

Healings

by Raymond Gariépy

Lac Sainte Anne, July 2002

I dream that my wife is on life support. I wake up crying. That morning she tells me she feels too dependent on me.

I pick my way along Lac Ste. Anne's shoreline. I'm poised between lake and land—walking to clear my head—thinking out the connection between the dream and my wife's unexpected disclosure. As I walk, I suck on two small, rough and red stones the size of a newborn's testicles. They are cauterized lozenges from the Precambrian, and taste volcanic, water-weedy and fish-kissed. I play my tongue over the stones until the tip goes numb.

Occasionally, I spit stone stew onto the beach, hesitating long enough to watch my saliva dry on the flat stones—dark gobs, red palpitations withering in the heat. I feel like Cronus, the paranoid Greek god. Fearing that his children will usurp him, he swallows them whole as they are born.

Unfortunately for Cronus, he is royally duped by Rhea, his wife, who gives him a stone wrapped in infant's clothing. Believing he is devouring his newborn son, Zeus, the unsuspecting Cronus gulps down the stone. Zeus escapes.

Eventually he returns to overthrow his gluttonous father, forcing him to vomit up his offspring. I spit out the stones. They are sucked clean of colour. Should I fear my second wife's children?

I'm looking for a healer.

Midday. I arrive at the Lac Ste. Anne Catholic Mission. Established by the Oblates in 1843, the mission honours Sainte Anne, wife of Saint Joachim, mother of Mary, grandmother of Jesus. Every year, Natives make the pilgrimage from across Western Canada and the Northwest Territories to socialize with family and friends on the shores of this sacred lake. The campground adjacent to the mission buildings and open-air church is wedged tight with campers, trailers, tents and motorhomes. Many campsites have large sky-blue tarpaulins stretched over them as defence against the sun, rain and fat prairie sky. I imagine the tarps as meteorite-repelling trampolines designed to bounce aberrant sky rocks back into space.

The image of heaven hurling meteorites down on the campground is unnerving.

For centuries, the Cree and Blackfoot revered a mete-

orite called the Manito Stone, which was nestled into a hilltop near Iron Creek, Alberta. The meteorite had been exposed for so long to the elements and the caresses of passing Indian tribes that its surface was worn smooth and shone silver in the moonlight. The stone is said to have gained weight over the years. No doubt traces of sweat and dirt and skin from the glancing fingertips of children dogging their parents, the fleeting touches of weary elders and the jabbing index fingers of hunters and warriors on the trail added greatly to the stone's girth. In 1869, 26 years after the mission at Lac Ste. Anne was established, Methodist missionary George McDougall carted off the

Manito Stone to his mission near Fort Edmonton.

The following year, McDougall lost three of his daughters to smallpox, and the Cree and Blackfoot were decimated by famine, war and disease.

Although ropes secure the tarps, they bulge to bursting as the wind rises on all fours and bounds across the lake.

The sky is a big blue—sharp and stiff like stretched canvas, big enough to lunge at.

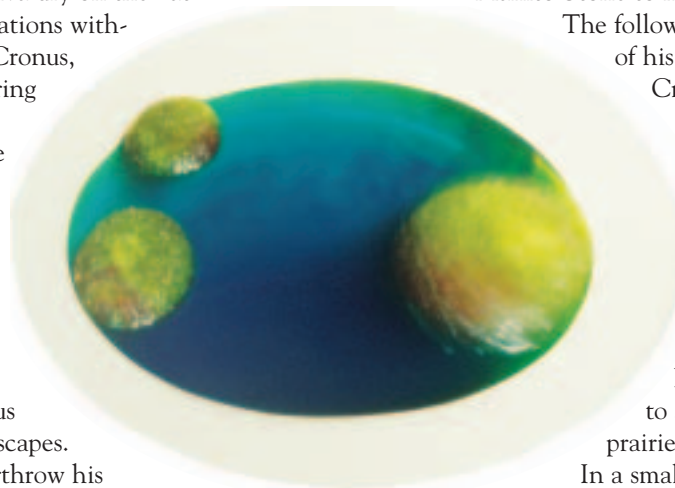
Like Marian Engel, I too want to scribble all over that vast prairie sky.

In a small red box I keep at home, I have a newspaper clipping about a Holocaust survivor whose fellow prisoners stuffed her mouth with stones so she wouldn't cry out during childbirth and be killed by the camp guards. I have often wondered if she and her child survived and if she kept those birthstones as a memento of her journey through hell.

The shore is dotted with Natives. The amplified and disjointed voice of a Catholic priest saying mass is carried over a public address system. The priest's voice is thick; every word sticks to his heavy French accent, clogging the microphone. I barely make out the solemn prayer of thanks he offers for God's love and capacity to forgive sinners. But then again I'm indifferent to the black robe's words of absolution and his condemnation of our delicious transgressions against God.

The Thunders Speak

The original Cree name for Lac Ste. Anne was Manito Sakahigan, or Lake of the Spirit. The Cree considered the lake sacred. When white traders arrived, they renamed it



Devil's Lake, after the fierce thunderstorms that exploded without warning over the lake.

Legend has it that an Oblate named Father Remas once tempered the lake's savage spirit. One day, while Native fishermen were out on the lake, a violent storm blew in. The men's wives, fearing for their husbands' safety, summoned the Oblate. Standing on the shore, the good Father ordered the waves to be still and calmly sprinkled holy water over the troubled waters, and the angry lake backed down.

August 1870: A Blackfoot name of Wolf Collar becomes holy after he is struck by lightning during a thunderstorm, and dreams of the Thunders. The Thunders appear to him as a bird, then as a woman who gives him a drum, four songs and the recipe for healing people struck by lightning—rub yellow paint and wet clay on the victim's chest and sing the songs. On December 27, 1928, Wolf Collar vomits a small stone and dies. Before he dies, he tells his son, Many Shots, that the stone given to him by the Thunders is the source of his power. When Wolf Collar dies, Many Shots returns the stone to his father's mouth, but does not sing for his father's spirit. The stone is buried with Wolf Collar. That day, there is a fierce blizzard accompanied by blue and yellow lighting. Many Shots is not struck down.

Man alive! Never have I seen so many Natives in one place. Thousands of Natives wander about the mission's grounds. Cree, Métis, Blackfoot, Chipewyan and Dene stand, play and walk in the water. Children splash about while their fully clothed parents and elders proceed into the shallow water "Indian file"—a term coined by explorer John Long in 1791. In *Voyages and Travels of an Indian Interpreter and Trader*, Long wrote: "The rest of the Savages then came into my house, one by one, which is called Indian file, singing war songs and dancing." I watch some "savages" playing with their young children or gently guiding their elderly parents towards the water's edge.

1875: Thirty-two years after the mission is started at Lac Ste. Anne and five years after Wolf Collar's power dream, Bishop Vital Grandin writes: "We instill in them a pronounced distaste for the native life so that they will be humiliated when reminded of their origin. When they graduate from our institutions, the children have lost everything except their blood."

There is blood on everyone.

Some Natives pause to meditate, some dip their hands into the lake and cross themselves. A blind man splashes water on his eyes. Other penitents and walking wounded fill plastic milk jugs with water to take home with them. Three women walk barefoot into the lake. They feel their way, a dawdling toe-crawl across sharp stones and coarse sand lying just beneath the murky water's surface. They stop in ankle-deep water. The woman in the middle immerses her hand in the lake, cups a handful of water and, dipping her finger into palm, draws signs of the cross on her companions' backs. The sanctified water wets their blouses. I bristle at the thought of cold lake water trickling down their spines. Their heads bowed in prayer, the

women silently cling to each other. What is the language of their prayers? When I was a child, I prayed in French, confessed in French and repented in French, although my misdemeanours were always committed in English. I innocently believed that the beauty of the French language would diminish my sins somehow and my soul would not be heavily tarnished. I turn my head toward the sky that is broad enough, bastard enough and blue enough to shout prayers at.

Kissing Holy Relics and Eating Sacred Hearts

1886: Lac Ste. Anne's pastor, Father Joseph Jean-Marie Lestanc, visits the Shrine of Ste. Anne d'Auray in France. Was he shocked to hear the holy grandmother's gravelly voice rise out of the relic he was kissing and command him to build a permanent shrine at Lac Ste. Anne? "*Et toi, qu'as tu fait pour moi?*" the voice asked.

I watch a husky Native woman push a young disabled woman in a wheelchair. I name them Big Woman Pushing and Disabled Woman Rolling. The wheelchair does not move easily; the fine beach sand and shore grasses offer little support to the chair's thin, hard rubber tires. The wheelchair sticks; it cannot and will not budge. The sudden lurch from the wheels digging into the ground almost propels Disabled Woman from her seat. Her bare legs are like twigs, and her skin is a taut, burnished brown. Although I have seen many disabled people in my lifetime, the sight of this woman sitting in a wheelchair is an unexpected bodycheck. I have lived with the disabled—I have bathed and cradled the wretched limbs of my father, who was confined to a wheelchair since the Second World War. Big Woman Pushing dislodges the wheelchair and steers it into the lake. Her victory is short-lived, as the wheelchair bogs down. Big Woman easily lifts Disabled Woman and gently dips the young woman's feet into the water. Disabled Woman appears to hover momentarily like some misshapen and undernourished bird. Could she be Wolf Collar's Thunder Woman? I want Big Woman to cast Disabled Woman aloft. The two women squeal with laughter as Big Woman pretends to lose her balance. Aside from the priest droning on, there is little sound, despite the fact that many people are milling about the grounds, attending church or perusing goods offered for sale by vendors.

Calm and serenity pervade; the healing powers of the lake have not lost their touch.

1649: One hundred and ninety-four years before the mission at Lac Ste. Anne is opened, two Jesuits are martyred. Missionaries Jean de Brébeuf and Gabriel Lalemant, who were ministering to the Huron in what is now Ontario, are taken prisoner, tortured and killed by the Iroquois, who believe the Jesuits to be magicians. I know the story well. In kindergarten, I coloured a mimeographed picture of the two priests tied to stakes. They wear necklaces of tomahawk heads heated almost to the melting point in the execution fires, and they stand in cauldrons of boiling water. They are being baptized, Iroquois style. The

priests do not cry out as they are reborn. They do not have stones in their mouths; their tongues, shrivelling from the flames, curl back and down their throats. I received a gold star for colouring within the drawing's black outlines. So determined was I to get just the right intensity of red in the flames and tomahawk heads that I wore down several red pencils. My school friend wasn't as lucky. He had embellished his drawing and coloured outside the lines, much to the consternation of Soeur Marie-Joseph, with whom my friend and I were secretly in love. Once the Iroquois were finished making bouillon of the Jesuits, they carved out the priests' hearts and ate them. Such is the honour paid by the Iroquois to those who die courageously. I imagine a young Iroquois brave standing before the two dead priests, his arms outstretched like Christ's on the cross, a bloody heart in each fist. Did he squeeze the blood from the hearts before cutting them up and serving them like canapés at this horror fest?

I wander through the crowds. I'm aware of my white skin and the fact that few white people are present, save clergy and traders. Yet I do not feel uneasy. I listen to children and their parents speaking Cree. I feel reassured that they will endure.

The open-air church has a roof and a back wall, where the altar is located. The remaining three sides are open. Long rows of benches accommodate the worshippers. Along the altar wall are crutches and canes discarded by those who have been healed over the years. This eclectic collection of walking aids pales in comparison to St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal, where thousands of crutches, canes, leg braces and wheelchairs hang from the walls. The Oratory was built to honour the saintly deeds of Brother André, who devoted his life to the sick and disabled. Once, during a visit to Montreal, I was invited to supper at the home of a dear friend of my mother's who mistakenly believed that I knew the person who had stolen Brother André's heart from the Oratory's display case. The heart of the dead layman had been held for ransom! (Had the robber been tempted to eat the brother's heart as a way of paying him tribute?) I remember that I picked at the peas on my plate, holding back my desire to laugh out loud as I weighed the complicity of my silence against being associated with a thief of sacred hearts. Thankfully, we came to an understanding that I was in no way involved, and in fact I expressed my outraged disapproval of the crime (although I quietly celebrated the bold culprit's sacrilegious feat).

What is it about men's hearts?

When Father Albert Lacombe died in 1916, his body was buried in a crypt in St. Albert, which is Cree territory, but his heart was removed and buried at Midnapore, which is Blackfoot country.

I move among the people gathered at the booths and tables where vendors are busily flogging used cooking utensils, glassware, nuts and bolts, clothing, rugs, rusty car parts and children's toys. Several peddlers look like they've suffered unspeakable difficulties and could use a quick dip in healing waters.

A Small Wonder of Water

Sainte Anne is the patroness of housewives, women in labour, cabinetmakers and miners. Her emblem is a door—entrances and exits, births and deaths.

I timidly walk into the lake; my naked toes nudge skin-slicing stones. Someone whispers to me that if my feet do not bleed then I am a sinner.

The sky is oppressive, fearless and cruel. I stare at it; I want to see sky stones, flying doors, burning hearts, blue lightning and Thunderbirds nailing down the big blue of rolling sky. I splash water on my face, lean forward and gaze into grey water. Brébeuf's and Lalemant's baptismal waters tingle my skin—the water in which they were boiled alive evaporated, was taken up by clouds and carried to this lake by the wind. I lick my lips.

I wonder if what they say is true: that one day we'll have no more fresh water. I taste water's freshly squeezed journey: glacier melt, torrential downpour, the fury of Niagara Falls, Victoria Falls, Athabasca Falls, mischievous rain falling on the neighbour's lawn but not ours. I sip murky soul water from the River Styx. Ancient red ice from Mars melts in my palm. Mohammed's spit mingles with the river water that Christ sucked from John's curly beard. Filtered water, bottled water, ice-blue ice caps, drops glistening in dawn's precious light, salmon-spawning waters, dirty gutter gush carrying homemade boats to sea. White-gowned Baptists immersed in the River Jordan. A mourning of monsoons, a tongue-lashing of tidal waves, a tantrum of typhoons. Hitler's piss. Delicate dew-dangles from a leaf's underbelly. Green whale water soothing Jonah's callused feet. Hot bath before sex, hot shower after. Spring runoff, baby's first bath. A walk on water. A moist sponge held to my father's lips as he spoke, died and swallowed his soul. Berserk white water. Sealing ships cleaving spring ice. Plunging into streams. Pools in the Sultan's summer palace. Lumbering chunks of Antarctic ice, prairie creeks after a summer storm, dugouts with gossiping waterfowl, puddles reflecting clouds and bright sky and a startled animal's eye. A stream of consciousness. A forgotten garden hose left running overnight, car wash, public swimming pool in July. Drinking cold water from earthen jugs. Trudeau in a canoe, Beaufort Sea, Big Bear Lake. Night storm trickles on car windows. Wetback. Fingers dipped in holy water Ash Wednesday morning. Drinking fountains in school, drips from a blue heron's upheld foot. You drip! Water off your back. Intertidal pools flush with blueprints for Genesis, the pure creation of water from the void, small wonder of water created alone—God's craggy face moving upon immense waters.

I sip, gurgle, spit, sip, swallow, splash water on my face and wonder how many people have been healed by the water I just drank.

Raymond Gariépy lives in Edmonton with his wife and children. He is currently working on a book about the Lac Sainte Anne pilgrimage. "Healings" received the 2003 Jon Whyte Memorial Essay Competition prize awarded by the Writers Guild of Alberta and sponsored by The Banff Centre.