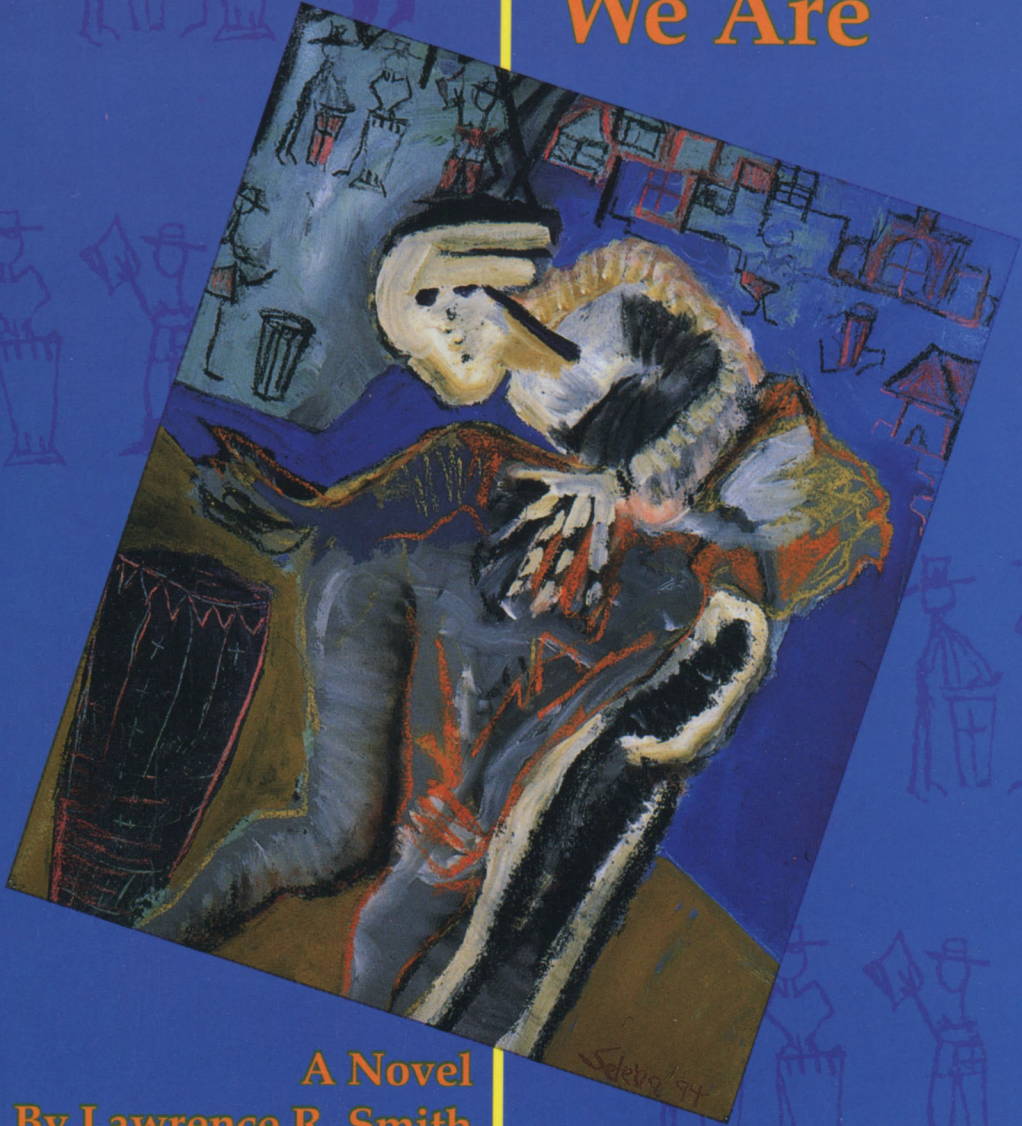


The Map of Who We Are



A Novel
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Typeset in Baskerville by Daniel Estrada Del Cid,
HS Marketing Solutions, Santa Ana, California

CHAPTER I TRAVELERS

Power is there, under high-tension lines. Stand quietly to hear it. Look up and feel it polarize the cells of your body, tug at your teeth and eyes, halo the grass at your feet. If you ignore it, slip under it, drive by it, it'll burn a hole in the heart of your favorite song, leave a black tunnel in the air you plan to breathe tomorrow. Power companies say the wires are harmless, but there are no Travelers at Consolidated Edison or Pacific Gas & Electric. You'd think the scars those merchants of darkness have slashed and burned from coast to coast in great swings of electromagnetic frenzy would have totally screwed up the sacred earth-sky grid, undone the Network. But they haven't. We're lucky the grid is on another frequency. The Death Squad controls only a few AM slots; Travelers have all remaining numbers on the psychic AM dial, and end to end on the FM band, the one that connects us with the stars.

Once there was a Traveler, a woman with a name no one could see. She drummed word processor keys and organized for the clerical union in a small university town outside Detroit. Since her father was from Alabama, her mother from Canada, she naturally homed in on a north-south polar hotline in the Network grid. It cut right through the straits, the sacred water crossings, the place we call Detroit. Her mother had been a high yellow beauty, a farm girl from western Ontario, where redwings tend wheat fields on the other side of the river. As a joke, that beauty once stabbed lacquered chopsticks through the twist in her hair. The year was 1942, and it didn't play well on the Ambassador Bridge. Two border guards skated onto the running boards of the old Ford and escorted the family to one side. Hard to convince them she wasn't Japanese, an escapee from a camp in Utah, the authorities not at all amused when she didn't listen to their questions. Whistling a few bars of "Maple Leaf Forever," lost her pucker and could only blow air through her laughter. When she let down her hair, flashed her Billie Holiday kiss-my-ass smile, they finally allowed her back into Detroit. That was 1942: a year before the riots.

Travelers believe in the power of light. They know the shining is always there, in darkness or the stretch of day. It pokes through the planet—rips through sand, clay, rock, and magma—or comes at us straight on, sailing through space in divine transparency. Travelers navigate, transmit, and make preparations. They calibrate turtle shells, adjust our meanderings to the stars, plow heaven, replant the sky with fireflies, exploding corn, the exuberant cries of yucca blossoms. The Travelers have stayed tuned.

The daughter of that sassy Ontario farm girl, Ethel Wright to those with the magic to see her invisible name, crossed different borders: layers of sky, time, energy, and light. Then there were the rituals. She picked ham out of gumbo every time she ate the stuff. In the kitchen she chops onions, green pepper and celery, big flat-leafed parsley, humming “God Bless the Child.” Not so much a religious thing on her part, but recollections of her father’s Nation of Islam lectures still turn pork to crud inside her mouth. Whisking butter and flour into a medium brown roux, she shouts into the living room, tells Thomas to wake up and turn off the baseball game. *Fait attention!* You got to do a good roux, you got to lace the whole thing with a good Choctaw filé, you got to simmer it up till it slides off the ladle. And to cook a good gumbo you got to use ham—or tasso, smoked down bayou country. For Ethel, all the rest was perfectly OK: crabs, shrimp, oysters, mudbugs, frogs’ legs, alligator, redfish, chicken, and duck—just not the ham. She dipped out each stringy piece and laid it by the side of her bowl. *Gombo*, Mandinka for “okra.” But not the ham.

Ethel’s tight-curved chestnut hair, the makeup that blushed out her tan complexion, the professional white blouses, and her preference for Lou Rawls over straight-ahead bebop, gave no indication she was a Traveler. Travelers and bebop have always been very close. Thelonious had all the marks; it was obvious the first time you saw him. It was just more subtle with Ethel. When she smiled, the diastema between her two front teeth opened the passage to her secret life of nerves and spices. But you had to know what you were seeing.

Dr. Horace Crumlich, her boss at Midwestern State University, could see very little, in spite of bifocals. He couldn't locate Ethel, even if she were the only one in the room. When she left her cubicle of decorative cats to seek clarification on one of his directives, he used his secretary, Karen, a stout platinum woman who seemed to apply lipstick directly to her teeth, as a seeing-eye dog.

Ethel stood in the outer office, leaned through the door. "Dr. Crumlich, I don't think they're going to be happy if you brag about the school's Indian mascot in your speech for Native American History Week."

Crumlich groaned from behind his desk. "Karen, someone there to see me?"

"Yes, Dr. C. It's Ethel."

"Tell her to leave a memo. I'm tied up right now."

"Dr. Crumlich wants you to leave a memo, Ethel."

"OK, I know I'm not here, but if he doesn't listen to me now, he's going to have a couple dozen Indian kids burning sage on his putting rug."

Karen smiled her reddest, most sympathetic smile. "Ethel, why don't you put that in a memo?"

Fumbling with his tweed jacket, Crumlich charged out of his office, aimed for the hallway door. But as he passed Ethel, brushed her arm, there was a loud crackling sound, and a blue flash leaped from his elbow. Staggered, he caught the edge of his secretary's desk and tried to draw a long breath.

"Damnation, Karen, it happened again. Call the campus electrician. There's a short in the wiring under this rug."

Ethel had all the voltage of prismatic light, but that never changed her easy style. She'd talk about any kind of cat, but never herself. So how would anyone guess Ethel knew about people who laid numbers on folks, calling them repeatedly on the phone, chanting, dropping off stuck painted lizards on the doorstep? A ring and then a dial tone. Two rings and the whisper of flute music. Three rings.

"Hello. Who is this anyway?"

"Papa Legba, Prince of Crossroads, Prince of Shed Blood, open the gate, come and ride this horse."

“Don’t you go and try to put a number on me! You better quit or I’ll come ride on you.”

“Papa Legba, come and . . .”

“Listen here now, don’t you feel my words burning? Don’t you feel the telephone getting hot on your ear? Right now my words are crawling through that wire and into your brain. When they’re finished, they’re going downtown to have lunch on your heart. Hello? Do you hear me?”

Dial tone. Sometime after midnight the caller stopped by and tried to undo the injury: castor oil, black soot, Mamman Brigitte’s graveyard dirt cast at the doorway. We’re talking Detroit now, not the bayou. Ethel didn’t deal the stuff, but she sure knew all about it, and she knew who was who on the lowdown hoochie coochie circuit.

The Traveler’s Network is what we tell each other when we’re gone and no one’s listening. It’s the map that frays at the desert’s edge, reflecting a pattern bigger than everything. It’s a chant that enfolds time, measured from points of fire to places we sound out as “then” or “now” or “will be.” Travelers sight along the flashing lines of the Network grid, speed across a web of interwoven lives and destinies to wherever they need to go.

When Ethel moved into a big frame house back in the city, she talked to the former owner, a yellow-haired Polish guy who’d died at the Battle of the Bulge. He kept wandering around the house in a blue robe: brushing his teeth, hogging the bathroom. He seemed quiet, kind of sad, and really nice enough.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be through here . . .”

“Ted, it’s time for you to leave. Don’t get me wrong. I like you, but you’ve got to go back where you belong. Your buddies are waiting for you.”

“Can I go fishing with them?”

“Fishing it is, then. There’s a largemouth bass on your line right now.”

Ethel clapped her hands. The yellow hair and blue robe exploded into swirling dust motes; the toothbrush snaked down the drain. And that was it. He never came back. Sorrel on the thresholds and windowsills to keep him out, but such precautions were hardly

necessary. The folks on the other side know who the Travelers are. It's funny how few on this side can see them. Or maybe we can all see for a moment here or there, then doubt the whole thing right back into oblivion. Like walking by a window and thinking you've just seen two people having the best sex since the beginning of time. But when you go back for a second look, it's just a dog and a television set.

Travelers carved canals through Venice marshland, channeled into hardpan above the wash that runs through Chaco Canyon. They created the ethereal gridwork of Mars. Travelers built bridges in Brooklyn and San Francisco, rebuilt one by the Chimehuevi reservation near Lake Havasu City, dream-engineered the Rainbow Bridge over the Bering Straits. They vaulted land through air, tongues of water through earth, and why else but to greet the dead, lend a sensual curve to persisting minds. Shoes and moccasins thump out an honor dance to integrate earth, water, fire, and air; to mix bloods, plant the seeds of cities and lives; to travel through a day where everything rings in crystalline octaves; to live in the tightly wound spiral that is formed by all women who have grown large and come together: the lotus, the cactus, and the crimson rose.

Travelers aren't born knowing who they are. Ethel hadn't found out until her late twenties. Jerry Martinez—who sprayed paint for a living at Chaco's Custom Auto Shop in Santa Ana, California—still didn't know. He loved to airbrush fantasy on the sides of vans, low riders, hot rods, cruising machines. Beyond the assortment of gargoyles he laid over pearled finishes and candy apple red, his passion was the natural world: not depictions of RVs and dirt bikes in the desert, but a soft-focused world of buttes, canyons, prairies, mountains, and seashore. The Great Work of his dreams was painting an entire bus. Not an old school bus—splashing on a few colors to whip up a hippie express—but a mint-new Greyhound to transform. It was a grander vision than Michelangelo's biblical wanderings in the Sistine Chapel, and Jerry's was more mobile. Paint the whole thing, even the roof, so the birds could groove on it, and people on bridges too. That's what he was going to call it: "The Bridge to Aztlan." However, most of the jobs he got were filigree,

highlights, pinstriping, from the kind of people who install gold trim on their Mercedes Benz. He wished customers without imagination wouldn't waste his time; there were decals for junk work like that. But Chaco never let him refuse a job.

Jerry pushed his masked face closer to the door of the mini-pickup. He was pulling a wing of eagle feathers from the truck's black body, pulling them out of the mist he sprayed with deft turns of the wrist. Knee on bench, hunched over his aerial scene, looking down into the valley. The hangover foot kicked time to the sounds of his salsa box—Jerry riffing inside the ring of percussion, a monkey's collision of gesture and pace, cooking syncopation to open all gates out of the labyrinth.

"Hey, Jer. Come over and sight me out on this mask job." Chaco was calling from the other side of the garage.

"Hold on, man. My eagle's almost done."

Chaco spit into the epoxy dust. "Eagle's never done till he shits on your head."

But Jerry knew that. He once wrote Katherine Davalos Ortega to ask why all our money is gray green, the color of burnt-out astroturf. Jerry had suggestions for alternatives: fuchsia for the ones, the blue of turquoise for fives, sunflower yellow for tens, and black for the twenties if they insisted on keeping Jackson, but persimmon if they could find something else. He assured Katherine he had even more ideas for higher denominations but wanted feedback before devoting any more time to the proposition. And Jackson, after all, wasn't the only problem. Why not dump all those presidential and distinguished colonial faces? Why not hawks, eagles—but not the bird with the arrow up its ass on the back of the one—buffalo, snow geese, snakes, and beavers? Jerry knew it could be done. He'd laid them out on metal for years, and paper had to be easier than metal. To give Katherine a rough visualization, he enclosed bills inked over in various colors with a fine brush. He'd also razored animal pictures in perfect ovals out of *Audubon* and *National Geographic*, and rubber-cemented them over George, Abe, Alexander, and Old Hickory. But Katherine never replied.

He felt disgusted, and was momentarily tempted to abandon his patriotic enthusiasm. Later Jerry decided it was foolish to let the bureaucracy kill a beautiful idea, so he set about converting his own currency, in exactly the same manner as the mock-ups he'd sent to DC. Unfortunately, he met resistance in Southern California as well. Whether it was a gas station, a burger joint, or a drugstore, the cashiers would never accept his imaginative money. He reasoned with them. It wasn't counterfeit, after all, and the same old faces, if you really couldn't get along without them, were still right there underneath. You could always peel off the animals and convert back to the boss man's idea of history. But it never worked; no one would accept the money.

One day Jerry decided to take a stand on the issue. He was in the checkout line at Lucky Market, and the checker rang up \$23.11 in sundries. He paid with two snow geese, three beavers, and change. At first the checker laughed, then she got mad.

"Hey, you got any regular money? This is no good."

"I'll give you a rattlesnake, if you can break it."

"Joke's over. You got regular money or not?"

"I only have the colorful kind, like the ones you've got in your hand."

"You know I can't take this. If you're not going to give me real money, you got to step aside." The checker fingered her hair and looked beyond him to the next customer.

Jerry leaned over the conveyor belt, blocking the progress of someone's beer and potato chips. "Listen, my money is as good as anybody else's, and I'm not going to step aside. I can wait here as long as I have to. As long as it takes for this country to get its shit straight."

Shoppers in line behind Jerry began to get restless: there were mumbles and finally bad words shouted in a couple of languages. When the manager arrived, and asked him to leave, the money artist stood his ground. The big man tried to grab Jerry by the shoulder, but each time he brushed the hand away. At the moment of losing patience, just after the manager tried to punch him and he'd countered with a blow to the boss's chest, two cops jogged through

the automatic doors. As he held out a sample and began to explain the idea behind his colorful money, Officer Wilkens kneed Jerry's groin and Officer Roman looped a baton over his head from the rear, pulling it tight against the throat. Handcuffs. The whole night in a lockup. Later, back in the streets, his friends couldn't understand why he felt so committed to his experiment. But Jerry still hadn't changed his mind. "Hey, man, that's what this country is all about: flip sides. One side is so beautiful it makes you want to cry. The other's just mean shit and rotten teeth."

His girlfriend, Leslie, who had taken cover behind the cigarette lock box, eased out and snapped a few shots of the cops working him over at the Lucky Market checkout, then took the film to a one-hour developer. When he got back home, Jerry razored out these little tableaux of struggle and rubber-cemented them over the White House and Treasury building.

Travelers make you laugh every time. It doesn't matter if they're dying, or you're dying, but they make you laugh. Then again, when you're in a silly mood they're just as likely to lean over, whisper in your ear, then nip a small piece out of the lobe. It keeps you alert. You have to be alert, because they make up all the rules. When you're with a Traveler, you learn to improvise and hope your instincts will carry you through. Like Bjarni Grimolfsson on his voyage from Vinland back to Greenland in 1012. Their boat had been attacked by sea maggots and was sinking fast. When they drew lots to see who'd be saved, Bjarni was one of the ones to make it into the dinghy. But his foster son screamed at him from the gunwale of the ship, "You coward, promising my father, Orm, you'd protect me, and now you're leaving me to die!" Bjarni crawled out of the dinghy and back onto the ship, traded places with the boy. Grimolfsson, the maggots, and the remaining terrified Vikings went down together. He laughed at the boy and at himself. He waved good-bye to the story because he knew he'd always be in it. Bjarni still lives in the settlements there on Rhode Island, where he said the beautiful wild rice grows itself, and you can get drunk on berries and dew. He lives inside the myth that is the map of who we are.

Chief Seattle knows Bjarni. Right now the Seer of the Northwest is standing at the base of the Space Needle, smiling to think of all the people who go up to the top to get the lay of the land. But what's really there they can never see: young Dwamish boys practicing with bows and salmon spears down by the bay, drying and smoking racks with women attending, long cedar houses with hearths cut through their centers to drive out damp and cold. He promised that his people would never leave those lands by the water, and they didn't. He told Governor Stevens they'd only appear to be dead and gone. What Seattle didn't tell the governor when he surrendered the territory in 1855 was that his healing men would be lingering there in the white man's hospitals. When spirits journeyed back to this side of the world and entered white babies, the eagle men were waiting to link the hand of each baby with the hand of a Dwamish earth child. They drew first breath together. Their souls were bound together from that moment on. And when those children grew up and cried out, the universal music could be heard again, no matter how many laws were passed against it.

Neanderthals excited Carla Abruzzese, made her change majors from Spanish to anthropology. UC Berkeley was a good place for that: the shrine of the Kroeber legacy—Ishi, “last of his tribe,” the collision of time and evolution in the Golden West. Carla liked to tell a story about fur traders in Outer Mongolia. They swear there are people back in the farthest reaches, in the mountains, who don't look like other humans. In Mongolian they call them *kümiin güriügesü*, a name that translates “people animals.” There were outsiders who'd heard this talk of “people animals,” listened carefully to the descriptions, and had a hunch the mountain people in question might be Neanderthals, or descendants of Neanderthals. Of course, no one but the Mongolian traders had actually seen them. But why should Neanderthals on the lam in Central Asia be particularly surprising? The past keeps hanging around, like smoke from a fire that burned a hundred or a thousand years ago. Diffuse, but still there. Think about it: we already know we're part fish. Any high school biology textbook clearly shows gills on the human fetus in the first month of development. Later, they seem to disappear right

into the neck. But we know they're still there, covered by skin, ready to climb with us out of the sea and up the mountainside. There are Neanderthals here too, right here at home. We've all seen them; maybe we haven't noticed them, but we've seen them.

Joey Malone was a young Neanderthal who lived in the little town of Egypt, located thirty-five miles southwest of Rochester, New York. He'd been diagnosed as retarded by a local family practitioner. True, his forehead was more shallow than most, and had a slight backward tilt. But what did that mean to Joey? If the boy couldn't see ordinary water, how could he imagine the duplicity of mirrors? So what if he didn't look and sound like the typical upstater. That wasn't necessarily bad. For one thing, he didn't hit an obnoxious nasal flat with his *o's* and *a's*. When his watery hazel eyes focused on a point somewhere behind your head, maybe it was from looking at the sky so much. Joey saw angels and smelled Christmas spices all year round. He tended a garden of radio waves and injured stones. Sure, he had a few problems. He couldn't pronounce the *J* in his name, so it came out "Doey," or "Doughie." He never hit back when kids taunted him by snatching at his spiky hair; he just planted his big bare feet, almost as wide as they were long, and smiled. Returning good for bad, what could be more retarded?

When Joey first heard "Little Egypt" by the Coasters on his old Philco, he thought it was a song about his hometown. The hip-slinky beat didn't confuse him at all. He felt the Lake Ontario basin, its earth and sky, on his skin and in his teeth. It made his pubic hair tingle. And when he looked at lilac bushes in May, he could taste their colors, ride high on purple ink and pearls. That's why he'd always pop a few clusters in his mouth, until his mother or sister caught him and made him spit them out. Whether it was lilac time or hard-hearted winter or leaf burning in October, the world's size and dazzle made him think he couldn't stand any more pleasure. If he looked or smelled or tasted one second longer, he'd spontaneously combust and rise into the clouds. Those were the moments when he'd close his eyes, squeeze lids so tight his huge eyebrows touched his cheekbones. But then the flying animal colors took over, and that mad circus was hard to handle too.

“Hey, Doughie, want a candy bar?”

Tim Shelton, the middle kid from next door, had tripped, kicked, and badgered Joey, but never offered candy. Since the Neanderthal boy didn't speak to people outside his own family—that is, his mother and sister—he nodded yes and held out his hand. As usual, Tim and his neighborhood pals were in uniform, each wearing a pair of khaki cotton shorts and a T-shirt with broad horizontal stripes in muted earthen colors. They'd just come from Danielson's Hardware, where Herb always took them in back and let them try on his work shoes. But Joey didn't recognize uniforms. He wore baggy denim overalls and an oversized white T-shirt, a dozen of which were his vanished father's sole legacy.

He held out his hand, and Tim placed in it a Three Musketeers bar. It was huge. The advertisements for the candy said it was big enough to share with two friends. He opened the wrapper and stared at the wet glob of mud shaped into a rectangle. Tim and his buddies cackled, screeched, and flung themselves into midair twists like the Baptist clowns at the Strawberry Festival. But Joey started to eat the bar—finished it in five bites. When he smiled at his friends, the laughter stopped and they ran away.

Joey actually enjoyed the special bar. How could he explain that he still tasted messages the earth sent, long after the humans he lived with had forgotten the trick? When he sniffed the wind, laughed at what he saw in the sky, or buried his lunch money, his mother could only shake her head. When she extracted him from the mud and his clothes, thrust him into the shower, he saw only his hands, and watched astonished as they crawled and flew through the rain. Maybe Joey could have told his mother some of what he knew, but he just didn't care to explain. Nevertheless, in spite of his silence, or maybe because of it, Joey was a Traveler too.

After the failure of the mud candy caper, Tim tried to think up another prank, one that would indisputably horrify or injure the retarded kid next door. But nothing came to him. At night the Shelton boy stared into the bulb of his Roy Rogers lamp, his hero atop a rearing Trigger on the translucent shade of lashed vinyl buckskin. Roy had smiling Choctaw eyes, trickster coyote eyes, and

whether he rode Trigger across the TV screen, Tim's lunch bucket, cocoa mug, or place mat, Roy's eyes dismantled the world, hurled spare parts toward the flash point. He was making it over, redoing the whole thing—not just the Lake Ontario basin, but the big map, the one experts can never imagine how to read. They look at it and handle it, but the language of water and earth eludes them. Tim stared at the lamp, but illumination never came.

Several weeks later, two days before the solstice, Tim and Billy were playing in the swamp near Carlton's junkyard, where Egyptian dead float open-eyed beneath the lily pads. Tim pulled a turtle out of the muck. Billy called dibs, but fat chance—Tim ignored him, held the turtle by the edges of its shell, spit through the curled tube of his tongue, arching a lougie four or five feet to one side with no apparent effort. This ability marked him as a leader among local boys. Billy tried, dribbled over his chin and onto his shirt as he struggled from log to log through the ooze behind the more agile Shelton boy. The two of them walked a country road the Chamber of Commerce had forgotten to name. When they got to the Malone house, Tim hid the turtle in a gravel well outside a basement window, knocked on Joey's back door. Mrs. Malone answered, wiping her hands on a flour-dusted apron, red heart over one hip for a pocket.

“We want to play with Joey.”

“OK, boys, but no rough stuff. I'll go get him. Would you like some of my special pumpkin doughnuts? They're fresh from the kettle.”

Joey and a plate of the doughnuts descended the rear steps into his backyard. The boys were waiting for him, sitting on a tree stump next to the garage, where his dad had leaned the Chevy's spare tire and side skirts while loading the trunk for his getaway. And there they still leaned, casual in forgotten rust. Joey noticed Tim hiding something behind his back.

“Bet you can't guess what Tim's got.”

“Yeah, Doughie, I got a surprise for you.” Tim spit cleanly and laid a wad between Joey's oversized feet. “A real one this time.”

The Neanderthal boy tried to look behind Tim's back to see what he was holding, but each time he tried to look, Tim moved the

surprise out of view. He was getting excited, and a sound somewhere between grunting and moaning came out of his mouth.

“OK, OK, Doughie, take it easy. I’ll show you what we got for you.” Tim held out the turtle, right under Joey’s nose. His eyebrows, nose, and lips danced in a chaos of directions and dissonant quivers.

“Go ahead, touch it.”

“No, really, Doughie. Go on and take it.” Billy snickered.

Doughnuts into dirt, Joey held out both hands to accept the turtle, but the neighbor boy pulled it away again.

“Wait a second, Doughie. Let me show you how he goes. Look!” Tim lifted the turtle over his head and threw it down hard. The turtle’s shells split, both over and under, and a surge of soft flesh, blood, and internal organs spilled over the stump. The two boys turned and dug it out for Tim’s house.

Joey stared at the smashed remains of his swamp brother, its feet still quivering from reflex action. Open mouth. Tongue swept over his teeth several times and finally delivered the howl that had been rising inside him. He howled as he ran around and around the house. His mother caught him by an overall strap and took him indoors, but he continued to howl. He howled through dinner, blew peas and mashed potatoes even beyond his plastic Hopalong Cassidy place mat. He howled into the night. Every time his mother or older sister thought she’d calmed him, the modulating howl wormed its way up through his throat into explosions of dust and silence. Joey kept his family busy all that night and into the next day. At noon he stopped howling and began to smile. He lifted his nose, sniffed the mildew-laden Egyptian breeze for the turtle’s spirit, breathed it in, and went on.

Carla Abruzzese had a notion; she wanted her friends at Cal to join her on an expedition to search for Neanderthals in Outer Mongolia.

“Don’t you see what this means? It’d be wilder than talking to people who stepped off a UFO. You know, like time traveling, going back to beginnings.”

“Sorry, I don’t believe in time traveling. My best friend in high school talked me into reading science fiction one time. I hated it. It

was such rotten plagiarism, like most of the junk Rod Serling did on *The Twilight Zone*. Sorry.”

“Who said anything about science fiction? I’m talking reality. You know, like when something comes up and bites you on the ass.”

And she did, then and there. The boy was lying stomach down on the grass, reading *Steppenwolf*, so she had a clear shot. She had opened a door for him. Revelation in the California sunshine. She opened another door for him too. Her legs were so strong, she could wrap them around the boy’s back, when he was in her, and squeeze all his breath out. He liked it. Her pubic hair was black, curly, and rose in an even rug almost to her belly button. He liked that, too, and wondered if it had anything to do with her fascination for Neanderthals.

Carla eventually got to Outer Mongolia. Time dissolved in that twilight meeting on the mountain. And when Neanderthal hands invited with elegant tribal swoops and flutterings, she walked right into the Network.

Women are powerful, unless they forget other genders they’ve carried from earlier places. They hold shields, made of human hair and bark from the slender birch, that can withstand most frontal assaults. Men fancy they are powerful too, when they wear armor of metal and hardened leather. But they never forget the hollow spot, the one they’re afraid will collapse if they breathe or dream. Their political energy is spent on government, television, and searching for oil. Both men and women, in their present configurations, engage in debate and strategies of delay. But delay brings us back to travel, and we are always, if we only knew it, already there—everywhere and in every time, all at once. Most people don’t have the radio turned on, so they can’t hear the music—“Blue Monk,” “Round Midnight,” “Ruby My Dear,” “Crepuscule with Nellie.” You’ve just got to stay tuned, listen for the weather report, make sure you know where the sun goes down. For instance, Cherokees had ideas on how to raise children. To teach a child to navigate earth, water, and sky, to keep its feet walking back into sunlight, they always chose a maternal uncle. This freed women up for skirmishes with Creeks and Catawbias, legal debates in the roundhouse. Then the case of

Iceland. The Viking women were always there in the same cold and equal place, whether farming or fighting or looking into the future. On this last point, their eyes were much clearer than men's. Red Erik's daughter, Freydis, was an Icelandic wonder wherever and whenever she arrived. She led an expedition to Vinland, then murdered her male partners to get their boats and cargoes.

Bartering bowls of milk drawn from dragon boat cattle, along with pieces of junk they'd planned to throw away, the Vikings took beaver pelts, wolf and fox skins, the tanned and decorated hides of deer and moose. The men with scruffy beards could hardly keep from laughing at the natives, their greed for cow's milk and broken tools. But one *skraeling*, as the Vikings called them, spotted the scam, demanded two bits of brass instead of one for his decorated deerskin. A skirmish, several *skraeling* heads cloven in two, ripe melons to the tempered Viking swords. Later that afternoon, warriors returned by the hundreds, caught the Vikings off guard as they worked outside their stockade, drove them into the meadow beyond with large stones inside tanned moose bladders that had been tethered to long poles. As the *skraelings* chased the men with painted hair across the meadow, one of the natives stopped, dropped his weapon, picked up a gleaming axe from the hand of a downed Viking. Entranced by the tangle of snakes writhing on the burnished bronze, he pressed finger to blade, but it bit him, drew blood. He dropped the snakes, picked up his pole again, and sprinted on into the meadow.

"Why are you running from these ragged *skraelings*?" Freydis screamed after her retreating men as she puffed across the field of battle. Eight months pregnant, a little slow on the run, she pulled the sword from the hand of Snorri's son, his skull crushed by a tether stone.

"Where are the men here? These are only two-legged animals, you fools! Skin their hides and stretch them out to dry!" Turning to face the charging *skraelings*, Freydis pulled her tunic down to the waist and slapped the flat of the sword against her swollen breasts. The natives stopped, terrified at the sight of the fire-haired Death Squad angel, ran back to their canoes, and set up a flurry of churning water as they paddled away.

Consider having sex with Freydis. Since she's pregnant, you'll have to take it easy. The manuals warn that only gentle sex will do at this advanced stage, or you run the risk of dislodging the cervical plug that holds the whole process together. Could anyone have gentle sex with Freydis? If you asked her to roll over on her side and lift one leg, do you think she'd do it? As her belly grows, her breasts get even larger, and she was always substantial: blue veins under the skin are a map to a place you can hardly remember. Blood and milk in abundance. To Freydis, blood *was* milk. They traded milk for pelts with the *skraelings*, then made them pay again in blood.

Her feet were wet and cold with dew when she climbed back into bed a few weeks later with Thorvard the Nameless, her forgettable husband. Now if Erik's wife had climbed into bed with cold wet feet before dawn and told him she'd just been talking with the neighbor about trading boats, he'd have leaned down and sniffed between her legs. Hell to pay. And if Freydis wasn't wet down there when she slipped between the sheets with Thorvard the Nameless, she surely was when she took a war axe and split the skulls of the five neighbor women. Her backers had grudgingly finished off the men, but they had no taste for chopping up women. It was a pleasure only she could enjoy. If Thorvard couldn't satisfy her, she'd get what she needed on her own terms. A woman all flesh and sharp edges. When a man made love to her, it was sailing into the Western Seas without provisions, risking everything to ice and turbulence.

Even before the Death Squad there were Travelers, riding solar butterflies, sucking waves of electromagnetic nectar. They rode buffalo too. When the Holy Six—North, South, East, West, Up, and Down—bend their vectors to a straight shot, laser through a hole in the fabric of totality, Travelers are calm, alert, and taking names. They sing through war, famine, and pestilence, through earthquakes, floods, and volcanic spewings. They tune harmonic strings in their wild stratospheric spin, play octaves of light to bridge us over the gulf between death and imagination. Flowers for teeth, tongues and eyes of sliding fire. Even when you're sure they've packed up and gone home, the Travelers are still there, ready to ride the last wave in.

The Moon Feast finished, Eagle dancers shed feathers and returned to sleep and their two-legged pursuits, landing hard just after the sun had risen high enough to ignite the edges of the eastern mountains. Even before dawn, the bear women had reclaimed their village faces. Now there were only a few matriarchs in the roundhouse, spooning the remainders of corn pudding and strawberries into tightly woven baskets for distribution among the clans. John Walkingstick went to the river alone, bathed himself, reached into a pouch of ash he'd gathered from the communal fire, swirled it into circles around his eyes. The raccoon was his power: stealth instead of size, a mind as quick as those tiny hands, knowledge of everything that thrives under the moon. He felt strong after the Moon Feast, thought the celebration's ending a good time for another assault on his daughter's disease. Back to the roundhouse, to toss tobacco on the communal fire, lift his crippled daughter from the mat where he'd left her. No humans saw this doubled person as he slipped into the brush at the edge of the village, but the healer knew animals always watched and listened, waiting for a sign of weakness. He sang out a challenge.

Listen to me, you star creatures! Furry runners and wind riders, there is no greater healer than the one you see in my moccasins. How could I fail in anything? Trees bend their branches and adjust their leaves, tell me the secrets that they keep. Ha!

Walkingstick carried his daughter eastward through the valley to the feet of the Seven Sisters: the place called Grey Eagle, hotspot on the Network grid. And he sang as he traveled.

It's only a screech owl that frightened my daughter's spirit. As these words leave my mouth, they harden into laurel, weave a cage to hold that bad moon owl. I'll keep it prisoner until her disease is gone. Ha! Listen to me, all you star creatures!

He knew the culprit wasn't a screech owl, but maybe insulting the bears by not mentioning them, denying the damage they'd done, would trick them into a fatal lapse of concentration. He wasn't sure when the bears had declared war on him. There were signs he'd been

marked even before his wife, Chaw Chaw, a bear woman herself, had abandoned the family and gone back to live with her hairy kin. Walkingstick had hunted them in anger ever since. His oldest son thought he was crazy to be so vengeful. A good hunter, but not a fast learner, Wiley had disappointed his father in other ways. The Old Raccoon gave up trying to teach him the language of plants. Walkingstick spoke it so fluently, he'd followed Sequoyah's example and written his own syllabary. Not that he'd told anybody about it. Not even his sons knew of its existence; the time was not right. Wiley, contrary to his name, could not understand the dynamics of Network connections. He wasn't even interested in lower-level complexities: the politics of skirmish and negotiation that were bringing the Tsalagi nation to ruin.

Walkingstick had also tested his second son, Pumpkin, in the hope he'd be more receptive. The plant talker made the boy climb a large white oak tree, stay there until he'd heard the stars sing. Walkingstick warned Pumpkin he'd expect a full rendition of that song the next time he saw him. The boy returned to the village four days later, wild with hunger, delivered an atonal version of "Yankee Doodle." The disgusted father bit hard on his knuckles. No wonder Nancy had always been his favorite. She was not only smarter than her brothers but more spiritually insightful than most adults in the village. That's why the jealous bears had taken her down.

Thin, slack muscled, a lack of syntax in her bones, Nancy Walkingstick couldn't move her legs. Her father set her down on the mountainside, doused her arms and feet with cold creek water, unfolded his healing stone from its seven-layered wrap of deerskin. He held the stone up, let sun pass through it, then balanced it on her chest. Held it to the sun again, but now it was cloudy. Praying for the power to undo the curse, clear out the contamination bears had flooded through his daughter's soul.

"Stars, listen to the words coming from my mouth like smoke. Strike down the creatures who've turned my daughter's food to stones inside her gut!"

He touched the bright welts along her inner arms. Auburn hair fell out of her head like broken rope. More creek water, then a pipe

smoked in the directions. But no sign came. Even in power places you can fail, even if your dream eyes have seen war and famine and miraculous arrivals. Even here at Gray Eagle a father could lose his daughter and do nothing but watch her cross the long damp fields alone.

Prophesy seized him and spoke through his teeth. “My sons will die a few ridges from here, last holdouts against an army of dead things, gathering my people to march us into winter. And Nancy...” The voice disintegrated into bear grunts and mumblings. Even though they were fooling with him again, it was hard to maintain hatred for the bears. This long enmity wasn’t really their fault. About the same time humans forgot the multi-tiered language they shared with all other creatures, they acquired a taste for the sweet flesh of their hairy cousins.

Betrayed by President Andrew Jackson, a senior partner in the Death Squad, and all of his cohorts: land speculators, generations of squatters who’d enjoyed Cherokee hospitality and now wanted to drive their hosts away, rednecks hungry for the gold that had been discovered on their land in northern Georgia. This betrayal drove the healer down white oak and honeysuckle paths, basket-making paths, back to the dream caves, where he worked through blood webs of horizontal lightning. He knew the universe was a puppet, those flashing lines the strings that made it jump. Blocked and frustrated by the Death Squad, the healer reimagined death, invented a way to hibernate souls, using basket codes computerized on the old star matrix system. He’d read the white man’s Bible, and Revelations gave him the plan, even showed him how to key in the wake-up call. Of course, there was help from Handsome Bear, Chief Seattle, Ethel Wright, Jerry Martinez, and a long Network list he’d transcribed from the dream cave walls. And Thelonious Monk—he wrote the music. For a time John Walkingstick lost family, almost the entire Cherokee nation, but he found a world of pregnant chance beneath the dome of his anger and grief. He fathered the Great Millennial Shift.

“Nancy, listen. I’m going to try one more thing. The sky power of thunder and lightning can heal you—and if I hold your hand, you may live.”

The raccoon man knelt beside his daughter, who lay entranced by their winter house fireplace on a river cane mat. Finally she turned gray-veiled eyes in his direction. “Take me to the open place. If a fire river can’t heal me, I’m ready to die.”

He touched Nancy on the forehead, lifted the child into his arms, set off for the top of Gray Eagle’s dark mountain. As the healer moved through fields of rain-soaked grass, he bent his head to speak into Nancy’s ear. She heard him utter the sound of the colored bands that weave to form the evening sky. He asked her to remember the healing light that pulls, when you call it by its true name, dazzle out of gray. He told Nancy to listen for the deep humming reach of the earth’s power, and the song of every healing plant that grows through clay skin. He kissed Nancy on both eyelids, asked her if she could still see the quick-talking points of fire behind the clouds, the ones with a music for eyes that plays only when we sleep. She nodded her head, and Walkingstick shook the air with his bear cry.

Thunder rolled in and out along the jagged horizon. Then the Network light show began. Slashes of light and power, the multiple afterimage explaining that nothing ever dies. Finally, a thick bolt of lightning snaked along, parallel to the ground just to the north of them. Walkingstick lifted an eagle bone whistle to his lips. The snake hesitated, then exploded into fragments, chunks of ball lightning that flew and bounced in all directions. One came straight for the healer and his daughter, blowing across the tops of trees and scattering fiery splinters as it rolled. About to be engulfed, Walkingstick blew his whistle hard enough to pierce the fabric of the world. Nancy’s open throat shrieked an even higher note.



Lawrence R. Smith
Photo by Dick Schwarze.

"The Map of Who We Are is an epic American vision. It challenges the reader to understand reality in new ways. Using the freedom of the writer's imagination, Lawrence R. Smith takes us to taboo places. We are given precise myriads of details—speckles and sparks of manna rain—and miraculously everything falls into place. Smith pulls off the amazing feat of creating a form that integrates all our worlds, all people."

MAXINE HONG KINGSTON,
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Norman and London

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Jacket design by
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ISBN 0-8061-2956-5



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