uncomfortable.”

“I find that question uncomfortably *familiar*.” Vivian pressed her hands between her knees and rocked. “Yes, yes, yes, somebody else who sat in that same workshop audience might tell you that I selected only certain details of what the Storyteller said and left out other parts, but that’s... that’s how stories work. In his story, the Storyteller also talked about his charity work and of honouring ancient traditions and drawing nearer to archetypes, using those sunny distractions to obscure the damning clues to what he actually is. The devil really is in the details.”

Again, nobody rushed to speak. Bernice opened her mouth, but then closed it again and instead looked to Doctor Berg.

“Everyone’s experiences predispose them to interpret stories in a personal way. To see certain meanings....” Doctor Berg trailed off, inviting Vivian to take up the rest of her idea—to repeat what she had told Vivian in session about the dangers of seeing messages that did not really exist.

But Vivian refused. “You want me to admit that I *could* be wrong, because that’ll secretly mean that I *am* wrong. And if I don’t admit I could be wrong, then you’ll say I’m being unreasonable. You can do that to me—bully me into calling myself a liar—because you’re bigger and stronger. Because you’re healthy and not scared all the time.”

“Vivian....”

“But being healthy means that you should help me find out the truth. Here.” Vivian took a bureaucratic form from her purse and held it out to Doctor Berg across the group’s open circle.

Doctor Berg leaned forward in her chair to demonstrate that she was not necessarily unwilling to accept the paper, but she did not hold out her hand just yet. “What is that?”

Vivian turned over the form so that everyone in the circle could discern its municipal police letterhead. “It’s a request form for a criminal background check, the one that all the education majors at the university have to fill out before we can start teaching children. I’ve already filled in the Storyteller’s real name and address from his web site, but I need someone official to fill out the ‘purpose’ section and sign it—then I can give it to the police.” She stretched out her arm until the request form touched Doctor Berg’s knee.

Doctor Berg finally took the form, but only to set it aside on the empty chair to her left, the place in the circle reserved for the absent Florianna. “At this juncture, I think we’ve passed beyond the limit of what we can usefully cover in a single session.”

“But I had to share it all!” Vivian protested. “The Storyteller will be leaving campus after a final storytelling session on Friday afternoon, so I need to get this form to the police tonight.”

“Or what? Or he’ll get away?”

“Or he’ll get away with it, yes. Yes! And it’s not just about *his* guilt.” Vivian hesitated, head bowed, but what she felt needed to be finally said. “As mad as I am at my Uncle Randal, I understand that he’s a monster and always was, and that he acted as a monster does—even his lies were true to what a monster is. But I have this other more serrated sense of betrayal at the people that should have protected me: my parents, the neighbours, the therapists, my teachers—they’re the ones who betrayed their promise to watch over me, who weren’t what they were supposed to be. I feel such... such *rage* at them. And I can’t set aside this anger, because I don’t think I should. People make excuses for them, people say that my protectors had no real proof,

just suspicions, so it's understandable that they couldn't do anything; but that's just a bullshit rationalization, and calling their betrayal 'understandable' is just a single sorry step away from calling it 'right.' And failing to protect children isn't right! It's never right!" Vivian wiped at the sweat of her flaming face. "And now here I am: a newborn adult. I was always the child before, but now I've moved away from home and I'm training to be a teacher. A *teacher*. I'm promising mothers and fathers that I'll watch over their children. I'm the protector now."

"If you see yourself as the protector, Vivian," asked Doctor Berg, "what are you asking of me?"

"I don't think I'm *asking*. I think I'm holding you to your promise to help me." Vivian pointed to the background check form sitting on the empty chair beside Doctor Berg. "Sign the form, that's all. I'll... I'll fight the rest of the fight. I have to."

Doctor Berg hung her head to one side and said nothing. Disappointed in Vivian. Waiting.

Trembling though she was, Vivian refused the doctor's invitation to lose her nerve—to retract her demand, to qualify her accusations—matching the doctor's silence instead.

As the silence stretched onward, Ayeesha's parka creaked as she scrunched herself more firmly into its quilted interior.

"Maybe the background check won't even reveal anything," Bernice finally said to Doctor Berg. "Maybe nothing would have to be done."

"What we're experiencing in-group at the moment is not about me, or about my willingness to act or not."

But Vivian heard a secret hornet in Doctor Berg's tone: stung and stinging back. Even as Doctor Berg denied the implied accusation of indifference, she further stiffened her posture, an

act that both emphasized her body's fine lines and raised her head all the higher above the other members of the circle. Her stung reproach and her aristocratic rearing-back spoke to Vivian as clearly as though the therapist's inner voice had suddenly been broadcast aloud: Doctor Berg cared for her patients, but she also wanted them to keep their refugee lives outside her borders. Vivian had transgressed the border by asking her to act. The doctor would extend them the hospitality of her ears and advice, but she refused to have their stories truly enter into her real life.

Vivian snatched up her vest and purse. "I'm sorry, Ayesha, Bernice," she said, and fled for the door.

Vivian descended to the ground floor of the community centre via a stairwell, unable to face the prospect of being confined within the elevator while she was so upset. Classes were still ongoing and the main foyer of the community centre was deserted. As Vivian paused at the glass door to don her anonymizing flapped hat against the blizzard that was scouring the streetlights outside, Bernice emerged from the elevator behind her.

"Hey, wait up, Viv," Bernice called. "Are you coming back next meeting, or what?"

"Did Doctor Berg send you to ask me that?"

"No, but I'm sure she wants you to come again."

"Does she? What did she do with the criminal background form?"

Bernice hesitated, then produced the background form from her macramé purse. The sheet of paper now had the same lizard-skin texture as Bernice's wrinkled face.

“Oh my god, did she...?” Vivian took the form from Bernice and inspected it: the page now had thousands of creases. “Doctor Berg actually crumpled it up!”

“You gotta understand how these things go, hon,” Bernice cajoled. “Listen, you never met that girl Florianna, right? Florianna used to be called Lilith, and before that she was Persy as in ‘Persephone’—Christ knows what her real name was. Hell, she even tried to rename herself ‘Cassandra,’ but Jackie finally put her foot down. Every time Florianna showed up in-group, she brought some new memory about her past. It started that she had been abused by her stepbrother; then she uncovered a memory that it was her father, too; ‘n after that, a Jungian something-or-other guided Florianna to a realization that her biological mother had sold her for drug money. Last time Sam showed up in-group, she brought this Satanic ritual abuse checklist that she and some New Age hypnotist girlfriend had cooked up, and she told Jackie to distribute it across the whole province. Just like that: ‘Get on it.’ You never met Florianna, but the Floriannas of the world have already done a number on you. And on me, ‘n on Ayesha, and on Jackie even.” Bernice pulled at Vivian in the very most cautious of ways, just a single fleeting tug on her purse strap. “Come back next week, hunh? Ayesha likes you—you’re not scary-ugly like me or scary-normal like Jackie. Maybe you’ll be the one who finally gets Ayesha to talk or at least take a picture of her poor damned kid. Coming back?”

Vivian hung her head, pressing her forehead to the door’s icy glass. “I don’t know. Suddenly, I’m not even sure that I’m going to continue in the teacher-training program.”

“Geez, Viv. Don’t say that.”

“I mean it. If I can’t take a stand this time, then... then what am I going to do? Live in dread for an entire teaching career? Cringing in anticipation of the next time a child told me they were being abused and that I pretended to believe that it was all just a story?” She lifted her head

from the door's icy glass and saw that her breath had created a foggy cone of condensation. A little girl ghost. "I remember thinking to myself when I enrolled in teacher-training, *Finally, I'm a newborn adult*. But here I am, still a child who can't grow up. Not some giggler too in love with childhood to leave the forest, just a shivering girl hiding inside a old dead log. Crammed in too tight to grow, but too scared to leave."

"Yeah, a little wizened crone," murmured Bernice, softly, to herself. "A frightened childhood gets old after forty, fifty years."

"Jesus, Bern."

"Yeah."

Vivian contemplated the criminal background check form still in her hand, then turned away from the icy door to Bernice. "I could fill in the form myself and fake Doctor Berg's signature, but I'm too scared to do it alone. You have brass, though. If you went with me to the police station just when I hand it in, maybe...?"

Bernice's shoulders sagged so much that her macramé purse bottomed out on the slushy foyer floor. "I can't, Viv. I'm sorry. I'm loud, but I'm not strong—these sessions wreck me, just absolutely wreck me. The worst part of the week for me is sitting at home after group—a half hour from now, I'm gonna start a crying jag."

"I'm sorry, Bern."

"Look, I gotta go. I'm gonna start leaking any moment, and this is one god-awful face when it runs." Bernice pressed past Vivian and leaned her shoulder into the door, but paused on the verge of stepping out into the blizzard. "Listen, I learned a lesson or two in seventeen years of group, and here's the biggest lesson of all: Get used to it."

“‘Get used to it.’ Wow. That might be the most hideous thing anyone has ever said to me.”

“That a fact? Even Uncle Randal?”

“He didn’t *say* hideous things at all.”

Bernice snorted. “That’s the reason why the bastards always get away with it: your truth is uglier than their stories.” She flung open the door hard enough to make it bash against a railing and stomped out, calling back as she vanished into the blizzard, “Get used to it!”

Seen through its glass wall, the Faculty of Education’s multipurpose room was dark except for a single klieg light focused on a storytelling workshop display: the Telling Stick, posed against the Storyteller’s elm-stump stool. A sign on the room’s door announced, *Come One, Come All! Storytelling Workshop Series: Campfire Finale Today! Pre-Service Teachers, Bring A Story to Share!* Vivian had lingered in the corridor outside the multipurpose room for a half hour now, a single silent and motionless figure amid a boisterous stream of university students hurrying between classes. During this time, she had stared fixedly through the glass wall at the Telling Stick as an act of extinction; she had even tried staring at the stick one-eyed, centring it within one of the diamonds of reinforcing wire embedded in the wall’s safety glass.

Safety glass. Throughout her grade school years, she and all the other children had taken it on faith that the distinctive wire-reinforced glass on the doors and windows of their school was called ‘safety glass’ because the reinforcing wires kept the glass from shattering and cutting children. But when she had become an education undergraduate major, a professor coaching her

in preparation for teaching a class of seven-year-olds in the multipurpose room had cautioned her to never let the children use the room's glass wall as 'home free' during their games.

"Even though it's safety glass?" Vivian had asked.

"It's only called 'safety glass' because it resists the spread of fires," her teacher-trainer had explained. "Schools use it to keep their insurance rates down. But if a child smashes into it running full tilt with their arms out, the glass breaks and the wire inside slices them up so horribly the child can end up as a little Captain Hook." The teacher-trainer held up her hand with two fingers curled in an imitation of a prosthetic hook.

"My god. Have you— Can *I* warn the children about that?"

The teacher-trainer had shaken her head. "Well, they'd tell their parents, right? Nothing's going to change, so best not to make an issue of it."

The multipurpose room's door had a coded lock, but everyone in the education program knew the code. (The undergraduate office secretaries gave out the code only to people they trusted, but they more or less trusted everyone they actually knew.) Vivian tapped the security pad's 'three' button thrice and then the 'star' button, and the door chimed the first bar of *Puff the Magic Dragon* and clicked open. She passed through the wall of deadly safety glass into the multipurpose room.

When the door closed behind her, the hush after the tumult of the bustling corridor pressed on her eardrums like water pressure. Vivian forced herself to approach the Telling Stick. The stick was, she reassured herself as her racing heartbeat threatened to trigger a panic attack, merely a broom with its bristles cropped away and its handle adorned with cheap baubles—plastic jewellery, mitten tassels, glittery star decals—all mounted on a pied covering of stitched

felt shreds. She stretched out her hand into the klieg light's spotlight to touch the Telling Stick with a single shaking finger—but then Vivian froze, for suddenly she found herself in a forest.

A night forest. Tree trunks and thick leaves, toadstools and tangled vines, looming on all sides—silhouettes crafted of black construction paper, a simple art class project mounted on the walls, transforming the unlit room and its single spot of light into a moonlit clearing in the midst of a dark forest. Blood thrummed in her ears. Transfixed by the magical materialization of the forest, Vivian realized with a finality that she was doomed to live all her life as she was at this moment: afraid. Fear was the natural state of humankind. For tens of thousands of generations, humankind had dwelled in deep forests surrounded by creatures ferocious, unseen, unheard, swift, envenomed, clawed, fanged—beasts that saw in the dark, smelled prey from afar, heard the softest breathing, and devoured flesh. This primordial forest of perpetual fear had never, ever, gone far; it awaited all of us a single camping trip epiphany away, one bad dream distant, a thin layer of consciousness within, a single story away. Vivian knew this to be true by the surest possible means: when she had months earlier chanced to describe her awareness of an ever-looming forest of the collective unconscious to Doctor Berg, the psychologist had asked Vivian to never speak of the dark forest if she ever attended the survivors' group. The forest was to remain a secret, never to be spoken aloud—the fate of only the deepest of truths.

As Vivian stood petrified within the forest of simple black paper, she realized that extinction would never work for her. Extinction diluted a phobia by making the focus of the fear more familiar and innocuous, less strange and potent, robbing the phobic object of its falsely perceived power. But as Vivian stood with her finger trembling just short of the Telling Stick as though it had come up against an enchanted barrier, she understood that the Telling Stick and the stories it summoned truly *did* possess magic, and psychology would never fundamentally change

that truth. Extinction would never work for Vivian, because she believed in the magic of stories as wholeheartedly as any child who had ever clapped their hands to bring Tinkerbell back to life. Vivian drew her shaking finger back from the enchanted Telling Stick.

The door chimed *Puff the Magic Dragon* and boomed open.

The Storyteller entered the darkened room on the limp, hunchbacked, grunting as he dragged behind himself a legless table and propelled before him a stack of stolen milk crates via a series of ill-humoured kicks. Without thinking, Vivian moved to hold the door open for him. In place of the pied vest he had worn at the first workshop, the Storyteller was now clad in the garb of a gypsy prince: burgundy silk shirt with a ruffled front and flaring cuffs; pants that fit loose to the knee and then gave way to leggings; fold-down leather boots. When he noticed Vivian holding open the door, the Storyteller ceased kicking the crates, straightened up, and smiled.

“Ahhh, I’d hoped you’d come. Have you decided to tell your story, then?”

“I brought a story.”

“I knew it, I knew it.” The Storyteller set the legless table in front of the elm-stump stool and covered it with a spangled black cloth from one of the stolen milk crates full of supplies. “At the first workshop, you hid to make me see you, then you whispered that you had a secret story, an important story, a story that you didn’t think you’d share. And I thought to myself, ‘Oh yes, this one is a storyteller.’ And now you’ve saved your tale for the finale, just as a true storyteller would.”

Listening to him speak, Vivian understood how the Storyteller reassured so many people. He talked with fingers flying, face flaring, and eyes batting, like a delighted aunt who loved sweet children and simply adored naughty ones. She could not resist helping him prepare the

room for the Campfire, unstacking chairs and arranging them in rows. “But I thought I should tell my story to you first,” she said, “to make sure I have it right. It’s something that actually happened to me.”

“‘It actually happened to me’—good beginning, good beginning.” The Storyteller took candles from the milk crates and set them on the black-covered table. “I find that lowering the lights and lighting candles helps make the audience receptive. When I see that look in their eyes, I always find my natural rhythm. I’m sorry, did I interrupt you?”

“Not really, I was stalling. I was saying that my story is something that actually happened to me, and I thought I’d better tell it to you first.”

The Storyteller shook his head as he took from his seemingly bottomless milk crates a bouquet of tissue-paper wildflowers with pipe-cleaner stems, then started scattering them on the black-draped table by dropping them from shoulder height. “I’m sure that’s not necessary. You can mar a tale’s freshness with too much preparation.” He dropped a final flower on the table and then held his hands splayed in the air above the table as though magically affixing the flowers in place just so. “Stories follow natural rules. So as long as the tale is good, the telling of it flows.”

“How does the telling flow if the story should never have occurred?”

The Storyteller frowned. “What sort of story would that be?”

“A story in which children get hurt.”

The Storyteller nudged a frail tissue-paper flower farther away from the threat of a candle. “*The Little Boy Who Cried Wolf?*”

“More like *The Pied Piper*.”

The Storyteller did not answer at first, as he took a black silk eye patch from a milk crate and contemplated it, apparently uncertain if he would add the sinister patch to his gypsy costume. “The rules for the Campfire say that you have to tell everyone where you found your tale.”

“Oh I will. I’m wondering about names, though. About what name I should give my story’s villain.”

“I suppose that if you tell a story about elves in an attic or dragons in a subway, you can use any name at all. Otherwise, be careful.” He came to his decision, and tucked the sinister eye patch back into its crate.

“How about... ‘Jack Miller.’ I’ve heard that name used in stories.”

“‘Jack Miller,’ he echoed. The faint accent that she had not even consciously noticed before, the Caribbean rum-and-merriment lilt, had disappeared from his voice, so that he spoke this name in the flat accent of any old neighbour. “Did you say, ‘Jack Miller?’”

“That’s right.” She took a diver’s breath. “It’s a name I’ve heard in stories before.”

“That surprises me.”

“Let me check.” Vivian took a taut square of paper from her pocket and unfolded it into three pages covered in her own handwriting. These sheets rattled in her shaking hands as she pretended to consult the story written upon them. “Yes, there it is, ‘Jack Miller.’”

The Storyteller closed one of his eyes and stared at the sheets, seeking to read the ink through the paper. “You wrote the story, did you? Made it up?”

“Tell me what you think.” With this, Vivian read to him her story.

In a place and a time neither near nor far, a demon named Jack Miller hatched a plan to steal the songs of children. You may wonder why a demon would have a name like ‘Jack Miller,’ but the truth is that demons wear clothes very much like you and I, and you may even live beside one without knowing it. (Although you don’t go to school with any, because there are no children demons; and any grown-up who tells you otherwise is likely a demon themselves.) Demons wear clothes like you and I because they fear being discovered more than anything. There’s nothing in the world worse than being a demon, and any demon caught in the company of people gets sent to the place where demons are kept. We won’t talk about that place here.

Now, Jack Miller wanted to steal songs from children because demons just absolutely hate to hear children sing. Demons won’t say it that way, not even to themselves, because they consider themselves the world’s greatest musicians; but the truth is that ever since they lost their harps long ago, they just can’t carry a tune. Oh they can wail, they can roar, they can howl, but for the life of them, they just can’t sing. This torments them because they haven’t lost their sense of music and their pointed ears can hear things even dogs can’t, so any music playing within a mile makes a demon chew his ears in frustration. And any demon can tell you that the finest music doesn’t come from a minstrel or a nightingale or an orchestra—the best music of all is the song of a child. Demons can’t stand to hear children sing even a simple song like *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, and a proper children’s choir will make even nasty Old Ned himself gnaw the pointy tips right off his ears in jealousy.

One fine sunny day, the demon Jack Miller was sitting on a blasted elm stump on the edge of a shadowy forest, listening as the children of a nearby school sang *Open Up Your Heart* in voices as sweet as any angel’s. As he listened to them, the demon gnawed on his pointy ear

tips and mumbled into his own bent ear, “If I don’t find some way to steal away that song, I’ll nibble myself deaf!” And so Jack Miller schemed and schemed until he had thought up a plan.

First, he disguised himself as a child. However, the disguise did not work very well because Jack Miller was a great big demon, so when the children of the school saw Jack Miller come skipping out of the forest, they all hid behind their teacher, Mrs. Wise, and squinted their eyes at him like *this*. But Jack Miller just smiled innocently and declared, “I am simply a boy who never grew up, for I was a champion child. My body became bigger and bigger, but I refused to lose my love of fun and games, so now here I am: a boy forevermore.” He told this story very, very well, because when demons lost their songs, they kept their ability to tell stories. In fact, many of their best stories are really old songs told without the music, so when demons tell these tales, listeners often hear a gentle echo of the old music in the air, and that’s why demons always *seem* to tell great stories, even though they don’t really. So it was that when Mrs. Wise listened to Jack Miller’s story about being a champion child, she seemed to hear far off and away some lovely flute music, the kind of music she loved when she herself was a little girl—and so she smiled at Jack Miller and believed him. Don’t judge Mrs. Wise too harshly. Adults always think that demons have horns and tails, and believe that demons are off someplace hiding, not standing right beside them.

As soon as Mrs. Wise wandered away in search of the distant flutes, Jack Miller grinned at the children and declared, “I have the funnest thing in the whole world, I do.”

Now, children are experts on being children, so Jack Miller’s great big body didn’t fool any of them. All of the school children squinted their eyes at Jack like *this*. But still, they couldn’t help asking (just asking, after all), “What do you have? What’s the funnest thing in the whole world?”

“Can’t show it. If I show it to you, then Mrs. Wise might see it. Haven’t you ever noticed that grown-ups won’t let you play with all the really fun things? They certainly won’t let children have the funnest thing of all. If I show it to you, Mrs. Wise will take it away from us.”

Then the children all squinted at Mrs. Wise behind her back like *this*. Don’t judge the children too harshly—remember, demons are great storytellers.

Jack Miller clicked his fingers. “But if we were hidden in the shadowy forest, I could take the funnest thing in the world out of my pocket and show it to you.”

Now, the children knew that the shadowy forest is where the big kids go when they had things they don’t want adults to see, so they couldn’t help just going along with Jack Miller to see (just see, after all). They followed Jack Miller away from school out of sight into the forest, and there they said to him, “Now you can show us the funnest thing in the world.”

“I could, yes indeed I could...,” said Jack Miller hesitantly. “But then one of you might tell Mrs. Wise, and she’d take it away from me. I know *you* wouldn’t tell,” he said, pointing at one boy, “and *you* wouldn’t tell,” he said, pointing at a girl, “but *someone* here might spoil the secret. Doesn’t it always happen that way?”

And the children had to admit that keeping secrets was pretty hard, so all the children squinted at each other like *this*.

Jack Miller clicked his fingers. “But I could take the funnest thing in the world out of my pocket if I could be sure that none of you was a secret-teller. There’s a way to tell: a secret-teller always has a tiny little notch in her tongue. Why, some of you may already have one and not even know it!”

All the children looked into the creek that separated the school grounds from the shadowy forest and squinted at their own reflection like *this*. They each wanted to stick out their tongues

and check for a little notch, but they didn't dare do this while everyone else was watching—just in case. After all, everyone's given away at least one secret in their life.

Jack Miller clicked his fingers. "I know! I could take you each, one by one, behind this old oak tree, and then you could show me your tongues. If you don't have a notch, then I can show you the funnest thing in the world. Hooray!"

"Hooray!" the children shouted, for they had started to worry that they would never get to see the funnest thing in all the world. So one by one, they let Jack Miller take them by the hand and lead them behind the old oak tree. Once behind the tree, they showed him their tongues, opening their mouths so wide that they had to close their eyes like *this*, and at that very moment Jack Miller took out the knife that had been the only thing in his pocket all this time and cut a notch into their tongue. And when each of the children ran screaming from behind the tree, Jack Miller cried out to the other children, "Look! Look at her notched tongue! She's a secret-teller!"

One by one, the children went behind the old oak tree with Jack Miller. One by one, he cut their tongues.

When the children all ran to Mrs. Wise and tried to tell her what Jack Miller had done to them, their cut tongues could only make a hissing sound. Mrs. Wise, still straining to hear the distant lovely sound of distant flutes that so reminded her of when she was a little girl, grew angry at the ugly sounds the children made and wouldn't listen to them or even look into their mouths. When the children's parents wondered why their son or daughter could no longer speak (let alone sing) only hiss like snakes, Mrs. Wise took the parents aside one by one and said, "Sometimes children turn bad for no reason, no reason at all. Between you and me, I think all children have a bit of the devil in them."

As for Jack Miller, he travelled all around the land stealing children's songs with his newfound trick (which was really a very old trick). He never actually got to *keep* the children's songs he stole, only ruin them; but ruining songs is the closest a demon ever gets to singing, so Jack Miller bent his long pointed ear around to his mouth and whispered to himself that he got to keep the songs he stole—and Jack Miller could tell a story so well that even Jack Miller believed it.

So it is that I'm telling you now that any child who wants to always be able to sing—or even just speak—should keep a close eye out for grown-ups who act like children and ask them if they can keep a secret. When you meet an adult like that, you've probably met a demon, and you should never, ever, go anywhere with him.

After she finished telling her story, Vivian stood for a few moments staring at the written pages. These pages were rattling audibly in the empty multipurpose room's silence, for her hands still shook. The truth was that she never had summoned the courage to submit a signature-forged criminal background check form to the police, so she did not know for certain if it was the Storyteller who was guilty of being a demon, or if it was she that was guilty of the sin of telling stories. She took a shuddering breath and raised her gaze from the story pages.

The Storyteller was smiling, but he was smiling with only half his mouth as he stared past her into the deep shadows.

And Vivian knew. If this were a story *she* were telling, she would have had the Storyteller stammer, '*Have* we met before...?' or something else equally as damning, but only for the benefit of her listeners' certainty. She herself needed no other admission of his guilt than

that laconic distant gaze unique to a person carefully crafting in their imagination a proper denial, a plausible lie—a story.

“Do you want to hear the end of the story?” she hissed at him. “Eventually, the children’s tongues heal and the demon gets what he deserves.”

“I advise that you don’t use that word ‘demon’ in your story,” the Storyteller whispered, his voice as faraway as his gaze. “It’s too harsh, and people don’t believe in demons, anymore. Perhaps, the story could be about mischievous leprechauns...?”

“Oh I’ll make people believe in demons.”

The Storyteller finally drew his gaze out of the shadows and met her eyes, losing the last half of his smile as he did so. “I don’t want you telling a story like that at my Campfire.” With this, he sent his stack of stolen milk crates skidding into a corner with a violent kick.

Vivian twitched and trembled all the harder, aware that they were alone together, for the crowd of students and faculty flowing past in the sunlit corridor beyond the glass wall were all the way on the other side of the forest. “I’m going to tell my story at the Campfire anyway,” she vowed. “I’m going to teach people how to recognize demons, and a room full of teachers seems a proper place to start.”

“A roomful of teachers? Aaahhh, I see. You forgot the rule, the most important rule.”

“What rule?”

“The first rule of storytelling: Know your audience.”

Ghostly giggling floated through the gallery’s glass wall behind her. Vivian cautiously backed several steps away from the Storyteller before she turned to peer through the glass into the corridor. A troop of young children were just arriving at the door, a whole grade school class on a field trip, a score of seven-year-olds holding onto nooses knotted into a single length of

bright yellow polypropylene rope. Prompted by their teacher and several parent-helper escorts, the line of children all waved hello through the glass.

The Storyteller waved back at the children, grinning with avuncular delight. Even as he waved to the children, he spoke to Vivian out of the side of his mouth, “For the Campfire Finale, I’ve invited a class of children to listen to the stories.”

“I’m going to tell my story anyway,” Vivian insisted, but even as she did so, she averted her face from the children, aware that they would measure the glower on her face against the merry smile of the Storyteller.

“Oh careful, do be careful,” the Storyteller said as he tended to the final few details of his gypsy costume, donning a gaily coloured headscarf. “Telling your sort of story to children fell out of favour years back. Do you remember the news stories? Some imaginative social workers visited daycare centers, asking the kids: ‘Does the woman who teaches you the alphabet ever make you dance around fires? Does the man who gives you milk ever dress up in black and poke babies with knives? Take this dolly and show me where they touch you.’ Such ugliness. But there was a happy ending: everyone was found innocent except for the evil social workers, who were found guilty of professional misconduct and never heard from again. The end.”

The door chimed *Puff the Magic Dragon* and the children flowed into the darkened room.

“Hello, hello, one and all,” the Storyteller cried out, lighting the candles on his black-covered table. “Welcome to my Campfire!”

In the Campfire Finale that followed, the children sat on the floor around the black-draped table, while their teacher, the parent-helpers, education undergraduates, and professors

occupied the three rows of chairs behind them. Whenever the children reached their fingers toward the burning candles on the table, the Storyteller made a funny face of alarmed disapproval, turning this snatching-at-fire into a merry game. A series of pre-service teachers took turns on the elm stump: the Storyteller presented each the Telling Stick, they held up the book containing the tale they had selected, said a few words of explanation about why they had chosen that particular tale, and then ritually asked if anyone wanted to hear a tale, using traditional formulas such as the “Cric, crac,” query-and-answer. After each pre-service teacher finished telling their story, the Storyteller led the applause and gave the student teacher a choice nugget or two of advice: “You can soften your voice now and then, to lure people’s attention” “Always look your audience in the eye as much as possible.”

Throughout the storytelling, Vivian sat hiding in the same farthest-back, farthest-aside position in the audience that she had chosen for herself that very first day of the storytelling workshop—trapped now, as on that day, by inertia. Having already lived this story in her imagination a hundred times in the past several days, she recognized that the moment had come for her triumph of resolve, *If I don’t act now as an adult, then I’ll finally be guilty of what happened to me when I was a child—guilty in the way that my mother and neighbours and teachers were—and I’ll stay a child forever, no longer merely frightened, but guilty as well. Damned and damnable.* But she did not rise to denounce the Storyteller; she remained silent and invisible. Imprisoned among the contented audience, she understood more of why so many accusers in her position felt unable to act: the danger of the Storyteller seemed so exotic and uncertain; the present situation, so mundane and concrete. To voice her dark suspicions in such a place of contentment would be to rave like a street corner lunatic.

Beyond this fear of becoming the outcast ‘other,’ there was another shame. The guilt of the storyteller.

When Vivian had been at her most desperate, a little girl telling lies to the adults in her life to make them believe in her suffering, she had still felt a pleasure—the pleasure of telling her invented stories well. The pleasure of spinning a web, of casting a spell. Her adult listeners had discerned this pleasure in her and had hence believed her guilty of lies. Even in the later times, when they had finally accepted the terrible truth of her victimization, they still remembered seeing the pleasure in Vivian during her storytelling, and they—in the sour, sickened secrecy of their thoughts—formed a hideous suspicion about this pleasure: a suspicion that the evil in Randal had been answered by a wickedness hidden within the child. This thought, they could not bear to face, not for a moment, not ever. Now, Vivian feared that if she told her tale to this audience, they too would suspect her of this same wickedness—would suspect that her story was not truly a warning, but rather a wish in masquerade. *How could she tell stories of such secrets unless she sinned those very sins within her own imagination?* This was the guilt shared by all storytellers: the sin of seeing. Of seeing and telling. Of *admitting* the vision, in all senses of the word.

Rendered invisible by the shame of seeing, Vivian remained rooted to her farthest-back, farthest-aside seat, while others rose to tell their safely borrowed tales.

The last scheduled pre-service teacher told her story, an Italian folktale. This tale began promisingly, “It is a great truth that from the same wood are formed the statues of idols and the rafters of gallows...,” but the morality tale went on so long that the children began to play with the candles on the black-draped table. When the pre-service teacher finally concluded with the moral, “No evil ever went without punishment,” the children did not even notice that the end had

come, until the Storyteller cued their applause with a mighty sigh of satisfaction. After the ensuing dutiful clapping had sputtered out, he stage-whispered to the student-teacher, “If you’ve lost your audience, stop and go back for them. No use arriving at market if all your apples have fallen off the cart along the way.” Chuckles rippled through the audience seated in the chairs, and the children, looking back at the adults, giggled too.

This approbation for the Storyteller provided Vivian the only thing in all the world that could break the spell of inertia imprisoning her: anger. Fury at seeing the Storyteller approved, rage at his resulting pleasure—he who could hide himself while preening in front of crowds while she was forced to hide herself in empty corners. Vivian finally arose from her farthest-back, farthest-aside chair. Even this victory brought with it a new guilt: the guilt of knowing that she would act not out of righteousness—not because she was Good—but simply because her fury burned hot enough at the moment to overcome fear’s perpetual paralyzing chill.

When Vivian arose from her chair, the Storyteller’s gaze flickered halfway toward her, then he announced, “That brings us to the end of the Campfire. I want to thank—”

I have a story to tell,” Vivian declared, and she made her way out of the audience to the front of the room.

The Storyteller glanced meaningfully at a pocket watch, backing away with the Telling Stick firmly in his hand. Vivian sat on the elm stump anyway, and cleared her dry throat in an unintended bit of showmanship. “I have a story to tell.” She had to clear her throat again; all the moisture in her body was beading up on her forehead. “I’ve been told that my story isn’t a children’s story. It’s frightening. It has a monster, children get hurt, and adults don’t help like they should. But I think that until the day comes that children can rely on grown-ups to always do what grown-ups are supposed to do, this story of mine *is* a children’s story.”

With this, Vivian held out her hand to the Storyteller, demanding the Telling Stick.

The Storyteller looked over the heads of the children sitting cross-legged on the floor at the front of the room and appealed with raised eyebrows to the seated adults.

The adults had all become very quiet at Vivian's announcement that she intended to tell a frightening story. Backlit by the light shining into the dark room through the hypocritical safety glass, they were a film noir jury: all silhouettes, no faces, their lack of separate identities emphasizing that they possessed that power of judgement that the uniform members of society always wield over the non-conforming. Their verdict on her: silence.

Vivian did not accept this judgement of the silence that silences. She had abandoned the safety of her anonymity in the audience out of a need to protect children, out of rage against those who would harm children, and even out of a desire to eventually become a teacher—but there was another reason as well: in her secret soul, Vivian also knew that she could not bear to leave her tale unspoken, because it was, after all, a very fine tale. She had laboured on her story of the demon and the children's songs for three days, and now she felt for her tale that love common to mothers and artists: the love that both takes pride in a supremely personal creation and yet cherishes it as something that now exists beyond the creator. Even when she was a child hurt so often by tales, she had never lost her love of stories—had always secretly yearned to be a storyteller. She had so many fine tales within her, and to leave them untold would be as terrible a sin as locking away one's children within a deep and dark place forever. And so, when her fellow adults rendered their verdict on her with their silence, Vivian appealed to her fellow children seated before her. Looking down at them with a trembling smile, she asked, "Cric?"

The children replied, "Crac," but after so many stories their reply was no more than dutiful and it further lacked strength because all the adults behind them remained silent.

Surprised, the children looked back at the grown-ups' shadowed faces and read a tale in their silence and stillness. One of the children elbowed a neighbour who had answered 'crac' and remonstrated, "She's not supposed to tell it!"

Beside Vivian, the Storyteller stood with his two fists stacked atop the Telling Stick and his chin atop the fists, eyes closed, lips fluttering in a snore.

"Cric," Vivian repeated.

Again the adults remained silent, and only two children replied "Crac," in voices as thin as angel hair.

Vivian asked one last time, "Cric?"

Silence.

"Crac!" someone shouted.

The shout knocked the Storyteller's head off his Telling Stick, startled the seated adults, and delighted the children. The children burst into laughter at the shout and joined in the fun, crying out, "Crac!" "Crac!" "Snap, crackle, pop!" "Cric, crac; tick, tock!" This last rhyme caught on as rhymes do, and the children launched into a singsong chorus of "Cric, crac; tick, tock; cric, crac; tick, tock...."

In the very farthest corner of the room, seated atop an overturned milk crate near a book display where the kohl-eyed Scheherazade knelt at the feet of the smiling sultan, was the woman who had shouted 'Crac.' Ayesha was sitting as she always did: alone and in pain, turtled down inside her Arctic Cat parka, her hands hidden inside its sleeves; but when the teachers and parents turned to stare over their chair backs at her, Ayesha raised her head high enough from within her coat to show them all that her lips were pursed into a bloodless blossom of resolve. She returned their glares defiantly until the adults finally turned away, back to Vivian.

Vivian set her hand upon the Telling Stick for the very first time, claiming it from the Storyteller's hand. He resisted a moment longer, then let it go. She set aside her papers so that they would not rattle in her shaking hands and told her story from memory: “Once upon a time, what happened *did* happen; and if it had not happened, you would never have heard this tale....”

Her story did the good that stories do. No more, no less.

Afterword: “The Storyteller”

To voice her dark suspicions in such a place of contentment would
be to rave like a street corner lunatic.

-- *The Storyteller*

The nascence of fiction often involves scattered life experiences that establish broad yet unfocused notions in the writer’s mind, where they may percolate and evolve for years until a specific event motivates the writer to finally set words to page. The first of the personal experiences that motivated “The Storyteller” surely occurred in that misty unformed time of my earliest years before narratives established the labyrinth walls of my view of the world. For example, I cannot remember my first dark forest, my first monster, my first fear, or my first heard story, yet these experiences surely inform “The Storyteller.”

Other foundation-stone experiences that informed the writing of “The Storyteller” do exist within the range of conscious memory. I remember that, as a child, I believed in the intrinsic benevolence of the social order and hence of teachers, for I believed that teachers were but one step below my parents in terms of safeguarding my welfare even at the cost of their own self-interest. In this assumption, I was not alone. I recall from schoolyard discussions that my fellow Northern Ontario grade-schoolers also believed that if a bear entered the school grounds—or if monster had entered the classroom—the teacher would protect us or meet their doom trying to do so. This, the world assured us through the narratives of television and movies

and comics and books and fairy tales, was why teachers were entrusted with children. So this we believed.

Some of the experiences that informed “The Storyteller” are more specific—and some are dissonant, in the way that certain of the experiences that motivate fiction almost certainly must be. I recall returning home from school and telling my mother of a troubling incident in which my grade three teacher had lost self-control and railed at the entire class over an issue of rather childish import (a mislaid pen). Being yelled at by a teacher bothered me, but even more worrisome was the discovery that an adult—and a guardian adult at that—could succumb to a tantrum. It puzzled and unnerved me. After listening to my story, my mother, a former teacher herself, gave me a piece of advice, “Some people choose to become teachers because they’re frightened of the adult world.” The eight-year-old boy that I was found this idea to be very striking; the adolescent that I became thought even more widely upon its implications as he encountered several problematical educators; as a psychology undergraduate, I dwelled upon this notion’s developmental underpinnings; as a fiction writer, I explored the topic in a variety of thematic guises; becoming a teacher, I found myself confronting this issue within the staffroom; and yet, for all of these decades of reflection upon the issue, by the time that I was an education graduate student, the notion still held gloomy corners waiting to be explored.

Finally, there came one very focused experience that served as the immediate catalyst of “The Storyteller.” I attended a professional storyteller’s workshop, one designed for educators. The storyteller concluded the workshop by telling the tale of how he became a storyteller. That story included multiple elements that seemed to me to indicate—even confess—that he possessed an inappropriate sexual attitude toward children. However, the rest of the audience of educators apparently discerned nothing in the story to dim their subsequent applause, cool their

effusive congratulations of the storyteller, or taint their ensuing laudatory discussions about the merits of the workshop.

So, I kept my mouth shut.

But I did write this story.

My composition of the “The Storyteller” reflects two dynamics: I wrote *a* story because I was a writer, and writers *express*; but I was moved to write *this* story because I was a writer, and writers *see*. This latter authorial ability, the capacity to discern and consider at length elements of human behaviour and of the environment that go unnoticed or unconsidered by most other people, is one of the hallmarks of artists. I believe that it was this writer’s habit of seeing—of well and truly *seeing*—that made me the only person in the storytelling workshop audience to derive the ominous interpretation of the storyteller’s tale. (Indeed, I believe that the storyteller had meant the dark and hidden import of his tale to be glimpsed—that it was a storyteller’s confession.) Much of my fiction, including all three of the novellas in this dissertation, contains an element of the individual who possesses some unusual form of perspicacity, but “The Storyteller” is unusual in the degree to which it explores the negative implications of such perspicacity.

As a story about the way that narratives order our perceptions and do so in competition with one another, “The Storyteller” is very much a postmodern story: a narrative about narrative (or, as I consider it, a self-aware story). Lyotard and the main characters of “The Storyteller” would agree: narrative contends, but narratives contend.

Furthermore, “The Storyteller” is a *Bildungsroman*, a story of the maturation of an individual, albeit one that focuses upon a key crisis of maturation rather than maturation as an extended process. Moreover, the story describes the maturation of an artist, positioning it within

that *Bildungsroman* subgenre known as the *Künstlerroman*. Similarly, the story describes the education of a character—indeed, the education of an educator—so it simultaneously belongs to another *Bildungsroman* subgenre, that of the *Erziehungsroman*.

As I discussed earlier, I have chosen to observe a high level of thematic ambiguity in my novellas, so I hesitate to speak at further length about “The Storyteller.” Yet, since the novella is also a NAR research document, I feel that generally locating the arena of its themes will serve as useful further expression of my ‘research puzzle’ (p. 124), to draw upon a term used by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). I have already touched upon my general topical motivations in composing this novella, but during the writing of the story, these general research foci evolved, intersected, and splintered, and the splinters proceeded to further evolve, intersect, and splinter—the whole process continuing onward throughout the composition process like the spreading of crystal lattice. By the point at which I considered the novella ready for sharing with readers, “The Storyteller” had touched upon quite a few topics either briefly or at some length, and believe that I can share a partial listing of these thematic nodes without compromising my chosen level of thematic ambiguity:

- Considerations of the use and effects of distress in the relationships between adult and child, artist and audience, teacher and learner.
- The asymmetry of dialectical relationships between adult and child, artist and audience, teacher and learner, therapist and patient, the healthy and unhealthy.
- Narrative as tool; narrative as weapon.
- The use of narrative in defining identity and self-defining identity.
- Epistemology and the narrative.
- The aesthetic demands of effective teaching.

- The self-aware story. The self-aware individual in a society of narratives. The self-aware character in a self-aware story. The non-self-aware individual in these contexts.
- The ambivalent ramifications of perspicacity, vis-à-vis the self and one's standing in society.
- Cassandra as cause.
- The nature and uses of passive ignorance versus wilful ignorance.
- Storytelling's ancient and pan-cultural roots, rules, and uses, positive and negative, commonly appreciated and not.
- The narrative as victimization; the narrative of the victim.
- People forbidden from having narratives of their own: immigrants, women, children.
- The problem of ugly themes, truth, and transformative power.
- The evolution of the fairy tale from sugar to make the medicine go down, into a sugary pastry. Implications for other narratives.
- Epistemological ethics. The guilt of knowing, when knowing must involve imagining; the revulsion against learning, when learning must involve imagining.
- Art and the id. The collective unconsciousness and art.
- The sinister side of the suspension of disbelief.
- The positives and negatives of teaching students to analyse public narratives and create narratives of their own.
- The symbolic belief as protective talisman.
- The culpability of logic; intuition as excuse.

The Wrong Breed of Dreamer

Every time an explorer finds a new world, someone's old world begins to die.

The high school history teacher who long ago taught me that particular lesson of history now point-blank denies ever saying such a thing, or so I've been informed by a *Wall Street Journal* reporter who tracked her down to a retirement home while fact-checking some background material my publicity people provided in advance of this interview. But that teacher said it. Said it, taught it, meant it. Knows she did. My memory's the last strong part of this old body of mine, and I remember that history lesson, I remember the history teacher, and I remember that when she announced to the class this wonderful, terrible truth, *Every time an explorer finds a new world, someone's old world begins to die*, that I instantly knew exactly which new world and which old world she had in mind, because she taught that lesson in a Northwest Territories classroom full of old world ghosts: aboriginal students—Inuit, Gwich'in, Métis—dressed in NHL jerseys and energy company ball caps. The irony is that these aboriginal phantoms called the Anglo woman who taught them about Leif Eriksson and Champlain and Alexander Mackenzie a ghost because of her pale skin. (They nicknamed me, the only Asian in our grade, 'Pissed-On Ghost.') But they're the ones who were the true ghosts, the half-visible refugees from an old world, human wreckage haunting the frozen fringes of a world whose society was itself about to give way to yet another new world. To *my* new world.

First thing I want clear: this interview, this story I'm about to tell you, this piece of history I want recorded right, is not a deathbed confession. I want this understood because any successful man inevitably has his share of jealous critics, and I have an entire legion of harping

little birds who accuse me of having lacked the vision to foresee how my business practices would transform the world—critics who claim that I suffered a businessman’s fixation on what the world *could* be that blinded me to the dream of what the world *should* be. Bullshit! Critics of that ilk have long sought to twist the import of my life’s work into something negative, and they’ll try to pervert this deathbed testimonial into some statement of regret to suit their benighted social agendas. People like them *have* to cite vanished or non-existent utopian worlds as arguments for their point of view, but the real world is my exhibit for the defence! That’s the difference between *their* breed of dreams and *my* breed of dreams, right there! Their dreams couldn’t really ever exist, while my breed of dreams... couldn’t stop... just can’t— I—

Wait... hang on. Can’t... gotta breathe. Recorder off! Doctor for.... Oxygen, yeah. Just a minute.....

Okay. Yeah, yeah, I’m okay now, damn it. I’ll keep calm. Is the recorder still on? It is? You taped me gasping for breath? Good for you, you cold motherless bastard.

Let’s start. I want to talk about a certain night. A night I’ve never discussed in public in my entire life. The night I first glimpsed the outlines of the next new world drawing near through the mists.

To understand my place in the old world on the eve of the new world, first try to visualize in your mind the world’s loneliest place. Don’t make the mistake of imagining a cramped prison cell, because even the lousiest third-world dungeon is only one key ‘n corridor from sunlight and people. No, the world’s loneliest place must so vast that a prisoner can wander free across the land without ever seeing another living soul, and dark enough that the sun never shines. To add

to the loneliness, scatter across this wasteland the relics of life: dark houses, silent towns, buried roads. Make it cold, god-cursed metal-cracking cold. There. Now you've designed either a lost civilization on the dark side of the moon, or the land of the dead, or an Arctic highway in the middle of winter.

I lived in this loneliest of all places, driving that Arctic highway. Just driving. On the night in question, I was four years free of the Northwest Territories high school that I had hated, yet I had gone absolutely nowhere—I still lived in the Territories, the same damn desolate land of tundra. That particular night was maybe my thousandth night driving a snowplough in an endless circuit along what passed for highways and roads in the Arctic Circle. A blizzard was blowing that night and I hadn't seen another human for hours as I worked my route through the wide white tundra. On my truck's radio, the pre-recorded CBC Christmas show being broadcast out of Inuvik paused at midnight and a living voice announced we had officially reached the winter solstice, the longest night of the year. This was an Arctic joke, right? The sun had set two weeks earlier and would not appear again until the next year, and the soul-sapping darkness of the long polar night hung on the land like a lead blanket. After announcing that the wind chill stood at minus fifty, the announcer ran out of things worth saying, and the broadcast reverted to canned strains of old yuletide carols sung by the dead.

Me, I could barely hear the radio anyway over the eternal boom-rumble of the plough blade bouncing on the highway, a ceaseless avalanche punctuated only by the occasional rifle crack of a stray piece of gravel kicking up through the snow against the blade. Ten hours of tending bar earlier that day had already exhausted me before I had even climbed into the cab of my GMC, and now six hours of staring out the windshield at the hypnotic tunnel of blowing snow and deserted Arctic highway had left me so desperate-tired that the ephedrine-laced cold

tablets we used to call ‘trucker’s speed’ had plain stopped working; my consciousness had retreated so far inside my head that I felt like I was this tiny pilot seated inside my skull, manning the controls of the clumsy body that in turn drove the big rig. Couldn’t stop, though. My plough blade had a faulty electrolift that continually sucked juice, ‘n sooner or later the strain was gonna stroke out my alternator and strand me in middle of the tundra out beyond cell range; so I drove plough all the hours that the Ministry of Transport would give me, risking my life in a race to afford the new plough-blade electrolift that would save me from freezing to death. Couldn’t stop. Couldn’t stop. I was twenty-two, and I wasn’t going to make it.

A little past midnight, I came to the farthest extent of my plough route, nipping at the verge of distant Inuvik’s isolated island of cell phone coverage; instantly, the cell phone clipped to my visor lit up with a text message from the Ministry of Transport: all roads closed due to the blizzard. I slammed on the brakes right there in the middle of the highway ‘n called the department dispatcher as fast as I could—took me three frantic tries to dial the number, because the numbness left behind by hours of gripping a vibrating steering wheel had made my fingers chimp-clumsy. Too late though: a recording announced that some other private plough owner-operator had already scooped the ‘emergency on call’ fee the Mounties offered to plough drivers to stand ready during road closures in case they needed to transit a buried road. Maudlin tired-drunk, I almost burst into tears at the unfairness of losing this fee simply ‘cause I was already out beyond cell range on the highway working my route. This was the pattern of my life up to this point: missing out on opportunities to get ahead in life because I was too hard at work. I yearned to slump over on the seat and sleep until the engine died silent and the falling snow buried the rig six soft feet deep; but falling asleep in the cold was a drunk’s death, so I slapped my cheeks until my ears were ringing then manoeuvred the rig around and headed home to get some work done.

After forty minutes of empty tundra, the highway entered the slim shelter of the stunted forest that grew in the vicinity of the Mackenzie River, and soon the beams of my blade-mounted halogens lit up a sign on the shoulder: *Forest's End Restaurant and Gas Bar, (Licensed) -- souvenirs, diesel, propane, showers, laundry*. This was my pub, my home. The sign, like the pub itself, was unlit, business hours having long ended and all electricity this far out being expensive, coming as it did from a generator. As my GMC's beams flashed across the knee-deep snow drifts of *Forest End's* front lot, I warily eyed my gas pumps for any sign that someone had been at the padlocks with a bolt-cutter, and it was then that I saw it, a sight as out of place in the Arctic as a three-masted schooner sailing up a river.

A Jaguar. Parked beside my gas pumps was a sleek silver sports car the like of which had no place in the Territories, none at all. See, performance sports cars rode too low for our gravel highways and snow drifts, right? And besides, nobody who could afford a Jag actually spent the winter in the Territories—they went south.

My first reaction? *Here come the Chinese*. At that time in history, mainland China was buying up natural resources all over the world, and they were eyeing investments in the Canadian north's oil and minerals. This had driven the locals into this 'The Chinese are coming!' frenzy of half-panic half-delight, because the economy was always flat, everyone just living for the hope of the another great boom like in the days of the Klondike Gold Rush and the Mackenzie Pipeline talks. My dad had been one of this kind of dreamers. He and my mother had come over from Taiwan and built *Forest's End* in the hopeful years when the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline was supposed to make the north into some kind of pristine Texas, but the environmentalists and the native groups plugged the pipeline with protests over the impact they claimed it would have on wildlife and aboriginal culture, leaving my father with a pub in the middle of nowhere, no

wife (Ma having fled back to Taipei), and a son who thought his dad was an idiot for daydreaming all day long in a land of month-long nights. *Forest's End* never did better than break even, in its best years. My dad finally hit upon a solution: for my high school graduation present, he drove me to a played-out gravel pit where they stored used construction equipment and he proudly presented me with a battered GMC snowplough, announcing that I could drive plough in my spare time to help make ends meet as I managed *Forest's End*, while he headed back across the ocean to set himself up as a consultant-translator for the Chinese banks and corporations that he was so certain were champing to do business in the Canadian north. ("It'll be a great thing," he promised me. "Everyone happy!")

Four years later, staring through the cracked windshield of that same GMC snowplough at that sleek Jaguar half-buried in the snow, I saw nothing but money and stupidity, and I instinctively figured that my father's Arctic-as-the-new-Texas line of consultancy bullshit had finally found a sweet spot in the imagination of some romantic Shanghai junior exec who'd hopped a plane to Vancouver and headed north in a ritzy airport rental. Shaking my head, I drove my plough around back to its Quonset garage, plugged in its block heater, dumped out the cut-down anti-freeze jug that served as my trucker's piss bottle, then high-stepped through the drifts back around front to check out the Jag. Figured I'd be spending the rest of the night working my rusty Mandarin hard as I explained to some betrayed 'n wounded exec that my dad had sold him a line of bullshit.

When I cleared the sheltering bulk of the pub's main building, the north wind flash-burned my cheeks despite my parka hood and woulda taken the legs right out from under me if I hadn't leaned into the blow by habit. The blizzard-blotted night was so dark that I had to find my way across my own damn parking lot using a flashlight. As I played the flashlight beam

across the Jag, I noticed that its black and yellow license plate had a smiling sun logo that I'd never seen before. I tapped at the plate with the toe of my ski-doo boot to knock off the snow, exposing a single word: Argentina.

Argentina, yeah bullshit. But the Jag's grill had no block heater plug, and its silver leaping-cat ornament and hood were streaked with the long green smears of bug hits. I admit that I kind of stood there staring and visualizing that: Argentina. I supposed I'd driven enough miles to make it from Argentina to the Arctic that winter, but only in the perpetual spaghetti loops of my plough route that actually went nowhere. *Someone's a travelling man*, I thought, *not just a driver like me.*

The Jag's sole occupant shouldered open the driver's door against a drift that had already risen as high as his window, then stepped out. At first, we kinda stood staring at each like two people from different planets, because I had on my heavy parka, boots, and padded three-fingered mitts, but he was unaccountably dressed for a Caribbean resort: a light sport coat over a tropical floral-print shirt, with white cotton beach pants gathered at the cuffs by drawstrings. My flashlight beam traveled upward from his sockless deck shoes all the way to his face, and I saw that he was deeply tanned—not just around-the-eyes wind-burned like me, but honest-to-god sun gold. The stranger tried to shout something at me over the blow, but I shook my head, *Can't hear you*, and waddled through the drifts to his door, where we stood with our heads together and slanted parallel against the howling wind.

Turned out the stranger wasn't Chinese or even Asian at all, for he had blue eyes, a thin face, and an oversized blonde-but-balding head that gave him the look of a teacher, a clergyman, or maybe an old time circuit judge. "I nearly ran out of gas," he shouted at me over the wind. "You people have only one gas station every hundred miles up here?" Argentine plates or not,

the driver's English had no accent I could detect, unless you counted Pissy as an official language. "Fill it up, *please!*"

"Why?" I shouted back at him. "What for?"

The traveler didn't know what to make of that. He stood there for a time, hopping from foot to foot in the drifts as snow leaked into his deck shoes. "Would do you mean, 'Why?' I need gas."

"What for? Your engine's dead, hoss." I slapped my mitten down on the Jag's hood. "It's minus fifty, and you let the motor stop. Can't do that up here. She's fucked-frozen now."

He pressed one palm over his windward ear as the cold started to work right through the thin flap of flesh. "Engine's been off less than an hour."

"Pop your car hood. Go on, open it."

He reached into the Jag and pulled a dash release, and I lifted the hood and shone my flashlight on his battery. The sides of the battery bulged outward around its brackets. "See that?" I shouted to him once he'd made his way around the front. "Frozen like a ice cube. Even you put jumper cables on her, battery'll just explode. Dead." I slammed the hood down. "C'mon inside."

"Can't. You arrived in that snowplough, right? I need transport north, up the highway to—"

But the rest of his words vanished behind me, carried off by the wind as I stomped off through the drifts toward my pub. Wasn't gonna stand in the wind freezing while he talked stupidity. Stupid fucker would have frozen to death in his car if I hadn't come back, 'cause he sure as hell couldn't have gotten into my pub: all the staff had gone home hours ago and the windows and doors were covered by grills heavy enough to ensure that any thieving prick who

tried hauling them off with a chain and snowmobile went home thirsty (if he didn't wreck his tranny and end up freezing to death on my doorstep). Anyway, I walked away from him to the pub door, expecting he'd follow me. It took me a minute with a squirt-bottle of de-icer to open the padlock of the front door's grill and near as long to thaw out the door's lock; when I finally had the door open, I glanced back expecting to find him huddled out of the wind close behind me, dancing foot-to-foot in his eagerness to be inside out of the cold, but instead I saw nothing in the darkness behind me except the slanting streaks of the blowing snow. I shone my flashlight into the night.

Beyond the pumps, beyond the Jag, a fresh set of footprints in the snow led off into the night in the direction of the highway. I stood there just staring at the tracks the way you'd stare at a perfect trail of footprints marching straight over a cliff's edge. The tracks vanished toward the highway northward, the direction that the traveler had said he wanted to go, but there was nothing on the highway to the north of *Forest's End* for twenty clicks. Dressed for warmer climes as he was, the Jag's driver wouldn't get even a single kilometre in the blizzard. Probably wouldn't even find his way back through the storm and the dark either, unless he turned around right quick. Hell, the howling wind was already smoothing his tracks away.

I turned my back on his fading footprints, went inside my pub, and slammed the door.

Now you gotta understand why I didn't chase after him: I've never had patience at all, at all, with people who turn up their noses at basic commonsense, daydreamers like my dad. That kind of dreamer seems romantic, but what I can't ever respect about them is that they actually rely on others to take care of them. I mean, a man climbing Everest without oxygen sounds brave and noble, unless you happen to be the suffering Sherpa who eventually has to carry that wheezing hero's camp stove and provisions up the mountain and then afterward lug that delirious

asshole back down again. I figured the traveler expected me to take a gander at his tracks, get all impressed about his mysterious resolve to head north along the buried highway, then hop in my snowplough and go after him; once he was in my truck cab, the Adventurer would flash a devil-may-care grin at his brand new sidekick and announce where I was to take him.

But me, I just went inside my pub and flipped the breaker that turned on the lights over the pumps, so that the stranger could find his way back through the night if he had the sense to turn back. Figured, *If he doesn't have the sense to turn around and come back, then fuck him: I got myself a new Jag.* That's the way of the world. In fact, after I had warmed up inside the pub, I even lugged a power cord and an old block heater out to the Jaguar to keep its engine block from freezing and cracking.

When I ducked into the Jag to pull the hood release so that I could install the block heater, I noticed more signs that the stranger's voyage truly had been a long one. In the passenger footwell was a nest of music CDs (symphonies by orchestras based in European capitals, but with labels in Spanish and Mexican). A digital camcorder was affixed to the dash by a professional-looking rig, its lens trained on the driver's seat. Curious, I pulled off my mitt with my teeth, tasting gas on the leather, and thumbed on the dashboard's GPS. The cold unit's screen flickered, then firmed up and resolved itself into a map of the Territories. The dotted line of the driver's intended track led from the Jag's present position northward along the highway toward what seemed to be his destination: Fort Frobisher, the next town, twenty clicks off. When I adjusted the GPS's zoom outward and the display screen's POV soared up into the virtual sky above the Territories, the solid plotted track of the route the stranger had already driven stretched southward down the Dempster Highway, through the Yukon, into British Columbia, and continued still southward. I zoomed outward until the GPS map encompassed

first all of Western Canada and then all of North America, but still the starting point of the stranger's trip remained out of frame to the south, the display's plotted track snaking down across the United States, through Central America, and still onward. Only when I had zoomed so far outward that the Earth became a sphere hanging in the blackness of outer space did the traveler's point of origin finally come into view: the very tip of South America at the other end of the planet, a place called *Tierra del Fuego*.

The display flickered and then faded black as the frozen battery died.

Fifteen minutes later, the traveler burst into the pub on the run, fleeing the lacerating cold of the blizzard as desperately as a man running before the flames of a forest fire. He worked the door handle with the insides of his wrists as people do when their hands had frozen numb, and his ears had gone grey 'n hard as freezer pork chops. His snazzy, ridiculously inappropriate beachwear was frosted white. Limping on feet he could no longer feel, he made his way to the end of the pub counter and dropped onto a stool before the soft orange glow of a portable heater. There he sat with his frozen hands squeezed between his thighs, hunched over and silent except for hisses of agony as his flesh thawed.

Me, I had doffed my winter clothes and was perched on my own stool behind the bar counter, sipping on a freshly brewed cup of coffee as I worked on the day's sales receipts. Sure I was curious about the stranger, but... but a person needs both drive and hope, the way a ship needs both a wind and a hoisted sail, and right at that moment I was dead-calmed. So I ignored him and kept sorting receipts into piles along the bar counter, tallying them on a laptop with two missing keys. I'd have loved to leave this bookkeeping job to the diabetic former trucker who

served as the pub's assistant manager, but the *Forest's End* stayed near break-even only via creative bookkeeping that I didn't dare trust to anyone who might one day get pissed off over hours or smoke breaks and decide to rat me out to the government.

Even while still sitting hunched over in the pain of the thaw, the traveler started in on me again. "I need to get northward along the highway," he announced. "Tonight."

"Where you need to get to so bad?" I asked without looking away from my laptop spreadsheet.

"North, to—" But he hesitated mid-sentence, then simply repeated, "North."

"Well, you made it then. Welcome." I stapled a stack of credit card receipts, tossed them into a storage envelope for Revenue Canada, and started working on a pile of cash-sale receipts that the government was never gonna see.

The traveler finally thawed enough to straighten up on his stool, and he eyed the pub's interior. *Forest's End* wasn't much more than the counter, a seating area for thirty tops, plus an attached souvenir shop. All lights were off but one, all chairs were up, everyone gone but me. He asked, "Any chance we can call a garage somewhere and have a new car battery delivered?"

"Come sunrise, sure."

The traveler checked his watch. "When's sunrise?"

"January." Before he could bitch at this tired Arctic Circle humour, I nodded an apology. "Yeah, yeah, okay, I'll put in a call for someone to run out a new battery come morning, but your Jag's just not going north along that highway, battery or not. Past here, the tree line ends and the tundra starts: the drifts on the highway'll be higher than your Jag's grill, and where there's no drifts the gravel humps'll tear out your underside." I jerked my chin toward one of the booths. "Go ahead and catch some sleep."

“Sleep,” the traveller echoed as he eased off his stool, hissing as his tingling feet took his weight. “I’ve got miles to go before I sleep.”

‘*Miles to go before I sleep....*’ I recognized the quote from high school English: *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, by Robert Frost. I remembered that particular poem because it had cost me a punishment: well-prepared for an English exam but exhausted from pumping gas and hawking souvenirs and mopping floors at *Forest’s End*, I cited the poem’s title correctly but ascribed its authorship to ‘Jack Frost.’ Ninety-nine percent on the exam. Unacceptable. My father gave me a Confucian lecture on the value of relentless study and hard work, then he made me memorize that poem. Throughout the years whenever I raged at him for the way we worked ourselves ragged yet still pocketed less than the local dole jockeys, he would order me to stand and recite that poem, from its beginning: ‘*Whose woods these are I think I know...*’ to its end ‘*But I have promises to keep, And miles to go before I sleep, And miles to go before I sleep....*’

The stranger made his way along the bar counter and sat on a stool directly opposite me as I input receipt figures into a laptop spreadsheet. “The town of Fort Frobisher—that isn’t too, too far away, is it?”

“It’s on the moon, hoss,” I declared without pausing in my paperwork. “Frobisher’s along a deserted highway, off an unmarked side road leading into the bush along the Mackenzie River, down some dirt tracks nobody’s ever going to bother mapping for GPS. All roads buried, all road signs caked by flying snow.”

“But you have that snowplough, right?” With this, the stranger slapped a yankee hundred-dollar bill down on the counter right in the middle of my sorted sales receipts. And smiled. And Jesus, that man couldn’t fake a smile—he was just all cold blue eyes, with the lower leather of his tanned face creasing into this slit flap. I don’t much care if people fake

smiles—that's the world, right?—but if you fake your smile that badly, you're telling someone, *You're too stupid to see through me*, or worse, *You're too low on the totem pole to call me on my bullshit*.

I kinda sat there, staring at that lousy smile and at the hundred-dollar bill laying in the middle of my disturbed piles of sales receipts. “Sir, what the fuck's your name?”

He hesitated to answer. Actually hesitated.

That should've given me the creeps, me being in the middle of nowhere with a stranger unwilling to give his name and eager to keep traveling, but I was too brittle-ornery from lack of sleep and caffeine to care. “I'm Calgary Zheng,” I told him. “‘Calgary,’ yeah, that's my real name; back in the day, my dad had a thing for the Alberta oil-patch *zeitgeist*. Listen to what I'm about to tell you.” I leaned back from the counter so that the single light dangling over the bar shone full on my haggard face and my blood-seamed eyeballs. “I worked the bar in this place all day, then I drove my plough six hours, and now I have to finish these receipts. After that, I have a business case study to finish for an online commerce degree I'm two semesters behind on. Then I'm gonna get maybe four hours sleep. Probably only three hours. After that, I'm gonna jump up and get my ass back to work.” I flicked his hundred-dollar bill off my counter. “No, whoever the fuck you are, I'm not driving you anywhere.”

Balked for the moment, the stranger picked up his money, then limped away to pace a circuit of the dining area and the adjacent souvenir shop. I returned to my receipts and spreadsheet, listening to his slow footsteps—listening to him thinking, thinking. When the creaking paused, I glanced over. He was standing was in the dim gift shop fingering this fake souvenir, a native dream-catcher. If you've never seen a dream-catcher (and these days you probably haven't, though they used to be pretty popular with a certain kind of dreamer who were

called ‘New Age’ an age or two ago), a dream-catcher is this hoop frame of willow branches crisscrossed with sinews in a spider web design, with eagle feathers and beads, that sort of thing. Of course, the kind I stocked were made with plastic branches, nylon kite-string, glass beads, neon-dyed chicken feathers—made-in-China stuff, no word of a joke. The traveler, he was turning one of these mass-produced dream-catchers around and around in one hand staring into the spider web like the thing actually did have some magic in it. Finally he came to a decision; I could see that the way he replaced the dream-catcher on its rack really gently, as though whatever future he’d seen in its centre had crystallized into a pane of glass he didn’t want to break.

“You work four jobs, do you?” the stranger mused aloud as he returned to the counter.

“We both have something the other needs, then.”

“How’s that?”

“You asked me my name. Here’s my name.” The stranger slapped something down on the counter in front of me: a pill bottle with a bright blue lid. He turned the bottle around so that I could read the label: *Henry Drake. BioLogic Pharmaceuticals Inc. SP-3.63n. FDA NON-CERTIFIED.*

And that was how I first learned Henry Drake’s name: off a bottle of SP-3. That’s something for the history books.

“You’ll want to look me up on the net,” Drake suggested. “It’ll be faster.” With this, he paced off on another slow circuit of the pub to give me privacy as I searched for him online.

I minimized my spreadsheet, logged onto the internet through a satellite connection, and searched for the name ‘Henry Drake.’ Found him instantly because the search engine’s algorithm prioritized all the “Henry Drakes” of the world based upon frequency of mention and

number of cross-references from other pages and other esoteric measures of, well, impact on the world. Even at that point in history, Henry Drake ranked right at the top of one million hits: I clicked on the first hit in the list, a week-old edition of the *Wall Street Journal*, and there he was.

The article began with a panoramic photograph: an unlit pharmaceutical laboratory occupying an entire upper-level floor of a skyscraper. Beyond the windows glimmered the vista of a city's nightscape, office building after office building with darkened windows. In the foreground, Henry Drake stood alone in a lab coat amidst blue-shimmering laboratory equipment—the only man awake in all the sleeping city it seemed—his arms crossed in confidence, in impatience. The title of the article labelled him: *A Pioneer in the Night*.

Phoenix, Ariz. December 15. When BioLogic Pharmaceuticals Inc. priced its initial public offering last week, the jaded Nasdaq community responded with a collective gasp followed by more than a few snickers. Arizona-based BioLogic announced that its IPO will be 8,000,000 shares priced at a startlingly high \$25.50 per share, unprecedented for a start-up pharmaceutical company. Naysayers in the investment community accused BioLogic of cynically pricing itself unreasonably high to create a controversy, in the hopes that it can transmute the resulting high public profile into a lingering high public perception of value. But founder, lead researcher, and chief executive officer Dr. Henry Drake defends the IPO share price by citing what he terms the “world-changing” potential of BioLogic’s primary product, a “wakefulness promoting agent” (as opposed to a more-familiar “stimulant” product like a caffeine pill). This agent, code-named SP-3 during development, evolved from Dr. Drake’s pioneering genetic studies of people who inherently never need more than four hours sleep.

Contacted by phone in South America where he is traveling, Dr. Drake notes that BioLogic will hold an informational investors conference in the ski resort town of Banff, Alberta, in advance of the IPO, “We’re asking absolutely nobody to invest on faith. We in BioLogic are that confident that SP-3 will give the investment community many a sleepless night.”

I pushed my laptop and receipts aside, then turned around the bottle of SP-3 so that I could peer through its translucent rear side. Inside the bottle were capsules that gleamed bright orange in the light of the single overhead fixture. Golden dragon eggs, that’s how I thought of them right from that start.

“This medicine, SP-3, it really works?” I asked. “It helps keep people awake?”

On the other side of the pub counter, Drake nodded. No fake smiles now. “I drove here from Argentina, from the bottom of the world to the top, in only thirteen days.”

“Thirteen days?” My tired brain struggled with the mathematics of the feat. “How many hours you sleep during the trip?”

“Calgary, I haven’t slept in four years.”

I don’t quite remember what I physically did when he told me this (seems to me I stood up from my stool), but I remember that this revelation suddenly gave me a vision of Drake behind the steering wheel of his Jaguar, the camcorder mounted on his dashboard recording a time-lapse montage of day changing into night over and over again as he drove ever onward. I studied his face for any hint of a lie, but his red-rimmed, ice-blue eyes were steady.

Drake eventually nodded my attention away from him back toward the pill bottle on the counter, then he unscrewed its lid. “Seems to me that a man working four jobs could appreciate

a cure for sleep.” He slid the open bottle over to my side of the bar counter. “Go ahead. Try one.”

But I backed away from the counter. “‘First one free?’ Dude, don’t give me that line; remember, you’re talking to a fellow drug-pusher.” I ran a fingernail along a colourful row of singing liquor bottles that glimmered on a glass shelf behind me like so many genie lamps.

“But SP-3 is the anti-liquor, Calgary,” Drake insisted. “Liquor makes you stupid, ruins your clarity, erases your days; but SP-3 keeps you sharp, keeps you focused, every minute of your life. ‘Spree,’ we’ve nicknamed it. With Spree, you’ll be smarter, you’ll live two hundred-and-fifty years, and you’ll become wealthy.”

“Oh yeah. Good as ginseng, is it.”

“‘Ginseng Gold!’” Drake smiled and nodded. “There’s a name I’ll have to remember for the Asian market.” Drake took the pill bottle for himself, closed his eyes like he was about to pray, then dry-swallowed one of the dragon eggs. Kept his eyes closed afterward too, diving deep into his memory. “The first time I took Spree, it didn’t just keep me awake: it awoke me. I realized that sleep doesn’t just blank out your night, it fogs your mornings and dims your evenings. Right now people live at their mental peak only a third of the day, wasting another third of their life with sleep’s death and compromising the remaining third of their life with fatigue. But Spree keeps you sharp all twenty-four hours, and that triples your peak productive life, functionally allowing you to live as many useful hours as a person who lives a quarter millennium.” Drake opened his eyes again, then placed the pill bottle back on the counter right in front of me.

I eyed those golden dragon eggs as I wiped my damp palms on the front of my jeans. “You didn’t answer my question. Is Spree addictive?”

“Depends on your viewpoint. Do you believe in lifestyle addictions?”

“Hell yeah. My dad’s addicted to hard work and bullshit hope: to this day, if I call him to ask about his health and happiness, he answers by telling me how many hours he works for peanuts and how his treasure ship’s just about to come in. Can’t help himself.”

“Then the answer is yes: Spree is very addictive. Success always is.” He kind of canted his head, all inquisitive. “Would you like to be successful, Calgary?”

“All I need’s a chance. Don’t judge me by this dump; anyone but me would’ve been tits-up long ago. But one pill doesn’t get me anywhere.”

“Are we negotiating, now?”

“Like you said, we both have something the other needs. You need to travel north up the highway, and I need to get on the road to *somewhere*.”

Drake chuckled, a dry sound. “Maybe I could find you a place at BioLogic.”

In the ensuing silence, the north wind howled just outside my door.

“I’m listening.”

“We offer Arizona weather, great wages, stock options,” said Drake. “Best of all, you’ll have a supply of Spree years before it clears FDA trials. Would you like that? To steal a march on the new world?”

That was the very first time I heard that phrase used in connection with SP-3, *the new world*. Liked it. “You must need my help pretty fucking bad. What’s waiting for you up the highway?”

“A friend.” Drake took a small squeeze bottle out of an inner pocket, raised his face to heaven, and squeezed a couple of artificial tears into his red-rimmed eyes. “My trip up from Argentina was a media stunt meant to end at an investors conference in Banff, with me still clad

in my tropical clothes triumphally dismounting my Jag in the snowy parking lot of a ski resort—the world-conqueror. But around the time I was crossing Wyoming, I received news that a colleague who lives in this region was ailing.”

“Quite the detour, shooting past Banff for the Territories. Your friend must be damn sick.”

“He’s dying.” Drake blinked to distribute the eye drops and then touched a sleeve to the artificial tears that leaked from the outer corners of his eyes. “The rest of the story is a trade secret. Employees only.”

As I stared at the waiting bottle of SP-3, my stomach fluttered with the paradoxical nausea and hunger of gambler’s fear. Though I hated the north and hated the way my father had tethered me to his failed dream of a pub, I had never possessed the courage to cut loose and head south into the unknown. But though the unknown future is frightening to approach when it’s a phantom in the mists, the unknown future is goddamned hard to resist when it takes the form of a golden pill shining just inches away from your hand. I popped one of the golden dragon eggs into my mouth and washed it down with a swallow of black coffee. “So am I hired?”

“You’re on probation. Grab your plough keys and let’s go fight for our future.”

Drake and I drove north together through two frontiers. As Spree took effect, my fatigue fell away and became something so unreal that it required an active effort of faith to recall that I had ever known such a melting state of mind as exhaustion. Outer reality became slate-sharp, its edgy grain snagging at my attention: my truck’s diesel engine sounded like a swarm of hammers trapped inside a metal hive, every rattle demanding my notice; the rumble of the plough blade on

the rough highway threatened to shake the truck apart; the blizzard-swept road ahead was a quartz tunnel blasted through the night by the halogen lights, the snowflakes falling chips of mica, all and each such shining flake drawing my eyes. Drake (now properly dressed in winter boots, ski-pants, and a khaki parka I'd scrounged for him) was sitting to my side hidden in the cab's darkness; yet, simultaneously, he existed as a reflection floating in the night before me just outside my windshield, a hologram coloured the electric azure of the dash lights. This doppelganger stared through the windshield at me as it floated in the mesmerizing centre of the star-tunnel of onrushing flakes.

"I can't think," I warned Drake, staring sideward out the windshield through only one eye. "I mean: I can't *stop* thinking."

"Why would you ever want to?" murmured Drake's hologram doppelganger. "Focus. Just focus. Spree heightens your alertness, so you'll have to learn to ignore what's not important to your goals and invest all of your attention on what is. It's a vital skill. Always has been."

I obediently set about triaging the details of reality, and decided that I needed to remove the thunder of the plough blade on the highway foremost. My plough blade's illuminated control pad was four disembodied arrows glowing in the darkness like the Flying Dutchman's compass; I briefly thumbed the 'north' arrow, and the plough blade rose just slightly above the rough surface of the gravel highway, leaving the blade's lower edge passing through nothing but the newly fallen snow. The blade's rumble-barrage instantly transformed into the smooth hiss of a razor sighing through silk. I focused on this sound, and the sweet silken hiss dissolved all other distractions, leaving me as serene as a glider pilot sailing through white clouds.

Smiling at this smooth silence, the holo-doppelganger of Drake floating beyond the windshield peered speculatively at me. "Are you cold?"

“No. Or yes. I’m not chilled, but I notice an absence of warmth.” I leaned forward over the steering wheel and peered up through the top of the windshield at the night sky. “And something inside me says it’s noon and that any moment the clouds will stop blocking the sun. I feel... mischievous. Alone in a time-stopped world. Like I could walk into any bank and shovel up the money, nobody around to stop me.”

Drake’s reflection sprouted shadow-whisker smile lines. “I love that sensation of freedom. Frontier freedom. As though I could travel in any direction forever and never see another person.”

“Yeah, that’s it. I’ve driven for years, but I’ve never gone farther than five hours in any direction.” My thumbs drummed an eager tattoo on the wheel. “I’ve always dreamed of travelling, really travelling.”

“‘Always dreamed...,’” Drake mused, and the shadow-whiskers of his smile curved downward into the shadow-scars of a frown. He leaned forward to better examine my reflection in the windshield, his own windshield doppelganger drawing nearer to its side of the windshield directly in front of me, ominously gaining clarity. “There’s something you should understand early and well, Calgary. English, and our Western culture, conflates two very, very different concepts within a single word: ‘dream.’ The sleeping dream is merely a hallucination, nothing more than unfocused neural static, but our perverse language applies the same word ‘dream’ to the conscious mind’s crown jewel: a vision. An ambition. ‘My dream is to be a scientist and discover a new medicine’—that. Mark my words, when Spree remakes the world, the timid sleepers who choose to stay behind shall say to the bold pioneers who have awoken forever, ‘You have no dreams.’”

“I know those kind of people, Boss,” I assured him. “I was sweeping floors in my dad’s

pub before I was tall as a broom, and there was always a certain breed of kid who teased me for working while they played make-believe games in the forest, the kind of kids grew up into the people who laugh when I mop their puke off my pub floor. And I tell ‘em, ‘You keep joking, have another drink; pay me and you can puke all you want.’ And you know what they do? They lecture me! ‘Hey buddy, take time to smell the roses.... *Domo arigato*, Mister Roboto.... All work and no play....’” The memory had me seething, but SP-3 made my rage the cold-blue cutting flame of a properly focused acetylene torch. “Those are the ones who whine about me not letting people run tabs at my pub. But that’s my motto, right there.” I pointed out a plaque mounted on the passenger-side corner of my truck’s windshield: *No riders*. Worried that Drake might misinterpret the sign, I assured him, “You don’t have to worry about that though, Boss; it’s just a message for drunks who think I’m a charity taxi.”

“I understand. I approve.” Drake’s windshield reflection turned into profile as he stared out the passenger-side window at the passing tundra. “Do you know a local man named Thomas Larocque?”

“Larocque? Hell no, around here that’d be a Métis name, and I— How do you know him?”

“We were doctoral research colleagues in UBC’s Pharmacology program.”

“A native doctor? That’s something. I started high school with about twenty aboriginal freshmen in my year, but there were only about four left by the time I was giving my valedictorian speech. This Larocque, he your friend? The ailing friend we’re going to see in Fort Frobisher?”

“He’s the one.”

“That’s a shame, him dying,” I said cautiously. “What’s his problem? What’s he sick

with?”

Drake thought about this a bit as he took out his little bottle of drops and squeezed more artificial tears into his dry eyes. Finally, he said simply, “He’s the wrong breed of dreamer.”

We drove into Fort Frobisher not long afterward, if time could be said to have any meaning to sleepless men in a never-ending night. A traveller stumbling on Fort Frobisher by chance would have thought he’d come upon a ghost town. The tumble-down remains of saloons and cabins from a gold rush era haunted the outskirts of town like a collapsed log palisade. Even the relatively more modern homes closer to the centre of town had gone dark row-on-row, their last inhabitants lured away to Inuvik years ago by the promise of jobs, modern schools, doctors, and government services. When we reached the town’s main street, I turned off the truck’s lights and let the night flow into the cab so that we could better see out the frosted windows. In all the town, nothing moved except for the falling snow and a single *pro forma* traffic lamp that swayed in the north wind like a storm lantern on a mast. As the traffic lamp teetered one direction, its perpetually amber radiance touched a corroded Canada Dry sign mounted on a supermarket the size of a convenience store; when the traffic lamp swayed back in the other direction, its glow revealed a community centre façade boarded over with greying sheets of chipboard.

“A town of the dead,” Drake whispered in the darkness of the cab. “But I’d say the same if you and I were driving through any city at night. Night isn’t a time, it’s a place—a whole world barely explored and never settled.” He eyed a nearby row of homes with smoke curling from chimneys but otherwise dark and still. “Look at the waste. Look at all the hours dying around us. We have to crack open these mausoleums, Calgary; we have to bring all the sleepers

to life.” With this, he searched through the inner pockets of the sport coat he still wore underneath his parka, withdrew a document, and used the glow of the cab’s cigarette lighter to read an address off the document’s header. “The address we’re looking for is... Thomas Larocque, 12 Raven Road, Fort Frobisher, NWT.” Before the lighter’s glow faded dark, I snuck a sideward glance at the paper and glimpsed the official typed form of a legal document:

THOMAS LAROCQUE, Plaintiff, V. BIOLOGIC PHARMACEUTICALS INC., Defendant.

Before I could see anything more, Drake refolded the lawsuit notice and tucked it away. “Did you get that?”

“Twelve Raven Road, you got it Boss.”

We had to hunt a bit for Raven Road, most of the town’s street signs either caked with snow or shotgunned to shit, but I finally spotted a signpost on which some local smartass had nailed a raven wing. Raven Road was another row of identical pre-fab houses so run-down that none of them seemed to have visible house numbers, but one of them stood out. That particular house was surrounded by several trucks and a half dozen snowmobiles parked half-assed in the yard. One Polaris even had the front tips of its ski blades sticking through the lattice skirt that covered the gap between the permafrost and the raised house’s underside, as if its rider had arrived at the house had in such a hurry that he’d hopped off his sled even before the snowmobile had come to a complete halt, just letting the thing smash into the house.

Drake peered through the passenger window at that house’s modest junk yard and declared, “That’ll be Tom’s place.” He zipped up his parka. “Let’s go.”

The frigid air briefly paralyzed our lungs as we dismounted the cab, leaving us gasping. I found myself discomfited by this familiar cold like never before: *People shouldn’t live in a place this hostile*, I thought. *If they do, they have to bear some blame for the cold.* As we

approached the house, we saw that the snowmobiles and even the porch stairs were covered by a deep layer of snow, as though people had entered a couple days earlier and never come out again. When Drake mounted the stairs and pushed on the porch door, it opened with the *whoosh* of a weather seal. Unlocked. This demonstration of small town trust didn't surprise me none, but Drake yanked his scarf below his mouth and declared, "You see that? See it? Stupid and lazy."

I nodded and followed him inside.

The house had a populated decay about it. The porch we entered into first was buried in scattered boots and parkas fallen off wall hooks. On the wall beside the inner door, pink insulation protruded where someone had idly chopped a star-gouge into the wall with a hatchet, apparently for no other reason than to make a design. Just bored. We paused to listen for signs of life within the house, but the north wind was rattling the porch windows' cold-stiffened plastic weather sheeting like snare drums. Drake eased open the door leading from the porch into the house, and the stink of rotting garbage wafted out—that, and a strange hiss. We pushed back our hoods to better listen. The odd hiss was a rhythmic susurrations that rose and became almost loud enough to be identified, then descended once again into near silence. Drake must've recognized the sound, because he beckoned me forward impatiently and boldly entered the house.

Inside the house, electronic snow from a blank television screen frosted a landscape of bodies. These motionless bodies lay curled on sofas and stretched along pushed-together kitchen chairs; other bodies even covered the floor, separated from the burning-cold linoleum of the kitchen tiles by snowmobile cushions or old sleeping bags. Me, I saw those bodies and the first thing I thought of was the Jonestown Massacre. All the bodies were covered by blankets and dressed in several layers of clothes beneath that. I couldn't count the tangled bodies—may have

been two dozen. The majority of them were native (hard to tell in the dark), but they were all young and all asleep, the mysterious susurrations being the sound of their collective breathing and snoring. Absolutely every one of them wore something over their eyes, a toque or baseball cap pulled low or a scarf wrapped high around the face, as though they were all determined not to be awakened by January's distant sunrise.

Standing amidst the bodies, Drake whispered to me, "Do you understand what you're looking at?"

"I do, but you don't." I dabbed my mitt around my face and nodded at the sleepers to call his attention to their faces. Goatees of scabs surrounded their noses and mouths, making the youthful sleepers appear old and diseased. "You get those sores from holding bags of gasoline over your face. You know, to sniff yourself high, 'cause there's fuck-all else to do. We got the wrong house, Boss; this is just a sniffers' dive."

"Is it?" Drake wondered out loud, then made his way with high, slow steps across the body-covered floor. I followed. We continued through the kitchen, where a framed Virgin Mary smiled cherry-mouthed and flour-skinned on a counter heaped with both plates of half-finished caribou meat and the burst blossoms of microwave popcorn bags. To my surprise, however, no beer cans littered the tables, no trophy bottles of liquor lined the window ledges, and I smelled no gasoline. Yet, all the sleepers slept like the dead drunk or the stoned. Following Drake into a dark living room, I accidentally stepped on a denim leg with my clumsy ski-doo boot, and when I recoiled from the sensation of flesh underfoot, my elbow brushed a Canucks cap off a sleeping face. Neither sleeper awoke, or even stirred.

"All around us," Drake whispered to me. "See?"

All around us—this stiffened the hairs on the back of my neck. Raising my eyes from the

chore of tiptoeing around the bodies, I eyed the shadowy fringes of the room.

The walls around us were completely covered in, well, journeys. Pictures by the dozens—or hundreds maybe—rendered by artists of every conceivable skill level using everything from oil paint on canvas to pencil crayon scribbled on lined note paper. Many of these pictures featured aboriginal imagery familiar to me—the northern countryside; natives in heavy furs; anthropomorphic animal spirits—rendered in a traditional style of two-dimensional forms flowing in colourful pool-loops. Yet, many of the pictures also showed the encroachment of wide-flung influences: a traditional hunter with harpoon in hand was rendered in Japanese manga style, bounding ninja-style across the tips of pine trees toward a distant pagoda citadel of snow blocks; across a frozen sea meandered an ice road composed of sheet music’s five-lined staff, with fishing holes for clef notes, the road vanishing toward a horizon from behind which rose a breaching whale of rippling sound waves. Standing there, I noticed that all the pictures, both traditional and cosmopolitan, shared a common idea: the journey. A flock of geese soared over a forest of pyramids toward a split mountain standing upon the horizon; animistic spirits paddled downriver in a canoe crafted from an overturned and hollowed-out truck, toward a waterfall that rose up into the sky; a crowd of prismatic teens wearing crosses walked free of the land toward the gateway of a sun. Now that I think about it here on my deathbed, those pictures actually shared *two* commonalities: the journey, and the journey’s sublime vanishing point.

“This is the place,” Drake declared with conviction as his eyes roamed the landscape of journeys. “Tom’s here somewhere.” He glanced down an adjoining hallway. “There.”

The hallway’s walls were also covered by pictures, but these images were the work of a single artist—the journeys all undertaken within the landscapes of a single mind. These images were painted directly onto the bare walls, a contiguous mural that began with the familiar images

of spirits and the land. But as the mural progressed farther along the hallway, its imagery evolved into motifs ever less familiar—ever more complex. A medicine man became a staring medicine man with a herd of caribou stampeding from his left eye became a true herd of caribou migrating across a landscape whose rivers and lakes and forests suggested a medicine man's mouth and eyes and hair. A brooding hunter walking beneath a flying raven became a fleet runner with a raven on his shoulder became a giant raven with a man clutched in its talons became a black-hued egg with a foetal spirit yolk became a fissuring black sun that leaked sunlight.... By the time the mural drew near the end of the corridor, it had completely evolved away from decipherable images, becoming abstract shapes and stylized symbols and strange textures that I can't describe in words except to say this: the elements of the mural seemed to both suggest familiar forms and devolve into these familiar forms as they existed within the mind. The decoded, revealed to the puzzled eye.

Drake and I found ourselves creeping down this corridor of long dreams without either of us exactly making a decision to enter that hall at all. As we did, I noticed that the paint of the wall mural was differentially aged, the initial imagery discernibly months—or perhaps years—more faded than the images further along the corridor. Older. The mural had been created little by little, night after night perhaps, lengthening along the walls toward the corridor's end.

At the end of the corridor waited a single door, and on the door hung a drum of fawn caribou skin and sinew.

"That's him," Drake declared when he saw the drum. "He'll be in there."

We passed through the door of the medicine man drum.

Within the bedroom beyond lay Thomas Larocque, dreaming alone. A streetlamp outside the house cast racing blizzard shadows through the bedroom's plastic-covered window onto the

bed, so that the room's solitary sleeper seemed to slumber immersed in a swift-flowing current. A single flannel blanket covered Tom Larocque's gaunt body, and though no gas-sniffing scabs marred Larocque's skin, the bones of his face jutted sharply and the curling tips of his wispy black moustache didn't quite touch the skin at the bottom of his deeply sunken cheeks. His eyes were covered by a blindfold of caribou hide adorned with a beadwork emblem of either a mid-summer sun or a single staring eye of many concentric pupils.

I carefully eased the bedroom door shut so that the sleepers in the rest of the house would not hear me, then I asked Drake, "Is he dead...?"

"I'd say so."

I stared at Larocque's face. "He's still breathing."

"What does that prove?" Drake muttered. "Come look at this."

Along one side of the room stood a narrow Inuit feasting sideboard supporting an incongruous collection. There were art pieces such as sculptures of whale bone and shells, pendants of caribou horn, soapstone carvings—so many and so varied that they seemed to me to be a collection of offerings. But intermingled with these traditional gifts were laboratory implements: Pyrex beakers, a digital weighing scale, graduated measuring cylinders, an orbital agitator (although I didn't know what an orbital agitator was at the time). In the centre of the sideboard rested a soapstone bowl carved in the image of a raven's nest, and inside this nest were small cones of tin foil. Drake used a glass stir stick from the lab clutter to poke open one of these tin foil cones, exposing its contents: a chalky substance half-solid and half-powder in the way of ancient bone.

"Do you know what this is?" he whispered to me. "A homebrew version of Spree."

I bent over the soapstone bowl and examined the contents of the tin foil dose-packets: the

recondite material inside the tin-foil cones looked nothing at all like the golden dragon eggs.

“How does this guy Larocque know the Spree formula?”

“Tom and I pioneered the original form of Spree during our graduate days together at UBC, back before he decided to drop out of the world.” Drake drew the stir stick xylophone-style along a row of drinking glasses perched on the feasting sideboard, their sides still bearing dried traces of the chalky substance. There were twenty or so of these glasses, one for every sleeper in number twelve Raven Road. “Everyone in this house is a Spree addict.”

“Spree addicts?” I studied Larocque’s sleeping face. “If they’re on Spree, why aren’t they awake?”

“Spree affects natives differently. They have a different balance of digestive enzymes, did you know that?”

“Yeah, I do. That’s why liquor hits them so hard: they can’t metabolize as much of the alcohol before it enters the bloodstream. Some protestors told me that.”

“Same syndrome with Spree. Natives overdose easily, and a Spree overdose puts a person into a deep sleep, as much as twenty-three hours a day.”

“But how can you get addicted to sleep? That’s... that’s a living death.”

“You and I agree.” Drake carefully unfastened the rawhide fastenings of Larocque’s beadwork blindfold and removed it to uncover Larocque’s eyes. The sleeper’s closed eyelids were twitching with dreams. “With a Spree overdose, a sleeper dwells in the REM stage nearly all night, and when he awakes, he remembers everything he saw. Tom isn’t addicted to sleep: he’s addicted to dreams.”

Fascinated, I bent over the bed and stared at Larocque’s trembling lids, yearning to peer through them into the visions beneath. Like everyone else, I’ve had dreams so grand that

awakening sent me into grief at the poverty of reality's grey day. Any of us awakening from such a dream to find a bowl of Larocque's sleep drug on our night table might risk an addiction to sink back into our dream of a green land, a golden mountain, a loving God, a good war....

"It would be interesting to try," I confessed to Drake.

"Yes, Tom often urged me to try dreaming the way he does—it's just a matter of dosage, really—but I have too many plans for my life to risk a dream addiction. Too many miles to go before I sleep." Drake knelt on one knee to better examine Larocque's face, unconsciously adopting the stance of a death-bed vigil observer. "Dream addicts like Tom get one hour of wakefulness a day, and they don't use it to buy food or care for themselves; they spend their hour telling someone—anyone—about their nonsense dream journeys. I remember trying to jab spoonfuls of stew into Tom's mouth while he jabbered on and on about talking animals and strange countries. All the pictures on the walls are hunters' trophies brought back from the land of dreams—proof of life, in a way. Have you noticed the roof?"

I tore my attention away from the gaunt figure on the bed and looked to the ceiling. Floating serenely in the high shadows of the room, safely above the harsh glare of the streetlight shining through the plastic-smothered window, was a slowly twirling forest of dream-catchers. A hundred of them or more. Not dream-catchers like the neon plastic tambourines of my souvenir shop: true dream-catchers with hoops of green-scented willow branches, webbing of caribou sinews, and feathers that truly had come from a flying wing.

The bed springs squeaked. I jumped back with a twitch of alarm, then saw that Drake was shaking Larocque by the shoulder. "Tom. Tom, it's me. It's—"

I seized Drake by the wrist, squeezing as hard as I could, trying to grind his bones to splinters. "What are you *doing*?"

“Trying to wake him up so I can talk with him. What are *you* doing?”

“Trying to stay alive! You ever try taking a drink away from an addict? I could tell you stories and show you scars. This guy will fight like hell to keep himself wrapped in the good times, and his screams will bring all those other sleepers on the run to save the town dream-dealer. For a drug-pusher and a businessman, you sure don’t understand people like you should.”

“I’m more of a researcher by trade.” Drake tore his wrist out of my grip. “And you get out of the habit of calling me a drug-pusher, right now.”

“You got it, Boss. Mea culpa.” I stared through the closed bedroom door for a time, listening for any sign that the commotion had awakened the sleepers beyond. Didn’t know what I’d do if it did. Dive out the window maybe. “Why did you need to talk with him, anyway? And don’t give me any more bullshit about sick friends, this guy isn’t dying.”

“He certainly isn’t living,” Drake retorted, but let it drop. He withdrew from inside his coat the lawsuit document he’d consulted earlier and held it out to me over the plaintiff’s sleeping body. “Read.”

“Now? No! I don’t care how deep everyone’s sleeping, we can’t screw around here too long. Just give me the gist.”

“Tom is suing me and BioLogic, claiming credit for co-inventing Spree. He timed the lawsuit to catch me just before the investors conference in Banff, so that he could leverage me with the threat of a court battle that might delay human trials for years on end. I just barely managed to convince his lawyer to keep everything quiet until I’ve talked to Tom. Luckily, Tom’s so broke he has his lawyer working on commission, meaning she naturally wants a quick settlement, not a war that might scuttle development completely and leave behind nothing but

bankrupt litigants unable to pay their legal bills.” He pulled up a sleeve to consult his watch. “The investors conference in Banff starts in about six hours though, and she’s already on-site, ready to start spreading word of the lawsuit if Tom and I can’t negotiate a settlement tonight.”

“All right, I understand: we need to convince the man to drop his lawsuit.” I reaffixed the blindfold over Larocque’s eyes, reaffixed my own scarf over my face, and took hold of two corners of the sheet beneath Larocque’s body. “Grab the sheet. We’ll lift him.”

“Lift him? Why?”

“We can’t negotiate with the dream-pusher in a house full of his true-believing addicts, for Chrissakes. Pull your scarf up over your face and grab your side of the sheet.” It took a few moments, but Drake finally arranged his scarf over his face outlaw-style and took a grip on the sheet. “On three, quietly. One, two, *three*.”

Larocque did not awaken as we lifted him up using the sheets as a sling stretcher, and he kept on sleeping as Drake and I managed the ungainly miracle of lugging him through the body-strewn house.

As we stepped out of the porch, however, the north wind shocked Larocque to life. He writhed so convulsively that the sheets twisted out of our clumsy mittens, and he plunged into the snow. Dressed only in an Argonauts jersey and Nike sweats, he cried out as the snow drifts burned his hands and bare feet, and he might have escaped us altogether if he’d bolted right then, but the disjointed remnants of his dreams and his own beaded blindfold confused him, leaving him kneeling in place, exploring the empty air with his hands. Despite the pathetic spectacle he presented, I couldn’t feel pity for him. A person who’d drug himself that helpless deserved whatever happened to him, same as any street corner beggar or closing-time drunk. Drake and I seized him by the arms, dragged him through the snow to my truck, and shoved him into the cab,

where he floundered in confusion among the footwell's slush mats.

As we drove away with our headlights off, I kept watch on Twelve Raven Road in my rear-view mirror. No light appeared in any of the windows of the sleeping house, no pursuers emerged from its door. First Raven Road and then Fort Frobisher dissolved into the blizzard and were gone.

As I drove slowly through the night, Drake and Larocque's reflections floated outside the windshield in the storm, like the ghosts of some historic tragedy doomed to re-enact a centuries-old argument on certain nights of the year. Larocque eventually collected his wits, removed his blindfold, then crawled up out of the footwell onto the seat between Drake and me. Drake's parka hood and scarf almost completely hid his face, but Larocque needed only a single glance to recognize him: "That looks like Henry Drake's red-rimmed eyes inside that hood." Larocque culled some snow from the folds of the flannel blanket that he had somehow retained in the struggle and rubbed the snow on his face to wake himself up. "Damn, Hank, I expected my lawsuit to bring lawyers, not masked men in the night."

"But it's always night for you, isn't it Tom?" Drake unwrapped his scarf and sat with his back against the passenger door so that he could face Larocque more squarely. "We've got quite the situation to resolve."

"But I don't want to hold discussions with you in this place and time," Larocque enunciated with the precision of a diplomat. "I have not invited you here. I will only communicate with you through my lawyer. I want to go home immediately."

"Then why didn't you protest when we escorted you out of your house? Think maybe

it's a case of diminished capacity, you being so dead to the world?"

"*Me* dead to the world? You're the one who creeps around night after night alone, like a vampire." Larocque pulled his blanket around himself as he studied me. "Made yourself a fellow vampire, eh Hank? Hey Driveman, when Hank put the Spree bite on you, did he that mention you'll never be warm again?"

Drake pitched a sigh past Larocque to my side of the cab. "You're fine, Calgary."

"During sleep, mammals turn poikilothermic—cold-blooded," Larocque continued. "Spree keeps you awake, but it locks you into that state: cold-blooded like a lizard. You gonna go south to Arizona and lay on a rock in the sun, like Hank here?" Larocque waited for me to answer. "Hey Driveman, he ever let you talk?"

I kept my eyes on my driving.

Meanwhile, Drake had produced an envelope from his pocket and unwrapped a piece of red string to open its flap. "All right Tom, let's talk." He gave Larocque a slip of paper from within the envelope.

"Is this us, talking? Is this the way we talk?" asked Larocque as he examined the slip of paper. I glanced sidelong at it: a bank draft. "You must be expecting a fortune, to be able to throw away this much money, Hank," Larocque said. "But my lawsuit's not some litigious begging bowl; I've already got everything I want and it's all free." Larocque flicked the bank draft away, and it fluttered down to the footwell. Drake dropped down into the footwell on one knee to save the bank draft from the slushy floor mats, struggling in the darkness to pinch the paper's edge between the fingers of his clumsy mittens. Meanwhile, Larocque turned on me. "Hey Driveman, you ever buy a dream with cash? I don't mean this year's model of truck, no Bermuda estate—I mean the real thing."

“A ‘real dream,’” Drake mocked, implying an oxymoron with his tone of disgust. He rose up from the footwell, shaking the bank draft clean. “Remember what I told you, Calgary, about the two meanings of ‘dream’: there are the visions of those who are awake, and then there are the hallucinations of those who are asleep—don’t let him confuse the two in your mind.”

“I had the wings of an owl the other day, Driverman,” said Larocque. “I flew over a canyon the colour of a desert sun, and at the bottom of it lived a lizard big as an hill, eating desert dirt all day long and starving. It followed below, waiting for me to drop, but I didn’t fall. I flew and I flew, and I landed only when I came to the ocean.”

“And when you awoke, did you have to wring the saltwater from your hair?” challenged Drake.

“No, but I awoke better friends with the sky, the sea, and me.”

“Sounds so fantastic, why not share it?” Drake said. His voice then turned venomous, “Oh, that’s right, you did. You gave Spree to all those kids.”

“That’s right, Hank. I give it to anybody who wants off the liquor or the gas sniffing—spares them the DTs, the heart palpitations, the depression, the hyperactivity. Spares them the despair. I give it to them free, not like you—and not like this here Chinaman of yours. Did you know he’ll sell gas to any kid who shows up at his station with a fistful of coins, a scabbed-up face, and an empty pop bottle?”

The ensuing silence could have been a result of shock I suppose, though Drake might just have been giving me a chance to deny the accusation. But I kept my eyes on the road and didn’t say anything—no denials, no justifications. Fuck ‘em both, this two-man jury of my drug-dealing peers.

“If you’re going to give Spree to children,” Drake asked Larocque, “why not restrain the

dosage? Wake them up. Get them out into the world.”

“The world? The world’s what made them sniffers.”

“Wrong world,” Drake declared. “I don’t mean *this* world,” he gestured through the frosted glass to the grey landscape, which was all the more bleak because we had just emerged from the bush back onto the tundra. “I mean the whole wide world. It’s a good world. I especially love the sunrise in the Sahara before a sandstorm. Do you know that colour? No, I don’t suppose you see much of the world from your bed.”

“About as much as I ever did from a laboratory. You still spending all that time in the lab?”

“Yes, but I have a lot of time to spend, don’t I? I travelled Africa and South America and the Middle East this year alone. Smelled the sun in the Serengeti grass and swam in the Mediterranean with a lunch of roast lamb and cold grapes waiting for me on the Greek shore. Do you know that sight? That smell? That taste?”

“Do I look like some great white hunter?”

“No, you don’t know any of it, but I do because I was willing to climb out of bed, cross an ocean—”

“Cross any river!” Larocque cried out. “Cut down any forest!”

“And use the wood to build something. And if a mountain gets in the way, I climb it.”

“Or burrow through it, or blast it flat.”

“If necessary. You see, we agree.”

“The hell we do. You think you’re a traveller, Hank, an explorer; but I think you’re just a man searching real hard.” Larocque crossed his arms in a gesture that pulled his single blanket taut around his bony shoulders. “Hell, even a hungry dog has the sense to sit down and fill its

belly so it don't starve; but you wander the world searching for something missing inside you, figuring you gotta stay hungry to keep room in your stomach for all the great stuff you're gonna find across the next ocean, the next forest, the next mountain. What are you looking for, Hank? What's missing?"

As Larocque spoke, Drake simply shook his head in denial, and Larocque eventually fell silent to force Drake to answer the accusation. At first, it seemed an act of strength to me, this patient silence of Larocque's. However, after a few moments, Larocque's head lolled over onto one shoulder, and I realized that he was not silently pressing home his accusation: he had simply dozed off. As I glanced sideward at him, Larocque's eyelids started to twitch in REM sleep.

Drake stared at Larocque's peacefully dreaming eyes as well. He was still sitting with his back against the passenger-side door, and the snow beyond the frosted glass haloed his head with frenetic motion, like a physical manifestation of his restless thoughts. There was this wistful look in his red-rimmed eyes as he gazed upon the sleeping Larocque, and I couldn't help asking, "You ever miss having that kind of dream?"

"Yes. I miss a great many things from my childhood." Henry Drake leaned his profile against the soothing cold window glass, closed his burning-dry eyes, and confessed, "Someday when I'm old, with my body and eyes and mind so useless that the real world has become useless to me, I'll overmedicate myself into a sleep of dreams and *soar*. I suspect that at that time—that dream time—I shall think to myself, 'Oh, I remember now. How could I have ever forgotten this feeling, this amazing wonder?'" However, Drake opened his eyes then, and his voice cast off its wistfulness. "But there are miles between me and that dreaming bed; and if I lay me down to sleep now, then I'll... I'll get the dream I deserve, not the dream I choose." With this, he roughly shook Larocque's shoulder. "Tom! Wake up!"

Larocque stirred, opened his eyes, and became lucid so quickly I suspected he'd been dreaming of us.

"Time, Tom, time," Drake demanded. "Why are you suing Biologic? If it's not about money, what do you really want from me?"

"Nothing you're gonna give." Larocque turned to me. "Hey Driverman, did my buddy Hank warn you why he and I nicknamed it 'Spree'? Did he tell you about the side effects: the megalomania, the sense of destiny, the episodes of manic energy...."

As Larocque recited this list of side effects, Drake uttered a low refrain of "Not anymore, not anymore, not anymore..." and finally cut him off, "Yes, yes, back when I first started taking Spree, I was three types of fiery-eyed missionary, but that was years of development, preliminary testing, and refinements ago. Quit talking about history in the present tense, and wake up!"

"Oh I'm awake now, and I can see that you never corrected the problem with affect disassociation."

I broke in. "Affect disassociation. What's affect disassociation?"

"A myth," Drake declared, flatly. "The sour grapes of self-dishonest, self-justifying histrionics."

But Larocque turned to me. "'Affect disassociation' means a man has become a stranger to his own feelings. You're on Spree so you're probably experiencing it right now, Driverman: seeing your own emotions, not *feeling* them." Larocque pantomimed removing something from his chest and setting it atop the dashboard beneath the frosted glass of the windshield. "You're cognizant of how you should feel, but the emotions exist somewhere outside of you. Isn't that right, Driverman?"

"I... I can objectively consider what I'm feeling, yeah."

On the other side of the windshield's cold glass, Drake's diamond-clear reflection nodded. "Sober and clear-eyed."

"Sociopathic and cold," Larocque mocked. "When I read that Spree was going to human trials, I crawled out of bed all the way to the lawyer's office."

"Afraid your people will be left behind in an Spree world?"

"My people? Christ, Hank, I'm worried about *all* people. If Spree turns the rat race into a twenty-four-hour death march, millions of people will fall out and be left behind—and yes, I *am* scared that they'll cope by choosing my kind of Spree dream." Larocque crossed his arms beneath his blanket, a gesture of both chill and defiance. "Living asleep, it's no way to exist—I know it. A person should have a Spree dream-journey once in a full moon and then live the wisdom the rest of the month, but people aren't gonna use Spree any more responsibly than they used whiskey or acid or any other poison. Gonna be millions of people living out of the pill bottle, everything beyond their dreams rotting away."

"Well then what...?" Drake sputtered. "If you don't want money and you don't want people to live the way you do, then what *do* you want?"

"I want to keep Spree from making people into people like you *or* people like me. I'm suing BioLogic to scuttle Spree completely."

Drake stared at him in disbelief, then tossed his head and snorted two plumes of hot breath out of his nose. "You can't be... you can't just be against everything, you have to pick something! You can't champion the cause of doing nothing. I mean, what do you expect me to do? Surrender to the sovereign state of inertia? Bury my head in the snow, too?"

"I don't know, Hank," answered Larocque, and he sounded like he meant it. "You do what you gotta do, I guess. Me too."

“All right. So be it. Someone sound the cavalry charge, here come my lawyers.”

“I’ll be waiting for them,” Larocque said with a shrug. “You know I’m not going anywhere.”

The two of them then began to posture with threats of injunctions and claims of intellectual property, talking about points of copyright regarding originating an idea versus bringing it into reality through years of development. I stared at their windshield reflections in disbelief—they both understood the stakes, but somehow neither understood the situation. *My* situation. They really thought I was just some... some driver, some chauffeur, a mere ghost in the windshield, and they would have forgotten about me and argued until January’s dawn if I had let them.

I braked the truck to a halt, then turned off the engine.

The diesel clattered and died, leaving a silence that rushed in to remind everyone where we were. In the hush, the north wind moaned against the side of the truck so hard that its springs creaked like the timbers of a sailing ship sealed in Arctic floes. The snowflakes that had been sliding magically clear of the windshield on the slipstream of motion now began to strike the glass and roof audibly, *tick, tick, tick....* I toed a floor switch, and the blade-mounted halogens died. In the more perfect darkness, we could see farther into the blizzard—deeper into the emptiness of the tundra stretching into hopeless infinity on all sides.

Larocque’s voice had a shiver in it as he asked, “I thought we were headed to your pub, Driveman?”

“Calgary?” Drake said. “Didn’t you say it was dangerous to turn off the engine in the cold?”

“Yeah. Minus fifty. Freeze up in no time.” I took the key from the ignition, and the

dash lights and the cab heater died black and cold. I felt no warmer than a lump of iron, but intellectually I understood that my parka would keep me alive. I put the keys into a deep pocket.

Larocque hugged his knees to his gaunt chest beneath his single thin blanket. “Hank, tell him to drive.”

Drake hesitated, then merely pulled up his parka’s zippers and sealed closed its Velcro flaps.

The seat creaked beneath Larocque as he turned to me. “Think, Driverman. That damned drug isn’t going to make your life easier: you’re gonna need all those extra hours of wakefulness just to survive. Life has never been better than it is now, but everyone’s working two jobs, moms and dads both, with the kids in daycare. You’ll need to drive all night just to satisfy your inflated needs. You really want a world like that?”

“It’s too late,” I declared.

“No, man, no—not this time around,” Larocque insisted urgently. “The three of us out here talking, we’re like those old explorers, three officers alone on the foredeck just as the new world comes into sight on the horizon. They didn’t know to turn around and leave it be, they just kept sailing onward, never thinking about the people already living in their new world, never thinking about the germs they were carrying or the way of life they’d be destroying. But we know better. We can turn this boat around and leave the world as it is.”

“It’s too late,” I reiterated, staring through the spokes of my truck’s steering wheel. “The Chinese discovered North America first, did you know that? Could have colonized it before the Europeans, but the emperor lost his nerve about keeping control of such a wide new world and forbade all new exploration—even suppressed knowledge of the new world. And you know what that accomplished? Nothing. The Chinese ended up trapped in our homeland, crowded ‘n

clawing for a daily bowl of rice century after century, while other countries colonized the new world—because the new world was *always* going to be found. It existed. It wasn't going away.” I squeezed the steering wheel until it creaked. “It's the same thing with Spree: Spree is possible, which means Spree is inevitable, which means that we three can't control a single goddamned thing except whether we're the ones who discover Spree or we're the ones to lose it.”

“Well put, Calgary, well put,” Drake commended. “Now let's head back and let the lawyers do their job.”

I swore in Mandarin. “See, Boss, that kind of thinking is why you need me at the wheel. There's a time and a place for lawyers, but the verge of a gold rush isn't the time and the middle of nowhere isn't the place.”

The cab got colder then.

“What are you saying, Calgary?” asked Drake.

“What am I saying? I guess I'm saying this: The wall of *Forest's End* used to have a photograph from the Yukon gold rush era, this giant enlargement of a mountain pass with a queue of thousands of prospectors from all over the world filing up through the snow on their way to find their fortune in the gold fields. My dad, he loved that picture, because he looked at those men bent beneath their packs and he saw hope and perseverance. Me though, as soon as my dad fled back to China and left me with his pub and all its debts, I tore that fucking picture down and I burned it in a garbage heap: I just couldn't stand the sight of all those idiots arriving years too late, delusional romantics staring at the asses of all those men ahead of them in the line and somehow still believing there'd be gold left in the stream by the time they got to the Yukon. Dreamers who froze and starved by the thousands, nothing but bones rotting in the long grass.” I slammed my fist on the dashboard, and the chill-brittle plastic cracked in a spider web. “We're

at the head of the line for the great Spree gold rush, Boss! But if we stop to attend to lawsuits, we'll get passed. I may not know exactly how the pharmaceutical industry works—yet—but I know how people work: if you and I don't keep moving as fast and as hard as we can, someone in Brazil or India or China will steal the Spree formula or reverse-engineer it, and they'll run with it, and you and me will be— Well, we'll be left out in the cold, Boss. *That's* what I'm saying."

Drake didn't reply, and I don't know what he was thinking right then. But Larocque understood. His hands slipped from under the blanket he was holding around his shoulders and seized an anchoring grip on the truck's gear shift. It helped me make up my mind, this show of understanding. This show of fear.

I rounded on Larocque. "Hey, what the fuck's the matter with you? Can't you read English, the fucking language of the world?" I pointed with my three-fingered mitten to the plaque mounted on my windshield. "The sign says: No riders."

Larocque clung to the gear shift with a death grip, but I grabbed his upper arm, kicked open the driver's side door, and yanked hard. He was bigger than me, but he'd starved himself into a stickman, and what muscles he did have had turned soft from sleeping through life. Me though, I worked for a living, so I easily hauled him along the seat and out the door into the howling blizzard.

Larocque plunged down from the cab and landed full-body in the deep snow that buried the highway, crying out as the minus-fifty-degree cold seared through his single shirt and sweat pants. The tundra wind shrieked back at him. Barefoot in the snow and protected only by his single thin blanket, Larocque immediately tried to fight his way past me back into my truck, as a man heaved overboard from a lifeboat in the middle of the ocean has no chance but to fight his

way back into the company of those who had cast him out. But I easily pushed him away from the truck, once, twice, three times.

“Get away! Get... get off...!” he shouted through gasps as we fought, breathing the bitter air with difficulty.

I finally managed to shove him from the highway into the ditch, where he plunged up to his waist in the snow gathered in the lee of the raised gravel bed. Bent over and panting myself, I glanced back. Drake had slid over to the truck’s open door, but he was still sitting inside the cab—watching us, saying nothing, his hood up and his scarf across his face again. I stared at him a bit. He descended from the cab and shut the door, but otherwise kept behind me with his hands in his parka pockets.

Larocque floundered out of the ditch’s deep snow, trying to hold his blanket around his shoulders with hands whose fingers had gone stiff. When I moved toward him again, he limped away from me down the highway. “Go to hell!” he shrieked at me.

“Go home!” I shouted back, pointing vaguely in some random direction. “It’s that way.”

Larocque panted as he fought to breathe the razor air. “I am... home.” He turned away from me and stared into the slanting wind, but he must’ve saw death in the distances, because he suddenly turned again and charged me. Might’ve succeeded too, but I saw it coming—saw everything so damned clearly. I cushioned his charge with my outstretched arms, let him push me back a few controlled steps until his starved ‘n numbed limbs had spent the last of their strength, then I just let him fall forward: he collapsed onto his hands and knees.

Drake was right behind us at that point, no more than two steps off. Standing there in his big puffy parka, Drake didn’t even look like the same species as the barely-clothed Métis on the ground. I stepped aside and gave him a free line at Larocque in case he wanted to give him a

shove or maybe a kick, but Drake backed off, shaking his head.

“You got it, Boss!” I snapped out smartly. “I’ll take care of business for you.”

Drake didn’t say anything to that, either. Hadn’t spoken since I painted for him that picture of us losing control of Spree.

Larocque rose and hobbled down the drift-covered highway with some desperate idea of making it to the nearest town, walking on the outer edges of his rock-frozen feet. I followed, and Drake trailed along behind us.

Cold makes a man small. Hunched over with his arms tight to his body, Larocque looked like a trimmed stump as he lurched along the highway. His breathing grew ragged. When he tried to step through a snowdrift no higher than his shin, his knees couldn’t bend enough to raise his feet above the snow, and he tripped and fell. Floundering over onto his back, Larocque surrendered warm breath from his lungs in order to rail at me and Drake, “What’s it gonna... gonna be like... everyone in the world like you two?”

“It’ll be a terrible world,” I said as I stood over him. “Sleep and dream of a better one.”

Larocque pointed at Drake with a red-raw hand locked into a claw. “I’m... I’m right, Hank... and you know it. But you... you picked... the jury.” The hooked hand moved over to point at me. “If I were the one... with the money—”

“Then I’d be calling you ‘Boss,’” I agreed. “See how that works?”

With this, I tore the blanket from Larocque’s feeble grip and tossed it away; the shrieking wind swept it tumbling across the tundra like a fallen banner. As I flung away the blanket, one of my mittens came off by chance and fell into the snow. One hand frozen completely through now, Larocque crawled three-legged across the icy highway, retrieved the mitten, and held it up to me. Looking down at Larocque as he offered me my own mitten as a token of friendship, I

realized something that conquerors and princes of commerce and other great men have understood throughout history: murder is only an absolute if all men are equal. And we're not. I snatched my mitten away from Larocque, banged it clean against my thigh, and put it on. That's all.

Larocque remained on his hands and knees panting for a time, then he rolled over onto his back and called out something in a voice so weak that Drake had to kneel down over him to verify that he was hearing Larocque right. "Okay, okay," Larocque was babbling. "Okay, okay, okay...."

"Are you saying that you've changed your mind?" Drake asked. "Because it's not too late." A bottle of Spree appeared in Drake's gloved hand. "A half pill will keep you awake—that's how people die from hypothermia, isn't it? By falling asleep? I'll send Calgary to fetch the truck and he can blast the heater until the cab's steaming like a sauna."

The moisture of Larocque's watering eyes had frozen into a row of tiny pearls along his lashes, and his windward eye had sealed shut altogether. "... okay, okay, I'll sign... I'll do what you want... okay...."

"Calgary, bring the truck!" Drake ordered. "Quickly!"

I pulled my scarf down from my mouth so that I could speak as clearly as possible over the wind. "Get up, Boss."

Drake nudged back the side of his hood to uncover his ear, certain that he must have heard me wrong. "What...?"

"I said: stand up, Boss. We're leaving. Miles to go, and all that."

Still kneeling beside Larocque, Drake stared up at me. "I could fire you."

"Then you wouldn't be the Boss. And I've made my policy on riders pretty damned

clear.”

Drake remained on his knee beside Larocque for a time, but Spree and an Arctic wind both give a man clarity. Drake glanced past me through the blowing snow to the distant blur of my truck, looked down to Larocque, and then he put his bottle of Spree back into his pocket, rose from his kneeling position beside the dying man, and stood behind me.

Larocque understood as well. He rolled back to his hands and knees and crawled off the highway. The wind blowing straight into his face must’ve told him that he was moving straight into the endless empty north, so I figure he wasn’t trying to crawl to shelter—he just didn’t want to die in front of us. When he had struggled through the deep snow of the ditch and his clawed hands touched the wind-scoured soil of the tundra, Larocque fought his way upward to stand on convulsing legs, then he turned, pointed a shaking hand at Drake, and proclaimed something—something doubtlessly poignant, but he said it to two men who’d already pulled up their hoods against the cold and decided that nothing he could say mattered anymore. So if you want to know what Thomas Larocque’s final words were, go ask the north wind.

After speaking his last lost words, Larocque set a forearm between his eyes and the tearing wind, walked northward, and vanished into grey eternity.

Drake and I stood a time staring into the place where Larocque had disappeared into the blizzard—you don’t turn your back on something like that too easily. But the cold doesn’t give you any time to linger either—gotta keep moving, always moving—so I eventually nudged Drake and led him back to the truck.

The truck’s chilled engine lugged a bit when I turned the ignition, but then it caught and came to life. I cranked the heater to maximum, and my and Drake’s cold hands met over the dash vent’s blast of warm air like two murderers’ bloody hands mingling in a pump’s cleansing

stream of water.

“What if the body is found?” Drake asked.

“A half-dressed native dead of exposure in the middle of nowhere?” I shrugged.

“Happens. Drunks get delusional about being too hot and wander off into blizzards to cool themselves; sniffers fall asleep and slip off the rear of snowmobiles without the stoner driver ever noticing.” I consulted the dash-mounted clock that would never again tally the hours of another shift of plough driving—of another wasted night. “Not long until morning now. We’ll head back to my pub, then you’ll call Larocque’s lawyer in Banff and say to her, ‘Here I am nearly at Fort Frobisher, but I can’t get up the highway in my Jaguar. I’ve got a plough that I can hire though, so call your client and set me up a meeting with him.’ Then you and I will make a show of waiting a couple days while she vainly tries to contact Larocque. Eventually we’ll make a show of losing patience and tell her that we’re giving up on having a meeting with your pal Tom, then we’ll fly south and get on with life.”

“She’ll still frighten off my investors gathered in Banff with her talk of a lawsuit.”

“I’ll get you a hundred more investors in Shanghai. A thousand more. They’ve got billions to invest in Australian iron and Canadian nickel, so what do you think they’ll pay for gold like *this*?” I reached into Drake’s pocket without asking permission, took out his bottle of Spree, and held the container of dragon eggs right in front of his eyes. “You and me, we’ve got a monopoly on the world’s next golden mountain.” I rattled the bottle enticingly. “We don’t chase investors, they come crawling to us—do you know what the word ‘kowtow’ means? It’s fine if you don’t, because I’m gonna be there to translate.”

“‘We.’” Drake echoed. “‘Us.’”

“Well sure, ‘us.’” I put his Spree bottle into my parka’s pocket and patted the Velcro flap

closed. “You’re going to sell me every penny of BioLogic stock I can finance, right now when it’s at its lowest. I’m gonna sell the pub and sell my truck; gonna take out loans; gonna beg, borrow, steal—and if that doesn’t get me enough stock for a seat on the board of BioLogic, you’ll finance me. Sure it’ll look suspicious in some eyes, so we’ll have to stick together—but you and I already have to stick together, don’t we?” I filched the squeeze bottle from another of Drake’s pockets, raised my face to heaven, and set about dropping artificial tears into my dry eyes. “Don’t worry, I’m not looking for a free ride; you’ll get full value from having me as a partner, Hank. Like I said, you don’t know people like a drug-pusher and a businessman should—weren’t for me, you’d have let Larocque smother BioLogic in the cradle with his lawsuit. You’re a visionary, but new worlds don’t get made by Leif Erikssons who make a first voyage and put a few footprints on some shore; it takes a Champlain to follow up and colonize the new world, someone who’ll labour over the details, govern the settlers, and fight the dirty little wars that need to be fought.”

I tossed him back his bottle of fake tears and shifted into gear.

Hank Drake, he didn’t talk all that much on the ride back, but he knew I was right—he knew it then, and he knew it in the decades of our working relationship that came after. Wasn’t until the end of his life, when he made good his promise to overdose himself on Spree and become that other breed of dreamer, that he turned into the most unconvincing repentant since Oppenheimer, that hypocrite pioneer of the nuclear age who confessed himself no less than the god Death, but not until after he’d gotten to work his will on the atom. Hank Drake, history should remember, did not denounce Spree until we voted him off the board of the corporation that was BioLogic’s successor, Endless Horizons. Only when the real world had no more use for him did he choose to start dream-walking through life, wearing beads and spending his daily

hour of wakefulness making speeches of contrition to protest coalitions like Redeem the Dream, renouncing his part in the making of the new wide-awake world. Myself and the thousands of men and women at Endless Horizons—both in our Dalian headquarters and overseas—who have worked so hard over so many years to ensure that all the peoples of the world have equal, equitable access to Spree are especially wounded by Drake’s parroting of nonsensical claims that Spree was responsible for the twenty-three-hour factory shift or the twenty-four-hour study session. The roots of such abuses existed long before Spree, and such problems won’t be solved by burying our heads in the sand of sleep. Hank Drake may publicly confess to being the father of the ‘home-free’ twenty-four-hour corporate lifestyle (doing so with all the humility of proud Oppenheimer), but he has never once denounced himself for his part in spawning the world’s hundreds of millions of parasitic dream-junkies who choose to overdose on Spree and live out their wasted lives in silent shanty towns like The Land of Dreams and Shambhala. And Drake has never once confessed to the original sin of killing the original dream shaman, Thomas Larocque.

But me, I’ll own up to Larocque’s killing, because I’m not ashamed of what I did: let the whole world know. And let the world know that I still take my golden dragon egg every night, despite the oncologists’ warnings about it interfering with the chemo. Let the world know—let *history* know—that I died as I lived.

I dream how I choose to dream.

That night, as Hank Drake and I started the drive back toward the *Forest’s End*, we passed the spot where Tom Larocque had left the highway and disappeared into the land, and we

saw that the footprints marking his passage had already been erased by the wind. Soon, willow wraiths appeared in the blizzard as the tundra gave way to forest. Snow-laden pines dipped on either side of us, their crowns bowed.

Looking upon the snowy forest, I quoted to Drake, “‘Whose woods these are, I think I know.’ You know whose woods these are, partner?”

Floating in the storm beyond the windshield, Drake’s phantom reflection looked to mine.

“*Our* woods,” I told him. “These woods belong to us.”

Afterword: “The Wrong Breed of Dreamer”

I remember that history lesson, I remember the history teacher, and I remember that when she announced to the class this wonderful, terrible truth, *Every time an explorer finds a new world, someone's old world begins to die*, that I instantly knew exactly which new world and which old world she had in mind....

-- *The Wrong Breed of Dreamer*

Given the ubiquity and variety of the narratives that populate human society and perpetually impact the motivations of its individuals, I feel that the case can be made that all fiction is some degree of frame story. A frame story is a story wherein one or more shorter narratives are related within the ‘frame’ of the main story, e.g., the famous narrative of African exploration and colonialism conveyed within *Heart of Darkness* is actually a tale being told by Marlow, one of the Europeans who engaged upon the expedition, to an audience back in England. “The Wrong Breed of Dreamer” is overtly a frame story in the sense that it is a tale being told by the narrator, Calgary Zheng, decades after the events described in the main narrative. Yet, during the composition of the “The Wrong Breed of Dreamer,” I found myself contemplating just how many embedded narratives it implicitly contained.

The notion of the frame story—of narratives embedded within narratives—has particular resonance within the field of narrative inquiry since narrative inquiry’s two main parents (the social sciences and literature) believe that narratives inform humans, who create narratives,

which inform other humans, in a perpetual cycle that helps impel the evolution of human culture. The humans that exist within fiction (i.e., characters) similarly inhabit this cycle, for they are influenced by contending narratives of culture, of race, of religion, of occupation, of age demographic, of media (the list is too long to attempt), and these characters in turn produce narratives of their own. So it is within “The Wrong Breed of Dreamer,” wherein the narratives that exist within the story include: the main character’s deathbed testimonial; Chinese history; tales of exploration; tales of the gold rush; aboriginal history; classroom lessons; Western mythology; local gossip; aboriginal mythology; dream journeys; science’s worldview; business world rumours; sales pitches; the visionary’s ambition; the sleeping dream; the news media; the tales told in artists’ paintings—again, I cannot hope to list all the narratives explicitly or implicitly at play in the novella, even though the world contained within the boundaries of “The Wrong Breed of Dreamer” is infinitely smaller than the world beyond the story.

The richness of the frame story as a metaphorical conceit for narratives at play within society demands a careful examination of certain implications of the frame story. The narratives embedded within a frame story, like those within society, do not nest neatly within each other like Russian dolls; rather, their boundaries are typically sloppier, harder to demarcate, and in conflict. Within the frames-within-frames reality of “The Wrong Breed of Dreamer,” the embedded narrative frames only rarely exist so estranged from each other that no collisions occur (e.g., the mythology of Arctic aboriginals and Chinese history, for the most part, do not influence one another); more frequently, the embedded narratives overlap with each other non-destructively to create new meaning in the way of two differently coloured lens that create a third hue when brought into some degree of alignment (e.g., Japanese manga sensibilities rendered within Canada aboriginal art); but quite often, the embedded narratives crash together with the

fury of tectonic plates, creating upheaval, destruction, and eventually a radically transformed landscape (e.g., aboriginal culture impacted by European culture).

Education enters into “The Wrong Breed of Dreamer” both at its beginning and at its core, and then again in a third manner. In the story’s first lines, the narrator demands that his listeners locate his ensuing testimony within the context of grand social narratives, and he does so by alluding to his high school history lessons, hence ‘framing’ his life as that of a great man. But in the story’s core, the world of education manifests in a very different form: as the setting wherein the epochal drug SP-3 is invented by graduate students. These two manifestations of education suggest a yin-yang binary in which education is seen as both the passive recorder of societal change and as a dynamic engine of societal change. Were this binary the plot’s only characterization of education, “The Wrong Breed of Dreamer” would be quite a different story. However, education manifests within the plot in a third guise, i.e., the business education that Calgary Zheng receives via long distance commerce courses and the applied classroom of his failing pub. The introduction of this third manifestation of education into the plot advances the education themes into fresher realms of insight than could have the earlier binary manifestation of education.

The story’s consideration of binary relationships—their epistemological attractions and potential weaknesses as semiotic units—arises from an ongoing personal reflection on binaries. This reflection was prompted by the manifestations of a certain species of binary concepts within multiple chapters of my life’s journey of learning. As with any idea that manifests within different contexts, this binary takes on different forms that possess mutable boundaries, making it something of an epistemological fractal pattern. This pattern’s related component binaries include: intuition versus logic; imagination versus memory; fantasy versus reality; future versus

past; art versus science; religion versus science; spirituality versus religion; fiction versus non-fiction; dramatic fiction versus speculation fiction—I cannot possibly list all the related binaries, in part because the pattern potentially encompasses all of human knowledge if one traces all its pathways in all directions far enough. Within my graduate education studies and research, this binary pattern manifested in a variety of forms, including: right brain versus left brain; aesthetics versus science; qualitative versus quantitative; subjectivity versus objectivity; logic versus imagination.

As I mentioned in the afterword of “The Storyteller,” I believe that all individual acts of fiction composition are inevitably motivated, in part, by personal experiences that create a dissonance. One such dissonance that helped motivate me to write “The Wrong Breed of Dreamer” involved my dissatisfaction with the ‘logical versus imaginative’ binary pairing. As a person typically disposed toward what society labels a ‘logical’ approach to thinking, I often found myself struck by how logic is viewed as inimical to imagination and hence creativity. This seemed odd and infuriating to me—a writer, and a speculative fiction writer at that. On one occasion, during a dinner break from a frustrating PhD class in Arts Education in which some of my fellow art educators had promulgated elements of this ‘logic versus imagination’ binary, I decided to explore this binary via a narrative. Sitting in a cafeteria, I scribbled out a brief tale about a Troubadour and an Alchemist sitting around a crossroads campfire arguing about gold earned with a lute (‘Begged gold!’ scoffed the Alchemist) versus gold created in an alchemical laboratory (‘False gold!’ scoffed the Troubadour). But as this stale tale sputtered out in an agreement to disagree, I knew that I had not yet summoned forth the genius of the dispute. I could label this belief ‘an intuition’ and leave it at that, but the more accurate truth is that I take it as a logical aesthetic tenet of faith that any narrative that explores a complex and contentious

issue and arrives at a simple theme that promises an equilibrium has likely been speciously written.

So, I wrote another tale of the Troubadour and the Alchemist and their contest of gold (doing so after a period of reflection). This version of the tale involved the preciousness of the single gold coin earned with the soulful sound of the Troubadour's art versus the unending mounds of gold that could pour forth from a smoke-belching alchemical factory, and the theme suggested by this narrative was one of psychological and economic inflation. As a morality story for children or as a tale sealed within a bottle (i.e., judged solely by its internal logic), this narrative would have sufficed, I suppose. But when I compared its thematic assertions to the extant reality of our capitalistic world, the theme of the rich artist of the single coin seemed (to use a term that psychology adopted from Aesop's Fables to denote a certain process act of rationalization) a case of 'sweet lemons' (the converse of the act of rationalization known as 'sour grapes').

My narrative quest to understand this binary continued, and I eventually composed a third iteration of the tale:

A Troubadour entered an inn with a handful of gold and declared, "Behold what I have earned with my lute. Innkeeper, give me your finest bottle of wine!"

But just then, an Alchemist entered the inn with a handful of gold and declared, "Behold what I have made in my laboratory. Innkeeper, give *me* your finest bottle of wine!"

Who had the most gold? The purest gold? Who drank the finest wine?
Who settled?

"Who cares?" says the Innkeeper, counting his gold.

That one rang true. This narrative not only advanced a lesson for its potential audience, its composition offered a lesson for its author: beware the epistemological myopia of thinking in binaries.

When I resolved to undertake narrative inquiry for my dissertation, I decided to explore the troublesome binary fractal in more length because its component binaries manifested in so many forms throughout art and education. I needed to select one of the binary's many related manifestations to serve as the seed of the story, and so I chose one such iteration that had always struck me as fundamental to the fractal, resonant, and curious: the sleeping dream versus the waking dream. By 'curious,' I mean that my views on this binary seemed to run at crosscurrents to popular views of the binary, for I did not well understand why culture conflated the sleeping dream with the consciously crafted products of the imagination also known as dreams. (Notably, I find that such disjuncture between my views on a topic and popular views of the topic often signify that the topic is a rich opportunity for narrative exploration, for such exploration promises the potential for an increase in my personal understanding coupled with an opportunity to potentially advance innovative themes unfamiliar to my audience.)

In the ensuing NAR endeavour's initial drafts, I initially kept the basic trinity of troubadour, alchemist, and innkeeper. As the writing progressed, however, I recognized that I could achieve greater thematic layering by introducing more tensions to the narrative. For example, the early drafts had a European-versus-aboriginal binary which I found to suggest rather well-worn and simple themes about cultural colonialism, but when I introduced considerations of more recent Canadian immigration and globalization, the ensuing themes became fresher and more complex. Similarly, by making my troubadour into a shaman and a

scientist himself, I complicated and invigorated the familiar ‘art versus science’ binary’s traditional themes. Indeed, as draft followed draft, narrative inquiry’s tendency to continually refine and even redefine the research focus suggested ever more layers of meaning: the blank page and the writer versus the Arctic and the explorer; night as imagination, day as understanding; what *could* be versus what *should* be; mere movement versus a journey; clarity of the senses versus vividness of imagination; locus of control; successful students (valedictorians) versus unsuccessful students (drop-outs). Some of these tensions I consciously selected, many of them I stumbled upon through the journey of the composition and subsequently consciously refined, some of them I did not discover until after the text had reached a final form and I re-engaged with it merely as a reader—and I have little doubt that there are many other similar tensions within the story that I have not yet recognized.

The composing of the story was particularly productive of personal discovery because I utilized an approach to characterization that I term ‘the right and write approach.’ As a reader, literature student, and beginning writer, I noticed that many of the narratives that I considered to be particularly powerful in terms of characterization (and hence vigorous in terms of conflict, plot, and theme) had a commonality: those characters who would, in a narrative of lesser quality, be portrayed as acting based upon simple motivations such as venality, altruism, or foolishness, were instead given a convincing motivational rationale. Shylock was afforded a legitimate motivation for his murderous loathing of his Christian enemies (i.e., a lifetime of anti-Semitic prejudice); Falstaff, the coward, could well explain why living through a battle was more reasonable than dying in one (i.e., honour affords no benefit to the dead). From this observation, I derived what I termed ‘right and write’ writing philosophy, which I have used in my fiction and have communicated to fellow writers, including my writing students: *When undertaking a story,*

resolve to yourself that your major characters all possess legitimate motivations—all of them, even the antagonists—then write a story that reflects this. After all, if you have a story in which one character has legitimate motivations while the contending character or characters do not, then you will tend to have the conflict of a hammer hitting a pane of glass, and the resulting conflict tends to be weak, its resolution tends to be foreseeable, and the resulting themes are obvious and likely trite. But if you have a story in which the characters in conflict all possess legitimate motivations, then you have a duel of hammer against hammer—more dynamic, more uncertain, more compelling. I find that this ‘right and write’ philosophy forces me to create well-rounded characters, which in turn impels me to deeply contemplate the logic behind viewpoints that differ from my own, and this has often led me in thematic directions I had not anticipated. Indeed, I believe that the ‘right and write’ approach is particularly advantageous in a NAR context, since NAR explores human behaviour through characters created by the writer rather than through collaborative participants who report their motivations to the writer, and hence creating characters with carefully crafted motivations is vital to NAR’s ability to glean knowledge. Without the ‘right and write’ approach, and without transcending the binary of ‘scientist and artist’ via the introduction of the businessman, “The Wrong Breed of Dreamer” could not have been as productive of insight as I feel it to be.

The Pain Stain

My own tattoos are old, old, many, and old. There never was a time when people didn't wonder about my tattoos, suspecting that a tattoo artist's personal 'toos must have a special significance. But at least folk mostly only eyed my tattoos 'n never gave voice to their curiosity more than once in a blue moon—and only if they felt they'd somehow earned themselves the right to ask. That changed. Over the decades, the folk who found their way to my tattoo parlour began to ask more and more often what the 'toos covering my arms and chest and shoulders signified, their curiosity becoming hungrier and bolder, impelled by that conjoined sense of emptiness and entitlement that disfigures the spirit the way that starvation distends the belly. Whenever people ask about my tattoos, I tell 'em nothing, in part because I know that they're only asking the artist about *his* tattoos to seek reassurance that the 'toos I'll put on *their* skin will have significance—that their time on my parlour's stool won't be just another of life's empty rites. Faded age, this. In the past, people took it on faith that tattoos had significance: a sailor fresh from the sea got an anchor inked on a bicep that'd proven it could haul anchor chain; a lover had the name of a woman inscribed into flesh that'd known her soft touch; a ranch hand had a mustang emblazoned on a chest tanned to saddle leather by the prairie sun. Faded age, that. Nowadays, pink punks buy prison 'toos with their parents' credit cards, a party slag'll show no shame in having a unicorn inked on her ass, and anyone at all feels entitled to wear wings—and why not, when there's a tattoo salon on every corner eager to sell 'em skin candy? World's

full of such people, looking to make life bleed a little colour, which they'd mainline straight into a vein if they could figure how. They don't understand.

Around the time I finally tore down my tattoo parlour's sign and burned it in a barrel, I stopped tending to my personal tattoos. Used to be that'd I renew them once an age, but I just lost the heart. Now my tattoos' colours have vanished and only their black tracery remains visible, like the tumble-down foundations of a city otherwise lost to the desert sands. Yeah, to those with a certain eye, my tattoos descend into my body layer after layer, like an ancient city often scourged by fire and war but always renewed. Maybe not this time, though. Time may finally have come to fade away.

I'm known as Stain. Been an age since I've had any other name. My tattoo parlour is *The Pain Stain*.

No light still shines in the alleys outside my tattoo parlour, so my customers have to find their way to *The Pain Stain* by feel, navigating the crypt maze of the city's rotted original core by instinct. I hear 'em out there some nights, stumbling around in the garbage-strewn darkness, lost, cursing my name even as they seek me out. On this particular night, I hear two of them out there in the alley, one of them trying to fend off humiliation with threats of violence, promising that he's going to fuck up someone-or-the-other for giving him bad directions—this chest-beater I name 'Monkey.' Most seekers never find my parlour, and I can tell from his snarling that Monkey's not one of the few who could. But there's a second set of footsteps out there tonight, belonging to someone who walks well in the dark and doesn't speak much—someone who lives by their eyes. Monkey passes my parlour and bashes obliviously onward down the alley, but the

quiet footsteps of his companion pause before my front door; and in the ensuing hush, I hear his eyes thinking. To most people, *The Pain Stain* looks simply like an abandoned auto body shop, but this silent wanderer's eyes scrutinize my parlour's crimson-painted stairs, the barbed wire on the railings, the sheet-iron window shutters; and I figure it's about then that he finally sees what he's only sensed to this point—there's not a single fleck of graffiti anywhere on my shop. See, any tagger tries to spray my wall, I burst out with a pistol-grip shotgun, screaming like a savage when some photographer tries to steal his soul. This lack of graffiti announces to all the world, *Nobody puts their mark on me*, and it's my parlour's only sign—but you need a certain kind of eye to read the message in that emptiness.

“In there,” the quiet one murmurs to Monkey. “This'll be his tattoo parlour, here.”

This soft-voiced one with the eyes—him, I'll have to name more carefully.

Stairs creak. An iron latch rattles in the grip of a hand unfamiliar with its antiquated design, but eventually the door of my parlour swings open. The patch of night framed by the doorway is a lighter shade than the blackness of the parlour's unlit interior. A silhouette takes a single step through the doorway into the parlour's blackness, seeming to peel away from the silhouette of the second visitor that remains in the doorway. This single step into my parlour is enough to raise the hackles of the one I've named Monkey. Monkey instinctively distrusts the parlour's unlocked door and unlit interior, and he's outright unnerved by a mysterious scent of burning hanging in the air. But when he tries to back out into the safety of the confusing alleys, his quiet companion—the yet-unnamed one—pushes him onward and steps inside, quietly closing the door. Blind, Monkey moves through the parlour's darkness with a sideward shuffle, and when he blunders into a ray of light leaking through a hole in a tin wall, he instantly jerks to

a halt, sensing that by entering into the light he's bumbled into a tripwire. He's right: this thin ray of light gives me my first good look at him.

Monkey's young, like I already knew; maybe twenty or twenty-one, the age when you can still be anything but you start panicking to be *something*. He's dressed in grunge rags carefully chosen according to the street scarecrow creed: *Notice me, fear me*. Used to be that a street-corner stranger laid claim to being dangerous by looking sharp—looking in-the-know—with flash jackets, styled hair, and fast eyes. But something happened, something changed, something lost hope—'in-the-know' gave way to 'don't-know-any-better.' Monkey wears a watch-cap pulled down to his eyebrows so that its brim gives him a Neanderthal brow, he effects the half-lidded expression of impaired consciousness, and his pants are poised halfway down his ass so that his underwear's hanging out—these fashion statements his proud declaration, *I'm dumb as shit, so I'm dangerous; I'm dangerous, so I'm not worthless shit*. His black hoodie is worn inside-out and is covered with coarsely-stitched-on patches of music bands, military units, and even a poison warning label, these patches chosen simply for their single common emblem: human bone, in the form of grinning skulls, dancing skeletons, and crisscrossed femurs.

Even as he stands exposed in the ray of illumination leaking through the wall, Monkey eyes the light in suspicion, probably thinking, *There wasn't no streetlights still working in the alley, so what the fuck...?* Good question. Good instinct. A monkey should listen to his instincts, but this Monkey can't keep a grip on a thought for more than a few moments, and he soon slumps back into a habitual pose: world-weary shoulders drooping in perpetual disappointment, thumbs hooked inside his pockets, eyes profoundly indifferent, like he's so damned tired of the world always failing to meet his standards. Gotta be the most bullshit pose a kid can adopt, one that makes people just ache to fuck him up. *Slut came in the bar wearing that*

short skirt and warpaint 'n strutting like she's too good for anyone in the place, officer, so of course nobody paid no mind to her screams when they tossed her up on the pool table and started in on her. But Monkey holds this pose only until he sees that the parlour appears deserted, then he drops the world-weary act and comes alive—starts looking for something to steal. Now *that's* my Monkey. He yanks drawstrings to tighten his hood into a face-concealing periscope in case there's security cameras, then he starts rooting half-blind through shelves of old automotive parts, paint lockers, and tool-littered workbenches. I let him for now, remaining hidden. He's not going anywhere.

The other one, the quiet one, he's different. No older than Monkey, maybe even still a teen, and just as skinny; but instead of Monkey's five kinds of heraldic fashion rags, he wears utterly anonymous jeans 'n jacket, the kind of 'distressed' denims they sell in malls these days. Yeah, I look at him 'n I see a suburban kid on an inner city safari, the kind easy enough to dismiss; yet, he's got a claim on my attention—he recognized my parlour, right? 'Sides, his denims are devoid of any logos or emblems and his black hair bristles along the crown like it can't decide between a mohawk and a pompadour. 'Can't decide,' I like that. To someone with a certain kind of eye, 'can't decide' looks like the morning mist—fulla both shimmering auroras and half-seen shades, these shifting shapes constantly on the verge of resolving into a signpost, a hangman's oak, or maybe a wandering stranger, but never becoming just one thing. I decide to name this quiet one 'Roach.' You can see rainbows in a cockroach's black carapace, if you stare just right.

While Monkey's rooting through the corners for something to steal, Roach tracks the strange scent of burning to the very centre of the parlour where something lies hidden beneath a tarp. He pulls aside this tarp without hesitation, but then freezes mid-motion like a stage

magician paralyzed in the midst of the table-cloth trick, arrested by the sight of what he has uncovered: a tattoo machine—an exotic relic from an indistinct age, a graceful ebony-and-gilt pedestal that hints at both a Victorian dental drill and an Egyptian altar. Roach eases the tarp to the floor as though now concerned that its rustling might awaken something, and then he sets about examining the tattoo machine without actually touching it, his eyes tracing the gilt design of flowering vines around the pedestal's edging, then sliding down the smooth contour of the pedestal to the machine's attached pedal switch. When he eases his foot down on this pedal switch, he's startled by a small but sharp *crack* sound and a teal flash of light from the far side of the pedestal. A moment later, a thread-thin wisp of smoke rises into view, attended by the scent of burnt sulphur mingled with post-lightning ozone. Recovering from his momentary fright, Roach leans over the pedestal and sees that both the smoke and the incongruous seared-and-sweet scent are rising from the tip of a tattoo needle of baroque design hanging on the side of the pedestal from a caryatid-shaped brass hook. Despite the needle's rattlesnake tail of smoke, he reaches out to take it into his hand—but I can't have that.

I draw on a lamp cord, pulling down light from on high. This ceiling light, an old-fashioned arc lamp enclosed in a dented tin cone fixture, focuses a boney glare directly down on the parlour's tattoo machine—a spot of white moonlight harsh as the midday sun. Caught in the centre of this glare, Roach yanks his hand away from my tattoo needle and quickly steps away from the pedestal into the shadows. Monkey jumps back from a workbench so fast that the automotive spray gun he was trying to cram into his hoodie pocket clatters to the floor.

Me, I'm standing against the far wall, my hand still on the lamp's long cord. In appearance, I'm an old man, short and biker heavy, with a goat beard and stiff grey bristles all over my body; and you can see plenty of these bristles, 'cause my work overalls are bound

around my waist and my undershirt bares my arms and shoulders. On my bare arms and shoulders coil the ruins of my tattoos, all their colours faded away and even the black-work tracery of the tattoos dimmed to the aquamarine of old woad. Ain't nothing about me that ain't ugly, 'cause people trust ugly in an artist. Ugly makes 'em believe you somehow know beauty—that you somehow got all the beauty out. For the same kinda reason, I wear a cross. For the faithful, a cross proclaims their resolve to remain pure, a sweet 'n innocent *fuck you* to the world; but many a man covered in prison tattoos also wears a cross, 'n their cross declares that they've travelled a dark and winding road for so long that they've finally worn out night and come to the dawn. (All without ever stepping off the road or turning back, mind.) The cross I wear is the same and different—a Celtic cross rendered upside-down in the way of a dagger with its tip held to the underside of my jaw, make of that what you will.

At the sight of me, Monkey quickly struggles to pull back his hood, eventually squeezing his head through the tightened-drawstring opening like it's a birth canal. Fresh off this indignity, he steps into the glare of the arc lamp spotlight and points at me with a finger-splayed poke of his hand that's supposed to be hip-hop slick ('cause if you're nigger-cool, then your fingers must be too ape-long to work right, right? Fucking racists); and he says to me, "You'd be my man Stain?"

I stare at him like he's a pile of dog shit that just asked, *Do I smell pretty?* I even flick invisible lint off the woad-blue tracery lingering on my shoulders to tell him that I don't care for his eyes on my tattoos, he's that low.

Naturally, Monkey immediately starts eyeing my tattoos hard. "Everyone says if I want a really sick tat, I gotta go to Stain."

"Everyone says, hunh," I mutter, voice hoarse with age. "You know everyone, do ya."

“Everyone enough,” Monkey insists with a shrug, thrusting his hands into his hoodie’s front pocket. “Everyone in certain circles says old Stain’s been doing tattoos since before anyone.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m the original. Shop’s closed—didn’t ‘everyone’ tell you that?”

“Hell yeah, but they said you still do special orders.”

“‘Orders,’” I mutter. “‘Special orders’ at that. Fuck.”

Meanwhile, Roach, he’s not really listening—not even looking at me at all. Those eyes of his, they’ve seen past me and into the depths of the silhouette I’m casting on the far wall, discerning that my deep shadow obscures a black shape: a vault door. A man-high vault door of sooty steel emblazoned with the insignia of a flat-topped pyramid. I’ve just emerged from this vault, and its door is still slightly ajar.

But Monkey, he’s blind to everything but me. “Illustrated William there, we had beers with him after his set at the cycle show. He’s the one finally gave us directions to your place.”

“Tha’ right? My mate Billy sent you?” In this day and age, I speak in a limey accent, because that’s the sound of grit in this particular town, where the old core’s decaying pubs and grotty hotel flop-houses have names like *The Duke of Gloucester* and *Empress*.

“Yeah, yeah, dude, Billy there. He’s your bud, right?”

“He’s my used rubber, tha’s what he is. A discarded skin-o-the-lizard.” I step aside so that Monkey has himself a full view of the vault inset to the wall behind me, give him a moment to register the existence of the vault and the fact that its door is ajar, then slam the vault shut and whirl its spindle wheel. This one-two combination—*behold the secret vault; it’s not for you*—stuns Monkey to silence.

As Monkey's distracted by the vault, I sneak a glance at the other one, Roach, only to discover that he had lost interest in the vault even before the spinning of the wheel. He's found my parlour's collection of tattoo designs scattered across a table and now he's sifting through them, burrowing by instinct through the upper layers of laminated flash down to the deeper layers of real treasure: tattoo designs on yellowed paper delicate as medieval parchment. Digging still deeper, he even finds a sheet of material that folds in his hands like soft rawhide; stretching it out in the light, he beholds the image of the Egyptian goddess Maat kneeling with wings outstretched to an empty throne. As he studies this ancient tattoo, he runs his hand along the top of the head as though his thoughts are pressing restively against the inside of his skull, an unconscious habit that has created the crest of mussed hair that I'd mistaken for a half-assed mohawk.

"But I'll give this to Billy," I say to Monkey, pitching my voice in Roach's direction, "the lad had the skin of an angel."

Monkey is only half listening, for he has sleep-walked his way over to the vault door and is running his fingers over its soot-smooth finish. "Clear skin, like?"

"Clear? Naw. Billy's skin was pus-grey 'n pimply from a life lived afterhours. What I meant is that the lad's skin was sensitive: the tiniest little touch of a tattoo needle made Billy dance the battery-wire jig."

This image of torture draws Monkey's attention away the vault, and he does a little shuffle-step of glee. "William shouldn't have come to you then, hunh? Everyone says your needle hurts like a hypo fulla piss and turpentine." Monkey adlibs a hip-hop snatch, "'Muh stain is the symbol of muh pain.'"

And I sing back at him a possible next line, “‘Soul so fucked that ‘needle’ rhymes with ‘need.’””

Monkey’s bullshit bonhomie wavers. I just put a line into his song, and whether or not this budding hip-hop artist likes the line, the fact remains that it’s *my* line, and that means there’s a little less music in the universe that could ever belong to Monkey. See, when you remove a potential from an artist’s universe, it’s the same as pounding something of yours into him.

Fucked ya, I tell him with a yellow grin.

But Monkey, he wants something from me bad, so he returns my grin all the way to his flat molars. “Yeah, good one, eh. Anyway, Illustrated William there, I saw his tattoos, and they were so... so *epic*. I mean, when I looked up at the stage and saw those angel wing tattoos all up and down his back and legs and arms, I thought to myself... Jesus....” Monkey trails off, shaking his head in wonder, like he’s trying to both savour the memory of a drug high’s visions and shake off the lingering fumes of the narcotic.

At this mention of wings, Roach stirs from his fascination with my hoard of old flash designs and starts paying attention to the conversation.

“I’ll never get a set of wings like those,” Monkey continues, “but I want the guy who did those wings to ink me. Give me my first ‘too, like.”

I nod at Monkey, agreeing that getting a stain from me would be a hell of a fine thing, then I inform him, “Not gonna happen.”

“Wha— I got money enough to pay.”

“*Money?*” I roar, jarring him back a step. I kick a garbage barrel in his direction, caving in its corroded-thin side and sending empty paint cans ricocheting off tin walls and rattling across nail-protruding floorboards. “This place look like the bawdy house of some money-

grubbing whore? No, Johnnie me boy, no—there was a time, but I closed my legs long ago ‘cause clientele like you had made me go so dry I couldn’t stand the chafing. Fucking untried, unstained, unworthy—you pick the word!” I brush past him and stalk away.

“Dude, no, c’mon, don’t do me like that,” Monkey pleads to my back. “You’re the man, you’re the legend. I passed five—fifty—tattoo shops on my way to *The Pain Stain*.”

“Shouldn’ta.” In the farthest corner, I yank a tarp from an ongoing project, a long-forked motorcycle with a half-completed tank mural, and toss this tarp over my tattoo rig. “Any ‘body modification salon’ will do for you, Monkey. G’wan.”

“‘Monkey’? Everybody calls me—”

“There’s *everybody* again!” I snap. “You sure don’t look like you run with *everybody*, Monkey—you look more like an *anybody* boy to me.” This I say to him even as I kneel before the motorcycle and gauge the dampness of its mural (the image of an old school biker trying to outrace a tsunami of pearly-glowing blades), using only the daintiest possible touch of my finger so as not to profane the art with my fingerprint. As reverent is my treatment of this microns-thin fantasy of heaven’s personal enmity is the contempt in my voice for the untried youth behind me, “Fucking Monkey—rhymes with ‘money.’ Goddamned gutter garbage looking to be pimped into right respectable wreckage. Out! It’s the winding road for you, boy. G’wan!”

With this, I pretend to forget all about him and completely devote myself in the tending of the half-completed cycle mural, like I’m trying to get the taste of him out of my mind. This is partly true. When this tattooist needs to relax, I paint machines—same way fiction writers needing to unwind often read history. Machines and history, they have no distracting hints of a contending will—no consciousness behind the narrative, no soul in the gears. But even as I prepare an airbrush, I keep an ear to Monkey and hear that, for all his passion, he’s gone silent

behind me. Monkey's not silent by nature. Only one reason that an angry monkey goes quiet. "I banished you to the winding road, Monkey," I eventually murmur, softly because I secretly delight in his silence's song of murder. "So what, oh what, shall we expect will happen if I turn around and see you still standing in my parlour?"

Monkey answers my question—declares himself—by holding firm to his silence: no words, no footfalls heading for the door. Fair enough. I set my airbrush aside. But before I can rise to my feet and turn to attend to Monkey, Roach breaks his own silence for the first time since he entered my parlour. "Tonight's an occasion. He wants a tattoo to mark an occasion."

I like Roach's words for the same reason I like Monkey's silence: marrow. If you can't understand my meaning, fuck ya.

"An occasion, you say?" I rasp a horn-hard thumbnail along my whiskers. "A man lives as long as I have, you'd think he'd have his fill of occasions; but the truth is—the sorry truth is—that occasions are sometimes all that's left to give a sense of significance."

"Yeah," Monkey mutters. "That's what I want, a 'too with meaning."

"I said 'significance,' mind you, not 'meaning.' Ain't nothing more common than meaning. A man alone in a city of strangers buys a tribal tattoo; a sow-ugly young thing buys the tattoo of a butterfly; a soldier reduced to a single serial number emblazons himself with the emblem of a whole army—all of it rich with meaning and utterly empty of significance." I blow lovingly on the fuel tank mural's drying paint as though longing to resume work on this vision of an open-road apocalypse. "Just what sort of occasion brought you to me this particular night?"

Monkey hesitates to speak the name of the occasion aloud.

"Tell him," Roach urges Monkey. "You want your tattoo or not?"

Monkey's jaw pops audibly as he unclenches it. "Illustrated William—he died, eh."

“Billy’s dead? The devil you say.” I pick up a rag and wipe at my hands as if Illustrated William’s death is news to me and I need a few moments to digest the implications. “Well, death might be an occasion at that. Still, the lad lived a colourless life, so he probably died an empty death. Any significance in his passing, you reckon?”

Monkey’s patch jacket of bones rustles as he shrugs. “I dunno. You were the one gave him wings.”

“Tha’s a thought, innit? And the lad did manage to die with his wings on. Now that *is* an occasion.”

With this, I heave up from my kneeling position beside the motorcycle and scrounge the fixings for a toast to the dead. After retrieving a jar of whiskey from a hiding place behind a milk crate full of rusted pipe fittings, I fill three mismatched shot glasses almost opaque with paint fingerprints, then pass two of the drinks to Monkey and Roach. I observe a few moments of silence, then offer the toast.

“Dust returns to dust: Billy was a waste of skin before I inked him, and now he’s a waste of skin again; but there was a time between, a moment as brief as a wing beat, when Billy was something worth.” I raise my glass to the high darkness. “To Illustrated William—to the well-adorned moment.”

Monkey and Roach also raise their drinks to the night and invoke the name of the departed—but not too loudly, for the night is particularly dark and silent in these alleys, and the dead are too newly dead. We toss back the whiskey, and they’re caught off guard by the unexpected taste-sensation: it’s homebrewed the way I like it—no smokiness, all flame. Coughing against the dragon fire blazing in his belly, throat, and mouth, Roach eyes his shot

glass in suspicion and sees that an errant dribble of the whiskey has stripped a clean tear-streak through the paint fingerprints. Monkey, though, he whoops with the pleasure of the flames.

I grin at my Monkey and fling the tarp off my needle rig with a flourish. “Now then, my lad, what tattoo do you reckon will suit the occasion?”

“I know you’re not gonna give me those angel wings, right?” Monkey says slowly, giving me time to protest that he’s wrong, then he quickly continues, “Those spiky black flames, then—that’s what I want. I’m not sure their name, though.” Roach plucks a design from the very top of the flash stack and hands it to Monkey. “Yeah that.” He hands me this laminated photo, that of a Viking-muscular arm bristling with a popular design that some people think is black fire and others think is a wreath of thorns. I could tell Monkey chapter-and-verse where the design actually came from and what it truly signifies, but that’s a hell of a thing to do to a man, rat out his dream. So I merely examine the flash design for a ritual few moments and then nod my grave approval.

Monkey bares himself, first wriggling out of his patch jacket and then removing his T-shirt, which he tucks into his waistband. A single zone of isolated curls runs down the middle of his narrow chest, and acne sprinkles his flat shoulders. He flexes his skinny arm to show where he wants the black flames to centre: the bicep. But I shake my head and wordlessly press my thumb to the knob of his bony shoulder.

“Near the bone, yeah!” Monkey agrees, eyes bright. “Illustrated William said that the skin nearest bone is what hurts the worst. Getting my arm tattooed in flames right over the bone, that’s gonna be some real pain, right?”

“Gonna hurt like hell,” I promise most solemnly, and pat the parlour’s customer stool, a three-legged altar stained black with use.

For all his excitement, Monkey eyes this worn altar with a bleakness in his gaze as he glimpses something of the suffering to come, but he steps into the hard glare of the hooded arc light hanging over the tattoo machine and takes his place on the stool.

Roach takes a respectful step backward out of the spot of recondite light, but stands where he can watch all that is to come.

I set about the ritual of preparation. My tattoo needle has the ornate and yet functional menace of a derringer, with a well-worn frame of scroll-engraved nickel; and it lacks the capacitor that drives the nipping-stinging piston action of a modern tattoo needle. I affix to the needle a cut crystal bottle as ornate as a tycoon's brandy decanter, its glass black with old ink. The rubber insulation of the electrical cord running between the needle base and the pedestal top has the aged texture of rhino hide. Nitrile gloves, antibacterial soap—none of that sacrilege exists in my tattoo parlour. To disinfect my needle, I dip its stinger into a shot glass of whiskey, raise the needle into the air, and touch my toe to the pedal switch; a tiny electrical spark spits from the tip of the hollow stinger, igniting the alcohol still clinging to the needle so that Persian-green flames wreath the stinger. These flames hiss and spit for a few moments, then abruptly sublimate into a slithering wisp of smoke.

Eyeing my seared-'n-smoking stinger, Monkey asks, "Should I make a fist?" meaning, *Would it hurt less, if I do?* I blow the smoke from my needle and otherwise ignore his question, refusing him all hope of escaping the suffering. Suffering, that's part of where the shine comes from. Nobody can make tattoos like mine—they can copy my designs all they want, but they'll never get the colours as vivid as mine. Never as alive. Pain, that's the secret. Suffering brings

out the colour from within, infusing a tattoo with something more than mere ink—with a hue that is to ink what soul is to flesh. Nobody who gets a pain stain from me ever renounces it to a laser's pure light.

I seat myself backward on a wheeled chair, its back bracing my chest as I lean forward over my work, preparing the skin of Monkey's shoulder and arm with a splash-'n-wipe of whiskey. There'll be no preliminary stencilling of the design; I've never used stencils, and wouldn't feel like my own artist if I did. I sniff and raise my eyebrows at Monkey. He nods, *Ready*. Working freehand, I begin inscribing the black work outlines of the flames.

At the sting of the tattoo needle, Monkey gasps, groans, hisses. The needle tip's tiny flares of lightning spawn wisps of smoke and tracks of black ink. When Monkey tenses his arm against the agony, beads of blood begin to well from these needle lines as though he were squeezing himself dry. In the way of the tormented who seek to escape the world of suffering, he closes his eyes, only to find that the pain seems even clearer in the darkness behind his lids; and yet, as the tormented do, he keeps his eyes closed all the same. Staring.

Five minutes pass.... As the needle tip sizzles at the vertex of smoke, ink, and blood, the attached cut-crystal ink bottle seethes in its depths with black bubbles. Ten minutes pass....

On the edge of shop's sole circle of light, Roach stands with arms crossed, leaning back against the edge of a worktable, half in the darkness, saying nothing, watching everything.

Eventually, I dip the needle stinger into my shot glass of whiskey to clean it, coils of raven ink unfurling to drift hypnotically in the depths of the honey gold. This I intend as a distraction, but Roach's swift eyes notice the furtiveness in my sleight of hand as I change ink bottles—a new bottle goes onto my needle, the first bottle is slipped into my overalls' deep

pocket. Roach sidles around the edge of the circle of light to a place where he can watch my work even more closely.

Monkey's blind to all of this, deep in the pain reverie. His lids, mouth, head, and shoulders all droop as the agony of the tattoo fascinates him. Behind his closed eyelids, he sees himself as a stone statue in a dark and sacred place, the needle riding like a white-cored spark along his marble surface, leaving behind glowing gilt tracery.

"Feels okay, the burning," he mumbles from far away—from far within. "It's good, the pain."

"Clears a man's mind," I agree.

"'What doesn't kill me,' however that works." Monkey's head lolls a languid circle. "Illustrated William, he didn't just die. Somebody killed him, unh?"

"Now is that a fact?" Without pausing in my needlework, I pour Monkey a glass of whiskey and nudge it at his blind hand, but he shakes his head. He's good as he is. Doesn't want to mess with the pain. I toss down the fire myself. "I confess I feel a bit guilty," I say, "Billy getting killed over his wing tattoos like that."

Monkey snorts softly. That's all.

But Roach clears his throat. "Billy might have been killed over something other than his tattoos."

"Over what else?" I challenge. "Billy never had nothing but his wings. 'N when he first came to see me, he didn't even have them." I'm talking in low and lulling tones, trying to keep Monkey and Roach from awakening to an awareness that I have started to fill in the black-work outlines of Monkey's flames with apple red. "First time Billy came to my parlour, his music career was already down to his last two nickels of hope."

“Music?” mumbles Monkey. “What music? Guy never sang at the cycle show, just stood there in a fucking g-string.”

“Never actually much of a singer, our Billy,” I allow. “The lad felt the music down deep, but when he tried to get it out, the music had to pass through that tin whistle of voice of his. Was near the end of his rope when he somehow got it in his head that if old Stain gave him a steer tattoo, he’d suddenly be able to sing ‘Folsom Prison Blues’ like the Man in Black. When I asked him what he could pay for a stain, Billy promised to write a song about me.”

“A song. Hunh.” Monkey is impressed enough to almost open his eyes. “Whadja say?”

“Told ‘im I’d kill him if he tried.”

“He believe you?” asks Roach.

“I most surely did have that impression. I asked point-blank if he believed me, and he made that *uh-hunh* sound folk do when they have a shotgun muzzle in their mouth.”

Monkey snorts out a laugh so sharp he has to wipe the snot away afterward, but he keeps his arm steady in my grip.

“Anyhow, ‘bout a month of winter later, Billy came back to my parlour and offered me all the world. He’d already sold his guitar, and now he was offering me the last thing he owned, the first thing he’d ever really cared about down deep: his music collection. Stood right out there in the night, swaying like a sapling in that cold alley wind, holding out to me all these store-bought DVDs and CDs like they was coins o’ the realm simply because they meant everything to him. So I say to him, ‘Burn it.’ He thought I was joking, but I told him, ‘I got no use for off-the-rack souls. Burn all that shit.’”

“So he did,” says Roach, confident like.

“Burned it all in a barrel, just outside my window over there. He stood out in the cold

staring into the flames, seeing all his dreams going up in fire and down into ash. Watched the whole thing out the window, I did—I coulda stared at those deep staring eyes of his all night.”

“So then you gave him the wings?” asks Roach.

“What, for the sacrifice of a store-brought soul? No chance of that, my lad.” I nudge Monkey’s shoulder, causing tears of blood and black ink to dribble down his white arm. “You understand why Billy came to me, don’t you?”

Eyes clenched closed against the pain, Monkey nods. “Because you’re the one hurts the best, boss.”

“Tha’s a fact, my son. And do you know why I finally decided to give Billy his wings?”
Monkey doesn’t.

Roach does, though. “Because *he* hurt the best.”

“Tha’s the sorry truth of it—lad had the skin of an angel. When I rewarded Billy’s sacrifice of music with his first tattoo, just this little steer skull on the back of his hand, the pain made the lad’s eyes roll so far back in his head that he was staring at his own brain. Took him an hour to be able to talk again, but the first thing he asked me was what the ultimate stain would be. The ultimate pain stain. And I told him. ‘Wings. A full set of wings, each wing a fully realized architectural miracle of muscles, delicate bone, secret sinews, and fifteen kinds of feathers, and each of its thousands of feathers fully rendered with a shaft and hundreds of hair-fine branches—now *that* would be the supreme pain stain. See, that which enables a bird to rise into the wide clear sky makes its wings a near infinite labyrinth of lines.’” I smile at a fond memory. “Once your life crosses paths with an idea like that, it’s like a bear you meet on a forest path: you have to immediately turn around and walk in the other direction, and you can’t under any circumstances make eye contact with it. But my lad Billy, he had these big staring

eyes and nowhere else to go. So, one night later that same winter, Billy showed up at my door again, shaking with more than just the cold—he had shaved himself clean, head-to-toe, like a monk ready for his vows, or a martyr aching for sacrifice.” I toast the air with the whiskey I’ve been using to clean my needle. “To you, Billy.” I toss back the whiskey and then grimace-grin against its fire, my teeth stained with black ink. “Twenty-six hours.”

“What?”

“Twenty-six hours it took me to give Billy his wings.”

“Holy...!” Monkey declares with the passion of a man who means it. “You mean twenty-six hours straight?”

“Twenty-six hours all in a go, a right proper pilgrimage. By the end, Billy couldn’t even walk—legs had nothing left in them. Nothing. When I helped him to his feet, he raised his hands to heaven, and the blood was flowing down his arms, down his shoulders, and down his chest, down his back, down his legs, and he says to me, ‘You know what I feel like?’ and I say to him, ‘No need to just feel it anymore, my son—now you can *see* it.’”

“Everyone could see it!” Monkey’s nostrils flare. “Jesus, those were incredible wings. You’re the man, Stain, the man. Everyone at the cycle show heard about him ‘n had to see those angel wings for themselves—the line waiting to walk past his stage was so long the guy couldn’t even take a break. Couldn’t hold his arms up that many hours, so he had these two hanging ropes tied around his wrists. Head was kinda slumped down by the end.” Monkey unerringly turns his closed-eyed face toward Roach. “What was that you said about him again? That he looked like someone...?”

“Like someone crucified on something invisible.”

“Yeah, that was it. Fuck me.” Eyes still closed, Monkey jerks a thumb toward something he can see high in the darkness above him. “Guy looked so fine standing in the spotlight—like someone you’d want to talk to, like someone who’d *been* there—but once you met him offstage, you realize that he’s completely out of it. The moment he puts his robe on over those tattoos, he’s like a horse with blinders on: guy turns completely oblivious, right? Just waiting to be led. We were having beers and smoking up with him back at his room, and his joint runs to ash all the way down to his fingers, but the guy doesn’t even notice his skin blistering, that’s the kind of burn-out he was.”

“A man needs to get it out sometimes; but poor Illustrated William, he got it *all* out.” As I say this, I change ink bottles. Roach is watching me too closely now, so I give him a three-heartbeat stare and then let him see clearly how I work: the bottles I affix to the needle rig don’t actually contain ink, it’s only the stains on their old crystal that makes them appear filled. In reality, the ink bottles are empty. But as I resume running my needle across Monkey’s flesh, crimson is drawn up from *within* him, staining his skin on its way into my needle stinger, to eventually splash into the needle’s empty bottle: pure liquid colour, stolen away.

“Nice vermillion,” Roach says to tip off Monkey.

At this warning, Monkey opens his eyes and reflexively reaches for my wrist to stop me, though his hand hovers just short of actually profaning the hand of the artist. Staring down at his arm, he doesn’t notice that I’m drawing the colour out from within him; he sees only that I’m filling in the black outlines of flames with a raging incarnadine fire. Monkey’s got a problem, now. Monkey asked for modern spiked-fire of minimalist black, not old-school raging flames of five shades of red and four of gold; but Monkey can’t tell me to stop, because he wants his half-finished tattoo so bad. Caught like a monkey in a monkey trap, he won’t release the bait inside

the coconut even though it doesn't feel like the fruit he expected. Hungry before, hungrier now, Monkey merely mumbles, "'S good, the fire," and closes his eyes, eager to return to that dark temple of the mind's eye where he's a molten statue: hot, hard, and gleaming.

So the rite continues. The screaming needle draws colour from within the man, and the flames take form on his flesh. When each bottle is filled with stolen essence, I slip it into my pocket and attach another empty vessel to the needle rig.

Purified by the pain into a state of grace, Monkey decides that the time has come for confession. "Illustrated William, he didn't really deserve those wings."

"Ahhhh," I say, as though just realizing something I've known almost from the moment I laid eyes on Monkey. "You killed him, didja? 'Cause the lad wasn't worthy?"

With a start, Roach shoots out a hand to stop Monkey, but Monkey's blind to the world beyond the sanctuary of suffering behind his closed eyes. "That was definitely part of it, yeah. Illustrated William, he's sitting there with his cigarette burned down to ash, all used up, and he suddenly notices me trying to sneak a peek at his wing tattoos, right? And for the first time he comes alive—really comes alive—waving his stiff finger in my face: 'No can have. Only Stain gives wings like this, and Stain only allows one chosen man to have these wings at a given time.'"

I nod at the second-hand memory. "That's when you killed him, is it?"

"Think he wanted me to. Coulda screamed, but he never did. Just took it, no matter what I did to him."

"It's like I said," I murmur as Aztec-gold hue flows into my needle's bottle. "Lad had nothing left inside."

"Hollow, yeah," agrees Monkey, head drooping chin-to-chest.

After that, there's no need for more talk. I work in silence, slipping bottle after bottle of stolen colour into my pocket. When I'm finally finished the birthing of the tattoo, I spank the newborn to awaken its wail: without warning, I lave my hands with whiskey and in one swift motion stroke them down Monkey's bloody arm, sweeping away the blood like so much afterbirth and bringing the tattoos to life by setting fire to the flames. With a demon howl, Monkey leaps from the stool and does a dance of agony, pivoting around his dangling arm as though the pain weighed five hundred pounds. "Man... fuck... shit!" Still hissing, Monkey stalks over to a window transformed into a mirror by the night and examines his tattoo: the flames seem to erupt from his shoulder bone as from the magma of his marrow, the fire flowing down his arm in the direction of his hand in a promise that the flames would fully enter into his grip in the fullness of time. That kind of shit. He flexes his arm; the flames bleed. Peering over his burning, bleeding arm at his own reflection, he lays his curling tongue down his chin and holds up two fingers in the sign of the horns, glaring mad-eyed into his own eyes—and the devil who stares back at him from the night is as real as the devil ever was, is, or could be. For him, his freshly fire-wreathed arm is a fist shaken at empty heaven: *This scar is a scar of my own free will!*

Roach averts his eyes from the sight of Monkey, make of that what you will.

Monkey whirls on me. "My man, Stain! Now that Illustrated William's dead, if someone else comes in—some bull biker, like—you gonna give 'em those angel wings?"

"Not if they don't deserve them. Not if they can survive twenty-six hours in my chair."

Monkey assumes that I misspoke, that I really meant, *Not if they can't survive twenty-six hours in my chair*. For him, this is a tenet of faith.

With a war whoop, Monkey flings open the door and charges out of the parlour into the dark. This night, he'll burn hot and wild like an acetylene tank freshly punctured, shrieking 'cause he thinks that someone gave him the fire forever—kindling like him, they ache to burn but can't admit what feeds the flames. He'll blaze bright, burn low, fade to cold; then in the coming days, he'll lay shivering in a bed with window shades drawn grey against the gold of the sun, trying to figure out some way to deserve twenty-six hours of agony. He'll eventually think of something, the greedy little monkey, and one night show up at my parlour door with a scared grin and a shaved head.

I wipe my bloody hands on Monkey's forgotten patch jacket, then toss this discarded snakeskin out the door into the blackened oil drum where Billy's music once burned. Old ashes rise, hover, fall.

Roach follows Monkey only as far the open parlour door, then stands staring out into the night alley, meditatively running his hand over his head in a way that makes his hair bristle and his thoughts run smooth. Reaching a decision, he turns his back on the open door and all considerations of chasing after Monkey, and faces me instead. "What were those colours you stole out of him?"

Wiping down my tattoo equipment, I shrug. "No business of yours, lad."

"You steal it outta all of your customers, don't you," he accuses. "What do you do with the colours?"

I toss down the whiskey I was using to clean ink from my needle and then grin at him with teeth stained ebony, crimson, and gold. That's the only answer he gets.

“I could tell everyone what you do to your customers.”

“Been done many a time, my son. It’s been whispered in bars ‘n shouted from pulpits, but it just brings in more customers, and tha’s a sorry fact.” I cant my head as though struck by a sly thought, then take a handful of the small cut-crystal bottles of stolen colour from my pocket and begin working them through my fingers: Mammon savouring his riches. “Hell of thing to know a secret that you could never make anyone else believe. Would you be willing to hear the truth of what I’ll do with those colours, even though nobody’d ever believe you? Eh, lad? Figure you could stand being an alleyway Cassandra?”

Roach nods, those eyes of his widening into hungry chick mouths.

“All right then, let the truth of it be on your head.” I take a draw straight from my jar of homebrew whiskey, swish Monkey’s ink from my teeth, then give my tattoo rig’s pedal a single pump as I spit a spray over its needle: true flames billow outward, cleansing the palate of my parlour’s darkness. “The truth of it is this: I’m going to take these colours I stole from your mate into my vault where I keep *her* portrait, then I’ll set these living colours onto a palette and resume my long labour of bringing her painting to life.” I give Roach a few shining moments to imagine this, then I say, “Naw, naw, I can’t do that to you. Here’s the real truth. What I’ll actually do in the vault is set to work painting another Monkey, using his redeemed colours to airbrush on the empty air the portrait of a finer man—a perfect Monkey. By the time that mortal waste-of-space reaches his favourite dive and tries to show off his new tattoo, he’ll have completely faded into invisibility.” I take a slow draw on the jar of whiskey and then wipe a dribble from the corner of my smirking mouth. “Naw, tha’s a bold-faced lie, really. Here now, here’s the god’s-honest truth, I swear it: I need the colours to inscribe on my vault’s floor the thousand-and-one paths of my lost tribe’s ancient Labyrinth of Winding Ways. Once I’ve

returned the sacred maze to its olden glory, I can finally walk its paths for myself ‘n follow my long-limbed folk out into the stars....”

Roach lives in his eyes, able and eager to see what people paint on the air with words, so it angers him, this casual scattering of dreams. When a man tells a story, there’s one less story in the darkness of the universe left to be discovered, but one more story shining in the sky of the world of men; but to start a story and then deny it is to pluck a possibility out of the universe and then grind it underfoot into the dust. But even as I scatter glittery chaff into the air before Roach, his mind’s eye peers through the distracting possibilities and discerns the single commonality behind all my lies: the vault. He walks past me to the vault door and stands studying it—doesn’t run his hand over its smooth soot-powder surface the way that greedy grasping Monkey did, he just stares at a single point in the depths of the vault door as though willing the steel to part before his eyes like so much dark mist.

Lost my audience, so I stop telling my shiny lies. I’d intended to give him the same *fucked you* grin that I flashed at Monkey earlier when I put a line into his hip-hop ditty, but Roach is so focused on the vault he wouldn’t even notice it. I ask him, “Now then, what tattoo are you after?”

“The wings,” he answers, a mere formality.

“Think you can do twenty-six hours in my chair?”

Roach turns away from the sealed vault and sneers at the thought. I shit you not, *sneers*—right to my face. “I can do twenty-six hours in *your* chair yeah—be a hell of a thing. But I’m not sitting on your customer stool for a second.”

Not easy to surprise me, at my age. “How’s that, now...? You’re not looking to get inked?”

He hangs his head, just another young man impatient with explaining things to a befuddled elder. “Me, ink-stained? Fuck that. I want to learn how to *make* those angel wings.” Roach starts running his hand through his tousled hair, stroking against the grain. “How’d you get the lines so fine but keep them so vivid? Illustrated William says those tats were three years old, but there was no fading in the colours at all. Most of all, I’ve never seen a tattoo so... so alive. If anyone else inked wings across an entire body, the customer’d have to hold still all the time—‘d have to stay a statue, right? ‘Cause the moment he moved one way or another, the skin’d stretch thirteen different ways and the wings would distort into just a picture on pink rubber. But your wings... I mean, when Illustrated William raised his arms, his wings *unfurled!*”

“And you think I’d teach all of this to you?”

“You’re the only one who could, Stain.”

“But who the fuck are you? Who the fuck are you to think that I’d give you the sweat off my balls, let alone any secrets of the craft? Let alone my wings.”

Roach jerks his chin at me the way people do when they greet an acquaintance on a crowded street. “We’ve met before, Stain.”

“Fuck we have. My mind’s not that far gone.

“Virgin Marie mentioned me to you. Said she showed you the holy ghost.”

Virgin Marie and the holy ghost—shit, that memory brings me up short. People can be born ghosts, did you know that? Had it all explained to me by an ancient crone all of seven-and-ten years old: Virgin Marie they called her, and she was already two years a whore by the time she came to my parlour. As I was inking a mandala on the sweet teen skin around her navel, I asked Marie how a streetwalker gets a name like ‘virgin’; ‘n she starts talking about ghosts, like she heard my question wrong or maybe she’s wrong in the head. Sunk deep in the meditation

that comes with the pain of the needle—eyes closed, autopsy-still on my table—this seventeen-year-old sibyl starts explaining to me in the kind of voice you’d hear in a séance that not all ghosts are of the dead: some people are born ghosts. Half the souls who haunt the streets are such ghosts, echoes born of family tragedies. Seen only at night as they flit through the ruins, and only fully visible to other ghosts. A born ghost may scare some timid souls now and again, but they’re unable to truly affect the living unless the living make the mistake of freely entering into their world. As the Virgin Marie is explaining all of this to me in that crypt voice of hers, she reaches down and draws up her skirt, making me think I’m about to get offered a fuck fee; but then I see what she’s showing: above her sweet young cunt is the tattoo of an angry spirit, a crone of a spectre, blood on her fangs and pure loathing in her eyes—a pain stain that so perfectly conveyed what lurked inside that haunted house of a whore that any man seeing it understood at a glance that their dick would emerge from her cunt gushing blood from two puncture wounds. Goddamned horror of a tattoo—a goddamned masterpiece. Turns out they called Marie ‘the virgin’ because the sight of that pain stain could shrivel the cock of even the horniest john. Petit mort, you godless fucking ghouls.

Me, as I’m remembering the sight of that tattoo, I’m looking at Roach, really looking at this quiet kid with the big eyes. “Yeah, Virgin Marie, she showed me her holy ghost. Takes some real needle voodoo to put a teen whore out of business. ‘N I’ve seen a few other fine tattoos by that particular tattoo artist, a real comer who calls himself... what was that name again?”

“Denizen.”

“Yeah, ‘Denizen,’ that was the name. That’s you, is it?”

Roach nods with nothing but a blink of those eyes of his.

Shaking my head, I gotta take a few moments to sort out Roach from Denizen. I'd figured Roach for a mall rat looking to get inked as a ritual rebellion, not an ink artist himself—let alone the sorta artist that could channel the demons of a true street denizen like Marie. But sometimes people born to good circumstances still have this understanding, this instinct, for the ugliness—no pain, just stain. There's no denying this kid's got that kind of eye: ask me the colour of Virgin Marie's hair, even her cunt curlies, and I couldn't tell you, but that holy ghost tattoo of hers I could pick out of a line-up of a thousand flash photos. It haunts me. No, between the names 'Roach' and 'Denizen,' I get no say in the matter: the lad's established himself as an artist worth remembering, so the right of his naming falls to him alone. 'Denizen' it is.

I need to reset, 'cause Roach has walked out and now I'm suddenly greeting Denizen at the door, right? "Didn't recognize you, Denizen," I say as I fetch 'n fill two shot glasses, one of 'em fresh 'cause I don't expect Denizen to use Roach's glass. "Never met a tattoo artist without any ink of his own."

"I like fucking, not taking it up the ass," he says, accepting his drink. "It blows my mind that other people let me ink their skin. To take some part of them that could've been anything and make it something of mine, forever."

I freeze in the act of raising my glass for a salute. "'Something of yours?'"

"Something of me," he amends.

We can drink on that. Glass chimes on glass and we swallow fire together, eyes never leaving each other. I ease myself into the comfort of the wheeled chair I use when I'm giving tattoos, but Denizen hauls over an old wheel rim for himself rather than sit on the stool my customers use.

“I can see why a soul wouldn’t want someone else’s mark on them,” I say to him, “but you could still give yourself a tattoo by your own hand.”

Denizen’s eyes run along the woad-hued tracery of my shoulders. “But then there’d be part of me that could have been anything, that’ll never be anything else. If I ink a skull on the back of my hand, that patch of skin can never have a lotus.”

“Naw, naw, naw, doesn’t work that way, my lad,” I insist. “Here, answer me this: what’s the opposite of getting a tattoo?”

“The opposite of getting a tattoo? The opposite of getting a tattoo is getting no tattoo—is preserving all possibilities.”

I shake my head. “The opposite of getting a tattoo is getting nothing at all. That’s the fear that drives the sorry soul to a skin shop like mine: life’s a-passing, and they’re getting nothing out of it. Nothing to *show* for it. For some people, the world’s as fulla ideas as the air’s fulla butterflies in the spring, but all that wonder’s passing overhead, passing onward, flying off somewhere else. So some folk reach up and snatch an idea from the air, then hire a tattoolist to pin that image in place on their skin—to set the butterfly under glass.”

“In a killing glass, you mean. That killing glass kills a little piece of the owner, and leaves the butterfly completely alive.” Denizen holds up his hands splayed in the air, in the gesture of a child proving that his hands are clean. “I have no tattoos on me, so all my possibilities remain alive.”

“Until when, though? Until when? What, you think your skin’s got an immortal soul? Something you gotta keep clean as you pass through this mortal vale on your way to eternity?”

Denizen sips at his whiskey and shrugs, signalling that he’s giving up on making me understand. He even smiles a secret little superior smile he thinks I won’t notice—see,

according to him, an old man like me covered in tattoos is riddled by all the choices made that can never be made again, a blanket with more holes than wool. Little fucker. Furious, I remove from my pocket a handful of cut-crystal bottles of stolen colours and shake this fistful of jewels in his face. “You know what I’m going to do with these colours?”

“Of course not.”

“Rejoice, then! Because according to you, *not* knowing what I’m going to do with these stolen colours leaves alive all the other possibilities. If I *don’t* reveal to you the secret behind these colours, you can walk out that parlour door into the night with your ignorant pockets filled to the brim with unspoiled conjecture.” Cackling, I rise from my chair and fling open the parlour door as an invitation for him to leave. “Hell, you should run away! Because according to you, if I *do* reveal what I do with these colours, all the other infinite possibilities dwindle down to a single certainty—it’s a slaughter of the butterflies, with a sole lone and lonely survivor truth cawing in the depopulated sky. On the other hand....” I cross to the other side of the parlour and set my hand on the vault’s combination dial. “The answer to the mystery of what I do with those colours lies right here within this vault, Denizen—and I’m giving you a choice. You can flee out the door into the night of infinite possibilities, or you can join me in a cramped vault just big enough for a single truth.”

Denizen hesitates.

I spin the vault’s combination dial clockwise, then back, then forward again, and once more back, then I set the spindle wheel awhirl: deep steel answers, bolts booming open. I haul the heavy door open just enough to give Denizen’s eyes a taste of what lies within—to reveal to him that there’s a light glimmering deep inside the vault.

Denizen averts his eyes from the glimmering vault, stares deep into his whiskey for a time, then suddenly downs the remainder of the fire water and sharply slaps his shot glass down on the floor. He rises from the wheel rim that he had chosen for a seat, then steps to the parlour's open door as though he has a mind to walk out of *The Pain Stain* and never come back. But where would he go? Out the front door, back into the world of everything he already knows? If he was that kind of person, he'd have never sought through the alleys for my parlour, let alone found its hiding place in the night. Denizen closes the parlour door, slides its bolt shut, then joins me at the vault.

I say nothing as I pull open the massy door of black steel and step back, allowing him to enter.

A single step inside the vault, Denizen suddenly ducks his head and recoils as though from the caress of cobwebs against his face; but it's not a cloying closeness that startles him, it's the unexpected sensation of space. There's no roof above him. This overhead vertigo triggers his instinct to brace himself, but when he reaches out toward the vault's close-pressing walls, his outstretching hands find nothing at all—just more empty space on both sides of him.

Disoriented, he drops to one knee and stays there, trying to understand the nature of the vault.

Standing behind him on the threshold of the vault, I say nothing. Nothing needs saying—the lad's got eyes.

Adjusting to the darkness, these eyes behold that the vault has no roof: there's nothing above but the star-poor city sky. To each side, instead of the expected shelves laden with treasure that Denizen musta been expecting, there's only the tumbledown remains of two walls,

their bare bricks descending on a slant outward until they reach a single remaining row of disintegrating bricks which's all that's left of the far wall. Underfoot is a rattling path of industrial gratings laid over the slick moss of the mouldering original floor. See, the section of the building that once housed the vault collapsed decades ago, exposing the vault interior and making its inner wall the outer wall of the surviving building, the vault door becoming just a rear door. Over the years, the surviving remnant of the building was leased cheaper and cheaper as the neighbourhood vanished into the rear shadows of taller structures, until it decayed to the verge of being forever forsaken. That's when it became my parlour, *The Pain Stain*.

Denizen rises from his knee, walks the path of old gratings, and steps over the remains of the far wall. I follow, not real fast.

Beyond is an alley, a lost one. Walls of wind-whistling sheet tin topped with corroded concertina wire seal off the ends of the alley, and the flank of the building opposite is blank brick devoid of windows and doors. A rust-leprous camper rests on blocks to one side, a string of patio lanterns connecting it to the building's power supply; it's one of these split-plastic lanterns, the only one on the string still functional, that provides the alley's only illumination—this old light, the reality behind the beguiling glimmer that Denizen had glimpsed around the edges of the vault door earlier. The iron carcasses of vehicle frames and engine blocks lay tumbled upon the ground as though a herd of living machines died decades ago and decayed to skeletons on the spot. The ground, visible in veins through pavement long fissured into squares, radiates the chilled loam scent of soil too sunk in shadow to ever know the life-giving touch of sunlight.

Denizen takes it all in, then turns to me, arms open and out in a question, in a plea. I jerk my chin toward a patch of corrugated shadow on the ground: a drainage grill of a type no longer

seen in the rest of the city, its corroded bars more widely spaced than permissible in this era of bicycle commuters. Hasn't rained lately. From the grill rises the fermenting-hops stench of an old man's urine.

Denizen stares down at the grill. "This?"

"Yeah."

I set about a familiar unappetizing chore. I take a bottle of Monkey's stolen colours from my pocket, unscrew the cap, and upend it: liquid saffron streams down through the air and into the grill, pattering into the stagnant urine somewhere below. The next bottle contains an incarnadine as lustrous as imperial sealing wax; when I pour it into the grill, the drops of liquid that chance to land upon the corroded iron bars have the clotted consistency of spoiled blood plasma.

Hands in pockets and shoulders slouched, Denizen watches the colours vanish down the drain with the bleakness of a man staring into the dying coals at the end of a bonfire party that's run too close to dawn. The alcohol's catching up with both of us out here in the cool night air, making our thoughts sluggish and our eyes heavy. When I have poured out the last of Monkey's stolen colours, I stand with my own hands in my pockets, staring down into the grill. The two of us could be two lone mourners gazing down into a grave. Denizen shakes his head. "Is that it?"

"Yeah."

"Then what's the use of stealing his colours at all?"

"Truth be told, 's hard to even say that I *steal* colours—they were all going to waste anyway. Listen."

Somewhere beyond the alley, the thin wail of a police siren rises into the night. Then two. Converging.

Turning toward the distant sirens, Denizen wonders aloud, “Is that Monkey they’re coming for?”

“Yeah. Think so.”

As Denizen and I gaze into the night sky beyond an alley wall, flashing red light pulses on the tops of distant buildings like firelight from the other side of a range of hills. The sirens converge into the brief scream of rubber. We tense in anticipation of gunshots. None come. Doesn’t matter—prison is gray enough to be a death of all colour.

“No wings for him,” I declare, boot toe nudging at some nodules of dirt stained by errant drops of colour, tipping them into the grill.

“What a waste,” Denizen murmurs, still staring off into the high night. “There’s nothing to be done for his colours, at least? Nothing at all?”

I shrug shoulders covered in fading tattoos. “What am I going to do with someone else’s colours? Can’t keep ‘em—anything that comes out of the body promptly sets to rotting.”

Denizen rubs fists against his eyes, trying to drive away the sleepiness. “But what’s the point of drawing out his colours at all, then?”

“How many times I gotta tell you: ain’t really a matter of there being a point. I mean, the *Mona Lisa*’s a masterpiece, but what’s the deep-down point? Uh? I pull the colour out of people to stain their skin, to give them *something* to show for the hidden rainbows going to waste inside ‘em. That’s all.”

“But if people have whole wellsprings of colour inside them, who’s to say they won’t do something worthwhile with those colours during their life?”

“Sure, everyone has it in them to be a DaVinci or a Darwin; but here we are, living in a world of hogs and pork-loving cannibals.” I chuckle conspiratorially, inviting him to join me in laughter and be recognized as a fellow wise man.

But Denizen refuses this invitation to be elevated into the ranks of the low aristocracy of cynicism. Scowling, he paces a circuit around the rusted remains of an engine block, sucking deep sobering draughts of oxygen and eyeing the oil rainbows lingering in the bottoms of water-filled piston chambers. “People should be helped to understand the colours within.”

I give him a sour look. “Yeah? Which you gonna teach them first, professor: how much potential they’re pissing away, or how little of it you can redeem for them? May heaven and a helluva good pawn shop help the tattooist who forces his customers to confront just how skin-thin a tattoo really is—that tattoos are dreams writ on flesh, that go the way of all flesh. An artist who forces the audience to confront the limits of his craft is guilty of the original sin of knowledge and the original sin of Cain both-in-one.”

Denizen runs his hand over his crown again, stirring his hair into a crest. His hand’s shaking. Voice’s shaking, too. “You’re lying. I can’t exactly say which parts are lies and which parts are truths in the service of a lie, but I know in my heart that you’re lying.”

“Naw, no you don’t; you believe me. My words hurt like hell, so you know they’re right, ‘cause there ain’t nothing that people believe in better than pain. People who lose faith in everything else still retain their faith in pain. Ours is a world of affliction, so people believe that the more something hurts the more firmly grounded it is in reality. The truer it is. That’s why the extremes of agony provoke that sense of intensified reality, of a higher core truth, that gives rise to the notion of significance. I mean, there’s the apples you buy in a supermarket, and then there’s the apples that you get to taste only at the cost of paradise and an exile life of suffering—

between me and you, it's the same fucking apples; but they sure taste different. Us monkeys even went so far as to compose the myth of eternal suffering in the afterlife to give our actions in daily life a sense of significance. We crafted ourselves Hell as a desperate act of faith."

As I speak, Denizen rubs at his aching forehead with a thumb and forefinger, the gesture causing the rest of his hand to shade his eyes—the hands-over-ears mannerism of a man who listens with his eyes but is pained by what he hears. "But if a law ever forced tattoo parlours to use anaesthetic, people would still get tattoos."

I sniff and hawk into the grill. "Only out of tradition, and not for long. Without the suffering, tattooing as an art form would wither within a generation, 'cause the significance of the image would be gone and all that'd be left is its meaning. Tattoos would become just another cosmetic."

"Some say that's all tattoos are now."

"They only say that 'cause they don't understand ritual. Rituals make something special—give it shine—'n the ritual of the tattoo is a gauntlet that invests meaningful-but-only-skin-deep symbols with magic. The suffering turns a woman's name tattooed on an arm into a love charm, makes a tiger image into an animal totem, transforms a Chinese character for 'warrior' into a spirit-summoning sigil, and all that other sweet old voodoo." I smile at fond memories. "It's a crock of course. A goddamned wondrous crock."

Still pacing through the wreckage of the lost alley, Denizen refuses to so much as retort. The alley walls' corroded concertina rolls rasp in a night breeze like bare mattress springs.

"I'm not saying that suffering is everything," I continue. "I'm not even saying that suffering's enough, but it's the best we have left. And people are even starting to lose faith that the pain of the tattoo needle is suffering enough: they've started turning toward piercings, and

even outright mutilations—they're getting their tongues split now, from the tip down the middle, like a snake. Sad fucking day, giving way to a sad fucking night."

Just as Denizen earlier refused to protest that the magic behind tattoos is no crock, he now refuses to agree that self-mutilation marks an inflationary decline. He's listening though, for his lip curls in distaste. He leaves off his pacing and stalks back to the edge of the filthy grill, there to stand staring down at the grave of all colour.

"Congratulations," I press him from the other side of the grill, "you won the argument. Back in my parlour, you said that to remain in unstained ignorance is to keep all shining possibilities alive, and it turns out that you were right—you shoulda walked out the front door and never learned the shitty truth about what happens to people's colours back here in the alley. Hell, you were even right never to get a tattoo of your own. And you figured it all out before you ended up a hickey-covered hypocrite like me." I put my fists together before me and flex my arms and shoulders to highlight their wreckage of decaying tattoos. "Congratulations, lad. Here's to ya, and here's to the clear-eyed life." Whiskey's still back in the parlour, so I toast his victory by raising an empty hand posed as though it gripped a glass and then drinking down empty air.

But Denizen now no longer hears me or my taunts, for he is now staring into the darkness below the rusted grill in the same way he earlier stared into the steel depths of the locked vault door, his face set in the ferocious scowl of a man who believes that his eyes can pierce darkness and matter by sheer force of will. The hand that has never stopped stroking his hair now curls, his fingers combing parallel furrows into his tousled hair even as his nails rake at the scalp as though digging toward entombed epiphany. I sense that he's so close to it now, but I do not allow myself to feel even the slightest hope that Denizen can, in the forest of his thoughts, walk

the winding way through the true lies I have told him and come at last to truth of artifice lying beyond. I keep my eyes on the grill and hold as still as I can, resolved to be blameless of his fall.

But Denizen does not fall—he rises. He raises his eyes from the foul grill, lifts his shaking hand from his head, and studies the back of this hand in the way of a man visualizing how a proposed tattoo will look. That would be my Monkey. But Denizen’s another species: he slowly turns his now-steady hand and gazes into its palm, seeing something *inside* his hand. Eventually, he gives words to what his eyes now behold. “I already have tattoos.”

I keep my voice as steady as I can. “How’s that?”

“I have *thousands* of tattoos.”

“Do tell.”

His eyes upon his hand and his hand upraised to the starry sky, Denizen testifies, “I’m the artist—my tattoos are on the inside. I’m a church, Stain. I’m a cathedral of thousands of stained glass murals, but the light doesn’t shine inward through the stained glass to cast these images on the bent heads of the faithful—I burn with my own light, blazing from within, the glory of my stained glass shining outward to fall upon the flesh of others.” He’s nodding his head now, those eyes of his distant. “*That’s* why I’ve always recoiled from getting a tattoo of my own. I don’t want people looking at my mere meat; I want their eyes to see solely what I shine.” With this, Denizen closes his hand as though firmly gripping something precious that he has just plucked from the air; his fist quakes with effort, the fingers going white, as though he were squeezing this air-plucked epiphany with force enough to pierce it through his palm into himself.

Staring at him, I know. I know *him*. Any doubts remaining are gone now: the lad has the eye. The ‘fire eye’—can’t explain it any better than that. He’s what I need. What I’ve needed for an age now.

For all my eagerness, I observe a silence out of respect for Denizen's passage through understanding. Only when Denizen eventually opens his fist, revealing four bloody scimitars imprinted by his fingernails on his palm, do I speak: "I have a confession."

"So go find a priest," he retorts, his voice sere and distant in the wake of his welling of passion.

"Don't believe in priests—they already stole all the colour they're ever gonna get, and the shine's gone out of their lies." I gesture with my thumb over my bare shoulders to my back, to the skin hidden beneath my undershirt. "I have a problem, Denizen. I can't reach my back."

"Got an itch?"

"You can't know how bad. My tattoos are fading, see. I can renew the tattoos anywhere on my body except my back, but I can't bring myself to redo any of my tattoos if they can't *all* be renewed. And it's been an age since I found anyone I could have faith in to ink me right." Even as I confide this, I can't help setting my hands to my undershirt's shoulder straps and drawing them tight, cinching them down against the thought of showing anyone the ancient stains on my back. "What I need is an artist who could ink like Michelangelo and keep his mouth shut about murder."

Denizen appraises my shoulder tattoos, but understands that he can't ask me to take off my shirt and show him my back until we have a deal. "If I renew your tattoos, you'll teach me how to make those angel wings?"

"Is that still important to you?"

"More than just important, now."

I nod once: an acknowledgement that's he's passed another test. "Help me, and I'll teach you the secret of my wings, my son. Starting with the simplest fact: who says they're *angel*

wings? Whoever tells you that wings on a man make him either an angel or a devil is a liar, and no friend of man. And the outright enemy of the artist.” I hold out a hand stained along its edge with many inks. “We have a bargain?”

Denizen shakes my hand of many colours, a mere formality.

Back inside my parlour, I empty my pockets of cut-crystal ink bottles and entrust them and my tattoo machine to Denizen. I take my place on the customer stool for the first time in an age, bow my head, and begin composing myself for the coming ordeal. Hands overfull of clinking bottles still filthy with Monkey’s clotting colours, Denizen addresses himself to the strange ebony-and-gold pedestal and its ornate needle, a cleft of shadow between his brows as he strives to comprehend the workings of the equipment. He carefully sets down his awkward burden of cut-crystal bottles along the top edge of the pedestal, then he surveys the machine from all sides, perhaps seeking out an access panel that could provide him a glimpse into the inner workings of the machine. No such panel exists. Frowning at the necessity of using his hands to learn, he picks up the ornate needle rig, tests the feel of its worn grip, then holds the needle tip as far from his eyes as possible and steps on the pedestal’s pedal switch. The *crack* of the needle tip’s tiny arc of electricity is expected, but Denizen is taken off guard by the current that shoots through the needle rig’s nickel handle. As the needle flies from his stung hand, its attached cord sweeps half the cut-crystal bottles off the pedestal, needle and bottles rattling down onto the dusty floor planks.

Petulant with fright and frustration, Denizen leaves the bottles and ink where they have fallen. “Damn it, Stain! How’m I expected to know how this works?”

“You’re not expected to *know*; you’re expected to learn. So goes the hope.”

“Why can’t you just teach me?”

“Have been.” Now as calm as I’ll be able to make myself, I set about removing my shirt.

“Someday, I’d like to understand why everything has to be such a mystery,” bitches Denizen, turning away from me. “And then—” But Denizen falls silent, his gaze rising into the air as the shadows of the parlour start ebbing away, fleeing before a waxing luminance. This pearly light casts Denizen’s startled silhouette larger than life upon the wall and the underside of the peaked roof so that he seems to loom over himself: a shadow of a titan bending to greet an awed mortal that is himself. After the first wave of confusion passes, Denizen unpuzzles the angle of the light, though he still understands nothing at all of the light’s nature, and he turns toward its radiant source.

Wings unfurl from my bared back. It is these wings that have brushed back the shadows with a pearly light, for my wings do not merely radiate shed light, they *are* light. The lead edges of my proud wings rise high enough to stir eddies of dust from the roof’s beams, and the broadest of the flight feathers descend all the way to the nail-protruding floor planks. Like all things of perfect whiteness, my wings have shimmering within them rainbows of all colours; but like all things of the world, my wings are no longer perfectly white. Each feather retains a purity of whiteness only at its core, and fade to gray towards its outer edges.

Denizen stands transfixed by the sight of my wings for a time, then eventually bows his head and shades his eyes from their blinding radiance with a shaking hand as he stretches forth his other hand to touch my radiant feathers—but he cannot bring himself to set his fingers upon them. Too afraid to touch these wings of light and yet overwhelmed by the need to do so, he fetches my jar of whiskey, anoints his hands with the burning-cold liquid, then sets his hands to

the tattoo rig's fallen needle and steps upon the pedestal's floor pedal; the stinger's tiny arc ignites the whiskey, wreathing his hands with Persian-green flames—two fiery five-pointed stars kindling deep in the awed eyes of the watcher who owns both the hands and the fire. The flames swiftly burn out, and his purified hands, now bare of all hair and dead skin, marvel at their new sensitivity, thumbs rubbing across fingertips in a prayer beads gesture. Only then does he allow himself to touch my wings—exploring their texture, making their inner rainbows coruscate, witnessing how many colours short of perfection the whiteness has become.

“How do I do it, Stain?” he asks. “How do I make it right?”

I answer in a voice made hoarse by ages of life, by a night of whisky, and by fledgling hope. “I’ve already taught what you need.”

Denizen's purified hand strokes the air just above his hair as he reflects upon the glints of esoteric knowledge he has glimpsed this night. After a time, he gathers the fallen ink bottles, washes them with whiskey, then washes them to a higher order by touching tiny lightning to the damp bottles—sanctifying them with fire, leaving the cut-crystal bottles so perfectly clean that they are invisible save for the rainbows inherent to crystal. He affixes one of these bottles to the needle rig, addresses his eyes fully to my wings even though their dazzling light makes his eyes leak tears, then nods.

I bow my head in acknowledgment, then press my hands together in the prayerful position of one bracing for a gauntlet of suffering.

Denizen begins. He presses the tip of the needle to the place where the skin lies thinnest over the bone—the centre of his brow—then he sets his foot upon the pedal switch, a first step upon a very long journey. The secret lightning that lives within the pedestal blazes through the needle, its current vastly more intense than Monkey ever experienced because this electricity

flows not merely through the tiny tip, but through the needle's broad handle as well. The agony forbids even a scream. Tears smoke. The empty cut-crystal bottle begins to fill, drop by torturous drop, with cobalt blue, and the auspiciousness of this hue heartens me, for it is the very colour of the highest sky. When this seemingly endless, yet merely first, stroke of lightning fades, Denizen already feels hollow. Everything about him trembles now, save for his hand; his hand is steady as he sets the tip of the needle to one of my wings' many grey stains.

The artist sets his foot upon the pedal, another step in the journey. In his hand, the lightning sings the colour of the sky.

The fiery ink of sacred inspiration sears my feather as though piercing it with a burning nail, a pain greater than anything known to anything merely mortal. But I endure. I endure, as I shall endure all the hours of agony that shall follow, so that I may—renewed for another age—once again rise into the sky.

Afterword: “The Pain Stain”

“Without the suffering, tattooing as an art form would wither within a generation, ‘cause the significance of the image would be gone and all that’d be left is its meaning.... The suffering turns a woman’s name tattooed on an arm into a love charm, makes a tiger image into an animal totem, transforms a Chinese character for ‘warrior’ into a spirit-summoning sigil, and all that other sweet old voodoo.” I smile at fond memories. “It’s a crock of course. A goddamned wondrous crock.”

-- *The Pain Stain*

Being a writer can sometimes make one feel less for having been a writer. There are nights when one is writing and not out socializing, having fun, falling in love; there is money that could have been made in a more lucrative career; there are sunny days that one sees only through the slats of a window blind. Regrets for moments missed, and ghosts—both are the presence of an absence of life, and both haunt.

Yet, there are also times when the writer emerges from the depths of a story and, blinking, realizes how much lesser they would have been had they never been a writer. Such rare stories convey to the writer knowledge only truly attainable through the ritual of writing; for, in the way of ritual, the very process of artistic discovery imbues the gleaned knowledge with a significance that transcends mere meaning.

“The Pain Stain” is such a story for me. Had I never been a writer, I could not have communed with the insights I found via the writing of this novella, for (in keeping with one of the epistemological themes of this story) had someone else merely *told* me these ideas, they would not have resonated so powerfully with me.

“The Pain Stain” is a tale of art. Of art, artists, art audiences, art mentors, and art learners. As with my other fiction, the story’s nascence in my imagination involved a philosophical dissonance and a disjuncture between my views on a topic and more popular views. The seed topic, in this instance, was tattoos. Over the past generation, the art of tattooing has conspicuously become much more mainstream, with tattoos becoming nearly as ubiquitous as cosmetics. As an artist, I understand the attraction of tattoos; yet, they also seem tantamount to writing someone else’s name on your skin. Notably, I have an unusual attitude toward external identity adornments: I wear no clothes with team names, conspicuous company logos, numbers, pictures, designs (beyond, say, stripes), mottos, and the like; I’ve never worn a badge or pin; I never wear any jewellery, beyond a watch; I have no fashion affectations such as an unusual hat or bandana; my haircut is as generic as possible; I eschew moustaches and beards; and I certainly would never have a tattoo. This topical dissonance and the disjuncture between my view and the popular view of tattoos motivated me to explore the issues of tattoos, identity, and art via narrative, and this culminated in “The Pain Stain.”

As is typically the case, the relatively modest handful of ideas with which I set out upon the path of composition spawned innumerable other considerations, many of which yielded insights into issues that had bedevilled me for years (e.g., the meaning versus significance tension cited at several points in the tale). Indeed, a quick survey of the topics under examination in “The Pain Stain” yielded me a list of forty-seven major topics (e.g., Is there truly

such a thing as a failure of identity? Anthropological symbolism of colour and form. Ignorance as inspiration. Reclaiming archetypes from Judeo-Christianity). As a story of artists discussing art, “The Pain Stain” risked pitfalls associated with art stories, such as lofting free of a concrete manifestation of the abstract principles under examination or becoming a story only interesting to art cognoscenti; yet, I feel that the story managed to avoid the trap of becoming a languid sitting-garden of contemplation, and that it instead possesses a vitality.

For me, one of the currents that gives this particular piece of fiction its vitality is its lies. In the afterword of “The Wrong Breed of Dreamer,” I outlined my ‘right and write’ approach to characterization, a compositional strategy of assuming that all major characters have a legitimate motivational framework—that they are ‘right’—and then composing the narrative based upon this presumption. This approach facilitates strong characterization, which in turn impels sharper conflict, leading to a tenser plot; and these elements tend to result in themes disposed toward complexity and innovation. But the ‘right and write’ approach also often has a striking side-effect within my fiction: characters rarely lie. Being possessors of a motivational framework intentionally designed to be dialectically defensible, these characters often feel both little need to dissimulate and an eagerness to express their opinions with candour. (Dissembling, in my fiction, tends to flow from fear, e.g., Vivian’s many falsehoods in “The Storyteller.”) Indeed, I have arrived at the end of some of my stories with the sense that no character tells a lie anywhere within the narrative; for example, the case can be made that none of the three characters in “The Wrong Breed of Dreamer” ever lies. They occasionally evade, and the accuracy of many of their assertions can certainly be challenged, but a careful analysis of the story would struggle to find an instance in which a character expresses an idea that they themselves do not believe to be true at the time of its utterance.

But in “The Pain Stain,” there are indeed lies. The characters not only acknowledge these lies, they occasionally even revel in them. A few of these lies are common dissimulations, e.g., Monkey is a murderer who lies about his crimes, but the majority of the lies that give the story its organic vitality flow from the nature of aesthetic discussions. To understand this, one must consider the lies in the context in which they are advanced—specifically, in the several art-focused pedagogical relationships that exist within the story.

In the initial stages of the story, the pedagogical relationship that exists between the tattooist and his two visitors is that of an artist and his audience, and in that instance the lies that the artist tells aim at creating an effect in his audience—aim at manipulating and eventually altering their viewpoints. Indeed, the tattooist’s lies, like his truths, are hence tantamount to tiny acts of art.

But when the owner of the tattoo shop finds himself alone with one visitor and discovers this visitor to be a fledgling tattooist himself, and a promising one, a new pedagogical relationship comes into being: that of an art mentor and a student. In this relationship, the mentor chooses not to directly express knowledge, but rather to impel his student into discovering aesthetic knowledge for himself. In this process, the lies of the mentor are not misinformation, they are challenges—provocations, not prevarications—designed to elicit an emotionally charged reflection upon the student’s part, emotionality and reflection being vital in artistic growth. In this way, the art mentor’s approach to impelling growth in the art student mirrors an artist’s engagement with their audience, and also suggests a dialectical process in which a conversation leader (such as a classroom teacher or professor) may advance hypothetical positions that are false for the purpose of provoking the other discussants to attack the position,

which will demand that the discussants actively formulate counter-arguments, advance contending hypothetical positions, and develop support for these positions.

Similarly, the story itself challenges the reader in an attempt to elicit both emotion and reflection, in order to impel the reader into epiphanies that allow the learner to feel ownership of their learning. (A process that can only be successful in the context of high ambiguity of theme.) Given this, the story's reader will hopefully recognize that the lies told in "The Pain Stain" exist in a literary dialectical context, and hence properly interpret these lies as challenges and not prevarications.

But how shall "The Pain Stain" be judged in terms of its overall truthfulness? Should it be evaluated in terms of truthfulness at all? My answer to these two questions is: of course the story must be evaluated based upon its truthfulness, but I cannot specify exactly how. In criticizing narrative inquiry as a form of research, Gardner contends "Essentially in a novel, you can say what you want, and you are judged by how effectively you say it without any particular regard to the truth value" (Gardner cited in Saks, 1996, p. 403); but his dialectic opponent in that particular debate, Eisner, retorts with what seems to me to be the merest commonsense, "questions of truth are not irrelevant in assessing the worth of a novel" (Eisner, cited in Saks, 1996, p. 403). I shall not dwell upon the quixotic challenge of demarcating truth; instead, I shall suggest that the simple wording used by Cole and Knowles (2001) in suggesting that narrative inquiry's fiction must evidence "a high level of *authenticity* that speaks to the truthfulness and sincerity of the research" (p. 216) should suffice to characterize the truth criterion by which "The Pain Stain" will inevitably be evaluated by its readership.

There is a third implicit artistic pedagogical relationship within the story: the relationship between the first-person narrator and the reader, for Stain clearly has ideas about art that he

wants to communicate to the readership. Notably, the narrator and the writer are not synonymous, and hence my relationship with the reader constitutes a fourth implicit pedagogical relationship. The compositional implications of the first-person narrator have been extensively explored in literary criticism and have also been examined in narrative inquiry to an extent, e.g., by (Ely, 2007), so I will limit myself to one further observation: the first-person narrator technique is particularly resonant in an educational narrative inquiry context because the relationship between the narrator and the readership within the context of a story echoes the relationship that exists between a teacher and students in a classroom context; in these instances, the narrator-teacher is recognized as a mediator of knowledge, a lens whose influence upon the knowledge stream must be gauged by the audience-students.

“The Pain Stain” is a rare piece of pedagogical art: narrative inquiry in the form of genre fiction. In my research, I came across very few instances of genre fiction in narrative inquiry (e.g., fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, romance, westerns), though my review of narrative inquiry was tightly focused on the education field and was inevitably not all-encompassing even within that arena. Nevertheless, I can safely assert that genre writing in narrative inquiry is, at the most, unusual. I can imagine three reasons for this.

First, a condescending attitude toward genre fiction exists within society, wherein genre fiction is viewed as more escapist in agenda, as correspondingly less given to mature examination of intellectual matters, and as demonstrating a lesser standard of literary quality. Personally, I believe that this prejudice fails to acknowledge that genre fiction can span a particularly broad spectrum, from the admittedly lightweight pulps to brilliant intellectual masterpieces such as *Brave New World*, *Animal Farm*, and *1984*. Yet, whatever one believes of the accuracy of these negative views of genre fiction, a writer cannot help but be aware of their

existence, and hence a narrative inquiry writer-researcher must be aware that composing a research text in a genre such as, say, romance, may prejudice some portion of their potential readership against the text—a burden all the more difficult to support given that narrative inquiry itself still suffers from a similar prejudice in which many members of the research community hold narrative inquiry in low repute as a research form. Narrative researchers may even fear that the prejudice against genre fiction may impact their reputations as scholars should they choose to write genre fiction.

The second reason why narrative inquiry practitioners may hesitate to write genre research texts lies in the collaborative nature of RAN. RAN gathers and analyzes the life experience of collaborative participants and then restories this experience; hence, the RAN researcher who gathers and analyzes the life experiences of real people such as, say, mathematics teachers, may be pressed to justify restorying the participants' real-life experiences in an 'unreal' context such as fantasy or in a bombastic context such as that of a thriller. Personally, I consider that RAN could indeed draw effectively upon genre fiction, e.g., I see the aesthetic authenticity in restorying the life experience of abused children via a horror story, and Gough (2002) notes the parallels between crime fiction and stories of educational inquiry; yet, RAN researchers who draw upon genre fiction can anticipate potential accusations of distortion, authorial self-indulgence, and of failing to 'honour the participant.'

A third reason why a narrative inquiry researcher might shy from genre fiction is the difficulty that genre fiction poses to reviewers attempting to assay the veracity of the fiction's depiction of human behaviour. In discussing the issue of truth within a narrative inquiry novel, Eisner posited a standard for evaluating a narrative inquiry novel:

I think you would have to make judgments on the basis of whether that novel has referential adequacy, in my terms. That is to say, if you went out to look at such places, whether you would see what in fact the person has described as existing there. (Eisner, cited in Saks, 1996, p. 404)

But how could reviewers evaluate a narrative inquiry novel for such referential adequacy if that novel depicted the education system of a 22nd century dystopia? Given this difficulty, a narrative inquiry researcher might hence choose to avoid writing genre fiction for fear of the criticism that they have insulated their fiction from such evaluations of veracity.

These three concerns of genre fiction in a narrative inquiry context (prejudice against genre fiction in general; concerns that genre fiction cannot appropriately represent the collaborative participants' real-life experience; the difficulty of evaluating the referential adequacy of genre fiction) partly remain just as much of a concern in NAR as in RAN. The general prejudice against genre fiction and the difficulty of judging referential adequacy impact RAN and NAR equally. Yet, NAR does not feature RAN's pivotal focus upon collaborative participants, and hence a NAR researcher can engage in genre fiction without facing the accusation that they are distorting the life experience of their collaborative participants.

Moreover, the fundamental pedagogical premise of NAR better meshes with the nature of most genre fiction than does RAN. Whereas RAN observes, NAR speculates, and such speculation is the very soul of those genre types such as fantasy and science fiction that have been collectively termed speculative fiction. Whereas RAN distills its observations of daily life experience, NAR extrapolates from its speculations, and this affords NAR a freedom to boldly explore innovative themes, a strength of speculative fiction as well. Whereas RAN feels an onus to disseminate its distillations of daily reality via stories that represent daily life as directly as

possible in order to achieve ‘truth by fidelity’ in the way of a metaphoric camera snapshot, NAR has a freedom to depict settings, events, and characters that do not conform directly to daily reality but which are alternative viewpoints of reality or intensifications of elements of reality, hence achieving ‘truth by representation’ in the way of art. For these reasons, I submit that NAR is not only, on the whole, less vulnerable than RAN to the negative ramifications of using genre fiction in a narrative inquiry context, many of NAR’s strengths are a good fit with the strengths of genre fiction, speculative fiction in particular.

In light of these considerations of RAN’s and NAR’s differing relationships to genre fiction, the question could usefully be asked: could “The Pain Stain” have originated from a RAN context? I believe this would be possible, but unlikely. The esoteric nature of the story would have been difficult to actualize in tandem with RAN’s collaborative participants, since for the collaborative participants to truly have been collaborators in the fiction, two conditions would have had to have been satisfied: a) the participants would have had to have been able to understand the story’s themes; b) the participants would have had to subsequently concur that the themes of the story accurately represent their experiences, albeit as viewed through the prism of the genre. I expect that condition (a) would have been difficult to satisfy, given that “The Pain Stain” is so complex and esoteric as to challenge even a very sophisticated reader; furthermore, for me to have been forced to explain the evolving themes to a collaborative participant during my writing process (draft after recursive draft) would have slowed the creative process and rendered stale many of the story’s ideas in my mind. Similarly, I submit that condition (b) would also have been difficult to satisfy, since the story’s themes are so numerous, varied, and sometimes even apparently in contradiction with each other that a collaborative participant who concurred with Theme X is almost certain to have rejected Theme Y. Hence, in sum, so esoteric

and multifaceted a tale of art as “The Pain Stain” would have been difficult to actualize in partnership with any collaborative parties at all (let alone collaborative participants unlikely to possess advanced literary awareness), and thus “The Pain Stain” is an example of a narrative inquiry text unlikely to have ever existed at all were it not for the advent of NAR.

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