

LAND OF THE DEAD

by Rod Clark

Every year when trees turn red and golden, I contemplate a visit to the Land of the Dead, Wisconsin's most under-appreciated theme park. At this writing, a day or two before All Hallows Eve in late October, I am sitting in my yard, sipping Oktoberfest beer, and thinking of people I have lost and would like to see again. The harvest is not all grim though. A late Indian summer has enchanted the land, evoking strange fantasies. The air is soft as velvet, and the fantastic old maple arches its bright lemon foliage over the garage like a ripe fruit ready to fall. Suddenly I am deep in what Bradbury called "October Country," a place where sumac blazes scarlet at the foot of orange hills. Winter lurks just beyond those hills—reminding us that all things end; but here and now at the bright rim of things is a place where present, past, and future flow into a single stream, and spirits mingle, forgetting or not caring whether they are alive or dead. It is time, I tell myself, to be a tourist once again. I pour a little Oktoberfest on the ground, in an ancient Wisconsin ritual. One for the dead. The Land of the Dead is not as well known as many other Wisconsin tourist destinations. Much less famous for example, than the House on the Rock near Spring Green, or the Jellystone Park up near Fremont. The LOTD is a bit off the beaten track, and difficult to locate, unless you are dying to get there. You have to feel as much as find your way. Just take W52 north to P29, skirt the Dells, and head out into that dark alphabet of country roads east of Mortville. Then (and this is the tricky part), look for the turnoff to Sumac County Px29B. The turnoff is easy to miss, elbowing back to the left, about halfway between Bratworld—that's braht as in "bratwurst"—and the International Horseradish Museum, following the Stick River as it winds its way among the glacial hills like a snake of muddy silver. (If you reach the crossroads at Hootville, where that guy built a palace out of stucco and bottle caps at the edge of the woods, you have gone too far. Turn back and try again!) Once you have made the turn, the rest of the journey has a certain inevitability, like an eight ball bobbling gently in a pocket about to sweetly descend. As I navigate the curves along the Stick River in the old truck, it occurs to me that while the world has many fine landscapes, few are prettier than this. Rounding the final bend, I see the huge sandy spit where the Land of the Dead rises above the river like the towers and tents of an ancient carnival. The day darkens a little as I park at the edge of the lot and walk across the gravel toward the gloomy little gift shop where the tickets are normally sold. There are little tombstones of polished granite and tiny silver shovels you can use as cheese knives displayed in the window along with other cheery trinkets, but the place has a dark and dusty look that gives me creeps. Just as I am thinking of turning back, the sun creeps from beneath a cloud, and I hear the cheerful barking of dogs down by the river.

I wander back across the lot and descend the bank. A tall blond man with his back to me is throwing sticks out into the river, and the dogs are joyfully plunging in and swimming out to retrieve them. All but one small and sturdy specimen, a genetically challenged black lab and Bassett mix with short legs, who races back and forth along the edge of the water, barking furious encouragement. Something catches in my throat. Only one dog in the world ever moved like that, like a small black torpedo through the woods and fields: the amazing Morley Underfoot, whom Melanie and I put to rest just weeks ago at the age of almost seventeen. Ancient and stiff no more! I watch in amazement as he makes one of his legendary leaps, snatching a stick right out of the air on its way to the river. I call his name and he runs to me, planting his paws on my stomach, stick still in his mouth, stub of tail wagging furiously, ears in happy mode, nose soft as black velvet. He was never much of a water dog, but on grass, leaves or snow, he had no peer. Hell, I think—the trip is worth it just for this! After saying hello, he dashes off again, certain I suppose, that time is nothing now, that I will always be there to come to. Other furry friends dash up to greet me. Nana, Mel's German shepherd, who has been gone since '93, is the unquestioned queen of sticks. She is always first to reach the wood in the water and no one challenges the possession. Almost knocking me over at first, she makes a little circle of joy in front of me and shakes vigorously, showering me with doggy wetness. She crouches playfully and dances in a little circle again. "Where is Melanie?" She seems to ask. Before I can answer, she hears a branch splash in the water and races back to plunge once more into the river of sticks. And there are still more: the copper-colored cocker spaniel named Snicker from my childhood in Shorewood Hills who always came to me when I was crying, comes up and licks at my shoe. Morley's friend Gatsby greets me like an old friend, and Michael and Linda's dog Holly, gone some years now, races to my feet, and lowers her head guiltily between her paws. And here is my twin brother Steve's wonderful black Labrador, Jazmine, who—Steve??!! He walks toward me with a stick still in his hand and the sun behind him, making a halo for an instant of his hair. Tall, sturdy, apple-cheeked. Wearing jeans, boots, a heavy shirt of red corduroy. He hugs me like a grizzly and ruffles my hair. "Ho! Ho!" He says. "Put on a bit a weight, I see! Still driving that piece of junk? When are you going to get a real vehicle? Still married to that girl I found for ya?" I cannot slip into the banter easily. In fact I can barely speak. There is too much to say; love to tell, arguments to finish, words crowding my throat. It has been more than eight years since a sudden illness carried him away, and I still reach for the phone at least once a week to ask him how to repair something, tell him about a science fiction book I have just read, or just to hear a voice that sounds more like mine than anyone else's. Steve whistles to Jazmine, and beckons me imperiously. We climb into an aluminum boat at the edge of the river, and the dog leaps after us. I hear faint shouting behind me. A roly-poly gentleman with thinning hair and glasses has dashed out of the gift shop and is waving his arms at us in frustration.

He looks like the vice principal from our old high school, and I suspect he is upset about the fact that I have inadvertently violated one of the rules. "Come Ba-a-a-ck!" he screams, but Steve casually pushes off from the shore and squeezes the bulb on the gas line to prime the outboard. "Looks like you slipped under the fence, again," he says, almost admiringly. "That was always your style: avoid the gatekeepers—make your own way. Took me ages to learn that." The motor starts with a single pull, and we worm our sweet blue way upstream among sandbars, waving at occasional groups of picnickers. Bright foliage whispers along the banks. It is almost too beautiful to bear. Steve always loved rivers. He painted in the style of "the group of seven," a fantastically colored impressionistic style favored by a small group of Canadian artists in the early 20th century. It included much work inspired by the boundary waters north of Minnesota and the Canadian Shield country that stretches all the way to Hudson Bay. Clarks have been sailing to and from the island provinces and along the inland waterways of maple leaf land for hundreds of years, and our family has always been happiest when we are gathered near the water. As we turn into a new channel, the riverscape changes. All of the sudden, Steve's favorite waterfalls from all over Wisconsin have somehow been transported here, their frothing streams now gathered mysteriously into the river of sticks. "I'm going to paint 'em all, now," he shouts proudly over the soft roaring of his friends. "I have all the time in the world." "Neat trick!" I shout over the noise of the motor. "You think that's cool?" he cries, "Watch this!" He throttles down to a quiet chug, and makes a cast with his rod into the channel behind us with his free hand. Almost immediately, the water

explodes behind us and a giant muskie, spangled in orange, green and gold leaps at the sky and u-turns back to the water. The fish puts on a great show, racing back and forth as Steve reels him toward the net, until I get the feeling it is all a performance for my benefit. Finally the struggle ends in a fury of fins and white thunder at the bow. The muskie gasps up at me from the net, dagger-toothed, jewel-eyed—the largest I have ever seen. Steve dehooks, and lowers his catch back in the water, gently working the current through his gills. The leviathan raises its head and winks at me. “Never caught one like me, didja?” it says, and then with a bronze flip of its tail it is gone. Steve squints in the sun and sighs “Not much left of this visit,” he says. “Enjoy it while you can.” A lump forms in my throat. Not much time—and there is so much more I want to do with him. Sit on the deck of the Canadian cabin sipping Kakabecka Falls Cream Lager (a beer that hasn’t been brewed in twenty years), tell him about sci-fi books I’ve been reading, listen to the loons laughing as evening falls. “Let’s go for it,” he says. The engine roars again. We cut down one channel and then another, emerging in a thick white mist. For a while we are lost in it, and I wonder if we will ever come out, but when the mist lifts we are deep in the world of Steve’s paintings, gliding among islands deep in Ontario, cruising along pink granite banks robed in moss of purple, pink and emerald, embroidery of lichen, and a finery of ferns.... Then, out of nowhere, there is the sound of a klaxon horn, and a boat with flashing lights pulls up alongside. “LOTD SECURITY” it says on the side. “Oh Jeez,” says Steve. “Not these clowns again.” The security guys look pretty much like they might anywhere: rent-a- cop suits, mirrored sunglasses.

A seedy looking young man wearing a white robe sits at the tiller eying me sternly. In his free hand is a shepherd’s crook with which he hooks my elbow in a proprietary manner. “Registration? Poetic license?” he demands. Thinking quickly, I slip him a twenty, and he seems slightly mollified. “You’re not supposed to be here,” he says sourly. “You’re suppose to enter through the gift shop! You’re supposed to buy a ticket and join the tour!” “You better go,” Steve says. “I’ll see you later.” “Later, bro’.” As I get into the security boat and we pull away, I’m thinking that the crook wielder at the tiller looks like an extra from a really bad Christmas movie. He also looks eerily familiar. Noticing my regard he shrugs in a surly fashion. “Pneumonia,” he explains. “Winter of 1982. I used to be a shepherd at Biblical Gardens. You used to work with me at Alphonso’s Pizzeria in Madison. Remember?” “Biblical Gardens? Isn’t that the Bible theme park up near Lake Delton on Parkway N?” He nods sadly. “I was a better shepherd than a pizza cook, so when I got here they put me on the downstairs tour.” Downstairs Tour?? The boat pulls up to the mouth of a large misty cave and I am hustled ashore. “Hurry,” he says, getting officious again. “You are holding up the whole damned tour! Virgil is going to be really pissed!” I follow him through a long, dark tunnel, emerging in a vast cavern where a fetid breeze fans our cheeks. At our feet, a rocky gray path winds across a dark bubbling mire from which moans are emanating, and little plumes of flame are escaping like the dying gasps of a Zippo lighter. Large winged things flap high overhead, uttering weird and haunting cries. Pale stalactites, dripping from craggy overhangs, glow strangely in the flicker of flashing cameras. On the path, a long line of middle-aged people in cruise-line garb take snapshots of the classical looking dudes and ladies striking Promethean poses, neck and waist deep in the fiery lake. Aside from the flames, and the tortures of the damned—which might (except for the melting temperature of wax) have been better suited to the Wax Museum in Wisconsin Dells—the scene reminds me of the Cave of the Mounds, that mysterious tourist-haunted cavern located near Blue Mounds just off County F. “Pretty impressive, huh?” whispers my shepherd guide, as I take in the view. “It’s based on The Divine Comedy, with lighting by Gil Helmsley and atmospherics by Gustave Doré—but of course these idiots wouldn’t know Dante Alighieri from Neil Simon!” It is not a very fragrant realm though, and the noisome air is uncomfortably warm. The line moves sluggishly, and the distant voice of the guide, a tall gowned character crowned with an olive branch, drones on endlessly in dreary blank verse. I gather there are even more grim floors of exhibits further down. “This is the pits!” I tell the shepherd. “Do I really have to stick with this stupid tour?” He glances around and leans toward me confidentially. “The truth is that in the Land of the Dead you have a lot more freedom than you might imagine, but no one is supposed to know that. Ticket revenue would drop like a stone. Virgil and the LOTD board would get very upset....” Off to my left I hear a faint, yet familiar voice howling at unknown sinners. Can it possibly be the great Joel Gersman? Former dramatic patriarch of Wisconsin’s experimental Broom Street Theater? When no one is looking, I tiptoe off to the left across a few sizzling rocks and slip through a cleft in the rock through which the sound is emanating.

I pass through dark and shaggy spruce that suddenly changes to the rough edges of a cardboard forest and emerge in a huge amphitheater. The glow of stalactites is gone. Fresnel lights blaze down on a hardwood floor which seems to be blotched with large—bird droppings?? Little surprise there. The place is full of winged creatures of all sizes, chittering among the bleachers, clutching tattered scripts in their claws and preening their varicolored plumage. Some are more humanoid and look like molting angels. Others are more birdlike on top, but have stumpy human feet. Still others are obviously people in avian costume. Joel is sitting on the bottom rung of the stony bleachers in deep dialog with an intense looking young man wearing classical garb and sandals. Joel is in full work mode, looking unshaven and happily intense. At my entrance he looks up and waves absently, as if he were expecting me, and will talk to me shortly. I retreat to the bleachers where the late great Capital Times reporter Bob LaBrasca, is frantically scribbling notes on a pad. He looks up through thick glasses as I join him. “Hey Clark,” he says, “glad you could make it! We’re making frigging history today! Do you have any idea what’s happening here. You know who that Greek guy in the toga is?” “Ummm...surely not—” “Aristophanes, man! Aristophanes of Athens! We’re doing a revival of The Birds here with Joel Gersman and Aristophanes codirecting! I ought to get a frigging Pulitzer for this!” A spotlight falls on me. Looking up at the light grid, I see Wiley Dixon Powell, that bearded Scottish leprechaun of a man from Kentucky who worked with me on several plays—beam cheerfully at me and wave a wrench from the top of a ladder where he is tweaking assorted lights and leicos. “Let’s have that spot back!” Joel bellows, and after lingering reluctantly for a moment, the spot moves back to the stage, illuminating a tall and regal looking bird with a chef’s hat who is dipping a huge spoon into a huge pot held in the nook of a wing. Joel mutters to Aristophanes in ancient Greek, sounding like the messages he used to leave on my answering machine when he was translating Homer’s Odyssey from the antique tongue. Aristophanes shrugs, gets up and mimes a man stuffing his mouth with food. “Right!” Joel says, turning to the cast. “Here’s the scene. The birds have set up a blockade in the air, intercepting sacrifices made to the gods, so the gods are getting hungry, right? So the Gods send an ambassador to negotiate, and the ambassador is Hercules—but Hercules is notorious as a glutton. So during negotiations, the birds send in the cook carrying all sorts of tasty dishes that are in progress for the victory banquet, right? And every time Hercules sees the food, he weakens and gives up a point in the negotiations—” “When the hell do we break for lunch?!!” bellows Hercules from the stage, an actor I don’t recognize—but who seems excellently typecast. “That’s it!” Joel shrieks. “Once more with feeling!!” “No! I’m serious!” snarls Hercules. “We’ve been rehearsing nonstop for hours! I’m starving!” The avian cook dips a spoon in the pot, passes it enticingly under the actor’s nose, and then lifts it to his beak, slurping loudly. “I’ll fix you, you overgrown chicken!” yells Hercules and leaps for the pot, spilling a cornucopia of fragrant meat and vegetables all across the stage.

With an angry squawk the cook seizes Hercules by the throat, and in an instant, stage hands, actors and the cook's fowl friends join the fray, filling the air with flying food and feathers. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Joel looking suitably stunned and Aristophanes laughing uproariously. "Exemplary blasphemy! LaBrasca declares. "Truly exemplary!" He heads for the exit, notebook angled against the barrage, scribbling furiously. Someone taps me on the shoulder. It is my departed friend, John Tuschen, Madison, Wisconsin's Poet Laureate emeritus: "Th-this way," he says. "F-follow me." I follow him down a long dusty hallway away from the melee. "I'm alw-ways get-ting you out of t-trouble," he says. "L-like the time I had to get Hannibal to bail us out of j-jail when we got ar-rested for d-drunken hitchhiking on St-state Street!" He neglects to mention that we might not have gotten arrested in the first place if he hadn't put out a cigarette on the back seat upholstery of the police car, and said "H-Home J-James," when the officer turned in the driver's seat to object. But I am so happy to see him that I do not correct him on this minor matter. "Y-you are a r-rascal like me," he says, "and Byron and Sh-shelley, but far less t-talented." How true—but so what? Talented or not, we are Wisconsin word boys all the way to the bone. Nothing wrong with that. He stops me at a doorway to a garden. "I have to g-go now, he says. Th-that's the way to the gift shop and the way out. G-glad to see you, b-but don't be in a hurry to come b-back." I bid him goodbye and walk through the door. It is the garden behind the house where my wife's sister Zoe used to live. The sun is shining through autumn leaves, and there on a bench is Arlie, my late mother-in-law, smiling at me. "You have a minute before they come get you," she says. "Sit with me for a while." I sit down of course. I always liked Arlie. "I'm not sure what I've done wrong," I said. "I was never very good at following the rules." She laughs. "I always got in trouble too," she says, "Like the time when I was seven and a friend and I borrowed a handcar on the railroad track and ran it right past the school house!" Then she looks serious. "You are taking good care of my girl," she says. It is more of a statement than a question. "I try," I tell her. "I really do." "That's all anyone can do," she says. Bye now!" Suddenly, someone grabs me by the ear and drags me off the bench and out of the garden. "You are in trouble now young man!" the vice principal declares. "I'm taking you right to the principal's office." "Let go of me!" I protest. "I'm not in high school anymore!" "Oh! You're not?" He releases me, looking confused and uncomfortable. We have somehow arrived in the gift shop. Little coffins full of satin-wrapped chocolate and jars of gumdrops that look like skulls adorn the shelves. Through the dusty window in front I can see the parking lot I and my truck out there in, looking as tiny as a toy on a distant beach. The vice principal puffs himself up for one last try. "Rules are not meant to be broken young man," he says sternly. "You came in without buying a ticket! You have violated a dozen LOTD protocols, you have gone places you had no right to go! You have engaged in frivolous and irresponsible behavior!"

"But the tour was boring," I protest. "The river was gorgeous. I got to see my brother and Arlie; I got to hang out some of my friends." "To the principal's office we go," he says grimly. "You can explain it all to the man in charge." "I don't think so," I tell him. I don't know much about the string cheese theory of reality that holds this place together, but I know instinctively that this creep's power is limited and that he can't keep me here. "I never liked going to the principal's office," I explain. "I'm going home." I select a red licorice skeleton from a tray on by the cash register and take a bite as I stroll toward the door. Indignant in his impotence, the vice principal nags me all the way to the entrance. I'm in trouble now. He will tell my teachers, tell my parents. I am a failure, I will always be a failure! But he shrinks back at the sunlit door—and I escape. Outside, the air is crisp and clear as a glass of Leinenkugel's. Dogs are barking happily down by the river, and the October sun is setting like a red ball in the western hills. "You're not going to tell everybody about all that cheap beauty and freedom are you?" he calls after me plaintively, a desperate note coming into his voice. "Why the hell not?" I tell him over my shoulder as I crunch over solid gravel back to my truck and the land of the living. "In fact, I'm thinking of putting it in a magazine."