

CULTURE AND COMMENTARY ON THE PRAIRIES

# NEWEST

REVIEW

**Saying  
goodbye  
to a friend**

**fiction  
by Tom  
Bentley-Fisher**

the power of light

**painting the forest**



# Chicken Blood

BY TOM BENTLEY-FISHER

Johnny sat on the edge of the bathtub holding his roll of toilet paper, waiting for the blood. His grandfather slapped the straight razor up and down against the leather belt. The stropping sound stung the small boy with excitement. It was much better than being in Sunday school colouring pictures of holy things.

Gladys Potts had persuaded his grandmother to let her take him to the Presbyterian Church once. Mrs. Potts was worried about the boy's spiritual education. He liked all the decorations but wondered why the church needed such a high roof. When it was time for the sermon, the children went to the basement with a Sunday School teacher to get little drawings to put crayons on and learn about Jesus. There was a photograph of him on the wall. Johnny learned that Jesus had blond hair, red lips, rosy cheeks and looked like a woman with a beard. If that's the son, he thought, I wonder what his sister looks like?

When Bob Todd found out that his grandson had been in church with that Mrs. Potts bitch, Johnny's spiritual education came to an abrupt halt. So every Sunday morning after that Johnny had to stay home and help his grandfather with his weekly shave.

Johnny felt nervous today, though. It was Monday morning. His grandfather had never stayed home or shaved on a Monday morning. He shaved on Sunday. What if his grandfather shaved differently on a Monday? Or what if the toilet paper dropped from

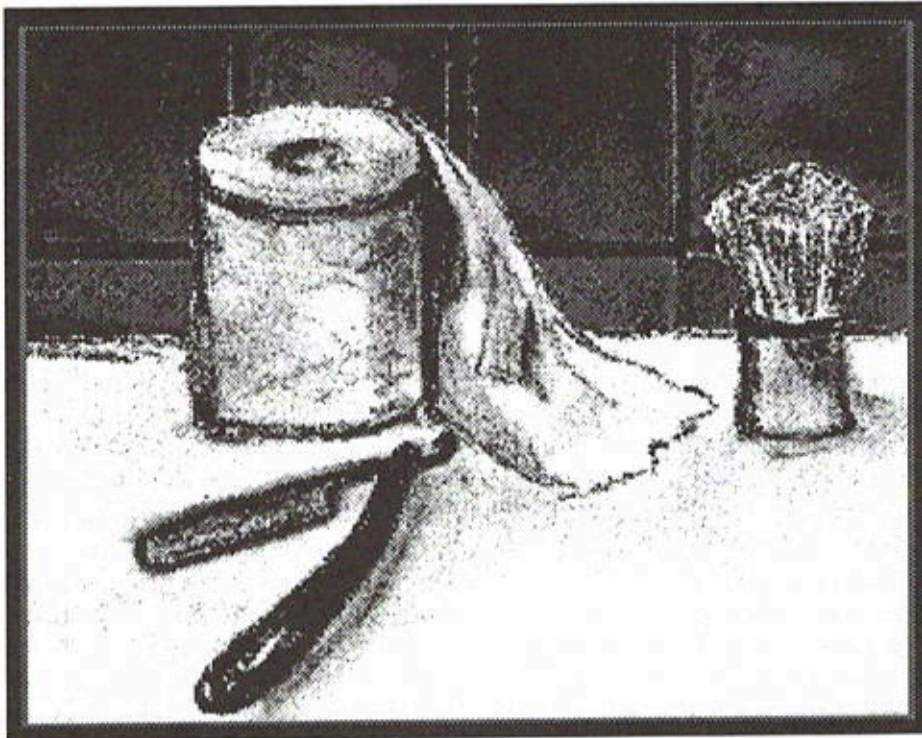
his hands and bounced over and landed on the cellar door?

In the middle of the bathroom floor was a heavy hinged door. Down below was a ladder that dropped straight into a dirt cellar full of coal and potatoes and chicken blood.

His grandfather had brought a chicken home once. He carried it into the bathroom and put its head on a block of wood that he had brought in from his wheelbarrow. He clamped the head with one hand and yanked the screeching bird away from its head, squeezing and stretching its body from between his knees. After rubbing his fingers up and down the bony neck, he took his knife from his overalls and sawed through to the block of

wood. He cut the chicken's head off. Right off. And the head stayed in the bathroom as the chicken ran all through the house. With no head. His grandfather couldn't chase after the chicken body because Bob Todd couldn't see. He had to wait until the chicken body ran back into the bathroom to find its chicken head. And it did. And it died. Right there with its head on top of the cellar door. Johnny ran out to puke on the caragana bushes

outside the front screen door. He spent the rest of the afternoon killing Koreans on Billy Palmer's wood pile but when Billy's mum wouldn't invite him for supper he had to go home. After he found his nerve, he looked into the bathroom. He saw no sign of the chicken body or the chicken head. Johnny figured maybe the chicken blood had leaked through the hinges of the cellar door



and sunk into the coal and potatoes. He decided he'd never step on that cellar door again. Or eat potatoes.

Johnny held on tightly to the toilet paper waiting to do his duty, hoping that his grandfather didn't feel as nervous as he did. Today was different. Today was Monday. There was no room for mistakes.

Bob Todd turned on the hot water and undid his overalls so they could drop to his waist. He took two white face cloths and soaked them in the stream of very hot water. He brought a chair in from the kitchen, sat down in front of the sink, and stirred with his hard bristled brush, dropping beads of water onto the bar of shaving soap inside a bowl. Like an alchemist, Bob Todd's slow round-about motion began to transform the unyielding yellow mass into lush and gentle fog banks. The steam from the sink began to fill the room and Johnny felt intoxicated with the softness of the world and the promise of wild monkeys from the rain forests of Peru. He loved the wet magic of his grandfather's incantations. He loved his grandfather.

Bob Todd was a strange and mammoth man. His tall strong body defied his age. The people of the small prairie town called him a miser, a fanatic, a recluse, and it was all true. Some people laughed at the son of a bitch, but most were afraid of him. He towered six feet above the horizon as he pushed his wheelbarrow, guiding his memory through the streets of Biggar, not taking shit from anyone, including his wife. He had been totally blind in one eye for many years and the other had a cataract that made it hard for him to see anything but shadows. Some time ago a doctor in Saskatoon told him the cataract could be removed from his good eye if he was prepared to go to Rochester for an operation. After years of thinking about it, and even announcing on several occasions that he was going, his eye had become so useless he finally decided it was now or never.

The smell of soap filled the bathroom as the swelling foam began to drift off the ancient medicine bowl.

Johnny's grandmother stood in the kitchen adjacent to the bathroom chewing the left side of her lip. She stood paralysed with confusion and dread. Usually at this time of the day on a Monday morning she was in full battle with the tight suck pull of the second-hand wringer washing machine in the corner of the kitchen. Bob Todd had finally caved in and installed plumbing. The last house on the block to take the plunge. He left the outhouses out back though, just as a precaution. Who knew if those fancy pipes could stand the test of time?

For a few months after the installation, Maggie was happy. A toilet, a bathtub and even a kitchen sink with hot water! It

wasn't long until she recalled her seven children who had left home and the piles of laundry and waiting for the cold water to boil on the coal stove. Now it was just her husband and grandson. The old man slept in the back bedroom with the boy and she in the front off the living room. They met in the kitchen at 12 o'clock for lunch and 5 o'clock for supper. That was it. That was the routine. And that suited her just fine.

Maggie chewed her lip. Never had her husband been in the house on a Monday morning. She held onto the kitchen sink and breathed heavily. She didn't know if she was more afraid of him going to Rochester or chickening out and not going at all. A week without the old man would be grand. But she worried about him returning to peer beyond the shadows of his eye and seeing her 250 pounds of rolling flesh in all its glory. She knew his blindness and was comforted by it. It gave her room to live in her own shadows. She stood frozen, breathing heavily, knowing that the Happy Gang would be "KNOCK KNOCK KNOCKING" on the radio by now. She hated her sisters for making her marry the old man in the first place. "WHO'S THERE KNOCKING? ... DA ... DA ... DADA IT'S THE HAPPY GANG! ... WELL COME ON IN!"

Bob Todd lifted the two scalding face cloths from the sink and let them fall onto his face as he leaned his head back against the chair. Johnny breathed into the mist cloud and said a silent goodbye to the comfort of the swimming eye – a pale blue sun through the fog bank whiteness, veiled and oozing wide to the back of the head, promising that the universe goes on forever. There are things in this world you can't even imagine, his grandfather always said.

The old man leaned forward to let the white mask drop from his face and onto the edge of the sink. He pulled his full mane of shocking white hair back off his face and reached his chin to the ceiling. With eyes closed, he placed his fingertips on his hard bone cheeks and slowly brailled through the valleys and canyons of his stubble. Johnny felt his grandfather's body growing larger in the steam. The huge muscular thighs, the hard stomach, the long hairy legs, and the brown spots like war medals, which every year would cover the tight elastic vastness of his grandfather's skin.

Johnny's grandfather dipped his horsehair brush into the water, stirred it in the bowl of foam, and lathered the right side of his face. He draped a linen cloth over his left shoulder. Pulling the skin from his right ear towards his chin with his left hand, he began to scrape the straight razor down his face towards his jaw line. After each careful scrape he wiped the foam onto the linen cloth. The transformation had begun. Rochester was waiting. Johnny could hear the deep sigh breathing from the kitchen, and thought he could feel slippery eels oozing down his back ready to slide into the bathtub.

Bob Todd was obsessed with good health. Several years back he discovered that his hair was thinning. It was then that he began to participate in a cure for the balding little circle on top of his old man head. This ritual also involved his grandson's participation. Every Sunday afternoon.

Johnny thought he could hear the red gobs of raw liver growing in the tin on the side of the bathtub. But today was

**THE PEOPLE OF THE  
SMALL PRAIRIE TOWN  
CALLED HIM A MISER,  
A FANATIC, A  
RECLUSE, AND  
IT WAS ALL TRUE**

Monday, he reassured himself. It was Monday.

Only on Sundays would Johnny hold the slimy blood-soaked tin, red gobs of shapeless liver, arm stretched towards his gagging grandfather. Cannibals and hearts of buffalo, lifted from the tin, sliding down like raw egg, blood dribbling in the corner of Bob Todd's mouth as he accepted the wide-throat sacrifice, the medicine man's cure for falling hair. Down it would go slippery easy like an eel.

His grandfather's hair started to grow back at the same time as a marvelous new beard began to grow from the bottom of his chin, joining the hair on his chest. Bob Todd was a healthy man.

Noises of pots and pans moving about began from the other room. The breathing became faster and heavier and loud footsteps pounded on the linoleum kitchen floor. The old man started to scrape away the stubble on the left side of his face.

Johnny knew that he would never be as healthy as his grandfather. He figured he'd probably be bald and crippled over with polio by the time he was 30. And he knew it was his own fault. His grandfather had tried to give him a healthy future.

Every morning Johnny was bounced cold turkey awake by squeaky springs and a flip-flopping mattress. When he snapped opened his eyes he would once again see his grandfather's huge hairy legs pedalling high in the air as he began his morning exercises. Johnny wondered how he survived the earthquake and wasn't squashed flat when he was a baby.

Every morning it was the same routine. Johnny knew his part and was not allowed to leave the bed he shared with his grandfather until the ritual was complete. When he finished

his exercises on the bed, Bob Todd would stand and stretch his colossal arms in homage to the cracked, plastered ceiling, groaning like the trains moving in for repairs down at the roundhouse. Then he would run, double time, up and down, on the spot, knees to hands, counting loudly, slap slap, to 150. Johnny would watch him take his overalls, the same ones he wore everyday, out of the wardrobe. After he put them on he'd pick up the big pot and throw his night time piss out the window. Now the day could really get going.

Then Bob would go into the kitchen and start the porridge cooking on the stove. He'd return to his grandson with a full cardboard box. Johnny would sit up. From jars and bottles came spoons full of magic substances guaranteeing years of good health and lush hair. Black thick molasses, gobbled and clinging for dear life onto the spoon, coming closer and closer to Johnny's mouth. Swallowing it – awake! Cod liver oil – awake! Wheat germ – awake! Brewers yeast, powdered garlic, lecithin – awake, awake, awake! Then the parade of little lady bug pills and brown tablets. Vitamins A and B and C and D. Calcium and potassium and magnesium and zinc. Niacin and Pantothenic Acid. On and on, and finished off with a large bowl of porridge, eaten lump by nourishing lump. Then Johnny was allowed to get out of bed, stepping with bare feet onto the cold Saskatchewan floor. Now could a grandfather be kinder or try harder than that?

Johnny found out pretty early on that it was possible to trick a blind man. He still had to swallow the thick gobby stuff but the vitamins and pills found their way into a hole in the plaster. Year after year. When the capsules became permanent insulation against the long drafty winters and rose to the top of the hole, the crime was uncovered. Bob Todd still had an acute sense of smell. The evidence was absolute.

Added years to his life – down the drain. Protection from disease – wasted! Brain power – squandered! Johnny's shame was met with stony silence and an unusual home improvement act as the plaster hit the hole. Johnny would have preferred the shit to hit the fan.

He learned about the power of his grandfather's silence. Yes, he would surely be bald and crippled over with polio by the time he was 30.

Johnny hoped he would never disappoint his grandfather again. He held on even more tightly to the roll of toilet paper as Bob Todd began the final campaign in his conquest against total blindness. He gently pulled up his nose with his left hand and with the certainty of a surgeon began a series of miniature downward slices towards his upper lip. The steam was lifting. The time was getting close.

A scream came from the kitchen. A high screeching wail as the kettle boiled over on the stove. The razor sliced down into Bob Todd's lip. "Goddamn you, woman," he bellowed.

Goddamn yourself, thought Maggie, pouring

# Giving the Gift Of Sight®

Help us to prevent blindness  
in the developing world

**OPERATION EYESIGHT UNIVERSAL**

**1-800-585-8265**

Charitable Registration # 11906 8955 RR0001

the water into her tea pot. Goddamn you yourself.

Johnny started whipping the toilet paper off the roll. No, it's not time – it's not time, he told himself. His grandfather thrashed down the razor and plunged his face into the sink. Johnny started rolling up the loose toilet paper, careful not to rip a square, as his grandfather drenched the second face cloth, twisted the water out, slapped it on his face, and leaned his head once more against the back of the chair.

I'll have my cup of tea, thought Maggie. I won't be a prisoner in my own house. The old man'll get dinner on the 12 o'clock. I'll make some soup and me and Johnny can sit down when he gets back from the station. He can catch the train to bloody hell for all I care.

Maggie sat down at the kitchen table and stewed. She wondered if he'd actually get all the way to Rochester. Or if he'd get off in Saskatoon. Well either way was fine with her. At least he'd be out of the house. She was going to carry on. Mrs. Potts and Mrs. Jenkins could come over at two and she'd read them their tea leaves. Mrs. Jenkins could bring her Pekinese this time. The dog had made it through 18 Saskatchewan winters. She'd stop over and tell her when the old man gets out of her hair, or maybe she'd read the cards. Maggie hadn't the heart to show Mrs. Potts the ace of spades when it showed its ugly face the last time. It wasn't about any of her husbands, thank God. They're all dead. It was about her niece, Edna. Gladys Potts made her money by taking in other people's laundry. She kept Edna in the basement with a wringer washer, an ironing board and a strange pulley contraption clothes line which Edna could operate from the basement window. The cards kept spelling out disaster for the poor girl. Maggie didn't know how Gladys Potts was going to manage if Edna was taken away. She'd probably have to work harder at getting another husband.

Since the old bugger's gonna be gone, maybe I'll head down to Wednesday afternoon bingo this week, thought Maggie. Usually Mrs. Todd just went to bingo on Saturday nights. And when I win I'll take the chocolates this time instead of the flour and sugar. She looked at her husband's cardboard boxes in the kitchen. At least if he gets his eye fixed I could throw out all that damn lotion and salve stuff. Maggie bit harder into the side of her mouth. I hope to God he does it, she thought.

Bob Todd leaned towards the sink and let the face cloth drop off. Then he took a clean white towel and once again sat back against the chair with the towel falling onto his uplifted face. With the palms of his hands he patted the moisture into the flannel like the gentle expert coaxing of a baby's burp. He stopped.

Johnny nervously fingered the end of the toilet paper. He waited. Bob Todd stayed seated and swivelled towards Johnny. He raised his body in the chair, stiff like the tomb mummy in Saturday afternoon serials down at the movie theatre. The bandaged skull ... what was there? ... What was there?

Johnny was ready. His grandfather pulled at the bottom of the towel and unveiled the naked terrain of his conquered face, clean and glistening in its magnificence. Johnny sat there,

tense and concentrated, the pale blue jellyfish floating wide beneath the deep shadow river of the eye ... waiting for it ... waiting.

One by one, tiny little blood beads popped out from all over Bob Todd's face and started their migratory journey down to his neck. Johnny revved into action.

Rip, lick, paste. Rip, lick, paste. Faster, faster! Rip, lick, paste. Rip, lick, paste. The blood beads were coming in battalions.

Not for a moment did Johnny lose his cool. He could handle anything. He worked like the dickens. On and on until the task was done.

And when he was absolutely certain that the well was dried up, he sat back on the bathtub and surveyed his victory. He counted 17 blood-gobbed shrivelled little pieces of toilet paper decorating his grandfathers chin, cheeks, forehead and nose.

Step one had gone without a hitch. Step two would be pulling them off.

Bob Todd stood up tentatively, careful not to let any of Johnny's work fall off his face. He left the instruments and remnants of his Monday morning massacre strewn all over the bathroom. Johnny followed him as he walked through the kitchen and into his bedroom at the back of the house. Johnny glimpsed his granny, tight-lipped and staring into her tea.

Bob sat down on the edge of the bed and started putting on his boots. Johnny helped him. As he finished lacing, Johnny looked over and saw his grandmother standing on the kitchen side of the doorway, peering in at her husband as if she were

## Big Breath of a Wish

Poems by  
Richard Harrison

Supported by my hands, Emma walks  
the width of the park,  
from kitchen to bedroom,  
couch to door. She's quit talking: gone  
are the multisyllables, the first word candidates,  
All she does is *abababababa* —  
and she walks. Right now the rest of  
the alphabet is not important.  
What she cares about  
is getting from a to b.

from: *LOCOMOTION*

514 Paper • 82 Pages • 0-919897-62-2 • Dist. by Wolsak & Wynn Publishers

Wolsak & Wynn Publishers Ltd.  
PO BOX 316, Don Mills Post Office Don Mills, ON M3C 2S7



trying to solve some great puzzle. It made the boy feel nervous all over again. After his grandfather had put on a starched white shirt and notched up the top of his overalls, he laid his huge body, boots and all, down on the bed. He closed his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest. Johnny slipped up on the bed onto his knees and looked down at his grandfather's face. He wondered what a corpse looked like.

When Johnny began the painstaking task of tugging off the 17 little bloodsuckers, he looked over again to his grandmother. She was now standing with her arms stretched against the frame in the doorway, looking as if she were holding up the inside of the house just like the arms of the caragana bushes looked as if they were holding up the outside. He hoped to goodness she wasn't going to take one more step into enemy territory.

Johnny picked and peeled, picked and peeled, careful not to leave any paper bits or start the blood flowing again. He felt the shadow at the door and heard his grandfather breathe more quickly as his grandmother sighed more deeply. It was a stand-off. I wish I had a TV, thought Johnny.

Pick and peel. Pick and peel.

The muscles of Bob Todd's face were as disciplined as a ventriloquist. He threw his voice out of his body and over towards the door. "Goddamn you woman, get out of my room."

She threw her voice back in. "I'm not in your goddamn room you old bugger. I'm at the door and I'm not budgin'." And she didn't. Pick and peel. Pick and peel.

During the past summer, the modern world had snuck over from the Rocky Mountains and settled in Saskatchewan. A couple of old-timers with no kids had purchased the first Biggar television set. They were operating it down at the bottom of Second Avenue.

The machine was placed in such a way that if you stood by the fence outside their yard it was possible to see the reflection catching in the window. You couldn't see the picture but you knew something was moving and it was great. A sign went up on their front yard late in the summer. PLEASE DON'T LEAN ON THE FENCE. Crowds of drooling children used

to start gathering at about 7:30 every evening. When the fence tumbled over, Melanie Perkins's skirt went flying right over her head. Television is great, said Jimmy Highness's older brother Gary.

Ron Hayes and Jane Leikam's parents both bought television sets for their kids the following winter. Johnny knew there was no hope in hell that his grandparents would ever get a TV.

When he'd finished picking his way through his grandfather's face, Johnny glanced over to see his granny still holding her ground. She hadn't budged. Johnny sidled over to the windowsill at the edge of the bed, not knowing where to look. Behind him was his grandfather's backyard. He couldn't look out there. Johnny hated the secret ice-bumpy shapes that always thawed out and tried to get him ... rusty tin cans, spiked two-by-fours, greased axles, tin slabs, wound wire, coils, tires, frozen rat shit, old piss and rhubarb. Even the robins stayed out of the backyard in the springtime. Johnny decided just to close his eyes. He heard his grandfather get off the bed, put on his parka and pick up his suitcase. He heard him walk over to the door. He didn't hear his grandmother budge.

In the blackness of his eyes he saw the chicken body running through the house like a crazy bird looking for its chicken head. "Goddamn you woman, get out of my way!"

Still nobody moved.

Johnny could hear his heartbeat pounding. He felt as if he were at the Saturday afternoon movies just when the hero gets sucked into the foaming quicksand and the action stops and the screen flashes "WILL THE CAPTAIN BE RESCUED? ... COME BACK NEXT WEEK FOR THE EXCITING CONCLUSION OF CAPTAIN INCREDIBLE AND THE ALLIGATOR PIT!"

Johnny couldn't stand it any more. He banged open his eyes. There they were. His grandparents. Standing a foot away from each other. Nose to nose.

Nobody moved.

Just as he decided that it might be easier to look over his shoulder and into the backyard, his grandmother spoke. "Good luck, Bob," she said, and went back to her tea at the table. **NWR**



*Tom Bentley-Fisher retired as artistic director of 25th Street Theatre in Saskatoon in 1997, after 12 years on the job. His early years were spent in Biggar, Saskatchewan, after which he attended the first high school for the performing arts in Edmonton. He studied performing arts and worked in the field in Toronto, New York, Montreal and London, England, before returning to Saskatchewan in the mid '80s to take on the 25th Street Theatre job. He was subsequently credited with reviving the theatre's moribund fortunes, winning acclaim for engineering "the most dramatic come-back in Canadian theatre." Bentley-Fisher lives in Saskatoon. As well as writing short fiction, he does sessional lecturing at the U of S, directs theatre on a freelance basis, and works at another of his loves, writing music.*