

The Long Way Home

by Timothy A. Herwig

EXTRACT

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Published in this first edition in 2022 by:

Triarchy Press
Axminster, UK

www.triarchypress.net

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBNs

Print: 978-1-913743-60-4

ePub: 978-1-913743-61-1

PDF: 978-1-913743-62-8

Week Four

Lansing, IA to Albert Lea, MN



The Valley of the Upper Iowa

The road follows a little rise and reveals fields of uniformly tall corn in row upon countless row stretching across the broad floodplain of the Upper Iowa River. Ahead stands a single, solitary hill covered with pine and hardwood trees. It is surrounded by fields of corn like a carefully selected stone placed on the raked sand of an enormous Zen garden.

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A well-tended farm stands on the high ground to the left of the road. There is road construction ahead. A teenage boy is working in the yard. I hold out an empty water bottle and ask, "Would you mind if I filled it up?" His dad comes out of a large machine shed wiping his hands on a dirty rag.

As they walk toward me, their feet unsettle a fine white dust that covers the grass. They each wear Red Wing work boots, blue jeans, white T-shirts (the dad's bearing a knockoff of Grant Wood's *American Gothic*), and billed caps, the boy's fashionably curled under, his dad's straight across. They both have powerful forearms like a Popeye cartoon.

They are happy to oblige my request and direct me to an outdoor faucet near the machine shed. They wait as I fill up both bottles.

We talk for a while. I ask them about the road construction and the dust.

The father replies, "The dust isn't the problem; it's that the county has decided to punch another road through our fields; that's the problem. They couldn't just widen the old one; they had to build a new one twice as wide as the first."

I ask why. He replies, "It used to be that roads were built either side of a valley. Here where the river flows east/west, the road was built on the north, as the sun is in the southern sky all winter. In that way the sun melts the snow and dries out the mud earlier in the spring, making the road passable sooner than if it was built on the south bank. If you build a road along the side of a valley and not across it, you leave more land free to farm."

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An old wrought-iron bridge crosses the river. The wooden plank deck is scattered with gravel kicked up by passing cars. A sign on an upright notes the bridge number and that it was forged in Chicago, like so much of the infrastructure of the Midwest from that time. The river is shallow and passes quickly by.

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Mount Hope Church stands above the north side of the valley. It is a sad little church clad in dirty white siding. Somewhere beneath there must be a nice mid-nineteenth-century building.

I sit down in the shade of a tall cedar and look out onto the small graveyard. After a while, I get up and have a look around.

There is a single father and son gravestone for Joseph and John Williamson: Joseph was born in Ireland in 1798 and died in 1878. His son John served in the Union cavalry in the Civil War and died in 1876 at the age of forty-four. Had he lived with his dad all those years and never married? And what were Joseph's last years like, living on after his son had died?

Then there is Mrs. Sarah Hammond, who was born in 1798, and Jacob Singleton, born in 1795, a veteran of the

War of 1812. Both stones were cut from white marble. Mrs. Hammond's is rectangular with an image of an open bible carved in relief above the inscription. Jacob Singleton's is an obelisk like a small chess piece. The lives of Jacob Singleton's wife and children are noted on the gravestone, but there is no sign of Mr. Hammond's grave. Either he was buried elsewhere or, like many markers made of marble, his had long ago been broken into fragments by the frost, dissolved in the rain and snow, and swallowed up by the earth.

Coming across graves of people born in the eighteenth century there on the shoulder of a river valley in northeastern Iowa makes this place seem even more remote from the present moment. What must they have seen that now is largely forgotten and almost entirely vanished from the landscape? Now all that is left of them is a gravestone that over time lists with the ebb and flow of the land from winter frost to springtime thaw, slowly eroding until the inscription marking its purpose is wiped clean. Like a pale ghost it hovers over the dark earth at twilight or all but disappears in winter, white against white, as if it had never been there. And then it is gone like the life it was placed there to mark.

I lie down in the aromatic shade beneath an ancient cedar and feel the almost imperceptible slowness by which the landscape changes, where a century is no more than a minute increment of time measured in millennia.

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An historical marker on the side of the road indicates that a feature up ahead is called "Elephant Hill." According to the marker, early settlers had used it to navigate the valley's twists and turns. The hill stands alone, dark green silhouetted against the bright blue sky. And after a while, the elephant slowly emerges like a 3-D image in the Sunday paper that

suddenly appears as you relax your gaze and allow it to focus your attention. There it is, just as described, an elephant lying on its haunches with its trunk extended out in front, coalesced from indistinguishable elements to form a single image right out of a Rudyard Kipling story or from a colorful circus poster. Had I been driving, there would not have been time to recognize it. A farmer living in the mid-nineteenth century had plenty of time to imagine elephants.

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The road holds tight to the northern side of the valley. Because of the road construction there is no traffic. The quiet is liquid. Birds fly among the trees and over the fields like fish darting across aquatic grasses swaying in the sunlight within the slow-moving current of an enormous river.

Dorchester is five miles ahead. The heat of the late afternoon is intense. What water I have left is as warm as bathwater. Having left the valley behind, the highway begins to climb. It crosses a bridge high above a rocky stream. The road is busy with traffic traveling to and from the Iowa-Minnesota border.

The bridge has no shoulder. At a break in the traffic, I walk on as quickly as the sun and heat of the day will allow. The bridge cannot be much more than fifteen or twenty yards long. Ahead the highway climbs up and around the base of a ridge, then out of sight.

As I reach the midway point, not one but two semis come round the bend and bear down on me. Too confused to run ahead or back, I sit down on the concrete embankment at the side of the bridge, swing my feet over, and drop.

With a jolt, I land on an unseen ledge. A cow stands in the stream below looking up at me. The first truck roars by, and then the second. Shaken, I scramble back up and get off the bridge as quickly as possible.

## About the Author

Though *The Long Way Home* is my first published book, I have been a writer, performer, teacher, and student of literature and the humanities for all my adult life. Most important to me was the period in which I was a performance artist. As a performing artist, I was interested in how a poet or writer transforms an image into metaphor. I imagined a physical space or moment of time between the formation of a metaphor and when a writer or poet writes it on a piece of paper or taps it out on a keyboard. I wanted to emote for an audience the first words of discovery.

It is in this spirit that I wrote *The Long Way Home*. I have tried to imagine the present moment using the power of discovery to invite the reader into the same experience. Wherever possible, I've used context to inform each image with meaning rather than explaining its importance. I hope this approach will help readers imagine and understand my experience and also to imagine themselves undergoing a similar experience of self-discovery.

I also worked for many years in the social/economic justice field of community development. In that time, I worked both for a bank and a federal regulatory agency. Community development largely came about because of the passage of the Community Reinvestment Act in 1977. It is the last major piece of federal civil rights legislation. Through it, the federal government monitors the extent to which banks provide access to financial services for low- and moderate-income people and low- and moderate-income communities. Because of the historic correlation between race and poverty in America, this has meant working primarily in communities of color. In my final years, I worked on community development in economically distressed communities in the rural Midwest.

I live in the City of Chicago with my wife and our son.

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# Reflections

*The Long Way Home* gives new meaning to Emerson's words: "It's not the destination, it's the journey." As Herwig opens to the land during his quest for that elusive state of being known as home, he opens to memories of childhood, family, and to the histories of all the idiosyncratic people he encounters along the way. His photographic journey transcends time and place in the best possible way, and ultimately leads him right back where he belongs.

– Djola Branner

*Professor of Theater, George Mason University. His first book of collected plays, sash & trim and other plays, was a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award in 2014*

Seeking to exorcise demons both recent and enduring, Tim Herwig set out to walk from his adopted home of Chicago into the arms of friends and family 500 miles north. Along the way, he rediscovers a sense of self with the help of dozens of ordinary Midwesterners who share their own trials and triumphs. Part aching memoir, part meticulous travelogue, *The Long Way Home* is both a masterful portrait of small-town America and an inspiring tale of hard-earned redemption.

– Craig Cox, author of *Storefront Revolution: Food Co-ops and the Counterculture*

Intensely personal, Herwig's *The Long Way Home* describes the long and literal walking journey he takes as an adult to his home in Minnesota. While doing so, he recalls in vivid details the significant and life changing events of his past in this coming-of-age story. Young readers will find comfort

and hope in the stories of challenge and triumph while more mature ones will find themselves reflecting on their own journeys as they, like Herwig, are inspired to discover their way home to the people they are.

– *Paul Goodnature, teacher, Humanities, Albert Lea Senior High School. 1987 Minnesota Teacher of the Year*

Timothy Herwig illuminates the literature of walking with profound observation and self-contemplation. His curiosity about, and love of, people, land and history shines through every word. What makes this book particularly special is that as Tim journeys, he realizes that, at least in part, it is helping him heal from the trauma of teenage sexual abuse and a painful, fractured marriage. The landscape, weather and individuals he meets entertain, cajole, nurture, threaten, and push him to go deeper into memories and dreams. He wrestles with his demons, even while Mother Nature guides and holds him in a safe space until he comes at the end of his journey to a place of peace. Tim's humility, honesty, transparency, and authenticity is deeply engaging and refreshing. You walk with him and see yourself. As a therapist/healer who helps people heal from trauma and find a spiritual light within nature to guide their life, I highly recommend this book. It shines like a brilliant gem into the soul.

– *Rachel Mann PhD, Sacred Activist, Social Scientist, Healer and Spiritual Teacher, [rachelmannphd.com](http://rachelmannphd.com)*

*The Long Way Home* is an authentically and beautifully rendered memoir of the internal trauma that results when adult mentors sexually violate the vulnerable youth who trust them. More importantly, it is the story of what healing is like – a literal and metaphoric journey that ends with wholeness, but a wholeness imbued with a wisdom that comes from stepping into what is most feared. It is not a

book about winning over or vanquishing the past – it is a book about accepting that the past can't be undone, while showing that it can be disarmed and embraced, gingerly, in our own journeys. *The Long Way Home* is about the potential that comes when we trust our bodies to heal our minds and hearts and is an example of the gifts that come from reflecting deeply and honestly on our experiences of the world around us. Without sentimentality or cliché, *The Long Way Home* invites us to imagine our own journeys to being at peace with ourselves and with the world as it is.

– Keith Morton, Professor of Public and Community Services at Providence College. Author of *Getting Out: Youth Gangs, Violence, and Positive Change*

Tim Herwig's journey from Chicago to Minneapolis is more than a memoir of a walk across several of the United States, it is also a traversing of states of mind, the poetic sense of time, place and light, and a lyric evocation of geography and history (both cultural and personal). Reading this is to know both the man and the Midwest he clearly loves.

Loren Niemi, *Storyteller / Author of What Haunts Us, winner of the 2020 Midwest Book award for 'Sci-Fi / Fantasy / Horror / Paranormal Fiction'*

*The Long Way Home* is a remarkable treasure of exquisitely crafted prose that reads like poetry. As he walks from Illinois to Minnesota, Tim Herwig describes his journey in vivid detail with glorious and highly informative descriptions of geography, history, landscapes, trees and plants, architecture, and rural life. This is also the record of a journey of coming home to the self as the author walks through childhood ghosts, an exploration of his past, and ultimately finds a new sense of place and home within.

– Catherine Pines, Ph.D., DePaul University Family and Community Services, Coordinator of Training (emeritus)