

## *A Rare Thing*

*The Uncharted Heart*, Melissa Hardy. Knopf Canada, 2001.

From time to time the dedicated reader of short fiction is rewarded for his loyalty to the genre with a volume that treats its material in a wholly original way. Such is the case with Melissa Hardy's new collection *The Uncharted Heart*, a group of stories set in and around Northern Ontario mining territory in the early decades of the previous century. These are stories of hardship and survival in which nature is a capricious friend and a deadly enemy. The moral code is that of the frontier. Food and companionship are often scarce; for much of the year people live snowbound, in virtual isolation. Neighbours, and even loved ones, cannot always be trusted. Many of the characters we encounter are explorers, miners, prospectors, trappers, and their families—people forging new lives in a new land, surviving by their wits on the fringes of civilization; people for whom a change in the weather can mean the difference between life and death.

However, the fact that she is depicting grim, stark realities of life and death does not prevent Hardy from indulging the playful side of her art. In almost every one of these tales her characters encounter a landscape filled with mysterious and magical forces and creatures from local legend and myth. Lurking in the forest depths are beings concocted from dreams and nightmares and old wives' tales. Yet her characters take all of this in their stride. It is their unquestioning acceptance of the supernatural influences that surround them and impinge upon their everyday lives that draws us deeply into this world—a world so distant in time and space that it seems both alien and unknowable and yet is as convincingly rendered as the world outside our window.

Hardy's characters are driven by a diversity of motives. Many are simply trying to survive the harshness of life in an unconquered wilderness. But others are enticed by the lure of gold, or dream of love or freedom, or of quenching an insatiable curiosity. In "The Prospector's Boot," following the deaths of both her mother and her sister, and rather than accept the attentions of an unattractive suitor, Emma Trudgian, "a severe girl with no fortune," ventures into the bush near Cobalt, Ontario to seek out her prospector father, intending to "keep house" for him. He has been gone some eight years, and yet has kept in sporadic touch with his family, posting letters describing the terrain wherever he happened to find himself and hinting at the tantalizing possibility of a big gold strike that will make them all wealthy. Emma boards the train for Kelso, which is where the track ends and wilderness takes over. Toronto has been her only home, and the land that rolls by as the train makes its passage northward seemingly lacks all connection with that to which she is accustomed. Equally alien to her sensibilities are her traveling companions:

The train was full of men, some Indians. Many of the men spoke a rasping French that scraped away at Emma's ear like a bow dragged rustily across the strings of a man-handled fiddle. Others spoke a rough English, burred and ragged with oaths. They drank from gallon jugs of Catawba red wine that they passed between them, wiping the top of the bottle each time with the tails of their red flannel shirts. Spread-legged, they played noisy cards on big, dusty knees. (154)

Emma's journey does not end in Kelso, where she had hoped her father would meet her. When he fails to appear she hires a guide to take her into the bush, where, days later, they discover her father's camp, yet no trace of him beyond a single boot and evidence of an explosion. Against the advice of all who accompany her, she stays on at the camp, and in the weeks and months that follow she studies her father's notes and takes to wearing his clothes and carrying his implements into the bush. The story ends with a simple image, of Emma watching a duck's feather spiral upward in the wind only to catch in the branch of a tree, and we understand that she has fallen under the same spell that transfixed her father.

The title story, which was included in the *Best American Short Stories* volume for 1999, tells of George Macoun, geologist and mapmaker. As the narrative begins, Macoun is confined to a cancer ward in the final stages of the disease, yet still obsessed with a secret that transformed his life and his work for the Bureau of Mines into an elaborate lie. In morphine-induced dreams that bring those years to life, he is once again a young man, betrothed to Frieda Eckert, venturing far into the uncharted wilderness around Porcupine Lake, on a journey that will take him to Golden City in the heart of prospecting country. From here he makes his way into unexplored territory charged with the task of delivering a survey of the region to his superiors at the Bureau. While travers-

ing land that is officially empty of people, he encounters a young woman who laughs at him when his canoe capsizes, pitching him into the Buskegau River. When he asks what she is doing there, she tells him only that she lives by The Lake, before running off into the forest. Too easily he falls in love. He calculates the location of the encounter and returns the following summer. This time he discovers that her husband and children are newly dead, that she is alone. He helps her bury the bodies, but again she eludes him by running into the forest. Later he returns and she takes him to her cabin. Her name is Marguerite and she has always lived by The Lake and, according to the story she relates — of her mother turning into dust when her father tried to remove her from her home — she will always live there. He scoffs and, applying a scientific rationale, tells her it's a fairy story. There is a clash of irreconcilable cultures, though by this point they have become intimate. Over the years, even after his marriage and after the births of three children, he returns north to visit Marguerite. In the end Hardy demonstrates that the differences between the worlds they inhabit are too profound for simple love to overcome.

The story is touching and whimsical, something that can be said for many of the pieces in this collection. The world they depict is often violent, but the grimness is allayed by humour and can give way to hope and triumph.

Hardy writes in a precise, understated style, one that sometimes approaches the melodiousness of poetry but never strains after effect. Carefully balancing descriptive detail with the inner lives of her characters, Hardy gives us just enough to let us see what they see and feel what they feel, never burdening us with excess. Hers is the deft and confident voice of a seasoned storyteller. The lightness of her touch leaves us with a sense that these stories were not so much written as dreamt; that, like the best art, they are inevitable.

*The Uncharted Heart* is that rare thing, a book that can be recommended unreservedly.

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