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## Farinata After the Flood

*Garry Thomas Morse*

The plane tilted its nose upward and quickly vanished. Farinata cast his eyes away from the disposable headline. Almost a hundred towns declared to be in a state of emergency. The headline guy or gal had to keep it going, the fear and the sense of infinite chaos. A job well done. Of course, he couldn't complain. The consensus was that he was staying in a place built on a slough that would sink into the gooey clay soil before too long. Eighty to ninety millimetres had fallen, and he had experienced a mild scare. The water in the storm drain had kept rising, and Farinata had regressed back to his sorry origins, even to the exact instant when the trauma had first formed. Then out of a cozy wet nook he had been heaved—screaming out into a world that probably did not have his best interests at heart.

Farinata sat on the live and dead grass and looked down into the shimmering brown water. Some kids had been wading in the impromptu pool only yesterday, terrified of eels, but was he adult enough to give them two bits worth of advice? After the mild scare, a raven had tired of flight and had walked around instead, picking up



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bugs and worms. During the rains he was not a threat, but a red-winged blackbird didn't split hairs—or feathers—and dive-bombed the bigger bird repeatedly. Often, the same bird could be found warding off iridescent Brewer's blackbirds on foraging missions. Farinata thought that the red-winged blackbird was exemplar of fatherhood, but that thought only brought back the trauma, or more accurately, its harbinger, like some unidentified but almost fathomable speck on the horizon that was approaching at top speed. Farinata felt it approaching and turned away, turning his mind to anti-matters. He remembered the celebrated painter from these parts who had striven so hard—all her life in fact—to think of nothing. Most folks didn't have to try quite so hard, but that judgment was only another mood coming on, or so he reckoned, like a funny cloud floating into view. He need not heed its shape nor pore over the prospect of its future outpourings. No, the sun was shining and, for the moment, he was happy. Not too happy, as that could knock him off balance just as easily. Climb no mountains and you will find no valleys. The hot hard flat of the path, that was for him, and in his estimation, long and substantive and relatively comma-less. Vast sections of this dry unforgiving place were submerged, but that did not matter. The landscape could not all *become ardent aquarium* because he knew that was only a misquoted line in his head. He knew that sun and land were altering him, too.



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You couldn't run from your problems, and yet, he had done so, or so he figured, and that was quite all right. He was a different person and that was also quite all right. He felt that he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, the (stupid) need for money, other needs he dare not name lest he disrupt his fine equilibrium under the sun. Various problems had stowed away with him, but they were friendlier once afloat, and besides, they had nowhere to hide amid all this openness. The trick was to give up everything, to live a life that most folks on two-thirds of the continent would consider a life not worth living, and to no practical purpose, living that "crummy" life for its own sake and somehow deeming it none too shabby. Indeed, he was pacing himself, and taking in things very slowly. Feel around—fumble if you must—for the present, then grab hold gently. That was the best he could do and that was quite all right.

A small grasshopper hopped from one plant stem to another. Then another. Then another. A while back, they had been tiny nymphs, clinging for dear life to a blade of grass. Now they were instars although the precise stage eluded him. After a long winter, the adults had appeared first, crepitating during spells of intense sunlight. They were band-winged grasshoppers, but their scientific name was like something out of a classical Greek play. The other day, he had seen a small specimen with an intricate pattern on its pronotum and abdomen. The professor's best guess was an immature clear-winged grasshopper, one of the two leading pests. Sharing that title, and sharing the same field of



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wild barley and thistle right near Urban Barn, was the two-striped grasshopper, who did small penance for wiping out crops by eating up herbicide-resistant kochia (originally a bit of tumbleweed rolling across the landscape, hell-bent on colonizing a relatively yellow landscape). In the same field, the lesser migratory grasshopper and Packard's grasshopper were up and about, and doing their part to eat everything in sight. As for the speckled rangeland and northern green-striped grasshoppers, they enjoyed singing in the live and dead grass upon which they dined, preferring this mound in the sun that encouraged their leaps of courtship. Yes, they were also quite all right. They could fly pretty far, but courting slowed them down. The males would crepitate with a flash of red or yellow wings, and then a female would either wave a suitor in or, in Saskatchewan fashion, get into the kick-off position, which as signals go was loud and clear. Anyway, they would all be dead soon. That was the brutal truth and not one of Farinata's valleys of mood getting its own back. He was all right with the brutal truth because there was by no means a shortage of them any given summer.

A light breeze blew through clumps of cattails in the middle of the slough, which was not really a slough. Soon, it would dry up again to a mere trickling. Memories would be reduced to garbage that perpetually floated in from construction sites and retail outlets. When the snows had first stopped, Farinata had been caught tidying up around a bush in front of his window and had been warned by passing neigh-



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hours that the city did that. Actually, there were two or three people who rode around in a little car to check on each plant. There was also one woman who was never seen doing anything but driving around in circles and talking on her phone. She had turned the role of civic worker into an art form, but she was not the special someone Farinata had taken a shine to when he was in a mood—or in the mood. She had given him the glad eye and had even gossiped about him—wait, that didn't add up to much. He must have heard a few things before his mood had taken him for a “joyride,” shooting off on a frolic of its own. In the interim, he had given up coffee, or more accurately, the place had produced a powerful disinclination for the stuff within him. Irish breakfast did the trick, in the rotation with green, jasmine, lemon, hibiscus, blueberry superfruit, chamomile, and licorice spice for those frequent occasions when he required an adaptogen to deal with startling new situations. Passionflower before bed was now reality and not a come-on, honest.

Farinata would have been happy—but not too happy—to explain to the young lady his working theories, were they not an epidemic of overshare or TMI, thanks to her caffeinated contributions and extra-strong cups of Kicking Horse at home, combined with the seasonal shift around the time of, say, a recent stabbing in the downtown mall, which had increased his propensity for “manic” behaviour, turning slights real or imagined into gushing injuries—in that case, there was little difference, if an emotional injury birthed the suppression or eradication of a key gene for regulating

neuronal production, or let us say, nodal dedication—so that her finger-to-nose pejorative retorts reached his acute hearing heightened by misappropriated adrenal purpose, and without even buying dinner first, took advantage of his flawed hippocampus—or let us say, cerebral seahorse—and recontextualized this sudden glut of neural data in terms of image, sensation, and mood. For argument’s sake, let us suppose that the aftermath from a string of unhealthy relationships, already glomming onto that common trait of Wagnerian heroes, that fear of abandonment engendered by progenitors who had left him on a wobbly hillock (or butte) that one time, or perhaps without umbilical for good, cultivating a neatly labelled neuronal garden to which the name of the fair-to-middling barista was appended, like a colourful species pinned right through speckled shield under glass, or a fickle noon-flower plunked down in the muck. Given such a loveless *a priori*, the rough-and-tumble *a posteriori* arose from the imbalance of glutamate promoting irritability, to dip our beaks even deeper in the elemental chemistry of Farinata’s issues, postulating in step with the school of thought that dopamine agonists have a starring role in precipitating mania. In other words, the red-handed culprit, happiness.

We would have a real story on our hands if Farinata were addicted to counting bathroom tiles, buying irregular shoe sizes, voting against celebrity poker players, or watching golden shower scenarios until his red eyes ached—or eked basalt, whichever comes first. No, he was merely excited by the thought



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of her and quickly upset by the absence of her, cast down into a despondent quagmire of confused interpretations, what with the mind being its own place, even if it was more purgatorial than ever before. Now he could watch joggers of all shapes and sizes jouncing past his window and no longer feel it was absolutely necessary to mate with each and every one of them, lest he perish before the summer ended. Now he would cease to swagger about playing tarnished knight for splendid ladies between the hours of ten and two on business days, splendid ladies who had already pledged their troth to unresponsive oafs. Now he would seek out his own borage—an abominable turn of phrase—in that field of wild barley where purple thistles nodded over sow thistle and buffalo beans, where he had spent many idle hours in contemplation of surrounding canola or mustard, or incestuous combinations of the two, ignoring that upstart mania waiting in the wings like a brash understudy ready to burst out at the first misstep, provided the killdeer did not kick up the usual fuss. After all, there were plans to move the #1 and lengthen his constitutional and that was quite all right.

Farinata was famished and that did not help. He opened a small bag of mountain trail mix and knocked back a few handfuls. Fatty acids and selenium, followed by naturally occurring lithium and magnesium, and sounding far more exciting than nuts, seeds, and a glass of fizzy water. His stomach brain would be free to give the all-clear to his “brain” brain, giving him leave to go on a vision quest although there wasn’t



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quite enough mix for that. Then again, no mountains, no valleys. In some ways, to examine the fifth instar of the infamous *cannula pellucida* had been his vision quest, a real vision only a few paces away that would lead to a luminous journey inward. Of course, it was not too late to catch a bus to the farmer's market. Then he could buy baby kale and pea shoots from the grumpy hippy type whose mustard green dreams are besieged by drifting canola and rolling kochia. Farinata had not dared to see if the purveyors of chicken and waffles were back—suddenly the image of Trish flickered seductively across the packed live screening just above his barking animal brain, downing a waffle that left traces of whipped cream on her lips, revealing the faint apparition of her tongue ...

Hang on, that had not even happened! False idols were a symptom of one of his moods gearing up—yes, the sun was already at a certain angle of intensity. The lone noon-flower had shut up long ago, and the grasshoppers around him were crackling to signify their half-mad interest in mating. Farinata heard rapid snaps and caught scarcely perceptible flashes of colour. No, the food truck might not be there. If the food truck was not there, he might sink into a valley and find himself unable to claw his way up and out again, and then the simple trip downtown would become a tragic adventure. No, he did not want to stray too far from the pseudoslough today. Perhaps he would go to the breakfast chain with the grandmotherly icon. No, they would only give him heaps of white flour with a few berries hidden somewhere in-





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side—practically a form of colonization—for an arm and a leg, and that too would be tragic. It would also be strange for him to observe countless families enjoying themselves in a great clamour, lifting those suspect objects into their “cakeholes,” as he reminded himself he was the one with the noggin problem.

Two of the city workers passed in their large orange car that saved them from having to walk more than a few feet along the environmental reserve. They did not return Farinata’s smile and, in return, he did not think much of them. Still, they were winning the war on mosquito larvae, or so he understood, and that was something. It was good to try and keep happy, but not too happy. Then he thought of the little bird. One night, he had been listening to Cecilia Bartoli’s forceful rendition of Vivaldi’s *Cessate, omai cessate* when he realized that one of the robin’s brood in the bush outside was trying to sing back at the voice it could hear, and with much difficulty. Would the trauma for the little bird be one day learning that Cecilia Bartoli was not its mother and could not—schedule permitting—bring food, perhaps not now or ever? This was not the first example of wildlife outside showing a keen appreciation for music of the baroque era. Why Farinata should feel paternalistic urges toward the tiny boreal chorus frogs and small grasshopper instars was beyond him; another working theory was that his unconditional love for them was connected in some way with his reptilian brain.

It goes without saying that if his thyroid tests came back okay and his endocrine levels were good, then



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his own metamorphosis might very well be at hand. As for his happiness problem, the field was scheduled to become the newest home for the most familiar shopping and fast-food experiences, and that was quite all right with everyone.

Garry Thomas Morse is a two-time nominee for the Governor General's Award for his poetry collections, *Discovery Passages* and *Prairie Harbour*. He survives in Winnipeg. Email: [morse.nomad@gmail.com](mailto:morse.nomad@gmail.com)