

James McConkey

I am fond ("fond" being a synonym for foolish) of saying that I was born on Brockley and raised on Mars--though it would make more sense if I lied, and said I was born on Mars and raised on Brockley. Both of them are streets in Lakewood. Actually, during my years of growing up, I lived on another Lakewood street as well. My father changed jobs at least once a year, moving his family around much of the country, but always returning to Lakewood, as if it was his (and our) home base: the other streets on which I lived were McKinley, Fries Ave., Hilliard Rd. and Clifton Blvd. During the last two of my high school years, I wanted more permanence than my father could give me, for he had changed wives as well as jobs; and so I asked my uncle and aunt, whom I had briefly lived with when they were in Lakewood and who were now living in Olmsted Falls, to take me in; and they did.

What I remember most vividly from my early years in Lakewood is the sound of the foghorn--the mournful Ah-woo-wah on misty and foggy mornings in the spring and fall, as I still lay in bed. That mysterious sound is intimately connected with the spiritual impulse which underlies nearly everything I've written. It still has connotations for me of loneliness and connection, and of vast expanses of sea and sky. It speaks of the littleness and lostness of each of us in a terrifyingly immense universe, and of the degree of assistance we can give each other; it also speaks of a freedom as impossible as it is frightening, but which the soul desires. Without that foghorn, I doubt if I could have understood the story that has become so important to my own self-understanding, Chekhov's "Gusev," whose conclusion is also the conclusion of a book I wrote in 1984, *To A Distant Island*.

For many years, I thought it necessary to live near a large body of water to avoid entrapment. Sea and sky--and that warning foghorn--underlie whatever creative impulses I have. In Olmsted Falls, I was given much love by my uncle and aunt, and made some long and lasting friendships with other high school students. Olmsted Falls then was a village, surrounded by farmland, and Rocky River an unpolluted stream for midnight skinny-dipping with friends. My two years there were happy ones, crucial to my psychic health. For years, my uncle and aunt spent most of June on North Bass Island, off the Catawba peninsula; my mother and brother and I had gone with them to North Bass previous to my stay in Olmsted Falls, and my mother and I went there twice more during my stay with my uncle and aunt. I used the peninsula and the island as the major environment for a novel published in 1979, *The Tree House Confessions*.