

---

# Pro Rege

---

---

Volume 49  
Number 2 *Fine Arts Issue 2020*

Article 24

---

December 2020

## Sons of the Prairie

James C. Schaap  
*Dordt University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege)



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Schaap, James C. (2020) "Sons of the Prairie," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 49: No. 2, 37  
- 46.

Available at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol49/iss2/24](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol49/iss2/24)

This Short Story is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).

# Sons of the Prairie

---

*James Calvin Schaap*

In 1846, sixteen years before the Dakota War, the Reverend Stephen R. Riggs visited the Indian mission at Red Wing, Minnesota Territory, where he took a hand in the outreach. One night he called on a young Dakota man, very ill, who was, at that moment, being ministered to by a medicine man who claimed angrily that the evil spirit, which was that young man's very illness, was "greatly enraged" by the mere presence of a white Christian missionary. Riggs left quickly, he says. Strangely enough, that sick young man became "one of our excellent native pastors," Riggs wrote in his memoir, then added this note: "We have talked over the event with much interest." End of chapter.

Emory TeKrony, himself a pastor, was mesmerized by what he'd been reading of Reverend Stephen R. Riggs. TeKrony volunteered to be a part of the local historical committee after he'd retired to his childhood home, even though his own close family was largely gone from rural Minnesota. The truth was, after a professional lifetime as a pastor in a number of mostly rural churches, he knew very well that he had no home—his wife was gone, their children all over the place.

It was 150 years since the Dakota war, and he had time to read now, time to learn the story, to dig into it closely. As a boy, he'd heard stories of the Sioux Uprising, horror stories of pregnant women sliced open by Dakota savages, their unborn babies nailed to barn walls for target practice with rifles, knives, and hatchets. When they were kids, sometimes they played it out—he'd be Little Crow or Flandrau or Colonel Sibley. But back then no one had ever talked about the missionaries, white missionaries, Christian missionaries. Even if they had, the stories that stuck in his soul

were the bloody ones that ran wild with nightmarish mutilation and death.

"We have talked over the event with much interest," Riggs wrote. Emory TeKrony put down the book, haunted by that line. Years later, the zany outcome of "the event" was still a stretch, he thought: a Dakota man is gravely ill, Riggs comes to visit, the band's medicine man spits and fumes, Riggs leaves very politely, and yet that very young man so righteously attended to by his own native holy man becomes, of all things, a Christian missionary to those very Dakota people. Go figure on God's will, Pastor Emory TeKrony told himself. Just go figure.

It was the stuff of sermons maybe, TeKrony told himself, but he wasn't writing them anymore, thank God. He'd retired a few years earlier than necessary when it became altogether too clear to him, that his ability to minister to people had eroded through the years, as had his desire. He'd been at it too long and suffered too much, then began to flounder when, one morning, Cathryn Jane simply hadn't awakened, the victim of a heart attack that came up like nothing else in this flat prairie land, where every movement of weather was forecast in a billowing sky. When he had reached for her early that morning, like he always had, she was stone cold, a touch he would never forget.

One day the Reverend Mr. Riggs and a brother of his beloved wife, Mary, were bathing in the Minnesota River, when her brother, Thomas Lawrence Longley, threw up his hands as his head went down into the current, a victim of a cramp, Riggs says in that memoir he wrote. Riggs tried to rescue him, but Longley thrashed violently before disappearing, and Riggs, by his own admission, had all he could do to save himself.

Thomas Lawrence Longley had come to the mission with his sister, who recounted her grief to her parents by way of one of her touching letters: “When I stand by his grave,” she wrote, “overshadowed by three small oaks, with room for another person by his side, I think that place may be for me.” She was far too young for such profound sadness, TeKrony thought, but she was also alone, a thousand miles from home, and he felt the depth of her despair in his very own heart.

Riggs must have wondered “How long, Lord?” like the Psalmist: “How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?” He must have worried about his wife’s grief because right there in the memoir he stuck in a long passage about what a man named Black Eagle had told him about grief, how ducks and geese and deer, “make an outcry about it, and the sorrow passes by.” The Dakota too “wail out their sorrow, and it becomes lighter,” Black Eagle told the missionary. It’s right there in the book. “But you keep your sorrow—you brood over it,” Black Eagle told him, “and it only becomes heavier.” The Dakota way was to make an outcry, to wail out their sorrow, Riggs remembered, in what the missionary must have felt to be something of a scolding.

Easier said than done, TeKrony thought. He had new neighbors now. They’d just moved in, a young couple, two kids. They probably would have questioned moving into the neighborhood if the retired preacher in the bungalow across the way just stepped outside and howled some morning, made an outcry, like Black Eagle advised. Maybe he’d be better off if he could—if he could just stand somewhere alone and howl, like a wolf, like a man in grief.

He kept seeing the same otherwise unfamiliar names in the books he’d been reading: Bishop Wipple, Revs. Williamson, Pond, and this Stephen R. Riggs, who first put the Dakota language into print, preachers all, missionaries. He’d wondered whether Riggs had ever written a memoir, and then found it—*Mary and I: Forty Years with the Sioux (1880)*, an old book that had been picked up by one of those wonderful publishers who simply can’t let treasures alone. They’d reprinted Riggs’ book and made it available again a decade ago already—but even that one was hard to find, and had Cathryn Jane been around, he would have thought twice about buying it, sticking thirty

bucks, with postage, into a book the public library could have found for him somewhere, on loan.

Col. Sibley became Governor; Flandrau had a park named after him, and who knows how many streets. Some folks still called it “Little Crow’s War,” even though the Dakota chief didn’t want any part of it to start with and frequently couldn’t control his own warriors, the “soldier’s lodge.” But what Emory TeKrony came to realize is that, through the years, no one really cared about the missionaries. Most found them an embarrassment since Native people considered their bringing the Christian gospel little more than the first dreadful step toward cultural genocide. He’d stumbled on the missionaries himself and couldn’t let them go because something in the shape of what he’d read offered him a place.

When the Dakota started killing settlers, Riggs got the word from the farmer Indians and the half-breed church members. *You’ve got to go*, they told him. *You’ve really got to leave the mission*, they said.

Soon it became clear that their urgency didn’t grow from unnecessary fear, so he placed Mary in the wagon with their children, and, with others, left. Their escape was treacherous and terrible but successful, when so many others weren’t. Hundreds of settlers were captured or murdered—some say 200 dead in just two days.

“All the events of the week past appeared strange,” Riggs wrote when he remembered that fearful week-long escape. “We had hardly found any time to consider them. But often the thought came to us, What will become of our quarter-century’s work among the Dakota? It seemed to be lost.”

With that line, Emory TeKrony put down the book because the story opened its arms, even though there were no bloody victims or rotting corpses in the parishes he’d served. He flicked his glasses up on his head. There he sat in one of the few old chairs he’d brought with him when he moved back home. Across the street, those new neighbors were moving in, but he couldn’t help thinking of Riggs and his family pulling out of the mission, looking back like Lot’s wife, and then asking himself whether everything they’d accomplished wasn’t about to burn away.

The only thing the two of them shared, really, was that river running just down the road from his

house—he and the Reverend Stephen R. Riggs. Nothing else, really, it seemed—and everything else somehow. But he couldn't put down the book.

\*

Les Swenson: “So, Emory—you going to be our resident expert on things here?—the whole story, right?”

The committee had met around a table in the Senior Center, in the back room of a silly knick-knack store in what was left of downtown Roseland. They wouldn't have had to look far to find genes that sprung from the DNA of massacre survivors, but Emory TeKrony had been a God-send to the committee, he knew, an educated man, a preacher, the perfect host for the local museum once tourists started up the river roads to find out what they could about the horrors that had transpired right there in southwest Minnesota, mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

Emory: “First time in my life that I've actually got time to read.”

Les: (Flips his cap back on his head.) “Got some things in my library, I think—although I'll have to check with Ellen. She can put her finger on 'em, I'm sure. If you need 'em, that is.”

Emory: “I'll let you know.”

Les: “Just give me a holler. I'd probably trust those old books anyway, more than anything anybody writes these days. Lot of spin, I'm sure.”

In eighteen months, it would be 150 years since the Dakota War—150 years. Roseland got wind of neighboring towns already starting to plan what they could to take care of the tourists likely to follow the new state map that featured what had happened way back then. New Ulm had a committee going for two years already. Good night, Roseland people said. They were on the map just like the rest of them, and everybody knew the local economy could use a shot in the arm from spendy tourists. Way too much of the old downtown was boarded up these days.

Hence the committee.

“What you learning anyway?” Les had asked him at a subsequent meeting—Les, the local real estate man and auctioneer, an old classmate.

With that, Emory TeKrony had looked around the table and wondered whether what he'd discovered would be of any real interest to any of them. Marie Swets might be—she was schoolteacher who years ago had married locally.

“I guess we can't call it what we always have—'the Uprising,’” Swenson said. “Goes by a hundred names now—and they're even fighting about that in St. Paul. What we going to call it anyway? State going to tell us what to call it so we don't offend anybody in particular?”

“Dakota War, I think,” Emory told him.

Les rolled his eyes. “So what you find out? People killed right around here, I know. You got any new stuff?”

“Lots of stuff I never knew, growing up here,” Emory told them. “It's been terribly interesting—keeps me up at night.”

“Ugly stuff, I bet,” Liz Clayton said, neatly rolling up the napkin she'd used to wipe the corners of her lips. Swenson had brought donuts from Casey's. “Whatever I read is just ugly. Sometimes I wish we could just skip the whole thing. Maybe there ought to be a statute of limitations on horrors like that—time to forget. What do you think, Emory? You're a preacher. Aren't some things simply better forgotten?”

“I'm not sure I know at all yet how to tell the story,” he admitted, an admission he knew would surprise some. “I don't think there's a way of telling it well at all. It's just a really bad story all the way around.”

“Well, we can't forget it either,” Les told them. “Some kid with a calculator is going to figure it's 150 years and why isn't anyone talking about it? Tourists are coming.”

“Why's it so hard?” Emily Manders asked him.

He didn't know if he could explain that. Maybe it was because they all had feet of clay. For six months and more, the whole region wore nothing but black. Even longer—for years, before and after. The Dakota had slaughtered the settlers wholesale, in the same way they'd always slaughtered Ojibwa and Winnebago when they had a chance, exactly the way God told the Israelites it had to be done, killed 'em all—man, woman, child, dog and cat—whatever they didn't want or need to barter with later on. And when the fighting was over, it didn't get any prettier. Just got worse. “It's a very sad story,” Emory told them. “The Dakota had their reasons, you know. They were starving. They had nothing. No food. Nothing.”

“Well, I am glad you're on it, Emory,” Les said. “We're blessed to have you here helping out the way you are.”

And so it went. He didn't tell them about Stephen R. Riggs and his young wife Mary, the letter writer. He wasn't sure any of them would really care or want to. Would anyone?

\*

He still knew where to fish, so when he'd taken early retirement, that fact, as much as any, prompted him to go back home to Roseland. It had been in the plan, really—both he and Cathryn Jane had wanted to come back to Minnesota, maybe farther up north. And then CJ died, his own wife of almost fifty years, and he'd determined the best place to call home was the place he'd grown up. The walleye weren't as big or plentiful as they were up north, but at least he knew where they were—or where they had been once upon a time. What he'd looked forward to about retirement, even before she'd died, was taking it easy with a night crawler dangling from a hook or maybe some crank bait combing the reeds toward shore or just being out there finding the Lord in the shape of the dawn. Jared and his family were in Omaha, Sally in Madison, and Emily in Pensacola. Roseland was halfway between Jared and Sally, and Emily offered winter quarters. Besides, somehow Roseland was home.

But there were times when he'd wondered about the choice because moving back alone hadn't been easy. Once in a while he'd preach, fill a pulpit hither and yon, but mostly he was alone, even though he tried some things like senior stuff and what not, a book club, the town historical society, an occasional trip to the Cities. Maybe if he'd go out and cry, go out and wail like the ducks and the geese and the deer, he thought, it would help. Maybe he could scream the darkness away. "You people brood on it," Black Eagle had told Riggs. Maybe they did. Maybe he did.

Somewhere on-line he'd picked up a recipe for strawberry bread because he'd been out picking a few days before. He'd heard someone talk about the strawberries just in, and he remembered eating them when he was a kid—from his mother's garden right here in town. It just about murdered his knees to pick and carry them, but he came home with a bucketful too many and didn't have a clue how to get rid of them. Even though he ate them on everything for a while—plopped them on Corn Flakes, sliced them up sugar-sprinkled on

toast—and drank strawberry sundaes three times a day, he still had half a pail left.

The thing was, he knew that Cathryn Jane would have done something special for that young couple just moving in across the street. In plain truth, CJ wasn't any more outgoing than he was, but the way he had it figured, somewhere along the line she'd determined that if her husband wasn't going to be all that perky socially—and he a preacher too—then the pastor's wife had to take up some of the burden. She'd always been the one to fix up a hot dish or bake up some sweet bread.

He looked into the oven and saw the bread pans, one for him, the other for the neighbors, the mix inside starting to swell just the way CJ's used to, a sweet, light hump rising in the middle. He tried a toothpick and it came out crumbly. He rolled his eyes—this was taking a long time, and he wanted to go yet, later that afternoon, to Ft. Ridgely.

It wasn't something he thought he could do—bake first, but then take it over there as she would have, even though he guessed those kids couldn't care less about the old geezer across the street. But CJ had taught him *you could do it if you put your mind to it*. She had.

\*

Riggs had awful problems. His education in missions, he wrote, had taught him that bringing the gospel of Christ would be nigh unto impossible if he could speak only English, so his major task in those early years, in the 1840s, was learning—and writing—the Dakota language. To accomplish that, he needed to learn French first, since French was his only means to Dakota. Mr. Renville, a half-breed who had all kinds of sympathy for the church, knew French *and* Dakota, as did just a few others.

The mission was visited once upon a time in those very early years by a Mr. Gavin, a French scholar no less, who buoyed their hopes of making progress translating the Bible into the Dakota language. The two of them—Mr. Renville and Mr. Gavin—sat in the same room, as Riggs went through the first few chapters of the gospel of John, verse by verse. Sadly enough, the two linguists, an odd couple certainly, disagreed totally with each other's French. It didn't take long before their disagreements turned loud, then fiery. "It

became apparent,” Riggs wrote, “that the perfection of knowledge, of which they both supposed themselves possessed, was a great bar to progress.” Eventually, the professor and the frontier half-breed marched out in an angry storm. They’d not yet finished the seventh chapter.

There was so much more. Eagle Help, a prophet and leader among the people, was the first Dakota not only to learn to read and write the Dakota language, but also to understand—or so it seemed—why being literate might be an advantage for his people. When his wife became a Christian believer, he became a greater presence around the mission, and he was a leader.

But he remained Dakota, regularly led a dance to prepare his men for battle against the Ojibwa, danced and danced until he pushed his own sensibilities into a dream state, during which he’d experience a vision that he—and the men with him, over 100—could carry into war, these “sons of the prairie,” as Mary had once called all of them in a letter to her folks.

“The thought that our good friend Eagle Help should lead out a war party to kill Ojibwa women and children greatly troubled us,” Riggs wrote. So they told Eagle Help that they would pray the war party wouldn’t succeed.

When the warriors returned and hadn’t seen a single enemy, Eagle Help and his cohorts were mad as hornets, sure that the Reverend Riggs’ prayers to the white man’s God had led to their failure, so incensed, in fact, that they grabbed one of the mission’s cows, slaughtered it, and ate it heartily—angrily, too, but heartily. “After this, it was some months before Eagle Help could again be our friend and helper,” Riggs reported.

What Pastor Emory TeKrony found so fascinating about missionary Riggs was that he seemed to be no loud-mouth authoritarian wielding razor-sharp religious convictions that bloodied whatever or whoever he ran into. Years later, Eagle Help maintained that his visionary powers had been totally destroyed “by his knowledge of letters and the religion of the Bible,” Riggs wrote. Then this: “Shall we accept that as true? And if so, what shall we say of modern spiritism? Is it in accord with living a true Christian life?”

TeKrony was sure that Riggs’ questions weren’t one bit rhetorical. He too had questions just like Riggs—when he worried about his own faith.

He took the strawberry bread from the oven when the toothpick came out smooth and unfettered from that gentle rise at the top. The color mid-loaf still seemed light, but the crust made clear that it was time. Those two loaves would have to cool, which would give him time to think about what he would say to say to his new neighbors, how he would describe himself, the old guy living alone across the street.

In truth, he was the only one of the committee doing much work right now. The meetings were neither well-attended, nor did they amount to much. A whole year was left on the calendar, and while there were inklings of regional events beginning to register on line here and there, there seemed to be no particular reason to do much as yet, other than make sure that someone—like him—could become expert enough to know how to tell the story when the job needed to be done. They’d need people behind the desk, in the old country school they’d moved into town as the museum, who could answer questions.

From the town library, Emory TeKrony got hold of a VHS tape on loan, something done a few years back, none other than Garrison Keillor narrating. TeKrony had seen it first at the treaty site just outside of St. Peter, then thought it might be worth using in their own museum. He’d brought it along to a meeting, when Marie Swets told him she could still dig out a VHS player from a dusty corner of the school’s media center. They watched it in silent darkness. He didn’t think anyone slept through it.

“We got to pay?” Les Swenson asked when Emory rewound the tape.

Emory had checked Amazon. “Twelve bucks—used, but we’d probably want an extra.”

“Can we use that thing?” Les said, pointing at the machine.

“Don’t know if it’ll hold out all that long,” Marie told him. “My guess is the school’ll give it to us since nobody uses it anymore.”

Les pursed his lips, then smoothed back his mustache, clearly uncomfortable. “I know I’m probably the odd man out here, but that Garrison Keillor guy has never been my favorite—too much making fun, I think.”

“He’s just the narrator,” Liz Clayton said. “They just wanted his voice. I’m guessing he didn’t write it—somebody else wrote that whole script,

I'm sure."

"Not that we have to make a decision right now," Emory said. "I didn't bring it in for that." He hit the eject button and the video popped into his hand. "You've been wondering about the story—I thought we'd watch it tonight, the way it's told here on the video."

"There's stuff there I never heard," Les said. "Shoot, I was born here, and I heard the story my whole life and there's things he said that was new to me."

"I'm not proposing a thing, but it's as good a presentation as there is, I think," Emory told them. "I'm not trying to push anything down anybody's throat here."

"Can't you just tell it yourself?" Les asked. "You're a preacher—or you were a preacher."

"I'm just saying it may be an inexpensive way to get the job done well," Emory told them. "And if the state thinks it's good thing—"

"Don't know if that means anything," Les said.

"What I mean is, they show it down at St. Peter," Emory told him, dropping it in his briefcase. "You got a problem with it, Les?" he said.

"No, no, no—I got no problem. That's not it. I just think we can do our own thing here, you know? Do a Roseland thing all by our lonesome without having to dance with the state and all of that—that's what I'm thinking."

"You think it's too sympathetic to the Indians, don't you, Les?" Marie said. "That's the real problem here, isn't it? You think the Dakota get off way too easily. I say we show it." Emory thought for sure her lips pursed a bit as if she were mad.

He hadn't meant for the whole issue to be out there on the table just yet. It just seemed to him to be an easy way to go over the story, to hear it again—maybe for the first time—from someone other than whoever was telling it in the community for the last century or more. He'd told them before that he didn't know how to tell that story himself because it wasn't an easy story to tell. What's more, the more he read, the more difficult the whole story became. This little film did it, with pictures, of course, and commentary that seemed to him to be balanced.

When no one spoke, Emory told them once more that he thought it was too early to take a vote since there was a lot of time yet, a lot of time

to decide a lot of things. "I just thought it might be a good idea for all of us to watch so that we know what we're talking about, so we know the whole story."

"Garrison Keillor's story," Les said, halfway under his breath.

Nothing got resolved at that meeting, and even though he could sense that around that table there were more votes for than against, the whole night had made him wonder once again whether coming back to Roseland had been the right choice.

He walked home that night, and when he did, he thought of what he'd found when he went downtown Mankato just a month or so before, at the spot where all those Dakota warriors were hanged. Right there at the site stands a big, sculpted buffalo and a marker that the vast majority of people passing by, right downtown, wouldn't notice if that buffalo came up and butted their behinds. But then, there's nothing to be proud of, right there, either—the largest mass hanging in the history of the United States. What he thought that night when he walked into a dark little house all alone was that there really is nothing to commemorate when the whole damned story is as dark as it really is.

He didn't know how to explain any of that to the committee or to the tourists who might just come there and stop at the little old school turned museum. It was too big and sprawling a story for any kind of summary, and far too ugly, too full of hate. How do you tell it with malice towards none and charity toward all, he wondered, when that's what it's all about?

And anyway who really cares? Maybe Liz Clayton wasn't wrong. Maybe they'd all be better off if the whole blasted thing got buried.

\*

He let the strawberry bread sit, went back to Riggs' century-old memoir, where he'd left it tented beside his reading chair, and looked out the window at the weather because he still wanted to go up to the Fort later that afternoon. Across the street a dozen people at least were helping out right then, the front yard full of them, too many for just one loaf of sweet bread. He'd have to take them both the loaves he'd made. CJ would certainly have.

When the fighting ended, the ugliness didn't. Settlers hated the Dakota, with understandable

reason. No one had suspected the attacks or the bloody treachery; often, white people were slaughtered by Indians they'd known as neighbors. Legislators and newspaper editorials called for the extermination of every Dakota man, woman, and child. Hate flourished like never before, spread like some wickedly fast lichen. When thousands of defeated Dakota were marched to Ft. Snelling, atrocious attacks along the way had to be fought off by the cavalry. When hundreds of Dakota died, imprisoned in God-awful conditions that winter, those few whites who ministered to them in their misery—the missionaries—were ridiculed, even physically assaulted.

All of that Emory TeKrony knew, or at least some of it. The war's postscript was as attended with dreadfulness as the worst moments of battle. No one was without sin, no not one.

What he didn't know, and what no one had ever talked about however, was the conversions that occurred wholesale during the imprisonment, something worthy of Billy Graham, hundreds of starving Dakota suddenly testifying to their faith in the white man's God.

"Many men had been wishing to be baptized," Riggs wrote, "and thus recognized as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ."

He stopped reading, fearing where Riggs was going to go with that, knowing all too well the earlier, shocking emptiness in the man's heart at having to leave the mission not many weeks before. Riggs was looking for meaning, and Emory TeKrony was too much a believer not to crystal ball what the missionary was going to do with all that testimony, but he was far too human to want to listen to the man say it out loud. Reluctantly, he kept on reading.

"This number increased from day to day, until about three hundred—just how many could afterward not be ascertained—stood up and were baptized into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost," Riggs wrote. "The circumstances were peculiar," he admitted, "the whole movement was marvelous, it was like 'a nation born in a day.'"

Emory TeKrony shut his eyes. Didn't Riggs ever question the preacher's voice in him, even for a moment?—didn't doubt reach up into his heart even a little bit? He picked up the memoir again.

"It began to throw light on the perplexing

questions that had started in my own mind," Riggs wrote, "as to the moral meaning of the outbreak."

The "moral meaning." Emory looked away again, out the window—told himself the strawberry bread was ready to give away. He couldn't read on, and yet he had to because he knew very well how this man, this preacher who'd somehow become a friend, was going to interpret what he'd lived through.

"God's thought of it was not my thought," Riggs testified. "As the heavens are higher above the earth, so his thoughts are higher than mine."

Don't say it, Emory insisted. Don't go there.

"In their thought and determination," Riggs said of the Dakota, "the outbreak was the culmination of their hatred of Christianity. But God, who sits on the throne," Riggs wrote, "had made it result in their submission to him. This was marvelous in our eyes."

*Marvelous?* A dying Dakota kid is ministered back to health by his own medicine man, only to become a Christian, and the irony of that event is something they talked about "with much interest"; but it's *marvelous* that God almighty arranged beastly slaughter simply to bring desperate people to deathbed conversions?

Not marvelous at all, but foolish, even blasphemous, he told Riggs, then put the book down on the floor, sat up straight, and put his head in his hands. Even if a scintilla of doubt wormed its way into the heart of the Reverend Mr. Stephen R. Riggs, Emory TeKrony knew a still small voice would have reminded him of a thief on the cross ushered along to paradise, Jesus said, just a moment before death. So Riggs must have wondered who *he* was to question God. Who was *he* to question the sincerity of the Dakota who, even as they were begging for baptism, watched their imprisoned families perish in disease and damp cold? Who was he to judge who he might meet someday in glory?

He understood why the preacher would say what he did, understood it too well; but he didn't believe. He couldn't. Not the salvation part—after all, who was among the redeemed wasn't his call. It was the logic that made him feel assaulted himself. *What about a score of broken treaties?*—he said aloud. *What about starvation and those criminal agents lining their pockets? My God, Riggs, he said, what about our grabbing all of their beautiful land?*

He couldn't live with that view of things, simply couldn't, and he knew it.

And yet he knew that Riggs needed to make sense of the horror—he knew that too. “This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you,” the apostle wrote, “that God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.” That's what Riggs wanted so badly to believe. What the preacher needed was a way to tell the story.

But the God he knew himself could not have simply created all that suffering, could not have nailed unborn babies to barn walls, slaughtered innocents, red and white. His God would not dispatch evil to accomplish his will. His throat blanched, and he bit his lip, then reached for a Kleenex. He could have bawled, not because Riggs was right—because he wasn't, he couldn't be—but because Riggs, like every voice he'd read—and even himself, Emory TeKrony—had to work so blame hard to find a means by which to tell the story.

He told himself he had to quit, had to shut the book because he'd finally arrived where there were only awful questions and no good answers, only unsettled faith to hold anything together. He had to quit. He had to let it be. He had to let go.

When he looked out the window, he saw the front lawn across the street full of extended family lugging in furniture and laundry baskets full of toys. He looked down at his watch. The strawberry bread had to be cool. He stood slowly, walked to the kitchen, felt the loaves, then reached up for the aluminum foil and wrapped up both. He needed to get out of the house, away from Riggs, away from the story.

A woman across the street stood beside a car at the curb. “You're my new neighbors?” he asked when he came up. “I've got some things I've been brewing here—thought you might need a break or so.”

The young woman shook her head. “I'm the mom,” she said, then pointed at a younger lady in shorts just coming off the front steps. “My daughter's moving in.” She pointed at a guy coming out the door behind her. “It's their first house. They've been living with us for too long, ever since they've moved from the Cities,” she said, pointing at her husband at the other end of the car.

“It's time,” he said, unsmiling, rolling his eyes, meaning it as a joke.

“I live across the street,” Emory told them both. “I guess, for better or worse, that means I'm your kids' neighbor.”

“And your name is?” the woman said.

“Emory TeKrony,” he told her. He'd let time explain that somewhere back there he was a preacher. “I've only been here little more than a year,” he told her, “but I was born here.”

“Don't know any TeKronys,” she told him, holding her hand up against the western sun.

“I'm the scrap that's left,” he said. “And your name is?”

“I'm Tanya Siebrands—and my husband Jake,” she said, pointing again. The husband didn't seem interested in meeting strangers. He wore some kind of bandage around his elbow.

“Siebrands,” Emory said. “I remember that name,” and then he said the very first thing that came into his head because he remembered reading how the Memorial Day celebration in town was going to honor that Siebrands boy who'd been killed by a roadside bomb in Iraq. There were a hundred Siebrands in the area, so he had no way of linking them, but he spit the question out anyway in a fashion he knew all small-town people do, playing bingo and hoping for a match. “Siebrands, huh? You're relation to that kid who died in Iraq?” he said.

The woman's face lit, beamed. Her chin rose. Some kind of firmness set in her jaw. A smile, an even bigger one, opened. “Yes,” she said, almost arrogantly. “That's my son.”

“I'm sorry,” he said, but his sympathy or apology, whatever it was, had no effect whatsoever on that smile because he knew, instantaneously, that what he'd said to that woman had been, for her, somehow precious, even a blessing. He knew.

He met the rest of the family, her daughter and her daughter's sisters too, and the son-in-law, gave them the first two loaves of strawberry bread he'd ever baked. He met them all and didn't stay long.

But what he couldn't forget when he walked back to his house empty-handed was the surprising way that woman's face lit when she told him the kid who'd died in Iraq was her own boy. He hadn't planned that out, but somehow he just happened to blurt out the right question.

\*

When he'd come home for class reunions, sometimes he and some old high school buddies from afar would play a round of golf up at the public course at old Ft. Ridgely. But he'd almost forgotten the skeletal remains of the old garrison there—snake-like, brick foundations clearly set in the grass as if the buildings had just been razed. He drove out there himself later that afternoon, when the blue sky promised sweet weather, and he tramped around out there, imagining the big fights, now that he had a clear sense of what had gone on.

When he drove through the old cemetery next door, he got out because his bladder wouldn't stop reminding him that it was time to be relieved and the woods were close enough to offer him a blind. He'd never been to that graveyard before, never even seen it, nor those tongue-depressor markers in the old section.

Light rain was falling. The Minnesota blue-sky had been an empty promise. He was totally alone in an old cemetery that couldn't have felt more haunted, living souls hovering all around, Little Crow's braves still skulking in the hardwoods just below, just as they'd done 150 years ago, the skies gray and thick and weeping.

Now that he knew the story, the names on some those stones had faces, like Eliza Muller, the wife of the fort's surgeon, a woman some called, way back then, "the Clara Barton of Ft. Ridgely." Here and there in what he read, she was a footnote; but when he actually spotted her stone, he felt strangely as if somehow he was there beside her, she beside him. He knew her. He knew the story. "Her valor and courage in the care of the sick and wounded soldiers and refugees during the Sioux Indian outbreak of 1862," the stone said, "will be forever cherished in the hearts of a grateful people."

*Forever cherished*—maybe so, he told himself, but the weathered stone made the words hard to read, and too much of it was already fraught with lichen.

He felt as if she were there as surely as he was with CJ every time he dared visit her. Eliza Muller: he even remembered her picture from a book—dark hair, dark eyes. Right there at the fort—right here, he told himself—this woman, day after day, night after night, served up unbounded charity

with her blood-stained hands. Her mortal coil—maybe a skull, that's all—was right there in the earth beneath his feet.

At a certain moment, he knew she had opened the doors for one of the big guns, the guns that killed Dakota and scattered them, kept them from swarming over the bullet-riddled fort, kept some suffering white folks alive while it killed Indians. She was Clara Barton to some, an accomplice in death to others. We all have feet of clay. How in the hell do you tell that story?

Besides, he thought, some tourists would want little more than directions to a chunk of ground where, 150 years before, some bewhiskered settler had been bludgeoned. How could he explain starvation, useless promises, empty treaties, or savage, bloody slaughter? How can you explain evil in a world where both red and white put their everlasting trust in a God of heaven and earth?

He'd stopped to relieve himself way, way out of the way of anyone who might pass, and no one did. That's where he'd spotted her, beneath a stone full of empty promises. What did any of it matter anymore?—he asked himself. There was too much to tell here, too much life and death to make any sense of anyway. Sometimes it's so easy to believe that God does not exist, he told himself, tears coming into his eyes.

Maybe it was the cemetery, maybe the rain running down through his hair and into his face, maybe simply Eliza Muller, who'd lived through the attacks and given everything she could have for others, everything; it was all of that, he assumed, that drew him right then to fight back something breaking in him—for Eliza, for Riggs, and for himself. We often wait for God in hope, he'd read somewhere; but sometimes we simply wait for hope itself.

He told himself right there in the cemetery that he *couldn't* tell the story because there was nothing to hold on to, nothing to point to, finally, but utter darkness. Something indefinably empty had come up from his heart and twisted every organ inside him. He'd brought his sleeve up to his face, but what ran from the corners of his eyes fell indistinguishably into the rain across his cheeks. He'd cried. He stood out there alone at the grave of a woman who'd long ago dispensed immeasurable mercies, and he tried to listen to Black Eagle, to scream away the sadness.

Had CJ been there, he might have simply willed himself beside her, he told himself. But then maybe she was. Maybe she was with him even now, two years gone.

“How does any of this make sense?” he said, aloud, looking for her, seeing her in front of him, sitting in the family room, reading, looking up from her book. “I don’t know what to make of it,” he told her.

She smiled, put her own book down. “Just be still,” she told him. “You’ve read enough now—just be still. There’s things we’ll never know.”

It’s exactly what she would have said, he thought, and he knew it as if she were right there beside him, which, maybe, he thought, she was, his own precious CJ.

And then she was gone. What came to him was that woman’s smile, the mother of a boy who was killed on a dusty road in Iraq, and two loaves of strawberry bread in her hands. That smile he

remembered, that joy—that face came into him like a dream that wasn’t a dream. She’d found a way to tell her story.

He looked again at the stone, read the old inscriptions. “Thy mission on Earth was Unbounded Charity,” one side said; “Thy Reward is Eternal Peace.”

Even in the darkness, he told himself, even in a cemetery, even in the rain, there’s Eliza Muller and lights that blink like stars in an eternal sky, always these specks of light in the darkness. If the whole damned world were laid in concrete, there’d be a single green sprout somewhere, even in despair, even in loneliness. Eliza Mullers, red and white—there were dozens, hundreds, thousands, millions.

He reached out to her cold stone and took that tall, mossy obelisk in both of his hands, because no one had, he thought, for far too long.