THE THEURGIST

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Schamane Grist stretched his legs along the floorboards where a passenger would sit if the front seat had not been removed from the carcass of a burgundy 1979 Buick Regal rusting by the upper fork of Wheelers Falls Creek. Normally, he would sit behind the steering wheel, force of habit for someone who had been driving, illegally, since he was younger than his grandson; but Semyon Hauser, visiting for his annual three-week stay with Gramps in the wilds of Vermont's Northeast Kingdom, wanted to play racing-car driver. Schamane rotated the antenna on his portable short wave radio as he fiddled with the tuner in search of the channel that broadcast the BBC World News. He had bought the radio after Semyon's birth together with a globe, topographically accurate, illuminated by an interior light bulb. He made do with the short wave, the hum and static, the fade-ins and fade-outs. If he had the money, he would subscribe to a satellite service, a clear signal

not subject to the whims and vagaries of time of day or atmospheric conditions.

After several attempts, Schamane located the radio signal and locked the antenna in place. On this particular morning, conditions favored the radio waves and the announcers sounded as if they were broadcasting from Lyndonville or Newport rather than London. Each morning after he listened to the BBC newscasts, he located on the globe the countries with reports of war. Someday, he feared, when Semyon reached a certain age, the draft would be reinstated and his grandson would be shipped out to one of these war zones to defend the interests of the United States, its oil companies, its defense contractors, its weapons builders, in the name of bringing democracy to another people whose most pressing needs were food, water, and medical care. Schamane wished the president would understand that democracy was a luxury to a people starving and dying of curable diseases. In his youth, he had brought democracy to a subjugated people, touring Europe with the 65th Division Combat Engineers, fighting a war that had to be fought against an enemy that had to be defeated. Unlike World War II, Semyon's war would be as disposable as the American troops who fought in it. Cowards make lousy presidents.

Schamane did not know whether it was the accents or the calm modulation of the BBC announcers' voices or, perhaps, the time of day that

eased the anxiety of hearing about the premature deaths of the children of Nyala and the other cities of Southern Darfur, Romanian sex trafficking, the slaughter of refugees in a United Nations refugee camp in Burundi, and the sacrificial deaths of American soldiers in Sadr City, Fallujah, and Najaf. The voices, especially those of the women, were like a narcotic, causing him to forget, momentarily, that someday his grandson would fight in a war in one of these countries. He leaned against the back seat of the Buick Regal as he smoked his sunrise cigar and sipped his sunrise coffee laced with anisette. Above his right shoulder a crow had ripped a tuft of upholstery and stuffing out of the back seat and dropped it like a blob of guano in the yard beside his shack the previous afternoon. The sun had risen several hours earlier, but Schamane adjusted his schedule out of deference to his grandson. Enjoy Semyon's visits while you can, his daughter had warned him. In a year he'll have outgrown spending half the summer in the middle of nowhere. Where you live, Schamane had wanted to say, is the middle of nowhere; but he had vowed to stop picking fights with his daughter. His life was his and her life was hers and, the spirits willing, Semyon's would be Semyon's.

Like many men of his generation, Schamane had never overcome the combat he saw in World War II. If he fixated on the children of the Sudan, if he looked inside his fears for Semyon's future, he would have to admit that it was as much about feeling sorry for the Sudanese children, as much

worrying about his grandson, as it was to feel better about himself. He did not gloat, he did not wish these children ill; but he understood that if they did not exist, if Biafra or Bangladesh had never existed, nor Uganda or Rwanda, nor some hitherto unidentified country that would take its place in the headlines of 2005 or 2006 or 2007, he would not be able to face the sunrise in the morning. He salved his conscience by contributing to several of the charities dedicated to saving such children, raising the money, when he had to, by selling one of his junk cars to the company that operated demolition derbies at county fairs across the country.

And like many men of his generation, Schamane never outgrew the Depression. Over the years, he had hoarded so many cars and trucks (now rusting in the acres around his shack) that he could smoke his sunrise cigar and drink his sunrise coffee and anisette and listen to the BBC World News in a different one each morning for fourscore and seven days. He did not follow any particular rotation for these sunrise excursions. In extreme weather, or on wet, rainy, snowy, or humid days, he favored cloth-covered bench seats; otherwise, he preferred leather bucket seats. If the sunrise promised to be glorious, he chose something roofless. He had only four natural convertibles. He carried a small spiral notebook in which he recorded the date, the identity of the wreck, the time of his arrival, the time of his departure. Although some were as close to his shack as ten feet, others as

distant as three miles, he timed his arrival for the beginning of the 6:00 AM or 7:00 AM (Vermont time depending on the season, 12:00 noon GMT) BBC broadcast and departed sixty minutes later after the broadcast ended except during the summer when his grandson made mockery of his punctuality and he would listen to what in London was a late afternoon or early evening broadcast.

On the other hand, the number of days between visits to each junk car or truck ranged from seventeen to almost one thousand, a record held by the burgundy Buick Regal near the upper fork of Wheelers Falls Creek which he visited once every two or three years because it did not have a front seat. Like a compass, the Regal pointed true north toward a grove of scarlet oak trees growing on the southern side of Mt. Onkaian, one of the seven mountains that surrounded the valley where Thebesford Center, the county seat of Thebesford County in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom, in the sandy topsoil of the basin where Wheelers Falls Creek emptied into the Moosup River, where Belle Baker's Joint once flourished.

During Prohibition, Schamane's two grandfathers, Rover "Gluscap" Grist and Armand "Morning Glass" Izard, brothers-in-law since mustering out of the army at the end of the Great War, had operated a line house in that grove of scarlet oaks they named Belle Baker's Joint after the singer who popularized one of the first anti-Prohibition anthems, *America Never Took*

Water and America Never Will. They sold Canadian beer and whiskey smuggled over the Quebec border, a three mile hike north--real beer, real whiskey, not that poisonous hooch a bootlegger knew better than to test on his dog. I took enough water in the trenches, Grist had complained when he returned home from France and learned he could not relax after a hard day of timbering with a bottle of ale or porter and a whiskey chaser.

Morning Glass, a whiskey man who refused to drink anything that looked the same going in as it did coming out, earned his nickname by waking up each day to a drink in celebration of his surviving mustard gas and hand-to-hand combat against the Hun. Rover Grist, on the other hand, was known throughout the valley as "Gluscap," short for "Gluscap the Liar," because of the exaggerated tales of monstrous mammoths, giant beavers, and spirit tricksters he told the "paleface anthros," white anthropologists from city universities who collected Indian (the phrase "Native American" had yet to be coined) tribal tales the same way young children collect rocks. Gluscap embellished these Abenaki legends beyond recognition with mystery, magic, and sexual innuendo, because he understood how children lust after the shiniest rocks regardless of how worthless they were. Schamane did not know if Gluscap and Morning Glass worried whether, someday, their grandson would go to war. He doubted it.

Bayonets, some rusty, others caked with the blood of dead or wounded trench soldiers, both comrades in arms and the enemy, hung above the bar of Belle Baker's Joint. Morning Glass's and Gluscap's infantry uniforms hung on clothes dummies beside the door: sentinels on watch to guard the liquor. Baby food jars filled with trench mud, now dried into dust, alternated with bottles of whiskey on the shelves behind the bar. Gluscap and Morning Glass allowed only combat veterans or their drinking buddies to patronize Belle Baker's Joint. Civil War veterans, because of their age, sat closest to the wood-burning stove. Veterans of the Spanish-American War had two tables beside the door to the bathroom. The remaining barstools and tables were reserved for men who had fought in the Great War.

Gluscap and Morning Glass stationed spotters in the rocks above the entrance to Jersey Drown, the gorge that offered the only passageway through Mt. Onkaian to the grove of scarlet oaks and Belle Baker's Joint. By the time a raiding party of revenuers, custom agents, and local lawmen could reach the line house, they found a quartet of elderly Civil War veterans hunkered around a table playing hearts, drinking sarsaparilla tonic, and swapping tall tales about killing Johnny Rebs or exploits in hunting and trapping. The boozers, along with their beer and whiskey, their glasses and mugs, had vanished into one of the many bear caves puncturing Mt. Onkaian. Revenuers and customs agents, many of them flatlanders, were

afraid of bears, and so local lawmen, sympathetic to the residents of Thebesford County, exaggerated their fears with tales of bears that devoured hapless hunters alive, wolves that scavenged the remains, and crows that picked clean the bones, tales of Gluscap's monstrous mammoths, giant beavers, and spirit tricksters. Agents from large cities, much plumper than the locals, were the preferred diet of creatures that lurked in the woods, local lawmen assured them.

Today a grandfather himself, Schamane missed his grandfathers more than Semyon would miss him. The spirits of his grandfathers had protected him as he threw temporary bridges across German rivers so the allies could advance on Berlin. His spirit would protect Semyon in some future war zone if only his grandson believed. Several times he had tried to share the tales of his grandfathers with his grandson, starting with his favorite, the tale of how Gluscap (not Rover Grist but the legendary Gluscap) had vanquished Par-sar-do-kep-piart the Mammoth, a monster whose body was shaped like a half-moon with large stringy ears that hung down on either side of its shrunken head, an upper lip so long it could snatch leaves from the crown of the highest trees, and curved horns that extended from either side of its snout. Semyon would yawn and bury himself in his *Fantastic Four* and *Thor* comic books, preferring make-believe stories of the Baxter Building or Asgard to the true tales of his own people. Perhaps Semyon understood in a way that

adults did not or could not or would not that with Loki or Doctor Doom in the White House disguised as the President of the United States, only Thor or Reed Richards, and not American soldiers, could save the world.

On this particular morning, when memories of his grandfathers competed with the recitation of the day's atrocities by the BBC, Schamane chose the Regal for his cigar and coffee because of that tuft of seat cushion deposited in his yard the afternoon before by a crow. The Vermonter in him knew that crows, raccoons, mice, and other scavengers did more damage to the interiors of his rusting hulks than a gang of adolescent boys with nothing to do and no common sense. The Abenaki in him knew, on the other hand, that crows were emissaries of the spirits not to be ignored.

In the sky above, a red-shouldered hawk circled the Buick in search of breakfast. A female, Schamane explained to Semyon, because its wingspan is twice its body length. His grandson merely shifted an imaginary clutch and vroom-vroomed his way into the lead of the Daytona 500. "Ten laps to go, Gramps," he said. White crescents on the tips of the hawk's wings and the orange and buff color of its belly magnified the intensity of the deep blue morning sky. The hawk tightened its circle, the better to observe them. Schamane glanced around the interior of the Buick searching for a mouse or squirrel that might be nesting in the rear seat cushion, or a snake or toad, anything that would trigger the hawk's power dive. He feared the hawk's

eyesight the way he once feared the radar of German bombers. He had watched a red-shouldered hawk, a female, descend directly on a field mouse from several hundred feet with the precision of a laser beam. He had seen a male swoop down from the crown of a mature scarlet oak sixty or seventy or eighty feet above the forest floor and carry off a snake with the same ease that a man bends over to pluck a penny off the sidewalk. He had seen another appear from nowhere and snatch a stuffed animal, Curious George, out of a young girl's hands. No anti-missile system built by man could intercept a red-shouldered hawk in its power dive. No one disparaged him as Gluscap the Liar when he told those stories, because he spoke true.

Schamane glanced at his grandson who had just made a pit stop three laps from the finish line of his make-believe race to devour jelly donuts and slurp milk from a cardboard container. He ate with the sloppiness of a hawk tearing apart a rabbit or squirrel. Semyon wore a brown jersey, two tones, light and dark, scattered in a random pattern of curls and swirls. His hair, as long as a girl's, reached the jersey's collar. Schamane cursed himself for letting Semyon wear something the hawk might mistake for the pelt of a rabbit or squirrel. Five years ago he would not have made such a naive mistake. He had aged into the flatlanders he despised.

Schamane closed his eyes and launched his bird spirit until he circled, eye to eye, with the hawk. It is my grandson, his bird spirit said to the hawk,

not a squirrel or rabbit to be fed to your young. The hawk stared at him with the unblinking eye of a bird of prey, its talons curved like the open doors of a bomber's bay. Do not trespass in my sky, it replied.

Schamane put his fingers to his lips to shush Semyon, then draped his grandson's chest and shoulders with a yellow windbreaker. Yellow was not a color a red-shouldered hawk would associate with its next meal. The hawk continued to circle, holding its position. Something within its range of vision tethered it to the sky above them. Schamane snapped the windbreaker around Semyon's neck. "You look," he said, "like you're about to get a haircut."

With a series of screeches, *kee-yarr*, *kee-yarr*, *kee-yarr*, the hawk swooped to the right, maneuvering as if it were in a mating flight; then, rapidly beating its wings, the hawk ascended as if being attacked from below. It flew southward, as straight as an arrow and twice as fast, trailed by its screech the way a missile is trailed by a plume of white exhaust. Schamane searched the skies for another hawk defending its territory against trespass. Semyon giggled at the way the *kee-yarrs* echoed off Mt. Onkaian was located. Schamane felt that a part of him and a part of his grandfathers was fading from memory because the sounds of the wild amused rather than intrigued his citified grandson for whom real life was what he saw on television or a video game screen rather than through the

missing windshield of a 1979 burgundy Buick Regal. If his daughter had not moved out of the valley, his grandson would not be a flatlander. Schamane lost sight of the hawk as the last echo faded.

Semyon fidgeted beneath the windbreaker. "I'm hot, Gramps."

"The hawk might come back."

Semyon resumed his race. Schamane savored the way his grandson could wrap himself inside a make-believe world. He savored his coffee laced with anisette. He savored his cigar. He savored his memories of Morning Glass and Gluscap the Liar. He savored the calm. He wished he had a thermos and a second cigar. He wanted to stay longer than his allotted sixty minutes, perhaps switch to one of those listener-supported radio stations that equated serving the public good with playing mind-numbing classical music for the ladies who lunched. All of these indulgences he never would have allowed himself in his youth, but surviving into his ninth decade broke old habits, created new ones, dimmed some memories, heightened others; stilled some fears, incited others. And freed him to be who he really was, a man who still held his breath whenever he stepped into one of the many streams or rivers that crisscrossed the valley, another one of his grandfathers' stories that did not excite Semyon enough to distract him from a *Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.* comic book.

One night while his grandson slept, Schamane had read Semyon's Nick Fury comics. If Fury ran the C.I.A., the World Trade Center would still dominate the New York skyline and giant Buddhas would still peer down on the plains of Afghanistan from their mountainside niches. If Fury had commanded Desert Storm, Saddam Hussein would have been deposed in 1991 and Fury, like General Douglas McArthur, would have faced the wrath of a president for doing what had to be done. If Fury had been president, Arab terrorism would be read about in history books, not on the front pages of newspapers. But Fury was not Director of the C.I.A. He was not a five star general. He was not president. And because he wasn't, Semyon would someday go to war without the spirit of his grandfather to watch over him. As Schamane thought of this, tapping cigar ash into the dashboard tray, an explosion showered the Regal in a hail of acorns, leaf shards, and branch-sized twigs.

Semyon yowled at the sudden noise and rain of debris, crushing his jelly donut so hard its insides squirted out. Jelly spread across the windbreaker as if it were blood being pumped through an open chest wound by his heart. Milk puddled in his lap, curdling in the heat like clotting blood. He started to cry. A second explosion loosed another broadleaf storm and silenced him as if the concussion had ripped out his vocal chords.

Schamane said, "Bend over and cover your head with your arms."

Another cascade of acorns pelted them. Those careening off the hood and trunk of the Buick sounded like bullets from the toy machine gun in the arcade at the county fair. Hit the bull's-eye, win a prize. Semyon still wore the cowboy hat he had won, with Schamane's help, at last summer's fair. The acorns tore a hole in the hood behind the Regal ornament where the sheet metal had rusted thin.

Schamane untethered his spirit and it wafted toward the grove of scarlet oak trees like the silky-hairy spore of the common milkweed on a summer breeze. In addition to the line house, the grove sheltered the healing waters of the Talakeetna Springs, six in all, each with a different mineral: iron, calcium, magnesium, sulfur, bromide, and arsenic. The springs had been sacred to Schamane's tribe since bearded men first visited over a thousand corn harvests ago and discovered their healing powers. After the repeal of prohibition, Morning Glass and Gluscap the Liar had refused to sell the land to flatlanders who wanted to exploit the medicine waters by building resort hotels. They fenced the grove against valley folk whose swimming, fishing, and livestock watering would pollute the spirits who dwelled within the springs. Schamane feared that after his death there would be no one to serve as guardian and keeper of the springs unless his spirit returned to haunt them, perhaps accompanied by monstrous mammoths, giant beavers, and spirit tricksters.

Schamane hovered above the springs like the ruby-throated hummingbirds attracted to the feeders he scattered among the rusting car hulks that surrounded his shack. The spreading crowns of mature scarlet oaks, originally some seventy to eighty feet above the ground, had been ripped from the trees and strewn over the sides of the mountain as if attacked by a giant wielding a chainsaw. The trees had been stripped bear of their dark green leaves, formerly lustrous in their summer hues, now shredded like confetti. Naked branches carpeted the ground like the bones of long gone animals. The remains of Belle Baker's Joint, the remains of the whole grove of scarlet oak, floated on the surface of the springs like a school of dead fish. What had taken centuries to grow now looked, from the height of his spirit, like toothpicks and matchsticks. It reminded him of the Black Forest after an Allied bombing run.

In the center of the destruction, as tiny as a bull's eye in an oversized target, was the foundation hole blasted by Capaneus Communications for a cell phone tower that would rise from the grove of scarlet oak to the peak of Mt. Onkaian and bring reliable cell phone service to the valley. Although the Thebesford County Commissioners had denied the application for a permit to build the tower, the Federal Communications Commission overruled them. The Federal courts had rejected his challenge to the seizure of the land by eminent domain. The Vermont courts had enjoined his interfering

with construction. It was the way of flatlanders to destroy so many acres when a few hundred square feet would be enough. His spirit returned to the Buick.

"Are we under attack by terrorists, Gramps? Are we going to die?"

"Not today."

Schamane lifted his right leg and pivoted so that it extended outside the car; then his left. He thrust his arms through the opening where the passenger's door had been and grabbed the window support columns, wincing at the pain that roiled his right shoulder. He had first noticed the stiffness three winters earlier after shoveling snow off the roof of his shack. It persisted through the summer when he hayed his fields and harvested his corn, then through the next winter, summer, and fall, worsening each season until now, in the middle of the fourth haying season, he had to contort himself to put on and take off an undershirt. It was getting more difficult to hide his condition from his grandson, who would tell his mother who would insist that he move to the city to live with her. Schamane strongly believed a person should die where he was born. He had no interest in being shipped back to the valley for burial in the Thebesford County Cemetery like a box of tractor parts or a carload of feed.

Gritting his teeth, he leaned forward and rocked back and forth until he tumbled out headfirst, as uncoordinated as a young child trying to master a

simple rolling somersault. He lay on his back. The sky felt empty without the hawk circling overhead and he wondered what other wildlife the explosions had driven away. Birds like the scarlet tanager and blackpoll warbler. Snowshoe hares and southern red-backed voles. White-tailed deer. The forest would be empty. Lonely. As would he when Semyon returned home. Tomorrow, or the next day, or as soon as he could arrange for someone to watch Semyon, he would investigate.

That evening Schamane's first cousin, Sterling Izard, telephoned to say that someone had dynamited the remains of Belle Baker's Joint.

"I know," Schamane said.

"No sense blowing up a falling down shack," Sterling said.

"No sense."

"Go figure."

Schamane and Sterling shared grandparents because a brother and sister had married a sister and brother respectively. Sterling's father, who had inherited Morning Glass's perverse sense of humor, named his son Sterling because he was so poor that he could not afford to window shop the silver spoons in the window of St. Johnsbury's only jewelry store.

"The springs?" Sterling asked.

"Floating enough wood to keep hundreds of beavers busy for years."

"Should be cleaned out before things plug up."

"I need someone to look out for Semyon."

"He's old enough to help," Sterling said.

"Maybe, but not to understand."

Rain settled into the valley overnight. The television weather reports showed Doppler radar, splotches of bright yellow and red, crawling slowly in the direction of Thebesford County from the west, then stopping as if they had encountered an invisible barrier. Ponderous dark clouds sagged on the mountains that ringed the valley and sank deep into the valley under weight of the moisture they carried. The weatherman spoke of a one hundred year storm and the threat of a one hundred year flood, the first in almost eighty years, he said. A photo flashed on the screen of Montpelier's State Street under water. November 4, 1927, the announcer said, the last one hundred year storm. The announcer pointed at white caps where the water surged over the tops of cars and around utility poles and made a bad joke about the water being deep enough for whales. Twenty years early, Schamane thought, changing the station to *The Simpsons* so as not to upset Semyon.

For days the clouds struggled to free themselves by disgorging sheets of rain thicker than the brocade of green moss that wallpapered the rocky skirts of Wheelers Falls Creek as it passed through the Jersey Drown gorge.

Instead of dew at dawn, the clouds erected walls of water as impenetrable as a boreal forest that had never been timbered. Someday, relieved of their ballast, as light and airy as corn silk, they would rise above the tops of the mountains and be borne away by the jet stream. Schamane guessed four days before the sun returned, maybe as many as seven, then a period of drying out. Storm systems had a way of snagging on the mountains that surrounded Thebesford Center.

Schamane remembered the 1927 storm. He and Sterling were about Semyon's age. That storm had lingered for eight days, so severe that the northern rivers overflowed their banks, setting new high water records. By the middle of the second day Wheelers Falls Creek had overflowed, flooding the Jersey Drown gorge and submerging the footpath that was, in dry weather, the shortest walk to Belle Baker's Joint. By the fourth day, the water flooding downtown Montpelier, nearly 100 miles southwest as the crow flies, had risen almost to the second floor of the buildings, exploding storefront windows out of their frames and rousting cars from their parking spaces as if they were Tinker Toys. Landslides scraped clean mountainsides that, years later, still bore their scars as a warning of the apocalypse for preachers to incorporate into Sunday sermons at least once each year. To escape the rain, red-shouldered hawks remained in their nests, a temporary pardon for the rabbits that had abandoned their lairs, the snakes their holes.

As he remembered that storm and the way it pillaged Belle Baker's Joint, Schamane realized that, if it were not for the repeal of Prohibition a year or two or three after his grandparents rebuilt the line house, he and Sterling would be living on inherited wealth. He would be operating a new tractor instead of one older than many of the wrecks surrounding his shack, baling his hay instead of pitchforking it into the loft of the barn. Proper crossbeams and cement-filled lolly columns would support the weight of winter snow on his roof. And, maybe, his daughter would not have married a flatlander and fled the valley.

Day after day fell the rain that year, a rain of biblical proportion, Reverend James E. Furlong, minister of the First Church of Thebesford, preached. We are surrounded, he thundered, by seven Mt. Ararats and lo, shall we be flooded by God's wrath if you do not hew to the path of righteousness, if you do not repudiate and repent the sin of liquor. Furlong did not scare the rumrunners, but he frightened many a young child into wetting the pew where he or she sat. With each year of Prohibition, his sermons more and more resembled the rants of Carrie Nation and her disciples. Members of his flock who indulged in an honest sip after a hard day's labor no longer invited him to Sunday dinner for fear he would drop their names in the ears of revenuers until, in the depths of the Depression while Herbert Hoover promised prosperity was just around the corner and

children starved before arriving at that corner, someone (Morning Glass and Gluscap the Liar were obvious suspects) fed Reverend Furlong to the bears. The crime, unsolved, evolved first into tale, then into myth, a bogeyman parents used to frighten recalcitrant children into behaving. Schamane's grandfathers had regaled him and Sterling with tales of Reverend Furlong, embellishing them with sidebars of spirit wars between Reverend Furlong who, like Santa Claus, knew which children were naughty, which children were nice, and bear spirits that believed children were good, not evil, until adults made them so. If he had the money, Schamane would hire an artist to draw a comic book of the tale or a computer programmer to create a video game; perhaps, then, his grandson would pay attention.

At Belle Baker's Joint that year, the storm trapped Gluscap, Morning Glass, and their grandsons and occasional helpers, Schamane Grist and Sterling Izard, in the attic. Cobwebs barricaded the angles of the eaves. Mouse droppings upholstered the floor. Flies the size of the salted cashews Gluscap and Morning Glass served with drinks buzzed around them. Huddling by the soffit vent, they watched the water of Wheelers Falls Creek rise, white with rage, brown with topsoil.

"The roof," Sterling suggested.

"Be washed away like a dead branch," Morning Glass said.

"Drowned dead before reaching the Moosup," Gluscap added.

"If you ain't battered into bits going through the gorge," Morning Glass said.

Beneath them, chairs and tables thrashed about in the water like drowning chickens. Bottles clinked against each other like glasses raised in toasts. Whitewater coursed through the windows of the line house. Trees, logs, and debris crashed through its walls. The attic floor below them, the roof above, shuddered. The floorboards sagged in the center. The depressions where the floor sagged filled faster than waterholes during the wet season. The trunk of a young birch, its bark stripped clean, gouged a hole in the roof. Rain soaked the mouse droppings. The wind howled like an animal in its death throes and scattered the cobwebs.

"Are we going to die?" Schamane asked.

"Not today," Morning Glass said.

"Not if you slay the river dragon," Gluscap said.

"River dragon?" Schamane and Sterling asked.

"Weewilimecq," Morning Glass and Gluscap replied.

Water geysered around them.

On sheets of horizontal rain, a pileated woodpecker blew into their refuge through the hole in the roof, a male, its forehead and the plumage beneath its beak as red as its crest. It clung to one of the trusses. Exhausted, it rested its beak against the wood. Water dripped from its claws. Tendrils of

rain whipped through the hole in the roof and strove to knock it from its perch. Sadness glazed its eyes as if it knew that in years to come its reward for surviving the storm was to have its likeness trivialized as Woody Woodpecker in cartoons and comic books and electronic games enjoyed by children like Semyon.

"*Cuk*," it said.

"*Cuk-wucka*," it answered itself.

"It has the arrow's mark," Gluscap said.

"May-May?" Morning Glass asked.

It beckoned Schamane to come forward, gestured for Sterling to stay back. Save me, it said.

How? Schamane spoke with his mind, not his voice.

A rock appeared beneath the truss where the woodpecker rested, smoothed round by millennia of rushing water. Words formed in Schamane's mind, instructing him to close his eyes and visualize the river dragon, to hurl the rock at the smallest part of its body, the tip of its tail. The rock solidified in his hand. He took aim. Once, twice, six times, miss after miss. The storm surge flooded the attic. Water washed over the floorboards. It rose above Schamane's ankles, his shins, to his knees. Morning Glass lifted Sterling, Gluscap, Schamane to their shoulders.

The woodpecker flew up to the roof beam. With its beak, it chiseled out flakes of wood, exposing the raw wood beneath. Schamane felt the woodpecker enter his mind. He blinked and the raw wood expanded into a target as big as the side of a barn, a target any young boy could hit with a rock. His fingers felt like feathers as he gripped the stone. With a flick of his wrist, he launched it a seventh time. It punctured the raw wood the way a hunter's arrow pierces the soft, firm flesh of a young deer. It entered the sky and was swallowed by the clouds. The storm roared, then writhed and thrashed about like a deer trying to dislodge a fatal arrow, unaware that every convulsion drove the arrow deeper. The water on the floor bubbled and boiled, then turned red. On the roof beam a small worm appeared, two or three inches long, a horned worm. Schamane had never seen a horned worm before. Nor had Sterling. Nor Morning Glass. Nor Gluscap. The woodpecker snapped up the worm, crushing the worm in its beak, swallowing the worm whole.

"*Cuk*," the woodpecker said.

"*Cuk-wucka*," it answered itself.

Slowly, as slowly as the sun crosses the sky from horizon to horizon, the storm clouds dissipated. The rain lightened to a drizzle, then a mist. The skies cleared. The winds calmed. Sun brightened the attic. The woodpecker trilled, then disappeared through the hole in the roof. "A tale to be told," said

Morning Glass, by Sterling and Schamane. "If they can find an audience," replied Gluscap the Liar.

On this summer morning, the third since the explosion that destroyed Belle Baker's Joint, Schamane thought about Morning Glass and Gluscap, wishing them to life in his memory. He sat behind the wheel of a 1974 Ford Galaxie less than 15 feet from the window beside which Semyon played his electronic games. He sipped his sunrise coffee and anisette, smoked his sunrise cigar. Hail the size of acorns pounded down around him, pockmarking the roof and hood and trunk of the car with dents. Storm static muffled the voices from London. If Schamane were sitting with Semyon at the table beside the window, he would have seen a computer-generated image of Woody Woodpecker rescuing his nephews, Knothead and Splinter, from a marauding dragon, a creature with two tails, one with an arrow at its tip, the other forked like a snake's tongue. Scales covered the dragon's body. Its eyes, oversized, glowed red like the setting sun. It breathed fire, this dragon composed of pixels--not the fire of a flamethrower as depicted in Hollywood movies, but the relentless burn of a forest fire with thousands of acres of trees and underbrush for fuel. If Schamane were sitting at the table with his grandson, he would have seen that as Semyon advanced from Level One to Level Six of the video game, the jungle through which Knothead and

Splinter ran became thicker and more overgrown, the dragon larger and more ferocious until, at Level Seven, the dragon caught Woody's nephews, slow-roasted them in its flame, and devoured them in two bites, one for each. If his grandson advanced to the tenth level, if his grandson slew the dragon and liberated Woody Woodpecker, maybe, someday, the sun would return to Thebesford County, perhaps by the eighth day, perhaps the ninth, perhaps the twenty-third. Eventually, the waters of the Jersey Drown gorge would recede enough to expose the footpath and he and Sterling and Semyon would be able to pass through the gorge to clean the debris from the sacred springs. They would have to walk softly, deliberately, as if they were tracking a deer. The footpath would be slick and wet and a fall, directly into jagged rocks sharpened over time by wind and water, would be fatal. If they were lucky, a pileated woodpecker would guide them.

From the north, water seeped into the field around Schamane's shack. It crept toward him like a rising ocean tide approaches a child's sand castle. The air thickened. Thunder rumbled in the sky. The ground trembled. He felt pinned down as if he were being bombarded by enemy artillery, tanks and mortars, hand grenades, as if he were being strafed by German fighter planes.

"Are we going to drown, Gramps?" Semyon asked without looking up from his electronic game.

"Not today."

"Where's the water coming from?"

"The sky gods are angry."

"Why? What did we do?"

"We did not respect them."

Semyon paused the game. "Mom says there are no sky gods. Only our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

Schamane sighed. "We should leave before water floods the driveway." He bundled Semyon inside his yellow slicker and tied the hood. "We'll take the tractor. It's higher off the ground and better in the mud."

"We'll be drenched."

"Better drenched than drowned."

"I want to call Mom."

"From town. There's room in the pocket for your game. Hurry now."

In the barn, Schamane opened the tractor's carburetor, primed the fuel pump, depressed the clutch, cranked the starter, and turned the ignition. The engine sputtered as it always did on wet days, then turned over twice before it caught. It sounded like a pack of motorcycles or a caravan of trailer trucks with pinholes in the mufflers. Schamane popped the clutch and the tractor lurched out of the barn into water level with the wheel's lowest lug nut. Schamane steered in the direction of where he thought the driveway

was. He wished he had left the driveway snow markers in place, but it was a rite of spring (as joyful as savoring a stack of hot cakes with virgin maple syrup or fresh corn, roasted, not boiled, sweeter than butter) to remove the markers at the end of mud season when the overnight temperature consistently remained above freezing, when the snow melt had been absorbed into the earth, when the lakes in the back country had iced out, when baseball returned to the radio.

Rain pelted the corrugated tin roof above their heads. Schamane had designed it to block the sun and little else. He closed his eyes and launched his bird spirit. It struggled against the wind and rain, but ascended high enough to see the shack, the barn, the antenna-tips of rusted hulks that, like reeds, pierced the surface of the rising water, the paved road, what was left of Belle Baker's Joint, the Talakeetna Springs clogged with its remains and the remains of the grove of scarlet oaks. Schamane followed his bird spirit, steering the tractor to the right when it dipped its wings in that direction, to the left when it dipped its wings left. The water deepened, rising to the level of the axel. He worried about the drainage ditches on either side of the driveway. He worried about the dip where it crossed the culvert. He worried about the incline where it merged with the road.

Down the road, his bird spirit saw a county dump truck loaded with ballast to anchor it against the encroaching water. Schamane shifted into

neutral and floored the gas pedal. The engine roared like a thousand bears warning away predators who would attack their cubs. The truck slowed, then stopped at the head of the driveway. Schamane slipped into gear and crept forward to meet it.

The Red Cross set up cots for storm refugees in the boy's gym and the classrooms of Thebesford County Consolidated Regional High School, the largest building in the valley with an auxiliary generator. The medical examiner commandeered the science lab, the most isolated classroom in the building, for a temporary morgue. Cold sandwiches and warm beverages were served and eaten in the cafeteria, the refrigerator and cupboards stocked with food delivered before the storm for the first week of school. With first aid supplies earmarked for the football and soccer teams, an ambulance driver treated minor injuries, bandaged minor cuts and abrasions, on the stage of the auditorium. Serious injuries, broken bones, internal bleeding, concussions, lacerations, languished in the boy's and girl's locker rooms where one nurse and a physical education instructor ministered to more than fifty people. There were no medical doctors in Thebesford County. The local veterinarian, Doc Soigner, who responded to emergencies because the nearest medical doctor was four valleys away, had been

imprisoned in St. Johnsbury for violating an injunction forbidding him from treating people.

Parents distracted their children with stories of the great adventure they were having. People shared flashlight batteries and decks of cards. An elementary school teacher organized games of Red Rover for the boys, hopscotch for the girls, in the long hallway of the shop wing. Space under one of the baskets in the girl's gym was cleared for the older boys to play shirts and skins. A volleyball net was set up for the older girls. The adults spoke in whispers about absent friends and neighbors, unable to distinguish between truth and rumor, crossing their fingers, mouthing quiet prayers, invoking spirit gods, practicing other rituals whose object was to bring about divine intervention or good luck or a change in fortune. The devout crowded into the custodian's room to repent their sins and beg forgiveness, promising whatever they thought would entice God to spare the valley. Others watched television news in the audio-visual room, careful to speak softly when they relayed information so they would not frighten the children. A tornado warning had been posted, a mudslide alert.

With Semyon in tow, Schamane rushed through the corridors of the school calling for his cousin Sterling, but no one had seen him, no one had talked to him, since the last calm day before the storm. Schamane attempted to launch his bird spirit to search for Sterling, but it remained

anchored in his body as if chained to his bones by a premonition of what it would see.

Outside, water now covered the teacher's parking lot and was lapping the driveway where the school buses discharged students. Within the hour, it would breach the curb and slide toward the front doors. Gym towels, covered with plastic sheeting and rolled tight into snapping whips normally used for horseplay, lined the floor inside the front doors. White athletic tape intended for wrapping wrists and ankles, legs and arms, sealed the seams in the first floor windows in front of the school. People patrolled the back windows for leaks. The natural darkness of night replaced the artificial darkness of the storm. Too exhausted to talk, too anxious to sleep, too resigned to eat, people huddled in family groupings. Shortly after midnight the lights flickered, went out. The smell of burned wiring permeated the school's ventilation system. The generator's under water, someone reported. Everyone, except those too injured to be moved, migrated to the second floor, an exodus of biblical proportion someone joked. Schamane abandoned his search for Sterling.

A few hours later there was a lull, as if the storm were a hurricane whose eye was passing directly over Thebesford County. In the distance, another explosion, then another. Branches and tree limbs punctured the school's roof. Water poured in through the holes. Schamane arranged the desks of an

English classroom into a platform along the wall opposite the windows. On it he built a dike of English literature, twenty-five copies of *Ivanhoe* by Sir Walter Scott, thirty of *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens, three-dozen Shakespeare anthologies.

Schamane understood now why his spirit remained anchored within himself. The waters flooding the valley were not falling from the heavens, but were flowing out of the earth through the Talakeetna Springs, unable to return to the earth because wood, the remains of Belle Baker's Joint and the grove of scarlet oak, had plugged the drainage. Someday that wood would rot, decay, drift away, and the water would once again first seep, then flow, back into the earth. But someday was neither now nor anytime soon. Schamane understood that perhaps by the next sunrise, certainly by the next sunset, the flood would rise above the roof of the school, submerging them all in the springs' healing waters. He understood that any attempt to build a raft or boat would only delay the inevitable. He understood that for all of his boasting and bragging, for all his mythologizing, Gluscap the Liar had not slain the dragon of Wheelers Falls Creek. He had only scared it away. Temporarily.

"Teach me how to play your game," Schamane said.

Semyon pushed the power button and Woody Woodpecker strutted across the screen. Schamane learned quickly and progressed through the

levels, saving Knothead and Splinter from being eaten on the fifth, sixth, seventh, until the eighth when the screen started to flash.

"Low batteries, Gramps."

"Any spares?"

"In my suitcase."

"Much longer?"

Semyon shook his head.

Knothead and Splinter cowered behind a boulder, trapped at the base of a cliff that went up forever. Woody Woodpecker attacked the dragon, dodging its fiery breath. Water gurgled under the classroom door. The dragon reared back for its final assault. The thuds of branches blown onto the roof of the school sounded like a stampede of giants. Woody Woodpecker's wings spun like the spokes of a windmill caught in a strong gale as he hurled stone after stone at the dragon. Six direct hits, like attacking a black bear with pebbles. As Woody Woodpecker wound up for his seventh attempt, the screen went blank. Schamane opened the door to the battery compartment and spun the batteries. The screen flashed once, the stone in flight. Schamane spun the batteries a second time. Now, Woody Woodpecker stood on a stack of Shakespeare anthologies. Its thoughts filled Schamane's and Semyon's heads.

"I don't understand, Gramps."

Schamane hugged Semyon to his chest. Listen to my heartbeat, he whispered. Like the ghost of Hamlet's father evaporating with the dawn, Woody Woodpecker faded into the night, taking its thoughts with it. In London, the BBC interrupted its programming with a news bulletin about the freak storm that had settled over northern Vermont. The United States, the announcer reported, has ordered the evacuation of cities and towns along the Connecticut River as far south as the border of Massachusetts. Massachusetts and Connecticut have been placed on flood alert, as have portions of Long Island in the state of New York. The announcer was as soothing as a summer sunrise, perhaps because she was speaking of the Connecticut River, not the Thames; perhaps because she embodied the British reserve that enabled London to survive the blitz. To BBC listeners in Great Britain, to its listeners around the world, to Schamane Grist who heard all this as if his short wave radio had been implanted in his brain, the phlegmatic voice of the announcer lent an ethereal quality to the news story, as if the events being reported had happened centuries earlier like the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius or millennia earlier like the meteor that caused the extinction of the dinosaurs. The BBC returned to its scheduled broadcast and Schamane, in his imagination, searched his illuminated globe for the location of the news bulletin.

Meanwhile, as the water continued to rise, Schamane's heartbeat slowed and the Northern Lights, like candles in a draft, extinguished themselves one by one until it was as dark above the storm as it was within it.

S. Frederic Liss has published or has forthcoming twenty-three short stories and has received several awards including *The Florida R*eview Editor's Award for Fiction; James Still Prize for Short Fiction sponsored by *Wind*; Midnight Sun Award for Fiction sponsored by *Permafrost*; Third prize in the Arthur Edelstein Prize for Short Fiction; Finalist for the Raymond Carver Award for Short Fiction sponsored by *Carve Magazine*; and Honorable Mention in the *New Letters* Literary Award for Fiction. Liss has also been published in *The South Dakota Review*, *The South Carolina Review*, *Dogwood*, *The Worcester Review*, and *Fifth Wednesday Journal* among other journals.