

George Bowering

THE HAYFIELD

THE SUN HANGS IN THE SKY, saying in a forceful whisper down through the air, "yes . . . yes . . . yes", propelling it in beams, overpowering with great old-man wisdom and domain, over men's signs in the park, saying "NO: parking, cycling, hunting, stopping, spitting, talking, fishing, No." Van Gogh's insane sun, rings of solid orange paint around it, a D. H. Lawrence sun, growing warm orange rings around the inside hearts of men, making them speak to one another on the streets (warm enough for ya?), shirts open at the neck, bespeaking chests of hair and skin, and the summer, a time to move across the country, in the high grass along railway tracks, the country of fences a long way from their people's houses, animals and men allowed to do many things unseen by the cities along the tracks, the discarded cigarette package in the same place for months, bleaching in the sun, never stepped on or swept up. Park with no signs in it, a man can spit if he wants to, nobody to say No, only the sun in the wide prairie sky, whispering yes through the air, the warm lapping on a man's bare shoulders once he has discarded his shirt, or at least stuffed it in his bag.

That was where Gordon set up his easel and little canvas-top stool. A man wouldn't even have to bring paint if he could dip his long-handled brushes in the colour of the yellow hay and blue horizon. Silly thing to think—a man doesn't have to be a painter when you get right down to it, which Gordon was finally doing this summer—not only on weekends after marking papers and preparing lectures. He opened the thermos and poured the cap full of hot black coffee, completely in keeping here by the hayfield, cup held to the mouth, under the shagbrow blue eyes squinting over the heat and the bright yellow light waving off the hay in the wind. So he began to paint.

When out of the high grass appeared a strange-looking man. It was that he was wearing the wrong kind of clothes: a corduroy suit, frumpy neutral-colored tie, off-white shirt, and in his mouth an old black briar pipe. Gordon, dressed in dungarees and running shoes, looked up, smiled, and cor

tinued to lay paint on the canvas, thick swabs of corn-yellow with deep orange stripes, a tiger of a hayfield.

"I see you're a painter, too", said the man in the corduroy suit, taking the bowl of the pipe relaxed into his curved hand, coming closer to look piercingly at the canvas, expert fashion seen in movie shorts and colour advertisements.

"Oh, are you a painter?" asked Gordon, squeezing horizon blue on to his pallet—an old dry painting.

"No, no", corduroy suit said importantly. "No, but I have looked at my share of paintings. Pissarro, Tintoretto, Hogarth, eh, eh?"

"You like Hogarth?" said Gordon, politely, holding a dry brush. He hated Hogarth, fat, ugly, pink-cheeked, flat-eyed.

"Well you know—Hogarth", said the other. "But dont let me disturb you, go on, I'll rest myself." He puffed at the empty black pipe.

Gordon, happy enough to settle for that, went on painting. Do your painting in one sitting, he had decided. Dont come back to it, not even a portrait. The hayfield was the hay of today, and so was Gordon. A test to do the one painting despite roar of automobile and chomp of eating neighbours, even here in dry slope of railroad ridge between track and wire fence, to paint the picture despite intrusion or weather. A man could paint a revolution this way, a violent act every day, thirty illustrations a month. Whereas the hayfield offered another kind of instant, one that stretched out radially, from the eye to the hole in eternity.

"Van Gogh", said the man in the corduroy suit.

"What?"

"He would have loved that hayfield."

"Oh, yes."

"He went insane at the end", said the man.

"Would you tell me your name, so I wont have to think of you as the man in the corduroy suit?" asked Gordon, not good-naturedly, just with a kind of necessity to meet the situation. He didnt like to carry that with him from the city.

"Carmen Ethiopia", said the man.

"My name's Gordon Featherall", said Gordon.

"The name of a painter, something to conjure with. Monet, Tiepolo, Brueghel—"

"Mr. Ethiopia, would you mind if I just painted? I dont mind you being here, and watching from a distance, but I havent got time to talk and

listen. I've been promising myself this trip for a long time, and I don't want to waste the sunlight. Okay?"

"Suits me, son. The temperament of the painter. Something to conjure with, eh?" And Mr. Ethiopia leaned back against the slope from the railroad track, his teeth firm on the root of the pipe, his arms crossed over his chest in the rural sun.

Gordon wrote *MOLTO* in orange paint on the top of the canvas, and painted slowly, letting his shoulders dip to the rhythm of the lines, the way it always happened, his feet rocking from heel to toe under him, letting his weight sink like a pear on the canvas stool. The hayfield didn't change, no stroke on the canvas took anything away from the yellow miles in front. Gordon thought about that and remembered a Japanese movie he'd seen, medieval-poverty movie on the rainy gates of a southern Japan town, four men met in an old wooden shrine or church to wait out the rain, grim black and white picture, slanting rain of gray. In old rags of poorest medieval period three of the men began to take the building apart to make a fire and keep it going. The rain went on for days—the relics of the church came down piece by piece to feed the fire, then boards from the walls of the church; then the movie may have been over—Gordon remembered the fourth man who stood away from the fire and looked mournful as the church came into hands and fell into pyre, but he moved towards the fire eventually, staring mournfully at the flames, his arms crossed, hands on opposite shoulders in that skinny Japanese way; the movie probably was over, but Gordon remembered the boards kept coming off till the church was gone, the rain put out the fire and the ashes lay in a soggy heap, the rain falling and falling, gray

He had been swabbing paint on to the canvas. Now he touched it lightly with a fine brush.

Lonely flute music reached his ear from the left. It was a lone soldier's flute in the middle of the vast empty land, long lone notes pinning a centre to the sunny day. With the flute noise nearing, the painting stopped. For a while he tried to groove the brush strokes to the music, but it was wrong, because the music was wrong for that place. It was Hindustan music, Old Testament music, like the bright wooden-looking colour prints of his old forgotten Bible, with picture of small David arms extended holding gigantic sword, foot on the giant unconscious and peaceful Goliath's chest, on the balance before the down! stroke!—in the Old Testament there were two possibilities for music, the long loud blare choruses of cornets as the walls of Jericho crashed in the sand, and the lonely soldier-flute of shepherd David. Gordor

imagined the later powerful king, escaping all alone from the blaring cornets of his palace, to walk into the desert and take the little flute out of a secret hanging fold in his vestment—

The flute came very near, and stopped, in mid-phrase. Around from behind a tree appeared a modern shepherd, in one of those denim suits, tight-fitting pants, and a shoulder-hugging denim jacket. He was a young farm man, walking that way that suggested years behind a plow, feet swinging along splayed, perfect for straddling a wide furrow, back slightly bent, for traces, arms swinging, shoulders lunging with each step, and the attitude that bespoke onetime big slicker of small town. The flute was nowhere in sight at first, but showed up protruding from the back pocket of the denims when he turned around to look behind him, at the imaginary straight furrow extending a track to the horizon.

"Howdy", said Gordon, spitting over to one side in the conversational manner, and wondering why. "You play a flute nice."

"Shucks, twarnt nothin'", he expected to hear, but Carmen Ethiopia opened his eyes and spoke first.

"Two artists! One walks into the lonely stretches of the wheat belt and is confronted with two artists in one spot," he said, getting to his feet and taking off his corduroy jacket to shake the grass and dust from it.

The newcomer looked at Ethiopia warily, without saying anything, then turned and looked at Gordon's painting. He didnt look at Gordon. Instead he turned his head down while he intently rolled a cigarette from Old Chum tobacco.

"Welcome, my boy", said Ethiopia. "Would you consider giving a man a pinch of that tobacco? The jaws get pretty tired clamping on to an empty pipe."

The newcomer finished rolling his cigarette and handed the tobacco to Ethiopia without saying anything. Gordon watched with simple admiration as the man crimped the ends of the cigarette and flipped one end between his lips, in the same motion picking a kitchen match out of his jacket pocket, bent wrist turning upward to thumb-scratch the match into flame, one puff drawing the flame into the end of the cigarette, the flip of the fingers and the match dying in flight away into a clump of couchgrass.

"Do you have a match?" asked Ethiopia, handing the tobacco back, shreds of it hanging over the edge of his pipe-bowl. The man gave him one silently. Ethiopia looked for a rock to strike it on.

"It aint that colour", said the man, jutting his jaw to point at the hayfield with the cigarette in his mouth.

"No it's not. I'm not trying to make it the right colour", said Gordon, wondering just what he could tell him, this man who has the previous and pre-emptive knowledge of the hayfield, much more than the portrait sitter who says "No I dont look like that, you've got the eyes all wrong"; more, because his knowledge had required many moments in how many years, of looking out over miles of hayfields while taking a drag on a cigarette at the turn of the corner in his daily farm-section chores. Presumably.

"Impressionism", said Mr. Ethiopia, who was back with the pipe smoking now, the smoke blue, too pale. "Renoir, Degas", he added.

The newcomer had already learned, faster than Gordon, not to turn his head and look when Ethiopia said those things. They looked at one another for a moment. Whose turn to speak? For there was that—they both wanted to talk here, and in his sudden nervousness, the newcomer absently picked the flute out of his back pocket, lightly slapped the side of his leg with it.

"My name is Gordon Featherall", said Gordon, finally, wondering if he should paint while he talked. He decided not to. There was the question of the colour.

"That hayfield there?" said the newcomer, pointing again with the cigarette.

"Yes—?"

"That's mine, my hayfield. Least it's going to be", said the man. Then he took one backward step and leaned slightly to the side to look at the painting.

"It's pretty good", he said.

"Thanks", said Gordon. "It's only the start."

"Go ahead. Paint", said the man.

Gordon fiddled with the paint on his palette, mixing the colours, blending. It would take a while to get paint to the picture.

"I wished I could of gone to painting school and learnt all the tricks", said the newcomer. "I always wanted to be an artist."

"Why didnt you?" asked Gordon, mixing.

"I never even mentioned it to my old man. Hee! I can imagine what he would of said."

I know what my old man said, or at least didnt say but thought, enough

so I knew without him having to embarrass himself to say it. Gordon flattened the brush full of blue on the canvas, near the top.

The sun was moving over, to the west. There could have been a hand holding the sun, extended at arc of arm's reach, eventually down to flat west horizon. The sky was high, it was highest summer. Gordon painted. The newcomer blew gently on the flute, making low hollow tones, and as he did this, Gordon lined in the darker brown shadows under the brilliant crest of the hay. Ethiopia was gone, nowhere in sight on the flat land, some distance the other side of the railroad's ridge, then.

"Your friend's gone", said the newcomer.

"Mr. Ethiopia", said Gordon, not turning his face from the painting, absorbed now, though he knew it wasn't going at all well, still wanting to go on with it, do the one painting for the day. "He appeared out of nowhere while I was painting."

"What a pain in the ass he was."

Gordon thought the newcomer would be looking to see what reaction he had, but the man was looking out at the hayfield.

"I believe you're right", said Gordon.

"I guess he knew a lot about painting, though", said the other.

"In a way."

Because Mr. Ethiopia was a man who was obliged to know something, that was why he popped up from behind the long grass in the first place, to be an observer, ambassador for the huddled union of men that is the city, where people are held together by the things they feel necessities to do for one another. One of the necessities was to know what the other people are doing, so that finally the people create a job that entails codifying the lives and habits of other people they would normally never meet, maybe never do.

Similarly for oneself. As he had thought earlier in the day, there is no necessity to be a painter, in relation with the hayfield, for instance. "I wished I could of gone to painting school and learnt all the tricks", the farm man had said. Farm boy, then. But what of obligation there? In the country.

"What are you going to do with it when you're finished?" asked the newcomer.

What indeed.

"Sometimes I keep them, in stacks in my painting room. Some I scrape the paint off when I'm short on canvas. Some I give to my friends, for favours, or nothing", he said.

"Dont you ever sell them?"

"Not yet. Is that why you wanted to be a painter? To sell them?"

"I dont know. It dont matter anyway."

The newcomer looked at the painting, as if sneaking a look at it. Or pretending he wasnt all that interested. Then he looked back at the hayfield. He put the flute in his back pocket, and touched his hands together, as in preparing for a long physical job, lifting a stove, or stacking a truckload of lumber.

"I wouldnt mind buying it off you", he said.

As if that was the reason he'd put the flute in his back pocket, to hide it behind him, from both of them, so that he couldnt have to buy it with that.

"I mean I aint got any money, but I was thinking, I mean from looking at you look at it. I could give you that there," he said, waving at it.

"What?"

"I mean a piece of it. You know. A bale or something, when we cut it."

Immediately Gordon thought: I want it. But what would he do with it? Eat it, maybe, when he lost his job in the fall. And on the other hand, what would that man do with the painting? Certainly he couldnt hang it in the house, what with the father there. In the barn was a strange notion, a painting of a hayfield hanging in a dark hay barn

"It isnt a very good painting", said Gordon.

"That dont matter."

"It's a bad painting", said Gordon.

"Come on."

"It's a deal", said Gordon.

So he stood beside the easel, watching the man walk down the bare dust line that was the road to his house, walking crookedly over to one side, holding the big canvas from the other side, so the wet paint wouldnt hit his denim suit.

Gordon put the painting things away and sat for awhile, finishing the rest of the coffee from the thermos. He looked out over the hayfield again, trying to see a portion that would pack into a bale. He threw out the dregs of the coffee in a swirl that caught the slanting sunlight, brown. And he started walking back, thinking, you do one painting a day, one sitting, and you dont come back to it. If you dont make it that day, you try again the next. There is no limitation on the chances you get. He took a last look at the hayfield in the slanting light and smiled. Then he went down out of sight, on the other side of the railroad ridge.