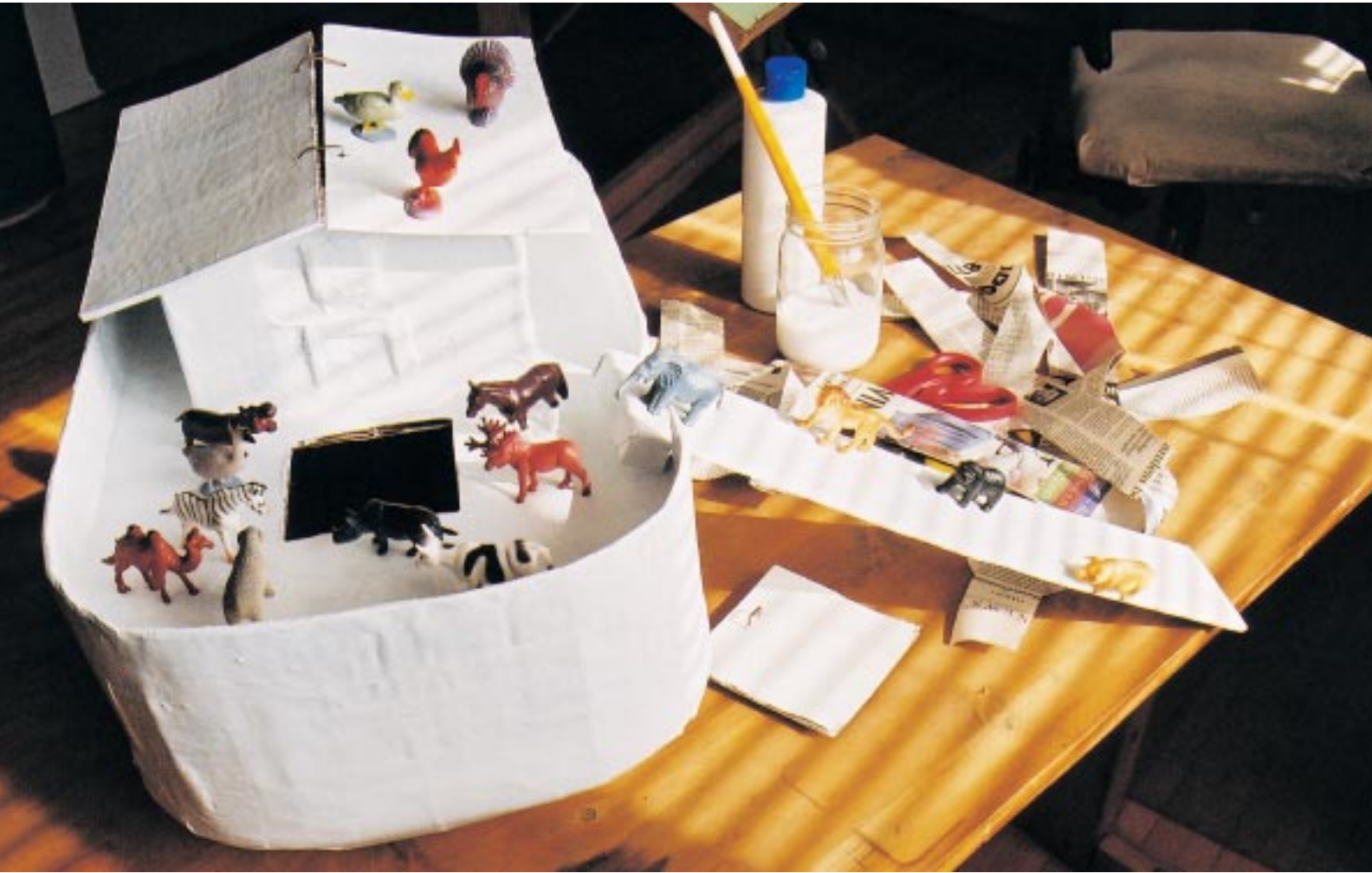


Among the Chosen

by Raymond Gariépy



BEYOND THE DARKNESS, my father busily indulges the nocturnal aspect of his character that is ungraceful, unshaven and unhurried. He is residing contentedly within the kitchen's scoured dominion, which is the unending hallmark of my parents' meticulous fury. It is two in the morning of the day that seems determined never to arrive as I lie awake planting the movements of his body in my mind. And it is my father's body that sways in unison to the "grau, grau...grau, grau" of the

toad nestled in the tall grass beside our cottage.

There is his movement: a steady combination of hands governing a knife's tip against the surface of a flattened cardboard box. Set against the coarse surface of the box, my father fixes the ruler's edge to the line he has drawn and deftly scores the surface, then returns to cut, determined that the cardboard will divide in half.

I believe he is now seated as he always sits, on the very edge of his chair, body tipped forward, legs tightly

crossed, his weight portioned to the upraised ball of one foot. Poised in such an awkward manner, he forces from himself cuts and separations, renders them more acute and more vulnerable, yet precise, as he bears down along the pencil outline of a ship's hull. He hesitates as he gathers the courage to cut. I listen, waiting for him to hum a song as he contemplates his handiwork. He settles back, impulsively jabs the blade's tip into the wooden tabletop. Will he sing tonight?

He is quiet, listening to the vague murmur of his heart trembling in his chest. He imagines flinging each beat from his body, skipping them each in turn like small stones across the water.

HE WAS REMINDED of this image—the snap of the wrist, the trajectory of heart beats—earlier that day as he flicked exhausted Bride Underwing moths to the gulls, contemplating the ceremony of the insects' marriage flight while casually grinding their scent-bearing hairs into his fingertips. Noticing the various positions of surrender adopted by the insects, he observed the absence of contemplation, selection or gratitude as the birds glided down and glutted their beaks.

He considers the outcome of the next pencil line and whether it will come clean, then draws himself up straight and repositions the ruler. The very simplicity of the task makes it all the more difficult as he verifies the pencil marks and gently shifts the metal ruler until he is satisfied with its placement. There is a sense of fulfillment as he initiates the second cut, not timidly and not with overbearing insistence, but decisively.

My father is building me a *papier mâché* ark in the kitchen of our cottage.

Though he has carefully cut the pieces for the hull and assembled them, the keel refuses to hold true and bulges noticeably, and though he tries in vain to tame the curve to match the mathematical precision of his steadfast plans, the hull's convexity persists. "It is not a racing boat," he mutters to himself, as though justifying his inability to engineer to no one in particular. "No!" he announces sharply. "The original was massive and cumbersome, constructed from cypress and reeds and smeared with coats of tenacious pitch. It was a lumbering salvage ship, not intended to flaunt wealth or gaudy elegance."

There is ritual: the monotonous soaking of strips ripped from the local newspaper in flour paste. This work continues until the first smudge of dawn when my ear is beckoned by the sound of his whistling as he dips each strip into the paste then squeezes the excess between his fingers. In turn, each strip is grazed over by his fingers, then methodically covered again with a second and a third layer. He shapes the paper, mentally gauges the angle at which the waves will unceasingly curse the beach. He adopts the rhythm of the waters rushing inland and works the pull and push of the waves' constant bombardment into the paper and paste. "And where are the living creatures who bound or belly-pull across the flooding

plains or who fly through unchecked waters falling from the sky? And the righteous one, the blameless one and his party of chosen few who will inhabit this vessel and tend its cargo... *where* are they?"

My father invades my room. He elbows about beneath my bed for the elephant, who snorts and bellows in appreciation of the peanuts that he has been told grow in the cavities of my ears; for the inseparable zebra pair, who are hopelessly in love; and for the outrageously coloured plastic dinosaurs, who were made in a toy factory in China. My father does not sense that I'm awake; he is too preoccupied thrashing about for the mournful tapir with the drooping snout. "So many of them are unpaired," he



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whines. We will match them up later and accept substitutions for those without mates, an improbable and comical mixing up of reptiles with mammals, birds with insects. "Yet," he ponders aloud, "imagine the outcome if encouraged to breed freely in the stalls of the ark, think about the potential—the upsetting of the great code of creation." This thought is matched by my imagination, and I give in to my father's legion of eccentric theories.

He twirls a brush loaded with white paint that he will apply to the boat. His foot is turned inward against the bone and the natural angle of the bone. His back is rounded by the late hour and by the trawling of his body through the sleep-imprisoned cottage. He is silent, concentrating on his endeavour. The craft glistens. He is tempted to leave it this way: white, unadulterated. He imagines the mayhem within: the animals stubborn, unwillingly pressed one against the other in the low-vaulted hull, defying the logic of placement, breathing in the fearful smells of other terrified creatures and preda-

tors meeting prey. He smells his fingers. They seem to bear the scent of slippery animal slobber, the stink of dirty fur, the musty smell of excrement-coated hooves and the gored flesh of small and stupid animals foolish enough to get underfoot.

He is contemplating the animals' confinement and why confinement and overcrowding encourage violence. He opens a door in the side of the ark and stuffs more ill-humoured animals into the boat's belly while mimicking their sounds in one breath then overriding their murmurs, moos and grunts with shouts to be silent in the next breath. The door is closed on them. Now he rattles the boat, lifts it, dips it forward through churning swells and the fierce heaven-sent storm. He flicks on and off the kitchen light as the ark hurtles, as my father stomps the floor with his bare feet. Boom! Boom! Boom! This is his thunder, a resounding exclamation that falters just beneath the floorboards and startles the toad's spongy mass deeper into the dew heavy grasses lying



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uncut beside the cottage. My father sounds off the elements, bullies the ark in time to the drumming of his fingers against the tabletop. “You want it, don’t you?” Mouth, teeth and spit chew air, become his great fury. “You want more? I’ll give you more!” he bellows. He turns on the sink’s taps, full force. More thunder. The hull cleaves water, divides water’s resistance in two. A hurricane of incantations and spume lashes the ark. He is in my room again, brandishing the ship above my head, shaking it in my face and down my chest and legs. He dances dizzily around my room, pivots, vaults and bends in the wake of his creation. The animals fall out, some hang by their hooves and paws, others by their necks and wings. They are forced to the air in whinnies and stammers as he calls to Noah and Noah’s God, who grieves and laments the destruction of His self-imagined artistry. “Help!” my father shouts. “Something is wrong.

Batten down the hatches. The livestock are drowning!” The ship is battered by this inexhaustible force that lashes and wails, that fears the loss of these creatures heaped and compressed within the hull. Gradually the sounds recede. There is a sullen calm. My father is humming a sea shanty; his voice embossed on my thoughts propels me through darkening blue hues until night is drained through my body.

II

MID-AFTERNOON. After my nap. My father and I walk hand in hand along the beach. My mother tans herself among the bleached logs strewn along the beach. I’m conscious of her presence and turn to wave. She is watching me, smiles and offers an exaggerated salute.

My father surveys the beach and considers its slope. As he selects a site between an outcropping of rock, he tells me about an island in the Philippines where sea gypsies bury their dead and place ornate soul-bearing canoes on the shallow, waterlogged graves.

He finds us a sunny spot on the beach where I dig a hole. Into this hollow we place the promise of our salvation. It is now my turn to line up the animals and guide them up the ramp two by two before enclosing them in the dank silence of the hull. He calls me to his side and pulls me close as he blocks the sun with his body. I smell sunlight on his skin and the familiar odor of sun-baked sweat. We watch the water fill the hole.

On the beach, thousands of fragments: shrapnel, fallout from the gulls’ gleeful slaughter of shelled creatures. The beach emerges in tawny specks. A cluster of fishing and pleasure craft shuffles lazily. The air reeks of rotting weeds, fish and death. A fisherman hunches against the rawness of his sunburnt back. He pulls a lake trout from a metal tub filled with water, slams the fish down hard on the dock and pulls a knife from its sheath. He then places a finger and thumb on either side of the upturned, still-living fish and quickly slices it open, spreads the belly wide, slashes at red gobs of flesh and webs of venous tissue, pares the intestines, stomach, heart and roe. A clump of whitish eggs lies glistening on the beach as the man opens another fish, digs with the skinny blade thrust between his fingers and separates the mass from the cavity. He hovers as the blade chants, scrapes and lifts.

The fisherman scoops out viscera with his knife tip. Countless cycles instantly denied by hook and by slice. A group of young children press eagerly in toward his hunching as he flings the guts into the air. The sky turns white with gulls, whose mad dinnertime chatter fills every cranny of sky. Further up the beach, away from the children, my mother rolls onto her stomach and unfastens her bathing suit top.

He pulls another fish from the tub, grasps its head in his hands and points it at the children, who press inward. The fisherman squeezes hard, his body strains as his face turns deep red. The fish’s eyes pop from their sockets.

The man laughs aloud as the children turn and flee.

As my father and I watch, our vessel is lifted free by the water. I stand and push on the boat with a long, crooked stick. In and out. Away. The ark is pushed back ashore. "It keeps coming back!" I cry. My father urges me on, "Push harder. Away from the shore. That's it! Get it out. That's a boy!" He watches me watching my animals fall over the side while still others, pinned and trounced within the hull, cry out in anguish. Father rolls up his pants and wades out to retrieve the creatures. He replaces them one by one on the deck and guides the boat through the weeds and wave-swept crowns of foam-green rocks.

I am standing in knee-deep oceans watching a large boat pass. It is the land, not the boat, that moves. The heat drones and drums against my body. I stand in the nervous green, slosh through weeds clinging to the water's surface. I am filled with disobedience.

"WE NEED A GUIDE," my father shouts, "you be our navigator." He is pushing the boat out into waist-deep water. How much deeper must he go before he is content? He slips on a rock and goes under. I lose sight of him. "Daddy! Daddy!" I scream. He surfaces, grasps the boat and turns toward shore pulling viscous tails of paint. "The paint was water soluble," he apologizes. "How was I to know?" A frill of paint scum rings his bare chest, a pitiful brown-red wreath of gunk. He holds the boat in one hand, my drowned animals in the other. "The ark is disintegrating," he offers beneath his breath, sheepish at having failed to engineer a seaworthy craft. But then he smiles his usual grin, tosses back his head in laughter and repositions the frail craft among the rocks. "Now, you are the raven," he says, picking a sand flea from his neck. "Fly away to dry land."

I swoop, dive, then return, running as fast as I can across the hot sand. "Nothing?" he asks.

Determined, we try again, this time he carries me on his hip as we race the boat out. "We aren't on board," he yells. "Wait for us! Taxi! We aren't among the chosen." Though he holds me tightly, I am jolted up and down and jabbed by his hip grinding against my crotch as we descend into the water and deepen our bond. The sting of cold water splatters our sun-burnished limbs. Our laughter pounces across the surface of the lake like a well-sprung cat and pounds the ark out of sight. Mere traces of paper, paint and livestock remain. As he reaches down and pulls up the sodden ark, my face touches the wet, tastes the fishy-glistening swirls. "My animals," I bleat. "They're all right. Don't worry, I have them," he says reassuringly.

We kneel side by side in the sand, whispering and preparing to leave impressions of our bodies on the threshold of beach. I am first. I lie flat, immobilized by his cautions as he gently packs the sand along the edge of my body, then carefully lifts me out. The crater is undisturbed and holds the imprint—a faint suggestion of my

body. Now his turn. As I press the sand, I see him swallow and watch his Adam's apple shudder. He winks and continues to direct me. We stand clear, holding the sun to our backs. The low ridges begin to crumble as the grains roll white through the parched air. Here are my shoulders, my head, arms and hands, the elastic waistband of my swimming trunks, here are my legs and heels. My fossil print.

I sit between his legs, my back pressed against his chest. "You are now the dove, the one who finds dry land. Though not the first time," he says softly into my ear.

My father kneels in the shadows of beached logs. He speaks in half measures, gently strokes each phrase as I return unnoticed to his side. "Shall I tell you," he begins, "about this place where the water is clear, warm and filled with creatures real and imagined? Who shall name them, you or I? When you are older, will I remember to tell you about the thickness of the heat that rises in shivers from

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the beach and rinses our bodies in unseen wavelets? Or will I ever be able to tell you about this episode of love embedded in the architecture of our salvage vessel?"

He places my hand within his and steers me to the sand casts of our bodies. Gently he presses my hands down. "These are the skeletons of the two who witnessed the Deluge," he whispers gravely, "the typography of survivors."

III

IN A DARKENING ROOM my father rubs the sweat from my head and back, scrapes away the hard ridges, massages away the day's crust of activity and fatigue. We are of the same skin. He rubs the salt lines from my body. Rubs the silt and skin into small, dry balls.

In the darkness a man moves from room to room speaking gibberish: the unpronounceable mumblings of sleeping others. He moves freely from shore to distant shore and back again. My father compiles images of all those who surround him, of all those who occupy him. He will bring us together during the dark passage of this night.

I am standing distanced from the continents, governed by trembling reeds that shift gently as the water slides away from shore. I am filled with curiosity as I step across the creeping rim of water, as my father slips under the sheet line into the opening up of my mother's body.

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