

Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal

Volume 1 | Issue 2

Article 15

October 2022

The Windmill Man

Richard Dokey

Follow this and additional works at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate>

Recommended Citation

Dokey, Richard (2022) "The Windmill Man," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 15.
Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol1/iss2/15>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal by an authorized editor of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.

The Windmill Man

by Richard Dokey

The old man came out of the house into the hot afternoon light. The Indian was waiting with the horses.

"Where is she hiding?" the old man, whose name was Grisham, said.

"Grand Hotel," the Indian replied.

"The Grand."

The Indian nodded.

"The father, then?"

The Indian shrugged, looking away.

The old man scowled. He was short and squat with a beet-red face that never tanned beneath the Montana sun but only got redder, until it peeled about the nose and cheeks into white, feather-tipped patterns which, from year to year, were never the same.

"And?" the old man said, squinting into the sky.

The Indian, who had been with the old man from the beginning and knew exactly how he thought, so that they spoke now in quick, elliptical lines which no one else understood, pointed in the direction of the lowering sun, circling his fingers.

The old man grunted, took the reins and stepped into the dust.



The windmill stood where the Old Boulder Road went across Elk Creek. It had been built before the turn of the century by a Dutch settler named Iver Gelderland, who had followed the trail of Lewis and Clark up the Yellowstone River. The descendents of Gelderland lived along the creek, which wasn't a creek at all but, after the spring rains, a boiling, white torrent that emptied into the Yellowstone, and which, Gelderland imagined, could be used to ferry grain to the mill from the ranches in the valley, allowing him to continue the trade he

Richard Dokey

had learned as a young man. Almost immediately, however, the locomotives came, blowing smoke against the great, rectangular arms, which swept clumsily, like broken masts in a fog. In two years business was done. Gelderland hanged himself from a beam above the millstone.

It was the only windmill ever built in Montana.

Surviving Gelderlands did not want the mill torn down, even though, almost at once, it fell into disrepair. They scrambled about the apparatus, painting and patching. They kept the weeds away and cut back the trees. They put round stones from the river along the path to the mill door. They painted the stones white.

Many people from nearby Big Timber, the county seat, wanted the mill removed. It was an oddity, they said, an eyesore. It made the people from Billings, Livingston and Bozeman smile when they came to visit. There were articles in *The Pioneer*.

But the surviving Gelderlands pleaded and cajoled. They attended town meetings. The windmill was important, they said. It was history, what once was and what was now, together, they said, a scaffold of cloth-framed arms that shook in the winds of memory, though none of them had ever worked in the mill or seen the country from whose knowledge it had been created.



Louise Grisham of Big Timber, betrothed to Angus Gelderland, was with Angus when he found his father Iver hanging from the roof beam above the millstone. Two nights later, in tears, hopelessly commiserative of him in her parents' home while they were away visiting, she was made pregnant by Angus, who fled the county and was never seen again. Jonathan, their son, a Gelderland after all, spent his life wandering up and down the Yellowstone, fishing, hunting, trapping, until his mother went crazy and was institutionalized in Billings. Jonathan stayed alone in the tiny house on Elk Creek, then,

86 Harpur

with the windows shut and the shades drawn for ten more years until, drunk, he was hit one night by a truck speeding up the Old Boulder Road. In the house they found a woman and a three-year old boy. Five years later, after his mother put a shotgun to her head, the boy was raised serially in the houses of the remaining Gelderlands, who continued to live, perpetually it seemed, on the outskirts of town.



It was very hot now in the afternoon, and as the sun touched the peak of the hills, the young man scurried upward and kept going. He was not a tall man, perhaps five-seven, five-eight, but his arms were muscled and his legs were strong from years of roaming and exploring above the valley. He loved the mountains and the trees and the springs that bubbled everywhere, and sometimes he paused to watch the water turn in the light as it fell to meet the big Yellowstone below. He was young and confident, had, in his opinion, done nothing wrong and was unafraid.

He paused a moment to adjust the shoulder pack, which was filled with food, and to remove his cap. He breathed deeply, took a single swallow of water from the canteen, drew a sleeve across his face and blinked the sweat away. The eyes were sky blue, like his mother's, very large and very clear and bright. He looked ahead to where the trail disappeared into the trees. He had come a long way, there was a long way to go, but it was all right. There would have been no chance along the roads or the highways. Up here he knew what he was and where he was going.

He continued to climb, the rhythm had come, the legs working smoothly, stepping out or around, the weight forward, the arms moving for balance. He was not tired and would not be for a long time. He felt he could walk off the end of the earth if he needed to.

Nothing was complicated or confusing. There was nothing to

Richard Dokey

think about or to plan, the steady lift and move of his legs going upward, sometimes traversing, sometimes taking short, high cuts to pull straight up, making it easy when he needed to, turning, angling away and up, so that he did not have to think, not about the town or the people or the woman or anything, not unless he wanted to. He did not think about the woman until, pausing, he looked back through an opening in the trees and saw them far below, the tiny heads bobbing above brown horses.



They came on. There were five, besides the Indian and Old Man Grisham: Harmon Ogren, the sheriff; Jim Creed and Tom Satler, who owned the ranches adjacent to Grisham's; Steve Keehnel, the mayor of Big Timber; and Johnnie Waldrop, the thin-faced, nervous little clerk, who had married the old man's granddaughter three years before.

The Indian was in front, his eyes to the ground, then the sheriff, the old man, Creed, then Salter and finally Johnnie Waldrop, who didn't look at anything particularly but was merely a load of something pitched atop the horse he had had to borrow from Jim Creed, when they had all met at the windmill earlier to pick up the trail. Johnnie's father-in-law, Mart Grisham, had said he wouldn't be a part of it, not any of it, for any reason, and Johnnie knew, everybody knew, even Old Man Grisham himself knew it was just to spite the old man for turning him off the ranch all those years before, but, go ahead, if you want, Mart Grisham had said, looking mockingly at his son-in-law. "The world needs another fool."

Johnnie did not feel that way. Every motion of the horse sent a jolt of pain through his body, which had, through no fault of his own, after having been kept so close and private for so long, at last betrayed him. He understood exactly what it meant, and perhaps, in a way, he was foolish for being here, trailing along behind his wife's

grandfather like a sheep dog, incapable of leading a chase of his own, of trapping Miles Gelderland high up in the Montana hills and beating him within an inch of his life, perhaps, even, of killing him. But he was wise enough to think that this itinerant trash, who had come to live finally in the old mill on Elk Creek because none of the other Gelderlands—a lost race of failures from a land no one had ever seen—would any longer keep him, had done nothing without the woman's permission, that same woman who, confessing her guilt and begging his forgiveness, pleading with him to say nothing, even after he had struck her almost senseless into a corner of the bedroom, revealed to him a cowardice at least as great as his own, for he had married her for no clear purpose but a desire to belong and lived with her now for no other reason than that he was afraid.

The Indian stopped, nose to the air, eyes as coldly dark as ripe olives.

The old man rode up and said, "Yes."

The Indian pointed to where the trail disappeared through the cottonwoods into the tall pines beyond.

The old man smiled.



He moved faster, catching a glimpse, now and again, of where the trees thinned to meet, finally, the high, granite face of the mountain. Crevices were there, deep, corrugated fissures which, eons ago, had been formed by the slow moldering of the earth, pathways where only the cautious step of a man, one foot carefully before the other, might go and where horses could not follow. Already, he knew that, since leaving the valley floor, the animals would be having a hard go of it.

It did not bother him about the men. Over time they had become faceless, like the faces of people he saw speeding by on the interstate. Their hostility and prejudice were as predictable

as the cold of winter snow, and he avoided them whenever possible, skirting their busy inquisitiveness like an antelope.

But the woman confused him.

He thought of her now, leaning against the stump of a tree, taking a swallow of water from the canteen and catching his breath. She came to his mind, released from all social structures and conventions, as a wind that comes from the mountains, stirring the leaves of the cottonwoods. She lingered at the foot of the mill, where the white-washed stones went up, turning and lifting her face into the sunlight so that her hair, which was the color of flax, shone. He watched from behind the weather-shredded boards of the mill how she raised her skirt to sit, how she talked to herself, snapping her hands, as though shaking dust from an invisible cloth. He watched her come straight up the path that one time and stand before the crack of the door and heard her say quietly, as he drew back and held his breath, "I know you're there, Miles Gelderland, and I know you want to talk. Why don't you come out and talk to me? My name is Leona."

A hawk dropped across the sky toward the valley. He allowed his eyes to go down the trail, but he saw nothing. He imagined the horses blowing, the men resting, their faces looking to where he was hidden, high above them.

The woman was in his mind, not as pain or sadness or even loss, but as something remarkable and so confusing. Though he understood perfectly about the men, when he thought of her, he did not know and was uncertain. When she spoke to him at last, when he had come out finally and been there waiting at the door one afternoon, she talked quickly, the way a jaybird does when it has been startled, so that he could hardly understand.

"Why are you here by yourself?" she asked, shaking her hands. "Isn't it strange living in a place that is not a house and certainly not a home and not even an old building with rooms, like the Grand Hotel on McCleod that's boarded up now and been for sale all these years, where they used to have such dances when I was just a girl and

we would all go to them and have such fun, but it's all boarded up now and I don't go to any dances anymore anyway, so living here must be very empty and strange for you too, when you have so many people with your name? I'm Leona. Why don't you ask me in to look around, Miles? I've never been inside the windmill before, though it's been sitting here ever so long. Everything is so boring and so day-to-day. A windmill must be a funny place to live after all. Show me where you sleep."

He began to climb again, but now he climbed with the woman inside his brain. She climbed, touching his memory, as he skirted the trees, the larger stones that began to appear when the forest thinned and he stumbled ever higher to where the horses could not reach. Though she had fled down the path to the thin-faced man she said must have followed her that last time and who, now, brought the men and the horses, he was still only confused. Those others were understandable. He had lived near them all his life, unoffended by their disdain, remote, like a traveller in a foreign land.

But the woman, this Leona, was beyond everything. He thought of her as that peculiar, chattering creature who, much of the time, was incomprehensible but who had brought to him an emptiness and joy he had only found, walking among the hills. That he had been capable of such feeling, such experience of life, even now, as he clamored higher, amazed and befuddled him. How could such delight bring so much anger up the mountain after him, when he knew nothing about her except that, from time to time, she allowed herself to be alone with him in the mill?

He leaned back a moment against a large rock to take a drink and to think about it, when a chip of stone struck him in the cheek and the sharp crack of a rifle sped up and away across the slope.

He sat down slowly. If they were willing to shoot him, there was no point in going any farther.



Richard Dokey

Creed and Satler took the arms while Keehnel put a rope under the chin to keep the head up. The sheriff stepped away and lit a cigarette.

Old Man Grisham came close, eyes wide, lips parted. He spat. The Indian, watching everything from his horse, turned the animal down the mountain.

Johnnie removed the plaid shirt that Leona had given him two Christmases ago. His flesh was pale and sickly in the hard light, the arms thin, the chest a bit sunken, with a tiny scruff of wiry brown hair exactly in the center. He put his left foot ahead of his right and leaned back. The men lowered their eyes.

The first blows were timid, for Johnnie had never struck a man before. The bones of his hands ached almost immediately. Miles Gelderland's face got red.

Then Johnnie began to like it. He moved closer, so that the weight of his body would help. The ache traveled to his shoulders, settling with a queer, sharp pleasure.

The blood came from Miles Gelderland's nose and mouth. It splattered the men as the head banged this way and that. It stippled Johnnie's chest and arms. Johnnie's hands got red.

He struck Miles Gelderland in the stomach, doubling him so that the men had to support him. Keehnel jerked the rope. Johnnie's fists struck the blood shining on Miles Gelderland's face.

The fists came again and again, but Johnnie's hands, though they took on the appearance of chopped meat and stopped hurting, left him oddly distant. He realized that he was yet safe, that only his body was there but not himself, his own private self, which had never been given to anyone or anything. Not even Leona had been smart enough to trick him into surrender. With each blow, sinking deep into Gelderland's stomach or smashing the blood from Gelderland's face, he was free, untouched, as cut loose as his own father-in-law, who had merely gone off to get drunk.

And when they let go of Miles Gelderland at last, stepping aside

92 Harpur

in the kind of timid revulsion which comes only after something evil has been done, Johnnie dropped to his knees and pounded helplessly at the unconscious lump, until the sheriff strode over finally to say, "Enough," since they would not kill a man merely for what Johnnie's wife had done.

They stood looking.

"All right, then," the old man said, and mounted his horse.

"We won't leave him," the sheriff declared.

Johnnie wiped his chest and arms with the old towel he had brought from home. He put on the plaid shirt.

"Tie him behind my saddle," he said.

All the way down the mountain, the weight of Miles Gelderland bumping his legs, Johnnie Waldrop felt peaceful and ashamed.



It was dark when they returned. Keehnell went into the mill and found some rope. They lashed Miles Gelderland head down to one of the great, tattered arms and then, working together, ran the arm straight up and tied it off.

"Let his people take care of him," the old man said.

They went home.

Later, a cool wind from the north awakened Miles Gelderland. His face disfigured, the blood crusted in his hair, the clothes fastened to his aching body, he tried to think, but there was nothing that thinking could do.

That night the woman came stealthily at last to see what she had done.

Floating high above the earth in the arms of the windmill, as useless as the man who had created it, Miles Gelderland looked through swollen eyes at the broad, bright yellowstone and the high hills stacked one upon the other against the stars.

It was the best view in the entire valley.