

# Tracks in the Snow

By Brad Cole



# Dedication:

*To those who seek  
the renewal  
of the human spirit.*



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## The Deer Skull

It was the first time I had found a deer skull that still had both antlers, a small two-pointed buck. I was walking on the barnacled beach in Klawock in southeast Alaska, at low tide when I found it half buried in kelp and mud. From left to right antler tip it was a little over a foot wide with the greenish skull a bit bigger than my hand. The island deer, Sitka Black Tail, are a small species. Was it from a hunter's carcass or did it die naturally and then fell into the sea, I wondered? Deciding to keep it for my cabin, I hid it on the beach and would later drive back with the truck to pick it up; I still had another mile to walk home and it looked too fragile to carry very far.

Continuing to walk near the curving beach, I gazed out at the calm sea darkening in the growing dusk. I had climbed up a small hill and I could see a beautiful bluish green glow lodged in the water directly below the barely lit western horizon. A ball of softly burning light coming from the dark sea seemed to have a deeply luminous clarity of its own, strangely separate from

the sunset. It was as though something within the sea was shining in unison with the sunset, rather than just being reflected light. I wondered it being such a beautiful evening, if the sea wanted to share in the refined but colorful lightshow. Perhaps it brought forth some of its own radiance to share in the spectacle.

The waters of southeast Alaska wind through countless inlets like a silky blue ribbon wrapping around the rocky shores of forested islands. The full drama of life is here: the dark shuffling of rain clouds, the unsettling breath of wind, fading twilight and then the soft and deeply beautiful glow that appears to be coming from within the sea itself. Like the northern aurora it was strange to find a light that seems to emerge from such dark waters.

While standing still and contemplating the quality of light unfolding before me a feeling of great clarity and lightness of being entered my mind. I began to see a radiant emptiness and felt like letting go of everything this world stood for, of falling into the frigid winds of night and finding a feeling of distant love in waves of starlight

streaming across the distant heavens. I thought about the nature of salvation, that the kingdom of heaven has always been here before our eyes; we were just too sightless to see it.

Then the feeling was gone. I saw night approaching quickly and stars appeared between the windblown clouds as I left the beach and walked down a quiet street to go back home. Overhead three large ravens began cawing, flying cartwheels and circling each other. A series of lofty chirps told of a bald eagle being nearby in one of the large pine trees. Only a faint trace of half-light floated high above the western horizon. Being the last remnant from the passing day I called it “wolflight”, because it stands alone so boldly in the night. In the south a crescent moon was slowly creeping out from behind black rain clouds and courageous Orion was beginning his rise up into the shifting sky.

When I got home that evening I drove back to the beach and picked up the deer antler. I carefully placed it in a cardboard box in the back of my truck and drove away.

I thought about this intriguing gift from the sea. A sea of intelligence and love where life on Earth began its long tough journey. Like the deer skull, by giving oneself so completely to the sea can the callousness of life be lost under its curling waves? Beyond the earthly veil does heaven lie in wait for us?

Finally returning home for the night I put the deer skull on a dresser and crawled into a wooly bed. Thoughts about the evening walk wandered through my light slumber and then I fell into a deep sleep. I dreamt about an antlered figure dancing under a starry sky. Then, just before I awoke, a vision emerged of a cold and dark ocean beach. I could hear in the sound of the collapsing waves the ocean calling my name.



## Blackfish Trapping

It was just before the rising of the winter sun that I walked away from the house in Tuluksak to check on my blackfish trap. Following a crunchy snowmachine trail through the bushy forest and weedy meadows it took me nearly an hour to reach the stream where I had set the trap. If the temperature has been cold there is always thicker ice to pick. I figured it takes me an hour to pick by hand through a foot of ice and if the ice is two feet thick it can make for some tough work. But I enjoy the labor and believe it is important for people to be working directly with nature. Only from the earth can a person gain a true sense of the wholeness of life.

I prefer walking to using a snowmachine, so fortunately I live close to blackfish streams. They are narrow but deep channels of water wandering through long grassy meadows. Moose, fox, and mice tracks litter the snowy, icy floors of these large meadows. Gray jays will perch in the tall barren bushes just to watch as I pass by and



once a gentle but curious fox followed me about a quarter a mile.

For convenience I hide my ice-pick: a four-foot long pointed metal bar under the snow. Then I find and re-use it to make my hole in the ice. A single circular line is all I chop. Once I haul the foot-plus thick ice out it becomes the opening for me to use. The four-foot long by one-foot wide chicken wire cylinder with a funnel at one end is easily dropped in and pulled back out with a strong line.

Peeling back the wire from part of the bottom of the trap I drop out the fish. I do not like taking any form of life and it does affect me seeing the small fish squirm on the snowy ice and then die. But it is the give and take of nature, I think, and it is the only way the wilderness seems to operate. So I take the five larger fish and release back to the water the smallest, still living one. Love is the only thing I can truly give back to nature, I felt.

I look up from the frozen land and see the morning star that often precedes the rising of the sun. Venus can shine like a small diamond close the dawning horizon. Its'

charm is so different from the howling desolation of the moon.

I will be bringing food back today. Black fish soup (with chicken broth) is one of my favorite foods. I believe that the virtue of the earth is found in its goodness, quality and strength. As a people we too are of the earth and so should be our food. We need this goodness, this wholeness of being to grow strong in mind, body and spirit. This I feel is our only real freedom.

I load the half-dozen fish into a plastic bag with a hand-full of snow and stuff it into my backpack. After returning the ice-pick to its original snowy hiding spot I start my two-mile walk back the same way I came, following my snowy tracks.

I like the land around Tuluksak, I thought while walking on the snowmachine trail. It is evenly divided between grasslands and forest. I cannot imagine getting lost following a long, narrow meadow. Looking up into the western sky a half moon was falling slowly toward the horizon. Nature can either give or take, I felt and today I have received some of its offerings. Perhaps tomorrow I will be making a sacrifice and will need the strength of my own nature to

do it well. Good people do not just take but they give back.

I stopped to turn around and look behind me for any animals that maybe wandering through the meadow. Once on a moonlight night I saw a dark, four-legged creature following me. It was spooky until I realized that it was only a village dog returning home. Soon I will be returning home from this frozen wilderness with the blessings of blackfish and the snowy spirit of the wild.



## A Church in the Night

On the horizon a bright round moon rose up into the sky, out of the snowy trees as though the forest had given birth to it. It was a beautiful winter world with winding trails tunneling under trees that were beneath a foot of snow. I thought, being the longest night of the year, it was rare to see so well by the glow of a full moon.

I was out walking during the Christmas holidays feeling a deep sense of weariness, a need to withdraw from the world of work and stress and just sleep. I wished to leave behind the demanding hardness of life and retreat into the darkened cave of foggy forgetfulness and slumber. At times I would fall into a strange sleep where only a strong faith helped me to see the distant star that guides people through the long, dark and holy night.

Pausing on the road where a large meadow opens out, I looked carefully down the open field about 2 miles long and 50 yards wide, a little wider where there is an icy pond. Since my eyes were

weakened by the darkness I tried to “sense” the meadow with my whole being to check if there was any movements or life, possibly a wolf or a moose passing through it.

Walking in the wilderness is a great way to connect to and develop one’s senses and instincts, one’s natural intelligence. I can only feel “big” when being outdoors.

Feeling the cold wind against my face I thought about Christmas. It is a giving time of year where the whole holiday season is like the gift-wrapping of a holy spirit. People should make it look and feel as special as possible. The love and joy of unions with friends and family adds to its goodness. The spirit of community should be strengthened at this time of year.

It suddenly starting snowing with large white flakes flying about in the sky like small icy feathers that the wind had stirred up and released upon the land. The snow in broad sweeping gestures was busily blanketing the forest in strong gusts of wind. The large amounts of falling flakes was hurriedly burying the land as though

it had died and now needed to be properly covered up with a dense, white sheet.

Looking through the thick whirling mass of snow I suddenly felt alone in the night. I put my hood over my head to keep the snow out of my eyes and kept walking, while feeling the icy wind slamming against my parka. I stepped off the road and into the deep snow of an embankment to a trail that heads through the woods back to the village. Pausing momentarily, I looked up at the night sky and saw the moon passing quickly behind dark clouds. A single bright star flickered and could be seen only for a moment before being covered, too. Since I was young the night has always fascinated me, I thought. It is as though I can think more clearly outside walking in the night. A connection to the Heavens is important for the soul. I would not be surprised if the whole spiritual universe was structured like a vast church. I would call it, “the church of the holy night”.

Heading back home I hiked following the frozen trail under trees of snow. In the forest there are tracks of many

different animals including my own. We are all in search of something.

Christmas is such a beautiful season that offers so much. It is a time for the church to share its' spiritual wealth to enrich the lives of people. It is a time for lonely souls of the night, who like the three wise men, seek to be guided by a distant star.



## The Candlelight

I was walking down the airport road just outside of Tuluksak, listening to the sound of the wind ripping past the telephone line that was swaying in a cloudy sky. I could hear it making a long hollow sound, the cavernous sound of a world growing dark and falling in upon itself. I could hear the wind slamming into the trees beside the road, bending them backwards with a swirling sound that was lashing wildly and pouncing upon the thick snowy branches. Sometimes the world wants to tear itself apart and it seems tonight is the night, I thought.

The dark, desolation of the world grows hungry if it is not well satisfied and I thought the unbearable thing can easily turn nasty. Only by learning how to live and love well can one escape its clutches and rise above the lustful treachery of worldliness. Sometimes we must retreat and find peace in our own private caves searching for pools of soul-lifting light deep within ourselves. What we need from our Elders are people who can lead us by the

hand out of darkness and guide us back to the light where we belong.

Just off the road I found the carcass of a moose cow lying on its stomach in the snow. There were no signs of tearing or blood. It must have found a comfortable place to lie down and die of natural causes. In a couple of days the local dogs will find it and in a couple of more days it will be nothing but bones. The only blood in the snow I saw later was from dogs fighting each other over the carcass.

People's lives can sometimes be an ugly struggle. If only the schools of our world could turn the darkness of our lives into light, I thought. Teachers would be the candles in the night, their love guiding the hopeful people. That would mean teaching a mental and spiritual independence, an inner strength where a people can stand up on their own, taking good care of their community. Each small village would be like an extended family lead by insightful Elders.

The wind was still whistling around the telephone line in a dark moaning manner as I stepped off the road to follow a snowy trail through the woods. It is the village

dog trail to the dump. While walking back through the woods to the village I thought about our struggles in life and how it tears at us. Like trees in a windstorm we feel to be under attack. But the only real enemy is darkness and I have faith that the candlelight from within our hearts can cure us of that sickness.



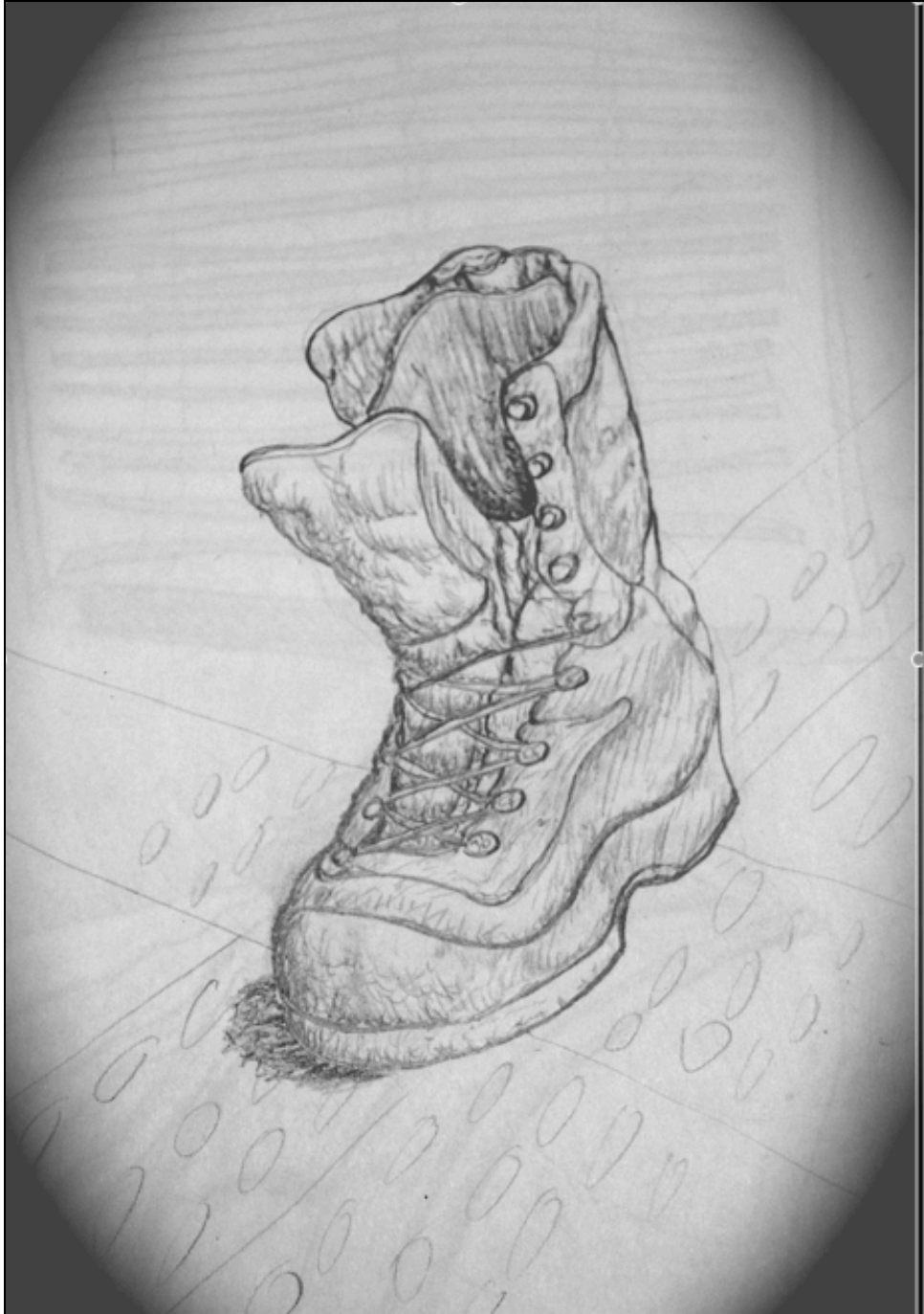
## A Sauna Story

There was a foot of fresh snow on the ground and inside the sauna you could hear the whistling of the evening wind. The thinly planked walls had a gap open to the outside just beneath the roof. I was sitting on a bench next to a short door going into the steam room. Crawling inside the small very low-roofed room I lit a tea candle and put it in a back corner. I sat in the dark naked and alone on a piece of cardboard. Scooping up water in an empty can and tossing it a couple of times on the woodstove created long hard waves of fiery steam that swiftly squeezed out the juice-like sweat of my body. The bottom of the chimney glowed a rusty orange. Suddenly another dense hot wave of flame washed over me causing streams of sweat to roll into my eyes and drip off my face. The burning heat drained me of strength and determination. The shadow of myself on a wall looked like an animal rising up out of a dark forest. I laid down on the floor, curling my feet away from the woodstove. The smell of pine branches that I brought inside was thick through the air. Soon I felt

that it was time to get up but lacked the power to do so. The scorching heat was like a jungle cat that had pounced on and was holding me down to the floor. It's claws tearing apart every fiber of my terribly weakened will. Only by rocking back and forth could I regain some self-control in the burning heat. I turned quickly over to my stomach and crawled through the small door back into the dressing room, white steam pouring out from the dark sauna.

While lying exhausted on the cold floor I felt I only had my solitude for strength while struggling against the raging fire. When facing the senseless flames of life we should never lose the heart it takes to raise ourselves up off the floor. I want a life that will lift my spirit, I reflected hopefully, while staring faintly at the frosty ceiling, steam rising still from my body.

Finally back on my feet, I put on a warm shirt and pants under a large, thick robe and returned home through the deep snows of night.



## A Riverside Home

It was so dark while standing on a tall grassy bank that I could not see the slough below me, but I heard the occasional splash of fish being caught in the distant net. The night wind carried a light mist and my body had grown sore from standing and watching the net for most of the day. But I enjoyed being there, sensing the silent black waters flowing past.

It was the same spot a friend and I had camped last year, watching over two nets that stretched halfway across the Akulerak Slough, an offshoot of the Yukon River. The nets crossed a calm pool of water in a sharp bend of the river. The place teemed with white fish and the nets did not get cluttered with the moss that drifts in the current.

It had been a beautiful autumn Saturday with occasional parka-bundled visitors stopping by while boating up or down the slough. Most of the people were returning home. Their spirited conversations helped to quicken the passing of the afternoon.

We were into the second night of our stay and I was standing on the steep bank listening to near perfect stillness. Suddenly I heard the sound of a fish once again, wrestling with the net, splashing in the black waters.

We were staying in a 10-by-12 foot canvas tent with a camouflage rain tarp and a woodstove, nestled next to the leafless willows that curled in the wet wind. The tent was warm enough for clothes hanging inside to dry.

While I was still standing on the bank, a single star poked out from behind the thick, dark clouds. I turned around and saw that it was the only star in the entire sky, directly in front of me, peering down as though curious about something. It sparkled bright for only a minute and then was quickly swallowed up the invisible clouds. There is nothing more simple and beautiful than a star in the night sky, I felt.

Again I could hear the splashing of fish, this time with the feeling of the light rain blowing against my face in a now stronger wind. I thought about the warmth of the large, thick sleeping bag, falling asleep deep inside of it as I did the night before,



listening to the sound of a beaver chewing on a nearby willow. The beaver was busy building a river home.

Giving myself only a few more minutes outside before going to bed, I thought of the single star and I wondered about the courage to live in so much darkness. These were winter thoughts. Was there wisdom to be found in surrendering ones' courage and spirit to the mysteries of the night?

Like falling into a shadowy river, drowning and letting the current take you to only God knows where. Perhaps our courage is meant to be conquered by deep love and devotion to life, I thought. Perhaps the light of the star travels through darkness, through the universe with the strength of this love. I felt foolish asking such questions in my old age.

Again the star appeared in the heavens directly in front of me, but this time I also saw its tiny reflection dancing about on the dark waters below. Its light looked so fragile yet strong. The rain was growing stronger and I knew that I would have to go into the tent to stay dry.

I admired the light of the star traveling through so many years of cold darkness just

to reach this confused, wind-swept planet  
we call home. Somehow it must be a  
journey of love, I felt, like finding your way  
home on the dark waters of the river.  
Perhaps surrender could mean letting go and  
having the light of a star take you  
homeward, like letting the light of the  
Heavens rule your soul.

Feeling more of the wind and rain, I  
turned around and walked back on the trail  
and then crawled into the tent. My friend  
was sleeping so I tried to be quiet. After  
curling up tightly in my sleeping bag, I laid  
there silently until falling asleep. I slept to  
the sound of a beaver gnawing on a willow  
for his riverside home.

## The Lost Totems

The evening mist was darkening and I knew there may only be another hour of gray light in the forest. I was walking past the workshop of a totem pole carver that sat at the trailhead in Klawock, on Prince of Wales Island. On the gravel surrounding it laid a dozen old, critically cracked poles, copies made during the CCC days of the Great Depression of still older totem poles. There were bears, eagles, ravens, a wolf, a frog and other mysterious animals that had been carefully carved out and painted on the tall cedar poles. They were lying so respectfully, I thought, face-up and wide-eyed in several neat rows.

Stepping over a log I saw ferns, pinecones and branches littering the wet floor of the forest. Mossy barked trees, young, old and some dead, stood quietly in the damp dusk. The twisting trail was filled with slippery roots and pools of mud. The river was a short distance and standing on the bank I could see several bald eagles, tens of seagulls and several ducks all taking flight as I emerged from the forest. The smell of death came from decomposing bodies of

salmon littering the bank where they had jumped out of the clear, turbulent waters and died. Their white bony bodies numbered in the hundreds, I figured, just in that one stretch of waterway.

Hiking the trail along the bank I crossed several small wooden bridges covering streams that flowed into the bird-filled river. Some of the older bridges were merely decaying split logs. The long green hair-like moss hung everywhere in the dripping, darkening forest. Looking around, I thought there must be hundreds of forms of fungus, of various colors, from large to small, growing on wood and ground.

Such a rich landscape had so much to give people. Fresh water, wood and meat were plentiful and I felt the spirits must be proud of what they have done here.

Then I remembered seeing the totem poles by the carver's workshop and wondered how each animal or being carved represented a relationship a family had with that creature. In such a diverse environment I could see the people having a strong working connection to a number of plants and animals, each contributing to the wealth of

their way of life. It was man's relationship with the dog that initially developed civilization; later came corn, chickens, salmon, oil and trees, etc. The spirits of nature are great providers and teachers and they have enabled people to build a rich and resourceful community and culture. The children should learn how to build a practical and meaningful connection to the diversity of their own environment, especially with Elders, so they can remain reassured, resilient and not feel lost in tough times.

Seeing the moist moss covered firs in the forest, at home beside the river, I thought of how a single tree can contain a multitude of spirits that can teach and enrich our lives, much like our Elders. The spirits of totems will stay even if the landscape has been forsaken. They will stay so someday things can learn how to return to normal; nature has a way of rediscovering and rebuilding itself. The eagles will come back to roost, the salmon will find their place of birth and the wolves will remember their old hunting grounds. Man will have to find his lost love of things wild to return home, because the truth is when the past re-emerges, ghost-like

back into the present. Man will have to find his lost totems and forgotten teachers; all those spiritual connections to his place of birth and natural community. Like a dogged child, he will have to learn how to listen well to those beings greater than himself.

The night had just arrived when I returned to the carver's workshop and saw once again the old totem poles lying face-up on the moist ground, dimly illuminated by a distant streetlight. I felt like they were staring out into the rainy night, watching and waiting for the lost souls of the windy forest to return to their ancient homes.



## Fish Camp

Above the fish camp an eagle was circling high in a deep blue sky. The old smokehouse and its drying racks sit close to a collapsing bank of the Tuluksak River. A long family history is here alongside the hanging salmon and a large cutting table sitting in the grass. Like a good tent the small plywood cabin can sleep many people. Here I realized that we are like the fish caught in a net of twisted dreams. Dreams that can keep us down deep in a river that runs through our lives. We are a strong-willed salmon swimming against the current and we grow stronger in our silence. The river like a parent feeds the fish camp. It is a place for families to grow and share in the gifts of the wild. It is for the people to return to the ancient waters and renew their bonds with nature. It is a place to be like an eagle winging high and disappearing into the sky.





## The Forest Gloom

It was a dark and dreary afternoon as I left the cabin with the dogs and headed for the trail. Rain from earlier in the day was still dripping off the branches of a thick and bushy forest, landing with an occasional wet thump on the top of my head. The air contained a heavy mist that easily changed into a light rain, causing the sky to hang like a translucent shower curtain across the moss coated winter woodland.

I had climbed a good five hundred feet, following the various switchbacks up a steep mountainside and brushing against the countless rain-soaked scrub hanging over the edges of the trail. Looking toward the west I could only sense the position of the sun laying deep beneath the different layers of mist and rain clouds. But stopping and reflecting on how recently I had learned to enjoy hiking in the mist, finding the air to have an invigorating or stimulating effect on the body's systems, like jumping into a cool shower. But after anticipating the arrival of night at around

five-thirty in the afternoon, I decided to return before it draw near too quickly.

After giving out a loud whistle to the dogs that I intend to turn around, I looked at the trail behind and below me, seeing that as darkness descended on the land so did a heavy cloud of fog; that it had rolled in and was now engulfing the forest, turning many of the huge fir trees into thin gray silhouettes. The dogs Chumstix and Suka, who were ahead of me on the trail now hurried pass me to regain the lead in our return to the cabin. As we descended into the bank of fog, it gave an eerie feeling to walking the switchbacks back downhill.

Seeing the approach of night fall I quickened my pace to so that I would arrive home before absolute darkness held the land in its' firm grip.

Perhaps, the initial sight came from an over anxious imagination due to having faced off with vindictive lawyers at work, or maybe it was from dealing with the despair of youth imprisoned in such desperate isolation, or living alone in a wilderness cabin for too long a time: but suddenly I saw a face staring out at me from the fog. It was a cottony white face clinging to the fog

like a water drop hanging on an Autumn leaf. Then another face appeared near the first one, but this was floating in the air with a stronger sense of presence and character, as though at any moment it may decide to speak. They had full human faces attached to bodies made of mist borrowed from the rolling rain. Stopping for a moment, I looked carefully at the strange figures, noticing that numerous other gray faces and cotton-like figures had lodged themselves amongst the wet trees now blanketed by fog. They all appeared to be looking at me, watching as I passed further down the dense bushy trail.

Moving more cautiously now, not knowing whether I beheld a crazed sight or a true vision, and the dogs far ahead of me still heading home, I noticed that as soon as one figure disappeared back into the surrounding fog, another one would appear elsewhere as though it had just arrived from a distant, mystic world. The fog seemed to control their every silent movement and nameless gesture, giving me an ever greater feeling of both fear and veneration. These spirits of dispossession created a whole scene of incredibly deep and vacant

anonymity within the sleepy, twilight forest. It was like watching the ghosts of the dead return to a weird woodland to await the arrival of deceased loved ones. The forest was transformed into a thin, one-dimensional terrain of timeless despair.

Or possibly, it was just me losing my mind.

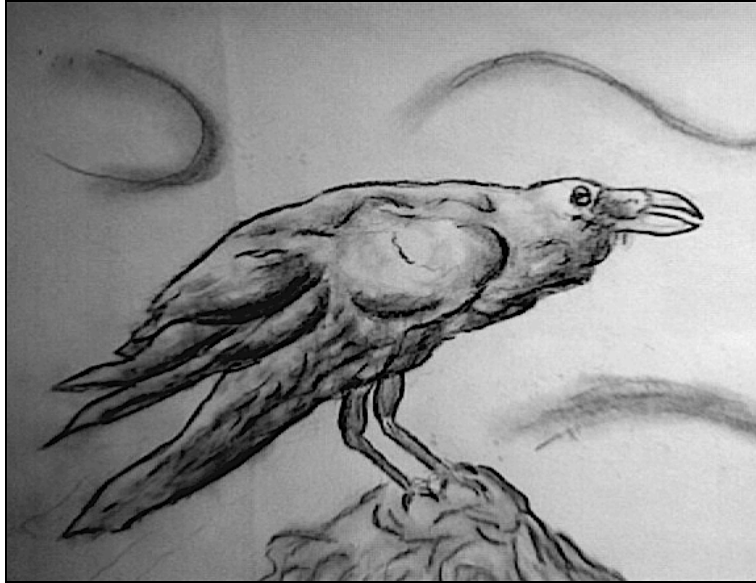
It was soon afterward, as I was nearing the bottom of the mountain trail where it connected an abandoned road, that the clouds parted momentarily and the setting sun gave out its' last glorious gleam of light for the day. Like a flashing golden sword the beam of light carved a spirit of strength and joy out of the dark dreariness of the rain clouds, causing the fog to roll back into a gloomy but translucent cloud bank.

Once I took my eyes off the sudden appearance of the sun, the fog people were gone. Only a darkening forest baring a cloak of mist remained. It reminded me of times that I would swear that I had seen the face of a man in the surface of a boulder, or in the twisting knurls of an ancient tree. But this time there were numerous people in different spots, coming and going, as though wrestling in and out of the fog.

As I walked down the abandoned road back to the cabin, a fear possessed my mind that it had just slipped away from reality, and may not be coming back for awhile. But walking a quarter mile to the front door of the cabin served to calm most of my uncertainties, so I was able to relax into a comfortable routine for the evening.

After setting the fire in the old wood cookstove and seeing the interior heat slowly rise from a chilly fifty-five degrees to nearly sixty, I sat down in the rocking chair with the plump body of Kitty curling in my lap.

Seeking some form of resolution, I carefully turned over the sequence of the past events in my mind, looking to see what had occurred and possibly try to understand why. But there was no cause and effect to uncover; what had happened must stand on its' own for me to remember the rest of my life. It must remain as a fear stirring forever inside of me, saying that in the arrival of each night my soul must begin anew a desperate search for a missing sun, for an eternal source, an eternal strength of light that will protect one from the gloom of the forest.



## My Meeting of Dante

I was out for an evening walk when seeing the falling star. It was a beautiful sight, a piece of heaven being torched by the high winds of earth, I thought while wandering through the darkening trees near my home. The shadows were lengthening as the sun fell below the horizon and twilight set in all about me. I could feel something watching me and turning around I saw a large grayish black wolf staring directly towards me. When our eyes met the animal jumped forward along a trail that was unfamiliar. So I walked over there and slowly but cautiously started down it to see if I could

once again find the strange animal. But I did not feel comfortable going where I had never been before. Looking up toward the eastern sky I saw a pale full moon rising ominously to greet the falling night.

It was then I again felt eyes on me and I saw a large darkly robed figure with a prominent face peering out from the folds of the hood. I immediately recognized the tall individual as Dante, a medieval poet that I had been studying. Before I could fully comprehend the presence of the strange man he spoke, "I am to take you on a journey. You will see things important for your people. Afterwards, it will be your responsibility to communicate what you have seen." Then he gave me a probing look to see if I understood.

With a wave of his hand I started to follow him down the trail, entering a forest that felt strange and foreboding. But feeling entranced if not captivated by the man, I followed him blindly like a child would follow his father.

The trees grew black and a heavy rain



started with strong winds. I felt somehow that the night had shifted as though entering into a different realm or world. The full moon was now high in the sky telling me that it was around midnight. Time itself had shifted, I thought.

“The Old Wolf Moon will be the first you will see tonight,” spoke Dante, his eyes burning as though undergoing an emotional strain. I turned and saw four cloaked figures with shovels throwing dirt on the ground. Then I noticed humans partially buried where the dirt was being tossed. Their faces were peering up from the ground so aghast with horror they could not speak. In shock I turned away to see the moon peering down between clouds and into the dark forest as though with approval.

“Why are they being buried alive,” I asked Dante, the horror of the scene having sunk into myself.

“Because the nature of their souls is so murderously abominable. They are being buried alive by the depth of their own calculating evil,” he said calmly. “A man’s ultimate destiny is determined by the

character of his life.” He paused and then added, “The Old Wolf that feeds off of such dark evil will not go hungry tonight.”

Again he turned toward me to see if I understood. I nodded my head as though I did, but in truth I did not.

The robed man seemed to sense my bemusement. While walking ahead of me he went on, “Spirit lays beautifully all around in Nature. Only the darkness of selfishness lays within us and those poor in spirit will be buried alive by its evil weight.”

He continued our trek through the rain and wind. The forest bent heavily under the strong blows of the gusty storm. He walked quietly with his back toward me and I followed as though in a dream, not knowing where we were or going. But I was still enthralled by this ancient man, even more so after experiencing such a fantastic vision.

We had just stepped over a fallen log on the trail when he turned to me and stopped. His eyes were still glazed over and slightly red. His face was drawn and tired looking as though he was emotionally exhausted, but from what I did not know.

“You will now see the Hunger Moon.” He voice was loud and it boomed through the forest. I looked about to see several figures being devoured by large flames that were engulfing their entire bodies. The light was sharp and throwing shadows of the fir trees all about us. The bodies were writhing about trying to escape the burning fire but every move brought the flames closer to them. I could see from their expressions the sheer pain they were in; they were being cut apart by the blazing inferno.

“These souls are being burned alive by their own unrestrained desires, a horrible hunger that overwhelms any reasonable or moral bearing.” He bent over slightly to see my eyes and then said bluntly, “But the fire will cleanse them. This is not the judgment of an autocratic God but of Nature itself. You must understand that justice occurs as naturally to Man as the falling of rain. If you touch a hot stove you get burned! ” Looking up I anxiously nodded to show him that I understood.

This was a second shocking sight to see. I shuddered at the thought of such a horrific

existence. But the storm seemed to lessen and the rain was not so pelting. Peering into the night sky the moon behind passing clouds had slipped farther to the west and the Dig Dipper had evolved like the hands of a clock showing it was pre-dawn.

We were now walking uphill. The trail was fairly steep and rocky, which was not easy to see in the moonlight. The sound of the wind was eerily haunting as though we had walked through a hidden doorway of the night into this strange, cryptic land.

“We now will witness the Worm Moon, when the land is prepared for the planting seeds. But for this to be done the Earth must be plowed and torn open.” He extended his arm and pointed forward; there appeared several robed figures carrying long spears, which they were plunging deeply into the bodies of several convulsing figures. “Here the seed of the spirit has been planted in a cold ground, these souls who cannot see beyond themselves still commit thoughtless and hurtful actions. Remember, it is the landscape of our lives that holds the ultimate truth.” He walked toward me and

looked deep into my eyes; a shudder ran through my bewildered body as though I was about to be touched by death itself. “You are witnessing the truth as it appears to a cosmic being. Remember this.” Then he turned away and continued our walk up a sloping wet trail through wind whistling trees.

By now I was mesmerized by the scenes I had seen, and I could sense that deeper meaning Dante was trying to impress upon me. He was more than just a guide through the woods, I felt, but a mentor on the meaning of life and death. He was my personal poet showing me eternal truths of the human spirit.

“We are now on the fourth moon of our journey. This is the Fish Moon. It is when the freshly planted seed fearfully wrestles from the dark earth its intimations of life, its desire to be strong and free. It is about the birth of spirit.” Dante paused to look at me and check if I would acknowledge him. But instead I was looking more closely into the trees where I saw a couple of figures struggling with

large snakes tightly coiled about them. The look of exhaustion and fear consumed their faces while their bodies shook with the desperation of battle. Dante spoke, "To grow spirit they must seek the waters of life." He paused and I could hear him breathe. "They are struggling to free themselves from an addiction to the darkness of earth," he spoke as though from a great distance or was it from weighted emotion? I watched him momentarily, seeing him more clearly than before, seeking to find the man within the figure appearing before me. I wanted to know how he struggled with his own weighty darkness, a burden that made him human. But he began walking, leaving me with only the back of a rustling robe to watch.

After a short way I could hear the sound of heavy rain falling, but felt only slight drops when I put out the palm of my hand. Descending a large mound we came upon a mountain river where a waterfall was just upstream. In the moonlight I could tell that it was about forty feet tall and fourteen feet wide. Beneath the falls the river was fairly calm and quite wide. Then I saw a single

light appearing out of the night, swinging from side to side, coming toward us from across the river. As it got closer I could tell that it was hanging on the bow of a wooden boat with an elderly gray haired man standing up and working an oar.

“That is Charon, the boatman of the spirit world. He will take us out of this Hellish realm of vanquished souls and transport us to Purgatory. It is a place where souls still struggle for knowledge of God.”

We boarded the ancient wet wood of Charon’s boat and he ploughed his oar through the turbulent water pushing us forward. The boatman had a deep but quiet look, like he had calmly seen all the evil a world could throw at a man. His long thin gray hair flowed in the wind and his tightly toned, muscled body gave him the look of a very mature and steadfast warrior.

The boat slid up to the opposite shore on a muddy patch that had been receiving the boat’s bow for near eternity. Dante and I leaped onto the wet grass and ferns of the forest and continued our hike up the sloping

trail. Strangely the weather seemed to have improved. Only a slight moist breeze ran among the towering firs and cedars. Again, I saw a star falling between the clouds rimmed with moonlight. I made a quiet wish for wisdom.

We had not traveled far before I could hear human voices muffled with heavy breath. As we got closer I could see figures bent over large boulders, pressing their bodies against the round grayish stone and pushing them up a long steep slope. But as they reached the upper levels of the muddy hillside the steepness of the slope would overwhelm the figures causing them to pull away, releasing the boulders so they fell back downhill.

“Here you can see the first signs of spiritual growth. This is the Flower Moon. But it is not an easy time. Like wildflowers in the spring, the will of these souls are pushing hard against the darkness of their lives, but they are not strong enough to endure. Darkness keeps falling down upon them. Hopefully, faithfully with time they will get it right,” Dante spoke with a slight



suggestion of sorrow in voice. I was surprised by this and looked at him, wondering about his revealing response, about his hidden emotions.

“Do you mean that someday they will leave here?” I asked him.

“Only if they are able to grow in their faith,” he said. “For it is the knowledge of God that will make you strong and wise. This you will see.” He turned to walk up a steep slope, stepping on stones to avoid slipping on the slick trail.

Soon the sound of soft drumming was heard as we continued our hike. After rounding a bushy bend in the pathway I could see nude figures running, one after another, down a connecting route. The gaunt figures look stressed and frightened to the point of desperation. Dante spoke, “this is the Strawberry Moon. In nature it is the time of plumpness. These souls have the knowledge of righteousness and spirit but do not know how to use it. So in desperation they run incessantly, but only in circles.”

“But will they too be able to leave here someday,” I asked.

“Only if their faithfulness can lead to the insightfulness needed to see and understand a more truthful way of life. One needs to abandon the craziness of the world in order to find the lasting peace of spirit,” answered Dante.

So we moved on and the sky became clearer and drier and the faint rosy rustlings of dawn were filtering through the night. I could see the Big Dipper with its starry arm pointing toward the morning. Dante was now walking a little faster, perhaps thinking the completion of his task was near at hand, I thought.

“This next moon is one that I have known well,” he said with his back toward me, still walking up the trail’s slope. “It is the Buck Moon. A time when the antlers of the deer begin to grow and they feel the acute need for the strength and vigor of life.” He stopped abruptly to turn and look at me adding, “but before they can do that they must confront the feelings of isolation and

darkness within themselves. They must face the greatest of their fears.” Suddenly he waved his arm out full and pointed to the side of the trail. There stood a group of robed figures, some with large sticks, others pointing outwardly, demanding that another smaller figure to go away and leave them. “To be exiled is to be abandoned, but abandonment is the beginning of true freedom. The freedom to seek and be enriched by the power of spirit,” he said.

I looked closely at the anguished face of the man being exiled and wondered if he will be able to find any consolation in his catastrophe. Dante looked at me as though reading my mind and said, “He will have a long journey and only in the end will he find peace.”

Then I realized that he was taking me on a journey. That this was all about the journey of the human spirit and its struggle with good and evil.

We continued our walk up a slippery slope crossing over a couple of old, fallen logs. The forest was still restive and seemed to be

bearing witness to our presence. I could feel the haunted weight of the woods and it burdened my walk with a feeling of foreboding. The horror of the initial sightings was with me still and I was apprehensive about what I would encounter next. I was not to be disappointed.

Soon Dante turned to me again and said, “This is the Salmon Moon. The gift of life comes from the waters and it is given generously, but many are unable to bear true witness.”

I had to look closely through the gray darkness. Even with my fear and frailty I could not resist probing the scene carefully and in detail. It was such an incredible sight. Four tall robed figures were busy with needles and thread, standing over kneeling figures that looked like they could have been praying. The cloaked ones were sewing the eyes of the supplicants tightly shut! I saw no resistance in those who were being so horribly abused.

“What is happening here?” I asked aghast.

“These figures have the will to do what is

right, but they cling to the ancient darkness of institutions which only serve to blind them with it's dogma." He walked up to one of the robed workers to more closely inspect his handy craft. The figure kneeling was silent and patiently bearing the painful problem of having their eyelids sewn shut.

"For the weak and timid blindness is a blessing. If they were to open their eyes they would feel the horror of being lost and alone in a strange and difficult world. They give themselves away so freely, just for safe harbor, even if it is an evil foul place," Dante spoke in a tone of bitterness. Perhaps memories of past personal conflicts had awakened, I wondered.

From there we walked down a slight slope in the path and hearing the turbulent sounds of a mountain river we met again with Charon. He appeared more refreshed and healthier, like he just had a good sleep. The weather was now pleasant and I noticed a sense of sanctity in the air, or was it the presence of redemption, I thought.

"I shall take you to the light!" Charon

said as he pushed hard against his oar, steering the boat across the dark wave swept river. Water splashed against us but the boatman had my confidence. As I was about to discover, it was a river that separated two different worlds, one darker than the other.

In an expectant mood Dante and myself leaped from the craft as it landed on the far shore and its nose bounced upon the muddy bank. Looking eastward the morning sun was making a subtle appearance in the now calm skies, giving the winding trail a welcoming appearance.

“The next is the Harvest Moon,” Dante said while walking in front with his back turned to me. Beneath a large fir tree I saw a robed man sitting at a desk with the top half of a human skull resting on it. The words “Remember Death” were scrolled across its forehead and a burning candle was sitting on top of the grayish skull. “Here is a sincere soul struggling to focus his attention on the eternal questions of humanity; so to open his eyes and better understand the world around him.” Just then an owl flew out of the forest and landed on

the man's shoulder. "See! The Muses favor this man. They reward his diligence, insightfulness and sincerity." There was the sound of pride in his voice as he spoke, "Within the nobility of the mind only virtue can awaken the love that is needed for one's redemption."

"He looks so lost in thought," I said almost laughing.

A slight chuckle came from Dante and he spoke, "It is better to lose one's thought than to lose one's soul." Just as we were leaving he turned to look into my eyes and said in a whisper, "See the owl? That means in time this man will do well for he has a good heart. Nature has given him a guardian spirit."

As we continued our walk the woods cleared away and we entered a clearing of thick moist grass. Suddenly there appeared several pale figures approaching one another rather quickly and began embracing, smiling into each other's faces. Then equally as fast they all disappeared into the surrounding forest. But soon more figures arose

phantom-like from the trees and again began to embrace one another and smiling beautifully. The figures were flowing like a stream into and out of view. “Here we have the Hunter’s Moon. These souls have learned that the true measure of life is love. But it is a love that knows the value of sacrifice so to better bond with spirit, the essence of wilderness.” Dante spoke bluntly while a look of joy came across his face. A light was reflected there that I had not seen before. “A true human would teach this important lesson. You must remember it!” I felt a sense of urgency to his voice and a feeling of responsibility fell down hard on my weary shoulders.

“So death and sacrifice is a way of purifying life?” I asked.

Dante nodded his head in agreement, “It is like a fire in the forest.”

He turned to move on through the grassy, dew moistened clearing. It feels like such a beautiful morning to be alive, I thought while looking out from the mountainside to the neighboring peaks. A bird song could



be heard coming from the fir trees.

After the clearing we walked farther uphill through scree of boulders and small firs. The sky had opened up and the sound of geese was heard flying overhead. I could tell that we were nearing the summit of the mountain. The trail turned sharply around a huge boulder that towered up into the sunlight above us. As we continued on to the back of the rock a series of light colored figures were seen climbing a spiral flight of stairs. The silvery steps looked like they were made from starlight, I thought.

“This is the Beaver Moon. These figures are on their way to be warmed by the enchanting goodness of nature,” Dante explained to me.

“Are they going to Heaven?” I asked.

“Only if they continue to follow the light.”

Finally after moving on farther we were standing on the boulder-strewn summit of the mountain. The rocky rise had opened to sky and distant horizons. The trail wound around to steep cliffs facing outwardly to

the surrounding peaks. It was there over the tall cliffs that I saw the colored winged figures floating up and gradually disappearing into the sky. The men among them were carrying long spears and the women had glass orbs. They looked so strong, brave and beautiful.

“They are winging their way to Heaven. This is called the Long Night Moon because from here they will only know starlight. It is like a child returning to its’ mother’s love. The dark earthly spirits eventually grow up to recognize the celestial realm and they use its light to return to heaven. It is like a harvesting of the virtuous,” Dante spoke calmly. Then he looked carefully around the mountain summit, admiring the beauty of the setting. Stopping with his eyes still ablaze, he turned directly to me staunchly stating, “Now it is time for you to go back to your people. Tell them what you have seen. Tell them to sow their seeds well and turn toward the light! ”

Then I remember a falling star and realizing it was night again. A grey wolf startled me by leaping out of the shadows and

disappearing down the pathway. Dante was gone. I felt alone and frightened. Following the trail back down the mountainside and seeing nothing of the past visions, I was back where the journey began, where I had felt those strange eyes on me, in a surprisingly short time.

Feeling tired and perplexed I began walking home. But images of robed figures in moonlight were fixed in my mind and as the days went by they continued to haunt me. In a desperate bid to rid their presence I decided to write about the full affair. So this is my story of meeting Dante.