

HURON, TWICE

By Charles Pinch

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author Merrill Gray writes: 'Huron, Twice' by Charles Pinch is a tete-beche style story that scrutinizes our beliefs in both culture and politics by juxtaposition of bathos and pathos. It is a story that will make you work and a story that needs to be read more than once. It has complexity, conflict and tension. Character is uncovered in nuances and intonations in the family rituals such as 'Sunday's Joint' eating 'tatties and neeps.' The repetition of the word 'naïve' throughout could be a jab at all of us who claim expertise in any creative form.*

Sometimes we throw away our treasures without ever acknowledging the emotional and financial value. The story questions the value of art and the randomness of price. Was Folk Art ever intended to be sold or was it to explore our history during a certain time period? Is the writer making a comparison between the 'scam' of the Vietnam War and Retail Art Stores where we were all sold a bill of goods? You decide.

Quotes:

'Now, darling,' she would purr, 'good folk art is always naïve but not all naïve art is good folk art.'

'It makes you smile. It makes you love the poor soul who crafted it. It makes you want to protect it. And most of all'—and this is where her eyes harden just a fraction—'it makes you want to own it.'

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor/author Tracey Sterns writes: (I knew Charles had already chosen a guest editor to introduce his story but Huron, Twice remains one of my favourites of his and I demanded to put my two cents in! Modest to a fault, Charles reluctantly agreed to the prospect of more edifying praise, (however much he pretends to shrink from it.)*

Here is a bittersweet story from the annals of some Senior Editor, Charles Pinch. It's a chance to get your own back, but that's unlikely; it's one of the most enthralling tales I have ever read over and over. Maybe it's why he's the Flea-King. I have known him occasionally and not for so long. But it is a most cherished friendship. It is a rare thing to encounter and acquaint oneself with someone so erudite, so deliberately fascinating, so true and so seldom far from your thoughts. He is a young man of letters twice the characters of the alphabet.

Now... 'Hilary, her Bishop Strachan intern, was away for the day—something about a sale at Dolce & Gabbana.' No one, but no one, would have sited this as an incidental segue in the narrative...but Charles makes it voluminous, it adds weight—taking something that is nothing and giving it bulk.

What?: 'opened their purses and reached in deeply at her urging.' Don't you know how melodic that line sounds? The harmony is symphonic... and these are just the little things: 'they dutifully trawled their Judith Leibers' ...just stop now! If I could be inside your mind, I would give up my left, cork ball that keeps me side-stroking when I'm attempting the Australian crawl. 'It makes you smile.'

And on: 'Sometimes they confined their pride—in a bid for reconsidered modesty' Who the-fuck-else could come up with a line like this? I love every inch of this yarn you have forged...'link by link, yard by

yard.' Nove is nine in Italian and 69 is a numerical pseudo Kama Sutra position...so what is it. Who other than 'Muffy' would have bought 'Frosty'?

While Virginia's little prank could stand alone as a delightful short story, Mr. Pinch treats us to a mystical, supra-natural, serendipitous, split-screen segue-epilogue that curled my toes. As he invites us into the world of Andy, Ethel and the memory of Albert, reminiscent of Pinteresque paintbrush patter, with fewer pauses and more twists. It is wondrous retreat to read a conceit, that soars so far beyond ones wheelhouse—don't let me spoil it for you...

HURON, TWICE

By Charles Pinch

For Frances, over and over

1.

No one in the thrift shop understood it. It took a practiced eye. But Virginia understood it the minute she laid her practiced eyes on it. It veritably jumped out at her.

She raised a manicured nail to her chin and studied the ensemble that had been placed in front of a shelf of toasters, lamps and other dreadful commonplaces. It was made from two pieces of plywood. One piece had been shaped into a large snowman. He wore a floppy hat, a scarf, had a carrot nose and a shovel rested against him. The handle of the shovel was made from a sawed off broomstick (good improvisation, Virginia noted), the scoop cut from a piece of sheet metal. It had been nailed over the wood and painted black then streaked, but lightly streaked (a sense of 'where to draw the line', she observed with great satisfaction) with gold radiator paint, a substance she ordinarily considered yucky. He stood beside a sleigh, set on its end, fashioned from a second piece of plywood. In front of the sleigh was a smaller snowman, a little lump snowman that reminded Virginia of Caspar the friendly ghost or

the Pillsbury doughboy. Both the little and big snowman wore Christmas-y grins painted like pieces of coal and had coal painted eyes. The big one wore a jacket and they both wore scarves. But what made it, what lifted it into realm of 'pure folk art' in Virginia's practiced eyes, was that the jacket, scarves and the boards of the sleigh, were painted as tartan. Tartan! When it would be so much easier to just cover the surfaces with flat color—red, green, blue. It was a tartan almost good enough to make her ask 'now what clan is that?' Stars painted with the despised gold had been sketched over the plaid and areas of the ensemble had been sprinkled with glitter. Oh and the sleigh. There was a pull cord on the sleigh made from shoelaces!

She leaned forward for a better look, gloated at it with love, reached out and drew it close. There was a price sticker on the back. Four dollars. What? Surely, they're kidding. Forty maybe...even for people as naïve as those employed by the thrift shop—surely they must see *something* here? But no. It was four. Four dollars.

There were chuckles when Virginia set it down on the counter. A girl who was the reason behind weight loss clinics and why some boys aspire to be plastic surgeons, jiggled like jelly.

'Ho, ho, ho! Getting ready for Christmas are you?'

'No,' Virginia returned with cool gravity.

A customer behind Virginia smiled when she glimpsed her 'find', a patronizing, sympathetic even pitying smile. Virginia raised a patrician eyebrow. The public, she comforted herself with the thought, had *sooo* much to learn.

She placed the paid for artwork in the trunk of her BMW and drove to her gallery with one foot on the pedal and one foot on a cloud. Hilary, her Bishop Strachan intern, was away for the day—something about a sale at Dolce & Gabbana. And Virginia, after closing the door, was alone.

She set the ensemble down on a table where she could re-evaluate it at eye level. Truly wonderful! A spectacular find! A minor—minor?—masterpiece of folk art. And folk art, if she need remind you—and she was always reminding somebody—was the hot commodity in today’s art market. Women with much more money than she and clamoring to be labeled sophisticated opened their purses and reached in deeply at her urging. They bought rusty weathervanes and plunked them onto Louis commodes. They tittered over century old hand-sewn rag dolls and placed them maternally on fauteuils. A brass bucket, whacked together by a village smith, was just as good as a Sevres *cache-pot*, even if it *had* been owned by Marie-Antoinette. They ooed, they awed, they dutifully trawled their Judith Leibers. They competed against each other. Numbers rolled steadily into Virginia’s bank account, like numbers spinning in a slot machine window.

‘Now, darling,’ she would purr, ‘good folk art is always naïve but not all naïve art is good folk art.’

‘How do I tell if it’s good?’

‘Charm, darling, charm. Charm and feeling. It is not only naïve it is *charmingly* naïve and it is heartfelt. It makes you smile. It makes you love the poor soul who crafted it. It makes you want to protect it. And most of all’—and this is where her eyes harden just a fraction—‘it makes you want to *own* it.’

And this ensemble had everything. Everything except—a signature. Virginia had spent twenty minutes going over every centimeter with a magnifying glass. Usually the amateur behind such a work was so genuinely proud of his creation that he could not even think about leaving it unsigned. The world must know! And a signature certainly helped in the marketplace. Think Grandma Moses. Think Edward Hicks. Sometimes they confined their pride—in a bid for reconsidered modesty—to a few cryptic initials on the stretcher, but more often it was signed in large on the front, easily seen and lauded.

Virginia took a step backwards. She frowned. Unsigned works of quality could still command a handsome sum but a work such as 'Frosty and Son', the title she had just minutes before bestowed upon it, really demanded a signature. A signature would be expected. It *needed* a signature.

Virginia's first choice was a felt tip marker, black suitably, but no. She would go for subtlety, for guile over braggadocio. It would make her artist that much more enigmatic: a real fellow (and it was a fellow, you understand, not a girl, on this she was firm) the collector would want to know about. A fellow to provoke one's curiosity. A fellow cloaked in mystery. Good. It will be pencil. Turning the ensemble upside down she began to write—a name she'd just chosen—when an idea occurred to her. Instead of writing the signature as one line...why not? She wrote 'A.' (For Albert, Arthur, Andrew, take your pick—Hilary could spend fruitless hours trying to track it down) in the top left corner of the plywood hat. In the top right corner she wrote HURON. That was the title of the naïve painting above her head, well, actually *Huron Village, 1844*. Good. Now for that folksy touch. What a professional, agented artist would not do. PARLIAMENT STREET. HAMILTON, CANADA. The first on the lower right. The second on the lower left. It was a sly touch to leave out the house number. And even slyer to make them guess which Hamilton. Hamilton, Ontario? Hamilton, British Columbia? Oh yes and the date. He would certainly date it. Well, Virginia pondered, raising that manicured nail to her chin again, Easter's out. He might of course have got the idea as early as Thanksgiving and set about to give himself plenty of time. But she thought November better. November was much more likely. By the end of that month who wasn't thinking about Christmas and snowmen? So NOVE. (She liked the touch of the misspelled abbreviation.) 1969.

The next day when Hilary returned in smart D & G, Virginia placed the ensemble in her gallery window. The same day, she sold it. Business, no matter what business, is about profit. Virginia had bought 'Frosty and Son' for four dollars. Virginia sold 'Frosty and Son' for four thousand dollars. (Less a ten percent loyalty discount—Muffy was such a *good* customer.) Profit.

2.

'Did you not hear, Andy?'

'Hear what, lovey?'

'Why Albert's snowman you made?'

'What about it?'

'It's on the news, Andy. It sold in a Toronto auction and somebody bought it for twenty thousand dollars!'

'What! My snowman?'

'Yes, Andy.'

'How do they know it was mine?'

'You signed it. They said your name.'

'I don't remember. Albert's snowman!'

'Yes, Andy. Imagine!' And after just the teeniest pause she let go, this buxom woman of British extraction and Canadian nationality, with her hands red from laundry and hair that never obeyed, with the teeniest sigh of regret. 'What we could have done with that...'

'No, Ethel. It was not to be. It was not to be, Ethel. It was not to be.'

Quiet clearly, Andrew Huron, recalled the day in 1969 when he had carried the ensemble, which Albert had dubbed 'Frosty and Son' to the curbside. It involved his walking from the garage to the street, a

short walk and at the same time, the longest walk of his life. It was the longest, longest, longest walk of his life and it was a journey from which he would never quite find his way back. He set the ensemble on the curbside. 'Well, then, goodbye. Goodbye, I'll say.'

'You could plead with Albert,' Andy would tell those who listened. 'But it would make no use. His mind was made up.'

'He wasn't so much stubborn,' his mother put in, 'as decisive.'

'That's it, Ethel. Decisive. Albert was decisive. And I said, Oh, Albert, you mustn't go. I've had the most terrible dream. You'll not come back, lad. You'll go off to fight and you'll not come back, son.'

'Oh, Dad,' he laughed. 'What a silly you are! It's a chance we take, Dad. It's something we do, Dad.'

'Aye, Albert. Don't go.'

'It was an American war, you see. We told him that. His father and me. But he said Canadians were going too.'

Thursday's dinner—since Albert departed Friday for Ottawa then on to Vietnam—was Sunday's joint.

'Our lad ate two platefuls, didn't he, mother? And pudding. I think he had three helpings!'

'It was three helpings, right, Andy. I made custard for it—Bird's—and it was like Albert was eating for his whole regiment—though he hadn't left yet. He had three helpings and like his father says two platefuls of beef. I made tatties and neeps. Oh, Albert loved his tatties.'

'When we learned the news, when we got the call and then the official letter that followed, I asked myself, is a dream not just a prophecy? Is it not? He spent the last hours with Ginny. They were to be married. They'd picked out a ring at Stafford's and Albert was saving for it.'

'He was good at saving.'

'The soldiers that shot him and the others dragged him away. They never found his body. He's over there somewhere but we know there is no finding him. That there's some corner of a foreign field that is forever Canada. I begged him not to go. I told you that, didn't I? Oh, I begged him. I should have got down on my knees.'

'You did all, Andy. Our Albert was a soldier. We don't see Ginny at all now. She married a lawyer soon after and we didn't see much of her after that. I have a picture of her though. And we have pictures of Albert and Ginny.'

'I don't know if I ever made it back from the curbside after leaving 'Frosty and Son' beside it. Well, you see, if you want the honest plain truth I simply couldn't look at it anymore. I've no regrets. It was too much Albert but in the wrong way. I didn't see Albert when I looked at it. I saw jungle. I saw Vietcong. I didn't see Albert. And I begged him, you know. I begged him not to go.'

'I don't make custard now.'

'We sold the house on Parliament soon after. November, I think it was.'

'Aye. It was November, Andy.'

'We moved away from Hamilton.'

'We moved here to get away from Hamilton.'

'Sometimes I can't remember what Hamilton. Isn't that a laugh?'

'What he means is Hamilton, Ontario or Hamilton, British Columbia.'

'We moved away from Hamilton in November 69 after we sold the house on Parliament Street.'

'That's right. We moved here to get away from Hamilton. We had to get away, understand.'

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Most of the stories I write come to me suddenly, the proverbial out of the blue thing. I think about them for a while, then put them away, do other junk, usually forget about them. Then suddenly, too often in the middle of the night, the story is 'ready' and wakes me to be written. I've learned through experience not to roll over and go back to sleep. If I do, it's gone in the morning. So I move the cat, get up, stagger into my den and switch on the computer. But most of the time I can't wait for it and just sit down and write the story in long hand, which was the case with 'Huron, Twice'. This is the first and only draft. I generally don't do drafts—if things slow down during the writing, become difficult or don't seem to be working then I know it's not ready and just put it away again. Some stories come back, some don't. I don't recommend this approach but it works for me. (And it's the reason I will never write a novel because they can't be realized this way.) Everything comes out in a rush and I've got like such major writer's cramp at the end of it I can't jerk off for a week. Everyone who has read this story sees something different in it. The thing that intrigues me about it is how did Virginia's random information selections square with Andy's name, address and year...especially when he recalls he didn't remember signing 'Frosty'? 'Voice' is something that intrigues me and I had fun with these two—they are so much the opposite of each other. I actually saw 'Frosty' in a thrift store but there was no Virginia present. The Andy part came to me when I had dinner at a friend's and there was custard for dessert. It is strange how little details of life experience will infiltrate the creative faculty. This story was originally published by The Wild Quarterly.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Along with Tom Ball, I am the co-founder of and senior editor at Fleas On The Dog. I speak English and Italian. As to the rest I guess I could say: Natus est. Ego viventem. Et non morieris. Vivo vicino a Toronto con il mio amichetto, Niccolo', che e' anche uno scrittore. Come potete vedere dagli apostrofi non ho una tastiera italiana.*

EDITOR'S BIO: *Merrill Elizabeth Gray's writing has appeared in Grain The Journal of Eclectic Writing, Temenos Press, Silver Birch Press, Birds we pile loosely, S/Tick, Blue Skies Poetry, Worth Architectural Magazine, Crazy Pineapple Press, Fieldstone Review, Four Ties Lit Review, Spring vol viii, Misfitmagazine, Sugar Mule Literary Magazine, CBC Canada writes Stranger than Fiction and Joy, Interrupted an anthology on motherhood and loss. Her CNF *Ground State* was published in Issue 5.*

2ND EDITOR'S BIO: *Tracy Sterns (no relation to Howard) is a nongendered person who was fired from a meat packing facility when too many sausages went missing. It met the author of Huron Twice during a police raid in Toronto. They remain acquaintances although Charles usually forgets to introduce it to his friends. There's a rumour (Cdn. sp) going around it's about to disappear without a trace. Favourite (Cdn. sp) authors include William S. Burroughs, Albert Camus, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Danielle Steele (who it reads for style). It's story Ball Caps and Coffee Mugs was published in Issue 2.*

