Metaphors of a Just World

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Scott was into minutiae. A pond arched in a crescent mid-way through the wooded walk behind his house, and he loved the tiny life that existed on the thin film of the water: long-legged, grey water spiders, and impeccable beetles—spotlessly black. He also knew another world that existed beneath the surface and spent late springs watching eggs grow pregnant then transform into tadpoles by early summer—observed the tadpoles become small frogs, which he communicated with by catching and letting go. This told them he was a friend and he would not hurt them. Even the yellow sheen edging the green borders of the shallow pool was a miracle of art, contrasting with the blue tint of the sky and the dark shade of the trees shagging the water, exhaling into the pond in dusty ripples. One early evening he encountered a praying mantis crouching reverently, taking no heed. He'd never seen one before and had no name for it, but after that he knew the pond as “Sanctuary Lake.”

Every boy loves a good pond, but in the summer of 1970, the year that Scott turned nine, the creek that fed Sanctuary Lake dried up and the water in the pond dwindled and disappeared. His sister, Rebecca, who at four still lived in an age of heroes, followed her champion every morning from the house, across the field to the dried bed with its cracked mud stiffening daily. She didn't understand where the frogs and the water had gone, and she worried because she was aware of her brother's loss.

“‘It's a drought,” he told her.

She replied, “Do we have grain?”

“Grain?” He thought, then he remembered. Sunday school—Joseph and the pharaoh. He imagined the felt-backed church
pictures Mrs. Davis affixed to a cloth board in the children's class in the church basement: camels with long tongues and labourers with outstretched arms saved by a smiling, blonde-haired, blue-eyed Egyptian standing in front of a pyramid spilling golden grain.

What could he say that would compete with that? He could only capitulate, surrender to the story in the pictures, and say, "Yes, Becky. We have grain."

"Oh," she grinned her relief. "Good."

* * *

The summer the creek dried up Scott and Rebecca's father was at sea on a package freighter working the easternmost margins of the East Coast. He stopped in Newfoundland, mostly, and addressed long letters from post offices with unusual names: Come By Chance, Dead-Man's Bay, Harbour Grace, Paradise. Scott always went to bed early on nights when the letters came because his mother, Anita, read them as bedtime stories to his sister, and he wanted to be there, too. Always, she skipped the first page which she said was a bedtime story to herself. One night the story their mother read was about a lost sailor caught in an impenetrable fog. His ship had crashed against rocks but he had escaped into a small boat and was paddling for a light he saw on the shore. All the way, two fish kept pace. One was a little fish that could talk. It said, "Beware of that light. There is another light, a better light where we all will play." The bigger fish said nothing. It protected the little fish, kept warding away dark fins that emerged silently, perilously. The sailor looked and saw that there were indeed two lights, not far from each other, and as he approached the shore he saw that the lights were lamps held by two beautiful women—the two most beautiful women in the whole world. One he knew. The other was mysterious...

Their mother stopped reading. She stared at the story, as though trying to penetrate the spaces between the words. She turned to the first page, her wet eyes hunting for meaning in the part of the

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letter addressed to herself. The children could not understand her expression.

"Mummy, what's wrong?" Rebecca asked. "Mummy, please read the rest."

"No," she replied. "Not tonight." Then she kissed Rebecca and Scott on their foreheads and said good-night. Even though she closed the door quickly, they still heard her sob. The next day, Scott noticed that his mother had removed his father's picture from the nightstand by her bed. When he asked her why she replied, "He's changed since that was taken. When he comes back, we'll take a new picture."

* * *

Rebecca had a watering can with a petaled spout that looked like a flower. She had a garden of dandelions that covered the lawn. It was her "Land of Butterflies," although it was hopping with other insects that were far more numerous than the occasional butterflies that fluttered in confusing patterns above the dandelions. Daily, she would go out and water the garden. With her green pants and her bright red hair, she looked like a representative of the vegetable world. The dandelions took a long time to water and the sun pounded away at the house and the yard from early morning till after supper, leaving it flat—hazy. So Rebecca wore her special hat while she worked. It was a spy hat like the kind she imagined Agent 99 had in *Get Smart*, although Rebecca had never seen 99 wear one quite like hers. It was a straw hat with a red plastic telephone on the top and a smiling face on the front, and strangers laughed and said, "Look! How cute!" when they saw Rebecca at her work. The hat was difficult. The phone was forever falling off and she spent an inordinate amount of time fumbling blindly to put the phone back on the receiver.

Anita was entranced with Rebecca's gentle world. She spent her mornings gazing at her through the kitchen window, her expression various—sometimes enraptured, other times, when she appeared
to be looking at nothing, enraged. One day she told her daughter, "You're just like your namesake. In the Bible, Rebecca draws water for Isaac from a well," but Scott corrected her. "No, she doesn't. It's his servant she gives it to."

The church lessons were much closer to mind. He found himself turning them over endlessly since the drought started and could picture Mrs. Davis's gnarled hands, arthritic and crooked, drawing felt-backed figures from one of several manila envelopes labeled, *Genesis, Egypt, Canaan, 1st & 2nd Samuel, Young Jesus, Jesus' Ministry*. He could even remember the taste of the new drink the kids were given every Sunday as a treat—*Tang*, the drink made by NASA engineers. It was sweeter than his mother's orange juice and, because it was both powdery and wet at the same time, proved a miracle of space technology. He remembered the children strung like beads in a horseshoe around Mrs. Davis, who was in her seventies and looked irresponsibly old to be in charge of something so important as the pictures.

He recalled her voice, as shaky as her hands, saying, "This is Rebecca." A dark haired woman in a headscarf arrived clumsily to the cloth board, fell, was picked up and put in her place at last. "And this is Isaac's servant."

Such a warm, kind smile, Scott thought. In a felt-world, he knew, the servant would be his friend.

* * *

Since Sanctuary Lake had dried, Scott ventured further from home. Some days he hiked to his friend Jeremy's house, which was four miles away. It was worth the walk. Jeremy's yard abutted an abandoned farm replete with a wrecked barn that time had dignified with ghostly characteristics. The boys made up stories about what might have happened in the barn to make it look so wicked and agreed at last that the farmer who owned the barn had hanged himself from the loft and so was condemned to haunt the fields. They agreed they would sleep over in the barn some night. They
had to, or the ghost would never rest. Once they had broken the
spell by not being terrified of the dead farmer’s spirit, he would be
returned to his family in heaven.

One day Scott trekked the four miles in the beating heat to dis-
cover the barn had been pulled down. A bright yellow bulldozer
was parked beside the sun-blistered wreckage. Jeremy, who’d run
out to join him, said, “They’re building a sub-division. Dad says it’s
because we’re too close to the city. People want to live here.”

The news struck Scott as hideous. It insulted his imagination.
He didn’t go to Jeremy’s very often after that. (The trip, he discov-
ered, was very, very long.) Instead, he pressed his mother for Hardy
Boys books whenever she walked into town. He would sit on the
porch with his mysteries, looking up as Rebecca passed to gauge
her progress.

“You know,” he said one day, “A good, hard rain would save you
a lot of trouble.”

“Will the frogs come back?”

He wasn’t sure. He knew that nothing ever died. It just went
somewhere else where it remained the same but was somehow more
beautiful. He didn’t know whether it ever came back. Maybe some
things never did. The thought made him uncomfortable, so he said,
“Yes, when there’s water in the pond, the frogs will return.”

“Will you let me watch the frogs with you?”

He looked up at the sky. It was cloudless. “Yes,” he answered.
“Promise?”

All was blue, not a wisp of relief.

“I promise.”

“Then I’ll make them come back,” she said. Rebecca picked up
her phone. “Hello? Hello? Frogs? The water’s coming. It’s time
to come home.”

Scott laughed at her joke, as he always did, but he felt wrong—
just wrong—and his laugh was thin. Something still bothered him,
something under the surface.
His mother was in the kitchen, stewing tomatoes. She had that creased look she wore when she was concentrating on a job that was thoroughly dull—dull and difficult for its tedium. Scott noticed that her hands and arms were marked with red welts like she'd been burned by her distractions.

"Mom," he said softly, not to surprise her—she startled easily—but held the syllable to warn her that what was coming was a complaint. She didn't look up from the kettle steaming on the stove. "Yes?"

"Why don't you read Dad's stories anymore?"

That stopped her. She stiffened and turned. Her posture was one of supreme anger but her eyes were delicate and kind. She asked, "Do you miss them?"

He nodded. "I miss him, too. Why don't you read to us?"

"There are no more letters. I haven't received one for a while."

"But the last story... you stopped part way through. Why? We liked it. We weren't scared."

"You weren't? Oh, you dear." Now her eyes were sorrowful. "Honey," she said, "stories sometimes say two things. They say one thing for children and another thing for adults. It's possible for the two stories to say things that are the opposite, for the children's story to be reassuring and for the adult's story to be frightening. I stopped reading because I was afraid."

"I don't understand."

"I'm glad. Soon I'll read the story to you. All of it. But not today. Maybe there will be a new story soon that will change what the last story means. I hope so."

"Can stories do that?"

"Your father's stories can."

* * *

Yes, he remembered, his father had told him that, too, and the memory solved the mystery of why the felt-picture thoughts oppressed him. When he was Rebecca's age he'd unstrung himself
from the other children in the horseshoe while Mrs. Davis was out on one of her many bathroom breaks. Then, while the other children gaped in horror, he pulled out two pictures at random from the Genesis envelope—an angel and a serpent—and put them together like they were wrestling.

The news traveled breathtakingly fast. As fast as Mrs. Davis’s next bathroom break his father knew what had happened and pulled Scott from the children’s class and took him outside. His father’s face was flushed with anger.

“Do you realize that what you did was blasphemous?” Scott wiped his eyes. He didn't understand but he was scared. His father tried again. “What you did was a sin.” It wasn't the words Scott didn't understand, but the anger.

He said, “I didn't mean anything. I just wanted to make the angel hold the snake.”

“You’re responsible for the images you make. You’re responsible for what other people see. An angel holding a snake suggests…. suggests…things that…” His father couldn’t seem to tell him what the adult picture meant, only that he was responsible for having created it.

Scott wondered now whether that same rule applied to the man who'd driven the yellow bulldozer. Was the man who'd collapsed the ghost barn into a meaningless heap responsible for his images, too?

* * *

That night they learned that there was a killer on the loose, although he wasn’t called that specifically by the man on the t.v. A woman in the neighbouring town had been found dead by what the newscaster called “suspicious circumstances.” A picture of her husband lingered on the screen. The man had gone missing, they were told.

In the picture, the husband was brown-haired except for his sideburns, which were grey. He stood behind a barbecue, wore a
smile. His apron had a funny caption: *I don't work here.* The man on t.v. said the smiling man was considered dangerous and was not to be approached. People should call the police if they saw him but, above all, should avoid contact with the man. It was believed he had a rifle.

Of course, Anita would never have let them see that news item. She'd gotten caught up in the story and had lost track of where they were. She started out of her reverie when Rebecca said, “I'll bet I can find him. I'm a spy.”

“No, no, no, child!” she cried and she switched off the t.v.

* * *

When Scott went to bed his sister was still awake. She startled him with a whispered question: “Why did the man kill his wife?”

“Are you awake?” He punched his pillow into place to give himself time to arrive at a good answer but couldn't find one. “I don’t know. I don’t know why anyone would do that.”

“When men and women marry don’t they love each other forever?” The earnestness in her voice affected Scott. He worried he might say something dishonest.

“I don’t know, Becky.” He had wondered that himself. “I think they want to but they’re sometimes wrong about things.”

“What things?”

“They themselves, I guess.”

“How can you be wrong about yourself?”

“Go to sleep, Becky. Just sleep.”

“I can’t sleep. I’m afraid. If he killed his wife, maybe he’ll kill Mummy, too.”

He thought for a while. He imagined the killer in the funny apron as a felt-man. The gun was felt-backed, too, and could be put anywhere. When he thought about it that way the story became more accidental. Scott told it to Rebecca the way he pictured it—he even imagined Mrs. Davis’s hands affixing the story to an endless cloth board. He said, “Maybe he didn’t shoot his wife. Maybe she
was cleaning the gun as a surprise for him and didn't know it was loaded and she shot herself. When he came home and found her he discovered that the only woman he would ever love was dead and he ran away because he couldn't stand to be with people any more. He didn't want to hear anyone say how sorry they were."

"Oh." Just that. A single syllable that grinned her relief. All the same, he wondered if it was still a sin to meddle with the felt-world. Later, Scott heard what he thought was a snippet of prayer: "...and please bring back the frogs."

* * *

When Scott awoke the next morning his mother was still asleep and Rebecca was gone. Stepping outside with his newest book, *The Hidden Harbor Mystery*, he heard a sound that was familiar but unclear. It was as though the house was hissing. By the time he was conscious of his confusion the sound had stopped. This pattern would be repeated throughout the morning as he read his book on the porch. The story involved disputed rights to a pond. There was a monster in the pond, and Frank and Joe were stranded on an island after someone stole their boat. Scott lost himself in the mystery. He wasn't even aware of how alone he was on the front step until he heard his mother call from the kitchen window, "What do you and Rebecca want for breakfast?"

"Toast," he decided
"Both of you?"

He looked around. "Just me. I don't know where Becky is."
Anita opened the front door and looked out. "What do you mean you don't know where she is? How long have you been out?"
Scott consulted his bookmark. "Forty-eight pages," he replied. "And you haven't seen her?"

He became aware that his mother was afraid and her fear impressed him. He looked into the woods, tried to penetrate the trees. The only motion was of the green boughs rocking softly in a light breeze.
Neither Scott nor Anita spoke. They didn't have to. They could hear the fearful silence; they both knew what the other was thinking, knew that the same image of a brown-haired man with grey sideburns lingered.

The house wailed, suddenly. "Oh my God, what was that," Anita whispered.

"I keep hearing it." But he still didn't know what it was. Scott dropped the book and stood on the edge of the woods. He might be there, just beneath the surface, beneath the verdant canvas, a rifle in his hand. Scott had never known true fear before. He had only feared ghosts, not the living. His mother stood beside him. Before she could spur him, he'd decided. There was no choice. He ran into the bush. He wasn't running anywhere in particular, just running, his face and arms lashed by the pointed ends of branches. He could hear his mother running as well. She was off to the side, occasionally in view.

But they couldn't find Rebecca. For half an hour they scoured the woods and then returned, panting, to the house. Anita was shaking now. Scott saw how the tears flowed freely from her eyes. She didn't say anything definitive, perhaps she thought the words would make her fears come true. Instead she muttered, "Please God. Please God. Please God. Please God."

That sound again, the house was hissing, wailing, calling.

And then he knew what it was and relief swept through him. It was the water. Someone kept opening the tap at the back of the house. His mother must have realized, too. They both tore towards the sound.

Before they could find her, Rebecca found them. Her petaled can was filled and spilling. "Mummy, when's breakfast?"

Anita grabbed her violently and held her close. "I was so scared! Oh precious, precious girl."

"I didn't mean to scare you, Mummy. I was watering the pond."

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“What do you mean? Why were you doing that?”
“If there’s water in the pond, the frogs will come back.”

Anita was sobbing so hard her body shook with spasms of joy. Scott’s own eyes were filled with tears as he watched them love. He heard his mother say, “I’m so glad you’re safe. Nothing else matters,” and his sister replied, “I’m fine, Mummy. Please don’t cry.”

Rebecca was smiling; she had emerged from nowhere: a representative of a just and merciful world. But her mother could not stop. She sobbed her joy as she held her daughter tight, tight, tight.

* * *

In the felt-world there was justice, but you had to put the right images together. Otherwise, you were damned. That was the way that Scott understood it. So he said to his mother that night after Rebecca was asleep and the pain of Anita’s joy had dwindled, “When will Daddy come back? If Daddy were here we wouldn’t worry.”

His mother was in her creased posture again. She straightened up. She looked defiantly out the window into the impenetrable, darkening woods.

“Don’t worry about your father. He’s in Paradise.”
Contributor Notes

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Amanda Earl’s poetry has been recently or will be soon published in Rampike (Windsor, Ontario), FillingStation (Calgary, Alberta), the New Chief Tongue (Mount Pleasant, Ontario), Peter F. Yacht Club (Ottawa, Ontario), some assembly required (pooka press, Vancouver, BC), Van Gogh’s Ear (Paris, France). above/ground press published two chapbooks by Amanda in 2007/2008: “Eleanor” and “The Sad Phoenician’s Other Woman.” Her chapbook, “Welcome to Earth” has just been published by Bookthug (Toronto, Ontario). Amanda is the managing editor of Bywords.ca and the Bywords Quarterly Journal & blogs too much at amandaearl.blogspot.com and ottawapoetry.blogspot.com.

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