

The Emptiness with No Eyes

*The writer and the
wilderness*

Edd B. Jennings

When unsaid things lace lovers' passion-cries
We cling to life, we're dust-drops, swirled. Afar,
Lies eyeless emptiness in deep disguise
As pauses in our breath. It's who we are.
For little deaths keep big ones chained at bay,
Our thrills, your charming chases, savage grins,
Growled games, my sweet resistance. We'll not pay
The Bitch before it's time (she always wins).
For when you leave, I'll stay. We know it, though.
With one salute to Lucy sails Sir Reep
His little boat to paddle, sword to throw,
To pierce salt waters, sink and stab the Deep.
I pour our tea, don't ask you when you'll go.
Departures. Lover, don't you think I know?

—LJ MacDowall, from the Utter North Sonnet Crown

Friday, September 25th—In the early calm—A few weeks ago I

would have logged the time. Exact time centers me. I lost that when my watch stopped. If the sun shows today—

it might not—I will use the rose, the mirror, and the lanyard of my compass to take a back reading off the sun. I compare this reading to others at sunrise and sunset, and I will have the hours of remaining daylight. I tell myself it doesn't matter if I do without that luxury.

I dreaded my first look out of the tent, but I had to see the ice. Without leaving my sleeping bag, I pushed my head out the door into the cold. The thin ice formed during last night's calm extended another thirty feet out. One morning soon, I will look out and see the first real ice of winter. Canoe travel for the season will end. This low

island in Beverly Lake, where the Dubawnt and Thelon Rivers come together, would be a bad place to be trapped. But this morning I can get out. I will get out.

The water in the coffee pot I left in the small tent's vestibule froze solid again, and the water in the half-gallon Nalgene jar I kept inside the tent barely sloshed when I shook it. I put the frozen coffee pot on the little one-burner stove and prayed the whole time the flame wouldn't burn a hole in the thin aluminum. It didn't, and I used the boiling water from the coffee pot to thaw the ice in the half-gallon jar. Edging across unstable new ice to get coffee water was not the way I wanted to begin my day. I guessed by the contours of the ground around the shoreline that the thin outward edge of new ice extended out only to knee-deep water, but sometimes sudden drop-offs hid in surprising places.

Cold deceives. Opening the tent door this morning and noting the frozen water jar magnified the cold. After three boiling cups of coffee and a pan full of the Stove Top stuffing mix, scavenged at the government gauging station days upstream, the creeping cold dominated fewer of my thoughts. A person can learn to deal with the cold. The nylon walls of this lightweight tent blunt the wind. In a calm, the tent walls reflect the body's heat to create a pocket of warmth that allows my core temperature to remain stable or to drop at a reduced rate.

I can only guess at air temperature and wind chill, but a person can acclimate to almost any conditions with the right gear, if he can stay out of the wind, and stay dry. My sleeping bag was already worn out before the season began in early June and dangerously light for these conditions. Everything I owned showed months and in some cases years of hard use. I dropped weight from a frame that wasn't fat, and I expected to destroy a pair of the surplus heavy wool West German military trousers a month. The trousers I had slated for September had a waistline four inches less than the ones I started with in June. If I didn't cinch my belt hard, they dropped off my hips.

I was a dead man, way too deep in the interior for this late in the closing season, but I had my rifle, remnants of strength, and my

precious gear. I would not die today.

Once I loved a woman. A memory of my fingers in her hair

lingered. Last I heard she translated Medieval Latin texts in a nunnery somewhere in the Ardennes. I had this.

Yesterday afternoon I stopped at the abandoned scientific

station, a cold, cinder block shell marked on the Aberdeen Lake map. To warm my feet, I walked around, and as always, went through the rubble for salvage. I found a half-full eight-ounce can of 3-in-One oil. For the last two months, I hoarded what remained of my tiny supply of lubricating oil only daring to use it on the stove pump, which will seize if it goes dry. On my rifle, I used honing oil, which is too light to help much with rust prevention. For the most part, I fought the rust and kept the bolt operating with graphite from a pencil. This can of 3-in-One oil will last until the season closes. It has more remaining oil than I started with in June.

With most items—food, fuel, and clothing—I cannot carry enough to last through an extended season. I proportion my load in what seems a reasonable fashion, understanding the tradeoffs: the six-pound Sorel Dominator boots represent several weeks of flour. A George Eliot paperback novel means doing without three days of oatmeal. Lubricating oil is in a category by itself. To run out of oil means I won't have an operating stove. I might lubricate the stove pump with pencil graphite, honing oil, or lard, but the lubricating pad might also go dry and ruin the stove. In this part of the Keewatin District of the Northwest Territories, I might go days without finding enough wood to boil two cups of tea. Until I found the can of 3-in-One yesterday, I couldn't bear to commit to paper how I foresaw my situation deteriorating after I used the last of the oil.

At dusk last night the Arctic fox returned. Only his eyes and

ears showed over the fold in the tundra. I feared that sometime in the night he would be in my meat cache. I would have killed him

had he presented a shot I could have made. Several times, I opened the tent door to look out, but saw little in the dropping light. Heavy waves hitting the new ice dominated my senses.

This morning the meat bags were undisturbed. The weight of the packs over them must have stopped him. A fox skin would make a warm little stole to go around my neck. The caribou hide over mitts I finished sewing yesterday morning blocked enough of the cold wind coming up that final section of the Dubawnt River to make the difference between stopping and continuing to paddle yesterday afternoon.

I wish I still had the wolf hide I skinned and scraped during a time when I needed to move. I carried that hide with one of the early loads around the five-mile Dubawnt gorge. When I returned with another load to the end of the portage, I discovered my loss. A quick, frenzied search didn't turn it up. I found nothing else among my gear disturbed, touched, or moved. The impression of nothing disturbed struck me so hard that rather than accept my loss, I went through my gear again in an increasing frantic crescendo until I forced myself to accept it was gone.

An Arctic fox took the wolf hide. The hard, rocky ground showed no tracks, but, aside from a tundra grizzly, no other animal or bird in this country had the strength to move the hide. A bear would have destroyed everything.

My clothes rotted off my body. I could have used that wolf hide. Ice won't form in wolf hide the way it will in caribou hide.

In this country, a man looks over his shoulder. Most of the time I saw emptiness, but I knew they were out there. On the lower Dubawnt River, the wolves followed. A long way downstream, a lone male sky-lined himself on a prominent low hill. He meant to show himself, to hold my attention. I only glanced at him because I knew the pack hunted closer, running behind the folds of the tundra, following. The shallow waters of the Dubawnt I bounced through, touching the rocks, wouldn't slow them. They'd come into my blind

side and fast. I knew what they were. Maybe they knew what I was, or one of their number knew. He, the magnificent white wolf, had howled long into the night when I killed his mate. I should have killed him instead, he was the greater threat, but I couldn't. He was just too magnificent, my weakness.

When the wolves lost interest in following, the Arctic fox, who may well have been there all along, reappeared. In winter, the Arctic fox follows the polar bear. By substituting me for the polar bear they paid me the highest honor I had known. Small recognitions from my fellow man meant nothing in comparison.

Under the Stars, Camp XCVII— Late in the day. In the dropping darkness, I rounded a peninsula on Aberdeen Lake to discover an ancient Inuit camp, a place I could touch dry ground without breaking through the shore-fast ice. The little stone man, the Inukshuk, guided me in. I found the ancient stone tent rings, the collectible debris of old tins, an axe head, the marks of the seasons. On the height of land in the center of the peninsula, where the wind swept the hillside bare of snow, I searched for dried crowberry, or, if lucky, heather, which makes an oily smoke that shows for miles and enough heat to boil water without wood.

The sight of the fresh grizzly track, double the size of any track that could belong to a tundra grizzly, etched out in the thin covering of snow, stopped me. I was a long way out in untraveled country. Maybe I had stepped into a place where the rules changed, and out there somewhere in the folds of the tundra, a supernatural grizzly hunted. I thought, please, not now, not here, not tonight; I am too weak, too cold, too diminished; but if I met him, I would fight him for his meat, as he would fight me for mine.

The caribou had gone west and south and left us behind. It was a time of remoteness, turning inward, maybe it was nothing more than pulling my coat tighter and trying to stay warm in the rising night winds. My reasoned self, which had a sharp picture of what could and could not be, warred with an imagination that looked to

the lengthening shadows and could believe anything. Then I understood, like the reported fresh tracks of the yeti, I looked at tracks that froze and re-melted and appeared fresh and supernaturally large after this afternoon's sun warmed them once again. These tracks were days old.

I hadn't collected fire starter in days. Patches of willow were rare in this country, but, much earlier in the day, on my last stretch of the Thelon River, I found a pile of whitened driftwood. One spruce bole, measuring six inches in diameter and eight feet in length, was larger than any wood I had seen even in the great forest, when I started my season back in June in Northern Saskatchewan. I tied all the wood in a bundle to the canoe cover.

This driftwood came from a little stand of wood further up the Thelon, famous because John Hornby starved to death up there in the winter of '27. The books said Hornby was never the same after the Great War, that he came back diminished. He was reckless, maybe insane, they said, and a better man would have survived. They were wrong. Hornby was good. He knew all the tricks: the ptarmigan nets, snares with a shoestring, everything. Once he wintered in a hole, but in the winter of '27, he missed the caribou. Caribou meant life in this country. I faced the same. Last year in the Mackenzie Mountains, I lived when I might not have, when I killed an old bag of bones caribou cow left behind by the herd to die. I am diminished too, maybe insane. I don't know how to tell.

On a huge fire under the vivid stars on this moonless night, I cooked one of my few remaining caribou roasts. I had not known this much warmth in days. I filled plastic bottles with hot water to warm my sleep. As I watched the fire and drank hot tea, I took the small chunks of bone from a dead musk ox I found in August and rolled them in the firelight. I had been doing this for days. Again, tonight when I rolled the bones I couldn't read the future. I saw nothing in the tealeaves, in the clouds, or the bones, but that's not entirely true. I saw images without words, but nothing I could interpret or translate into a clear message. The images assaulted me whether I sought them or not.

Tonight, I saw no images of what was to come, and perhaps that told me everything.

It happened. Maybe everything inside my mind collapsed. The stars moved in great long slow arcs, back and forth, in the eastern sky. A star represents a fixed mark or appears to. It scared me. Maybe I had done it to myself this time. My physical diminishment was a known phenomenon I could allow and calculate for, but what if my mind went, or what if I stepped into a place where the natural laws I understood meant nothing? Could I trust nothing? I fought with myself.

And then I understood. What I saw in the eastern sky only amounted to hot air meeting cold to create atmospheric turbulence, the same effect that created the twinkling of a star on the horizon on an ordinary warm Southern night. The illusion of stars moving in wide arcs meant a cold front moving in fast. A massive storm would hit sometime during the night. The ancient Inuit survived these storms. Maybe their Inukshuk guided me to this place for a reason.

My back froze as I sat by the fire, and I lacked the discipline to refuse the magic of the flames, even though they destroyed my night vision. I saw stories in the flames and I remembered them. I remembered images of this season past. Taste them, I told myself. These images and this night may be what is left. I remembered the gyrfalcons over the Dubawnt gorge; their cries, as I shouldered my canoe under their circling gyres, as they flew out into the great void I would never know. Not all the images were beautiful. I passed an Arctic fox pup alone on an island in a small lake, a dried, picked-over goose carcass beside it. The pup cried.

What lay out there watching my back, waiting for me to sleep? More than my fear of this wide, wandering grizzly, I feared that he wasn't out there. I feared the emptiness with no eyes....