

In 1917, during the construction of a large reservoir in the Catskill hamlet of Gilboa, New York, a young paleontologist named Winifred Goldring identified fossils from an ancient forest flooded millions of years ago when the earth's botanical explosion of oxygen opened a path for the evolution of humankind. However, the reservoir water was needed for NYC, and the fossils were flooded once again, along with the doomed town.

A mix of fact and fiction, *The Door-Man* follows three generations of interwoven families who share a deep wound from Gilboa's last days. The story is told by Winifred's grandson, a disaffected NYC doorman working near the Central Park Reservoir during its decommissioning in 1993.

The brief and provisional nature of one's life on earth – and the nested histories of the places, people and events that give it meaning – engender a reckoning within the tangled roots and fragile bonds of family.

"A suspenseful reflection on identity and memory, with their unsparing strangeness and dreamlike fragility, *The Door-Man* intimates that while time does not heal all, it does elicit forgiveness. Wheelwright reminds us that, like memory itself, life does not progress steadily without opposition, but occurs in unexpected leaps and bounds, seemingly random and always incomplete. A complex and thoughtful book."

–Susanna Moore, Author of *In the Cut* and *Miss Aluminum-A Memoir*

Peter M. Wheelwright's first novel, *As It Is On Earth*, received a PEN/Hemingway Honorable Mention for Literary Excellence in Debut Fiction.

"A beautiful, elegiac novel." –The Brooklyn Rail

"There is no lack of ambition or artistry in Wheelwright's *As It Is On Earth*. A truly remarkable debut."

–Helen Schulman, Author of *This Beautiful Life* and *Come with Me*

"A richly layered rendering of Cain and Abel with Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*."

–Wesley Brown, author of *Tragic Magic* and *Darktown Strutters*



THE DOOR-MAN
PETER M. WHEELWRIGHT

THE DOOR-MAN

A Novel

PETER M. WHEELWRIGHT

Praise for *As It Is On Earth*
2013 PEN/Hemingway Honorable Mention
for Literary Excellence in Debut Fiction

“One of the deep pleasures in reading Peter Wheelwright’s gorgeous debut novel *As It Is On Earth* comes from the dizzying journey through the constellations of his protagonist’s life as he attempts to untangle the Gordian knot of his family legacy. His world is messy and contradictory, saturated with desire and utterly intoxicating; it’s a place where ideas about science and art and nature and history combust until secrets are laid bare. As in the best of novels, Wheelwright both broke my heart and gave me great faith in acts of forgiveness and in the tenderness of our hearts.”

– Lisa Fugard, author of *Skinner’s Drift*

“Unlike his character Miryam, whose photographs of absent bridges depict only the supporting embankments that connect two sides of the earth, Peter Wheelwright, in this rich and moving debut, attempts to fill in those ghostly, empty polarities of space and time that we call family history -- and, in the doing, offers up a bit of America’s history, as well. Like a great bridge-builder, Wheelwright connects past and present, choices and consequences, hope and despair, fantasy and reality, all the while, like Miryam’s sturdy embankments, remaining anchored firmly into the land. A masterful balancing act; a beautiful, unpretentious, elegiac novel.”

– Joseph Salvatore, author of *To Assume A Pleasing Shape*

“A novel of guilt and its pointlessness...I can’t think of another modern novel that melds as well the WASP experience with that of the native American.”

– *The Rural Intelligence*

“With a Yankee tap root breaking through layers of granite guilt and miscegenation, Taylor Thatchers’ family tree is a challenging climb. From its

branches overlooking New England's old farms and old colleges, author Peter Wheelwright peers compassionately at a world inhabited by young survivors of extinct tribes and inherited griefs. Fascinating and absorbing and forgiving.”

– Meryl Streep

“...lovely, meditative, and thoughtful; Wheelwright is fearless with jargon and diction...compulsively readable.”

– *The Brooklyn Rail*

“Peter Wheelwright’s tale is full of mystery and family transgression, anecdote and the oddest facts imaginable, a tale of despair shot through with unexpected wonder. Wheelwright’s oddball cast of dreamer and alcoholic holy men, stargazers and crack mystics, naturalists and sidetracked philosophers, will linger in the readers imagination long after the last page.”

– Andrea Barner, author of *All-Night Party: The Women of Bohemian Greenwich Village and Harlem, 1913-1930*

“With great insight into his fascinating characters and the New England landscape they have inhabited for generations, Peter Wheelwright illuminates the Lives of the WASPS as they reckon with the multicultural world grown up around them. The Thatchers of Maine, their aspirations, longings, triumphs and failures, will live on in the reader’s mind long after this novel is closed.”

– Heidi Jon Schmidt, author of *The House on Oyster Creek*

“*As It Is On Earth* is wonderful...erudite, well written and entertaining at the same time... a richly grained context of place, time, connectivity with human foibles and a linkage to well-defined segments of humanity’s accumulated body of knowledge.”

– *Metropolis Magazine*

The Door-Man

A Novel

Peter M. Wheelwright



Fomite
Burlington, VT

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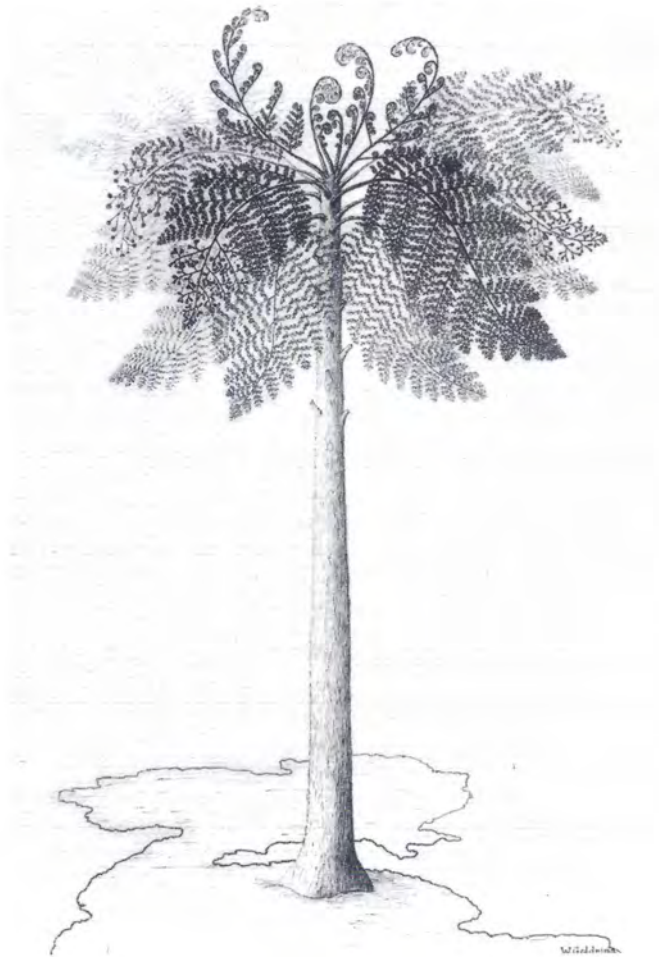
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For Josephine and Matt

The Door-Man

You ask whether I shall discuss "man"...I think I shall avoid the whole subject as so surrounded with prejudices, though I fully admit that it is the highest and most interesting problem for the naturalist.

(Charles Darwin to Alfred Wallace; December 22, 1857)



Restoration of *Eospermatopteris* by Winifred Goldring.

* * *

IT WAS SHORTLY AFTER the peculiar discovery at the Central Park Reservoir that I began dreaming about the men in my family again. About bones.

I have been dreaming about bones in the City's drinking water in one way or another for years, but they were always at the other end of the pipeline, upstate, in the Catskill headwaters near the hamlet of Gilboa. These dream-bones, the more recent ones, feel closer to home.

Last night, another came around. The details change but, as always, the dream was made up of events without order, referring to times without duration, to places without borders,...ghosts, alive again along an impossible horizon.

I don't know how much of it might have once been real, whether one of the family men actually lived it in part, maybe passed it along as a story to the next generation, then on again. Or whether it was just a dream conjured from their dreams, taking its own spectral shape to fit a new purpose, to make its point...this time, to me.

My father's dream? His father's? What does it matter?

I do not remember my father – his stories, his dreams were told to me by my mother. And I never even met *him* – my grandfather. All I know for sure is that I was given his name, as was my father before me, and that he was the first of us on the water. His hand had touched the gold cross on the steeple, the one that had been the surveyor's benchmark – The Cross of Calvary, marking the full water line, the "Taking Line." *That* part, the Taking Line, was not a dream.

I am inclined to tell it as if the three of us were simply one person. It felt that way. A Trinity – Grandfather, Father, and myself, first person plural in one body, our resemblances and dissimilarities congealed over time. I leave it to others to judge which are which.

In the dream's embodied Threeness, *We are...I am...*lying in a boat.

My back is up against the bow, a straw hat pulled down over my face. My eyes are closed as well, putting another layer between the sun and me. It doesn't do much good; the hard white glare is shut out, but the air inside the hat is Florida swamp-shade heat. Stifling; I breathe through pursed lips.

The boat is a three-bench flat bottom johnboat, aluminum, painted army green, one of those beamy open boats that were made in the 1930's to help the boys from the Civilian Conservation Corps get over the low-water crocs and cypress snags in the Glades. The water is the color of weak coffee, the sheetflow brew of tannin, anaerobic peat, and decaying sawgrass. The Catskill Mountains in upstate New York loom in the easterly distance over Florida's Everglades – Place and Time as entangled as I am.

In the dream, despite the rising odors and turbid surface of the swamp, I drop an arm over the gunwale, trailing my hand in the tepid water. The straw hat is now floating away. I watch it drift lightly on the surface toward a low hammock in the distance where Lincoln Gilboa, his daughter Trifina, and Delano DeAngelus are watching the boat, unmoving. The three of them should not be there either.

“Aw, Jesus, Piedmont. Pick up that fucking oar, will you? Fuckin' city boys!”

It's Rembrandt Stickey, standing up in the stern, leaning on a tall pole. He's feeling irritable, drenched in sweat, annoyed to be poling the boat along by himself. Rem's a “Local Experienced Man” out of Dade

County and often complains that a dollar-a-day from Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps is poor pay for shepherding around soft-hand slicks from up North...even with the Depression going on. Stikkey is calling me out as *Piedmont*, my grandfather...but it was my father, *Livingston*, who was in the CCC under Stikkey's watch.

"Leave him be, Rem. He's looking for the Cross. He's going to save us all, yet. Be patient." It's one of the Goldring women sitting in front of Rembrandt – Winifred, my grandfather's lover. She too is part of Franklin Roosevelt's "Tree Army."

In real life, unlike her two sisters Jenna and Mattie, Winifred was said to look "mannish." But that look of hers was only a matter of style, not flesh. In the dream, she is a lovely woman...and expecting a child.

She sits still, her long skirt spread out mid-boat, wearing a colorful cloth turban and chewing on a long stem of toothache grass like a Seminole matriarch. A Black Powder Frame .45 Colt Peacemaker is tucked into her calico waistband. The waistband holds up her pregnant belly like a sling. From her aspect, one would never know she's an expert on prehistoric life,...the Devonian Period...four hundred million years ago when the first forests appeared on earth, and mankind's ancestors crawled from the shallow seas to be born forevermore on dry land.

"Be patient, Rembrandt," Winifred says again. Her words echo quietly off the water. But it is no longer Winifred who is speaking, it is another woman – my mother...the real one.

I feel a sudden overwhelming sadness, and I slide closer to the edge of the boat. My hand reaches lower into the water. Something is there; I feel it coming. The dark water breaks around my elbow. The hat has returned and sits again over my face. Raising it with our free hand, we peer squint-eyed against the sun over the gunwale. Below the surface, large indistinct shapes swell from the equally indistinct depth; they mingle with the

reflected clouds and druidic limbs of bald cypress clawing the hot air overhead. I sense – again, in my Family Threeness – that whatever is there, whatever lies beneath us, it was there before the flooding in 1927 and returns for each of us, each in our own Time.

But it is then, at that seemingly timeless moment, that my grandfather's fingers hook under the arms of the gold cross on the submerged steeple in the town of Gilboa, New York, and my father's fingers hook on the shoulder strap of the bibbed denim overalls, the dead five-year-old boy from Princeton Florida still in them. My fingers, try as they may, elude both grasps.

I awake with clenched fists.

The Third...

Piedmont Livingston Kinsolver III
1993, The St. Urban, New York City
“Speak to the Earth and it shall teach thee...”
(Job 12:8)

KINSOLVER.

That is how I am called.

It does not sound like my name when they greet me. It has an off-hand ring to it, as if we all know that it’s not really *me* that is being greeted, rather it is our business together that is being addressed.

Most mean well. I smile and nod. They smile back. I lean away and take hold of the handle. The door swings, the light bounces off the polished brass and refracts through the glass. The reflections from Central Park sweep with it, flickering shards of impressionistic landscapes.

“Thank you, Kinsolver,” they say, leaving my name at the door. I retrieve it – my surname – carrying it back in time to the Patriarchs.

I can’t blame them; this is how it should be and how I want it; no further address is required. After all, they live here at The St. Urban; I am only a doorman, one of many along Central Park West. No one suspects that it is my considered choice.

Dante, the young boy from the east penthouse calls me “The Door-Man”...pulling apart the compound lexeme; no indefinite article or lowercase for him. It was the boy’s downstairs neighbor, Delano DeAngelus, who put the idea in his head. Although DeAngelus has just turned forty and Dante is only nine, they’re friends. Del, as he is called, is like a much older half-brother from a father’s earlier marriage – a half-brother that actually gives more than a half-shit about their shared blood.

In the beginning, it was a joke between the three of us. “The Door-Man.” Sometimes, I will even respond in kind by calling Dante, “The Altar-Boy”...which, in fact, is an accurate moniker for him; particularly most Sundays when he’s up the street at The Church of the Immaculate Conception. But lately, there seems to be a more urgent emphasis in Dante’s tone. I am not quite sure what is up with this, but neither am I inclined to ask. Not yet at least.

I am good at my job. Door-Man – my very Being coupled with a plane of glass and a set of hinges. I appreciate that in many ways I am interchangeable with the door itself, that it affords me a kind of invisibility, a way to observe comings and goings without being noticed myself.

But it’s also what I like to call “The Medieval Thing” – the business of being identified by...well, by your business. Literally – what you *do* on earth rather than how you got there. Mr. Smith?...a metal worker; Thatcher?...a woven straw roofer; Baker?...yes, mincemeat pie. The medieval thing, no soul-sucking scheme of parenting surnames necessary. Even the plants growing on the earth were named for their avocations, for their work on behalf of mankind – The Doctrine of Signatures – curing our bodies, our organs, our bones. Liverwort, eyebright, skullcap, bloodroot...bleeding heart, the earth’s bounty ground up in a stone crucible and applied to our flesh and credulous souls. Of course, we were all on God’s Watch then. All souls belonged to Him,

the only Free Will, His. Faith was Truth, modern Science was centuries away, and Our-Father-Who-Art-In-Heaven had not yet been dismissed as a “gaseous invertebrate” from Ernst Haeckel’s laboratory.

When I was a younger man, I was taught quite a few things about life on earth. I am still in the grip of those lessons.

This morning, in the wake of last night’s dream, I have taken up my position at the door of the St. Urban – uniform perfectly pressed, eyes forward, hands clasped behind my back, rocking ever so slightly on my feet. Like a pikeman at the portcullis, I face across the avenue into Central Park, surveying my surroundings – to the south, the turrets of the Museum of Natural History, to the east, above the trees, the sawtooth skylights of the Metropolitan Museum of Art...and to the north the great cathedral where young Dante is a server – the Church of the Immaculate Conception. Yes, the Medieval Thing. Perhaps I would have been happier then – before the Earth had revealed its true Nature, and science, art, and religion were not strangers to one another, but rather one and the same, their faint borders indistinct within a holy aesthetic alchemy.

Of course, there is no going back once one understands in the depths of their very being that nothing remains...that since the Beginning, the Earth has been ruptured and folded many times over, along with everything that has attempted to take hold on its fragile surface.

When I look into Central Park, I can’t help but see all of this... the Nature of things, the wheeling of the spheres above, the changes of season and light, the landscape’s deference to rain and wind, and the modest wildlife that finds a home on its temporary shape-shifting ground. Perhaps that is why I spend as much time as possible tending to the verdant humming of the Park. Tending to the door of the St. Urban behind me is secondary.

Today, as is typical of this time of year, the rising sun is shielded by the tall line of old dogwoods, oaks, and lindens standing sentinel along the brownstone wall separating Central Park from the City. Heavy limbs, thick with summer leaves, reach over the wall, mottling the sidewalk with shade. I note the green as I imagine my grandmother Winifred once did – the photosynthetic absorption of chlorophyll swallowing up the colors of the spectrum. All but the green. The sun and the leaves, the sun and the leaves. It begins there; she had known this well – in Ancient Nature – in the aboriginal sunlight, the slow taking up of carbon dioxide and transpiration of water, the release of oxygen molecules. And then, ...The Breath of Life – the botanical explosion of forest that filled the atmosphere with air high above the Acadian Orogeny and Pangaea’s lonely drift in the Panthalassic Sea. Life in the Garden – the very possibility of science, art, and religion. The very possibility of this City, of this Park, ...of this witness.

A sudden tight burst of reflected sunlight fires through the trees, skipping off the surface of the Central Park Reservoir like a smooth stone. I can see only a small silver sliver of the water from my post, only what a brief parting in the leaves allows; it grabs my attention, reminding me that there was a time when Central Park was better known for its position in the space of the city than for its pride of place. It was simply a “central” park, easy to locate...and in its own center – Lake Manhatta – the city’s drinking water, a reservoir filled from distant watersheds.

That is yet another history coming to an end. The Reservoir has been decommissioned, the pumps are off, valves shut, and no one is drinking its water any longer. No humans, at least. Still, if history has taught us anything, it is that each ending had its beginning; it’s only a matter of how far back one goes to find it.

I shrug off the cool morning air to allow in the sun’s slow warming.

Even with my back to the entrance of the St. Urban, I can sense when I'm needed. With a quick turn and smooth slide step, I time the swing of the door to ensure that Francesca Van Pelt does not have to break stride as she leaves the building.

"Au revoir, Kinsolver," Francesca says, sweetly, "Je vais au réservoir."

Francesca is actually Italian, married to a blended Gaelic Dutchman from upstate. She speaks French to remind me that she is a cosmopolitan who has had many doors from many countries opened for her. It is not difficult to imagine why this is so; she is...stately,...attractive to both men and women. She is fit – and makes a point of it – with dark hair and hazel eyes that set a Mediterranean aspect of self-assured noblesse. Today, she is wearing a pair of compression running tights. Black spandex trimmed with orange stripes. Her husband's University colors...Princeton. Colors that I, too, know well, but keep to myself.

"Shall we expect the Signore, as well?" I ask. My address of Mr. Van Pelt comes out sounding as if I am asking about her Italian gigolo. I had meant to say, "the Senator." It is the proper honorific. O'Gráéghall Van Pelt is a New York State legislator from District 46, just west of Albany.

I remain expressionless and at Francesca's service, wondering whether she feels comfortable going to the Reservoir alone, given the rumors since the closing – the sightings of unusual wildlife in the water,...and the bones.

"Dear Kinsolver," Francesca shakes her head, smiling at me as if I am a child. She walks sideways past me, raising both arms to tie back her hair. "No, the Senator ran yesterday, remember?...his elevator ride with Mr. DeAngelus?"

"Of course," I respond, lowering my head as if to offer my neck. "How could I forget?"

“One day on, one day off. That’s his routine,” Francesca says. She pauses with a sweet indulging smile and drops a hand to a cocked hip. “And I won’t be alone. I’m meeting someone at The Obelisk...*L’aiguille de Cléopâtre*.”

In my role as the doorman at the St. Urban, I have been well-trained in the task of appearing to see nothing while seeing everything – the play of light and shadow on the sheen of stretched fabric, capturing the shape of Francesca like a second skin. Above her tilted pelvic bone, the small, centered belly button – source of her original being – triangulates with two cosseted nipples, all three embossed on black polymer.

Poor old Van Pelt, I think. *L’aiguille de Cléopâtre*, indeed.

Cleopatra’s Needle is the winking misnomer for the granite obelisk from Heliopolis that stands, very erect, behind the Metropolitan Museum. It’s the oldest and tallest monument in Central Park. The Senator’s wife uses the French term in public, but I happen to know that she uses the English translation in private. Both with her husband and others.

Francesca uncocks her hipbone and turns away. She clocks herself with the traffic along Central Park West, waiting for an opening, then waves the back of a bejeweled hand to me as she lopes with a long easy gait across the street and into the Park.

On second thought, *fuck* Van Pelt. DeAngelus is the one in far more trouble.

It was only recently that Delano DeAngelus learned that we are related, both of us held fast in the grip of the patriarchs, the name-givers. We are cousins – at least on paper we’re cousins; by blood we are even closer than that. Like me, he was conceived in the dark, in sins of omission, false histories...and like me, he, too, descends from impounded waters.

I could provide a family tree, one of those genealogical charts with floating names and dates, tied together in a spreading triangle of right angled lines. The dates – birth, marriage, death – appearing to pin each name, each person, to their fixed place in Family Time, and yet, which have an uncanny way of floating free from it altogether. His brother, your fifth cousin-twice removed, her great half-nephew, my grandfather...? Who ever considers or cares that they are one and the same person – the dead, drifting as they do through the different lineages that extend endlessly into the invisible distance of The Family of Man. The dead are always on the move. To another chart, to a different place on another tree, to another family with a different story to tell, or to believe. And the stories are always incomplete, the dead borrowed to fit them as best they can.

Yet, on any given chart, the descent from a selected ancestor downward to the slow horizontal spread of the living at the bottom warns us of what we all share – that we all have been related since the beginning of Time...and our earthly communion is brief. It is as if these family trees mimic the sedimentary layers of death settling on the ocean floor of a primordial sea. The first ancestors, single celled bacteria – cyanoplankton and coralline algae – with its budding life force spent, sinking beneath the surface of the warm Proterozoic water to join others, and others again, on the way down to the vast demersal horizon of dead sponges, invertebrate brachiopods, echinoderms, and mollusk, layers upon layer of calcium carbonate from crushed shells and bacterial silica pressed hard into the sea bottom so that the rest of us, their descendants, would have a foothold on a dry earth.

But that is just the oldest story. As I say, there are always other stories, the more urgent ones that follow whenever men and women couple up without knowing, without looking back at where they came from, or just without giving a damn.

My full name is Piedmont Livingston Kinsolver III.

I say the “Third,” but I am actually the first to be called this, to be given this combination of words. I have never seen my birth certificate. It wouldn’t make any difference. What matters is that my grandfather was known as Piedmont Kinsolver, and my father, as Livingston Kinsolver. I have their Christian names, I have their blood, and I am the one at the end of their line, the one left to clean up the mess.

Perhaps this sounds harsh, but I say this kindly, with understanding and affectionate resignation. I accept the consequences of deeds of other men at other places in other times. I live content with what I was given. Hindsight is a much too easily acquired skill,...and of not much use.

“Piedmont” was actually not my grandfather’s birth name. He simply took it on as a description of his place in the world. It means “*at the foot of the mountains*” – his blessing and his curse. His vocation.

I had no idea that his given name was “Bramlett” – Bramlett Kinsolver – until I was in my early twenties. My mother Belle had never mentioned it, nor did any of the other women who might have known. What I did know is that my grandfather’s home had been in Gilboa, New York, a small town along the Schoharie Creek where the free flow of water ran down the streams of mountain slopes. It was at a time and place before the Creek was dammed up, stilled between the stones of mountain walls (“God-damned,” as my uncle-cousin Linc likes to say). Where our family home had once been nestled on the east bank of the Schoharie; it now lies beneath its waters. Like my grandfather’s lost first name, Linc asks, how does one ever reclaim such a thing?

Most of what I know about the past, about where I came from, was learned in the way most people learn about accidents of nature, how over time, far away, these accidents fit together to form us in the places where

we now stand. They're found in the stories of happenings – anecdotes, confessions, histories – unpredictable, unexpected, unsolicited,...discovered. Discovered, most often because they have been written down. Written down and saved, innocently, without anticipating the next accidents, at later times, that will follow on the reading. It is surely a form of natural selection when one truth carries forward, adapting to so many others.

I found my truth during my last year at University...it was a kind of graduation gift, my truth, waiting for me in an old steamer trunk in the attic of the Goldring home, just west of Albany, at Slingerlands. I had been beckoned there by my great-aunt Jenna Goldring DeAngelus.

I had not been to Slingerlands since the funeral of Jenna's oldest sister, Mattie, ten years before. That earlier visit had been memorable,...and confusing. I was too young for it. Mattie was my grandmother on my father Livingston's side...or so I had been told. My mother Belle had stayed behind in Florida for reasons that were unclear to me. She'd sent me up north with friends of the family – Linc Gilboa and his common-law-wife, Saskia Stikkey.

I remember standing at the edge of the open coffin, finding it hard to believe that Mattie Goldring's lifeless flesh could have given birth to anyone, much less to my father Livingston. Of course, having been too young to know my father before he died, birth rites had always been unclear to me. Mattie's only daughter, Wilhelmina, was also absent from the funeral. Unlike my father, she was still alive.

I was told that the reason she'd missed the funeral was because of an unusual heart condition in her newborn son, but I'd heard other talk. Grown-up talk.

“Mina” – as she was called in the family – had taken up with Jenna's son Xaviero before I was born. Their marriage had been frowned upon because they were first cousins, but matters between them seemed worse

than that, something unsettled, a family secret. My mother Belle would stiffen at the mention of Mina's name. Others would change the subject. Whatever had happened was not for my ears.

At the funeral service, I was standing next to Jenna's other sister, Winifred, the middle one of the three Goldring women. I had never met this great-aunt and didn't take much notice until she took hold of my hand. I remember her from that time, tall and gentle with big sad eyes, smiling down at me and whispering that families were like rivers, flowing in separate courses toward a shared sea, always to meet again. Always, she said. Her words made little sense to me, and I never saw her again, but ten years later, back again in Slingerlands as a young man, I finally understood what she had meant.

I was sorry that I missed Winifred's funeral, but I was glad that my great-aunt had sent for me shortly after. Jenna was in her mid-sixties – now, the last of the three sisters – and living alone at the family homestead with her ten-year-old grandson, Delano. She wanted me to see what Winifred had left behind; something that had been kept for me, safe up in the attic.

The house where the Goldring girls had been born around the turning of the century had worn itself out through the years. In the attic, the steamer trunks that had belonged to Winifred Goldring, had marked the time as well. There were two, both covered in a fine dust; no one had opened them in years but, clearly, they had once seen plenty of use. Old shipping labels, cracked and puckered with water stains, still held tight between the bent-wood staves and frayed leather straps. The Bay of Gaspé, Chickasaw Nation, Havana – places Winifred had traveled for her work – different worlds of climate and color. Places she loved...mostly for what could not be felt or seen on their surfaces. I have come to learn she was like that. Wherever she

went, across oceans and deserts, over hard-scrabble mountains or through thick tropical forest, she would search beneath the diverse flora and fauna, beneath their different natures for what was the same – the underlying rock and fossils, forged through the Eons on fractured Supercontinents drifting across the latitudes and longitudes, geological formations indifferent to the fleeting boundaries struck by the map-makers on the earth's surface. Old things, that was what she was drawn to. Very old things.

Her fingerprints – at least, I like to think they were hers – were still visible on the dulled brass clasps when I opened one of the old Saratogas. It contained a large wooden crate about the same dimensions as the trunk itself. The crate looked fairly new, as if it had been made in more recent years to fit inside the old trunk. It had no markings other than a small, embossed metal plate screwed on to one corner. '*The New York State Museum in Albany*' was engraved on it and beneath those words were two more. Latin words. I could not translate the Linnaean binomial at the time, though they have become familiar to me since. Part of my great-aunt's specimen collection, I suspected. There was also a hasp on the crate with a heavy lock on it and no key that I could see anywhere in the trunk. Closing the lid of the Saratoga, I figured that I'd find a way to open the crate inside another time.

It was in the second trunk that I found what I was searching for – her notebooks and letters. Like the dreams they've since triggered, there was no order to them or their contents. They lay in a jumble beneath the top removable tray, as if tossed into the trunk the way one might discard something that had, finally, become useless. Each of the small graphing notebooks was bound in an abraded black leather cover with a number on it. They looked like liturgical psalters, but their gridded pages were filled with science – pencil sketches and notes on ambulacraria, ammonites, crinoids, and other long extinct invertebrates from the Cambrian Explosion

that had ushered in the Paleozoic Era more than five million years ago – “The Time of Ancient Life” – long before Creation and the Songs of Israel.

I began sorting the notebooks by their number. There were eight altogether, but one seemed to be missing. Books 1 through 7 were there, as was a Book 9. But number 8, if it had existed, was not in the trunk.

It was in the fifth notebook, as I recall, that I found a letter from *The Board of Water Supply* in New York City glued to a back page. It was from J. Waldo Smith, *BWS* Chief Engineer, sent in 1921 to a Mr. Hugh Nawn of Roxbury, Massachusetts. It authorized Nawn, as the lead contractor, to halt construction of the Schoharie Dam until further notice in order to allow the investigation of a fossil discovery in the Riverside Quarry. The letter had been forwarded to The State Museum in Albany from *BWS* Division Engineer Sidney Clapp who had written in the margin: “We look forward to the arrival of the men.” A slash, struck with a green pencil, cut forcefully through the word “men.” It seemed like an angry mark, but it was softened by a sketch on the facing page in the notebook where she’d placed the letter. It was drawn in the same green pencil – a tall fern-like plant with curling fronds and splayed trunk like a palm tree – it was her beloved *Eospermatopteris*, The Gilboa Tree. Beneath it she’d written the words: *What love is lost is found in one born of it.* And beneath that, my initials: *PLK, son of my son.*

I dropped the book into my lap and, staring through the eaves of the attic at old memories, I could feel the weight of uncertain years fall from my shoulders.

It was then, at that moment, that I learned who I was; but it was a moment later that I learned how I came to be.

Peeking through a frayed stitch within the floral lining of the trunk’s dome-topped lid, I found a letter. It was from 1955 and addressed to Winifred from her niece, Mina.

I had not heard my great-aunt on the attic steps behind me. Jenna was turned slightly, unsteady, with both of her hands gripping the stair rail for support. Ever since the drowning of her daughter-in-law in the Schoharie Reservoir shortly after Delano's birth, she had been suffering from Bell's Palsy. It made her speech difficult, and the left side of her face was lifeless. Whatever was on her mind – Winifred? Mina?...or the letter in my hand – who could say, but her look told me enough. Tears falling on half a face can still make their point.

I will try to find a proper beginning.

The First...

Bramlett “Piedmont” Kinsolver
1917, The Central Park, New York City
*“The waters of the hills meet in gladness,
and the world rejoices in the glory of the Lord...”*
(*NY Times Front Page*)

IN GLADNESS. THAT WAS how the headlines of the New York Times put it. If nothing else, they got that part dead wrong.

Bramlett Kinsolver was in New York City for the three-day festival in October of 1917 when the Catskill mountain water, drawn from the Ashokan Dam at Olivebridge a hundred miles north, was shot up against gravity out of the Central Park Reservoir and into the city’s stormy skyline. Despite the forbidding weather, the city had gone ahead with the Columbus Day weekend event to celebrate its new drinking water. And the people had come; the downtown patricians mingling with the new citizens, particularly, it seemed, the Italians...Cristoforo Colombo was their man, and these recent immigrants, mostly from southern Italy, intended to make the world he “discovered” theirs as well.

On the second day of the festivities, the Reservoir was surrounded, hundreds – man, woman, and child – deep. The NYC Board of Water

Supply had a fountain installed just below the surface west of the South Gatehouse; it was hooked up to tanks of synthetic food coloring – five spouts in five different colors, each representing one of the five Boroughs from the recent confederation of New York City – Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, Bronx, and Staten Island. The crowds cheered wildly, watching the plumes of dyed mountain water from the distant Ashokan pool. They couldn't have cared less where the water came from, so long as it was there when they turned on their taps. The colorful spray filled the air over the south basin of "Lake Manahatta," drifted a bit in the breeze across the dividing weir, and then settled on the placid surface of the Reservoir's north basin in a blend of turbid brown foam. That was the last straw for Bramlett Kinsolver. He was still a young man then, twenty-seven, but he would be "Piedmont" Kinsolver forever after. He'd heard it said before: *Piemonte – "at the foot of the mountains."*

It was two days before when "Piedmont" had left his home at the foot of the mountains. As if setting himself to the slow flow of the Catskill water coursing its way by gravity south through the new Aqueduct, Piedmont had – like the water – traveled the two days to get to the City. First by horse, following the Old Susquehanna Turnpike out of Gilboa eastward to Jefferson Heights near the river town of Catskill. Even with his late start, he took his time on this first leg of the trip. The early fall hardwood forests were making their fiery last stand, sending their food stock into rooted ground for winter. He could smell the forest's rhythm in the cool drying air. It was familiar and he wondered for how much longer it would be so.

In Jefferson Heights, he left his mount with an old friend, Samson Lockwood, who ran a livery there, and walked down to the docks in Catskill where he boarded the paddle wheeler *Half-Moon* for the slow

trip down the Hudson River to the rail station in Poughkeepsie. He had missed the tide and stood on deck watching the sunset sparkling off the sheets of falling water from the western sidewheel as it pushed against the tidewaters rolling upriver from the Narrows of Lower New York Bay toward Albany.

He missed the Poughkeepsie train as well. The next day, at sunrise, after a benchnight among a group of rowdies – local boys heading off to the 27th Infantry Division for training at Camp Wadsworth in Spartansburg, South Carolina – he finally boarded the NY Central.

It was in Harlem that he disembarked and hitched his ride to Central Park in the sidecar of an Indian Scout Twin Cylinder with Erwin “Cannonball” Baker.

This last leg of his trip probably changed the course of Piedmont’s life as much as that godforsaken Dam. Erwin Baker and his motorcycle had just broken a world speed record. While Piedmont had taken two days to cover a hundred and twenty miles, Cannonball hadn’t needed much more to cross the entire North-American continent.

Cannonball Baker was another poor young man heading unbeknownst to his death in the Great War. Perhaps he did know something when he sold Piedmont one of his used Scouts in exchange for a leather saddlebag, an original Bowie knife that had come down from Piedmont’s mother’s family – the Bramlett’s of Bandera, Texas – and fifty dollars in cash. For two dollars extra, Cannonball gave him a spare headlight and a horn that Piedmont had to install on the stripped-down motorcycle himself.

And so, Piedmont crossed over into the Age of Mechanical Transportation. Winifred Goldring would later tease him about fueling it with her beloved fossils. Piedmont would laugh, but he would never ride a horse again.