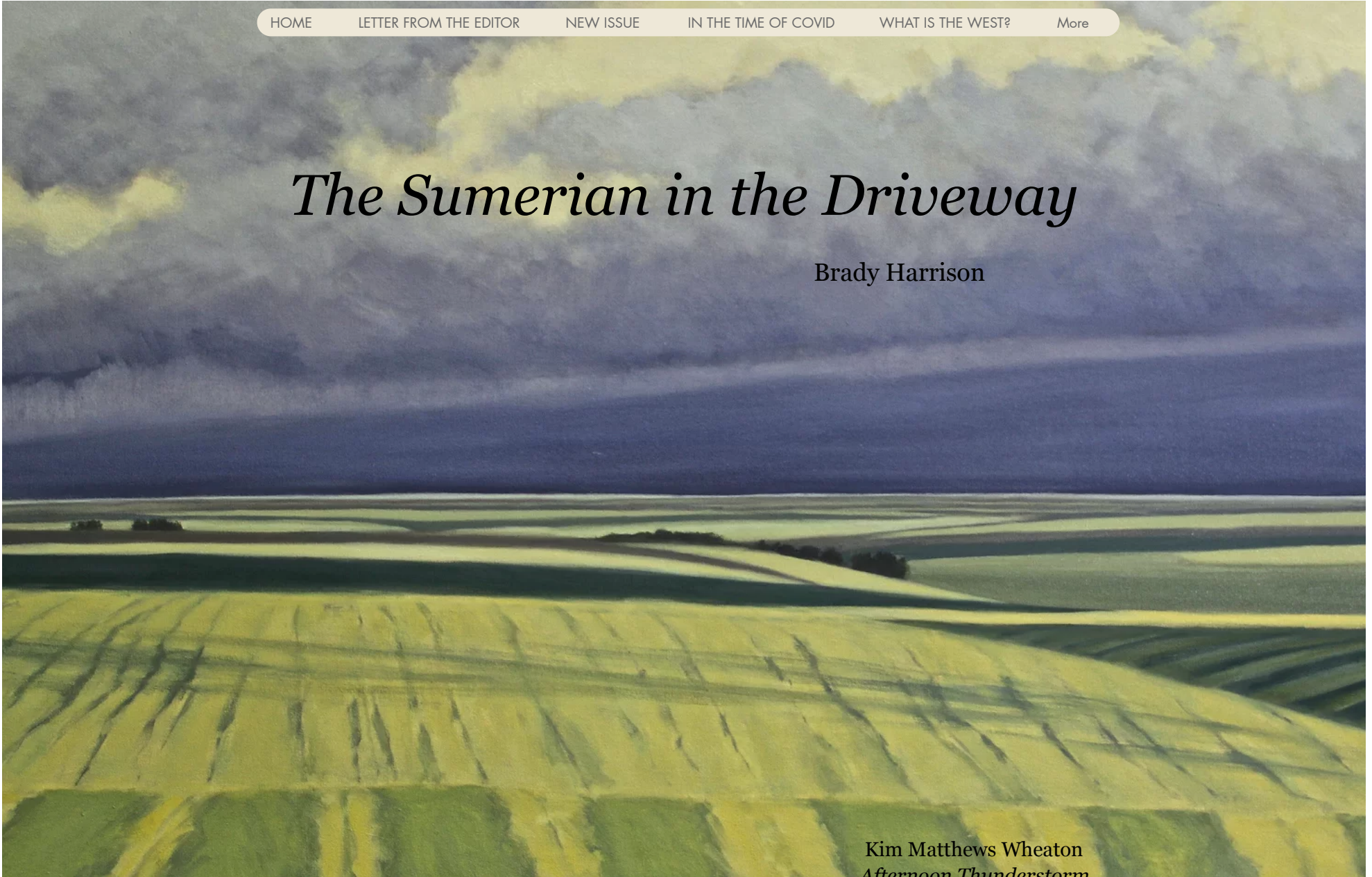


The Sumerian in the Driveway

Brady Harrison



Kim Matthews Wheaton
Afternoon Thunderstorm

Some winter nights, after hockey, with the Milky Way embedded in the tin vault of the great An who created and sustains the universe, the sky wagon, battle wagon, Ma-Gid-Da, as if falling from the heavens, its great, invisible horses in flight, armored, I used to grab a chair from the front deck and visit with the Sumerian who lived in the driveway.

“Tell me, Flynn,” he would say, the massive darkness of the foothill looming above us, the Rattlesnake valley below, “are you not worried, this very night, about the fate of the people on the faraway island shaped like a leaping cat? Shall we not do our part to fight the tyranny that oppresses them? Shall we not do our part to lift their spirits and cry out in the name of freedom?” The Sumerian, whose name was Akram, had an elaborate sense of humor.

“If you want a drink, just say so.”

He was from the city of Ur, and although he wasn't a priest, he had a full, wavy, square-cut beard and a white tunic fringed with gold stitching and bracelets over his compact biceps. He wore thick-soled leather sandals and, as a caravaner, had the ropey calves and thighs of someone who walked great distances in pursuit of trade. He never complained about the cold, but after I gave him an old North Face down jacket and a well-worn pair of ski pants that my daughter had left behind when she went away to college, he seemed grateful, yet he could never make up his mind whether the toque I offered did a better job inside or outside his bronze helmet. He wasn't tall—a little over five feet—but he had assured me more than once that, for a Sumerian, he was actually pretty tall.

When at ease, and when, perhaps, he thought no one was watching, he had the habit of standing sideways, legs wide apart, both arms raised.

One night, as I was rooting around in the side-pockets of my hockey bag for a couple of roadkill beers, he said that he thought that the all-but-frozen PBRs were evidence of Nanna-Su'en's goodwill toward the people of Ur: “Can you imagine how good this would taste on a hot, dusty day in Susa, trying to get the Elamites to part with the sacks of tin they had persuaded the sand-blasted, idiot Mundigakians to trade for grain? I shouldn't complain about the Mundigakians, but, like camels, they go days without water and never take baths. They smell like rocks and feet.”

“The Sumerians had beer.” I know because he had told me, and because, after I noticed a Sumerian living in the driveway, I did some research.

“Sure, lukewarm, and we sipped it with straws from communal bowls. That’s a lot of backwash, as you can imagine. Even so, Alulu, one of the brewers in Ur, made wonderful beer, even if it was thicker than porridge. I owe him for five Silas of his best that I took with me on our last trip. How much, after 4300 years, do you think that will be, with interest?”

After a couple of Kokanees, or a Cuba Libre with plenty of lime, he always wanted to play driveway hockey. “I’ll be Number 4, Bobby Orr. And you take goal and be Ken Dryden of the Habs.”

I had made the mistake of telling him about how, when I was a kid, we used to play hockey after school on the frozen, ice-rutted streets of north Edmonton. I told him about the hockey stars of those days, the ones we idolized and wanted to be, and I showed him video of a few games on my laptop. At first, he was alarmed—how do they move so fast? why are they so tiny? do they also use their sticks as spears?—but as he got used to the technology he was hooked. When I got a new Dell from work, I gave him my old Toshiba. Whenever I was going through things and packing up boxes to take to Secret Seconds or Good Will, I’d ask him if he wanted or needed a trivet from Sweden or a pashmina from a street vendor in New York or a plastic pill crusher from CVS.

He’d shake his head. “I don’t think so. What are they for?”

When he was online, he wanted to order things from Amazon, but since I didn’t hassle him about the porn—did I know any of these women? did they live around here, by any chance? could gaba truly become so large, yet be so round and remain so near the collar bones?—he didn’t press me too hard for my password or credit card number.

“You want to play again? Grown men don’t play hockey in the driveway, especially not at 1:00 a.m.”

“I need the exercise. Besides, who’ll see us?”

He was right. The driveway was sudden and steep and curved toward the garage before flattening out, and we were sheltered from the street by the retaining wall and arborvitae. Even if a car drove by, very likely they would only see shadows swaying like pine boughs in a strong breeze. Sometimes, the carrot-colored street hockey ball would ricochet off the goalpost or garage door and thwack the house nestled into the hillside a few steps below.

As usual, he won. He had a hard, accurate shot, and he whipped the hard ball past my shoulder or just over my boot and stick and although he preferred to play out, he was very scrupulous about equal time—“You be Phil Esposito, and I’ll be Gump Worsley”—and would dive about and crash onto the concrete without fear. He was a decent goalie, but I kept my distance since he would now and then swing the heavy goalie stick like an axe.

“You have to keep the crease clear so you can see the puck,” he said.

“Fine, but we’re playing a friendly game.”

“As in love and war, there are no friends in hockey.”

“You hit me in the shins again with that goalie stick, and there aren’t going to be any Sumerians in hockey.”

After the game, I would shake the snow off the small Weber I kept beside the garage and pour a bit of white gas onto some scraps of wood. We would pull up our chairs and Akram would admit that it was a miracle, wasn’t it, that even a measure of amber warmth from the country of my ancestors across the sea could be brought on ships and then on great, roaring machines across these United States of America, a wonder, indeed, that something as fragile as glass could survive such distances and that two friends, huddled near a fire, could revive themselves with that amber warmth, could settle around a fire and speak of things that need to be spoken of or of things that were nonsense but worthy of consideration nonetheless? Did I think that David Thompson, when he stood on this very mountain and sketched the valley, when he looked down at the place where the Blackfeet would lie in ambush for the Salish as they made their way east to hunt bison, had a drop or two to warm him on cold nights?

Akram liked Wikipedia.

“On the rocks?”

“Neat.”

One night, as we stared into the sometimes crimson, sometimes violet coals, he asked if he had ever told me about the journey after which nothing was ever the same?

I shook my head.

He nodded, and said that maybe it was time. This is what he told me:

We were going to be gone for many months, maybe a year or more, a journey that, after years of toiling in caravans, would have allowed us to save enough that I could become a merchant and would not have to be away from my family for months at a time.

You understand? A journey to change our circumstances, after years of work and scrimping? To become a merchant, to be home every night, instead of trekking across countless da-na, across deserts and great plains of rock, all the time hoping, with each trade, to increase our wealth that one grain of gold more? The simplest thing in the world: one last trip to change our family's fortunes.

And, by then, having traveled many times with my grandfathers and father, I knew all the routes, knew every river, stream, oasis, pirate town, and mountain pass. From Ur, packing grain and farm tools, we would follow the Id-Ugina north and west into the lands of the Akkadians, trading along the way, and finally, after a year and a half, back into Sumer and home—home!—to Ur.

Simple: trudge, trade, increase our wealth by one grain of gold each time, and, finally, reach home and begin our lives as merchants and not caravaneers. Let someone else do the walking, the bartering, the praying for water.

Except that on the tenth day after our departure my son, Naram, got a toothache.

Also a simple thing: a beginning soreness at the back of the jaw. At first, he had some pain, a little discomfort. Then, a few days on, the pain got worse, and there was some puffiness and his skin was, at first, warm to the touch, and then hot.

We were, as the saying goes, in the middle of nowhere. Before the fever began to spread, we reached a small village, but they had no wise men or women and when I looked in my son's mouth, all I could see was inflamed, mottled flesh: a new zu, no doubt, where there was no room for a new zu. What, then, was the best course of action? We set up camp and rested for a couple of days—and my son became neither better nor worse. We were wasting time, and I decided to send him home to his mother. We knew a man, in Ur, who could give my son something to numb the pain before cutting into the gum and yanking out the unwanted zu.

I gave Naram one of his cousins, a good man, as a guide and equipped them with plenty of food and water and a horse and while we headed for the north and the west, they turned to the south and the east. When I glanced back, not long after we had parted, they had vanished from sight.

The next several months went about as well as I hoped: no brilliant victories, but no inglorious defeats, either.

We had left in the fall, and by winter we had turned south and traded spices in Jericho that we had secured from Meluhha sailors the summer before in exchange for the tin we had wrangled, at great cost, from the Elamites. We debated, because we were doing well, whether we should push across the desert to the lands of the Egyptians, but decided to keep to our original plan: we decided not to press our luck.

By spring, we were almost in the lands of the Hittites. Hearing about the possibility of trade in this village, or that, we had worked our way towards the Amanus mountains and finally, in need of rest, had set up camp along an all-but dry river bed that ran down from snowy, jagged peaks and out onto a great dusty plain. We had been pushing hard, and I decided that a few days respite and mending were in order. For the first day, we did nothing but doze and sip water from the little stream and cover ourselves from the sun although the air was thin and cold. On the second day, we pretended to re-reed some baskets and panniers and to repair the leather harnesses, but mostly we did as we did on the first day: snoozed and wished for beer and dreamed of women.

On the third day, at about noon, there was a faint rumbling from the mountains above us, and then, in what seemed to be only moments, the rumbling turned into a roar and a wall of water, rock, trees, and mud came cascading down the dry river bed and hit our camp.

As I think about it now, I believe that somewhere high in the mountains a hard and sudden rain must have fallen, or perhaps an ice dam broke on the river, and, all at once, where there had been no river, only a trickling rivulet, there was now a rushing, deafening barrage and it swept over us and drew us inside and churned us up with boulders and broken pines and sludge and it swept us a da-na and then another out onto the plain in a great filthy, frothing roar, dropping the bodies of my men and animals here and there as it lost its fury and spread out on the dry land.

We did not all die, of course. But no one was left unscathed. Of my twenty men, ten were drowned or torn to pieces, and of the remaining ten, most had broken bones and severe

lacerations. My right knee was bent backward and my left elbow was gashed and so swollen that I could not move it at all.

“Lucky for you I sustained those injuries, or the hockey wouldn’t even be close.”

“Don’t kid yourself: I take it easy on you because you limp like an old dog.”

Somehow, a few of the camels survived, but none of the horses and almost all of the carts were destroyed.

Worst of all, the small wooden box that contained all of our earnings had been swept away.

I sent the least injured man for help, and while the three or four who could not move were secured in ragged shelters in a new camp, the remaining few, however badly wounded, scoured the plain for the wooden box. Everywhere they looked, there was mud and debris, and they hobbled about as well as they could, and dug and guessed and while they never found the box, after three weeks of looking they found a vein several šu-du-a long containing about half our wealth, a mix of silver and gold coins.

I sent a prayer to An when I heard the news. All, then, was not lost.

Yet we were farther from home than we had ever been, and while the nearby villagers were kind to us, we had lost almost all of our goods and we were beat up and sick. In the early days after the flood, they could have killed us in our sleep.

We spent almost six months huddled against the mountains, recovering our strength and making small journeys in search of trade. Slowly, we recuperated enough to begin again in earnest. In the early fall, we organized ourselves into a caravan of about half our original size and strength, and we set out to salvage what we could of our original plan: we would resume trading as well as we were able, and we would follow our intended route and try, as much as possible, to gain back what we had lost.

I was not without hope, you see.

Yet it seemed as if our luck, like our wealth, had been scoured away by the flood. We would trade for a horse, and one of our camels would go lame. We would follow a rumor about metals to trade only to find an abandoned village: everywhere there were signs of life, but nobody, not even a stray dog, in sight. And, where, until our luck turned, we had

been able to gain a little on each trade, now we lost heavily. For the next few months, the harder we tried, the worse we did.

Nevertheless, slowly, slowly, we won back some of our confidence, and by the time we reached Ur, almost three years after we had left, we had recovered most of what we had lost in the flood. By the time I paid off the men who had survived, and set aside portions for the families of those who had died, I had less than half of what I needed to open my business.

But it didn't matter, because when I arrived at my house, it was empty. Thieves, it seemed, had taken everything. My wife was nowhere to be found, my five daughters had vanished, and my son—my son, whom I had last seen as a ripple in the heat across an expanse of super-heated sand!—where was he?

I staggered around what had been our home, the cardinal point of our lives, and it was a ruin, our bedroom burned, the roof caved-in. As I stumbled about, weeping, one of my neighbors arrived at the doorway and he explained, as well as he could, what had transpired.

My wife, who was still beautiful and who had always been the subject of interest among the worst sort of men, found herself, he told me, beset by suitors. My wife, ever faithful, would not allow them into our home, but they became bolder and bolder until one night there was a scream, confusion, a lamp knocked over and a fire, and my wife was murdered, stabbed a dozen times, and with my wife dead and no word of me or my men, matters became worse and worse. The daughters were taken, and of the five, three were almost certainly dead and the remaining two held captive in Uruk, maybe, or Lagash.

My wife murdered because—

My daughters taken—

And my son—

Gathering what friends and family I could, we traveled to Uruk and Lagash and found my two youngest daughters, alive, not well, but alive.

We killed the men who had taken each of my daughters, and we killed their wives and children, and we killed their old ones, we killed them all, and the few of us who survived brought my daughters back to my house and what few relations and friends I had left

helped me to rebuild our home and our lives and many years later, when we had, at last, prospered, I left many guards at my house and yard and I went in search of my son and nephew. I took my horse and my two most ferocious men, and I retraced the route we had followed on those first days of the caravan. When we located the impoverished village where they had no wise men or women, we turned around in an effort to follow what might have been Naram and his cousin's course toward home. Everyone we met, we interrogated: had they seen a boy, perhaps quite ill, traveling these years ago with another man who looked not unlike the boy?

Most said they had never seen such a pair; a few said, maybe, but it was so long ago and who could remember?

As you will have surmised, I never found him. I looked back over my shoulder, one day, as he was riding toward home and I was riding, I hoped, toward our fortune, and he as if evaporated into the air. I loved him dearly. He was a sweet boy, with no meanness, and he seemed happiest when he was living as his grandfathers had. And I don't even know what I did, what any of us might have done, to be played so by the gods or fates or whatever it is that pushes our lives this way and that.

I leaned over and poured some whiskey into his tumbler.

“Over the years,” he said, drinking, “I made many journeys, trying other possible routes, trying to find just a little bit of him and his cousin that I could bring home. And, one time, while I traveled alone, a sandstorm enveloped me and then, for reasons I cannot explain, I was here, in your driveway.”

We sat in silence for a long time. Every now and then, I would add a few more scraps of wood to the fire, and the snow fell gently on our toques and shoulders and laps. At last, Akram spoke. “Do you know why I told you this story?”

I nodded. “You want to go home.”

“And for other reasons.”

I bobbed my head.

As we stared into the fire, we talked it over, whether he would ever be able to find himself at home again, whether he would ever be anywhere again. We talked it over—I told him he was welcome to live in my driveway until the day I moved away or died, and longer, perhaps, than that—but he knew, and I knew, that the time had come.

The next morning, I hitched up the old sailboat that my wife's brother had given us but that I hadn't used in years, and pulled it out of the driveway. I took it to Good Will and dropped it in the parking lot with a note, a bit of a dirty trick, but I had made a promise. Then, when I got back home, I took apart the cairn I had stacked on top of the retaining wall on the high side of the driveway one day not long after we had first moved in. For good measure, I cut down one of the arborvitae that stood between the street lamp and the driveway and that the deer had nibbled into the shape of a pinecone on a stick. Well into the evening, about the time I would be leaving for the beer leagues if it were Thursday or Sunday, I glanced out the front window at the driveway, bathed, as it always was in winter, in pale blue from the street light, the goalie stick leaning against the retaining wall.



Brady Harrison's fiction, poetry, and essays have appeared in *Cardinal Sins*, *Cerise Press*, *J Journal*, *The Long Story*, *Mattoid*, *The Prairie Journal of Canadian Literature*, *Serving House Journal*, and *Wascana Review*, among other literary journals. His fiction has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and a novella, "The Dying Athabaskan," won the inaugural Publisher's Long Story Prize from *Twelve Winters Press*. He lives in Missoula, Montana.

