ASHLEY PANKRATZ

# WITNESS

*Winner of the 2008 Nelligan Prize for Short Fiction, selected by Antonya Nelson*

The name of the street is Yellow Flower. Houses line one side on flat dirt lots, most of them rambling brown shells waiting for siding and occupants, for money to finish what's been started. Jack notices nearly every model is a replica of its neighbor, from the three-car garage right down to the sprawling entrance and Realtor's sign. Number 503 has a tan plastic mailbox and looks lived in, porch lights turned on even though it's the middle of the day, chilly and bright, the one-acre plot that used to be farmland now dusted bright green with fertilizer and grass seed. He drives the van up beside the mailbox, its red triangle flag sticking halfway up.

"Anna?" he says, and his wife tucks new magazines in her service bag. "Do you want to talk at this one?" But of course she doesn't, and Jack knows she's thinking the same thing: what could they possibly have to offer people with this kind of money, this quality of life? The sign at the entrance to Yellow Flower Lane arrogantly declares, "PRICED FROM THE 280s." Their congregation's territory in downstate New York is mostly dirt roads and crumbling farmhouses, migrant trailer parks, and creek-side campgrounds where people have colored plastic lights strung between tree branches and the RVs they call home.

Jack ignores the brass knocker on the front door and rings the glowing bell instead. He smells the newness of the house, the briny quality of treated materials, all of it clean and sterile, the cushion on the porch rocker still sleeved in plastic, the welcome mat springy and pristine. Footsteps slap on tile on the other side of the door, and when the girl opens up to them, she's naked. Jack drops his eyes to the mat but not before he's registered her age, six or seven, and not before he's seen the vacant blue eyes gazing up at him without focus.

"Is your mama at home?" Anna asks. The girl turns the doorknob back and forth in her hand, giving a rhythm to the quiet.

A man comes up behind her, slight, his face the kind of veined red that's related to blood pressure and alcohol, the same blue vacancy in the eyes. Jack guesses his age to be forty, forty-five, but the man shows off braces when he smiles and says, "What are you selling?"

"We're Jehovah's Witnesses," says Jack. The doorknob rhythm gains intensity and volume. "We're encouraging our neighbors to read their Bibles."

The man seems to snarl but Jack isn't sure what, exactly, has changed in his face. "You're not my goddamned neighbor," the man says in a low voice. He grabs the thin arm of the naked girl and pulls her back, slams the front door.

Anna stumbles off the front porch and Jack puts his hand under her elbow to steady her. As they walk back to the van where Sister Holmes waits with their daughters, the man opens the front door again and yells after them, "Get the hell out of here before I call the blasted cops!"

Jack turns around. The naked girl peers out from the edge of the door, but he sees her eyes go past him, to the van maybe, to his own girls, who are probably looking out the windows by now. "Maybe I should call the cops on *you,*" Jack says. He nods toward the girl and the man spits after him, slams the door for the second time.

In the driver's seat, Jack takes a breath and holds it in. Anna fidgets with her service bag, brushing off an invisible dust. He knows they'll never talk about this.

"Dad, was that girl wearing any clothes?" Rebecca asks.

"No," he says. "Did you recognize her from school?"

"I don't think so. People look so different when they're *naked*."

Ruth, the six-year-old, titters at the word. Anna turns from the front seat and says to her, "Maybe you might say a prayer for that girl, right now, in your head."

And so there is a praying silence when Jack turns the van off Yellow Flower Lane and back onto the highway, passing the broad, brown farmland still waiting to be developed. Everyone is selling out, it seems; families dispersed and subdivided like the land, so much change since he was a kid. In some way, Jack thinks, this should make him feel better, to know their farm is one among so many on the way under. But what comes next? The husband, the father, the ordained head of his family, and all

he can think of now is those vast, drab fields closing in on him from every side.

There is a difference in the quality of the air. Overnight, it's changed from cold and bright to warm and wet, the smell of damp leaves and wood smoke, mud sucking his steel-toed work boots deep into the ruts from the baler they dragged out, broke down, and sold last Friday for much less than the sum of its parts. He looks once at his father's house on his way to throw Ruby her morning hay, makes note of the long black windows boarded up already for winter, waiting for the insulation of opaque plastic. He remembers the sound from every winter since memory serves him, that lonely, muddled plastic flapping in the middle of many nights when as a kid he'd made his way through the yard to the milking barn in the clear, frozen dark, a memory tied inseparably to the image of Ruby's muzzle over the edge of her stall door, that image tied tighter still to the slow puffs of breath that smelled like old bran mash if you got close enough. Every predawn morning since the middle of his twelfth year, Jack got close enough, offering in his gloved hand a mix of sweet feed and raw oats, the puffing from Ruby's nostrils blowing much of it away.

He picks up a branch in the driveway and throws it against the washroom at the back of the house. Today is the second-to-last day in October. Two weeks ago, his father had called him into the office where the old harnesses hung dusty on the wall next to a faded, thumb-tacked Polaroid of Jack and the little chestnut mare at the 1984 county fair. On the desk were papers signed and spread out, the signatures big and clumsy, done in the hand of a man who'd left school too early. The room smelled like cigarettes and mud, like propane and old milk. All of the rooms in the house of Jack's childhood still smelled of milk, years after the milking heifers had gone—mild but sour nonetheless, a soft, cheesy ripeness with mildew and fermentation all mixed up in it. His father was old and worn and didn't look Jack in the eye when he said, "Sold out to Hansford. Either that or we'd a been bankrupt."

Jack stood quietly in the office, ground his steel toe into the creak of the dark wood floor, crushed a chunk of mud into a crack with his heel.

"I got nothing at all to leave you, kid." His father leaned back in the chair, the chair well-padded, designed to swivel before the glowing white face of a computer and bought seven years back in a flurry of good fortune and the new promise of soybeans, his father with his fingers laced, quivering—his father, a veteran of Normandy Beach and Korea, deprived and interrogated for five months in a prison camp somewhere in Siberia, the rough creviced hands that had fought two wars, had come back and planted, had birthed and milked and slaughtered—those hands now quivering sixteen inches across the desk from his youngest son.

"Jack," he said, and waited. Jack watched him turn a thought over and over in his mind without saying it. They both knew it: Jack was the one who had stayed, out of all of them—stayed with the farm, stayed with the Jehovah's Witness religion of his mother. At thirty-four he was the youngest elder in the Snake Creek congregation, and although his father didn't share the faith, he had to acknowledge that Jack worked his hands to the bone with less complaining than anyone he'd ever seen. His father's humiliation was too much to bear for both of them. "Jack," he said, "I think I'm just about done in. You don't deserve to be left with nothing."

Now, as Jack walks along the ruddy driveway to Ruby's stall, he sees that the doors to the main barn are shut for the first time in years. A slip of paper flaps softly against the dark red wood—an invoice, Jack guesses, with a delivery just inside. No. There've been no deliveries for a long time, no goodwill of credit extended to anyone on this farm for as long as he can remember. He crosses the driveway to the smaller barn where Ruby waits for breakfast, but his eyes trail over his shoulder to the paper and the peeling white Xs of the closed barn doors.

His mare snorts, as always, when he pulls open the door and lets the light inside. She works her hoof through the bed of straw as if he always comes just a little too late for her liking; as if he is a boy astray, her dark liquid eyes show a fond and gentle reproach. He scratches her chestnut face. He grinds his nose against the straight hard bone of that long lovely face. His fingers move just behind her ears to the place she likes, and she leans her slack old neck into the roughness of his work gloves and lets her mouth drop open. Twenty-two years he's called her his own, since the day he came home from seventh grade to

find her done up in saddle and bridle, the leather polished and new, his father beaming, holding the reins out to him, a gift, a promise, and with both Jack's older brothers gone that year in the military, a plea for him to put down his future and stay.

He throws her hay out in the field and opens the stall door, watches the mare amble up onto the swell of land where it's dry. He starts to work on other things: changes the oil in a tractor long overdue, wipes it down for sale, lets it run for some time. He shakes his head when his mind shows him the naked girl in the doorway with her father just behind. What could Jack have said, if he had followed through and called the police? Blue eyes with nothing in them. The working of the doorknob. From the underbelly of the tractor he lays down his tools and breathes in the ticking sounds of the engine as it settles; he tries to get rid of the image. He thinks of the barn doors closed across the driveway, the paper stuck to the door. He thinks it's late for his father not to be up and out here with him, repairing things, preparing things for auction; he stands up, wipes his hands on his pants, knows that Anna will complain about the oil stains when she does their laundry that night.

Through the mud, his boots sticking and weighing him down, the gray of the sky flat like steel and warm with premonition, Jack tries to whistle it away. On the other side of the driveway, he puts his hand against the paper to hold it still in the chilly wind. He looks for a minute without reading. Written in blue ink on the back of an envelope, Jack's father has pounded it in with a hammer and nail. He's used a bad pen and pressed down hard to make up for it:

*Sorry Jack to put this on you but dont know how else to do it*
*Dont go in the barn. call shariff*
*Tom Renton*

The great double doors squeal in rusted tracks when Jack hauls them open. Pigeons fly up from the packed dirt floor into the beams above the loft, cold morning light slicing through the missing rectangles of roof, the dust from the hay in the light like heavy mist. Jack's father hangs from a beam. Jack sees that he isn't hanging by much—his father has used several strands of baling twine, and Jack knows for as slim as it is you can't get through it except with a good knife. But it sure as hell can

get through you. The twine presses into the folds of his father's throat and there is dried blood down the front of his flannel shirt. Jack leans against the door frame, looking up at his father. He takes off his gloves and rubs his eyes hard, but his father still hangs there. He waits for some time, until the mail truck splashes through the potholes up the driveway, and Jem waves her arm out the open window and calls, "Halloo!"

Jack shuts the barn doors. "Morning, Jem," he says. He watches her navy blue carrier's jacket strain at the shoulders as she digs in the mailbag. He went to school with her. Her name was Edith until senior year, and her hair a different shade each week since. Today it's blonde with streaks of dark brown, a striped bandanna holding it back from her face.

"You left your wife yet?" Jem's teeth show touches of pink lipstick as she hands Jack a sheaf of bills in a rubber band.

"Do you mean, has she left me? No, not yet."

"Damn it all!" Her laugh has highs and lows that remind Jack of a cartoon character. "You let me know when she does!"

The truck spins down the hill through the mud. He thinks of all the work to be done. His father signed to a developer who has blueprints of cookie-cutter mansions and swimming pools, visions of streets with names like Yellow Flower Lane. All of the equipment needs to be prepared and listed for the estate auction. The barns will be torn down. The old house will be demolished. He wonders if he should shoot the cats to spare them from something worse. In front of his eyes is a flash of his mother's rhubarb pie set to cool in the kitchen window on so many late summer afternoons. It is an old memory, and he wonders why it comes to him just then, when he's been wondering about the cats. He looks at the bills in his hand. He stuffs them in his jacket pocket, tilts his head and considers the closed barn doors, unsure of what he'll see if he opens them again.

Anna smiles up at him when he comes in for lunch. She sits at the kitchen table with a fire going in the wood stove, her Bible and *Watchtower* spread open in front of her, glasses on and highlighter poised. He kisses the top of her hair, holds her head in his hands for a second too long.

"What's wrong?" she says, her mouth a serious flat line. She is prone to worry, inclined to panic. He shakes his head: Nothing.

"Girls will be home soon," she says, going back to her studies. "This article for next week—have you got to it yet? It's about letting go of your money problems and relying on Jehovah to work things out. I'd say it's come at a good time."

He's told Anna in passing about the trouble with the farm; has mentioned nothing, in fact, of the sale of it or the debt that he has inherited or the fact that he's out of a job, and no way on God's forsaken earth will he tell her that her father-in-law now hangs from the beam of the old hayloft where their first daughter was conceived eight years back. Anna is fragile, and she's had her share of trouble. He protects her where he can to make up for all those times he couldn't. He looks at her face in the stark noon light. She holds his look. He wonders how often he underestimates her, and suspects it happens more than he cares to admit.

"You have a talk tonight, don't you?" Jack asks. He takes a hard-boiled egg from the fridge and starts to peel it over the sink.

"Yes," she replies, "on showing subjection to the family head." She takes off her glasses and gives him a blurred, sideways look. "That's you, if I'm not mistaken."

"That's me, all right." He drops the egg and rubs his face harshly, grinding his eyes with dirt-lined knuckles until Anna comes up from behind and touches his arms, says in the gentle tone she takes on with the girls, "Don't do that. You always do that when something's on your mind. You do it so rough your eyes'll pop out." He turns around and she smiles up at him. Something fierce burns through his chest and he thinks he might not contain it. He holds her away from him, pushing her shoulders with his fingertips until she sways back. She smiles and rolls with it, rocks back into his touch. "Someday you'll hate me," he says, his voice like a hiss.

She stares back. "Not a chance," she says. Her eyes narrow, then widen until they are nearly round. "Never!" she cries.

He'd built their house from the ground up, the brothers from the Hall helping out for three straight days in May just before he and Anna were married. Their bedroom windows looked out at the barns and the fields beyond, and he'd put thought into all that southern exposure: good for both sunrise and sunset,

good for extra heat in the winter. He remembers Anna laughing with the other women as they set up card tables with paper plates and casseroles, vats of baked beans and trays of brownies spread out on a red checkered cloth that flapped in the breeze. He remembers the small, trim shape of her, the tiny waist belted into shorts that went down well past her knees, the white blouse and the ghostly outline of a white bra underneath. He remembers thinking it was finally okay to imagine her naked, with just a week before the wedding. He imagined her as he measured and drilled and fitted tongue in groove, and his imagination honed in with such great specificity—Anna, down on all fours in the spotless new living room, her hair falling over her smooth white shoulder—that he'd nail-gunned his own hand to a support beam in the basement.

"Maybe this'll remind you to be more like Christ," Anna said to him in the emergency room. She smiled at him with her mouth closed, hiding the little stray tooth on the right side that always made her blush in pictures. He'd closed his good hand around her small white fingers and held them tight under his hospital sheet. He could tell she meant no disrespect.

His wife, sharing the stage with another sister, their Bibles spread out like at home only now there's an audience, Jack among them. A five-minute dialogue with Anna pretending to be stuck in a bus station and Sister Loftus pretending to be worldly, soaking up this good news of the Kingdom like a plant in a drought. Jack watches without blinking. His father hangs from the rafters back at the sold-out, mud-wrecked farm. A blue-eyed girl waits naked on her unmade bed for her snarling father to come and say goodnight. Beside him, in the third row of the Snake Creek Kingdom Hall, Ruth kneads the sleeve of his suit coat absentmindedly, kitten-like, while his wife sits with white ankles crossed in front of all the brothers in the congregation, graded tonight on "personal appearance and modesty." *Daddy, sweat's dripping off you*—Ruth, whispering warm in his ear, but he can't take his eyes off his wife, still slim after children with the metabolism of chronic fret, practical in dress and not a stitch of makeup on her face but that face nonetheless failing to be plain; eyes the strange, deep gray of October sky, looking up only when necessary under lashes the color of soot.

When the five minutes end, she walks pink-faced to their row and Jack can taste the musky, nervous scent of her as she fans herself with the Bible.

"I've known you and your husband for a long time, Sister Renton," Brother Jenson says into the microphone. He taps his grading sheet against the grain of the podium. "I've watched you grow up, and we all of us can see you're a—well, how do I say—attractive—little sister."

Jack feels his wife's hand go from warm and damp to outright hot.

"I commend you on your appearance, Sister. We don't want any cold knees up here on this stage, no sir. Let's not distract ourselves from our purpose: We are here to serve Jehovah." Jenson is a large man with thickly layered scales of dry skin, and Jack has noticed through the years that he has a habit of licking his puffy lips and making a smacking sound in the microphone whenever he finishes a sentence. He looks at the man on the stage and panics and thinks *what if:* what if his whole damned life has been a mistake—the farm, the religion, the way he and Anna pray with the girls at bedtime and take them to strangers' doorsteps to offer the hope of everlasting life in paradise, the way they sing Kingdom songs in front of the wood stove at night, praising Jehovah for the gift of Truth. His father is done for, if he believes all that. No room in paradise for a man who takes the greatest gift of all and throws it right back in Jehovah's face—thanks but no thanks, I know better than you.

The meeting ends. Outside now in the Kingdom Hall parking lot under the stuttering buzz of lights, Jack holds Anna's face in his hands. The dry cornstalks rustle at the edge of the lot, making his belly churn with terror and lust. He hears the girls laughing inside the family van. The other Witnesses laugh and call to each other and pull their coats around them, shuddering and giddy in the warm night wind. His thumbs move under Anna's eyes to wipe the tears away.

"What's wrong?" he says, but it's pointless. Her grief has always been unclear to him. The wind stirs up around them like something alive, dangerous, pulling dress and suit against their bodies, flapping Jack's tie over his shoulder. "Can you make it home all right?"

She nods. He tucks her in the car and wraps her seatbelt around her, thinking it's a good thing they live so close. There is an elders' meeting in the Hall library that he really shouldn't miss. Rebecca and Ruth are quiet in the backseat, aware now of their mother's hurt. He blows them each a kiss good-bye, gives them a warning with stern, level eyes: "Take care of your mama till I get back."

He waits with his hands in his pockets until his family blends into the caravan of taillights pulling out onto the dirt road. He sees little white fingers waving frantically in the rear window: his daughter, Ruth, so full of six years old. In the carport of the Hall, where hardy mums the deep red shade of Passover wine heave in the strong wind, the other elders wait for him. He nods at the circle of dark-suited older men and turns back for a minute to look at all those lights moving away over a black sea of hissing corn.

Jack is glad that home is so close later on, too, when he finds himself tucked awkwardly in the passenger seat of Brother Jenson's stuttering Caprice Classic, bags of old McDonald's food crunching at his feet, the sour backwash of argument and money-talk bubbling up through his esophagus. The congregation is short once again for monthly expenses, and where can they fit one hundred and nine Witnesses if the Hall has its electricity shut off? In Jack's dark driveway, when Jenson lays a hand on Jack's leg and says, "I sense a real lack of faith in you, Brother," Jack recoils and looks straight at him before shutting the door: "Don't ever say my wife is attractive again."

Inside, the kitchen still smells of Anna's crock-pot goulash and oatmeal cookies. Jack rubs his eyes and moves through all the rooms they built from scratch so many Mays ago. The moon is full and patches of dull silver stretch in through the windows, falling on Anna's skin, pale against the blue-white pillow. He leans over her and listens to her breathe. He could slip in between those cool sheets, he thinks, shimmy up next to her silky warmth, press his nose to her hair and feel the small, hot swell of belly under his trembling hand.

In the hallway, he puts his ear to his daughters' door and hears high, twinkling laughter muffled by blankets. He touches the doorknob, turns it softly in his hand: one way, then the

other. The girls are silent. He is afraid to open the door so he keeps turning the knob in his hand, the only sound in this house he built with the expectation of family nine years back, turning until the knob starts to slip away from him with sweat.

Outside once again, he moves urgently through the brittle grass to the house of his childhood. He hears the flapping of plastic and is surprised to see the windows stark and black. He flips on the light in his father's office, opens drawers until he finds what he's after and locks the door, goes back out into the warm, bright night. He walks through the mud between the barns with all their closed doors, knowing it's his father on the other side; but something else there, too—the hayloft.

It had been a jump-off, a flying leap and a squeal in midair to a landing only partly soft with hay and straw. There was the humiliation of five years old, his brothers ten and twelve and already muscled with work, spinning and flipping in the air and calling him sissy, a mama's boy, nancy-pants. There was the thrill of the leap when he finally made it, at age seven, after two years of hanging alone on the ledge and letting himself drop, which never counted by anyone's measure, all those years of subsequent endless jumping and climbing back up until panting and exhausted, lulled to the house by the drift of his mother's rhubarb pie cooling in the kitchen window, the assurance of food and sleep and his mother's dry hand tousling his thick hair, her voice as papery and fine as her fingers, *What a good boy I have in Jack*.

And he brought Anna here, once, when they were both nineteen and she had been his wife for only a week, when he had tried every night for seven nights to make love to her and every night she'd cried and kept her legs tight when he made a move to go between them, cried as he spread his hand over her warm honey-hair, pressing her to him and telling her it was all right, they'd try again; and that one time she came to him in the middle of day with her best dress on, red flowers on breezy white fabric, little half-smile that hid the errant tooth and a paper bag with ham-and-egg sandwiches, sugar cookies still warm from the oven, and a small box of cold white wine they drank in the loft until they were laughing, until he rolled her over on the hay and smoothed the hair back from her serious eyes, looked in her eyes for a good long time until the dust in the light seemed to

settle around them, still as a curtain, and she undid his belt for him while he fumbled at her buttons.

Ruby's bran-mash breath rises above the stall door. He lets her out and she stumbles after him; old, stiff, but interested by his unscheduled presence. No halter, no lead rope, none needed for many years, and she waits for him when he crosses the driveway, the mud edging up past the soles of his dress shoes. He opens the barn doors. Inside is absolute stillness. The moon leaks in through the missing patches of roof. His father's heavy shape is dark, indefinite, suspended. He lights one of his father's cigarettes and holds it out far in front of him, like evidence. He tosses it into the mounds of dry hay, all those glossy-white summers of growing up beginning to smell like smoke as he leans against the door.