

Totem

By Thomas King

Beebe Hill stood at the reception desk of the Southwest Alberta Art Gallery and Prairie Museum and drummed her fingers on the counter until Walter Hooton came out of the director's office. She was annoyed, she told Walter, and she thought other people were annoyed, too, but were too polite to complain about the noises the totem pole in the far corner of the room was making.

"It sounds like gargling."

Walter assured her that there wasn't a totem pole in the entire place including the basement and the storage room. The current show, he explained, featured contemporary Canadian art from the Atlantic provinces.

"It's called 'Seaviews,'" Walter said, smiling with all his teeth showing. There had been, he admitted, a show on Northwest Coast carving at the gallery some nine years back, and, as he recalled, there might have been a totem pole in that exhibit.

Mrs. Hill, who was fifty-eight and quite used to men who smiled with all their teeth showing, took his hand and walked him to the back of the gallery. "Gargling," said Beebe. "It sounds like gargling."

Mrs. Hill and Mr. Hooton stood and looked at the corner for a very long time. "Well," said the director finally, "it certainly looks like a totem pole. But it doesn't sound at all like gargling. It sounds more like chuckling."

Mrs. Hill snorted and tossed her head over her shoulder. And what, she wanted to know, would a totem pole have to chuckle about. "In any case," said Mrs. Hill, "it is quite annoying, and I think the museum should do something about the problem." It would be a fine world, she pointed out, if paintings or photographs or abstract sculptures began carrying on like that.

Walter Hooton spent much of the afternoon going over the Museum's records in an attempt to find out who owned the Totem pole or where it had come from. At four o'clock, he gave up and called Larue Denny in the storeroom and asked him to grab Jimmy and a hand cart and meet him in the Gallery.

"The problem" Walter explained to the two men, "is that this totem pole is not part of the show, and we need to move it someplace else."

"Where do you want us to take it," Larue wanted to know. "Storeroom is full."

"Find some temporary place, I suppose. I'm sure it's all a

mistake, and when the secretary comes back on Monday, we'll have the whole thing straightened out."

"What's that sound?" asked Larue.

"We're not sure," said the director.

"Kinda loud," said Jimmy.

"Yes, it was bothering some of the patrons."

"Sort of like laughing," said Lame. "What do you think, Jimmy?"

Jimmy put his ear against the totem pole and listened. "It's sort of like a chant. Maybe it's Druidic."

"Druidic!"

"There was this movie about Druids on a flight from England to New York ... they did a lot of chanting ... the Druids ..."

Larue told Jimmy to tip the totem pole back so they could get the dolly under the base. But the totem pole didn't move.

"Hey," he said, "it's stuck."

Larue pushed on the front, and Jimmy pulled on the top, and nothing happened. "It's really stuck."

Walter got on his hands and knees and looked at the bottom. Then he took his glasses out of their case and put them on. "It appears," he said, "that it goes right through the floor."

Both Larue and Jimmy got down with the director. Larue shook his head. "It doesn't make any sense," he said, "because the floor's concrete. I was here when they built this building, and I don't remember them pouring the floor around a totem pole."

"We could get the chainsaw and cut it off close to the floor," Jimmy volunteered.

"Well, we can't have it making noises in the middle of a show on seascapes," said Walter. "Do what you have to do, but do it quietly."

After the gallery closed for the evening, Larue and Jimmy took the chainsaw out of its case and put on their safety goggles. Lame held the totem pole and Jimmy cut through the base, the chain screaming, the wood chips flying all around the gallery. Some of the larger chips bounced off the paintings and left small dents in the swirling waves and the glistening rocks and the seabirds floating on the wind. Then they loaded the totem pole on a dolly and put it in the basement near the boiler.

"Listen to that," said Jimmy, knocking the sawdust off his pants. "It's still making that noise."

When Walter arrived at the gallery on Monday morning, the secretary was waiting for him. "We have a problem, Mr. Hooton," she said. "There is a totem pole in the corner, and it's grunting."

"Damn!" said Hooton, and he called Larue and Jimmy.

"You're right," said Larue, after he and Jimmy had looked at the totem pole. "It does sound like grunting. Doesn't sound a thing like the other one. What do you want us to do with this one?"

"Get rid of it," said Walter. "And watch the paintings this time."

Larue and Jimmy got the chainsaw and the safety goggles and the dolly, and moved the totem pole into the basement alongside the first one.

"That wasn't hard," said the director.

"Those grunts were pretty disgusting," said the secretary.

"Yes, they were," agreed Walter.

After lunch, the totem pole in the corner of the gallery started shouting, loud, explosive shouts that echoed through the collection of sea scenes and made the paintings on the wall tremble ever so slightly. When Walter returned, the secretary was sitting at her desk with her hands over her ears.

"My God!" said Walter. "How did this happen?"

That evening, Walter and Larue and Jimmy sat in Walter's office and talked about the problem. "The trick I think," said Larue, "is to cut the pole down and then cover the stump with pruning paste. That way it won't grow back."

"What about the shouting?"

"Well, you can't hear it much from the basement."

"Alright," said Walter. "We'll give that a try. How many poles are in storage?"

"Three with this one, and we haven't got room for any more."

The next day, the totem pole in the corner was singing. It started with a high, wailing, nasal sound and then fell back into a patient, rhythmic drone that gave Walter a huge headache just above his eyes and made him sweat.

"This is getting to be a real problem," he told Larue and Jimmy. "If we can't solve it, we may have to get some government assistance."

"Provincial?"

"It could be more serious than that," said Walter.

"Maybe we should just leave it," said Jimmy.

"We can't just leave it there," said the director. "We need the space for our other shows, and we can't have it singing all the time, either."

"Maybe if we ignore it, it will stop singing," said Jimmy.

"It might even go away or disappear or something. Besides, we don't have any place to put it. Maybe, after a while, you wouldn't even notice it ... like living next to the train tracks or by a highway."

"Sure," said Larue, who was tired of cutting down totem

poles and trying to find space for them. "Couldn't hurt to give that a try."

The totem pole stayed in the corner, but Jimmy and Larue were right. After the first week, the singing didn't bother Walter nearly as much, and, by the end of the month, he hardly noticed it at all.

Nonetheless, Walter remained mildly annoyed that the totem pole continued to take up space and inexplicably irritated by the low, measured pulse that rose out of the basement and settled like fine dust on the floor.