

## **Stories Upon Stories: Island of the Sleeping Lambs**

It was cold and windy with a dusting of snow—a winter's afternoon in western New York. I was home for Christmas, wandering inside a rural cemetery with a camera in my hands. The wind would preclude any lingering visit, but I already had in mind what I was after—a few special headstones I hoped were still there.

My mom grew up on a dairy farm just down the road from the cemetery—she called it the old Christian Burial Ground. She told me she used to go there as a little girl to visit the lambs—small forms carved in the round and situated atop marble headstones. She found them attractive—as any child would I suppose—and I can imagine her small hands petting them. At the same time she felt sad, for she knew they marked the graves of children.

I did find the headstones, both close to each other—one had a single lamb, the other had two. I wonder if the double lambs indicate twins? One was headless, but they were poised as if asleep. The inscriptions were hard to read—worn, covered with lichens—the cold wind watering my eyes. I recorded a few images on film, got in my truck and left. I must have been planning to use these

images in a painting, for I finished one, titled *Island of the Sleeping Lambs*, the following spring. It features an elderly lady walking away from two headstones—the markers in weeds and surrounded by a plowed field, frozen and covered in snow. There are toys lying at their bases. A story left for the imagination—not knowing that four years later, in 2006, I would spin my first short story based on that painting.

After seeing an image of the painting, my mom's brother told me a poignant story about an older couple who were neighbors—Floyd and Mabel. They were fruit and vegetable farmers who sold door to door out of the back of their truck. As a boy he would visit them and they were always very kind and patient. They had several children but none of them lived past infancy or childhood. I can't imagine the heartbreak of burying one child after another and my mind churns with questions about the circumstances surrounding their deaths. My uncle said the children may lie in that cemetery.

I hope to finish that first story some day—after more experience with fiction, I realized it needs more work to be presentable. And for some reason I left it by the wayside as I wrote and revised a dozen additional stories in my spare time. Not an extensive output but I'm less interested in quantity than in getting things right. While studying creative writing, I read dozens of contemporary short

stories and was usually disappointed—there was little story in these short stories. Too much telling and not enough showing (it's hard work to dramatize scenes); too much endless, self-centered rumination; too many confusing or inscrutable styles—for my taste anyway. I was initially interested in tackling a novel but decided I should practice first by writing short stories. To that end I wanted them to possess, as in the novel form, a stronger basis in all the major narrative elements.

Stories are everywhere—stories upon stories—interconnected to one another in amazing ways. For me, creating fiction is an exploration—an attempt to understand or find meaning in things that are often beyond my grasp. They can begin on the most delicate of threads—a mother's reminiscence about some marble lambs, for instance, and then grow from there—into an idea and a mission to record them, then a painting and learning about a childless couple, and finally some fictional account to try and make sense of it all. The painting sold in 2003 to a lady from Greensboro, NC. I never met her, but awhile ago a friend swears he saw it on a TV show featuring home interiors—in California. It was above the fireplace.

For pictures, see the image gallery.