

The Other Side

by Christopher E. Hilliard

In the main room of a wooden shack, a knobby boy of ten years folds a thin newspaper in half and centers it on the small, plywood coffee table. He fluffs and straightens the flaccid cushions on the couch and on the arm chair with scratched wooden arms. When he stops, he's standing on a flat piece of fabric that serves as an area rug. He surveys the room and nods to himself before running to an adjacent room. The room is narrow with a disheveled bed, a half-open window, and a floor full of toys. He flattens the thin sheets on the small bed and shoves the toys under the bed. Wooden cars, egg carton dolls, tin foil balls, and paper action figures find themselves hidden in the bed's shadows. He pulls a wooden crate under the window and reaches up. Suddenly the room sways forward and back beneath and around him. He hops down from the crate and looks around the room with wide, curious eyes.

"Ma!" the boy shouts.

From the other room, a voice is heard, "Peter, if you want to talk to me, you'll have to come in here."

Peter hops down from the crate and runs from the narrow room through the main room and through a rickety door to another room with a wood stove with two burners, a small, wooden table with four chairs, and a short, open cupboard that holds four tin bowls, four tin plates, and four tin cups. Before one burner, a woman with a long, brown ponytail stirs a large metal pot. Before the other, a young, boney girl of six years with dark, kinky hair stands on a crate and holds a wooden spoon in her fist as she stirs the contents of a small pot. They both turn when the boy enters.

"Ma," Peter says.

"What is it, Peter?" the woman asks.

"Did you guys feel that?" he asks.

"Feel what, dear?' she asks.

"The house shook. You didn't feel it?"

"We've been busy, Peter. And houses don't shake unless little boys are running through them."
"It shook, I felt it!" he says.
"If you say so, dear."
The boy sighs. "Do you want the window open or closed?" he asks.
"Open, it's still warm out," she says. "Why are you in such a hurry?"
"We're having a competition with the kids from the other side today, and I don't wanna be late."
The girl hops down from her crate. "Can I come?" she asks.
Peter looks at her. "No, Lou," he says. "You're too little."
"That's not fair!" the girl says.
"Peter," says the woman, "Why don't you take Louise with you?"
"But, Ma, she's so slow."
"Am not!" Louise says.
"Peter, be a dear and take your sister. She's plenty old enough now."
"But Ma!"
"Peter!"
"Fine," the boy says.
"Good, then go ahead," she says and she kneels to look at the girl eye to eye. "Louise, do what your brother says, okay?"
"What if he's mean to me?" the girl asks.
"He's not going to mean to you," the woman says and turns her head to look at the boy. "Are you, Peter?"
"No, ma'am," he says and looks down and away.
"Good," the woman says and taps the girl on the nose and ruffles her hair.
Louise runs past Peter. "Let's go! Let's go!"

On the dirt path that leads away from the shack, Louise skips ahead of Peter. Her brown curls bounce with every skip. He jogs to keep up with her.

"Goin' to the wall," she sings. "We're goin' to the wall today!"

"Don't sing, Lou. It's annoying," Peter says.

"Ma said you have to be nice to me."

"No, she said I can't be mean. There's a difference."

Louise stops and narrows her eyes at the boy but resumes skipping. "Goin' to the wall, we're goin' to the wall today," she sings to herself.

"Hey, did you feel the house move?" he asks.

"I dunno," she says. "I thought I heard the dishes rattle, but we were busy cooking."

To either side of the path where the children walk, there stands a forest that turn into mountains that extend farther than the eye sees. Directly before the children, a clearing opens, and in the clearing stand rows of short wooden buildings. Beyond the buildings an enormous, transparent wall. And beyond the wall, buildings as tall as trees made of stone and brick and colorful glass. Louise pauses when she sees everything. Her eyes widen. "You never said it was all so big."

"Yes, I did," Peter says and walks beyond her.

"Does it go all the way to the mountains?" she asks.

"Look for yourself, Lou," he says. The girl looks and sees the wall spans the entire gap between the mountains.

Louise runs to catch up with Peter and matches his pace. "How tall is it?" she asks.

"I don't know. Really tall?" he says.

"Taller than the mountains?"

"Gosh, I dunno, Lou. Just look at it, okay?"

"What's it made out of?" she asks.

"I don't know," he says.

"I bet it's made of glass."

"It's not glass," he answers.

"You said you didn't know what it's made of."

"I don't."

"Then how do you know it's not glass?" she asks.

"'Cause we thought of that," he says.

"Did you try to break it?"

"Of course."

"With rocks?"

"Yes, Lou. With everything. Rocks, sticks, Tommy Johnson's fat head."

"Nu uh!" she says. Peter smiles at her. As they approach the wall, it grows ever taller and stretches out ever broader.

"Where'd it come from?" Louise asks.

"I don't know," he says.

"I bet Mama knows," Louise says.

"She doesn't."

"Then I bet Papa knows."

"He doesn't."

"I bet Mrs. Singer knows," Louise says. "She knows everything."

"She doesn't," Peter says.

"How do you know?"

"Because I asked 'em," he says.

"All of 'em? Even Mrs. Singer?"

"All of 'em," he says. "Even Pastor Tom, and the barber, and the newspaper man, and all the policemen. Nobody knows anything about it 'cept it's real big and hard and it's been there longer than anyone remembers."

"I'll say," the girl's eyes nearly bulge as she scans to the left and right. "Is it true they have lots of cars on the other side?"

"Tons of 'em. And flashing lights, and movie theaters, and ice cream, and fancy suits and dresses."

"And the beach?" she asks.

"And boats," he says. "You ever seen a boat, Lou?"

"Nu uh," she mumbles.

"If you're lucky, you'll see all of that today, and more."

The girl bounces again and sings, "We're gonna see the beach today, we're gonna see a boat today, we're gonna--"

"Lou! You have to stop singing."

"Fine," the girl says and she walks beside the boy. "What's the competition?"

"We're gonna see who can build the tallest kid pyramid," he says. "Us or the kids from the other side. Heyyy," he looks at Louise with wide eyes.

"What?" she says leaning away from him.

"You'll be perfect on top."

"Nu huh, Mama said nothing dangerous," she says.

"It's not dangerous," he says. "Anyway, if we fall, you'll fall on top of everyone, so you'll be fine."

"I don't think this is a good idea," Louise says.

"Come on, Lou. Think about it. With your help, we can beat the kids on the other side."

"I don't know," she says.

"Come on, Lou! It'll be great," Peter says. "We'll be a team. I'll be on the bottom, you'll be on the top. We'll build the best pyramid a brother and sister ever built," Peter says and smiles. Louise smiles back but says nothing.

When they arrive at the wall, Peter joins a small group of children, and Louise runs up to the wall and presses her hand against its smooth surface. Then she smacks it and then puts her head against it and looks through to the tall buildings with shiny windows and cars parked in the streets. Opposite her brother and his friends, she sees a growing group of children all wearing bright, colorful dresses and clean shirts. Looking away from them to the sidewalks, she sees a girl her own age with her family, all holding ice cream cones. Beyond the cars and the buildings and the people, she sees white sparkles, and beyond them dark blue sparkles that stretch farther than she can see.

"The beach!" she shouts, "Peter, the beach!" she turns around and runs to where her brother stands among the group. She

grabs her brother's hand and pulls, but he slips out of her fingers and says, "Not now, Lou. Actually," he says as he turns to the group. "Guys, this is Lou. She's going to be on top."

"Oh, she's perfect," one boy says. "Yeah!" shouts another, and the rest nod.

Louise looks at the group then at Peter. "What?" he asks.

"The beach!" she exclaims.

He rolls his eyes and says, "Yeah, go *look* at it some more." The group laughs.

Louise crosses her arms and walks back to the wall. Through the wall, she sees a teenage boy and girl walking down the sidewalk with a dog on a leash. A boy on a corner seems to be shouting, but she hears nothing but the group of children on her side of the wall and the bustling of the town behind her. She looks back through the wall at the white and blue sparkles. Her eyes focus, and she distinguishes sand, water, and waves. Tiny people walk on the sand, and a small, colorful ball bounces into the air. Beyond the sand, the people, and the water, a white tube floats on the horizon.

"Peter!" she shouts without looking back. "I see a boat! Peter, look!" she says and looks back at her brother and the group which grows in size. He looks at her and shakes his head. She faces the wall again and leans against her hands which she cups over her eyes.

On the wall of a building, she sees a bright sign with black lettering, words she hasn't seen before. People walk into the building holding jackets or walk out *wearing* jackets and holding bags of popcorn. On a distant corner, she sees a group of tables with couples and families sitting under big umbrellas and laughing and eating. The girl drops her hands. She looks back at her brother and the group of children wearing torn and patched pants and shirts, and at the dusty town with short buildings, and at horses hitched to posts or wagons. She looks back through the wall again, steps backward, and stumbles on a rock. She picks herself up, grabs the rock, and picks a spot on the wall in front of her. She pulls back her

arm, and flings the rock. With a slight *flick* it bounces off the wall and lands among a row of rocks that lines the base of the wall.

"Have you tried digging under it!" she shouts and kicks at the dirt and rocks along the wall.

"Good idea, Lou!" Peter shouts back. "Why don't you get started, and we'll join you." He and his group laughs to themselves.

"Ma said you have to be nice!" she shouts back before she plops down in front of the wall holding her chin in her hands. She scans the group of children on the other side, then shifts her gaze to people on the sidewalks, then all the way down to the sand, to the water, and to the boat which fades into the distance.

Her brother sits down right beside her and puts his arm around her shoulder. "I'm just kidding, Lou," he says. "It's just, we thought of all that already. You can't get through."

"But it's not fair!"

"That's why we're gonna beat 'em!" he says. "You wanna beat 'em, Lou? You'll be tallest kid there ever was on either side of the wall."

She looks up at her brother. "Really?" she asks.

"Cross my heart," he says and draws an "X" across his chest.

She looks at the children gathered on her side, then at the children on the other side, then over the town on the other side then back to the town on her side. "Are you sure it's safe?" she asks.

"Of course!" he says.

After a silent moment she says, "Okay, I'll do it."

"Big kids in the front!" Peter shouts. He points and says, "One, two, three, four, in the front row with me." With two fingers he points out two pairs of kids and says, "You two, and you two, in the second row right behind. Then you three, and you two in the back, fan out a little. Where's Lou?" Peter spins around. "There you are, Lou." He leans over to look her in the eye, "When we're stacking, you need to stay close to one end. You're gonna have to climb everyone's backs like stairs to the top. Can you do that, Lou?"

"I don't know about this, Peter," Louise says.

"Come on, Lou," Peter urges.

"Hey, Pete!" shouts another boy. "I think they're ready. Is she coming?"

Peter looks back at the children on the other side and sees they are assembled just like his group. He looks to Louise again.

"Come on, Lou. We need you."

"Where are *you* gonna be?" she asks.

"I'll be on the bottom with the other big kids, just like I said, and you'll be on top."

"Are you sure this is safe?" she asks.

"You'll be fine, Lou. Just be careful when you climb up, and don't rock back and forth. We have to hold it for ten seconds or it doesn't count, okay?"

"Okay," she says.

Peter turns and addresses the group, "Everybody ready?"

In unison, they shout "Ready!"

Holding three fingers in the air, he shouts, "We'll start on three!" Turning around, he holds out his three fingers to a boy on the other side who mirrors his gesture. "Okay, let me get in line," he says and squeezes between two of the children in the front row. He looks out to Louise who is tapping her feet with her hands in her pockets. "You ready, Lou?" he asks.

"I think so," she says and pulls her hands out of her pockets.

"Good. When I say go, climb to the top as fast as you can and stay perfectly still, okay?"

"Okay," she says.

"All right, guys," Peter announces. "One! Two! Three!"

Across the wall from each other, the front rows of each group of children kneel onto the dusty ground. "Row two, go!" Peter shouts, and the second row of kids climbs on top of the first.

Children grunt and groan under the weight, one child shouts, "Ow! Move your knee!"

"Second row," Peter calls, "Set?"

"Ready!" they say.

"Third row, go! Say 'go' when you're ready." And the third row climbs, squirms for an instant, and shouts, "Go!" Peter looks across the wall at the clean children on the other side. They're shaking, but the pyramid is tall.

As the fourth row of kids climbs, Peter strains a shout, "Get ready, Lou!" His shoulders shake under the weight of so many children. As soon as the final row settles, they shout, "Ready!" and Peter screams, "Go, Lou!"

She scrambles up the backs of the children to the last two and she places her knees firmly into their backs and raises her hands into the air. "I'm here!" she shouts.

"One!" Peter screams.

"Two!" Everyone screams together.

"Three!" They see the other kids shaking and counting.

"Four!"

"I'm so high!" Louise shrieks.

"Five!" They yell.

"Hold!" Peter shouts.

"Six!" they scream as the pyramid starts to sway.

"Hold still, everyone!" Peter screams.

"Seven! Eight!"

Suddenly the pile of children rocks violently back and forth.

"Lou! Stop moving!" Peter shouts.

"It's not me!" she shouts back.

"Nine!" everyone yells.

The pyramid of children on the other side of the wall collapses into a heap. And before the kids in Peter and Louise's pyramid reach ten, *they* fall together. Louise fumbles through the children who scatter outward like sand poured into a pile, and she lands on Peter and another girl.

Peter squirms out from the pile and stands up and shouts, "I told you not to move!"

"I didn't!" Louise screams back. "Everyone else did!"

"We almost had it," clenches a fist and looks through the wall at the other kids who are picking each other up and wiping themselves off. Peter turns back and looks at his sister, "Are you okay?" he asks.

"I'm okay," she says. "That was scary. It felt like the whole earth was moving."

"That's what it felt like earlier, just not so bad," Peter says and wipes the dirt from his pants and palms."

Louise approaches the wall and stares into the city beyond it. She sees cars smashed into each other and into buildings, buckled sidewalks coated in shattered glass, paved streets with gaping holes in them, and buildings crumbled into heaps on the uneven pavement. "Peter," she says. "Look."

He looks up from his pants and stares wide-eyed through the wall. The other kids line up against the wall staring at the destruction on the other side. Peter scans the carnage and spins to look at his own town. People form groups outside of every building. With few exceptions, the small buildings stand intact. A few people sweep up glass and debris, and tied horses yank at their ropes. Otherwise, the people outside their builds join the children at the wall.

"Lou," Peter says, "It's gonna get dark soon. Maybe we should go home." Louise stands against the wall with her hands cupped around her eyes like binoculars. "Lou!" Peter calls.

"Peter," she says.

"What?"

"Are waves normally that big?" she asks and presses a fingertip onto the glass. Peter looks through the wall, down the street, beyond the people and buildings to the ocean's horizon. There he sees a wave taller than any boat and it seems to grow. His eyes widen.

"Lou," he says inching backward. "I don't know if we should stay here."

"But what about *them*?" she asks pointing to the people on the other side. Many of them run, carrying suitcases or children,

cats or dogs. Cars disappear down side streets. Hordes of people stumble out of buildings onto the debris-covered sidewalks. The competing children on that side stand together for a moment before one runs off, followed by another, and another, until every child has run away from the wall leaving only the kids and adults on the other side watching. Some back away, most stand gaping through the wall.

Louise looks back at her brother, "Where are they gonna go?" she asks.

Peter stops and says, "I dunno, Lou."

"Are they gonna be okay?" she asks.

"I dunno, Lou."

"Peter, I'm scared," she says.

"I'm scared too, Lou."

Louise runs the few feet to her brother and together they stare through the wall as the wave grows ever taller. It is higher than every building that still stand in the ruined city. The water on the beach recedes while boats are lifted high and turned by the wave. Louise reaches for her brother's hand, and they grasp each other. The wave reaches the land now, and people on the other side of the wall appear to scream. They run, but the wave engulfs them, and they disappear inside the water. Peter and Louise and the other children and the adults all step back and run away. Every other instant they look back and see the wave chasing them faster and faster. Now it covers the entire city except for the movie theater and a few small buildings which stand closest to the wall. In an instant they too disappear inside the wave, and in another instant, the wave slams against the wall with a deafening, thunderous roar. On the other side, everyone running away stops in their tracks and looks back. The water grows higher, yet the wall stands. Inside the wave, bicycles and newspapers collide against the wall. Then cars and trees. Then dogs on leashes smash into it with people grasping the leashes and writhing against the ocean. They swim up and up and up, but the wave grows taller, and the wall is unmoved. Then, deep in the wave, a long white tube appears.

"It's the boat!" Louise screams. "Run!" Peter and Louise run with the people around them all shouting and pointing, but the boat slams into the wall sending out a loud, metallic clang and tremors. Those closest to the wall fall to the ground while everyone else ducks their heads. Peter and Louise stop. Looking back at the wall, they see water almost as high as the wall itself, and within the water they see trees, doors, cars, lifeless dogs and squirrels, and the bodies of children and men and women all pressed against the wall, and the enormous boat tumbling through the water like a toy in a bathtub. It and everything else floats upward, leaving room for more trees and bikes and beach balls and bodies to pile up against the wall. Everyone on the other side stands motionless, mouths agape. Finally, the water ceases to climb. Umbrellas and traffic cones and bodies are still pressed into the wall, but minute after minute the water recedes peeling every tree and car and body off the wall and carries them into the ocean.

In the immense crowd of people all staring wide-eyed and open-mouthed at the wall, Peter and Louise stand side by side. Their hands grip each other.

"Peter," Louise says, her eyes still fixed on the wall.

Peter says nothing at first. Then he says, "Yeah, Lou?"

"It's not fair."

Peter says nothing.

"It's not fair!" she says.

The group swells with people, all standing around looking at the wall and the water which has all but disappeared, except for large puddles in the streets and on the buckled sidewalks. Wooden doors with their hinges and overturned cars litter the cracked streets. Bodies lay motionless, dripping as they dangle from tree limbs or from the roofs of ruined buildings. The enormous boat rests half in the ocean and half over the city. And on the other side, people stare. One cries, then another, and another, while Peter and Louise stand hand in hand, their mouths half-opened.

