

John Cardwell, Hoosier farm boy, Hoosier and international schoolteacher, advocate for the elderly and disabled, has been using language all his life to open minds and fight injustice. His poetry and fiction carry that light of human possibility with a piercing brightness fueled by literary depth, moral intensity and the honest rapport of the born storyteller. John's a deceptive delight to read, a balladeer of hard truth and simple joy.

Dan Carpenter, long time *Indianapolis Star* columnist, and author of multiple books of poetry and essays regarding the arts, education, and human justice

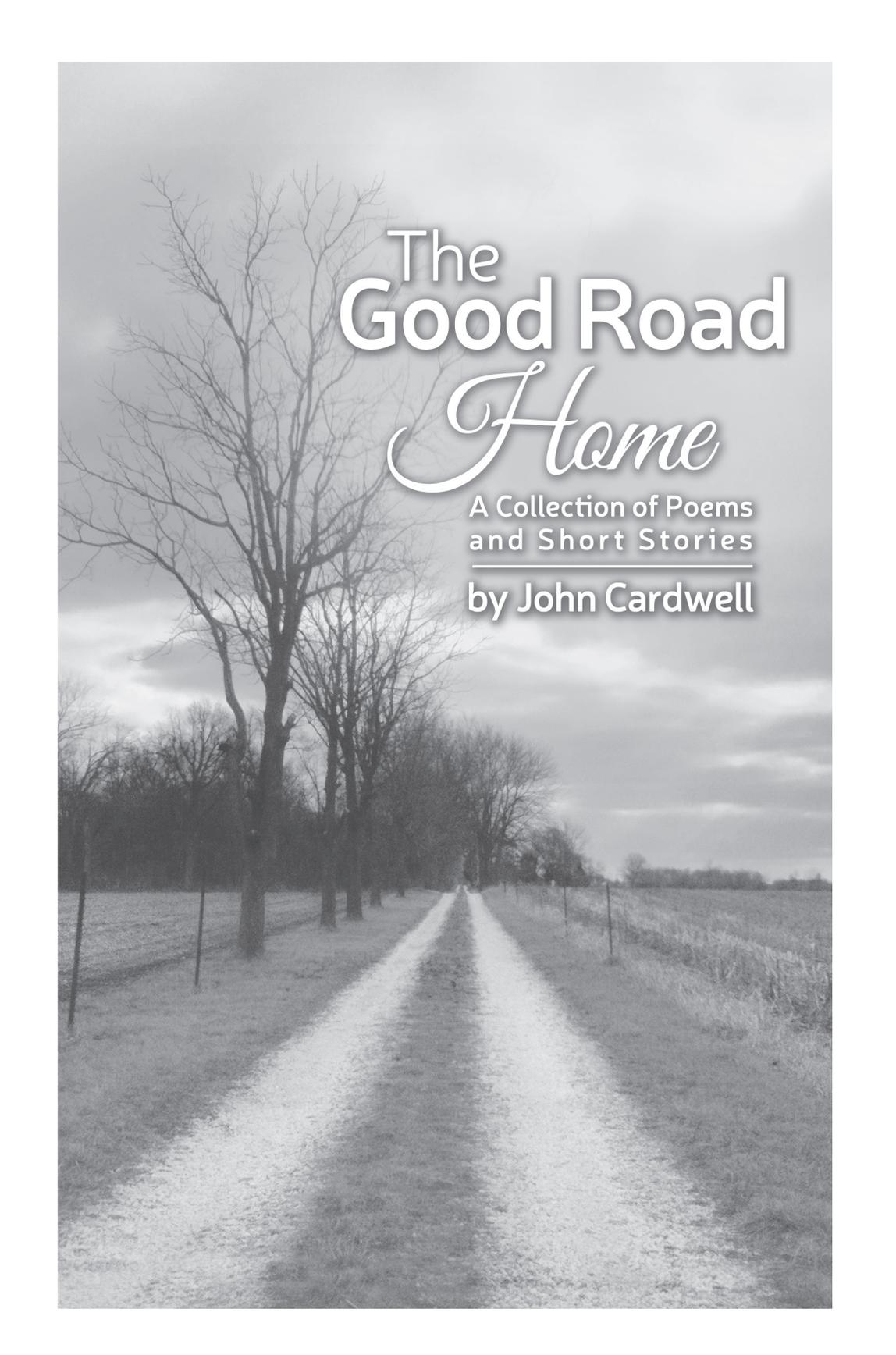
Like a walk down the pasture lane or the awareness gained when the wind hits your cheekbones just right, *The Good Road Home* reflects and taps the fun, quirks and sheer magic that can be found in rural life when we open our eyes to the simple things that really matter in the end.

Jolie Buchanan, multi-media artist, farmer, and founder of *Spaces to Create* and the Jolie B Studios

With poems told from the perspective of Midwestern farm living, Cardwell discusses the nuances of life, love, and loss with simple, honest imagery. For anyone who has lived in a rural setting, these works will speak to your heart and remind you of what is most important to being human.

Vaneta Becker, Indiana State Senator





The  
Good Road  
*Home*

A Collection of Poems  
and Short Stories

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by John Cardwell

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## Dedication and Thanks

*The Good Road Home* is a book of poems and short stories that tell a love story about living. In this case living in Tipton County in rural central Indiana, where I was born on a farm in the middle of the past century. The book is not a collection of fairy tales about happy Indians and robust farmers living on blissful green acres. The book is a journey that begins in pre-historic times and examines the good and bad in people from the perspective of the place where they have lived and died. A place that has proven to be generous and harsh with hidden complexities and many dangers. For the reader I hope the drama, sadness, and humor that weave through the poems and stories are sufficient to mirror some of who and what we are today. I hope the fictional journeys regarding people and animals convey with mystery, rhyme and common prose the aspirations of people everywhere. This is why the book is entitled *The Good Road Home* – a road long travelled by many people.

In many ways this book is the product of my life, lived for the most part among the fields and forests described in its tales. That life was made possible by my parents, John M. Cardwell and Harriet Ethel Jeffers Cardwell. They were kind and generous souls who were hard working, deeply imbued with humor, lovers of language and always in love. However, this book is singularly possible due to the encouragement, support and editing of Nancy Griffin, my wife – a person that is generous of soul and wisdom – who has always realistically encouraged my writing. This book has also been cheered on by my stepdaughter, Lori, who has never failed to find the positives in my poetry and prose.

Others who have greatly encouraged this effort include Jolinda Buchanan of Jolie B Studios, a wonderful spirit and multi-talented artist; Dan Carpenter, an enduring columnist and poet of note who has long brought honor to Indiana's literary community; my sisters and brothers Karen, Carmen, Norma, Wanda, Bruce and Glenn, who have all provided special inspiration; Jim Conkle, a friend and talented poet and song writer; Leon Warner, my former science teacher, a man of wit and wisdom, and an author regarding the archeology and anthropology of Tipton County; and the many friends who have been reading my poetry and stories for the past six years.

I must thank Patricia Keiffner, Jodi Belcher and all the good people at IBJ Book Publishing, who have been flexible, smart and supportive regarding this endeavor. Thanks are in order for *Brick Street Poetry* and the *Tipton Poetry Journal* for encouraging and pushing forward beginning poets of all ages and proclivities.

A special note of thanks must go to five people. The late Forest Fields, a wonderful educator, who first brought to my attention the idea that perhaps I could write and actually express worthwhile thoughts. The late Thomas Bell Lloyd, II, who treasured literacy, politics, science, religion and endless puns. Known as "the great one" to his friends, Tommy was a man who ran up enormous phone bills telling loving tales of southern Appalachia and humanity until the wee hours of the morning. Dr. Ekkehard-Teja Wilke, European historian, journal editor, librarian, and teacher, who refused to let me leave my brain in a state of ill-defined laziness. The late Kathleen Z. Williams, who as a candidate for Congress and a mentor for all, taught the essential truth that life has endless possibilities. Finally, Allen Snow, my childhood pal and fellow adventurer who planted many of the seeds that came to harvest in this book.

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# Walking the Good Road Home

I never understood how far Tom Joad walked  
Until walking his personal sort of far  
Though not on a hot dusty road  
Across wind cut land on the southern plains.  
My walk is on a cold Saturday  
Foot over foot, step over step,  
Over frozen ground and hard gravel  
Of round stones, pointed stones, bruising feet stones.

Walking on the straight gray lines  
Beneath matching gray skies  
That sag earthward like the bellies of old cats.  
Walking between fields of broken corn stalks  
And the patches of wood that remind me  
Of the old northwest where walking Indians  
Once held communion but never in a manner  
Recognizable to the people and religions  
That would displace them.

The walking choice was voluntary but it wasn't mine.  
The choice came in a dream from ancestors  
Of faded times so old that even their memories  
Were laden in webs, dust and reluctance.

The choice was held by more recent relatives  
Of tangible memories who did not enter  
Nor did they leave their lives easily  
As they were scarred by their times  
Even as they willfully defined them  
And left their marks on the land, trees and animals.

The revelation was cast by living relatives  
Immediate and otherwise but all tangible,  
Each a carrier of demands and wishes  
Steeped in the humility, perplexity,  
And hardness that comes with life.

All of these reveries of the dark hours  
Were in the mix, the dream decision  
That put my feet in walking shoes  
Through my sister's door, down the street  
And eventually on a country road  
Heading into the northwest wind  
Over the ice held earth.

In this mix of my dreamtime  
Shaped by old and present realities  
Framed in myth and western reverie  
I walk among the strange and familiar  
Going to the place that I knew  
Of biting stones, frozen ground,  
Soft dirt, enticing grasses and trees  
And rightfully suspicious animals  
On and along the good road home.

As the house of my ancestors and my youth  
Rises in the distance still beyond the stretch  
Of arm and hand, finger tips and a sighting thumb  
The ancestors and all that I am are speaking.  
So are the tired fields held firm by winter's trust,  
The leafless sleeping trees that murmur dark sounds,  
The whispering animals of human design and God's.  
They are all talking in their languages,  
The dream languages of nature,  
Watching and staying in wait to know  
If I have the courage to hear and feel their voices  
As they welcome or warn me on this journey.

# The Melt

The big ice had long ruled the land.  
It was like an old bison  
That used its large and heavy head  
To move and shape all that opposed it.  
But the world is a patient place:  
Ice and bison eventually move on.  
As told by the sun and her sisters  
The melt had begun long ago.  
Yet it was terribly inconsistent  
Not to be trusted, wise to be feared.  
Then finally there was a real spring.  
Soil and rocks appeared.  
Water pooled and the pools grew in summer.  
Melt and rain cut paths across the new land.

Winter remained harsh and cruel.  
Spring and summer were skittish affairs.  
Then in one or two places  
Then in the hundreds, thousands and millions  
The trees claimed the land as home.  
Independent life arrived with the trees.  
Life that divided and moved in all manner of ways  
In the soil and water, on both, and in the air.  
Life that grew to giant forms,  
Life that survived and knew wisdom,  
Life that included red men who aspired to learn  
And live among the trees and their dependents.  
Uncounted winters would come and go  
Before traders of iron and disease arrived,  
Followed by their farmers, to gather, hunt,  
Cut, burn, drain and plant, and always to kill,  
To give name, if not birth, to the till plain  
And in their own manner to raise life.

# The Buhbalyboo

It was a clear, pleasant and warm fall day when the leaves were still on the trees but making plans to spend their winter elsewhere. A light breeze danced through the oaks and maples of the village. Sparrows and other small birds lazily chirped among the branches. On the sun facing side of town a car of disinterested passengers occasionally cruised by. Nearly lost in the distance a radio played the chatter of a sportscaster. It seemed the Yankees were leading the Brooklyn Dodgers in some faraway place ... many hundreds of miles from this hamlet on the lower reaches of the Wabash. Few cared about the outcome other than to fill the minutes in the coffee shop on the morning following.

On this afternoon another drama was unfolding for kids who were both poor and bored. Where the southern view started, the shade trees stopped and the land fell away to the corn, the old man had agreed to tell a story. There he had his bench under a fading elm by his small house and barn.

Despite long held doubts around the village about the old man, the kids readily came to hear his stories as their parents had before them. Some elders in town called him the "old wizard" with a twist of suspicion and a hint of jealousy in their voices. However, most people liked the old man. He had a kind hardness about him for he didn't suffer fools, as the coffee shop crowd often noted. He also had knowledge and wisdom regarding the nature around them that seemed to come from another time. That knowledge permeated his tales giving them a spooky and other worldly quality. For all these reasons the old man and the people of the town were long acquaintances but uneasy friends. The old man was from the place but the villagers were not of his people.

As the years passed the weathered, deeply wrinkled old man seemed to move more and more in his own peculiar ways. Sometimes his neighbors deemed him too caustic in his everyday speech. He seemed not to care if they thought he was unfriendly

or ungrateful for their occasional charity by way of worn coats, old quilts, and gifts of food. He apparently thought he did well enough with his ten acres of corn, squash and beans, and his quarter acre tobacco allotment. The fact that over time he seemed little more than bones on which he hung his faded denim and sun burnt skin did not bother him.

The villagers had to concede two things about the old man: he seemed to have always been there, and he told odd mysterious stories that the listener wanted to hear. They repeated his stories, or at least bits and pieces of them, and in this place that moved as slowly as the Wabash on a drought stricken August afternoon that was enough for the kids. They sought him out on the stagnant hot days when their play along the river, in the woods and fields, in the barns, and around the few stores in the heart of town had spent all its energy and spare change. They sought him out when his disposition indicated he was willing to indulge one of his tales from a time long passed he claimed was true even if their parents and grandparents suspected otherwise.

On this Saturday, the old man said he would be on his bench just as the sun tipped its weight to the west. Today he said he would tell Gluna's story, her special tale but only if they stayed for the full telling. So the kids came as instructed and brought with them jugs and bottles of water for the long and warm afternoon.

The old man said he would not begin until he thought all the kids had arrived for this would be a sacred story not subject to interruptions. Once he was satisfied they were all present he said, "It was the morning of a day gifted to the people, a morning like that which was given to us on this day, a morning that began 365,000 days ago." The older kids wanted to chuckle but his narrow dark eyes told them not to laugh. He simply said, "Time is the oldest gift the sun and the earth have left to their children. This is a story about how that gift of time was once used." That is how her story began.

Gluna had been walking among the dead corn stalks for hours as the mile square field gradually climbed the shallow wall of the river valley. It was October, the stalks were a dusty yellow, dry and crackly. She suffered mocking breezes that rose and fell as they played through the corn creating waves of uneven rattles that ran up the valley's eastern wall. The teasing winds ran away from the weary sun that was slowly descending into the smoky horizon. Then they tumbled over the crest of the uneven ridge and vanished in woods and hollows that in turn fell into the gathering grey of the east.

The wizened air had been warm but showed no inclination to resist the coming cold of the night. This worried Gluna but did not deter her. The ancestors, of course, were right but they were not here, they did not share their spirits in the defense of her young and the village. The defense of the people, their food and time of living fell on her. It seemed the ancestors were only helping through the knowledge they had bestowed on her and imbued in her personal spirit.

If Gluna and those she loved were to survive then she had to drive off what threatened them even as the coming darkness grew its power. She had to drive off the spirit walker, endure its searing hisses, and the deathly magic of its blue spores.

So she continued walking, pushing back the stalks, following the erratic azure blue trail as it appeared first here and then there but always to be found drifting down from the corn leaves in sprinkles on the loose soil in the rising field. If she were to confront the presence she had to do so before the evening shades came when her own spirit was still stronger than that which she followed, before the buhbalyboo gained form and power from the night.

Gluna's progress was slowed by the spreading of red corn dust over the blue trail. The wisdom of the village ancestors, of which she was the keeper, insisted that this must be done to rob the presence of the strength it sought to take from the corn and the people. She was also hampered by dark gray mud, streaked in

vermillion that covered her body beneath her deerskin tunic with its emblems of her people: the sun, corn and river. The mud was her armor, the red lines the signs of her power, the robe bespoke of who she was. But the now dry mud itched and pinched while hindering her movement. Gluna tolerated these sacrifices to keep the mud's shielding power in place. Where the mud had peeled and broken away Gluna hoped her tunic would suffice. But as the day began to fade Gluna had to fight back doubts regarding the strength of her armor, body, and personal spirits.

The fall day had started normally. The morning arrived clear and cool. Gluna had performed the rituals of thanks to the sun and the spirits of the animal beings that lived in the woods and the river. She stoked the purification fire in the long lodge and shared its ashes with the cooking fires in the village. She also shared ashes and a whisper of the living dust that is corn pollen with chants to the four directions and endless thanks to the sun and the earth. As the keeper of the secrets Gluna had these and many other responsibilities but over the course of her life the common rituals had become part of her daily routine. The rituals were not a burden. They were simply a fact of her life, and the life and wellbeing of the village, and like villages that composed the world of her people in the shallow valley of the Wasobashi.

Gluna was preparing the high day meal for her lodge of corn cakes, venison, and squash when a neighboring mother appeared before her with a child....a child with blue dust lightly but clearly smeared on his leggings. Gluna contained her reaction as she calmly asked the youngster from where did the blue stains come. He did not know but he could show her where he had been playing with other children from the village. So she let the boy lead her through his course of play. When he finally stopped deep in the village's principle field of corn Gluna turned silent. Eventually, she asked the boy and his mother to leave. Only then did she dare to look cautiously beneath the corn leaves. It was at that moment that she froze.

There among the cracked and drying stems of corn, bean vines and squashes, and randomly spread on the grainy soil, was the blue dust of the buhbalyboo. Gluna knelt in horror as she recognized what the secret keeper before her had described: the spore trail of the spirit walker, the life taker feared by the ancestors. As the spirit walker swayed back and forth through the field it left its trail of dust. Normally, an unseen presence in the river it could emerge if the water was low enough and the ground was dry. Invisible during the day it would gain form in the coolness of the night and the strength it needed to draw life from the corn and the people around it. Gluna had never seen a buhbalyboo but knew she had to confront it's presence with the red dust of the corn and the chants of her ancestors before the darkness came.

Gluna planted a ritual stick in the soil where the blue dust began and then left the field. She went to her lodge and there among the earthen jars she sighed a deep breath of relief when one was filled with the shavings of corn cobs. She poured the red dust in a shoulder bag and put on her ritual tunic. Gluna then told her children and the village elder she would be gathering herbs and roots in the forest but needed to be alone as befitted her sacred duties. Once in the forest she took a narrow path of the animals down to the river. There she coated her body in the purest mud she could find and when it was sufficiently dry applied stripes of red paint diagonally across it. Then she again slipped on her tunic.

The river's low level allowed her to follow its bank until she was below the field. Normally, the villagers would be bathing, fishing, and relaxing along the river, and their children would be playing in the edges of the water, but the heat of the early afternoon had driven them back to the cool of the trees within the village.

Gluna carefully worked her way up the river bank and even though it was not steep it was enough to stress the limitations of her mud armor. It was already cracking, peeling and pinching, but she could do nothing about that now. She had already taken too much time when much more time was needed. To her relief

she managed to leave the bank and enter the field without being seen. This would keep gossip and even panic from sweeping through the village and allow her to do what only she understood but could not explain in confronting the spirit walker.

She stayed low in the corn in order to not be seen as she worked her way back and forth looking for signs of the blue dust, but she found none until she finally returned to the ritual stick. The old secret keeper told her that all of the blue dust had to be covered in red dust until the buhbalyboo was found and vanquished. The continuing silence of the ancestors was not helpful. As a matter of faith, Gluna assumed all of the blue dust that she saw was in fact all of the blue dust. So she worked on, carefully covering the blue dust as it randomly appeared in a long swaying pattern that gradually climbed with the rising field away from the river.

As we count time, the sun said it was 4:00 p.m. and still the upper reaches of the field were far away. Gluna knew she must work faster. As she did more and more of the mud armor broke and fell away. In anger she started to peel it off wherever it pinched and hindered her movements. Other chunks fell as her body heat and perspiration rejected the mud. By 5:00 p.m. the bigger pieces of the shielding mud were gone.

The silence of the ancestors continued as the sun dropped dangerously low in the west. The shadowy and tangled world of vines and dead leaves at the base of the corn stalks was turning grey and cooling. Finding the blue dust became a challenge to her imagination as her fatigue and fear grew. Then suddenly the corn was gone. Gluna was through the field. Before her was a clutter of high and drying grasses and weeds, beyond that berry bushes, and immediately behind them the endless, tall and darkening forest.

Fear gripped her. She felt the hair rise on skin and a paralyzing chill swept through her body. The pale light of the fading sun

was behind her. The forest that she knew was before her but as it wrapped itself in bolts of darkness it seemed alien and evil. She could go forward into the darkness or retreat into the tangle of the dying corn of the west. The spirits of fear urged Gluna to run. Her armor was broken. She did not know what to do.

Gluna numbly stepped forward into the tall grasses. The stems pulled at her frozen feet. Then she noticed that all was silent except for her and her clumsy body. An odd smell rose from the darkness, the fear inside her rose even higher. She gripped her shoulder bag so tight the leather was cut by her nails. The now pungent smell seemed closer. It seemed to be moving out of the dark places beneath the trees in front of her. For a moment she thought there was a swaying under the bushes, then in the grass, then a rising presence from the ground.

She spun away as a dark form whipped at her with a searing tail that lashed across her back and shoulder bag. Then a piercing hiss engulfed her as the bag of red dust exploded. As Gluna lost touch with the present she was vaguely aware of other noises and struggles around her.

Gluna awoke with a pale quarter moon just breaching the skyward reach of the forest. Its thin light wrestled for control with clouds that had arrived in the valley. As they retreated and the moon's brothers and sisters among the stars arrived the light grew. It still did not reveal much but as Gluna's consciousness returned she noticed that all the grasses and weeds around her were leveled along with stalks of corn on the edge of the field. Then she heard breathing, soft movements, even what appeared to be murmuring but not of any language with which she was familiar. As she gathered her vision Gluna saw shapes and movements. She tried to move but couldn't. Her body ached and was stiff. Her shoulder was burning. Then one of the shapes moved toward her but somehow Gluna knew not to be afraid. The shape bent over her, sniffed her, and to her surprise she let it lick her shoulder.

The large male buck gently snorted as he seemed satisfied with the results of his examination. Gradually other deer in the group stood and walked by Gluna. Several wandered into the corn and casually enjoyed the pending harvest. Gluna didn't care.

As she watched them her strength returned and she was finally able to stand but not too steadily. Still, she did regain her legs and as she was gathering herself in the pale light the buck returned. He stood a long while examining her and again she thought she heard murmuring among the deer. Then he and the others all turned and disappeared into the now friendly forest.

Gluna was still weak as she turned northward in the pale light to find her way back to the village along the edges of the corn field. With more light and a healthy body the walk would have been easy. But her bruises and wound made the trip difficult. She had trouble keeping her focus. The throbbing in her shoulder and head made walking a challenge.

Gluna had not walked far when she realized she was not alone. In the shadows she looked to see if the deer had returned, but this presence was different. At first it seemed to be behind her, then beside her, then to her front. This was unnerving. Gluna did not know what to think but she gradually realized whenever she made a misstep the presence would make a disapproving noise, and when she took an easier path it made a friendly noise....a noise like a dog. When she came to a clearing but was undecided as to the path forward the presence finally revealed itself. It was a wolf.

The wolf looked at her as to say, "Follow me." Finally she did and found herself walking a smooth and time worn pathway of the animals. Eventually, the wolf led her to the edge of the village and without a sound he turned and disappeared among the trees.

The village seemed quiet. Gluna was as silent as she could be. In the darkness of her lodge she found her medicine kit without waking her family members. She cleaned her wound the best she could. A better job would follow in the morning when the village healer could help her. She then took a people worn path to the edge of village. It was the path to the ceremonial mound: the place of the ancestors. The mound was shaped like a salamander because of its inherent good. The generations of people that had lived in the village for a thousand years had long recognized that when times were good for the salamanders they were also good for the spirits of the people and the other animals that shared this place.

On the mound Gluna built a small fire of thanks to the ancestors. They had spoken to her through the deer and the wolf. They had vanquished the buhbalyboo in favor of life. Gluna slept on the mound until morning.

When the old man finished the story there was a long silence. Finally, one of the kids asked, "Was Gluna your ancestor?" "What do you think?" responded the old man. But before the kid could answer another said, "Is it okay to play in your cornfield....and is it safe?" The old man actually smiled and said yes but then his eyes got big as he quickly added, "If you find any blue dust you must let me know. And you mustn't go too far into the field because it is getting very late in the day." With that comment the kids took off laughing and squealing into the cornfield.