

WET

Humidity hangs like a presence about the graveside. Beth tightens her scarf over her ears in resistance to the probing dampness, and turns her collar against it, but the seeping moisture beads up on her face. Though the clods of earth are still freshly turned, her eyes remain dry; she feels neither grief, nor remorse, nor even relief at being home again. The stone hasn't been set yet. Of course, who else is left to have chosen an epitaph? The other mound in the family plot is settled and long ago grassed over.

Beth turns toward her pick-up, parked beneath cedars whose branches have snagged wisps of the mist. Franklin is standing beside her on the sodden turf, staring at her with his almond-slanty eyes, his jaw slack. At least he doesn't drool anymore, she thinks, glancing over at him. It only took Dad the last ten years to teach him that.

"He said Beth was coming to take care of me."

"I am Beth." Franklin doesn't recognize her bleached hair and freckled skin, the aging of a decade of prairie sun. His memory doesn't work like a normal person's, lucky for him.

"Wanna see the pond?" He childishly tugs at her hand though he towers above her now, his thick, clammy fingers grasping at hers with rushed insistence, a boy in a young man's body. "The pond looks nice when it's foggy. Let's go to the pond."

"Maybe later, Franklin." The phrase slips out of her mouth in a habit oft-repeated, long-forgotten. He still loves that pond, then, the way she had loved it once. Beth knows she can put him off indefinitely with that "maybe later." Maybe never.

No one bothers Beth and Franklin at the house, although a faceless neighbour leaves a casserole in the porch, and the social services worker phones to check on Franklin. So for the

next two days, Beth packs up her father's few possessions, and sorts through the garden market accounts, and wonders that he'd ever stayed on the Island. She'd asked him about that, the one time she'd called.

“Thought you'd be able to find us easier this way, Beth, if you wanted to come back home.” She hadn't.

For two days, she sorts and wonders. She folds and stacks Dad's old clothes which are too small for Franklin, flushes away the unused blood pressure pills, and purges the cupboards of ashtrays. She is seeking vestiges.

Franklin bumps aimlessly from livingroom to kitchen, mumbling to himself about when his sister will come back, like Dad promised, until she sends him out to do chores. Feed the few chickens, sort the seed potatoes for rot, check for holes in the irrigation hoses. Beth huddles in the house and cranks up the thermostat, trying to wring the late summer dampness from the rooms, wishing for her prairie wind.

Her first experience of that wind had brought such relief. The east-bound Greyhound had dropped her, still a teen, at Maple Creek on a howling, dry August day. She was running from the sticky closeness of isolated life with a father scrabbling to feed his dependents, from the stickiness of a needy brother.

Vancouver had served to cover her traces for a few weeks, but there she could still hear the gulls screeching. And the rain! Constant drizzle shrouded her mood. A tiny ad in the Calgary Sun's "Help Wanted" wanted help with fencing a Saskatchewan provincial community pasture--no experience necessary. The cows frightened her at first, until she realized their snotty snouts were only curious, not demanding, and she had stayed, and learned to fence, and finally had phoned home.

“Beth, they pinned up missing person posters at gas stations all along the Number One.”

“I left a note, Dad.” Just like Mom.

“Franklin misses you.”

“You never told me I could get away from the wet.”

The prairie wind had weathered her skin and her soul, had evaporated the memories of the farm and the gardens and the dripping of her little brother’s nose, which she was responsible for wiping dry.

“Blow,” she’d order. He’d blink uncomprehendingly up at her, long past the age when he should be wiping his own nose. Even then, Beth suspected that it wasn’t Franklin’s handicap which caused Mother’s rejection, but the spark of life in him--the flash of vulnerability in his eyes, the spring of hope at being touched, the tears. When he finally learned to talk, he would pester her daily to take him along to high school instead of dropping him off at the elementary gates with the teacher’s aide. He would tempt her to take him down to the pond on weekends.

“C’mon, Beth. Let’s make a picnic again. You can teach me to swim.” Even in the dead of that last winter, when a thin crust would be forming over the surface and the weeping willow’s hoary mane would sparkle with jewelled frost, and the breath would hover, she’d resist with excuses. She’d stopped going down by herself, even, for the risk of falling into her own sweet memories, or the bitter one. A girl could drown in those memories.

She thought the pond was the ocean at his age, at eight, back when she was still the only child of older parents. They hadn’t taken her to the seashore--too busy eking out their backwoods existence. The pond was the center of her life. Mists rose from it on cool summer mornings, and dew clung to the grasses on its banks. Beth’s feet were always wet.

“Don’t go past your knees, now,” her father would warn. “The bottom’s marshy.”

Mother, rousing momentarily out of self-absorption, would pry, “What is so fascinating down there, Beth?” She didn’t want an answer.

The best part was the cool, shady pool behind the willow’s summer branches, a veiled sanctuary. She would pole over to that side of the water, and part the leafy curtain like an Amazon explorer, to enter the hushed, moist green refuge. It was there, as a girl, that she would lie, belly-to-raft, watching the teeming minnows dart, the water beetles skitter across the surface. It was there, as a young teen, that she would lean against the old, rugged bark with a book of ancient poetry, pondering philosophies while little Franklin dabbled in the shallows.

The banging of the door catches her attention, and Beth jerks her head up quickly from the papers on the table, the way she used to when Dad would come back in after supper, homework time.

“Wet out there tonight,” he used to say, shaking the rain from his jacket before hanging it behind the door. “Franklin out with his chickens?”

“He thinks they’re pets, Dad.” It was embarrassing.

This time, of course, it isn’t Dad at the door. Only Franklin. He’ll never be quite able to manage on his own--it’s funny that he hasn’t drowned himself yet. Signing the papers for the group home is really the only thing to do. They’d discussed it, in that one phone call, when she’d made it plain that she wouldn’t be coming back. Too damp.

“Dad, the shelter would be the best place for him. He’d be with his own kind.”

“He calls *you* his own kind.”

The quiet rebuff had stung behind Beth’s eyes. It stings now. He doesn’t even recognize me, she thinks defensively. He keeps wondering when his sister is coming home again.

The gentle, soaking rain continues, keeping Beth indoors. It patters on the thin roof and spatters on the kitchen windowpane, drop joining endless drop in dreary rivulets that fill the eavestroughing. Beth recalls the childhood days with her nose pressed up against that window, breathing vapour onto the glass and wondering why the sky was weeping. West Coast rains are enveloping, Beth thinks. They creep up around you like the rising of flood waters, the scent of mildew. She can't recall, now, ever having really experienced a thunderstorm as a child--at least, not like the thunderstorms of the prairies.

There is nothing subtle about the prairie sky, as she'd been reminded less than a week ago.

Miles of barbed wire fence sketched a line across the undulating Saskatchewan sandhills, scraped smooth by ancient glaciers whose waters had long since receded. Beth kicked her way through the sparse, brittle grass, from post to post, checking for dry rot. She tasted the gritty film on her lips, the mortal remains of a dried-up slough. The wide bowl of sky, tipped upside down over the arid grazing land, had blazed with heat all afternoon, cooking up weather. With only a mile left to go on this pasture, Beth ignored the storm building in the west, ignored the rub of purple-black on the translucent sky, the rumbling, trumpeting announcement of its far-off approach a prophetic voice calling out in the desert. She had worked furiously with the post hole digger, jabbing it into the ground, scooping out a space which caved in again almost as quickly with the fine, running sand. No moisture there but the dripping of her sweat as she pounded in staples to hold the barbed wire.

How she could sweat! She flung from her forehead salty drops recycled through her body to return to the dead seabed. The thirsty wind, with its long, hot sighing, its papery rustling through the sagebrush, snatched the moisture from her neck. She recalled the hothouse humidity

of the Island, as she recalled it every time she ran for shelter from the prairie storms. There, in her coastal childhood, she'd been so constantly, so thoroughly wet. No longer. She had dried up from the inside out. True, she still sweated, she spat, she got rid of her daily water. But now she made sure the generative moisture never passed through her soul along the way. She never cried.

Under the blistering sun, with hands calloused in their leather work gloves, and with back bent in ferocious labour, the woman worked, stretching wire, battering wood, deliberately disregarding the encroaching drama in the sky. She focused eyes and mind on her work at hand, dragging a new pole over, jamming it into the ground and kicking back in the sand to fill the hole. She hammered the staples in with the back of her fencing pliers, internally chanting the distance between each lightning flash and its peal of thunder. . . *one blue mountain, two blue mountain*. And she visualized. She saw the invisible wind sweep out of the heavens and hover over the face of the ocean a thousand kilometers away. She saw it reaping its crop of humidity, gathering, sucking moisture high up into itself, and rushing toward the Rockies. She saw the great, turbulent begetting, the forming of the clouds, the incarnational condensation of celestial waters. And now, she knew, would come the procession, when the eternal transcendent wetness, made visible, would wet.

Maybe she wanted to defy the storm, this time, to struggle beneath its ominous colour and cracking thunder as if she didn't care. And where was it that could she go from its wetness? Where could she flee from its presence? But finally, she could not ignore it any longer, could not run to hide this time, but only stand in awe beneath the great unfurling of the sky--the great disclosing. She stood beneath the billowing clouds as sheets of blowing torrents sluiced down from the pregnant sky, like the breaking of fetal waters. It issued forth precipitation to satiate

thirsty deserts, to replenish turbulent rivers, to trickle in little rivulets down the windowpane of a forgotten family house a half-lifetime away.

That last prairie thunderstorm convinced her there was a God. She feared the rain.

“I love the rain,” Franklin declares, his own grown nose pressed now against the windowpane. “Beth took me to the pond, sometimes, in the rain. Let’s go to the pond.”

“Franklin, it’s me. I’m your sister, Beth.” His lack of recognition is eroding her.

“She let me pick bullrushes from the edge. She told me not to go past my knees.” He is speaking earnestly now, in her direction, and she finds herself holding her breath. She doesn’t want to hear this. “We loved the tree.”

Stop, she thinks. Stop telling me. I can’t bear it.

“Stop.”

Franklin blinks. He turns, impenetrable again, back to the steamy window.

“We’ll go tomorrow,” Beth says, resigned.

On the third day the mists rise again. The two trudge the half-mile down to the pond wearing patched black and red rubber boots. Franklin grips a greasy paper bag lunch, and struggles on ahead of Beth, showing her the path as he’d done the last time they’d come together, the last time she’d come.

“It’s this way,” he points excitedly.

It was with that same eagerness that she had approached the pond, a decade ago. Now, she dreads it. Dreads it.

“We’re almost there. I can see the tree.”

Can it have been only last week, the prairie thunderstorm? The day she had returned to the ranch yard to find the note tacked to the trailer door with its ink splotched and running from the rain? *Family crisis--call home.*

“I love the pond.”

Finally, they had tracked her down to notify her of her obligations, too late for Dad’s funeral.

“Beth loved the pond.”

They come around by the back side, so they can get to the tree, opening the draping, dripping curtain of branches. Franklin sits down at its feet to open his lunch bag by the edge of the water, which is clear and green, its ripples casting soft light onto the shadowy tree bark. She stares into the water, into the reflection, giving up suddenly and sharply to turn, to run her hands up the trunk until she finds it.

The rusty nail, a mother’s height above the roots, is hammered in deeply. Ten years ago it had punctured a hole in Beth’s soul, and drained her dry. That day, she had found her mother’s note nailed to the tree, a grand, flourishing farce of self-sacrifice, a parody of crucifixion. *I’m sorry to do this to you, but I just can’t go on any longer. It’s for the best. I hope you’re old enough to understand--sixteen is old enough.* The ink of that note had become splotched and running from Beth’s tears, those last tears. The RCMP dredged up the body from the pond, that giver and taker of life.

She had been old enough to run, as her mother had run, from the dull, yearning gaze of a little boy thirsty for a mother’s touch. She lowers her gaze, now, to her grown, wet brother sitting on his haunches in the dappled and watery light. A drop falls onto his hand and he turns his face upward to see if it has shaken from the tree.

But she is crying, the water making its tributary again through her tear ducts, streaking her face, cascading off her chin, baptising him.

In a simple and wondering tone, Franklin says, “It’s you. You are Beth.”

THE END

INTERPRETATIVE THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY AND QUALIFICATION ON THE SHORT STORY, “WET”

I am no theologian, but the writing of my little story, “Wet,” has been a profitable exercise as I struggle to realize and apply biblical doctrines through the art of fiction. I am in awe of the many great writers of theologically rich literature who exemplify what is achievable. For example, Dante, through his *Divine Comedy* written a millennium after the Nicene Creed, proved his understanding of the foundational implications of the Trinity as a basic doctrine of God. He was evidently aware of the profound nature of the old debates, employing a vocabulary laden with references and allusions to the substantial unity and plurality of God—the Father as Creator, the Son as Begotten from eternity and essence of light, the Holy Ghost affiliated with loving action and procession.ⁱ Milton in *Paradise Lost* also used poetic fiction to beautifully explicate trinitarian doctrine, saying of the Son, “In him all the Father shone substantially expressed . . . Love without end.”ⁱⁱ Milton described the Son as “imbosom’d” in the Paternal Being while yet sitting at His right side as His equal.ⁱⁱⁱ The writings of G.K. Chesterton are equally delightful, spackled with biblical-sounding language hinting at a deeper mystery, with always a “spot of red” to bring the reader back to the historical fact of salvation. These writers encourage me to hold the scriptures not as some literary precedent or model for my own forays into writing but rather as

special revelation, the inspired basis and source of truth, the implicit “absent text” to which my writing must refer.

In the fourth century, Augustine of Hippo approved the writing of analogies as an exercise not in redefining truth but in causing contemplation in the reader, who can then apply “reason and intellect in order to understand and behold God.”^{iv} While I believe that God is self-revealing and cannot be seen by human reason and intellect alone, still I believe that creative expression can freshly explicate eternal truths. This is excuse enough to engage in the crafting of spiritually illustrative fiction, which satisfies the writer’s need to reflect and the reader’s need to be stimulated to thought. My purpose in writing “Wet,” then, was to re-analogize the doctrine of the three-in-oneness of the Trinity so as to restate the faith for today’s readers, with the practice of faith and the glory of God as my end goal.

In conjuring up “Wet,” I pictured God (Father, Son, Spirit) as the global water system, with the overarching, invisible canopy of Humidity begetting the visible condensation of Cloud from which proceeds Precipitation—three relationships, two missions, one endeavour. This immanent and transcendent God protects creation from the drying of the sun, but uses the “enemy” to effect evaporation, and the wind to draw up from the earth’s surface remnants of Itself back unto Itself, like unto like, in a type of resurrection in its flowing and ebbing, ever giving yet never decreasing. Water, as elemental to (and even generative of) human life, has as its essential activity the wetting of all it contacts, which is the necessary action or economy of its ontological reality. In “Wet,” God moves through His salvific action of condensation and precipitation to replenish the springs of the earth, to humidify the atmosphere, to moisturize the bodies of His people—His own Body. Whether the dry subject gets wet or not, the wetness exists in all its full essence, not dependent upon the eradication of dryness that it will eventually

achieve. My model of Trinity as Humidity/Cloud/Precipitation seems consistent with Augustine's analogies and his search for *vestigium trinitas* (vestiges of the Trinity), which find expression in his description of God reflected triunely in whom He loves (that is, wets), that which is loved (that is, wetted), and love itself (that is, the wetting).^v

The Athanasian Creed also supports the idea of wetting: "There is one form of Godhead, which is also in the Word, and one God the Father, existing in himself as he transcends all things, and manifest in the Son as he pervades all things, and in the Spirit as in him he acts all things through the Word."^{vi} The creed develops the idea of the three divine relations containing one another—a function easily seen in the picture of water.

The biblical action of God in the world includes much water imagery: the Creation, the truth-filled judgment and gracious preservation of the Flood, the thirst of His exodus people in the desert and their anticipation of deliverance through drought (physical and spiritual). God faithfully provides the seasons of rain, He alone controls the tempests (speaking to Job out of a storm, stilling the wind and the waves with a word), and it is by Him that Living Water flows out of the heavens and through the hearts of His people. Water is allusive of Christ's birth, baptism, and resurrection—and consequently of our own. In my story "Wet," the Divine Community of Humidity pours itself out upon the human community of siblings Beth (Hebrew name meaning *consecrated to God*) and Franklin (German, *free man*).

Of course, there is nothing new about using the picture of water as an analogy for the Trinity. For example, theologian Charles Ryrie suggested water as an illustration because of the way it retains its chemical activity whether in the state of solid, gas, or liquid; he also mentioned the "triple point" at which ice, steam, and liquid can coexist in equilibrium, when "all are water, yet distinct from each other."^{vii} In "Wet," I meant the Trinity to be described less by the physical

makeup of water than by the way water internally acts and interacts with its environs, causing change in relative humidity but not in itself as it proceeds through the global water cycle. The benefit of using a concrete image (such as water) over a relational image (such as family) for the Trinity is in the ability to manipulate the substance in attempting to explain circuminsession of the three; the drawback lies in its impersonal nature.

Five foundational elements of the Trinity can be summarized as the oneness of divine being, the three personal subsistences, the intertrinitarian fellowship, the administrative order within the three, and their distinctive but harmonious ministries.^{viii} In the conceptualization of “Wet,” I tried to portray each aspect. Oneness can be seen in the elemental unity of water in any form, the “closed system” ensuring no lessening of substance. *Perichoresis* (mutual interpenetration) might be seen in the simultaneous existence of gaseous humidity, visible cloud, and tangible rain. The administrative order is visual, with the stratosphere physically “higher” than the falling rain or spring-fed pond, yet the equality in substance of one over the other is not in question. Appropriation is modeled by the specific effects of each, such as the begetting of a storm cloud or the issuing forth of rain—each act bent towards the purpose of wetting. The most difficult aspect to satisfy proved to be the personal nature (intellect, emotions, will) of the three “persons” of the Trinity—H₂O, in any form, just doesn’t have personality!

This problem of water not standing as a suitable illustration for the personal nature of our God is not an inconsequential one, for “if something other than the Father is the ontological foundation of the being of God, the world and everything in it derives from what is fundamentally impersonal.”^{ix} Rather, it is preferable to embrace the Cappadocians’ understanding: “God is as he is made known by the Son and the Spirit: he is other—distinct—in person, to be sure, but not in being as God—for he is made known *as he is*.”^x The classical use of

the term “persons” has its own drawback, implying a sort of polytheism; Augustine himself had a problem with its usage but employed it for lack of anything clearer. My model errs perhaps on the side of impersonal monism, yet I cite Augustine’s same excuse: I use water “not in order to express [the relationship], but in order not to be silent.”^{xi}

In formulating a trinitarian model in this short story, a few negative guidelines helped me avoid some error.^{xii} A charge of *modalism* (holding that the persons of the Godhead are simply modes or forms) might be made against “Wet.” I strove to avoid this by showing the unity and co-existence, in time and place, of all forms of water. Both rigid absolutism and subjective relativism must be guarded against; the figure of the water cycle with its constant movement, implicit and explicit “relationships,” and limitations of physical law seem to strike a balance between the two extremes. Unorthodoxy might be a criticism levelled at the story, if the model was meant to replace or “improve upon” biblical teaching rather than simply to illustrate and arouse interest. “Wet” is not intended as a theological model to this degree, but simply as a reflection of a corner of truth.

I tried to express the enigma and the sovereignty of a God whose very existence is the medium of death, a God who allows a mother to choose to drown, and a daughter to choose not to cry, and a handicapped son to choose not at all. The Wet soaks what it will, mediating salvation or delivering death. The finality of the mother’s death and, to a lesser degree, the freezing of Beth’s emotions are each a rejection of community—the mother’s based upon self-centeredness and Beth’s upon personal pain. The individualistic response of isolating themselves from their community is not consistent with the relationality of the Trinity’s own example. The Wetness models cohesion in the drawing together of its essence into itself while retaining the distinction of its “persons.” Beth is called to follow, not by giving way to the sameness of

Franklin's intellect but by drawing back into their shared humanity (the distinction of his intellectual disability not lessening his humanness). Brother and sister are of the same "stuff," and this is verified by their siblinghood, to which Beth is recalled by their common wetness.

The continuous motion of the global water cycle can picture the unbroken fellowship within the Trinity. The essential equality of the three persons is not affected by the administrative order mandated by their activities of creation and redemption, as Lewis and Demarest explain: "In that functional order the first person creatively initiates, the second brightly exhibits, and the third effectively brings to fulfilment."^{xiii} This initiating, exhibiting, and fulfilling are part of God's eternal activity, for "the Word continuously emanates from the 'lungs' of the Father."^{xiv}

Yet, this eternal generation is something that Calvin soundly "rejected . . . as a continuous activity in favour of a once-for-all generation in eternity to avoid speculation about continuous generation."^{xv} B.B. Warfield also issued a strong warning against the cyclical nature of pantheistic evolution that symbolizes "the three stages of Being, Becoming and Dissolution."^{xvi} More than alluding to the eternal nature of the Trinity's relationship, "Wet" might seem to say that the part of the water cycle that returns moisture to the heavenly canopy from the earth is a resurrection repeated again and again; this is discordant with the Nicene teaching that the second and third persons emanate from the first, with the first never begotten of or proceeding from the others. So I feel that the historical grounding of the cross of Christ is *not* adequately reflected in my short story. This is perhaps its greatest theological weakness.

My creative expression of Trinitarian teaching is a humble attempt to arouse contemplation upon the implicit absent text of Scripture. It is necessarily incomplete because of the limitations imposed by the genre and the inabilities of my human intellect to comprehend the

mystery. The ancient struggle to define the Trinity has not abated. B.B. Warfield predicted my own difficulty in expressing Trinitarian truths when he said,

As the doctrine of the Trinity is undiscoverable by reason, so it is incapable of proof by reason. There are no analogies to it in Nature, not even in the spiritual nature of man, who is made in the image of God. In His Trinitarian mode of being, God is unique; and, as there is nothing in the universe like Him in this respect, so there is nothing which can help us comprehend Him.^{xvii}

Perhaps fiction can, however, help us illustrate Him to one another.

ⁱ For example, see Dante, *Divine Comedy, Paradise*, Canto XXXIII, lines 109-126.

ⁱⁱ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 3.139-142.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 5.597 and 3.305-7.

^{iv} Augustine, *De Trinitate* XIV, 6.

^v Augustine, *De Trinitate* VIII, 14.

^{vi} Athanasius, *Con. Ar.*, 3:13; quoted by T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1988), 302.

^{vii} Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: ChariotVictor Publishing, 1986), 55-56.

^{viii} See Gordon Lewis et al., "Confessing God's Trinitarian Saving Revelation through Scripture and Creation," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 21 (Jan. 1997): 7-15.

^{ix} Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1991), 54.

^x *Ibid*.

^{xi} Augustine, *De Trinitate*, quoted by Erwin W. Lutzer, "Upon This Rock," *Moody Monthly*, April 1984, 23-24.

^{xii} See Norman L. Geisler, "Avoid All Contradictions: A Surrejoinder to John Dahms," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22 (June 1979): 149-159.

^{xiii} Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* vol. 1 (Grand rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 279.

^{xiv} *Ibid*, 278.

^{xv} *Ibid*.

^{xvi} B.B. Warfield, "The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity," chap. In *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1952), 23.

^{xvii} *Ibid*, 23-24.