

“I Carve My Stories Every Day”

An Interview with Richard Van Camp

In this interview, the Dogrib (Tlicho) Dené author Richard Van Camp talks to a Belgian doctoral candidate, Sylvie Vranckx.¹ It was conducted over Skype, which explains the informal or rather oratorical tone. Indeed, Van Camp is a contemporary Dogrib storyteller before he is a writer or an educator. The interview covers all of his published fiction, including his two recent comic books as well as his new collection *Godless But Loyal to Heaven*, whose manuscript he generously shared with Vranckx. While he is starting to be studied seriously in the academic world (see Fagan, Haladay, Kelly, McKegney, Neuhaus, and Vranckx), he has generally been neglected by literary critics and mainly been interviewed by magazines, possibly because young adult fiction tends to be treated as subliterate (Vranckx 292).

At twenty-four, Van Camp became the first Dogrib writer to publish a novel—*The Lesser Blessed*. He belongs to the second generation of Aboriginal Canadian authors—the first generation that was not sent to residential school. He has been praised for bringing sophisticated new forms to Aboriginal, Arctic, and Canadian literatures (Hobson 78). The inventive vernacular spoken in the semi-fictional NWT town of Fort Simmer in *The Lesser Blessed*, “Raven Talk,” alludes to the Trickster Raven. Raven Talk, which has given its title to a scholarly study,² “[i]s a patois of French, English, slang, Chip[weyan], Cree, Dogrib, Slavey and the south. It’s fun and sexy and sleek as an oil spill. To speak it is to be in the know” (Van Camp, “Re: Hi + Questions” n. pag.).

Van Camp's career has been a journey across audiences, age groups, media, genres, aesthetics, voices, mythologies, cultures, and subcultures (Vranckx 292, 300-02)—consistent with his En'owkin International School of Writing training that a good storyteller should be able to work in any genre (Van Camp, "Living in a Time for Celebration" 298). Fittingly, he describes his craft as a process of carving, which slowly reveals the final shape of the project. Just as sculptures take their full meaning when placed together in an exhibition, his stories remain unfinished until they are juxtaposed in a collection (Van Camp, "Where I'm at" n. pag.) and meet the readers' eyes or ears. The use of the concrete art of carving also hints at his view of writing as experimenting with formal characteristics. He enjoys "pushing form": for him, short stories should not be reduced to the "a + b = c aspect of constructing" with a buildup of tension, a climax, and a denouement ("Pushing Form" n. pag.). He demonstrates that Eurocentric conventions can set obstacles to Aboriginal writing and he hopes to enchant the readers with the "riddle" that results ("Where I'm at").

Van Camp also writes to work through his pain concerning the psychosocial problems among the communities with which he has formed connections. A red thread is the intergenerational legacy of the residential schools: his characters' dilemmas convey the need to find hope and peace for oneself in the aftermath of such personal and collective traumas. This is epitomized by the notion of "letting go" evoked by the title of *The Moon of Letting Go and Other Stories*—where Dogrib, Dené, Slavey, and Northern protagonists go through mourning, divorces, and heartbreak but find ways of welcoming love into their lives again. The key is putting your anger behind you:

I have just learned . . . that anger is really fear and I have let go. I let go of so much bubonic fear so long ago. Deal with the fear and the anger dissipates. Writing helped me in so many ways. Writing, truly, is the best therapy. . . . *The Lesser Blessed* is a story of hope; [*Sword of Antlers*] will be about forgiveness. I am on my way to peace. ("Where I'm at")

Godless But Loyal to Heaven, which "[i]s part Western part Samurai part action movie and all Torchy brilliance" (Van Camp, "Re: Hello + mods" n. pag.), further focuses on "faith," and his characters "are at the crossroads": "most of [his] characters have faith in humanity, a respect for the Creator and a wish for a 'master plan' that finds them all at peace" ("Thoughts on My New Collection" n. pag.).

Sylvie Vranckx (sv): Good day to you. I suggest that this interview be structured into two parts. First, I'm interested in how you approach stories as an author who has worked in many different media and who's adapting some of his stories into movies, so the first part would be about your craft. Then, I'd like to ask about your main themes of trauma, grief, and resilience. They tie in with the notion of evil, as epitomized in your work by the horror tropes of zombies and the cannibal monster Wheetago. You also link these images with bullying as a potentially deadly social problem. But then, violence is also present in traditional rituals and in shamanism—from there, I'd like to segue into Dogrib notions of medicine in your work.

Richard Van Camp (rvc): Good day to you! I'm happy to help you.

sv: Thank you! What are you working on at the moment?

rvc: The novels I'm working on right now are *Furnace* (Torchy's epic story); *The Strongest Blood* (Leo's epic story); *Sword of Antlers* (Bear's epic story); along with *Night Moves* (my new collection) and a graphic novel tentatively called *Wheetago War*. *Wheetago War* is spec fiction and it's brutal and poetic and loving all at the same time.

sv: And how are the movies of *The Lesser Blessed* and "Dogrib Midnight Runners" coming?

rvc: *The Lesser Blessed* premiered on Sept. 9, 2012 at TIFF. TIFF was mind-blowing. The adaptation was more than I ever imagined. The movie is tender, sensual, haunting, brutal, and everything I love about movies about youth. Anita Doron captured what it's like to be young and falling in love every day, and how a look or a brushing of hands with someone you have a crush on can save your life. I'm so proud of everyone who worked so hard for seven years to make this movie happen. *Dogrib Midnight Runners* is now *Mohawk Midnight Runners*, as the director is Zoe Hopkins. Zoe's Mohawk (Kanien'kehaka) and Heiltsuk and lives in Six Nations, Ontario. Zoe wanted to put the Mohawk interpretation on the big screen and it's going to be brilliant.

sv: How does it feel to have worked in so many different media?

rvc: The secret to what I do is I create art every single day of my life, whether it's through writing, or uploading photos, or tweaking short stories or novels or beginning some new essay. Ultimately, when somebody approaches me and says, "We've got a new anthology on Canadian literature, can you send us a story?" I've got seven ready to go. Or if they say, "We need a poem from you," it's very easy for me to say, "I've got twenty done but there're four that I'm very proud of," then I can send several things to choose from. That's what a lot of artists do. Commissions are wonderful: sometimes, there's a story that's

in the back of your mind or in your heart, and you may be too chicken to write it, but when you have support from somebody who wants you to create something brand new. . . . Some short stories take a year to create properly, and some stories have taken years before getting published, but that doesn't mean I love them any less because I'm like a carver in a workshop, carving many things, and some are more polished than others.

Sometimes, the pieces are so big, I'm looking for the right editor. At forty-one years of age, doing this for half of my life, I think the key to my success is also working very carefully with very tough ones, like Barbara Pulling from Douglas and McIntyre, or Maurice Mierau at Great Plains, or Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm at KegeDonce. It's mahsi cho magic! I've earned every single word, and that's how I want to keep going, because I don't want to recoil in horror and shame when I see my name on a book. I want to be very proud of it, so the new comic book *Kiss Me Deadly* has taken me two years to create from beginning to end and it's beautiful. Chris Auchter's gone beyond the call of duty to create a gorgeous comic book and Sean Muir, to publish it well: the right paper, the right team for colouring and lettering, and everything we're creating together is a work of art. And I'm very proud, when I'm on tour or on stage, and I see all my books, they're like my children and I love them all dearly because every genre has its own rules and that's half the fun, figuring out how to write a comic book or a radio play, or being told, "You have to work with only forty lines." The overcoming makes me very happy. And short stories are their own secret society with subsonic rules. When crafted carefully, they can achieve tracings of light and forever.

sv: What's specific to expressing yourself in each medium? Why comic books, for example?

rvc: The story's the boss. First, it's the spirit of the story and then seeing how best it fits: is this a baby book, a comic, a novel, a novella, a short story? Then I take it to my publishers once it's done, and I'm so grateful to all of my publishers who believe in me.

sv: And you honour stories constantly. In your edited collection *Tracking Heaven*, you even work as a transcriber for storytellers. It's like a *mise en abyme* of storytelling.

rvc: I don't want to publish it, as I want it to be free, a gift. These are the stories that inspire me all the time.

sv: And it's online! What about *Kiss Me Deadly*?

rvc: It's free on www.thehealthyaboriginal.net/comics/KMD.pdf in English and it'll be translated into French too. It's a huge coup for myself because I'm very

proud to have been commissioned by the Government of the NWT to create a comic book on sexual health, and they're giving away ten thousand comic books for free. There's still a lot of shame with our bodies, with our sensuality, as Aboriginal peoples. I think the Church has a lot to do with that, and I can say that, I still go to church for midnight mass and every New Year's Eve, that's got to count for something. I'm not calling down the Church, but our shame is harming us because there isn't a lot of sexual self-esteem where people are willing to speak up for themselves and say, "Wait a minute, we need to use the proper protection." The NWT has eight times the national average of STIs, and we have to address this because it's crippling lives, and no amount of sorries can make you feel better once you've contracted something that's perceived as shameful, but is also physiologically very dangerous.

sv: It's one of the main themes of *The Lesser Blessed*, the way Larry has to grow up while the community's collapsing on itself. But there's hope for him, right?

rvc: Yes. I love hearing from people that though it's a brutal read, at the end you have a character who's so resilient. Aboriginal peoples are so resilient. When you look at the residential schools, the Sixties Scoop, the Indian Act, and everything that's been used to try and break us, it's actually made us stronger and Aboriginal peoples are the fastest growing demographic in Canada. So the love is strong, and stories are medicine. *The Lesser Blessed's* a story of hope, and everything that I'm worried about with my community, my family, my Nation, the North, that's what I love putting in my adult writing. And for children and babies, I always look to put my hope, and love for humanity, into words.

sv: It's a good time to segue into grief and healing. *The Moon of Letting Go and Other Stories* is so infused with light and the medicine in it is so strong, the main theme would be how characters mourn horrifying traumatic events. . .

rvc: *The Lesser Blessed* was my beginning of writing about my own sense of discovery of what it means to be an Aboriginal person alive today, in 2012, and in the world. Aboriginal peoples walk in two worlds: we have the spiritual world, our own astrology, astronomy, beliefs, and at the same time we're e-mailing or Skyping, as we are right now. So, we're carrying (I hope) the best of two worlds forward into this modern age right now. As an Aboriginal writer who's the first novelist to ever be published from the Dogrib Nation, with that comes incredible responsibility because I don't want to write propaganda: "There were no hunchbacks before Contact!" or "There were no wars before Contact." We all know we were warring nations. There was starvation, and times of abundance, and peace treaties. That's

what interests me the most, writing about the hard issues: STI education, elder abuse, our medicine wars. In “The Moon of Letting Go,” what would you do if the most dangerous medicine man in your community were sitting in the back seat of your car while you have your eight-year-old son beside you? “Dogrib Midnight Runners” is funny, but it was inspired by a suicide. As far as I know, that’s the first published story that ever takes place in Fort Smith. And I want to talk about what a great thief suicide is: the huge, never-ending echo of its fatal decision. “Born a Girl,” published in *Coming Home*, is about bullying from the bully’s point of view, and everybody knows bullying’s bad but I want to break people’s hearts with how close the main character comes to killing somebody by accident. I’m not afraid to go into the really dark places, and we need to go there. Sometimes I hear such heartbreaking stories from home about homophobia and I’m usually haunted by them, then I stick with them, then I write about them.

sv: I’m struck by how commonplace suicide, self-abuse, and substance abuse are in your work. The North sounds like a very tough place.

rvc: Yeah it is. Fort Smith used to be the STI capital of the North so I grew up fully aware that “the dose” lurked around every corner! That’s why I wanted to write a sexual health comic book and arm people with information, not power-load them with more fear and anxiety about their bodies or possible infection.

Also, there’s a lot of success and perceived abundance with the diamond mines and all the work that’s out there. There’s a saying that there’re lots of new trucks in the North but also lots of empty cupboards. That’s what interests me the most, writing about those homes where the parents are flying up to their work in the diamond mines, so they’re two weeks gone, two weeks home. So, we have gangs and prostitution now in Yellowknife. It’s very depressing to go downtown Yellowknife. And it never used to be this way. Yes, there were people who were drinking, but now I just see such heartbreaking hopelessness. And it’s crystal meth, it’s crack cocaine, and it breaks my heart that we have Dené, Métis, Aboriginal people, Northern families struggling with this new poison.

sv: Your writing’s also about the downward spiral ordinary people can get engaged in when their communities are steeped in psychosocial problems. It’s like something’s contaminating Larry or *carving* at his heart, while many of your gangster characters turn out to be okay people. How does it feel to write from the voice of a thug or someone who’s becoming very violent?

rvc: The two stories you’re referring to are *Path of the Warrior* and “I Count

Myself Among Them.” *Path of the Warrior’s* based on a drive-by shooting in Hobbema here in Alberta. The bullet struck a baby in the heart while in her crib. She lived, her name’s Asia Saddleback, and she’s a young lady now. The bullet’s still inside her body and they have to wait so that it grows away from the heart. I was so horrified with this story that I asked, “What if?” What about that gangster who realizes, “The bullet that was meant for me struck a baby next door”? And what if he was a father himself but he’d never claimed responsibility for his own child? I ended up working with the multitalented Steve Sanderson on my very first comic book. And what I learned was what gangs call “blood in, blood out”: when you join a gang, you’re half stomped to death to draw blood for the gang. What I really appreciated about Anishinaabe author Jennifer Storm’s novel *Deadly Loyalties* was how hard it is to actually leave an Indian gang or *any* gang. So, I wanted to satisfy the mandate, talking about how physical fitness, team sports, our culture, and family support can be used to detour our youths away from gangs. *Path of the Warrior’s* about the human story about why people get into gangs and what happens when you try and get out. Cullen’s faced with a decision: either you help and be a coach at the Friendship Centre for the kids that you’ve been terrorizing, or you go to jail. And he knows if he goes to jail, he’s probably going to die. So, he decides to become a coach.

In “I Count Myself Among Them,” we have a giant telling the story, his name’s “Flinch,” and he’s a gang enforcer. He goes to a community they call “Outpost 5,” but it’s really Agassiz, BC, at the base of Cheam Mountain. And he’s very naïve, there’s an innocence about him much like Larry’s, but he’s capable of *great* harm. He has a Biblical experience of epic proportions, where he’s part of something he can’t even imagine. And lightning hunts his family to kill them, and as he goes to execute his final contract, the sky starts to rumble. So that was a very interesting carving to sculpt because I felt like I was led, much like Flinch, into a field where anything could happen, and it was a beautiful story to write. It’s one of my most mysterious stories ever, I think about it a lot, and maybe I’ll write a couple more stories about Flinch when he was younger, and things that were trying to visit him. Because remember, he’s a doorman for sweat lodge ceremonies. He’s a man between two worlds—a Contrary. So, very shamanistic and ancient stuff—that’s what I love to write about.

sv: What’s a Contrary?

rvc: A Contrary’s also a “Clown,” a teacher, one who lives his/her life backwards to remind others of many things.

- sv: All in all, isn't your writing mostly preoccupied with evil? It's epitomized by the parthenophilic abuse committed against Wendy, a mentally challenged Dogrib teenager, by the school principal to whom she was entrusted in Fort Simmer ("Love Walked In," "The Contract," "Feeding the Fire," and *Sword of Antlers*).
- rvc: I'm noticing a theme of social justice, especially in *Godless But Loyal to Heaven*. Torchy raises my question in "Feeding the Fire." Who calls the warriors forward now? I call Bear and Torchy my gladiators. Larry's, well, Larry: he's the Ambassador of Love, a Soldier of Passion, and he calls himself "The Destroying Angel." Torchy's a bareknuckle brawler who's welcomed into medicine power very slowly. All of these characters are finding their own power and grace in the shadow of some horrible people and situations.
- sv: There's a sense in your writing that pure evil could waltz into a room any time. One of your first published short stories, "Birthmark," is about an involuntary deal with the Devil.
- rvc: Can you tell I was an altar boy? You have a lot of time to think when you're serving the people. I also love a great horror movie or ghost story so I'm always interested in what happens when someone's faced with someone or something who's an agent of evil or darkness or calling (or culling) you into "their way."
- sv: You also connect the idea of evil incarnate in the Wheetagó mythos with zombies in "On the Wings of This Prayer" and the forthcoming radio play "Zombies 911." What drew you to this image?
- rvc: I think zombies are already here. We see it with our family and friends who're lost in their addictions. Have you ever talked to someone you love who's high on OxyContin? It's their body but they're gone. So zombies are a manifestation of who we love and knew and "the other" as coming to eat you alive.
- sv: How does it feel to use an Algonquian story like the Wheetagó while the Dogrib are traditional enemies with the Cree?
- rvc: I think because we have such a new migration of animals, it's opened up borders for me on new visitors who find my characters or communities. We now have coyotes in Yellowknife, a new walrus in the Eastern Arctic who hunts seals and not clams, and hummingbirds visiting Fort Smith for the first time. There's a story about an encounter between a man and a Wheetagó outside of Smith published in *Tapwe*, a former newspaper in the NWT, so I used that chilling account as a springboard for "The Fleshing." And I love collaborating with Cree artists like George Littlechild on our kids' books, or

Steve Sanderson on *Path of the Warrior*, or Haida artist Chris Auchter on *Kiss Me Deadly*. We have come together in partnership, knowing we need to work together to reclaim our languages and traditions. We have a lot to share and learn from one another.

sv: Isn't the language of the Gothic as you use it paradoxically the most realistic way of representing colonialism, since people really went through an apocalypse that overwhelmed their belief systems?

rvc: I don't consider myself an eco-warrior, but re-reading "On the Wings of This Prayer" made me realize how horrified I am that we're letting the exploitation of the oil sands of Alberta happen. We're giving our Mother cancer. Not only that, we're all witnessing it every day and it's causing cancer with the effluent and it's so sad that we have a measured-in-minutes slow-motion mutilation of paradise.

sv: In the case of STIs and cancer, people are literally contaminated. You spoke out about uranium mining, for example. "The Uranium Leaking from Port Radium and Rayrock Mines Is Killing Us" is a kind of feverish dream about a derelict town. In "Godless But Loyal to Heaven," Lester dies from cancer of the heart after picking uranium rocks in the "circle of death."

rvc: Yes. I'm interested in what could possibly inhabit us, like a ghost, a Wheetago spirit, medicine power, a virus. It's spooky, hey?

sv: Yes, very! And in "The Fleshing," the one who turns Wheetago, Dean, is a bully—bullies as Wheetagoes, Wheetagoes as bullies. . . . Your adult writing seems very concerned with what Lee Maracle calls "implosion," when a community blows *inward* instead of up (132), and a lot of it has to do with bullying.

rvc: Yes. I can't stand bullies or when people are made to suffer so I enlist my gladiators to help in my fiction.

sv: But you don't gloss over the link between violence and traditional ways. In "I Count Myself Among Them," Flinch has a near-death experience during a shamanistic initiation. And "On the Wings of This Prayer" has a graphic ritual for killing the Shark Throats, zombies, or Wheetagoes with a "Decapitator."

rvc: Yes, Flinch stumbled upon his inheritance as a Contrary and a bridge to the end of humanity. And the Decapitator may be our only hope when we run out of shells during the apocalypse and batteries for blaring the sound of running water to scare the Wheetago!

sv: Rituals and secrets are central to your writing. You've also written the foreword to Dogrib Elder George Blondin's *Trail of the Spirit*, which refers to medicine wars (27-37).

RVC: Medicine power intrigues me because it's whispered about. And where there're whispers, there're great stories.

sv: So medicine power still exists? Mr. Blondin was afraid not (10-11).

RVC: Medicine power is still here. We all have power every day to help others. Storytelling's medicine power. So are forgiveness, making amends, trust. So are children. I like how in some of my stories even the most marginalized person can be given medicine power. There's hope for everyone in my stories (well, except for the characters in "I Count Myself Among Them," "Snow White Nothing for Miles," Icabus in "Sky Burial," . . .).

sv: But this use of rituals is not limited to shamanism: Larry tells "How [He] Saved Christmas," Richard creates the baby ritual in "Show Me Yours," and the "Dogrib Midnight Runners" have an epiphanic experience while streaking to commemorate a man who committed suicide. Is creating new rituals important in a community?

RVC: Yes, I was told once that there're three kinds of medicine: what you say about, think about, and do for someone. You can keep people weak by how you think of them or spreading gossip or the tone in which you speak to them directly. You can also raise someone's spirits quickly by surrounding them with light when you think of them, only praising them, and helping them directly. Many of my characters find their own medicine through modern-day rituals. Some invent them with the best of intentions like Grant in "Dogrib Midnight Runners," and he finds himself along the way. Richard helps his community in "Show Me Yours" with the spreading of a ritual of having a picture of yourself as a baby on a necklace so everyone can see how beautiful you used to be. Larry decides to save Fort Simmer and bring back Santa so he picks up the phone. Sometimes ceremony's about action and not waiting. Sometimes all it takes is to call an old enemy and say, "I'm so sorry. Let me make up my mistake to you. Let me cook for you. Come over. See my life. See my family. You'll know that you're always welcome here and that we deserve to grow older together, to care for one another, to help each other. Let me show you how much I care for you now and how lost I was back then. Tell me what you need right now and I'll do my best."

sv: In "Snow White Nothing for Miles," I laugh when the Métis policeman, Morris, talks about his "rat-faced weasel fuck brother-in-law Richard." Did the Richard who's definitely not a weasel fuck create the baby ritual in real life?

RVC: There're two Richards I've written about. I hope I'm not the Richard in "Snow White Nothing for Miles" but I do hope there's a little of me in "Show Me Yours." One night I was leaving the WildCat Café in Yellowknife and

I had this flash of everyone carrying baby pictures around their necks and never being able to forget that when you were talking to someone, you were talking to their future selves from those precious days of being pure and precious. How could you take anyone seriously after that? How could you ever betray or harm anyone? How could you ever take anyone for granted?

sv: Also, a lot of the medicine in your stories is tied to animals. For example, in “The Power of Secrets,” a man plays the flute for a porcupine but breaks the spell when he tells about him to other people. In “Wolf Medicine: A Ceremony of You,” the narrator explains to his beloved how he will weave his wolf medicine around her as part of his courtship ritual.

rvc: Fort Smith was and is a great place to grow up because it’s still traditional. The people know animal secrets and stories and I’m drawn to any partnerships or meetings between humans and animals. Look at “Wolf Medicine: A Ceremony of You” in *The Moon of Letting Go*. Talk about sensuality!

sv: I’m reminded of Richard Wagamese’s comment that animals are the Ojibways’ (Anishinaabe people’s) first teachers (142). Do Dené peoples have a similar belief?

rvc: I’d say they’re teachers through and through in partnership with what the land and seasons can teach you.

sv: In *The Lesser Blessed*, Larry tells the Tlicho Creation story: a human woman delivers six puppies and realizes that they turn into toddlers when she’s not looking. She manages to catch three of them when they’re still human, and they’re the first Dogribs. Sam McKegney’s take is the three puppies who turn back into dogs and are killed by their mother are those who wanted to escape from their responsibilities as part of the People. So the three living puppy children may be associated with Larry, Juliet, and Johnny, even if Johnny’s a Métis and Juliet’s Caucasian (206, 216-17).

But Larry speaks from his experience and sees it as a story about child abuse (Vranckx 301). Is it a misreading or part of his role as a traditional storyteller—adapting traditional stories to new contexts?

rvc: Wow. I’ve never considered it before. I have great respect for Sam and he’s just brilliant. I never tell anyone they’re wrong with their interpretations of my writing. I support him always!

sv: Speaking of animals and impish figures, you’ve written a lot about Raven—who’s a Trickster on much of the West Coast, among very different landscapes and peoples. You wrote “Why Ravens Smile to Little Old Ladies as They Walk By” and adapted your short story “Raven” into a children’s

book, *A Man Called Raven*—not to forget Raven Talk in *The Lesser Blessed*. What are the specificities of the Dogrib Raven?

RVC: I can't speak for the Tlicho Dené, but ravens are way smarter than they let on. My buddy Mike Mahussier told me they can remember faces, and that line made it into "The Fleshing" and "On the Wings of This Prayer." Ravens are Contraries biding their time. They're dethroned from something ancient and they're winged wonders all at the same time.

sv: "Why Ravens Smile to Little Old Ladies as They Walk By," about a woman Elder who hides Raven's tongue up her "unmentionables" (!) and comes to enjoy it, is a very naughty story!³ It ties in with the need to have healthy representations of Aboriginal sexuality, and with your work in *Kiss Me Deadly* and Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm's *Without Reservation*. The sexuality of elders is a very taboo topic.

RVC: I love writing erotica. It's fun and sexy and taboo and I always have this wish that when you read one of my books, you're being welcomed into "an event." I don't want it to be one steady hum for you all the way through. I want gossip stories, funny stories, blushing stories, scary stories, wondrous stories. I want you to recognize past stories making their way into new ones and if you never read one of my stories again, my wish is that you wonder about the ones you did years later. Now that's medicine power!

sv: And I love your own "Trickster spirit": you looked like you wouldn't answer my earlier question about Larry, but you've done so indirectly when you've just said "past stories making their way into new ones"—mahsi cho!

RVC: You're welcome.

sv: Since we're talking about supernatural entities, the Plains Cree have a concept of the artist as "tapping into the Great Mystery / the Life Force" (mamâhtâwisiwin) (McLeod 11, 97-100) . . .

RVC: I think of the word "orgasm" when I hear that sentence. Ha ha!

sv: This is very deep either way. Well, I'm reminded of this when you say the characters walk into your life. Do Torchy, Larry, Bear serve you, or is it the other way around?

RVC: When it comes to me and my characters, we enlist and honour each other. If I hear a heartbreaking story, I think, "Hmm. Which one of my gladiators shall I send into battle?" But then, in the crafting and combing of tangled hair of a story, the right voice and life emerges. It's alchemy and sorcery all rolled up into one.

sv: Maybe every good writer "taps into the Mystery"?

RVC: The Lakota have a saying: "May the Great Mystery always put a sunrise in your

heart.” My wish is that’s what my writing and storytelling does for all who discover my work. My stories, ultimately, are my love letters to and for humanity.

sv: How would you define “the Mystery” and “inkwo”?

rvc: “Inkwo”’s translated as medicine power. My grandparents had medicine power and I’m honoured to always hear how they helped people when they were alive.

sv: A lot of the medicine in your stories is also tied to Louise Erdrich’s “survival humour,” like Bear training to be a ninja to avenge Wendy’s molestation in *Sword of Antlers*.

rvc: I think many young men don’t know how to be “warriors” now and that families have lost how to honour young men and women and welcome them into their inheritance of power and grace and—for Bear who’s outraged that his cousin was molested—the ninja is the only image he has of a warrior who can take revenge. But many of my characters set out to do one thing and they’re welcomed into another. Perhaps that’s my definition of “the Great Mystery.”

sv: Mahsi cho, Richard!

rvc: Mahsi cho! Be safe!

NOTES

- 1 This interview uses the term “Native” to designate the peoples formerly known as “Indians,” while “Aboriginal” also encompasses the Métis and Inuit. “Indigenous” is used as a broader term for the tribal descendants of the original peoples of the world. Finally, “Tlicho” and “Dogrib” appear interchangeably as Van Camp’s preferred terms for his Nation, which is part of the Athabaskan group like the Slaveys, the Chipewyans, and the Navajos.
- 2 “*That’s Raven Talk*” by Mareike Neuhaus studies the holophrase (one-word sentence in Amerindian languages) and its phrasal equivalents in Aboriginal Canadian literatures in English. It includes a chapter on *The Lesser Blessed*.
- 3 For an in-depth analysis of this short story, see Kelly.

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