

Copyright © by Borealis Press Ltd. and Don Gutteridge, 2010

*All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without prior written permission from the Publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.*

## Canada

*The Publishers acknowledge the financial assistance of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP) for our publishing activities.*

**Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Gutteridge, Don, 1937-

The perilous journey of Gavin the Great / Don Gutteridge.

Poems.

ISBN 978-0-88887-412-2

I. Title.

PS8513.U85P47 2010

C813'.54

C2010-905896-8

*Printed and bound in Canada on acid free paper.*

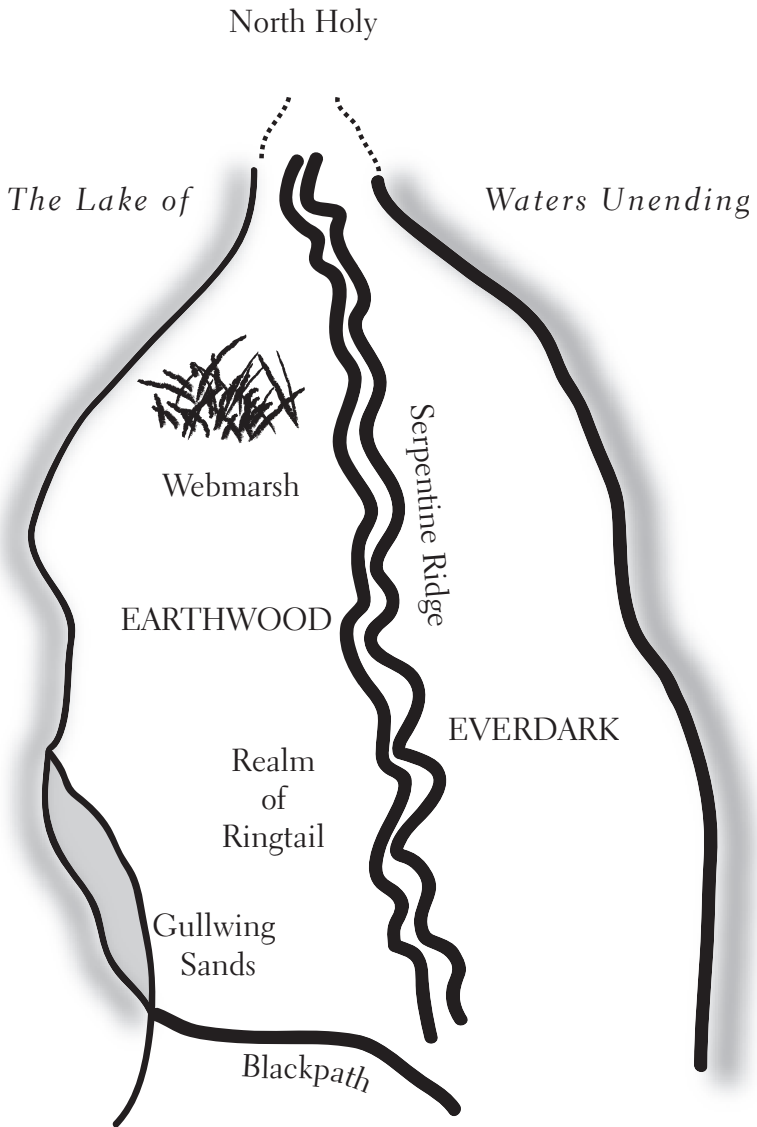
# The Perilous Journey of Gavin the Great

A Fable by

Don Gutteridge



*Borealis Press*  
*Ottawa, Canada*  
2010



TALLWALKER  
TERRITORY

## Chapter 1

### A Flood

Long, long ago near the beginning of time (or, as those few hardy survivors of Earthwood might have put it to their grandchildren, at the end of one time and the beginning of another), the spring rains that came without fail and fell without favour upon woodland, shore, meadow and waterway decided for no discernible reason not to stop. Oh, there was much speculation among the many-named creatures who scampered or slithered, darted or lumbered, clambered or burrowed, stalked or cowered among the benign boughs and mossy underpaths of the forests that Gollah had created principally for the benefit of the Chosen Ones—whom He had dubbed “woods-creatures” to distinguish them honourably from the lesser beasts and beings. (Or so it was said by those who ought to have known.) Shivering under a damp canopy of branches or huddled along the soggy corridors of a burrow, while rains poured down upon the greening of sprout and shoot and leaflet as if determined to murder what they had just persuaded to be born, the woods-creatures ruminated thus:

The raccoons, who judged themselves to be the cleverest of all earth’s beings, suggested to anyone who would listen—or anyone who could hear them above the din of rain-rattled twig and seething stream—that it was undeniably due to the after-effects of the Great Burning. After all, the fires they had seen erupting like exploded suns across the night-sky till the very stars trembled and went out and the wintriest of snows sizzled and steamed in mid-descent—such conflagration would need much rain to be brought to its senses and, as RA-Mosah (the eldest and wisest of the wisdom-dispensing clan) perpetually preached: “Dame Nature, who is herself but another manifestation of Gollah’s all-seeing purpose, must right herself so that all things be kept in precise balance like the perfect halves of an apple or a walnut split by a coon’s cunning.” The rains will stop, the eldercoons assured a pair of droop-winged blackbirds and one drenched

jackrabbit who happened to be within earshot, the rains will stop when they must, and not one milli-moment before.

The cottontails, on the other hand, who kept their ridiculously oversized ears close to the ground, insisted in their chattering, all-talk-at-once way that the thundering rumble (which had preceded the Great Burning and brought every animal upright and rigid with terror) had in truth not yet completed its dire reverberation, and was for those of sensitive ear and tender footpad still horrifically audible, and therefore one should not be concerned about a little surplus rain or the grass being a tad juicier than usual.

The mice, ever nervous and thrice superstitious, were inclined to blame it all on the intemperate greed of foxes and ferrets who last Fruitfall had helped themselves to more than their allotted share of rodent-pie and then further displeased the All-Knowing One by boasting of their obscene excesses. The upshot being that all Gollah's creatures were now being made to suffer for the transgressions of a few. How else could the denizens of Earthwood be reminded of their place in the order of things that was never to be challenged or changed? "We may be lowly, despised tunnellers of the underearth," an upstart mouseling named Bucktooth proclaimed from the crest of a flooded anthill, "but we know our place and do our duty, without complaint or braggadocio."

So bright had the Great Burning been, especially in the suddenness of its first burst somewhere over the house-habitats of the Tallwalkers who lived, thank Gollah, far to the south and preferred to stay there, that the moles of Earthwood rose out of their cozy vestibules up into the illuminated air like a chorus of blind cherubim and announced that at last they could see the light so long denied them. Even Owl, who was called Minervah by all who revered her and no less so after she had been struck sightless by the cruel dazzle of a Tallwalker's firestick, even Minervah had blinked and let the blast of brilliance shudder through her. But of the rains that refused to stop or what they might portend, she had nothing to say, or, if she did, it was too terrible to tell. And the moles, drenched but still blind, hunkered back in their holes and tried to find an undamp chamber where they could brood and indulge their disappointment.

The rains continued in spite of creature-talk, prophecy, good reason or, in the end, desperate petition to Gollah or any of the lesser

gods who might be in a more merciful mood. So strenuous was the rain's falling that Serpentine Ridge itself became a blur, then a blotch, then a blank. The sinuous, barren parapet of rock and pitiless stone that had spawned the sun every morning of their lives and the lives of the dear dead-ones; whose Ghosties and Phantasma (the very stuff of animal dreams and sleep-stirrings in the ever-dark), kept the Warlows, Bandahs and fanged Karkajim from devouring utterly the wise and foolish alike; whose grim, granite-rim defined for good or ill the eastern border of the known world—was no longer visible! Had the rains washed it away? Drowned the sun or driven it, horrified, in some other direction? Surely there could be no flicker of its flame left anywhere? Surely whatever transgressions had been made against Gollah's law were now fully punished? Surely Gollah would not be so spiteful as to destroy what He Himself had made and blessed and—through the generosity of His soul-mate, Dame Nature herself—encouraged to flourish from season to season in the great circle of Ever-Time?

Thus reasoned the Chosen Ones of Earthwood in the midst of trepidation and hope. But finally the hour arrived—it could have been high-sun or mid-dark, no-one could tell for certain—when reason itself went under. And instinct, older than Gollah and deeper than the world, took command.

\*

The moles spluttered and paddled out of the flooded ground, nosing dew-worms and root-grubs, flaccid and slimy, before them. Leaderless, panicked, in tumbling hundreds they rippled over the forest floor, whose drenched mosses and runnels of rain left no place to settle or pause. Whether they knew it or not, the whole jumbled troop of them was heading east. Towards high ground. Towards Serpentine Ridge.

"They'll soon be eaten," Hubert, the brightest and most admired of last season's litter of cottontails, informed Renée, who was herself not far from producing her own brood.

"Well, what can you expect of moles?" sighed Cuspid, the young beaver, to his twin sister as he watched her, with pride and brotherly affection, wedge an unco-operative cedar-twigg into the dam they were dutifully repairing even as the floodwaters began rolling over its high, never-before-breached rampart. "You don't need eyes or a brain to snout your way through life."

Paddle-Whee giggled, and dropped a birch-branch. The torrent

behind her spun it away and whistled it past the humped lodge where Mama and Papa stood stalwart and brave against every threat.

“Let the four-legged groundlings run like rats to their doom,” one of the recently arrived robins smirked to a nearby flock of starlings. “When the rains reach the top of the tallest tree, then we feathered folk might think about worrying. Gollah gave us wings to soar above His earth and all its lesser creatures.” That not one winged-and-superior being had ventured up into the teeming murk of the air for days was not, out of politeness, mentioned. Nor was the question of how berry-bereft bushes and uncocooned larvae and wormless soil and flood-stunned grasses and leafless trees would provide sustenance enough to energize flight and quicken the eggs now withering within. Nor could anyone recall hearing a chirrup or a chick-a-dee-dee-dee for days and days. And Baldur, the great bachelor eagle, grateful for the liberal provender of mouse and mole over the long annuals of his life, had swung his wide wings into motion and bullied his way upwards to see if indeed Serpentine Ridge had been obliterated and whether the rains extended as far as the Tallwalker colonies to the south or the Lake of Waters Unending to the west or, improbably, to the borderless realms of North Holy where Gollah and the other gods were thought to dwell and contend. But barely had he made it above the treetops, shorn now of those few virgin leaves that had dared the Rootburst air, when the wind-whipped rain tormented his lofting feathers into leaden petals, and he sagged and bent and flapped crookedly landward.

But it was when the groundhogs and rabbits and, incredibly, the water-loving muskrats surged out of burrow and nether-den and, saying no word to friend or foe, stampeded eastward—to the Ridge and certain death—that RA-Mosah summoned the Council of Elders to emergency session, something he had not done since that long-ago day when the Tallwalkers had rampaged through Earthwood as if they had owned it, discharging their death-dealing firesticks and dragging behind them, bloody and bone-shattered, every whitetail doe and buck the forest had to give. Only the fawns and a few yearlings survived—to perish in the brutal cold of a dark, dark winter. No deer had since been seen. Nor had the Tallwalkers bothered to return.

RA-Mosah gazed thoughtfully around the ancient High Ring of sacred pines, the holiest precinct in all of Earthwood, for the raccoons

and for those creatures who held their wisdom and canniness in awe. The elders had assumed the upper branches, as their age and sagacity warranted; the rest of the clan coon were squeezed, family by family, onto the stoutest branches farther down. Below them the watery ground swirled and seethed. The sanctified air enclosed by the High Ring shimmered before them like melting ice. Above the steady, reassuring words of their RA, the roar of the storm uttered its own, incomprehensible, speech.

“Elders, friends and children,” he intoned as if the sun were still shining and beaver-meadows greening again, “we have no cause to abandon reason, the gift of the mothers and fathers who have lived before us, have seen and endured much, and have loved us enough to try to make us as wise as any woods-creature is allowed.” RA-Mosah always looked as if he were staring into some magical spot just behind the sun, but Gavin—the oldest of the three grandsons, the sons of Uthra, who sat erect and solemn just below and opposite their father—was certain that the seer’s eye was cast in his direction only and was blessing him in some important but still-secret way. His brothers, who had not ceased to mourn their mother’s death, huddled against him and paid little heed to the words of RA-Mosah.

“Panic is the mundane staple of the tunnellers, the diggers and the nether-nosers placed here in Earthwood by Gollah to be the fodder of hawks and coyotes. If there must be a flood—and we can be certain that Gollah Himself has brought it into being for His own purposes and will, when He is satisfied, bring it to a just conclusion—then it is surely fitting that the lowliest and meanest of creatures should panic and flee its fury, while we remain firm in our faith that the forest itself is meant to be and is indeed the flower of all Gollah’s handiwork. It will survive. And as the principal wardens and watchmen of His glorious creation, we will survive with it. Our wisdom and steadfastness will be needed more than ever when the ruins are to be rebuilt, and the havoc turned back to harmony.”

Oh, how RA-Mosah could speak! Gavin’s heart trembled in his breast as if it had become words crying to be spoken. He clutched to his side the perfect little leather-pouch that Papa had given him just before stepping up beside grandfather-RA. Papa had smiled, as he habitually did when looking upon the wonder of his sons, but something like fear had fluttered in the air between them.

It was Uthra's turn to speak. Just then a flurry of blackbirds attempted to negotiate the space provided by the High-Ring pines, and almost made it to the eastern edge when their wings, furious with the wet weight of the wind, collapsed without warning, and they plummeted—askew, bewildered, and broken—into the dark surge of the ground.

Ignoring them, Papa spoke: “As long as there are trees left upright and last fall's dried fruits unblemished on them, we shall have food aplenty and makeshift shelter enough to ride out the tempest. I too have read the sacred and ancient texts of *The Book of Coon-Craft and Animal Cunning*—” (he did not confess, as he had to Gavin, that he alone had perused the profane texts of the Tallwalkers and mastered their Gibberlish) “and I tell you that such plagues as this have been visited upon the world many times in the days before Earthwood was deemed to be the chosen ground of the great Gollah. Locusts and fire and flood have been sent to test those favoured too much perhaps by the All-Knowing, to tempt them beyond endurance, to make them go mad with the very reasoning He gave them to ensure their sanity.”

Trisbert, who was half again as big as Gavin, gripped his older brother's paw as if he wished to lock onto it forever. Cuyler—tiny, sinewed, hardly weaned—buried a cold nose into Gavin's thick coat, and fidgeted.

“Do those foolish enough to think the heights of Serpentine Ridge will save them really believe that the roots of these mighty pines will suddenly jump out of the bedrock and skitter away, trunk and branch and everlasting needle? Are these roots not wrapped around the granite plates Gollah laid down to spread his seed-breathing soil upon? Has this needled limb I have my claws around ever been any colour but a living green? Since the very day it was created?”

The rain-soaked wind lashed at the High-Ring pines, bending the evergreen bitterly, howling against the words of belief flung against it. The branches, as promised, did not break. Not one needle was intimidated to abandon its post. But somewhere nearby a creek was transforming itself into a river, renegade and unrepentant.

RA-Mosah himself took up the animals' burden again. “Let us join hands and pray to Gollah. Let us swear to remain firm and reasoned and faithful to our purpose in Earthwood so long as Gollah grants us air to breathe, trees to harbour us, roots to hold the—”

RA-Mosah seemed to be leaning sideways, improbably tilting away from the topmost branch of the High Ring. His mouth hung open, stopped in mid-sentence, as if startled by something it had just said. The trees beside him seemed to be losing their bearings. The entire High Ring of pines began to waver and bob. Trees bounced against their neighbours. A hundred raccoons clung fiercely to the one branch that held them above whatever roiled below them.

Then RA-Mosah, Uthra, and the brotherhood of elders slowly sank away into ordinary forest until, with a scream like skin being flensed from vivid flesh, the roots that anchored everything to everything else gave way. They reared up into the most holy of spaces like crazed octopi, then followed trunk, branch, and scattered needle into oblivion.

Not a cry, not a whimper, not a gasp of astonishment or a goodbye (if such had been offered) was heard above the roar as the waters of the world—in vengeance, spite, jest, indifference (who could say?)—eradicated the trees of Earthwood and tossed them topsy-turvy upon the flood that was surely, unstopably, turning itself into a sea.

\*

Whether it was instinct or reason, or some combination of these ever-contending elements, or some other motive too fresh and overwhelming to be given a name, all those woods-creatures and their lesser vassals who had not been drowned outright when the first wall of water struck, took to their legs and aimed them at Serpentine Ridge. Better to be chomped in half by a Three-Toed Bandah or benignly frightened to death in an instant by a Ghostie or Warlow! No such thought was spoken aloud, however. Not even among members of family or clan, who tried desperately to stay close to their kin as the rain slashed sideways at them, blurred their vision and slickened fur or feather, while the rising riptide behind them licked at their tails and drove black panic deeper into belly and brain.

Soon there was not a creature who was not alone, though the undergrowth and moss-beds seethed and shuddered with a thousand of their kind in full flight. Fox tripped over Mouse and took no notice. Rabbit stumbled on Weasel, righted himself and carried on. Raccoon tangled with Coyote in a maze of leg and fur without a hiss or yelp. Squirrel felt the skim of Hawk's talons whisking above him and beyond. Porcupine bellyfopped upon Mole who did not mind. And did not mind again when Beaver did the same.

Still the rains did not relent, determined it seemed to swallow the whole of Earthwood till not even the tiniest tip would peep above it like a hopeful oasis or reminder of what had been and might be once more. No-one could see Serpentine Ridge. No-one could see an inch in front or beside. But the ground under paw and pad and snake-belly, beslimed and insubstantial, was rising, was lifting them upwards with each terrified step. Steeper and steeper. Grassier and grassier. Rockier and rockier. Surely this was the eyrie of monstrous birds and Three-toed Bandahs and Ghosties who feasted on obese clouds. But no such images, so common in the dreams of ordinary animals, occurred to them now: their panic was supreme. The heights of Serpentine Ridge, perilous and unknowable, now beckoned them, held out to them a last, frail hope.

Not all of Gollah's creatures reached even the first outcrop of rock, black and treacherous in the gloom above. Those who were small of limb soon scampered themselves into exhaustion and lay down as if preparing for some exotic, underwater sleep. Those whose heartbeat was frantic and tuned to quick escape soon felt the blood thicken and swell till it burst its chambers, and did not blink when the deluge closed over them. Others, more thoughtful perhaps than their cousins, simply arched forward onto a grassy foothill and gave up. And some, too clever by half and knowing less about water than they professed, clung to the flotsam of disgorged trees and let the flood take them where it wished.

The brave or naïve few who *did* reach the dizzy, twisting summit of the Ridge (they knew they were there only when their front feet suddenly pitched downwards) paused in solitary relief, slumped against a pitiless boulder or stunted root for balance, and waited. The sound of their own breathing and the roar of the tempest was all they knew until a ripple of wavelets whispered at their feet, at the knee-joint, at the vulnerable belly. With hope exhausted and courage mocked, who could blame them for sliding down into the waiting ooze—eyes shut and jaws wide open? Was Gollah's name the last word in their mouths?

So blinding and impenetrable had the rain become that the shadows flitting along the high crest of Serpentine Ridge might have been the last and boldest of Earthwood's elite or merely the phantoms of those already succumbed—travelling towards the abode of the gods

who seemed to have abandoned them, towards mysterious North Holy where water, sky and land came together so harmoniously they no longer mattered. The Ridge rose with them, and the grim flood followed.

Then, as it had been foretold but not believed, water, rock and air met in sudden and final perfection. Earthwood was no more.