
JACKALOPE WALKS INTO A MINNEAPOLIS ART GALLERY

DENISE LOW

On the phone the medicine man whispers directions—Bockley Gallery on 21st Street. The voice had an odd quality, almost a soft growl, but not unfriendly. Cousin Leland highly recommended this northern spiritual healer, so Jack decides to take the plunge. He has come this far.

A light snow begins to fall, covering the streets. He turns the ignition of the rental car and it catches, no problem. After following twisting roads around Lake of the Isles, he finally finds the art gallery, a small place tucked into a neighborhood shopping center. Birchbark Books, with a huge blue sign, is next door. The bookstore looks inviting, with bright windows, but the art gallery is murky. Just like a medicine person to choose a film noir setting as a place to meet.

Jack reknits his muffler and hops out of the car. He takes a deep breath, then regrets it immediately. The zero-degree temperature is not lung-friendly. Sifting white dust blows into his eyes and stings his exposed cheeks. He is becoming a sissy, too comfortable in his car with heated seats. Jack shifts to Warrior mode and skitters up the snowy sidewalk.

Inside, the gallery is not much warmer, although a space heater blows loudly. As he scans the room, no one looks like his contact. A few people mill about the room. Folding chairs fan out from a podium. On the back wall, a poster shows *Anishinaabe* author Gerald Vizenor's face, set in a thoughtful expression. Jack reads, "GERALD VIZENOR & HIS NOVEL *BLUE RAVENS*, 7:00." That is just a few moments away, and still no medicine man. He looks at the poster again, at the writer's eyes, which bore into him. He turns away.

On the walls, bright colors come into focus, neon-bright paintings. Not since a Fauvist exhibit in Paris has Jack seen such an eruption of bright hues—orange, scarlet, teal and cerise. He checks a tag next to a painting: "Jim Denomie, 'Vatican Café.'" Bold outlines depict a Last Supper scene, with a Jesus figure in the center holding a goblet and a fork. Next to him are the Lone Ranger, Tonto, and Elvis Presley. On the other side sit

monkeys, one with a priest’s collar. Beyond them, Ku Klux Klan members circle a cross. People surround a woman burning at the stake. A military tank smolders red. “What’s good here?” asks Tonto in a thought bubble.

Jack steps back. Yikes. Ouch. Wow. Postcolonial angst to the max.

A tap on his shoulder interrupts his response. Jack turns around to see Gerald Vizenor in person. “Are you Jack?” he asks in a throaty voice.

“Why, yes.”

“I’m the man you are looking for. I have to give this talk, and then I can see you.”

“Okay, no problem.”

“We start in a minute. There’s a bit of wine in the office area if you want some refreshment.”

What a surprise to discover Gerald has a double life as a medicine man. Jack finds red wine on a back table, pinot noir from the Mendocino Coast. The label shows an ant pushing a grape uphill, Anthill Farms. Perhaps ants burrow somewhere below this tundra, but right now the image is out of context. Jack pours himself a glass and takes a chair.

At 7:04, Louise Erdrich, from Birchbark, brings the audience to order. She introduces Gerald, author of *Trickster of Liberty*, *Fugitive Poses*, and *Word Arrows*. She gives basics of the bio, stops, and says, “I’ll just read the first paragraph of the new novel *Blue Ravens*:

“Aloyisius Hudson Beaulieu created marvelous blue ravens that stormy summer. He painted blue ravens over the mission church, blue ravens in the clouds, celestial blue ravens with tousled manes perched on the crossbeams of the new telegraph poles”

As she reads, he understands what power Gerald has with words. Even when Jack closes his eyes, images of blue Ravens continue to circle. The White Earth reservation of northern Minnesota becomes real—the small downtown, church windows, a gate to the hospital.

Louise finishes and starts to sit down, but stops, “I want to recognize a special guest tonight, in the back row. Frances Densmore, a musicologist, is visiting from Red Wing. She has been doing field work at White Earth, about the same time period as this novel.” Polite applause, and a gray-haired, blue-eyed woman dwarfed by her overcoat stands briefly and sits back down.

Gerald walks up and quietly commands the front of the room, creating an invisible proscenium. Jack heard on the moccasin telegraph that the grand gentleman ‘Shnob just turned eighty. The old man looks great, fit and crackling with energy. He sits and settles in a chair. He puts on glasses and rustles papers. They wait.

Behind Gerald’s largish nose, Jack notices a yellow owl in the “Vatican Café” painting. Funny he did not see that earlier. Also, squares of bright blue in the foreground start to move, as if they were alive.

The author’s voice brings him back to the moment, “This novel is set during World War I, before Native people were United States citizens.” He tells more about White Earth Ojibwa relatives who served in the Great War, including a great aunt who was a nurse. The story follows two brothers’ travels in France, during the war and the Spanish influenza outbreak.

He continues to talk, but Jack is distracted by the painting again as a blue winged figure takes shape, a crow. It steps delicately out of the painting’s frame. It ruffles its feathers a moment and then takes wing. Worst of all, it flies to the chair next to him. People stare. It perches, preens a moment, and says in a very audible voice, “Hi, you look like a stranger, Mr. Jackalope. I’m your translator for the evening.”

“Thanks, but I’m okay on my own,” he whispers.

Jack turns back to Gerald, who is much more interesting than a blue blackbird. “Let me add,” says Gerald as he pulls out some notes. “The soul dancer in me celebrates transformations and intuitive connections between our bodies and the earth, animals, birds, ocean, creation.”

The blue crow tugs at jack’s sleeve. “What he means is decolonization against monologic oppressors ruptures narratives inserting themselves into a hybrid recuperated space. . . .”

Jack glares. “That’s enough, Mr. Blue Crow.”

“Oh, okay. Just trying to be helpful.”

Jack turns back to Gerald’s talk. “The street dancer in me is the trickster, the picaresque survivor in the wordwars, at common human intersections, in a classroom, at a supermarket, on a bus,” he says.

Students in the audience bend to take notes, and the crow flies to a small group of them. The first brushes it away, and it flies to the next. Gerald pauses to take a drink of water as more audience members notice the crow.

Jack reflects on “picaresque,” one of his favorite words. It describes his life, a series of episodes stitching together fragments of dreams, aromas, words, and memory. He relates to the *picaro*, the low-born Spanish hero who is something of a rascal but always honest. Trickster roams everywhere, tells discrete and related stories, even when disguised as Rabbit or Spider.

Gerald turns a page in another notebook and finds his place. He clears his throat and reads so softly Jack has to lean forward to hear, “The word dancer in me is the imaginative performer, the mask bearer, the shield holder, the teller in mythic stories at the treeline.” The word “Mask” strikes Jack, another favorite word, from French *masque* or Latin *masca*, a “face covering,” and before that a “specter,” and from some pre-Indo-European language, the “dark cloud before rain.” Mask. He knows how he distances himself from even his closest family members, his own dance of survival and pain, by wearing a joker’s mask. Mask, unmask. Jack understands, as Gerald continues to speak, how words are strong medicine.

“Caw! Caw! Caw! Caw!”

The blue crow startles Jack as it flutters about the room with cries of alarm. It darts over Gerald a moment, almost suspended, then dive bombs him.

“Begone!” yells Gerald. Everyone laughs as the author shoos it away.

The crow flies to the ceiling light fixture, clings a moment, then heads back into the painting, where it flattens into an indistinct blue blob under Tonto’s feet.

Gerald waves goodbye to the crow, then continues, “The last dancer in me practices alone, in silence, to remember the manners on the street, the gestures of the soul, and the words beneath the earth.” Jack thinks over the term “words beneath the earth.” He imagines syllables as subject to primal gravity, as immutable elements of creation, as phonemes sinking into sedimentary layers. An irreversible force tugs them downward.

Jack waits for the next teaching from this Warrior. Gerald takes out the new novel. It has on the cover a huge green and blue Raven, static and in motion at once.

Gerald opens it and begins, “Aloysius Hudson Beaulieu created marvelous blue ravens that stormy summer.” The cadence of the writer’s voice pulls Jack into the story, following the delicate filigree of interrelationships between French and *Anishinaabe* relatives at a precise latitude and longitude intersection, the early 20th century war.

Jack rouses from the storyteller’s trance when the audience applauds. Gerald smiles. Louise stands and says, “We have time for a short question-and-answer session.” Hands rise.

Afterwards, Jack walks slowly around the gallery. He cannot make small talk after Gerald’s overwhelming presentation. Students surround the author and pepper him with questions. A few have books for him to sign. They chatter like sparrows on the ground pecking at seeds. Jack waits for the crowd to disperse.

Behind a water cooler Jack stops cold. He finds a painting directed toward him, as if the painter expected a wandering western Jackalope to find it, even in this north woods city. “Dream Rabbit #5,” says the placard beside a midnight-blue landscape. Two plateaus rise from the darkness. On one sits a white Rabbit. On the other are three Deer heads, bucks with seven-point antler racks. Jack feels like he has been split in two, with the jackrabbit side facing the antelope. How stunning. He stands before it, thinking nothing, for long moments.

Soon most of the hangers-on leave, with cold gusts blowing each time the door opens. Jack shivers. He turns as Gerald approaches and says, “I’ve given you my best.” He tugs his way into a brown wool overcoat.

“That was exactly what I needed to hear. I have a lot to think about and a lot to forget. Thanks.” Jack remembers his manners, “I meant to give you this small gift of tobacco.” He takes a red tobacco tie package from his vest pocket and presents it.

“Of course. I appreciate it. Well, I must be off. Take care of yourself, Jack.”

They shake hands. Close up, Jack notices unusually thick hair beneath Gerald’s collar, and his breath is unexpectedly fetid. He steps back as the author raises his arms to untie something on his head. Gerald’s face tilts. Pointed ears poke out. Big eyes appear. Big teeth.

Then the Gerald mask is off, and before him stands a Bear in a man’s coat.

Jack’s eyes widen.

“Oh, didn’t you know?” asks Bear, as he puts on a fedora. “Life is a chance, a story is a chance. That I am here is a chance.” He puts on large mittens and wraps a red cashmere scarf around the lower part of his face, covering his snout. His eyes smile.

“Frances, where are you?”

Bear turns to Frances Densmore, who has been waiting beside him, and takes her arm. “We need to be getting back home before it snows too hard,” he says to her. Jack stares, speechless, and feebly waves. They walk out the door into the thickening snow. In a moment, they have disappeared.

The gallery owner is stacking the folding chairs onto a cart. “Are they all right out there?” he asks him.

“Of course. They know the North winds well. They know the roads.”

Jack takes one last look at “Dream Rabbit #5” and heads out the door. He watches his step, careful not to slip. In the partly shoveled path, he follows their tracks, bear prints and her boots. Then the sky collapses onto earth and everything is frozen white.

“Life is a chance” quotation, Good Reads, accessed 12.24.14

<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/347818-life-is-a-chance-a-story-is-a-chance-that>

Other quotations are from the Native American Writers, “Gerald Vizenor, Chippewa,” a biographical online article about Vizenor, accessed 12.24.14

<http://nativeamericanlit.com/vizenor.html>