

## READING LOWELL KOMIE

Lillian Baker Kennedy

When Jim Elkins sent me *The Legal Fiction of Lowell B. Komie* and inquired whether I might want to write about Lowell Komie's stories, I sighed. How would he know how little I want to read another lawyer's work once I've put the answering service on. But (for Jim) in a desultory way, I read the stories. Resistant at first, I didn't hear much. Not until the white deer ran. That pricked my doe ears up. About the same time, my son, a college freshman trying to decide "what" to be, asked me for a book to read in his leisure time. Torn between the selfish desire to have him join my practice and a mother's concern that he might lose his most important *who* in *what*, I loaned him the book of Komie stories. And I didn't get it back for a long time. Now, a sophomore, he's treasurer of the Psychology Club. I see now, when we talk, he's becoming more himself. He's young. He might change his mind, but I have inoculated him with a spell of that old snake charmer, LBK, Lowell B. Komie.

For Komie, you see, is a shaman, shapeshifter, a healer. At the first major poetry reading I attended, an important personage (yes, poetry has those, too) read at least five bird poems. I asked the person sitting next to me, "What's with all these birds?" Unsurprisingly, I developed an annoyance with bird poems—frankly, the birds are just too puny. Komie turns out to be one of the big birds. So big, he owns the forest—the white deer. He owns the lakes and the leeches, the butterflies of the deserted lot. He knows the elephants, the Masai chieftains, and he knows where the piranhas snap. In all these shapes, he heals. He lifts us up, we captives of bordellos. He knows the trials of whores. What I figured out, over time, is that totemism is a natural creed of writers.

And Komie knows the truth of the fee, the way we protect ourselves. He knows the dance, the client who tries to entangle, the poisonous snake entwining about the ankles. He reminds us to stay clear of them as best we can. He knows how little some lawyers get paid, how some end up broke. He has lived long enough to realize that the grass is not so greener on the other side. Komie knows the color of gray—in faces and business suits. The noise of beepers and faxes and the satisfaction of voice mail erasure. He knows about who's in and who's out—and what that costs in shed skin, the cannibalized fetus, the door between cold and warmth. He knows the need we lawyers have for each other (even with the door in between) while we wait for the homebound bus. At times a bit pretentious—a Virgil to our Dante, but whole, fleshed out. I often

think of my mother, the cleaning lady, who said before she died, "I know you worked hard for it, but don't forget, you have a good life." What would she know of the stakes, of the hell that freezes face down? How many of us have rowed across the river with our clients? And here's what Komie knows that Dante did not—that the way back is the hope to help, that the echo of Ivan's plaint is mercy on our selves.

We need our mentors more than we need our tort professors so we can avoid "failing to see what there is to be seen," to avoid our own injury, to hold on to what's personal. We need our shamans, the mentors of our wounded hearts. And we need our mothers, especially the cleaning ladies. Wax to wisdom is scrubbed on the knees.

Let me be my own anachronism. I will turn back the clock. I will hunt—enough to survive. But on my own time, I know a beach with a white butterfly. I will let out my soul-kite and fly.