

On Don Hagelberg's "Master Mustalainen"
and *Vintage Voices, Four-Part Harmony*

by Beth L. Virtanen, PhD

As is all of Don Hagelberg's work, "Master Mustalainen's Relief" is a study in the complexity and the idiosyncrasy of the human experience. Master Mustalainen, a lad perhaps of six years of age, addressed in the "old world fashion," in desperation uses a "colored" bathroom in Missouri in the mid-1900s. The narrative ends with Isä, the boy's father, chasing away the teen who made fun of the boy, carrying him out of the restroom, exposed and mid-stream in his "relief." Ironies abound in the story. "Mustalainen" is the Finnish for "black man" or "gypsy" or "Roma," but here a white child is named "black." A white child named "black man" is called, "Master," which emphasizes what little actual control a boy has over himself. Further, the comment that the family wishes they could be gypsy is an ironic reference to the poor treatment of gypsies in modern-day Finland.

In the age of industrialization, Isä, the father, does not expeditiously address his son's need for the bathroom, even though the boy has indicated his need for some time even before they arrived at the gas station. This fact was first noted by Afgani-American author, Mir Tamim Ansary. The father, in fact, gasses up the car and is in process of entering the gas station to pay for the gas before the young lad bursts from the car to relieve himself. "Can't wait," he says. The father's lack of concern for his son's needs underscores the irony of males having difficulty in caring for their children and, instead, operating under the spare-the-rod-and-spoil-the-child mentality. The mother, aiti, also seems absent when it comes to meeting the needs of her son.

The teen who accosts Master Mustalainen is white, ironically enforcing the segregated bathroom arrangement on another white and thus using the convention of rules made to benefit the prejudices of one group to curtail the freedom of the same group the rule was designed to unjustly empower. Symbolically, the fact Master Mustalainen was unable to exhaust his stream on his attacker and his cohort of friends suggests an impotence that is caused by the absurdity of the situation, which is resolved only when Isä takes on his normal role of caretaker and protector.

The story is quirky and charming, a think piece that asks us to call into question racial inequality and bigotry, sexism and racism, and the absurdities that continue to limit human potential even at this late date in history. In the world where such things happen, we are reminded that we might be the ones getting urinated on, or freezing midstream, if we don't take active roles in promoting equality and opportunity for all of us.

The anthology in which "Master Mustalainen" appears, *Vintage Voices, Four-Part Harmony* (ISBN 978-0-595-52778-6), is a multifaceted collection of works by the Redwood Writers, Sonoma County Branch of the California Writers Club. It contains poems, memoirs, essays, and short stories that engage a variety of themes and styles. The single constant that holds the content together in a single work is the quality of each contribution. It is published by iUniverse, Inc., and is available under the bookstore tab is available under the bookstore tab in e-book, at <http://www.dealoz.com/> and in soft cover edition at <http://www.iuniverse.com/>.