

“Burning Image” Interview with Stephen Hundley of Driftwood Press

**Stephen Hundley:** Hi, Vincent, and welcome to the pages of *Driftwood*. Our editors were drawn to the specificity of place, language, and vocation in “Burning Image,” set in the hayfields and family farms of Vermont. We knew immediately that this was a singular story, capable of transporting readers to a stylized, emotionally tortured space as Travis struggles with his choice to burn down the barn and the rest of the community deals with the consequences.

To get us started, what parts of Vermont or New England farm and field culture were essential to you while writing this story, which is so deeply set in that place?

**VP:** I grew up in Queens and came to Vermont in the mid-seventies after having spent six years in the Midwest. Vermont is a mountainous state and much of the flat land tends to be in the valleys. I live in one these valleys where the small fields are flat enough for crops, and since the land tends to be poor, the main crop is hay. Those who own these fields, sometimes newer arrivals, will surrender the haying rights to keep the land open. Usually families who've lived here for generations have hayed the fields because they have the equipment needed to cut and bale the hay and have made agreements with the land owners. The hay can be used for their own small farming operations, or put out for sale. Hay is often a major source of income where the soil is poor and the season too short to grow anything else. Over the years I have watched the fields being mowed and hayed, and have come to know the families who work for those who often have more wealth and education.

**SH:** The layering of information and scene in “Burning Image” produces a cinematic effect. Was this triptych structure always the plan? How did you arrive at this ordering of the events?

**VP:** I write from character and let the story find its way. I originally conceived *Burning Image* as Julia's story and wrote long passages about her horse life in New York City. I threw out much of that and focused on the scene where she sees Travis on the hay baler and entertains the possibility of buying the hay he's baling. I then wrote the same scene from Travis's point of view, and how he's intimidated by the sight of her galloping on the fancy Arabian horse. This allowed me to bring Malvina into his thoughts, and I began to see how the story had three main characters.

It seemed natural to begin the story with Travis, but with Malvina and the spider tree and the image of catching baby trout in the brook as a gateway to the scene in which he delivers the

hay and Julia comes out in her bathing suit. So I had three characters and a burning barn as the outer frame of the story. The challenge was to make the story move forward with the barn burning and backward with the Travis and Julia story.

To be more specific about the layering, once I decided on three main characters, Travis had to be first. His resentment of the upper classes comes smack against Julia's machinations. Her section had to come next with the explanation of her behavior and her reasons for leading Travis on.

Then I came to Malvina, who had the widest scope of vision. She was necessarily last in the sequence. She occupies the moral center of the Forrett world. As I was putting the sequence together I thought not only of stories like *Rashomon*, but of those Renaissance triptychs where the large center piece is the main frame, and the smaller panels are complimentary. So I wanted to duplicate a triptych in a way that writing allows, which is linear.

**SH:** I can see Malvina as the tie between worlds, and I felt the heft of her authority when she was on the page. I was interested in the social pressure exerted by the locals on the outsiders—specifically in the case of the ostracized man from Maine. There seemed to be a certain moral high ground maintained by the working class over their wealthy neighbors, a way of exercising power and judgement. It made me wonder how much control the long-time Vermonters have over their environment.

**VP:** Since 1976 I have lived in southern Vermont, probably the most liberal part of the state. The moral high ground occupied by native-born Vermonters over what are called Flatlanders - like myself - leveled off over time as the newcomers split their wood and planted their gardens and learned to negotiate the mud and snow just like everyone else.

In the context of *Burning Image*, the person from Maine has triggered Malvina's condemnation by mistreating a horse and mistreating the earth by crowding two structures on a plot of land zoned for one. Coming from outside Vermont, and with non-traditional facial hair, he's a target. The pornography hidden in the woods — luckily not 'kiddie' as Malvina observes — offends her sense of decency, which gives her the high ground. Malvina exhibits a snobbishness rooted in pride of place. The Forretts have also mistreated the earth by pouring muriatic acid into their dry well. I can only lay out this irony for the reader to grapple with. Vermont's harsh climate imposes a living expense that makes people take shortcuts. Between natives and outsiders there will always be a line.

**SH:** The rumor mill was grinding along behind the scenes in this story. I was fascinated by the community of characters readers are exposed to—one of the strengths of this form. How would you describe the community that “Burning Image” takes place in? How did you find this place?

**VP:** Before moving to Vermont in 1976 I lived in a rented Iowa farmhouse and came to know the local people, and to witness farming in a place where the land was richer and the growing seasons longer. Much of that world was easily transferred to Vermont. I moved here after the farmhouse I was renting was sold to a man who wanted a hobby farm. As in Vermont, he would hire the locals to work his land.

Vermont is a poor state, and while the sixties and seventies witnessed an influx of anti-war types, often from cities, families like the Forretts remain. Vermonters are one with the land. They make their way by plowing snow, mowing lawns and fields, logging, selling firewood, hay, and maple syrup. Those who own backhoes and excavators can make a decent living doing what they call "dirt work." It is wealthier landowners, like Julia, who are essential to this economy.

**SH:** Have any influences from your time in Queens or New York persisted in your work or voice? You mentioned the long Julia passages set there. These passages, even cut from the piece, echo in her confident references to that time.

**VP:** The influence of growing up in Queens is permanent, and without a sense of place my writing falls flat. I left Queens when I was seventeen, but Queens never left me. In *Burning Image*, Julia's past experience in Forest Hills and her move to Vermont resembles my own trajectory from city to country. Two of my published books reflect this dual experience. *The Other Side* is a memoir about my family, and a story collection called *Lost Hearts* traces a set of characters drawn from southern Italian roots to Queens and beyond. Even within my historical novel, *Cutter's Island*, about the capture of Julius Caesar by pirates, I found that my city experience could apply to the Aegean pirates who terrorized the Romans.

I believe that few writers can completely escape their backgrounds. As Don Corleone was modeled after Mario Puzo's mother, as Elena Ferrante can't escape the streets of Naples, as Conrad the sea or Joyce Dublin, I can't turn my back on Queens. In two of my books looking for publishers, a story collection called *Disorderly Conduct*, and a novel called *The Writing Specialist*, city and country are side by side. In my Queens neighborhood where the European stock has been replaced by Hispanics and Asians, the streets still hold a gravity and terror that I experienced as a young man and against which I used literature as shield.

One more influence: I grew up one block from the public school I attended until the eighth grade. On my way to school I would pass the public library branch where as a ten-year-old I would read — standing up and cover to cover — a kid's version of the Trojan War. Next door to the library was a mob-owned supper club called The Orchid Room, the setting for a story in my *Lost Hearts* collection. These two places with their moral opposites are touchstones for my writing life.

**SH:** We've talked some on the economic dynamics and land use at the heart of this story—the Vermonters living off dirt work and the new-comers living out their fantasies of rural life. Travis cuts and hauls hay, while Julia spends her afternoons on a fine horse. I wondered who was experiencing the place more. Do you believe there are barriers that the landowners in the community experience that the land-laborers don't? What sorts of things open to people who live close to the land, in privilege and in toil?

**VP:** Julia might spend some of her afternoons on that fancy Arabian but she also spends time keeping two horses healthy, no small task for a single woman with little or no help. The biceps she developed in Queens by mucking stalls and restraining spirited horses helped her to keep up with Travis as they stacked hay bales in her leaky barn. Julia contends with the natural

environment as much as the Forretts and so she also takes shortcuts. This makes for some congruence of outlook, but the Forrett's closeness to the land cannot be shared with Julia or the wealthier classes. Native Vermonters who hunt deer and turkey for necessity and ritual have a more profound connection to the land because it feeds them directly. There will always be a separation between the two sides, and Julia's rejection of Travis's fantasy drives him to revenge that he can't articulate, and so he returns to the spider tree of his youth, the only place in his world that makes sense.

**SH:** We're intentionally given a narrow field of vision and time in "Burning Image." I found myself wondering about all the other scenes that we know about, but don't get to see as clearly. Caleb is one example of this. Have you worked with these characters before, or do you have plans to continue their stories? Was it difficult to pare the story to Travis, Julia, and Malvina?

**VP:** Caleb is the steady brother. I needed him as Travis's foil, confidante, and Malvina's source of information. The other characters were cameos who helped with back story and local color. It wasn't hard to pare the story down once I settled on the three-part pattern.

I have not written about these particular characters since completing *Burning Image*. but similar types have appeared in other work. I am a character driven writer and can only do my best work if I can also deliver a strong sense of time and especially place. This is why some of my other work deals with Italy and Italian-Americans, yet even within that locus I have managed to incorporate my experience with rural life.

**SH:** I was struck by the dialogue in this story, which I found textured and capable of being curt, coy, and devious while still maintaining realism. Is this style of character speech characteristic of your work, or was this an experiment?

**VP:** This is characteristic of my work. Dialog and the rhythms of speech are voices in my inner ear. I try to use dialog to define character and to push the story forward. It has to count.

**SH:** What or who has influenced your inner ear, and do you express this lyric awareness in any other mediums?

**VP:** That inner ear is the sum of myself, the ear that negotiates language and listens to characters and creates stories from what it hears. The need to tell stories is a product of my total experience, and getting to the source of all this would also require a list of writers and artists too numerous to mention. I spoke before about the public library and a memoir about the origins of my family in southern Italy. This foundation, American and Mediterranean, has determined what and how I write, and more importantly, why I write.

I grew up in a house without books, where the Sicilian and Neapolitan dialects were languages I couldn't understand and didn't want to learn, not then anyway. This background gave me the advantage of a double perspective so important for a writer. There were two outsides to look in from, and as a way of engaging life and being 'American' I had to not only learn but to master English. And so I became a reader. This love of English and history drove me to the great

story tellers beginning with Homer and Herodotus, and moving on to the usual suspects, Conrad, Hemingway, Joyce, Faulkner, Italians like Sciascia and Pasolini in translation. This mix gave me the voice I strive for and which I can only describe as an epic voice, a voice that tells a story from deep down, a voice colored by New York Jewish and Italian rhythms and exemplified notably by Lenny Bruce, whose combination of high and low diction and rapid flow I find particularly affecting.

Writing is my only medium, stories, longer works, an occasional play - one recently performed in local theater. For a few years I wrote for a now defunct site called Vermont Views. These were poems, memories, flash fictions, anecdotes from my bartending life in upstate New York, my short career as a news reporter in Dubuque, Iowa, and my longer career as a writing instructor at Vermont Law School. Publishing online provided me with small victories while I was writing longer pieces.

**SH:** Thank you for giving us a peek under the hood of this textured, driving story. Are you able to speak to or direct our readers to any other projects of yours, either forthcoming or still in the works?

**VP:** I have nothing forthcoming right now except the story to appear in Driftwood Press, I am busy with stories in progress and a longer work. I am trying to find publishers for the aforementioned novel and story collection. My web site, [vincentpanella.com](http://vincentpanella.com), is the best place to fill out the picture I have created here. Thank you for this opportunity to talk about my work.

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Thank you for your time and thought and, most of all, for contributing this excellent piece of fiction.

Best,  
Stephen Hundley  
Fiction Editor, Driftwood Press