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## Stranger and Sojourner

*Beloved, you are strangers and in exile. . . .*

*(1 Peter 2:11)*

In 1950 the young painter William Kurelek was hitch-hiking to Mexico where he hoped to be admitted to an art school. Caught at night in the chilly Arizona desert, he crawled under a low road-bridge and lay curled up on the bare ground. In his autobiography, *Someone With Me*, he relates what then occurred as one of the seminal religious experiences of his life. Unsure if he was fully awake, he became aware that he was not alone.

He appeared to be a person in a long white robe and he was urging me to rise. "Get up," he was saying. "We must look after the sheep or you will freeze to death." I obeyed and set off at a near run down the road shaking violently with the chill.<sup>1</sup>

The incident occurred not, as one might suppose, during a period of religious fervor, but unexpectedly in the midst of his professed atheism, after an indifferent religious upbringing. The vision was a sign that he would not understand until after his conversion to Catholicism seven years later. In the intervening years he would plunge into the disintegration of mental illness and the moral chaos of the modern world. While many successful artists of

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<sup>1</sup> Kurelek, William, *Someone With Me* (Niagara Falls, Ontario: Niagara Falls Art Gallery, 1988), p. 254. Originally published by the Centre For Improvement of Undergraduate Education, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 1973. All quotations of William Kurelek, unless otherwise attributed, are taken from *Someone With Me*.



Painting from The Passion of Christ Series, 1950



his generation were preoccupied with power, cultivating self-images as protean beings, Kurelek's experience of life was a constant plunge into weakness of various kinds, even to the point of feeling that he was "nothing." This would prove to be, however, a condition that gradually matured into true poverty of spirit. Throughout his life he knew firsthand what it was to be despised and rejected by men, to be a man of sorrows and familiar with grief. He was like us in all things, including sin. And if he was conformed to the sufferings of Christ long before he found a personal faith, it was in order that he might experience the resurrection offered to all, even the most devastated, that he might speak with authority about the mercy of God. While other artists were promoting secular salvations, while "we were all going astray like sheep," he was undergoing a discipleship that prepared him to be a faithful shepherd. It pleased the Lord to crush him with suffering in order that he might not be destroyed by the fame that would come to him in torrents. Because of that early crucifixion he remained a servant and became a prophet.

Saint Paul reminds us that the prophetic gift is limited (1 *Corinthians* 13:8). Prophecy is imperfect because prophets are imperfect. Like all men, they emerge from specific landscapes and histories; they are formed by their times and damaged by sin. It is their difficult calling to proclaim visions of wholeness while remaining conscious of their own incompleteness; to proclaim the realities of the Promised Land while dwelling in exile.

The homelessness of man is a universal awareness. The pagan philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius had described it when he said, "As for life it is a battle and a sojourning in a strange land." The young Kurelek had an intrinsic understanding of the aphorism. He was born in a "shack" northeast of Edmonton in 1927, the eldest child of Dmytro and Mary Kurelek, and was raised in the midst of the Great Depression. His father had emigrated from the

Ukraine after the First World War. From earliest memory Dmytro had grown up in a climate of disruption. He was forced to end his education in the third grade because of the war, and from then until his emigration he was a witness to frequent violence. He was a born story-teller and later recounted experiences such as loading soldiers' bodies on a wagon after battles. He became a smuggler and was beaten by border patrols and jailed before he finally managed to escape. He arrived in Canada at the age of nineteen with seven dollars in his pocket and the clothes on his back. He also brought with him a bitterness against his family in the Old Country and a smouldering anger against the injustices of life.

Dmytro Kurelek was the key figure in his son's life. A strong and hardworking man, he and his wife Mary, a second-generation Ukrainian-Canadian, were at work in their fields the morning following their wedding party. For them, life was a struggle, life was battle. Dmytro especially saw threats all around him: weather, neighbours, stubborn farm animals, or the imperfections of his children. He made enemies easily and kept few friends. He was a "displaced person" to the very roots of his soul, and he passed on a sense of exile to his eldest son.

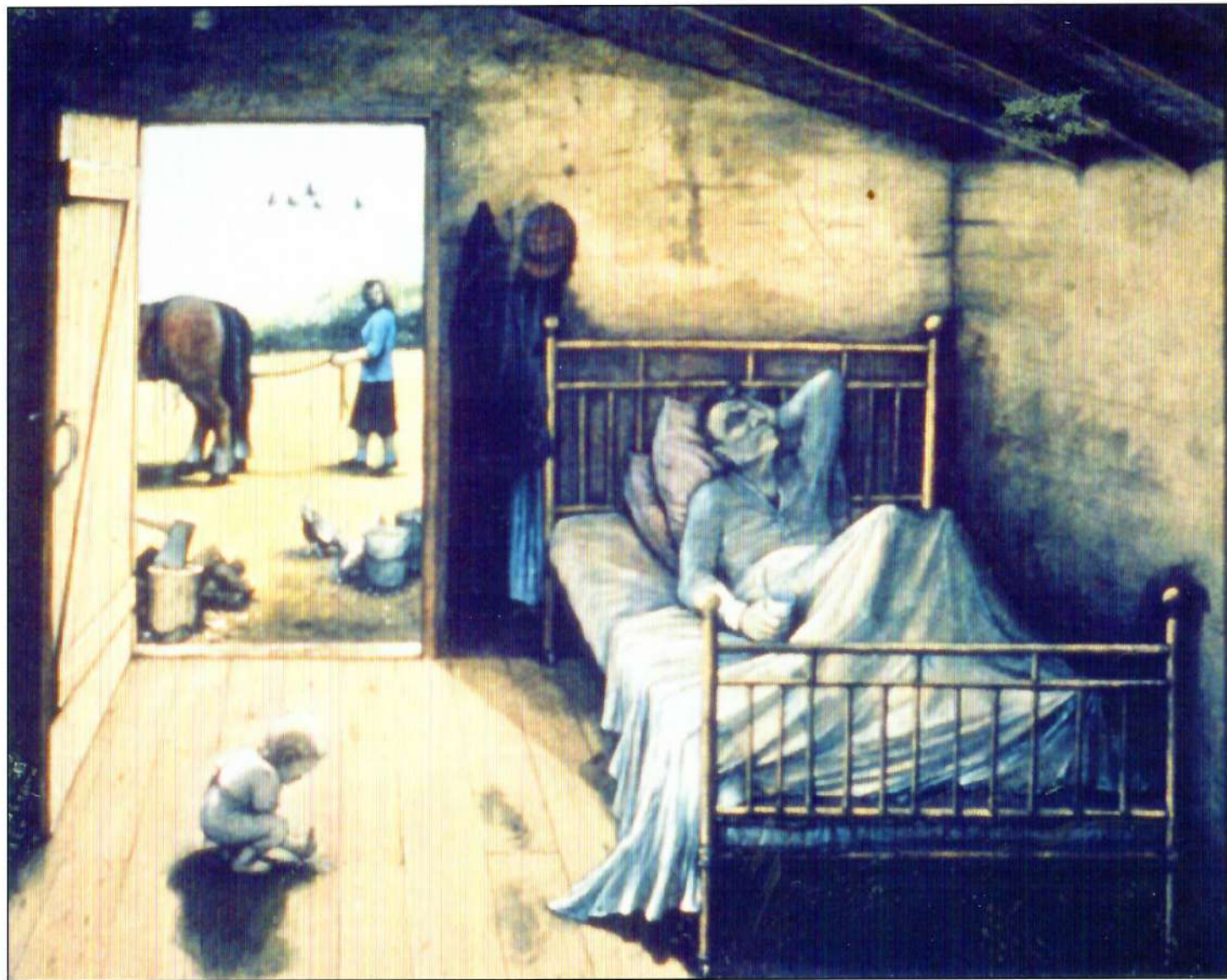
One of William's earliest memories has been recorded in the 1964 painting, *Illness* (see page 17). Severe stomach pain kept his father incapacitated during the summer of 1928. His pregnant wife worked the land alone while he watched the one year-old William. In the painted memory, Dmytro writhes in agony on a bed while through an open door Mary can be seen leading a horse. The child plays on the barren floor, while just outside chickens peck in the dust beside a bloody chopping block.



There was a great deal of anger in the household. The parental attitude was that children were to be punished, not just for “being bad” but for making mistakes, for fears, for sickness, for lacking vigilance in a dangerous world. The six younger children were light-hearted by nature and took this mostly in their stride. William, the sensitive eldest, suffered intensely. He was occasionally kicked in the backside but most often mocked for being “useless,” “weak,” and “deaf.” He retreated into himself and eventually became almost totally silent.

As a young child he began to suffer hallucinations. A huge vulture would perch over his crib, threatening to peck out his eyes. Vision was of great importance to the boy. The family was unaffectionate in those early years, and touch was not a sense used to express love. Hearing was the channel through which he received mockery. Sight, therefore, became a prized possession — he could gaze into creation and find there the joy that was lacking at home. The theme of vision was central in Kurelek’s life, long before he discovered his startling power to recreate what he had seen. In later years, before his conversion, he often experienced psychosomatic eye pain and terror of losing his sight.

Kurelek’s sense of alienation increased when he was sent to school knowing only a little English. His chattering in Ukrainian was met with laughter and derision. He devotes a large section of his autobiography to the bullying he suffered at grade school. In the early edition of the book he tells with a vivid sense of recall the names and exact words of his tormentors. He describes himself as “hypersensitive” in those years. He was excessively timid and lacking in courage at school, where a sense of social inferiority kept him the victim of “cruel sport.” For years he could not fight back, but his fertile imagination developed fantasies of revenge. Early drawings were full of violence,



Illness, 1964



such as people's heads being blown off by canon-balls. His ability to draw earned him some attention at school, and through this skill he eventually began to find a fragile sense of recognition and worth.

It was a frail defense against the over-riding disapproval of his father. Dmytro was upset by what he called "devil pictures" pinned to his son's bedroom wall, horrific imagery surging up from the boy's subconscious. He was not a religious man, and perhaps he merely feared that his own pessimism was being transmitted to his son. He was often morose about the series of crop-failures and the fires that dogged the family. In 1934 they relocated to a new farm in Stonewall, Manitoba, but the move did not cure Dmytro's frustrations. Often he would take out his anger on the farm animals. The young Kurelek would try to console his dog after the creature was beaten, and when a mare died of beatings and overwork, "it broke my heart."

Before the power of his father the boy was to live with a deepening sense of powerlessness and depersonalization. He approached adolescence with few strengths, but was given an education in suffering and compassion. And he was developing an intense love for creation, finding there a beauty and harmony that he was not able to see elsewhere. The cycle of the seasons, the sand pit where thousands of swallows had carved holes for their nests, the infinite variations of dawns and sunsets, were exposure to a wealth of mystery crying out in the created order. Every prairie child was immersed in such marvels, but there were few who would respond so passionately. The boy Kurelek would not break the chain of darkness by his seeing. He would, in fact, remain enchained until well into manhood. But he was storing up essential information about the nature of reality, a rich inner resource which would eventually be liberated and would inform countless other human beings about the nature of light and darkness.