

THE HUNDRED HEARTS

William Kowalski

OTHER BOOKS BY WILLIAM KOWALSKI

Novels (HarperCollins)

[*Eddie's Bastard*](#) (1999)

[*Somewhere South of Here*](#) (2001)

[*The Adventures of Flash Jackson*](#) (2003)

[*The Good Neighbor*](#) (2004)

Rapid Reads for Reluctant Readers (Orca/Raven
Publishers)

[*The Barrio Kings*](#) (2010)

[*The Way It Works*](#) (2010)

[*Something Noble*](#) (2011)

[*Just Gone*](#) (2013)

[*The Innocence Device*](#) (2014)

The Hundred Hearts



William Kowalski

ORCHARD STREET BOOKS
MAHONE BAY

Copyright © 2014 by William Kowalski

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means – graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or information storage and retrieval systems – without the prior written permission of the author.

This book was first published in Canada in 2013 by Thomas Allen Publishers and edited by Janice Zawerbny.

Cover Photo:

Ghazni province, Afghanistan. U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Michael J. MacLeod. Licensed under Creative Commons License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>)

INQUIRIES: william@williamkowalski.com

Visit the author at WilliamKowalski.com.

*For Alexandra,
whose heart is endlessly big*

As for your own end, Menelaus, you shall not die in Argos,
but the Immortals will take you to the Elysian plain, which
is at the ends of the world.

There fair-haired Rhadamanthus reigns, and men lead an
easier life than anywhere else in the world, for in Elysium
there falls not rain, nor hail, nor snow, but Oceanus
breathes ever with a West wind that sings softly from the
sea, and gives fresh life to all men.

–HOMER, *The Odyssey*

They call it the American Dream because you have to be
asleep to believe it.
-GEORGE CARLIN

PROLOGUE:

The Psychopomp

Helen Merkin passed away on August 3, 2011, at the age of sixty-six, having been ill just three times in her life—never seriously. The women in her family didn't get sick. They lived, in fact, to enviable ages. Her mother had carried on to ninety-four, her life beginning at the tail end of the age of horse and carriage, progressing thence through the ages of automobiles, flight, a World War, radio, another World War, the atomic bomb, the moon landing, and the computer epoch, to name just a few. Her grandmother, who was born in the back of a prairie schooner during the Garfield presidency, and who as a child had survived two attacks by Kickapoo warriors, made it to ninety-eight. These were the genes that made up Helen, strong genes, genes like cinder blocks but made of something even more obdurate—like quartz, or obsidian, or elements she'd never even heard of that had cooked for eons in the heart of a star a million light years away and then flown across the universe to accrete briefly in her being, as they do in all of us.

Yet in the end, her body, made of eternal star parts though it was, failed her like a cheap Battery Park watch. The cause was chronic severe sleep apnea, which had plagued her for most of her life—especially in recent years, when she'd begun to plump up due to her love of her own baked goods. Normally, when Helen's snoring choked off her breath, she woke in a flailing panic. But this time she simply stopped breathing. Helen's last thought was therefore not a thought at all. It was a dream.

It's a dream about something that really happened. She's nine years old again, breastless and wiry, back on the farm in the emerald-toothed Tehachapi Range where she'd grown up. Her parents are sheep farmers, as they were in real life. Her father has just given her a motherless lamb to care for, a sweet female that creeps up to her deferentially on spider legs and sucks her little finger. Helen is delighted. There are no other children living nearby, and her brothers are vastly older; her playmates are either animal or imaginary, and none of them need her the way this lamb does. It will die without her. No one has ever before depended upon her to survive. She feels her heart expanding to include it, feels a new sense of importance. Her uterus ticks into life; she feels tiny twin flushes in the places where someday her breasts will grow. Within a year, in a gush sparked by this moment, she'll begin to menstruate.

She names the lamb Agnes. Agnes, Agnus, *agnus Dei*, lamb of God. It makes her religious mother happy. This is the reason for many of the things Helen does.

Things are not exactly right. Somehow, in this dream, Agnes has learned to walk and talk like a person, albeit with sheeplike tendencies. She looks, in fact, like a little girl with a sheep's head. This doesn't exactly disturb Helen, but her dream is calling attention to itself, and to this she is not accustomed. Rarely does she remember her dreams at all, but this one is as vivid as the OMNIMAX movie she went to see with Al in 1990 in Los Angeles—the one about the whales.

Agnes greets Helen with affection. When she hugs her, Helen can feel her woolly face against her cheeks. After a moment of hesitation, she hugs her back.

"Let's go for a walk," says Agnes, because in this dream she can talk. Her breath is grassy, her muzzle articulate and pink, its fine white hairs glinting in the sunshine. "I've got something to show you."

"Where are we going?"

"The river," says Agnes.

"What river? There's no river here."

"There is now," says Agnes.

They walk toward the far end of her father's fields until they come to a spot that looks familiar, though Helen can't remember when she was here before. The path indeed ends at a river, a wide, eddying spill of slow silver, where there grows an ancient cottonwood with arms broad enough to shelter a whole village. On the far bank is a green hillside ramping up to the sky. Helen thinks it's very pretty, and says so. Then she ventures the suggestion that they'd better be getting back.

"Getting back where? We've arrived," Agnes says. "This is the place we go."

Only then does it dawn on Helen that she's not dreaming, and that Agnes has led her here on purpose. She feels tricked. And she doesn't like what Agnes has said: *This is the place we go*. As if this had been the destination all along.

"I want to go home," she says.

"There is no home."

"What do you mean?"

"Hold on," says Agnes. "Someone is coming."

"Who is it?"

"Someone important to you. You'll see soon enough," Agnes says.

It seems to Helen that she's both nine and sixty-six; she has the body of a child again, but she remembers her entire life, growing up and getting married and becoming first a mother and then a grandmother. How can this be? She doesn't care for this dream, and also she has the dawning sense that it's not really a dream at all. A snake of dread climbs up her ankles and settles around her middle. She feels tricked, disoriented. She's certain she knows every inch of this farm, and there's no river on it. Someone is playing a joke on her. Not Agnes. Someone even more mysterious.

"Why am I a little girl again?" she asks, looking down at her slim tummy, her sticklike legs. "I used to be a grown woman. I know I was. I remember."

"We're all the age we want to be," says Agnes.

"I don't like it here. I want to go home," Helen says again, and she begins to cry.

"You ca-a-an't just go home," Agnes says. In her impatience her voice reverts to lambiness. "Don't you understand? We're going across. You don't have any choice."

Helen sits on the ground and crosses her arms over her chest. "You go across. I'm not going. I want to see my family."

"You will see them."

"When?"

"Right now. But they won't see you."

"Why not?"

"Because," Agnes explains, as if to someone very slow, "you don't have a body anymore."

This news comes as less of a shock than it should. Indeed, Helen feels some sense of relief. Ever since the day she noticed the first speck of blood on her panties, followed by the painful swelling behind her nipples that made them puffy and unsightly, her body has felt like an ever-growing burden, an extra layer she must haul around with her everywhere that obscures the real her. She'd gotten plumper with every passing year, her breasts sagging and her behind expanding, until she was embarrassed to look at herself in the mirror. She would be glad to leave all that.

"How can I see them?" she asks.

"Look," Agnes says, pointing to the water. "You can see everything in the river."

So Helen looks.

In the water she sees Al Merkin, her husband, as he finds her gray and lifeless, a statue of herself. It's Al's habit to come into her room first thing in the morning and wake her to place his breakfast order. First he freezes in shock; then he recoils at the touch of a dead body, the first he's seen in many years. Finally, he holds her and weeps. He berates himself aloud for not knowing she was dying. Had she called out for him? Had she reached for his hand, even though they hadn't slept in the same bed for years? Would she be alive if he hadn't insisted on his own bedroom? He will never know. It bothers him tremendously that he'd been lying in the next room during her last moments, probably fantasizing about Theresa Talley-Graber, who had let him molest her once during a dance in high school and who, though he hasn't seen her in well over half a century, has crept back into his thoughts in recent days.

Helen, watching him in the river, approves of the emotion he shows; it's only the second time she's seen her husband cry. She can see all of his thoughts, so she knows full well that he's been thinking about Theresa Talley-Graber, but she forgives him. Sex had begun to seem stupid to her long ago, and now it's almost comical, the squishy, squirting japey of mortals who are really no better than dogs and cats when it comes to mastering their baser instincts.

"Look at him," she says to Agnes. "He's acting like a little boy."

"We're all children," says Agnes. "Just old children, that's all."

"Is that why I'm a child again?"

"No. You chose this form, whether you remember it or not. This was how you thought of yourself. You always felt like a little girl, even when you were grown up. Didn't you?"

"Yes. Now that you mention it, I did. But how did you know that?"

"Everything is known here," Agnes says. "Every single thing that ever was or will be."

Now they're lying on their stomachs in the grass, Helen's chin on her hands, Agnes's on her hooves, looking into the water. Then Helen hears the splash of water on oars. She looks up to see a man rowing a boat at a gentle pace. He's still some way downriver, but he's coming closer. His broad back is to them, so she can't see his face. He wears an olive-drab T-shirt and sports a military haircut. It sounds as if he's whistling. The tune is familiar. In the stern of the boat, a dog stands, its tongue a damp flag flopping in the wind, tail waving upright. The dog looks familiar too.

"Hey, there's Proton!" says Helen, standing. "Jeremy looked everywhere for him! Here, Proton! Come on, boy!"

"He'll be here soon," says Agnes. "Just be patient."

So Helen sits and waits for the ferryman to arrive.

1

The town of Elysium, California, lies halfway between Barstow and Bakersfield on Highway 58, near the western edge of the Mojave Desert. The desolation of the Mojave takes many forms, including blinding white salt flats, incisor-like ridges, and hellish valleys. Here, it's a vast plain of rusty dirt, home to foul-smelling creosote bushes and Joshua trees upthrust like gladiators' fists, and populated by serious, sunburned people who are accustomed to feeling as insignificant as insects in the howling wasteland. It's so hot that one's bones go rubbery and tend to bend in the wrong places. To compensate, people develop a stiffness to them, an unwillingness to yield. Jesus is King. The government is out to get you. The right to bear arms is sacred. These are the beliefs that have sustained them for generations. With every passing year, they become more firmly entrenched.

Jeremy Merkin thinks of Elysium as a dried-up zit on a whore's ass. It's a rather indecorous thought, but he learned to think this way while in the army, and though he's been a civilian for almost five years, he finds it a hard habit to break.

The developer who dreamed up the town, a Greek immigrant named Ouranakis, had been a great lover of ancient mythology. This was before he himself passed into a mythology of his own creation, which is still occasionally repeated around dinner tables in the homes of older Elysians, of whom Jeremy's grandfather is one. The original Elysium was the eternal paradise to which the Greeks believed their souls went after they died. This was portrayed on a billboard by the artificial lake in the center of town, on which a man in a toga stands before endless green fields, hoisting a goblet of never-ending wine, his chipper Hellenic features badly weathered by the California sun. On the billboard, some wit has spray-painted a speech balloon coming from the Greek's mouth, with the words *WELCOME TO HELL*.

Thanks to Ouranakis's showmanship and talent for self-promotion, a real estate boom had been expected here once. People talked about it as if it were a physical thing, like a train, that might be showing up at any moment. Ouranakis built several neighborhoods and promised a hundred more. He was even gracious enough to accept down payments from hopeful homeowners, to the tune of nearly a million dollars. An extensive network of streets had been bulldozed into the desert and paved with asphalt, and many miles of sidewalks and driveways had been laid.

The boom never arrived. Decades later, streets still end abruptly without leading anywhere. Sidewalks run through neighborhoods that have no houses in them, only empty concrete pads. It's as if a giant vacuum has come along and sucked up everything that wasn't attached to the earth, including children and dogs. And maybe Ouranakis himself. He disappeared one day as if he'd been Hoovered into the clouds, and he wasn't rediscovered until 1973, when he died on the Greek island where he'd been living like a prince.

This is where Jeremy grew up, in a town that looks as if it was laid out for a community of ghosts, partly real but mostly imaginary. American flags snap in the mad rush of the Santa Ana winds, reminiscent of the whips of teamsters who once drove the borax mule trains down from the hills. Two or three times a day, the ground is slapped by sonic booms from nearby Edwards Air Force Base. Occasionally a dark shape sneaks beneath the sun, casting a deltoid shadow. It's the stealth bomber, emitting a quiet roar, conducting practice sorties, its crew pretending to drop bombs on their unsuspecting countrymen. The strangeness of things reaches an extreme here, and so does the temperature, and the hugeness, and the isolation.

America has always been a big, weird place. And nowhere is it bigger or weirder than the Mojave Desert.

A month after they've consigned the remains of his grandmother, Helen, to the flames of the crematorium, Jeremy sits in his car in the parking lot of Sam "The Patriot" Singh's Fortress of America Motel, a crumpled note in his hand. The note had arrived today in his faculty mailbox. It's written in pencil on a piece of ragged-edged notebook paper. The handwriting is decidedly feminine. He knows whose it is. In just a few weeks, he's learned to discern the penmanship of most of his nearly forty students. He'd wrestled with himself over whether he should open it, sensing that whatever it said, it would get him into trouble. But in the battle between curiosity and discretion that took place in his mind, curiosity had discretion on the ropes.

Room 358. I need you, Jeremy.

You're the only one who can help.

Help with what, he doesn't know. Merely being in possession of this note makes Jeremy nervous. He's already received a lecture from Peter Porteus, principal of Elysium High School, on the importance of propriety: don't let yourself be caught alone with a female student, for God's sake, and if you do, keep doors open, keep hands to self, et cetera. It is preferable to wrap yourself hermetically in plastic and stay on the other side of the room.

"You're a man, so you're a potential criminal," Porteus told him. "That's the way it is these days. We're all rapists. Even if you've never raped anybody. So just don't do anything that might be misconstrued. Keep your johnson in your pants, don't get into any situations, and everything will be fine."

Jeremy didn't think he would have a problem with that. The only time he'd ever removed his johnson from his pants in a work-related setting was seven years earlier, during his tenure as cone dipper at the Freezie Squeeze, when he and Samantha Bayle, his assistant manager, had gone to town on her desk—a mildly acrobatic feat of which, thanks to his war injuries, he's no longer capable. And technically speaking, it had been she who removed his johnson from his pants, not he.

That had been in a different era, prewar, pre-IED, and it's a performance he has no intention of repeating. He's done his best to assure Porteus of this in so many words, and he's also promised not to get into any "situations." Porteus hasn't said anything about going to motel rooms with students, but that's probably because it's so blindingly obvious.

This, Jeremy thinks, definitely qualifies as a situation.

The car rocks from side to side as it's buffeted by the Santa Anas. Jeremy rocks with it, allowing his head to sway loosely on his neck as he continues to regard the motel room door. He cannot make up his mind. Go in or go home? He has the distinct sense that his life branches at this point, and it's precisely at such moments that indecision completes the paralysis that's been stalking him ever since April 7, 2007, the day the bomb went off. He really ought to just leave. But he finds that his hand is not obeying his brain's order to turn the key in the ignition. So he sits, waiting for a sign.

When you're in sign-seeking mode, you see them everywhere: in the patterns of clouds, the tracks of insects, the ticking of a cooling car engine. Or in the numbers on motel room doors.

358. There's something familiar about those numbers. After a moment he realizes what it is: 358 was also the number on Proton's license. He'd been the three-hundred-fifty-eighth dog registered in 1999, when Jeremy had rescued him from a Lancaster puppy mill. He'd gotten him cheap, after a coyote had broken into the breeding pen and impregnated one of the bitches. Nobody wanted a dog that might rip your head off while you were sleeping.

Proton turned out to have not an ounce of aggression in him. As a watchdog, he was useless; he would play ball with anybody.

Proton had disappeared five weeks ago, just before his grandmother died. Jeremy had walked everywhere looking for that stupid dog, or at least as much as his reassembled spine would allow. But he was gone. Al, his grandfather, said Proton had probably been bitten by a scorpion or a rattlesnake and crawled off into the desert to die. That was typical of Al; mostly he seemed glad Proton had saved the sixty bucks it would eventually have cost to put him to sleep. So Jeremy chose not to tell Al that he'd arisen before the sun every morning for seven days in a row and called Proton from the end of every dune-drifted street, wandering among the waist-high scrub brush until his spine threatened to buckle. Proton had been his dog. He'd bought him with money he'd earned at the Freezie Squeeze. Everything and everyone else had changed while he was in Afghanistan, the people getting older and fatter, and the town somehow greasier and sadder, but when he'd walked in the door as a civilian again, Proton had bounded up to him and deposited a tennis ball at his feet as if the whole war had merely been a lengthy interruption of their endless game. For that, he felt gratitude. On the seventh day of his search, he surprised himself by weeping, unable even to choke the dog's name out. That morning he returned home to find his grandmother had died in her sleep and the house in chaos. After that he didn't look for Proton anymore.

There's something else about the numbers 3, 5, and 8 that he recalls. Taken as individual digits, they are Fibonacci numbers. One day, out of nowhere, Smarty, his best friend in the army, had turned to him and said, "If there is a God, and I think there is, then the Fibonacci sequence is proof of His existence."