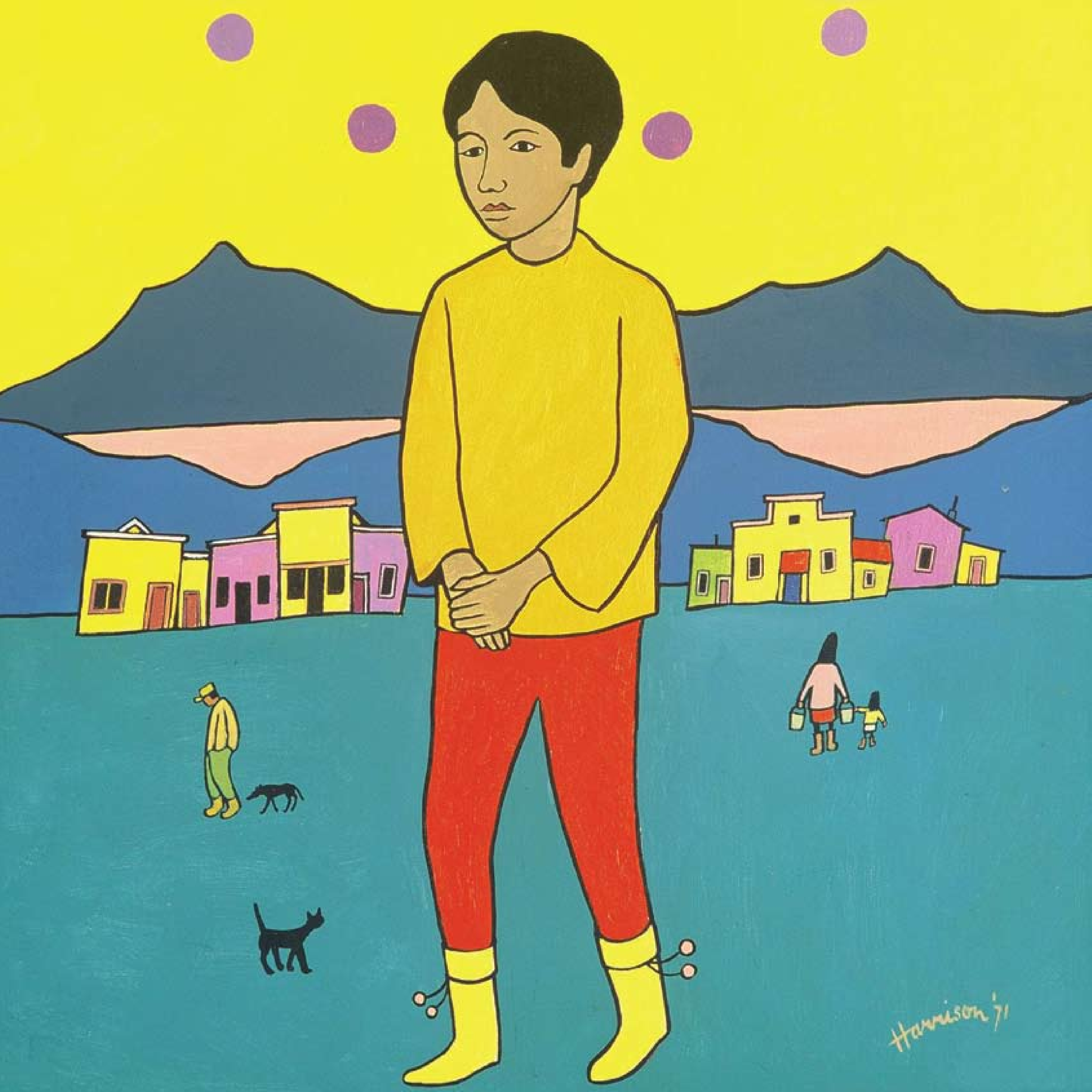

Harrison '71

Chapter Thirteen
Carcross Inspiration

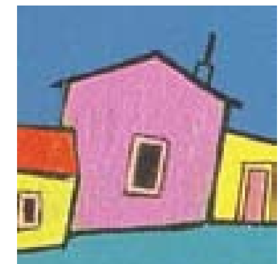
"I never thought I'd be an artist. I thought I'd be an art teacher, painting for my own amusement and getting fulfillment from watching my students go on and be successful."

By mid-August 1968, Ted had completed his first session of summer classes at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. From there, the Harrisons embarked on the 1,200 mile journey north to the Yukon in a second-hand Pontiac Beaumont station wagon. The car, sold to Ted by a quick-deal salesman, burned more oil than gas, "but at least the steering worked!"

The family meandered along the Alaska Highway passing through the BC-Yukon border at Watson Lake and then turned west to challenge the mountains of the Continental Divide. When they stopped for gas at Jakes Corner just east of Whitehorse, Ted gazed down the valley. He'd imagined a pristine wilderness, but now it surrounded him. "Here was a land all sparkling and pure with an air that had never known the grime of a coalmine," he later wrote. "Here the mountains were created by God and not from the toil of hard physical labour." When he spied a pretty little lake and thought, "I must have a cabin there one day," he knew this place could fulfill all of his expectations. The Yukon's seduction of Ted Harrison had begun.

As the family continued toward Carcross, they passed a hamlet presided over by Old Tagish Annie who sold fresh pies and crusty bread. They made a quick stop and then they were on their way with a warm apple pie on Nicky's lap. After rumbling down a gravelly road, which they following over a narrow, one-lane bridge, they turned southwest. Ted noted anglers trying their luck in the waters entering Marsh Lake. "Suddenly, as if a magician had conjured up a mirage, the village of Carcross popped into view," said Ted. "It looked like a little toy town." The sight of the village, tucked between two glittering lakes and surrounded by wilderness, rekindled Ted's boyhood sense of adventure. Energy surged through him. "It's wonderful, absolutely wonderful," he repeated out loud.

Ted and Nicky unpacked the car and loaded their belongings into the three-bedroom trailer



Opposite:
Child of the Midnight Sun *(detail)* 1971
Acrylic on Board
Ted Harrison Collection

provided by the school board. Little did they know that among their possessions were a few more of Ted's lucky shamrocks. After settling in, they scouted out the town. On left side of the road stood St. Saviour's Anglican Church, hauled to Carcross across the thick ice of Nares Lake in the dead of winter more than a hundred years ago. Beyond it was the remains of the paddle-wheeler *Tutshi.* The old railway station, the Caribou Hotel, and other Gold Rush remnants stood against a rise of aspen and spruce. A steam engine recalled the good ol' days. Montana and Caribou Mountain rose in the distance. Ted and Nicky rippled with anticipation. "I felt so very, very lucky," said Ted.

Lucky.

And flat broke.

It was Ted's good fortune to meet Nellie Watson. Her husband owned the Matthew Watson General Store, built by his father in 1910 after he quit the Dawson goldfields. The wood-frame building still resonated Old West ambience with its ice cream parlour on one side and general goods on the other. Bison-horn carvings, animal traps, caribou hides, canned goods and dried foods, bolts of cloth, and fishing tackle elbowed for space on the thick plank shelves. Ted imagined grizzled men in worn-out boots and sweat-caked shirts swapping stories on the benches outside the store. Yes, this piece of the past begged a painting.

Ted introduced himself to Nellie and after a leisurely chinwag offered to make a painting of the store in exchange for $30 worth of groceries. "Back in '68, thirty dollars went a long way," said Ted. "Heaven knows you can't light a cigarette with that now!" Nellie agreed and *Matthew Watson General Store* was Ted Harrison's first painting of the Yukon.

The Harrisons' year in Wabasca had prepared them for Yukon winters. When the temperatures plunged, vicious winds whipped the town into frozen submission. "We go around looking like Eskimos in our furry coats and the ice crystals from one's breath stick to the edges of the parka. …The Indians bring us gifts of moose and caribou meat as well as fresh fish from the lake. It is marvellous to taste all the various foods this country has to offer," wrote Ted in 1967 to his sister during his first Yukon winter.[53]

Between blizzards, the sun shone in brilliant abundance and beauty was ever-present. Ice crystals sparkled in the frigid air and snowdrifts glistened like bolts of silk. On clear evenings Orion, Venus, and the North Star seemed close enough for Ted to touch. On one particularly bitter night, mysterious curtains of light raced through the heavens. "A light pierced through our bedroom window, waking us. I threw on my clothes and dashed outside. Streams of yellow, rose, and green danced about as if they were searchlights from heaven. If angels had started flying down I wouldn't have been surprised. The elders say that the dancing lights are the spirits of ancestors playing soccer in the sky, using a walrus head as a ball." Ted had witnessed his first Northern Lights.

Life in Carcross was good. And Ted's luck, which had guided him through near-death in India and led him to paint the Perak Tong Temple in Malaysia, now followed him to this little Northern Canadian village. "We've won a mobile-sled in a raffle! It has a seat along the top and a motor in the front and does about 50 m.p.h. on the lake ice. Young Charles likes to sit in front. We often see wolves out on the lake — they run like mad when we chase them," Ted reported to Algar.

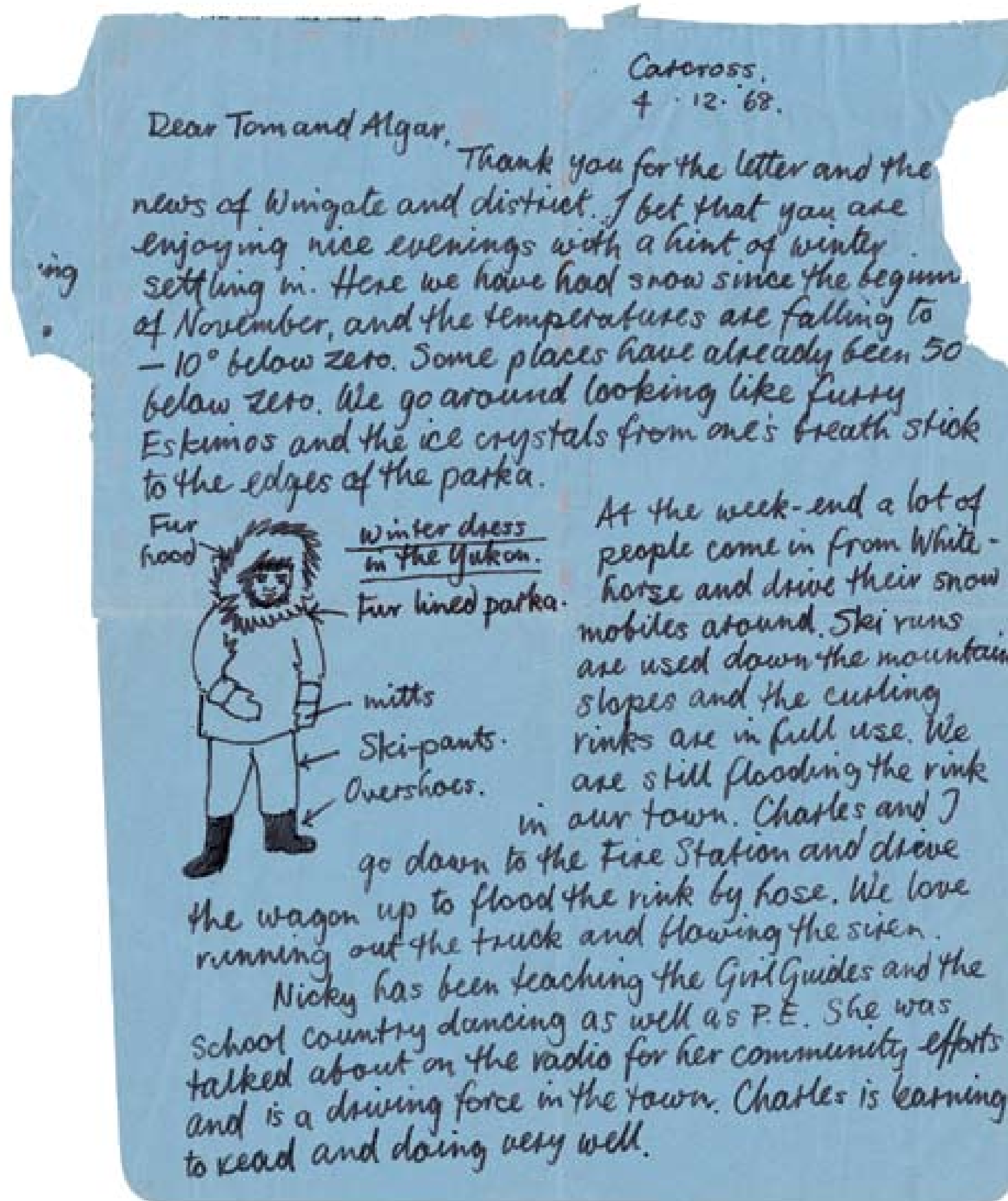
While the area surrounding Carcross abounds in wildlife, the town is also a living record of Canada's wild-west history. During the 1890s, thousands pouring over the Chilkoot Pass to the Yukon goldfields stopped there. Historian and author Ken Spotswood recaptures Carcross in those early days in this except from an article in the *Yukon News*.[54] "From the tent towns that sprung up in the area, several prominent hotels emerged. The Caribou Hotel was built here in 1898 and still enjoys the distinction of being the oldest operating hotel in the territory. That same year, Fred Trump, grandfather of American millionaire playboy Donald Trump, and his partner Ernest Levin, opened a restaurant in a tent at Bennett, which they called The Arctic. Trump and Levin fed their customers well, and before the year was out, they replaced their tent with a two-storied building that offered food and sheltered accommodations."

Great herds of caribou passed through the area on their annual migration before the hordes of prospectors descended upon Carcross. The coming of the White Pass and Yukon Railway in 1900, transformed Carcross from a shabby huddle of shacks into a bustling staging centre for prospectors pushing on to Dawson City. Workers stayed to maintain the railway. Boat builders, outfitters, and savvy entrepreneurs set up shop hoping to capitalize on fortune hunters gearing up before streaming on to the goldfields. Women looking for adventure, and others who knew men would pay in gold for an hour of affection, followed. Of those who survived the unpredictable climate, river disasters, disease, and isolation, a few hit the mother lode, but most left with their carpet-bags filled only with disappointments. The biggest winners were not prospectors, but those who ran hotels, saloons, brothels, outfitter shops, and dry goods stores.

While the Yukon attracted characters of all sorts, Polly the Parrot was one of the most endearing, and enduring. It is said she arrived during the gold rush, travelling over the Chilkoot Pass with her owner, Captain Alexander. She was still going strong when Ted arrived. (Polly was destined to become a catalyst early in his career.) The parrot lived in the dining room of the Caribou Hotel and quickly earned a reputation as a hard drinker, having developed a taste for whiskey. She was also a raunchy singer, enchanting visitors with bits of opera interspersed with choice phrases of profanity picked up from the hotel's rough-and-ready clientele. If someone asked, "Polly wanna cracker?" the bird responded, "Go to hell!" Polly was so notorious that fans from across North America sent her letters.

More than seventy years had passed since Klondike madness swept through the Yukon, yet Ted found poignant reminders of lives once lived. Within abandoned trappers' cabins and homesteads, faded wallpaper hung from kitchen walls, a woman's button shoe laid trapped in a tangle of left-behinds, and gold pans rusted in the underbrush. Remnants of touchable history such as these underlined the ruthless, fragile life north of sixty.

Ted learned that life in the Yukon demands that folks be tough enough to mush dogsleds in blinding storms, drink to last call, and still rise at daybreak. The locals like to say that in the Yukon the men were men, and women were men, too. Many of the loners and eccentrics who staked out a life there would not have passed muster in the restrictive mores of society south of sixty. But in this place, they were accountable to no one.



Carcross,
4 · 12 · 68.

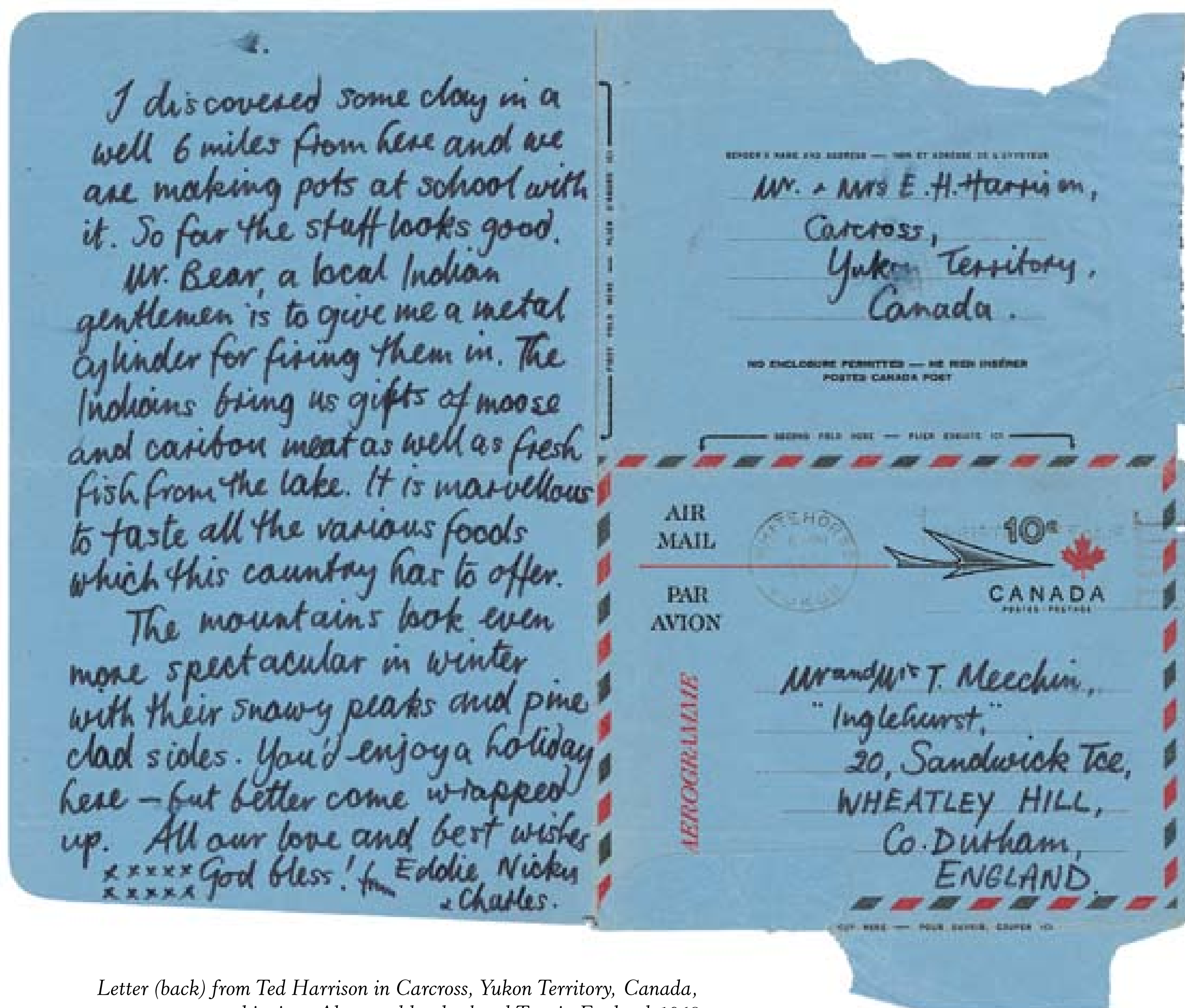
Dear Tom and Algar,
Thank you for the letter and the news of Wingate and district. I bet that you are enjoying nice evenings with a hint of winter settling in. Here we have had snow since the beginn of November, and the temperatures are falling to −10° below zero. Some places have already been 50 below zero. We go around looking like furry Eskimos and the ice crystals from one's breath stick to the edges of the parka.

Winter dress in the Yukon.
Fur hood
Fur lined parka.
mitts
Ski-pants.
Overshoes.

At the week-end a lot of people come in from White-horse and drive their snow mobiles around. Ski runs are used down the mountain slopes and the curling rinks are in full use. We are still flooding the rink in our town. Charles and I go down to the Fire Station and drive the wagon up to flood the rink by hose. We love running out the truck and blowing the siren.

Nicky has been teaching the Girl Guides and the School country dancing as well as P.E. She was talked about on the radio for her community efforts and is a driving force in the town. Charles is learning to read and doing very well.

Letter (front) from Ted Harrison in Carcross, Yukon Territory, Canada, to his sister Algar and her husband Tom in England, 1968



I discovered some clay in a well 6 miles from here and we are making pots at school with it. So far the stuff looks good.
Mr. Bear, a local Indian gentlemen is to give me a metal cylinder for firing them in. The Indians bring us gifts of moose and caribou meat as well as fresh fish from the lake. It is marvellous to taste all the various foods which this country has to offer.
The mountains look even more spectacular in winter with their snowy peaks and pine clad sides. You'd enjoy a holiday here — but better come wrapped up. All our love and best wishes
xxxxx God bless! from Eddie, Nicky
xxxxx & Charles.

Mr. & Mrs E. H. Harrison,
Carcross,
Yukon Territory,
Canada.

NO ENCLOSURE PERMITTED — NE RIEN INSÉRER
POSTES CANADA POST

AIR MAIL
PAR AVION
10¢
CANADA
AEROGRAMME

Mr and Mrs T. Meechin,
"Inglehurst,"
20, Sandwick Tce,
WHEATLEY HILL,
Co. Durham,
ENGLAND.

Letter (back) from Ted Harrison in Carcross, Yukon Territory, Canada, to his sister Algar and her husband Tom in England, 1968

"They call newcomers *cheechakos*. If they can make it through a winter, they're considered part of the community," Ted wrote to his sister. "Many don't. Either you love it or you can't get out fast enough. You have to accept this land for what it is. You can't change it. But those who stay, find the most beautiful place on Earth."

When Ted arrived, Carcross was a mix of Native families and others from Outside, drawn there by mineral exploration (and exploitation), railroad maintenance, and the townsite's strategic location as a transportation hub for railroad, highways, and the steam wheeler SS *Tushi*. Mary Berg, principal of Carcross Community School, was typical of those who came and stayed. "She was an educator of rare quality," stressed Ted. "She understood the beauty of the North and brought it right into the classroom." He recalled a winter morning when the sun had yet to rise. Principal Berg invited the entire school into her classroom to appreciate a breath-taking sight unfolding outside her window. "The full moon had set on snow-covered peaks gleaming with unearthly iridescence. We gasped in wonder, teachers and children alike."[55]

Others saw only an infinite emptiness. After a few weeks of snow and ice, the new kindergarten teacher hightailed it back to her home in Florida. Nicky took her place. At the time, that program was independent of the school system. With her customary take-charge attitude, Nicky instigated a move to incorporate the early childhood program into the school board's mandate. She stressed the benefits to all children, especially Native children, of a gentle entrance into formal education. Her persistence won over the administration, and to her credit, she brought the kindergarten program into the Yukon education system, making it one of the first in Canada to do so. She, too, was soon taking summer courses toward an education degree.

On weekends, Ted and Nicky went around the village chatting with their students' families over cups of coffee at the kitchen table. The Harrisons' empathy for the community expanded as they came to understand its underlying challenges. Poverty and unemployment fuelled considerable stress in the village where a residue of shame simmered beneath the storybook veneer of the little town.

More than seven thousand First Nations people lived in the Yukon before the discovery of gold in 1886. Within a few years, smallpox and other "white-man's" diseases took their toll. A census conducted in 1902, just four years after the Klondike Gold Rush of 1898, recorded only 610 Aboriginal people remaining. The original custodians of the land were becoming extinct.

In the year 1903, Bishop W.C. Bompas opened the first residential school in Carcross, bringing Native children into his home. The school grew quickly. Eight years later, the Canadian government opened Chooutla Indian Residential School on 1,160 acres of farmland close to the village. The school, managed by the Anglican Diocese of the Yukon, accommodated 150 students. When not attending classes, they worked in the vegetable gardens and fields, helping to harvest hay to feed cattle that supplied beef and milk. The school closed in June 1969 when students transferred to a facility in Whitehorse.[56]

Chooutla Indian Residential School was one of hundreds operated by churches nationwide and funded by the federal government. The schools were established in the

nineteenth century in answer to the government's Indian and Northern Affairs policy of "aggressive assimilation."[57] This national system of education for First Nations children persisted until the last century, accounting for approximately 130 schools throughout the territories and provinces except Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, and New Brunswick.

The program's mission to immerse Native children into white society often devastated the communities from which they came. Children as young as five were snatched from their families to be converted, "civilized," and educated. Mothers clung hopelessly to their little ones as well-intentioned officials pried them from their arms. When the Canadian government rescinded its assimilation policy in the mid-1960s, the children began returning to their homes. Some remember those days as positive and rewarding. But others suffered the cruelties well-documented in recent years. In those students' later years, these abuses often manifested in drug and alcohol addictions, and in poor parenting skills.

When the Harrisons arrived in 1968, the school in Carcross was serving children aged six to eleven with a mix of ethnic backgrounds, including those from the Carcross Tagish First Nation.[58] Ted's training as an art and design teacher was useless with these youngsters. Even his year with the children of Wabasca had not prepared him for the challenges he faced there. These little ones needed a steady — and heavy — disciplinary hand, something unnatural to easygoing Ted. Continuous difficulties in the classroom collided with his genuine affection for the children. Records document daily incidents of student truancy and belligerent behaviour. For a man of gentle spirit, this created in Ted continuous internal conflict. But he soldiered on, enduring the strain of teaching. In 1971, Ted also acting as principal of the school. That year exhausted his energy and affected his mental health.

For all the difficulties of the job, Ted also had comical, inspiring moments that appealed to his painterly sensibility. One such incident occurred when a little girl named Virginia needed to use the washroom. She became increasingly uncomfortable, refusing to use the toilet, for she was certain a witch was hiding there. "Hang on," said Ted, "I'll get rid of that silly old witch." He rose from his desk and briskly marched out of the room, leaving the door open so the children could see him. With two loud knocks on the bathroom door (which was just across the hall), he bellowed, "Witchery, witchery, witchery-woo. Come out quick or I'll cut you in two!"

He then returned to the classroom.

"The witch is gone!" he announced. The child dashed across the hall, peered into the toilet, and tore back to the classroom, sending a huge, sunny smile to her teacher as she posed in the doorway. "Yes, the witch is gone. I saw her flying over the kindergarten and she was green!"

The sight of that young girl standing in the doorway entranced Ted. "She had long black hair and wore a woollen sweater, a tartan skirt, and beaded mukluks with pompons that her grandmother had made. I held that vision of her in my mind." That evening, he began a portrait of the child. *Virginia* (1968) is pivotal in the development of his subject matter. It signaled his positioning of the Native people of Carcross as his subjects, softly echoing Cornish and Lowry who maintained, that what lies at the doorstep is worthy of a painter's palette.