

*Erasure*

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## ABSTRACT OF THE CREATIVE WORK

‘Patricio Muñoz’ is an aspiring writer. One day he meets Emmanuel Huffman, a professor at St. Sebastian University, Maragos. Professor Huffman offers ‘Mr. Muñoz’ a position as Writer in Residence and an opportunity to compile and edit an anthology of short fiction titled ‘Testimony’. The position entails relocating to Maragos and ‘Mr. Muñoz’ readily accepts the offer.

Upon arriving in Maragos, ‘Mr. Muñoz’ realises that Professor Huffman’s intentions were not entirely generous. Maragos is a country ruled by an oppressive regime. The government will do anything to find and prosecute individuals whom it believes oppose the regime.

*Erasure* is a work of fiction. It is divided into three parts. Part One is a complete copy of the anthology edited by ‘Patricio Muñoz’. Part Two is comprised of Professor Huffman’s reflections upon his situation. Finally, Part Three recounts the efforts of an over-zealous intelligence officer named Eric Garnett, who tries to find and prosecute the authors within the anthology.

*Erasure* deals with the nature of writing and the role of the author within society. It examines the issue of censorship and the pervasive sense of paranoia that underlies oppressive regimes.

## **DECLARATION**

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any other university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text.

I consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968 and the embargo on the creative work.

Patricio Eduardo Muñoz

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Date:



## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Professor J. M. Coetzee, Dr. Phillip Edmonds and Rachel Muñoz for their advice and support.

# Erasure

“Do not imagine you are on the earth, but in it.”

- Omar Khayyám

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PART ONE – TESTIMONY.

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# TESTIMONY

AN ANTHOLOGY OF LIVING WRITERS

*Edited by*

PATRICIO EDUARDO MUÑOZ



ST. SEBASTIAN UNIVERSITY PRESS

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A HAPPY MAN FROM BISMARCK, NORTH DAKOTA

## I

WITH A PENCIL, the writer crosses a blank page, leaving behind markings; words, sentences, paragraphs: *I was here*. He or she makes of the blank page (the real *terra nullius*) a lexical map; whose contour lines represent depth of emotions, rigour of convictions: *I was here and I felt this way*. The page has been occupied, its imperceptible populace subdued. The return home is no Odyssean feat, for the writer has not left from where he or she first sat. The journey is internal. The land is metaphoric. The page and its markings now not a land found, but a testimony of the self: *I was here, I felt this way and now I have returned*. He or she raises their hands, spiritedly displays the lead on their palms, the callous on their finger, unaware that the resulting applause is the sound of their own manacled hands.

## II

What is writer's block? The term suggests that there is an impediment existing between what a writer perceives and what he or she is capable of putting onto a page. Somewhere, out of sight, there exists an antagonistic muse, obstructing the clarity of their imagination with an obfuscating hand and a deafening voice. The muse that grants epiphanies must also be capable of inflicting sustained wordlessness. Seldom do we perceive the chasm between our imagination and output as a failure or limitation in our capabilities; we can see the road ahead, cast our eye beyond the green hills, cool rivers, on towards the townships; we know how happy we will be once we overcome this obstacle—this fallen trunk in our path, this gaudy leopard, hungry lion or lean she-wolf. Writing is a journey, you say, if only we were allowed a first step. The muse responds to your supplication. “When writing seemed effortless,” she says, “you were the plunderer, the conquistador, a demigod. What are you today, a victim, a prisoner, a good-intentioned free soul, a pilgrim even?” You will say anything just to be granted a loosening of the chains, a single unguarded pace away from the margin.



### III

Here follows a short chronology of failures, misadventures and delusions: in 1992, aged thirteen, I decided to write a book about a catastrophic world war. I knew nothing about global politics. I had each country attack its neighbour; vengeance, in my mind, must have proximity as its impetus (the fact that this belief mirrored the fraught relationship I had with my older brother, with whom I then shared a bunk-bed, does not evade me). In 1994, aged fifteen, I decided to write a love story. I had never been in love. The characters spent every moment having sex. After a hundred pages of imaginary (and often, perverse) carnal pleasures, I gave up. I learnt that there were quicker ways to satisfy my bodily urges; physical, ingenious manners that overlooked grammatical correctness. In 1996, aged seventeen, I decided that I would write a mystery-thriller aimed at the popular market. I was certain that I would make a fortune from this book and from then onwards be able to write what I truly pleased (namely, *real* literature; preferably a classic). I wrote a murder scene where a mother wept over her dismembered child. My words brought me to tears. This is it, I thought, jackpot; freedom from my angst. After two hundred pages, the violence sickened me. In 1999, I tried to compose several books of poetry, all of which I later burned. In 2001, aged twenty-one, I decided that I would travel to the United States with a pencil and a notebook and visit every single town and city possible (or at least those serviced by the Greyhound Bus system). My aim was to write the true American novel, rendering characters with creative tenacity and unimaginable clarity. I am not American, but Chilean, by way of Australia. I was not employed and there was no whimsical patron to fund my mania. Besides, I didn't know how to create characters. I had spent almost twenty years in my bedroom, struggling over a blank page, brimming with ideas—unbearably lonely. In 2007, I met Professor Emmanuel Huffman.

### IV

From my 'Journal of Imaginary Americans (2001-2005)': "He gasps continually, struggling for breath in the humid air. Hands in pockets, he fondles loose coins. Tiny blue eyes behind thick rimmed spectacles. A newspaper—The Richmond Times—

folded under his right arm, showing the obituaries page. He mumbles. Food in his beard. A pot-belly edging over a black and gold belt. An old leather satchel slung across his left shoulder. When he coughs he covers his mouth and then wipes that hand on his corduroy pants. Waiting for someone. If only that person would hurry. Virginian man.”

## V

Professor Emmanuel Huffman teaches English and Writing Studies at St. Sebastian University, Maragos. I met him by chance in a café in Sydney and we soon began conversing on literature and writing. While talking to him, I could not help but be amazed at how remarkably similar he appeared to my imaginary ‘Virginian man’. I felt an uncanny sense of déjà-vu; a feeling as if we had encountered each other on a prior occasion. He casually placed a newspaper on the table, and when I saw the obituaries section that he had been reading and circling, I almost gasped for breath myself. “Janice Massey-Barton died peacefully today. Her family and close friends were at her bedside, comforting her,” he said. “Isn’t it nice to know that death can be peaceful and comfortable?” “Yes,” I responded. Had I not invented a Janice Massey-Barton from Blue Springs, Missouri? He drank from his coffee; the cream remained on his moustache. He coughed, wiped his hand on his trousers and said, “Let’s talk about what you will write.”

## VI

From my ‘Journal of Imaginary Americans (2001-2005)’: “Young pigeon-toed girl, with tangled, blonde hair. She spends all morning in the dusty yard running in circles, arms outstretched. She recites all the names of the planes that fly low overhead. She has a sister who spends hours methodically combing a doll’s hair straight. She knows the name of only one city other than her own: New York. She even knows it in Spanish, Nueva York, thanks to her nanny. One day, she says and then darts across the brown yard. Shadows, like crucifixes, engulf her. One day, and nothing else.”

## VII

I didn't know where Maragos was. Professor Huffman had to point it out to me on a map. "It's this stretch of land here," he said. "It looks like a clover leaf, doesn't it?" He offered me an office with my own table and computer. He said that scholarships were easily attained and that the cost of living was affordable. "Living shouldn't be a prison sentence that you work off," he said. "In Maragos, you can buy bananas—not the type you find in supermarkets here, but larger ones, more golden—for less than a centavo. Believe me, they taste delicious." In turn, I would have the opportunity to work as a Writer in Residence for the Department of English and Writing Studies at St. Sebastian University. "They are always looking for hard working and intelligent people," he said. I could write in peace. I could eat bananas. "Do they speak English?" I asked. "Sure they do," he replied. "As well as Maragoian. Do you know how they say 'St. Sebastian' in Maragoian? 'Santo Sebastian'. It's easy. You'll have no trouble." I looked up at the sky. No planes. The day had arrived.

## VIII

From my 'Journal of Imaginary Americans (2001-2005)':

"His rattail rests on his shirt collar. A thin moron tie runs the length of his bony chest. He presents to work each morning on time. He has a smile for everyone; pale white tombstone-teeth. When he is embarrassed, he digs his head into his left shoulder. He is a happy man from Bismarck, North Dakota. He has a cubicle with photos: nieces, nephews, an old girlfriend, dry grassland prairies with irregular stone ridges. He greets every job with gratefulness; change the toner in the photocopier, fill all the cups with pencils, clean the lunchroom, take minutes at today's meeting; his smiling mouth shows every tooth. When he walks his arms seem to reach his knees. He loves his workspace. His eyes liven when he is asked to speak of the prairies; he stretches his arms wide and it's as if one can hear the rush of unobstructed wind in that land."

## IX

‘TESTIMONY: AN ANTHOLOGY OF LIVING WRITERS’ provides a comprehensive representation of short fiction in English translation by emerging and established writers from Maragos.

I must express my gratitude to Professor Huffman for initiating this publication. His extensive knowledge and contacts in the field of Maragoian literature proved invaluable.

I am fortunate to have had the opportunity to meet with so many writers. My engagements with these fellow authors were, at times, both contentious and supportive. The multifaceted nature of the short stories included illustrates these varying and meaningful responses.

Alongside each story, I have provided a photograph and brief biography of the respective writer. I have also incorporated a statement by each author, which reflects their particular view on the writing and reading process.

I hope that this anthology becomes widely available and that it offers aspiring writers both hope and guidance.

Writing is an arduous process, which benefits from creativity, diligence and luck. Of late, I have been blessed with an abundance of the latter and hope here to express my appreciation.

My journey has some way to continue, but in such company, one hopes that the muse continues to be generous and the end beyond sight.



Patricio Eduardo Muñoz  
St. Sebastian University  
Maragos  
2008



DIANE SALAZAR is the author of several books of fiction including *The Luckiest Stone* (Black Wolf, 1989) and *The Weight of Water* (Flint & Arrow, 1991). She won the H. P. Headstead Award for Critical Writing in 1999 for her work *A Certain Line* (Criterion, 1998). Presently, she is working as a dental assistant.

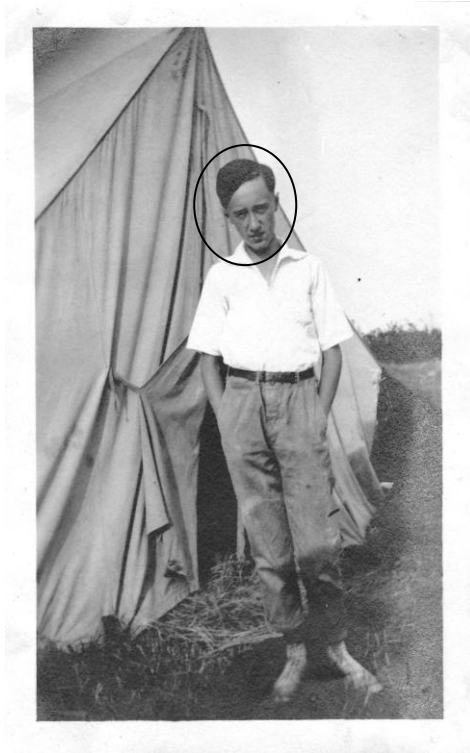
“I have a passion for books—all writers should also be good readers. I not only wanted to read books, I wanted to be a book. I envied the way they occupied a shelf, so happy and quiet, with their spines turned to the world.”

HANDS ARE THE HARDEST THING TO CAPTURE. To capture hands one needs a steady eye, and another set of hands. Hands are seldom listless, the hardest workers, the least loved. Fingers are always rigid, hunched at the joints, like a tired farmer. Lax fingers are usually found on a broken hand. A broken hand is in turn seldom looked upon with pity; mostly with repulsion. You are attached to my arms, you say, you even have the nerve to duplicate yourself, and now you are broken, weak and useless to me.

Hands are burdened with nails. Nails in turn collect dirt. At times, they push like jagged blades into the skin, growing into the flesh. The fingers swell with puss. Nails are thoughtless things; they continue to protrude long after one dies, when the hands are pale and bloodless. They are cowardly things; they fear the trim of the blade. They grow long and curl in tight circles, defensive, mimicking the great horns of a ram.

I often think that while we sleep, hands leave the body, detach themselves from our fleshy stumps. They commute to a place where all hands gather: a hall, a chapel, an office someplace. There they practice assertion, clenching themselves into fists. Happy with their defiance, they spend the rest of the night wildly applauding each other.

What if someone were to walk in on one of these nightly gatherings? There is nothing as definitive, as accusing as a pointing hand. Nothing will end a life quicker, than a thousand angry hands around a human throat.



PETER CARVER is a public school teacher. His short fiction has appeared in numerous literary magazines including *New Fiction Now*, *Plymouth Quarterly* and *Westward*. He spends his holidays in the mountains with his wife and three young sons.

“The most difficult thing to write is laughter: ‘Ha, ha, ha.’ ‘She laughed.’ ‘He found it funny’. These examples don’t capture the happiness felt when one either hears laughter or laughs. But why should this failure—or discrepancy between the thing and the thing represented—be limited to laughter alone? Tell me, how does one adequately describe pain or evil?”

AT THE CLINIC, Octavio waited with the others for his name to be called. Apart from a young child who screamed wildly about a pain that he struggled to locate with his tiny hands, everyone sat quietly and in good temper, browsing at magazines and pursuing the busy nurses and secretaries that paraded hurriedly without a word. The clinic was never without patients: no sooner was one patient called that another took his or her place, silently brooding upon their own ills. It was the heart of winter and the clinic was teeming with the sick.

After several hours, Octavio was called into a nearby office where he waited for his childhood friend, Dr. Alberto Morales. Dr. Morales entered the room as all doctors in hospitals do, in a frantic way, and he hardly looked at, or greeted his friend. Instead, he politely demanded preliminary details and complaints and drew a black pen across a clipboard. “Alberto,” said Octavio. “It’s me, your friend.” The doctor looked up and said, “Octavio! How rude of me. It’s just that it has been so busy here and I’m so tired. The sick do not come in gentle tides. They come unannounced like a disastrous wave. What brings you here?”

Octavio recounted that over the last few days he had awoken each morning with an excruciating headache, and that his nights had been plagued by apocalyptic dreams of horror. He related that there were no immediate stressors on his life or on his marriage and that he had exhausted all regular pharmaceutical medicine. The gravity of the dreams and the severity of the headaches had increased and he feared that his life would soon be incapacitated by unrelenting pain, both in the waking and sleeping realm. “I have become a cliché,” he said. “I cannot make love to my wife. My head resounds with pain and when I look into her eyes, I see the deep fires of a relentless abyss. I’ve come to you because you are not only a friend, but a specialist.”

After some quiet moments of deliberation, Dr. Morales said, “I should not really do this, but since you and I are old friends, I will make an exception. I will show you



something that will alarm you, but you have to promise to take my advice when I give it to you. Are we clear?" Then Dr. Morales stood and guided Octavio along a labyrinth of white corridors. They passed no one, except for a lonely janitor who quietly drew a wet mop across the floor.

Finally, they came to a closed door and Dr. Morales drew his stethoscope from around his neck and placed one end to his friend's ears and the other end on the shut door. "Tell me what you hear," he said. Octavio listened carefully. What he heard was a consistent dull sound; as if some primitive being was unceasingly grinding two stones together. "This is the grinding ward," said Dr. Morales and he opened the door.

The room was as large as an open field. It was filled with identical beds, all of which were ordered into straight rows. On each bed there were men, women and children, lying listlessly in their white hospital gowns. The people seemed quiet and relaxed. Octavio recognised some of the patients from the waiting room, including the young child who had earlier wailed in pain. "What is wrong with these people?" asked Octavio.

"We don't know yet," said Dr. Morales. "But we suspect that it is some form of viral infection. They have all complained of nightmares and headaches, a few of intrusive pains and other somatic oddities. Under observation, we have deduced that the headaches arise from the constant grinding of their teeth. These people spend both night and day grinding their teeth. Sedatives do not seem to work. Mouth plates only temporarily help, until they grind through those as well. In great pain, some have taken out their own teeth. Now they find that they are grinding their gums together, pressing the raw ends of their flesh together persistently." Octavio looked around at the people who otherwise seemed well and healthy. Standing among them, he could hear the grinding of their teeth: the workings of a strange, human bone machine.

"Our nurses have to wear ear plugs," said Dr. Morales. "The sound is deafening, especially so when they dream." Then he looked at Octavio and said, "Go home. Go to your wife and children. It may all just pass. We hope so. Consider yourself lucky that you and I are old friends. Had you not made me look up from my clipboard, had we shared nothing more than a doctor-patient relationship, then I would have had to have had you committed."

Even though Octavio was alarmed, he felt somewhat relieved. At least he was not confined to the ward, he thought. He still had the company of his wife and his children. He immediately went home and he kissed and embraced his family. He no longer let on about his ailment. He tried to speak of joyous matters, their fortunate life. He engaged himself in childish things with his children.

In the evening when they all sat together watching television, he could hear his two daughters and his wife grinding their teeth. At night, he found himself waking to the screams of his daughters: "I saw a man impaled on a giant knife," said one. "I saw an animal wearing the skin of a human," said another.

Over the following weeks, the pain continued. One day, his wife approached him with her hands cupped around her breasts. She looked dumbfounded and said, "Octavio, I am fifty-two years old and I am lactating like I once did before my menopause." At night, she breastfed the older girls, because it now seemed right to do so.

Then one day, several months later, the pain stopped. He looked at himself in the mirror. He had ground his teeth until they were short, ravenous stumps. His mouth had become an unknown land to him. It had changed his appearance completely. It had changed the way his voice sounded. Standing there, looking at himself as if for the first time, he felt as if he had undergone a primal change, as if he had been preparing himself for something, as if he had evolved in preparation for something terrible to come.



RUTH HELLER is the author of two books of poetry *Viper Pit* (Last Star, 1994) and *The White Horse* (Last Star, 1996). She has been Visiting Professor of Poetry at many universities. Presently, she lives and works on a farm with her husband, two labradors, ten ducks, three sheep and four horses. *When Will it Arrive?: Collected Stories* was published in 1999 by Infinity Press.

“No good writing can come without solitude. A writer must allow themselves long periods of isolation. They must become familiar with this agonising territory, memorise its topography. Don’t bother yourself with cafés or schools; the only teachers are the books already written and your loneliness.”

SOMETIMES, WHEN ALL IS QUIET, I can hear certain sounds rising from below the house. It's as if someone, or something, were burrowing in the soil and dirt below me. One night, I followed the sound to my kitchen. I turned on the light and I saw a lady, covered in dirt, standing in the centre of the room. Her eyes took a short while to adjust to the brightness. But when she could see, she turned to me and said, "Is this freedom?" "No," I replied. "This is my kitchen."

Beside her, by her feet, was the entrance to the tunnel from which she had come. "There are many of us women," she said, "blindly digging our way through the soil, all of us seeking freedom. The soil is like a honeycomb riddled with passageways. It is only when we sigh, out of frustration, that we realise that we are desperately close to one another. Sometimes, I no longer know if I dig for freedom, or simply because I know of nothing else. One day the top soil will cave in because of the fragile under-soil. What then? Nothing will change. We will continue digging."

She paused for a moment. She glanced around the room, at the various things that I had placed on the walls and at the fruit bowl that rested on a nearby table. It was as if her eyes were making an inventory of my possessions. Then she looked at me and said, "Do we move towards freedom, or does the world make of us its play thing and shift us about?"

It was late at night. I stood before her in my pyjamas. An answer to her question would have entailed a great deal of contemplation and effort. Once explored, such thoughts would have no doubt resulted in some losses, particular consequences. Nevertheless, before I could even utter a single word, she returned to the hole that she had dug, taking nothing with her.

I stood for a long while alone in the kitchen. Even though the hole was a certain distance from me, I had managed to get dirt between my toes. I heard my husband urinating in the toilet. Then I heard the familiar scratching sound; that peculiar noise

that had drawn me from my sleep. This time it came from within my refrigerator. I didn't have the courage to open the door. The scratching sound continued. My husband flushed the toilet. "Is anybody there? It's so cold. It's so cold. This world is so dark and cold."



DOUGLAS KOWIT was chief editor of *Strangeways*, a bi-monthly journal of poetry, fiction and essays. He has since published critical studies on the work of Dante Alighieri and, more recently, the cinematic work of Akira Kurosawa. He lives alone and enjoys origami.

“I write to abate loneliness. What more can I say? Perhaps, that when you leave, I will return to my desk to write.”

IN AUGUST, I ACQUIRED A BOX of miscellaneous goods belonging to an acquaintance of mine from Kings College, London. We had read English together and had, over the years, lost contact. The last word I had received from him had come several years ago during a particularly difficult period in my life. I had been ruminating over what now seems to be a trivial matter, when I received the over sized postcard, postmarked 12 March 1954, from the old Hotel Imperiale on the Via Veneto, Rome. On the reverse side was written a single word, *Pensi*, followed by an elaborate exclamation mark. That such a card, urging me to think, should arrive during such a pensive period with no prior notice, struck me with alarming profundity. It was only later that my wife astutely reminded me that we had been English majors and that the word was more than likely intended as a pun; only rarely, she added, did genitalia evoke such earnest revelations.

I received the elaborate snuff box with an equal measure of surprise. The only thing that accompanied the box was a brief note advising me—whoever I might be—that my friend had taken his own life and that his will stipulated this collection of oddities be delivered to me. The letter was signed: Ms. Hawthorn, Executive Assistant, Hotel Imperial, Av. Paseo de la Reforma, Mexico D.F.

The box contained few things of interest. There were several old photographs of London which, although overexposed, I have kept to this day. There was also an old stereograph depicting an area of the Vatican library which I also kept. It was published by the Keystone View Company and read: “The Library of the Vatican, one of 1000 rooms in the great Papal Palace, Rome, Italy.” I do not know why I chose to keep this particular item. Perhaps, I felt that although my friend and I had not shared an intimate friendship, the time that we had spent together had been filled with the infallibility of youth. That such opportunities had been seized, or now ceased to exist, saddened me and I soon discarded the box.

When these sentiments dissipated, I decided to show the stereograph to a young friend of mine, who I felt embodied some of the fanciful qualities my deceased friend had held. Sebastián Espinosa was unfamiliar with the field of stereoscopy. I did nothing to unmask the marvel of the art; the ingenuity and seeming trickery that allowed two siding photographs, ostensibly identical to the perusing eye, to be with the aid of a stereoscope, brought to one image and rendered with depth and immediacy.

“It’s amazing,” said Sebastián. “It’s as if I could walk down these corridors, or should I say, this single corridor. It’s two corridors, but one corridor! How does it work?” I laughed and said, “It seems as if it were the workings of some clever charlatan, but it is fundamentally no different than the normal, day-to-day functions of your own eyes.”

Sebastián paused for a long while and then said, “What a horrific thought.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Imagine that you were a man who mistakenly fell asleep in such a library. You awake to find the library completely empty. Confused, you are faced with two paths, each alike. What if one path offered you freedom and the other enslavement? How would you choose?”

I immediately followed the nature of his discomfoting thought. “And all the while,” I said. “If viewed properly, the paths were but one and the same.”

“Exactly,” he said.





DENNIS RONNELL is the author of six books of fiction, most recently *Come to the Water* (Blue Grass Press, 1998). He has worked as a cleaner, electrician, baker and university tutor. In 1997 he initiated the Parents for Literacy Program, which until 1999 formed an integral part of the national high school curriculum.

“We are all curious. But it is wrong to believe that the world is not itself inquisitive. The universe is not a repository of answers. If it were, would that not mean that it was somehow finite? I write with a puzzled look on my face. I hope to die with the same expression, having solved nothing.”

OFTEN HE WILL WALK until he cannot walk any longer, until he is absolutely tired. Then he will find a place to sit; a bench, a patch of grass, a wall, any place will do. He then hopes that someone will ask him why he is so tired; perhaps, he slouches, splays his thin arms, raises his shirt so as to reveal his lacklustre skin, his gaunt chest. But no one ever seems to approach him. He hardly garners a curious glance and soon fatigue overcomes him and he, wherever he may be at the time, falls soundly asleep.

What does a man who is always walking dream of? This may seem to us to be a legitimate inquiry, but to him, the question is of secondary importance. “What does it matter what I dream of?” He might reply. “Have you failed to notice my scrubby knees, or the matted nature of my beard? Why don’t you firstly ask me why it is that I am so tired?”

One would think that he would dream of a comfortable bed someplace, where he could hear the rain, knowing that it was gathering in a gutter and not on his few belongings. At the ring of a bell a pretty young girl would appear, whose sole duty was to attend to his every need. “I’m too tired to walk to the bathroom. I’m too tired to walk to the wardrobe. I’m too tired even to read the newspaper, because even reading seems to involve an arduous journey of the eyes.” The pretty young girl would smile. Returning to her home late each night, she would tell her inquisitive mother, “No. He did not walk today. He has already walked so far.” So amiable, so loyal is she.

However, his dreams may be of a completely different nature. I have known people who believe that they alone are subject to all forms of persecution. I once knew an unfortunate young man who lived in a small room within a boarding house. He had no possessions other than a knife and a bowl of blue water. Each morning he would complain to me that someone had been standing all night outside his door, blowing cigarette smoke into his room. He covered all the cracks in the room with tape. He sat naked in his room all day, dipping his knife into the blue water. He was too afraid to

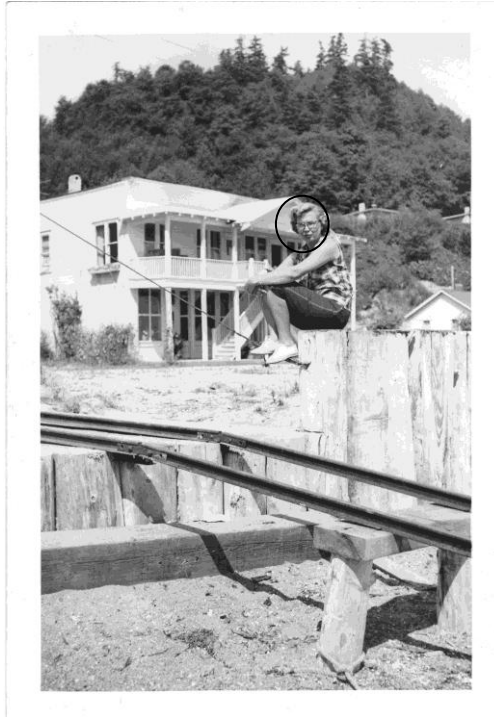
walk anywhere, because he believed someone was counting his steps. Such a man, I imagine, would dream of walking in an immense field, where the grass was knee-high, completely obscuring the movement of his legs. This would be a good dream.

But, returning now to our walker. There is a moment when he wakes, when sleep still impedes the clarity of his thought, where he is filled with utter confusion. At that brief moment, he cannot recall where exactly he is, or how he got there. The important thing is that he immediately rises, and then through habit or instinct, begins to walk again; taking the first steps in the grip of his waking perplexity.

At this point, one might ask him: “Where are you going? Why do you look so confused?” Again, this is a legitimate question. “Are you blind?” He might reply. “Have you not noticed the bunions on my feet? Do you not see how much hair I’ve lost? Why don’t you ask me why I’m so tired?” I ask you reader: Is it also a deeply ingrained habit that instantly draws from him this response? Or, is it some form of cunning, hesitant behaviour on his part?

Each day he may be further or closer from where he first started. Who is not to say that he does not simply retrace his steps after a day or two? Or, even if he were to walk in a continuous single line, how far would he be able to travel before he came across an outlet of water, an impassable ocean? It may alarm him to see such an expanse of blue water; here he encounters a worthy foe, an entity as alive, restless and as inscrutable as he.

Though, in the end, it really doesn’t matter. He will continue walking and you and I will continue to ignore him. Besides, even if we were to approach him, as he hoped, he would offer us no meaningful explanation. Clearly, he is tired because he walks so much. But, why does he feel the impulsion to incessantly walk? He shows us a bruised ankle, an infected toe. He reveals a few yellowed molars that he keeps in a dirty napkin. Perhaps, there is even a little golden bell in his pocket. “Go ask those,” he might say, “who believe that a man is the number of steps he takes.”



TESS ALEXANDER was a seamstress before she became an author. She has written eight novels, each of which bear the first name of one of her children. Her most recent novel *Penelope* (Vertigo, 1999) was shortlisted for the A.P.P.A Literary Prize. She regularly exhibits patchwork quilts that she has crafted.

“I am weary of the digitisation of books. What does it mean for our children, for our libraries? Can we imagine a father reading to a child from an electronic tablet in bed? Can we conceive of a library with empty shelves? Who will have access to these great databases? Who will decide what is kept? How quickly we forget the joy of turning a page. I write fiction that is hard to digitise. I want the reader to need to turn the page, to demand to feel the weight of the book.”

(I) HOW MANY TIMES HAVE I COME ACROSS a closed door and wondered what or who lived behind it, and whether or not that door also bore the scratches of a woman trying to flee on its inner side. Often, when I am walking, I will place my ear on a door at random. I will listen as attentively as possible. At times, I can hear the sound of people, of families caught in conversation and laughter. Often too, there is only silence. It is this muteness that alarms me most. On these occasions, I search for the courage within me to knock on the door, to ring the bell, to rattle the doorknob. I am always concerned about others. But I never have the courage that is needed. Despondently, I turn away from the door and go on walking. It is then that I realise that I am not outside, nor at a random door. I am at my own door, listening to the passing world outside, having only walked from my bedroom to here.

...

(X) I am certain that there is a fault with me. I am not flawless. But I can't tell you what this fault is, as I am not sure of it myself. Whatever it may be, it is something serious; certainly, it is in the range of debilitating and terminal. I have allocated a half-hour every morning to finding this fault, at which time I scrutinise myself both mentally and physically. I ask myself difficult questions, problems that I am certain I will not have the answer to, and then I berate myself for not knowing the correct response. I measure my limbs daily and I note, with a pencil, the varying sizes of each appendage in a small exercise book. I compare my notes each day. That way I am certain to see the fault before it escalates beyond my control. What I worry about most, is that this grave flaw will surface when I least expect it to. It may be a rapid transformation, rather than a gradual one. It worries me when I think of this, and on these days, I prefer to stay indoors.

...

(XIV) I seldom get a chance to write, because my husband watches over everything I do. He follows me from room to room in our house. He pursues me even if I am going to the bathroom. On these occasions, I will be sitting on the toilet and I will be able to hear his breathing at the door. I know that his ear is firmly pressed on the door and that he is listening to me urinate. I have tried to soften the hiss that my passing urine makes, but there is only so much that one can do. When I finish urinating, he enters the bathroom. He hunches over the toilet bowl and he inhales deeply through his nostrils. He attempts to smell if I did in fact urinate. Then, in a small hard-cover notebook, which he keeps in a drawer with key, he later notes the length of my urination, the size of my faeces, and the frequency of my bowel movements. Every second week, he draws a small dot on a large paper chart. The workings of this chart are far too complex for me to surmise in this present diary; although, it seems that I urinate more often in the summer.

...

(XXX) I know of women who repeatedly fall in love with destitute men. I not only seek out such men, but my empathy extends to all things in any way broken, torn, fragmented, neglected, used or on the verge of annihilation. Over time I have been able to acquire only a few personal items. Not one of my plates, cutlery, cups, mirrors or books is without a mark of wear; I even have a beautiful doll whose porcelain cheek is fractured from her left eye to the corner of her lip. When I had greater freedom, I would spend my afternoons mending my small collection with tape, thread or glue. Once, my husband approached me and said, "Why do you bother with these broken things? They're old and worthless. Besides, they all belonged to someone else." I often wonder if the blanched colour of old porcelain at all resembles the colour of a human bone. In some way, do we all carry a specific marking, a unique form of branding, a maker's label? We all need mending; but firstly, a hand to find the part of us that is broken.

...

(LVII) I no longer speak. I no longer trust my own tongue. It is fortunate that I have been able to capture it within my closed mouth. Sometimes, my tongue grows restless and pushes itself against my teeth. During these times, I put both my hands firmly over

my mouth. It fascinates me how others can control their own tongues. At dinner parties when people converse, I can see their tongues flapping wildly and saying all sorts of trained things. This excites me greatly and I get the sudden urge to congratulate their wondrous talent and skill. But, my husband is quick to see this and with a firm pinch to my thigh, he reminds me of my mutinous tongue. In truth, I can't blame it for being restless. All day it remains confined in my mouth. It lies there in that wet darkness; an abject prisoner in a ghastly cell. One day, I will cut it off with a sharp knife. I will hold its twisted form in the palm of my hand and I will give it to my husband. Perhaps, I will also write a nice letter to accompany the act, to express how I feel. "Here it is," I will write. "You can trust me now." I will use really nice paper. I will write using my best pen. I will write confidently. I have yet to lose trust in my hands.

...

(LXVII) My husband measures my limbs each week. He makes me stand naked with my legs spread wide and my arms raised. He holds a tape measure in his hands. Firstly, he measures the length of each of my arms. Then he measures the length of my legs. He writes the dimensions in a small exercise book. In this way, he is like a tailor. When he has completed measuring all my limbs (including the arch of my nose, the depth and curvature of my armpits and the diameter of my nostrils), he then takes the exercise book to his study. He places a large piece of butcher paper on the floor of his study. He then transcribes my measurements onto this sheet of paper, so that he is left with a detailed picture of me. With a small patch of tape, he then sticks the large sheet of paper onto a clothes hanger and places it in the wardrobe. These paper figures of me, all of which are dated, hang in the darkness like seldom used clothes. He says that although they entail more labour, they are no different than photographs. When, in anger, I tore one of these sheets, he wept pitifully and spent hours bent over the shredded brown pieces. Then he struck me across the face. It was not entirely an emotive response. It was intended to bruise my body, to alter my measurements for the following week, so that he would never forget the missing sheet of butcher paper that once hung in the wardrobe.

...

(CIII) While being captive, I have lost my voice. No, it is not that I have lost my voice. Nor has it been removed. It is difficult to explain. It is there, present, but it is no longer mine alone. It is as if my voice carried the weight of another voice on its shoulders. Everything I say has a sense of exertion and fatigue. Sometimes, I speak and I don't even recognise my own voice. I feel so happy. I sound so tired. My throat is home to a cruel imposter. No, it is not cruel. It is an exceptionally astute, extremely clever deceiver! How smart it is to not completely dispose of me. How wise of it to ride my shoulders as if I were a mule, pulling a hoe across a dry field. My voice is not mine alone. I am alone; but even then, I am never without company, always being watched, subjugated to the foulest abuse. Often, my voice leaves me completely and I remain mute for days. I lie flat on the floor and open my mouth as wide as I can. I hope that my voice can see the cavern that I have provided it and pray that it will soon jump back inside. Come back home voice, or don't come back; I must have some form of voice if I am capable of writing this diary. Should this not be enough to sustain me? Once, my husband caught me lying on the floor with my mouth wide open. He asked me what I was doing. I said, "I'm waiting for the heavens to fall. I'm looking to swallow man and his tongue."





MARIA PADILLA is a poet and environmentalist. Her book *People of the Land* (Seedling, 1998) blends poetry, prose and chanting rituals. She adds, “Although I have not been allowed to travel, I have read widely. Reading is like travelling, but without a class system. All reading is first class—enjoyable.”

“There are some writers who cannot begin their work unless they know where the story will end. I couldn’t work like this. My inclination would be to lure my character into a basement and there, in the dark where he or she could not see my face, forewarn them of their fate. You will warn me when the end is near, they would plead. I couldn’t lie to them. I would have to write until my pen ran out of ink.”

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TWO YOUNG LOVERS FROM THE CITY

WILL MARRY THIS MORNING

THE SUN RIDES THE SKY OF ITS WANING DARK and etches again with the quill of the night the undulating way of the land. Thin cords with coloured garments string the city's houses like a child's game. The clothes catch the first dew in the cross-hatches of their fabric.

The mutt-dogs rouse from their wandering lethargy, their wet snouts raised to the wafting scent of fried eggs and beans; their ears attuned to any passing words, foraging for a string of foreign syllables that they can mistake for a beckoning call.

Meanwhile, the vendors unlace the armour of their stalls, baring their sweet, coloured loins: bananas as large as swords, guava fruit that holds the alchemist's flame and watermelons that rival cannonballs. Their weary eyes hunt the desolate, cobbled streets for the hungry, the perpetually lost, the insomniac traveller to whom they can sell their ware.

A river pulses through the centre of the city like a blue artery. In summer, the children swim in its clean waters. In winter, when shreds of ice gather on its mud banks, only the melancholic brave its waters.

Nearby, among the elaborate statues of scantily clad goddesses and disproportionate beasts, the government buildings sprout metallic thorns so as to ward off weary birds. From their bowels can be heard the myriad tongues of foreign dignitaries, the pressing of stamps, the humming of printers as they forge new laws, impose amendments and pass judgements. The smell of dark coffee begins to permeate the surrounding streets; that one elixir that lifts and holds the eye of each public servant as they peruse the fine print of monotonous statutes.

On the street, taxi drivers sprawled in their torn, defecated seats emulate the plaster Christ's that hang from their mirrors. They awake to the rhythm of a samba, the melancholy of a tango, or the frivolity of a modern love song that plays on their radios.

With their fingers they scour like a blind man for a distant, gentle voice that can surmise for them the entire world at that moment, so that they can then search the streets like apostles to find someone that they can impart this information to, someone who is willing to part with a few dollars, while sitting in a metallic sea of stalling cars.

Far off, in the groomed estates, the women wake with ugly faces, following the scent of mistresses that plagued their dreams. While two floors below, the mop is drawn over an immense floor by a downcast lady with rich, dark skin who in the amber hue of the terracotta tiles and the rousing bubbles of the murky mop water, sees her own distant home, three separate bus trips away.

Somewhere, white chalk is drawn across a green school board, forming mysterious patterns, pronunciations, words, instructions, algebraic formulas that fall on yet slumberous eyes, empty stomachs and the chattering of day-old gossip.

In a bedroom, with the door closed, two new, young lovers persistently recite each other's names as if at any moment they might succumb to amnesia or worse, old age, caressing each other's faces, ploughing as if they were farmers unheeding the seasons.

They rise late and fill their stomachs with fried eggs and beans. They step with learnt skill on the dry parts of the freshly mopped floor. With an empty hand they fend off the pleading dogs. They turn deaf ears to the vendors. They are caught in their own amorous current and walk hand in hand beside the river whose melodious waters can be heard like a prayer throughout the entire city.

They hail a taxi, even though they are only going two blocks, so as to avoid the contagious, infected, scourging loveless masses and so as to find each other's lips one more time alone on top of a torn, love-ridden seat.

Blindly and passionately they kiss, ignoring the careful summation of the world preached to them, as the meter continues to measure the world in cents.

The streets are busy with cars, but they are not in a hurry. They are each only sixteen years of age, with an entire life ahead of them. No school board can teach them a thing of life. Pythagoras' Theorem can tell them nothing of the pleasures of an orgasm.

They are making their way to the Birth, Death and Marriages Registry, marked by its happy stone children, and its pristine porcupine skin, where they hope that their outward expression of love will hide their inexperienced youth; not knowing, that at a bare desk, where their allocated number will take them, a nameless public servant, plagued by dreams of infidelity, will wave out of hormone and whim a cruel stamp marked 'denied', marring the hope of the morning's abating dark with a bitter verse that falls on untilled ears.



ALICIA BLACK has published two works of fiction. *Stand Together* (Sparrow & Crown, 1997) won the inaugural Black Ink Literary Award in 1998. She initiated the Always a Chance telephone network, which provides troubled teenagers with a 24-hour support service. Presently, she works as a copy editor for *Dolls & Trucks Magazine*.

“Writing must affirm a social cause. All words are political. In a single sentence you immediately reveal how you organise your words and administrate your life. You are not writing for pleasure. You are filling a ballot box, drowning out opposition, electing engagement over apathy.”

TAKE A FORM. They are all the same. Make sure that your writing is legible. Use a black pen only. Follow the instructions carefully. When you are finished, return the form to the reception counter. Pay the required application fees and charges. A bank cheque, money order, debit or credit card will suffice. We do not accept cash payments. Don't forget to ask the receptionist for a receipt. The receipt will have a unique customer reference number. It is worthwhile to memorize this number. In the unlikely case that you have not heard from us in six months, please ring this number: 06-5123-8596. Please listen to the prompts carefully. A trained Selected Compliance Officer will ask you for your UCRN. If you have forgotten or fail to provide us with your UCRN, then you will have to visit the Citizenship Centre and complete a new form. If you provide the SCO with your UCRN, he or she will then pass your details to a Certified Resolution Consultant who will notify you within two months. Should your application for citizenship not be successful, then you are entitled to a secondary investigation, at which point a CRC will issue you with an amended UCRN (UCRNii). This process can take between six to twelve months. Usually, it will be finalized within eight months. During this period you will be mandatorily subject to Condition 15(B) which is accessible on the National Citizenship Centre website. It will be compulsory for you to report to a SCO on a weekly basis. You will need to recite your UCRNii and show proof of 'efforts made towards engaging in continual employment' as stipulated in mandatory Condition 15(B)(iv). Should you need further information or the assistance of a translator, please ring the number I mentioned earlier, which is serviced from Monday to Friday, 9:30am to 4:30pm. Thank you. Next...

To Question Seven: 'Your full Name.' You tell me that you do not have a single, definite family or given name. Your name and how you and others address each other depends on the circumstance and situation. You do not want to put any single name on

the form, because you fear that others will be offended and in turn reprimand you for claiming that name alone.

These ‘others’ are not officials—because I have assured you that the form is in large part confidential—but the spirit of deceased family members that shared one or all of your names at any given time or situation. Besides, you inform me, all of the people, living or deceased that you are in contact with are always in close proximity to you. Therefore, the immediacy of a look, or the sense of someone’s ever-presence (be it physical or spiritual) often supersedes the use of a name or names.

You are alone for the first time. No stranger has ever travelled from afar seeking to specifically address you. Why then, in the confines of an office, should anyone else seek to find or know you now?

To Question Nine: ‘Sex: Male, Female.’ I do not mean to offend you, but I can see that you are a female. Do not make me explain myself.

You tell me a story that is familiar to you and your kind. Before the world was occupied with people, there existed a great spider that made his house from a blue web. Sitting in the sky, he looked down on the earth at a large onyx stone that he believed to be another spider. Having no companion and failing to seduce this stone, he wept. His tears divided the stone into eight parts. You and your people stem from one of these eight fractured stones. Whether or not you can or will carry a child is inconsequential, because everyone is part of the same stone and joins not to procreate but to please the giant spider above.

To Question Ten: ‘Date of Birth’. You tell me that you do not know your date of birth. “What is the importance,” you say, “of knowing such information? Surely it does not relate to a matter of precision, because day follows night, or night the day, in an endless, seamless and intricate web. What does June 5<sup>th</sup> mean, or October 11<sup>th</sup>, December 2<sup>nd</sup> and so on?

“Are these things supposed to be like insects stuck on the great web? Shouldn’t one be capable of looking into another person’s face and knowing from the grey or coloured hair, the fresh or wearied face, whether or not one is older or younger than they?”

I am beginning to tire of your responses. I tell you that I require a valid answer. You tell me that when you were born there were already a lot of people alive.

You do not know your height. “Does it not sound like a children’s story,” you say, “to assert that you are taller than a gnat, a mouse, a dog, a flower, but smaller than a tree, a hill or mountain? Will not the gnat die, the mouse scurry away, the dog cower by my feet, the flower wither, the tree lose all its leaves, and the hill and mountain shift with the wind and rain?”

You do not know your weight. “Is that a form of cruelty?” you ask. “Are you not aware of the conditions in which I have lived? Am I supposed to revere or despise a fat stomach, admire or ridicule an emaciated thigh?”

You do not have a current occupation. “What is this notion,” you say, “that I must fill the day with certifiable actions? Is not the struggle and joy of existence enough?” I shake my head in astonishment.

You do not have a passport. You do not have dependant or accompanying persons. You do not have a present place of residence. You know of no permanent resident who is willing to sponsor or support you. Are you aware of our country’s values? Our belief in the equal right of all individuals to express and live according to their own customs with freedom and dignity. Our adherence to the constitution and to governing law. Do you know what the ‘pursuit of the public good’ means? Do you know that English is our national language?

You must know that your failure or inability to provide any definitive answers to my questions will be perceived by our officials as either unwarranted incompetency or overt dissimulation. Either way, your ineptitude will necessarily prolong the assessment of your application for citizenship.

You do not recognise my face; its features. You have not asked me how I am capable of alone understanding your language. I was like you, of you, stood where you are standing; petrified and alone. You might not seem scared now, but I assure you that you will soon be frightened beyond belief. Unlike you, I learnt that there were forms to be filled, questions to be answered, languages and customs to be lost.



Forms serve to rid the pulsation of hearts. It makes it easier to revoke opportunities. It is the only way. I can help you cooperate. I can provide you with a new life. Comply. Let me show you who you are.



CLAUDE SYKES is an author. His most recent work is *White* (Banner & Banner, 1999).

“I write for my own reasons. It’s none of your business, nor do I believe it would interest anyone else. I don’t wish to make my personal matters public. Isn’t it intrusive enough that you have asked me for a story to publish?”

“The question has been mooted as to what two men who had each grown up quite alone in the wilderness and who met each other for the first time would do.”

- ‘On Ethics’. Schopenhauer, A.<sup>1</sup>

HE CAME BACK FROM HUNTING. The fox he had killed was in a canvas sack. He dragged it along the snow. It left a trail of blood behind him. He brought home the fox and a resilient silence that she would not be able to encroach for days.

He put his boots at the door. He told her that he did this so that the snow and the blood would not dirty the carpet inside. But she knew that part of him liked to always remain outside in the cold, in the cutting gust.

She held him in bed. She kissed him. She thought that by kissing him, she could awaken something within him, something human, remind him that he was capable of responding. She rubbed his chest. She tried to summon what she needed.

He tried to explain to her why he left for months during winter to hunt. His mouth hardly opened when he spoke. It was rigid and obscured by his beard. “I don’t like seeing in colours like you and everyone else,” he said. “Ever since I was a kid, colours gave me headaches. Out there, the snow weakens the colour. My mind is clear and I can feel my heart pulsing. I can feel my muscles pushing at my skin. It feels right out there. It gives me a rest from the pain.”

“Have you ever come across anyone out there?” she said.

“Once,” he replied. “I thought it was a trick. As if I had come across a mirror in the forest. But when I came closer, close enough to touch him, I realised that he was much taller than me, but that he walked with a hunched back. He was covered in rags and fur. He wanted to look me in the face, but he couldn’t. We put down our rifles. He

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<sup>1</sup> Schopenhauer, Arthur. Selected Essays of Schopenhauer. Ed. Bax, E. B. London: G. Bell, 1926. 227.

reached out to touch me. He tried to push me gently, but it was almost enough to knock me over.”

“Did he say anything?”

“What could he have said? No man goes out at the height of winter, when the snow is at its worst, looking for company. Words only make a man lonelier.”

“Did you ever see him again?”

“I can’t be sure. One night, I was having a drink in a bar. A girl came up to me wanting to talk. I had just come back from two months in the snow. I couldn’t think of a single thing I wanted to tell her. I looked at her. I don’t remember what I said, but it must have been something foul.

“Then she went over to another man and said loudly, ‘That guy has got a dirty mouth Ned. What are you going to do about it?’ Ned got up. I immediately saw the trouble he had in straightening his back. I thought it was him. He towered over me. He came close as if he was going to say something, but instead, he smelt me. Then he took out a fox paw from his pocket and pressed it into my hand until it bled.”

“You men,” she said as she yawned. She stroked his hair. “I’m going to bed. You should come also.”

When she woke later that night, he was not beside her. She went downstairs and she found him sitting in front of the picture window. It was snowing again.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Just watching the snow,” he said.

“Can I bring you some tea?”

“No.”

“Why don’t you come to bed?”

“In a while.”

“You can go if you have to. I don’t mind if you go,” she said.

He paused.

“The snow has a way of falling,” he said. “Of falling slowly. Making you think of poetic things. Making you think that you’re human, when you’re nothing but an animal at heart.”



ADRIAN BROOKS was a professor of English at Fort Stead College. His works of fiction include *Running on Empty* (Pantheon, 1992) and *When the Lights Go Out* (Pantheon, 1993). He has been a recipient of numerous fellowships and awards. Presently, he works as the chief flag-man at Hampton train station.

“I believe that books can change the world. It continually surprises me that something as cumbersome as a book, as dull as a monochromatic page, can incite so much fear in certain regimes. Have you ever tried to read the Gideon Bible? Never have I come across such a tiny and tiresome book. But you will not believe how far these oppressive regimes will go to stop us from going cross-eyed.”

THE DAYS ARE LINED ONE AFTER THE OTHER. No sooner is it Sunday, then Monday shows up from out of the great dark. Outside, men and women go about with their daily things. The snow falls swiftly; its bleached white cuttings rid footprints. The light of morning catches the lingering dust in the room, the dust which falls upon books, shelves, lamps and half-eaten meals on plates. And Primo Levi draws himself like an anchor to the window, if only to see another Monday, if only to salvage the few words that cling like barnacles to his solitude.

So it is, I think, that he writes the poem 'Monday', on 17 January 1946, with a sharpened pencil, in silence, in a swift moment, for often written words are held for years in advance.

I sit over sixty years ahead of him. Between us runs a current of print and yellowed pages. I am nearing thirty years of age, but may have very well held these words for sixty years now. They may have been conceived in the great silence that follows the completion of a poem, when the mind, tired of its disclosure, finds some rest and the pencil mimics the action by lying on its side.

I formed these words in my mother's womb. When my mother bore me, I too bore silence. And Primo Levi lay in that other womb, that place where death and birth are alike, that hermetic space that affords us all the room and thought we like, but rids us of our language.

We impart solitudes. But how can we impart silence?

And sixty years from now, someone runs their finger across this page, these words, along the silent voice, the sole route of ink, and imparts their own solitude.

It is Monday, yet another Monday. I will answer the next phone call—should you call. The phone does not ring, or if it has rung, then I did not hear it. But anyway, it will be no one that I know. A man is a sad thing, if he does not see in the page, the face of all men ahead of him.



J.J. UNDERWOOD grew up in a rural setting where he nurtured his love for books, nature and extraterrestrials. He has published fiction, essays, articles, poems, songs and comic books. He has been pronounced dead twice. His latest book *If Living Were an Option* (Vertigo, 1992) recounts his early life and subsequent misfortunes.

“I am a paranoid individual. I have no mental illness. My mind is quite sound. Though I believe that my actions are being persistently monitored. It is easy for me to write, because in writing I am producing misinformation. Lying is anarchy.”

IT WAS EARLY MORNING and it was already hot. Arturo lay naked in bed. Winter could not come quick enough, he thought. The humidity was unbearable. He wanted to get up, but he was too tired. He wanted to remain in bed, but the sheets were soaked in sweat. Then he felt urine seep down his legs. I've done it again, he thought. I've gone and made a mess of myself. This time, I have to get up. I can't simply sleep through it. It's too hot.

It was only when he stood naked in front of the bathroom mirror that he saw the other man fixed to his back. Well this explains a great deal, he thought. For months he had been overwhelmed by fatigue, which he had attributed to the unrelenting heat. He had felt as if there had been a great weight on his shoulders. It had made him arch his back uncomfortably. It had made him limp.

He positioned himself in front of the mirror so that he could get a better view of this strange man. It was a difficult task. No matter at what angle he stood, he could not see the man's face.

Arturo could however make some general observations. They seemed to be joined at the lower back, near Arturo's hips. The stranger was still asleep. His body was limp. His feet did not touch the ground. Arturo reasoned that he was thus the taller of the two men. He was also the heavier of the two. Otherwise, he thought, we would topple over; or, this stranger would carry me on his back.

While Arturo was naked, the other man was dressed. His clothes were different. They were old and tattered. They were the clothes of a poor farmer or a vagabond. He was dressed for a winter that in the grip of this heatwave seemed distant and absurd.

Arturo addressed the stranger directly for the first time. "Although I can't see your face," he said. "I wouldn't hazard to guess that you are older than me and suffer from incontinency. Why couldn't you simply tell me that you needed to relieve yourself? It wouldn't have pained me to have walked to the bathroom. Instead, think of



all the trouble that we have caused mother?" But the man remained asleep, as listless as a newborn. All further investigations would have to wait.

When Arturo approached his parents about this discovery, they responded with indifference. They continued eating their dinner and watching television. "What does it matter that you have a man attached to your back?" said his father. "There are worse things in life. For instance, you could have liver cancer. Now that's painful. You should be grateful."

"You're missing the point," said Arturo. "I have a man on my back. A complete stranger is living in our house, in my bed."

"Now let's be honest about this," said his mother. "You've always been an odd child Arturo. You've always been different—different from your sister, your father and me; different from even your teachers or your school peers."

"Why should it then alarm us that for close to a year now you have been carrying this man on your back? I was more concerned when you told me that you wanted to be a fire-fighter. I couldn't sleep at night. I thought of all the lives that would be lost."

Arturo's younger sister was of far greater assistance. They sat together on her bedroom floor, among her many plastic dolls. "Does he talk?" asked Arturo.

"Yes," she said. "But only when you're asleep. He speaks in a language I don't understand. It could be German or French. Do you know any words in French?"

"*Bonjour.*"

"No. That's not it. What does *dood* mean?"

"I don't know."

"He says that a lot. Sometimes I say to him, can you say something else? That word is quite boring."

"Does he get hungry?"

"Yes. My word! He eats more than you do. Mum calls him 'my little beast'. I feed him custard with a tiny plastic spoon. He loves it. It's often the only way I can stop him from saying *dood*."

"What else does he do?"

"He plays with my dolls. But he makes them fight. It's not nice. Mum told him that if he behaved he might get a truck for Christmas."

“Does he do anything else?”

“He cries a lot. Mum rubs his chest. Dad tells him to toughen up. But I think dad likes him. He gave him a tie.”

“For what?”

“Just in case.”

“Why would he need a tie?”

“I don’t know. Just in case, dad said. You never know. The man liked it a lot. He rolled it up carefully and put it in his jacket.”

“Does he have a name?”

“I don’t know. Unless *dood* is a name. It would be a pretty silly name.” Then she picked up two plastic dolls and said, “Mr. Dood I would like you to meet Mrs. Dood. Hello Mr. Dood. Hello Mrs. Dood.”

Arturo did not expect to feel saddened by this information. He was used to feeling at odds with his family. He was accustomed to the neglect. However, he realised that the disregardance he thought absolute, had not been so. Even in his isolation, he had found, without his awareness, an iota of sustenance from his family. Now with the revelation of this particular growth, he felt this shred of love threatened. He felt deeply alone.

Soon it was evening and the strange man did not rouse. Instead he snored and he grumbled. He seemed happy and content. He farted. He urinated. He even chuckled.

Over the following weeks, Arturo considered having the strange man surgically removed from his back. He laboured over the decision: if he removed the growth, would the man die? Was it ethical to kill a man even under these peculiar circumstances? “Allow me to be frank,” said the surgeon he visited. “Why are you ruminating over questions of ethics? He grew on your back. You were there first. It’s not a difficult operation. Within a few hours, you will be back to your normal self.”

“And what would happen to the man?”

“He would die! What do you expect? That he should be given his own quarters at the hospital? You asked for my opinion Arturo and I’ve given it to you. We cut tumours from thousands of patients each year. Do you expect that we apologise to each malignant mass?”

“But he has feelings. He cries. He may even have a soul.”

“You have to be kidding? Look at you. You’re wasting away. This thing is killing you. It will kill you. This is not what you call a friendship Arturo. This is a quiet duel.”

Arturo left the practice. As he walked home, he noticed that passers-by were looking at him strangely. He then realised that he didn’t mind the attention at all. He arched his back further to the floor. He sighed as if in pain. “You blasted man,” he screamed, raising a fist to the air. “Why do you make me carry you on my back? Why have you made me into an object of mockery?”

Arturo could not bear ridding himself of this man with whom he had not exchanged a single word. The weight of his absence would only serve to crush him. He did not receive affection from others, but rather, attention that was focused on his horrific condition. It was not pity. It was ridicule and disgust. It was enough.

As time passed, Arturo found no rest in his sleep. He dreamt of desolate farmlands, hungry people and animal carcasses. In his dreams, desperate strangers approached him pleading for assistance in a language he could not understand. A mother offered him her child. The child’s face had been mangled by birds. Maggots coloured its iris’. Often, he would partially wake at night to the sound of laughter coming from over his shoulder. Glancing over, he would see his family chuckling with the man, as if they were no longer strangers. They conversed freely. Once, he even heard his father weeping as the strange man recounted a story Arturo could not understand.

Soon Arturo stopped eating. He was consumed by misery. His thoughts were disordered. His speech was incoherent. He now stuck out from the strange man’s back like a sack of bones.

The strange man was fed three times daily. He exercised morning and night. He was given a new set of clothes. He practiced his English in the bathroom mirror. He urinated in the toilet.

Arturo did not mind being carried. It amazed him to see how quickly the man had recuperated. He was positively thriving. When he walked, Arturo could sense that he did so in a manner that exuded great confidence.

Then, in the company of his family, the strange man said, “Thank you very much for your generosity, your assistance, but above all for your love and patience. You have grown to be like my own family. I only wish that I could have expressed these sentiments earlier. But my predicament was difficult. This morning I will seek employment. Thank you again for the tie.”

“It’s no problem,” said Arturo’s father. “It’s just nice to see you happy. That’s all a father wants. You toughened up when you had to and that did the trick. It always does.”

“Please allow me to recite a brief poem I learnt in English,” said the strange man.

“Poetry?” said his father. “Poems are for women.”

They laughed.

“Please get that thing cut off your back,” said his mother. “It might be cancerous.”

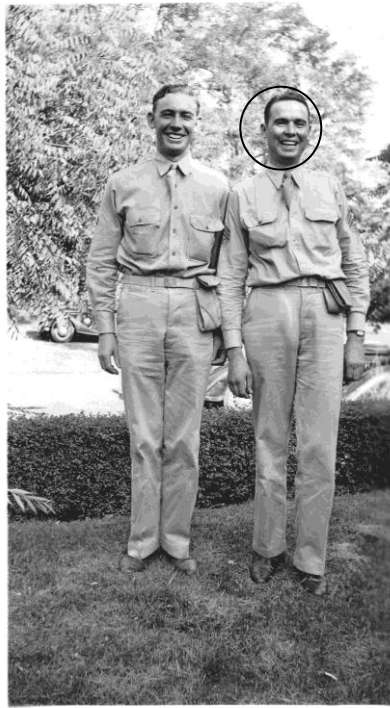
“It’s not cancerous,” said his father.

“It might be.”

“Even if it is cancer, it will do you some good. Make you a man.”

“I’ll get it removed,” said the strange man.

Arturo wanted to speak. He wanted to be heard. He didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t gather his thoughts. He said, “*dood*”. To which his younger sister replied, “There he goes again with that boring word.”



CARL HARPER has lived two lives. Prior to becoming a writer, he worked as a banker for Prestige Investments. He has since been a prolific writer. His latest publication *Light the Grove* (Harper, 1999) won the Olsen-Lindsey Encouragement Award for Fiction. His book of poetry *Is this it?* (Harper, 1998) was nominated for the Prince Early Poet Prize.

“I write because it makes me happy. I am fortunate enough to be able to engage in this craft for a living. I write on the days that I feel up to it. On the other days I enjoy swimming and playing golf.”

AS A CHILD I USED TO SHARE A BEDROOM with my brother. He was only a year older than me, but his body grew in such a haphazard way that everyone mistook him as being many years my senior.

The bedroom we shared was small. Our beds were less than a metre apart. Although I could easily traverse this distance with a leap, there were very few times that I could bridge the gulf of silence between us.

One summer I was taken to a camp where young children were entertained. We were made to swim in cold lakes. We hiked through sparse bushland and camped in bare tents. We ate in crowded mess halls. I remember yearning for nothing more than a particular comic book that I had stowed in a drawer, and also longing for the quiet brooding of my brother.

Even in the felled forest there is something of the trees that once were. In the uprooted trunks, with some imagination, one can still hear the stirring of the boughs, the quivering of the leaves. This does little to explain how I missed my brother then. Instead, I shared a bunk-bed with a talkative boy, who took great pride in recounting the many varying flags of the world.

“Desire the right,” he said. “The sheep and the ship. The Falkland Islands Flag. Try saying sheep and ship together quickly five times.” In another forum, at another time, such discussions of vexillology would have held greater interest for me.

I have never liked nature. I don't understand the use of the term, outdoors. Many decisions that I have had to make in life have been resolved by the absence of flora. The city feels good to me. It doesn't yield sap. It doesn't incense my histamines.

When I returned from camp, I ran straight upstairs to my room. I made my way directly to the drawer where I had hidden my comic book. There, instead of my comic book and my clothes, was a plastic leg. It was fitted with an athletic sock. It was bent

at the knee slightly so that it could fit into the small space. I stepped back in horror. I called for my mother.

“Red and yellow,” he had said. “Divided from upper-hoist to lower-fly forming two scalene triangles. The three-legged winged woman as charge. The flag of Sicily. Her own three-legged race. Available for party hire.”

My father told me that my brother had suffered an accident while I was at camp. I don't remember exactly what I said. I said something like, “Why wasn't I here? I could've helped him. Why didn't you call me at camp? Why did you send me to that stupid camp?”

My brother lay in bed. His face was pale and lean. His hands trembled. His leg was cut above the knee. There was less of him. There was a deeper silence. My parents had removed my bed from the room. It formed an odd, discordant space. Although I didn't say it then, I thanked them for this. I thanked them for sending me to a camp I detested. It would have driven me mad to hear my silent brother scream.

From then onwards, I slept alone. I was given a small room next to the laundry. It had no windows. I had to have the light on all day. During the morning, I heard the washing machine as it rattled on its frame. During the late hours of the night, I heard my brother above me, pacing across the confines of his room. It took me weeks to grow accustomed to the new sound.

Then one morning I awoke to find my brother sitting at the end of my bed. He looked at me and said, “How can you sleep in this room without windows? The drier makes these damn walls weep.” I looked at him in silence.

“You didn't grow at all at camp,” he said. “What about your penis, did it get bitten by a tick? How did they treat you?”

“It was horrible,” I said. “They made us swim in these god-awful lakes. Everyone was naked. We all looked like pieces of chalk with shrivelled scrotums. The water gave me an instant headache.”

“What about the girls?”

“The girls swam in a different lake. One for the boys and another for the girls. The girls were naked too. Their boobs were the size of pistachios.”

“I would've liked to have been a beaver building a dam in that lake.”

“I was just joking. There were no girls. That’s what was terrible. At night, they made us sing songs about the Resurrection. So you can imagine how that went.”

“And besides that?”

“Nothing. I read.”

“You read. No action then?”

“I don’t even know what that means. I had to take a pill every six hours to stop me from crying. I stayed indoors and read.”

“I read that comic book you hid. I don’t know if you’d call that reading. There are more pictures in that damn book than words. Those artists sure know how to draw a good pair of tits.”

“It’s not about the tits.”

“Is that so?”

“It’s not about the tits.”

“Who said that? Lao Tse or was that Mencius?”

“It’s about justice. Good versus Evil. It’s about life and enduring adversity.”

“It’s about tits. It always is.”

“Why did you look through my drawers anyway? Did you miss me?”

“Miss you? You’ve got to be kidding.”

“It’s okay to miss your own brother. You missed me didn’t you?”

“Come on.”

“You missed your younger brother.”

“Quit it,” he said. His voice was harsh. “I couldn’t stand seeing the plastic leg. I couldn’t stand seeing it on the couch, or on the chair. I couldn’t stand seeing it away from my body. I told dad to hide it. He put it in the drawer where the comic book was. I read it because I was bored and because my leg hurt even when it wasn’t there.”

“The Green flag of Libya,” he had said. “No greener is there or will there ever be a flag. Greener than the greenest of greens. Like a good bit of comic spew. Hurl. You’ve got Libya all over your face.”

My brother never grew accustomed to his new leg. He lay in bed all day and his skin began to fester with sores. He was often struck with fevers. His silence was replaced by an incessant and incoherent rambling. In a moment of madness, he had



written the names of imaginary animals on his plastic leg, carving the letters with a pocket-knife.

I stood by his bed. I was now taller than him. His muscles had atrophied. His body was covered in sweat. He retracted fearfully from anyone's touch. He snarled when I entered the room. It frightened me. But more so, it disgusted me.

"What can I do for you?" I said. "Tell me anything and I'll do it?"

"Go fuck yourself," he said. "Go eat your own shit. You shit-eater."

"You don't mean that."

"Go eat a horse's pussy. Go get a unicorn to call you pansy."

"What can I do for you? Tell me."

He paused. He seemed lucid.

"It might surprise you, but I was once in love with a girl. This girl was really special. She made me feel happy."

"Good. Tell me where she is and I'll find her."

"She loved me. She told me so. She understood me. We laughed."

"Tell me where she lives."

"Not far. First you have to take an aqua-dragon over the burning fires. Then you have to defeat the six-headed ox. Five of its heads will tell you lies. The sixth will reveal a key. It's a verbal key. It will open a door that is shaped like an ear. It will unlock the glass chamber. There you will find my lover. Go and find her. Tell her about my illness. Tell her to bring some crushed gnat powder. It's in the bible. Exodus 8:18: 'But when the magicians tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, they could not. And the gnats were on men and animals.' It's a secret art. They don't want us to know. They don't want us to love. It's a secret heart."

"The unfinished dragon," he had said. "The lazy artist. A thousand uncoloured scales. Talons clutching dull gems. The pale testicles of man. The flag of Bhutan. Come and get your testicles if you dare."

He died in his bed alone. A grown man curled rigid in a child's bed. By then, I had married. I had two children. I hadn't spoken to him in years. I returned to our house where he remained. For an afternoon, I lay beside him. I fell in and out of sleep.

I would wake and look over and see his body beneath the sheet. My mother came into the room and said, “This is how you both always were. So silent and happy.”

I went home to my family. This city is a mess. There are cars everywhere. There are people everywhere. There is noise all day and night. They construct buildings now that almost block out the sun. It’s an exaggeration. Maybe I’m too old for it. But those damn trees make me weep. It can make an old man look stupid.

On the way home, I sat in a taxi. I made the driver take E 42<sup>nd</sup> Street so that I could see the United Nations Building on the plaza. I wanted to see all of the different flags. They were still and quiet in the November cold.

“Would you like me to stay here a while longer sir?” said the driver.

“A while longer,” I replied.

Going down E 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, the driver nearly hit a cyclist. The cyclist turned to the driver and said, “Mind where the fuck you’re going. Go back to Pakistan you faggot.”

I said to the driver, “He doesn’t mean it.” The driver turned to me and said, “Oh, yes he does sir.”



PAMELA BOONE has published short fiction in *Horse & Cart*, *Apostrophe* and *More of the Same*. She enjoys playing checkers, which she says, “makes me somewhat unfashionable”, and is a hobbyist stamp collector. She shares her life with her husband and two young sons.

“The world is an empty library. We are forced to live among the empty shelves. Our existence depends upon filling the shelves with works that will provide our lives with meaning and happiness. We must form the world we live in. We must believe that there is a reader outside waiting for the doors to be opened, a library card in her hand, an empty bag on her back, waiting to borrow books which she will carry away to oblivion.”

WHEN I FINISH A DRAFT of one of my stories, I pin it with a yellow clothes peg to one of several lines of thread that cross my room. Over the years I have spun a complex web. Caught in this viscous trap, I often don't leave the room for an entire day and night.

With twenty or thirty pages strung, I then decide to leave the room. Glancing back as I exit, the white pages, scrawled with lead, seem like sorrowful flies.

I go and sit on the veranda. Sometimes I am alone. At other times, I sit with my husband and son. We normally don't say a word to each other; such a thing is effortless and pleasant.

He feeds my young son with a bottle. After time, he will say, "I no longer hear the wings buzzing. The spider has eaten. It is safe to return to the room."

I listen attentively. He is always correct.

Before I go into the room, I look at my son. He sees me and pulls himself off the bottle. He can't form words yet. He opens his mouth. Tiny black spiders, numbering in the hundreds, come out of his agape, toothless mouth and crawl across his face.

When he learns to speak, the spiders will leave him.

I return to my room.

For a long while I sit at my desk, incapacitated by the thought of my son. Then I begin to hear something ominous behind me; the sound of many legs coming towards me.

I don't dare turn around for the fear of losing my mind. My son wails. It is time to write. It is time to make flies for the spider.



KAREN SOTO is the author of *Naming the Night* (Black Ink Press, 1992) which won the Estrada Award for New Literature in 1993. She identifies herself as a transgender author and has been an advocate of gender rights. Her more recent work *Pronounced* (Black Ink Press, 1998) was a collection of articles, essays and poems that focused primarily on her adolescence.

“Sometimes I believe that my mother did not give birth to a complete baby, but rather an oversized ear. I seem to be receptive to every word or thing that I hear. My skin burns with sensitivity. It is almost unbearable for me to write. The sound of my HB pencil etching the page is excruciatingly loud and painful.”

AS A CHILD, HE LOVED BOOKS. His parents saw that he was happiest alone, with a book in his hands. They bought him as many books as they could afford. He showed no interest in playing with other children. He always wore two sets of clothes; one set on top of the other. Even in summer, he would wear two shirts, two jumpers and two pants. His parents had no explanation. His brothers thought him odd—timorous and unaffectionate. At the age of eight, he told his older brother that he wanted to end his life. His brother propped him up on the kitchen table and gave him a knife. He held the knife and hesitated to act. His brother thought that it was the means that dissuaded him. He then filled the bath with water and offered to drown him.

At the age of fourteen he lost interest in reading. He would not read again until he was twenty; and even then, not with the same voraciousness and enjoyment. He fell in love with the cinema; with its ability to not only transport him to an imaginative place, but also for its power to sustain his pervasive anxiety. He was an overwrought teenager. He gained weight. He wrote with a furious, senseless compulsion. At the age of fifteen he was introduced to a girl; she was to be his partner to a compulsory school dance. He found the meeting awkward and embarrassing. When she left, he realised that he had driven his thumbnail into his index finger; his hand was covered in blood.

At the age of sixteen his father died of melanoma cancer. At first, his father had a tumour removed from the left side of his mandible. A year later, he had the lymph nodes from his right under arm excised. Shortly after, he suffered a brain haemorrhage. A fortnight later he was dead.

He found it difficult to feel sorrow over his father's death. Yet somehow he is capable of crying at the fate of a complete stranger. He thinks of himself as cold, cruel—as a cog born into the wrong machine.

Although his father regained consciousness, he experienced few moments of lucidity. The haemorrhage had impaired his speech and thought; he babbled like a

child. In a moment of stark clarity, his father demanded that he sit by his feet. He obeyed. He loved his father, but he could not understand how his father could love such an awkward boy. His father smiled, caressed his face and then recounted a paradox.

The nature of Quinn's Paradox can be recounted: a device is attached to a person named the 'self-torturer'. The implement emits an electric current and has 1001 different settings: 0 indicates that the machine is off, while 1001 represents the most severe setting. The 'self-torturer' is offered \$10,000 for every increase in increment that he wills. He is allowed to advance one setting per week and is not allowed to escape his confinement. The difference in pain between adjacent settings is so subtle as to be undetectable. At no time then can a decision to halt the experiment be deemed rational, because at each setting the financial benefit outweighs the incurred increase in pain. This advancement necessarily occurs even with the fore-knowledge that setting 1001 is unbearable to endure.

At the age of twenty he enters university. He is not a successful student. He applies himself to the work given. He studies hard. He does not know that a fissure has developed in his perception; he walks unknowingly each day at the precipice of complete detachment from the world. His unconditional trust of strangers is morbidly naïve. One day he is approached by a fellow student who invites him to join a selective fraternity of intellectuals. The initiation rite was straightforward: he must read a quote provided to him five times each night at five p.m. precisely for five days. During this period he must not eat, drink or sleep. He was to record his interpretations of the quote each night. The eccentricity of the task ensnared him. He did not have the capability to know that he was being ridiculed.

The quote was from Blaise Pascal's *Pensees*. It read: "When I was small I used to put my book away, and because it sometimes happened when I thought I had put it away, I was doubtful..."<sup>2</sup> On the first night, the meaning of the text evaded him. He was hungry and tired. On the second night, he was sure that the text was only a fragment, holding no coherent meaning. On the third night, he was certain that the text

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<sup>2</sup> Pascal, Blaise. *Pensees*. Trans. A. J. Krailshimer. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1966. 221.

was of a similar nature to the koans used by Zen Buddhists. He lay in bed and meditated on the 27 words. He found no answer. On the fourth night, he realised that he did not need sleep, food or water; there was an indefinable energy that radiated from the text, a glowing seed that promised to nourish him if he persisted. On the final night, he had a vision which made him weep.

In his vision he entered a vast reading hall. Sun light from large windows rested on the stooped shoulders of the men who sat at the long tables. There must have been many hives buried behind bookshelves or hidden in the vaulted ceiling, because the room was filled with the sound of bees. The men were studious. They seemed fatigued. He knew that he had entered the Great Reading Hall of the Anaemic Sages.

He was approached by a sage. His efforts were congratulated. Suddenly, all of the men in the Reading Hall looked up from their books and applauded. The noise resounded loudly through the hall. It drove the bees away from their hives; they formed menacing clouds above.

He is welcomed into the fraternity. He is told the following: there are 1001,100,110 different books in the reading hall. Each of the books promises to provide him with a distinct and unparalleled level of wisdom. He need not read a book in its entirety; reading half a book, a chapter, a single page, or even a sentence, would offer him a unique level of insight. The pages of each book are made from beeswax. Embedded into each page are 1001 imperceptible bee stingers. Every page that he chooses to peruse induces an increasing degree of pain. If he were to read all of the books in the reading hall, he would be assured an unsurpassed level of intellectual superiority, but he would also be immobilised by pain. However, the difference in degrees of ascending pain between adjacent pages is so subtle as to be undetectable. At no time then can his decision to halt the pursuance of intelligence be deemed rational, because the advancement of wisdom outweighs the increase in pain endured by every page he turns. Having entered the reading hall, he is told that he can't leave. His only choice is to read, or to sit idly among the readers.

The next morning he relates his vision to the fellow student. The student summons two other friends. He repeats his vision for them. They laugh at him. They can't believe how gullible he is. He thinks that he has not been allowed into the



fraternity. Worse, he thinks that he has misinterpreted the extract. He has not eaten or slept in a week. They point at him. He has forgotten the meaning of common signs of derision. He is exiled.

He is banished to terra nullius; an inhospitable country divided into wards. It is his older brother who journeys to find him; he nurses him back to health. He feeds him. He dresses him. In the afternoon, he reads to him.

At the age of thirty, he sits and writes a story. What does he think that he is achieving by not naming himself? Does he believe that he can extinguish himself from existence? Or does he wrongfully believe that such wilful negation allows him frankness, when in fact it cushions the bluntness of reality?

A boy is born. He is given to his mother; she holds him briefly. Then, in accordance with his parent's wishes, the surgeons implement an electronic device within the baby. It resembles a heart; but instead of pulsing blood, it emits electrical currents. The device is what allows the boy life. It will sustain him for many decades. However each day that passes—as the device nears its point of failure—will bring the boy greater pain. The boy is assured that every day he advances will also offer him rewarding possibilities. The difference in ascending pain between each proceeding day is so subtle as to be unnoticeable. The possibility of happiness, of love, even of an easing in the pain, always outweighs the knowledge that the final day will be the most severe. Having entered life, he can't leave. His only choice is to live, or to sit idly among the living.



MEENA DIXON was visiting professor of Women's Studies and Technology at Friends College, Maridon Campus. A car accident and an assault in subsequent months rendered her incapable of work. She has since published a trilogy of critical works focused on violence, media and gender studies. *Void: III* (Knowledge Tree Press, 1999) won the McMillan Prize for Contribution to Gender Studies in 1999.

“My father loved books. As a child, I was allowed into his library. I read books by his feet, hidden beneath his desk. He wanted to become a famous writer. He didn't succeed. When the writing was especially difficult, he would forget that I was concealed by his feet. He would stomp wildly. I did not write anything until he died. By then, I was spilling over with ideas. Even now, I can hear in my work my father's thudding steps.”

NOW THAT YOU HAVE COMPLETED TUTORIAL ONE through to three and are adept at preparing for Great Loss, Great Anger and Great Jealousy, let us turn to tutorial four: Great Violence.

Presently, it is not possible to provide a succinct history of violence. Violence is amorphous; it ranges from a cruel word exchanged in a schoolyard, to the faceless gassing of soldiers on a front. There have been many wars. There will be many more. School children will continue to be bullied no matter what affirmations we saturate them with. The only thing that will change will be the ingenious means with which humans inflict cruelty.

Heraclitus said, “For those who are awake there is a single, common universe, whereas in sleep each person turns away into (his) own, private (universe)”<sup>3</sup>. Our experience of this sequestered universe is brief and forged of disordered recollections. Awake, we endure the span of each gruelling moment. We each share a common grimace. The dark circles around our eyes mark a shared hell that we have witnessed.

That is, we are all much alike. The child who was once scorned in a dusty yard, far from the teacher’s glance, may grow up to abuse the prisoner in a hidden cell. The brazen cadet, who speaks of pride and duty, may later seek to hide his achievements in a homeland whose moral territory has shifted beneath him. It is a common universe, marked only by small degrees of humdrum absurdity.

The aim of this tutorial is to prepare your children for assaults of great violence. In the realm of sports-coaching it has been a long-held mantra that a good offence requires a good defence. This is no new discovery. In Homer’s *Iliad*, Thetis turns to the skill of Hephaestus to forge a shield and armour for her son, Achilles. Hephaestus melds copper, tin, silver and gold and constructs a shield of great wonder. He slaves

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<sup>3</sup> Heraclitus, of Ephesus. [Fragments/Heraclitus](#). Trans. T. M. Robinson. Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1987. 55.

with a weeping face over the heavy anvil. On this shield he depicts the world in detail. It is a world centuries away from us, but it is a universe that we too share in common. In the foreseeing eyes of Hephaestus, we too are depicted on the shield. We too took arms in battle. We too felled Hector. We too bear the responsibility. The reading-eye storms the bastillion, surges against the written page.

Let us now turn to the screen in front of us. Could someone please dim the lights? To those in the back row, please let me know if you can't hear this brief audiovisual presentation...

"Welcome to Apartment 6a. Fair-Weather Terrace. A happy Place." The narrator's voice is congenial. "The Barrington's moved into this dwelling six months ago. Say hello, Mr. Barrington. Hello. Please introduce us to your lovely wife and your children. This is Laura and these are my children Samuel jnr. and Nicole. Hi there children, do you like your new home? Yes. I suppose. The Barrington's bought the apartment off-the-plan. It is fitted with the latest technology and amenities. A television for Mr. Barrington, a deluxe stove-top for Mrs. Barrington, a rumpus room for the children. In the evenings, when the children are asleep, Samuel and Laura enjoy sitting on their veranda. It overlooks the tended lawns, the newly laid streets. It has an unobstructed vista of the surrounding hills. We are blessed. It is just like it was in the plan.

"But not everything is subject to the certainty of blue-prints. In this common apartment there will soon occur a single act of violence which will irrevocably shatter their peaceful existence. Keep your eyes on the screen.

"Apartment 6a and its inhabitants are different in many ways. Mr. and Mrs. Barrington are actors. Little Samuel jnr. is also an actor. Sweet Nicole is not an actor.

"Apartment 6a is not a common apartment. The walls are soundproof. The carpet is replaceable. There are cameras in each room recording twenty-four hours a day.

"Little Nicole is in second grade. Say hi Nicole. Hello. She's shy. What's your name? Nicole. Say it louder. Nicole. She knows it well. Sweet girl. Nicole has lived with the Barrington's for six months. She has shared in their excitement. What an adventure! She has adapted to her new family exceptionally well. She loves her rumpus room. Do you love your customised doll house Nicole? I suppose. Sweet girl.

“Look! Mrs. Barrington has prepared a lamb roast. Just as everyone likes it, with roasted potatoes and gravy. They are all sitting around the dinner table. Great roast mum! He has a promising career that Samuel. A glass of wine for pa and orange juice for the little ones. An open veranda door. Why not? It’s early spring and Fair-Weather terrace receives the sweetest afternoon southerly.

“What did you do at school today Samuel? Nothing, It was boring. Come on son, Education is fun. Is it cold in here, I think it’s too cold. It’s fine Nicole. It’s too cold in here Laura. Nicole, When will you refer to your mother as mum or ma and not Laura? It doesn’t matter Samuel, Laura is fine. Mind the roast Laura, your carving hand is shaking. Perhaps it is too cold in here. Well there’s nothing I can do about it. I’m not hungry. Let me guess, you think lamb roasts are boring too? Samuel, be nice. Your mother spent all afternoon cooking. No she didn’t. Yes she did Nicole. I’m not hungry. Neither am I. Look, You’ve worked up Gloria’s nerves. Who’s Gloria? I’m not hungry. Eat.

“Oh, Oh! We better be quick.

“Enter the thief. He comes in through the open veranda door. He carries a shotgun. He runs directly to Mr. Barrington. The bullet crushes his skull just as he is about to fill his mouth with a fork-full of lamb. Mrs. Barrington screams. It is loud, unbearably terrifying. Little Samuel screams. The bullet tears open his chest. His school uniform is mangled and bloody. Mrs. Barrington holds the carving knife. Madness in her eyes. Two shots fill apartment 6a. One rips-off her arm at the shoulder. The second tears her head clean away. There is blood on the carpet. Blood on the walls. Little Nicole sits alone at the table. Her plate of meat and vegetables remains untouched.

“It is important that we allow little Nicole some time to suffer alone. We have decreased the temperature in the room. It is cold and quiet.

“Enter the Supervisory Unit, consisting of a paediatrician, a child psychologist and a research assistant. The paediatrician crouches so that his face is level with Nicole’s. Nicole, are you okay? Silence. It is often the way. Nicole, can you say your name? Silence. Such a shy girl. The child psychologist also crouches beside her. Nicole, I just want you to know that what you have witnessed was real. These people

are dead. They have been shot by a thief. Nicole, do you understand this? Silence. Nicole, we have done this so that we can prepare you for any forms of future violence. These are not your real parents, but in the future they may very well be. Silence. Would you like to see your family? Silence. Bring them in.

“Enter family. Hugs for everyone. I’m so proud of you darling. You did so well. Enter thief. She was great. She didn’t buckle at all, She stayed resolute. The shotgun is still in his hands. Thank you. How can we thank you? You don’t need to thank me, Kids need to be prepared. The world is cruel.

“That is the truth. Kids need to be prepared. The world is unpredictable. Even a place like Fair-Weather terrace, with its trimmed hedges, mosaic bus stops, colourful playgrounds and cheery neighbours is not exempted from the crushing mechanisms of the world. In our next tutorial we shall examine Great Betrayal. Until then. Good bye.”

The screen fades to black. Could someone please turn on the lights? Thank you. Right. Any questions or thoughts?



GUSTAV CARILLO has published two volumes of stories, the latest *Returning to a Place now Changed* (Winston, 1998) chronicles his recent visit to his country of birth. In 1981 he established P.A.T.H (People Against the Trafficking of Humans). In 1992 he edited the anthology of stories *A Forced Walk* (Bradbury Institute, 1992). Presently, he works in a retail store selling gift cards.

“My characters inhibit me. I create this person and he lives within me. He grips onto my ribs; he rattles the cage like a disgruntled prisoner. I feel his constraints; I sense how impoverished captivity has made him. I have no way of freeing him or myself. The page confines me. In writing I examine the limitations of freedom.”

HE WOKE FRIGHTENED. A set of automobile headlights crossed the window. He knew that he had to leave immediately. He was naked and he was sweating. He looked for his wife and his daughter, but could only see a single suitcase, yet unpacked, lying on the spare bed beside him.

Then he was completely awake and seeing things as they were, in English, stark and unfamiliar. He realised then that he had already left and that leaving had been difficult.

He did not pray. He switched on the lights in the kitchen and he served himself a bowl of cereal and a glass of orange drink. He sat and ate breakfast by himself. The kitchen was made of a light blue laminate. The ceiling was stained with grease. He forced spoons of rice cereal into his mouth even though he did not like it.

He was two hours early. There was no way that he could return to sleep. The steady hum of a pool filter filled the cold morning.

It was still dark outside. He wore gloves, a black scarf, and a heavy jacket. The streets were empty. The shops on the main street were closed.

He walked for a while in an aimless manner. He crossed Main Street and turned onto First Street and then onto Third. The streets were lined by simple and similar houses. It was quiet and cool.

When he returned to Main Street and to the park where he often sat, he saw Ahmed sitting alone on a wooden picnic bench. He approached Ahmed and said, “What are you doing here Ahmed?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” said Ahmed.

“Neither could I.”

“It happens. What woke you?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Neither am I.”



Then they were both silent. They sat next to each other, only slightly apart. They shook in the cold. They looked at an empty children's playground.

"I can't believe it's only autumn," said Ahmed.

"I know. I wonder what winter will be like," he replied.

Then they were both silent again.

"Ali," said Ahmed. "We have been here two months now, and you know, by God's name, I could not tell you exactly where we are."

Ali laughed. A cold wind split them, drew them further apart.

"I couldn't tell you either Ahmed. Sometimes it's as if I were nowhere."

"I don't suppose it matters anyway."

"I suppose not."

"We could be... It doesn't matter."

"It doesn't," he said. "Now let's get to the abattoir while we are still early."



WILLIAM K. FINLEY is the author of several books of fiction including *The Long Stretch* (Horizon, 1991) and *The Ruling Day* (Horizon, 1994). He has contributed to numerous literary journals. His short story ‘A Difficult Man’ (New Words, Spring Issue, 1998) was nominated for the W. T. Owen Short Fiction Award. Presently, he is a piano teacher.

“I don’t know why I write. I believe it is a sickness. I tell all aspiring writers to try everything else before they decide to become writers—surely it is easier to be a mechanic or a carpenter? I am sick and I can’t stand being around other writers. The only thing worse than one sick person is a colony of sick people, each envious of the others ailments.”

I HAD GONE THERE BECAUSE I had heard that it was a good place to write. I had heard that the people there let you be.

I wanted to write something sickening, because that's how I felt. I had been thinking of a knife and how it would feel and sound as it was swung and forced into a young, fatty gut. I thought about it every night and most of the day. It made me sick to think about it. I thought that if I drank until I threw up it would help, but it didn't.

Even when you haven't done anything and you have your head full of thoughts like this, you can't help but leave town feeling as if you really did kill somebody. Someday it will catch up to you, you tell yourself. This running around can't last forever. I walked to the bus depot in the cold. All I could hear was the sharp sound of the snow as it was cut by my swift paces.

From the start, I knew that it wasn't my sort of place. The streets were wide and sodden with mud. The trees were a muted green and heavy with snow. "We're a working farm," said the owner. "Mostly in the summer though. Did you know that?"

"No," I replied.

"Yes. We have a few head of cattle, but most of them are sold off in the summer. We have a few horses also, but we keep them in the stables during the cold. You could take one for a ride if you like?"

"It's fine."

"We have kids from charities come and stay a week or two, but mostly in the spring. We have families visit also. They swim in the lake, but that's frozen over. Do you skate?"

"I don't."

"Come on. Let me guess, you're a size twelve?"

"No. Really. Thank you."

He put a pair of skates on the table. The leather of the shoes was old and torn, but the blades were clean and sharp.

“So, you’ve come from the city?” he asked.

“No,” I replied.

“Well then.” He grew quiet. “It’s a quiet place.”

I looked at the skates. I was ashamed. This sickness makes you say things that you don’t always mean. It makes you into another man.

The room was simple. It had a bed, a table and a fireplace. There was a small kitchen, with a kettle and a gas stove. There was a window that gave to a field. Beyond the field were the foothills of a small mountain range.

I saw no one. Not even when I went out to get some wood for the fire. There was a mottled cow in the field and often I would walk towards it, or smoke a cigarette near it. I often thought of pitching stones at it. It would have been an easy game. Its fat body was dark against the gathered snow.

It isn’t hard to write when you’ve got the sickness, because you love and grieve with intensity. But although the writing is easier, it is of a lesser quality. The fervency of your emotions makes you disregard the rudimentary skill of writing. You write like a child that is wailing, shifting with incoherence from one agony to the next.

I wrote of a woman I had known in the city. She had fallen in love with an army officer. He had returned from a long service overseas. Soon he began to drink and to talk about how things were no longer fair. Things had changed for him, but he couldn’t put his finger on just what had changed.

She had seen him like this on one prior occasion, when his father had died. She knew that anything she said would only incite him. She let him drink. She gave him space.

Then one night, when he was out drinking, an old friend told him that his wife was pregnant. He was furious. By then he was too sick to realise that the child she held was his own. He cornered her in the kitchen. She held her body firmly upright with her hands. They stood close. Her hands like that opened up her chest. Then he drove the knife into it.

I could've cried. It would've done me no good. The room was cold and the fire needed wood. I went outside and lit a cigarette. In the distance I could see the cow, alone with its hooves deep in the snow. It came to my mind that I had not seen anybody for days.

The next morning I was awoken by the sound of a voice outside. I went to the window and saw a man in a heavy coat talking to the cow. It was the owner. He drew his gloved hand across its back and the cow turned its head.

It was snowing lightly and I had a headache. I went outside to have a cigarette and to maybe strike up a conversation. A part of me felt that I needed to make amends. As I stepped outside, I saw the man raise his shotgun to the cow's head. The cow had lived alone in the paddock and it toppled over after the blast in a clumsy way.

Soon the two of us caught eyes and we walked towards each other. He had a thick, grey moustache and his hand was warm when I shook it. I drew on my cigarette. "So, you're a writer?" He said.

"Yes sir I am," I said.

"Have you written anything I might have read?"

"It's unlikely sir."

"Writing must be difficult."

"I don't know sir."

"It seems that way to me."

"I suppose that at times it is sir. But no more difficult than...It's less difficult, easier in many regards sir."

"I guess you're right."

I stood rigid and quiet. The mountains were far away and still. The snow was cold and black with blood. I don't know why, but I still carried the formality, and a great part of the atrocity, of the army officer that I had created.



TONY GIBBONS was the host of 'Spin to Win'. After leaving television, he pursued studies in Literature, receiving his doctorate in 1984. Since then he has published four books of fiction. The most recent *Wailing* (Jupiter Press, 1997) was awarded the Huckleberry Award for Fiction in 1998. He continues to perform, but only for his wife and two children.

"I don't enjoy reading on a sofa or in bed beside my wife as she snores. Likewise I do not want to write fiction that can be read in a relaxed position. My work should be read while standing, and preferably while pacing irritably in a small room."

THERE ARE FEW SIMILARITIES BETWEEN moustaches and butterflies. But since the comparison has frequently been made by visitors to the Institute, let me briefly examine the impetus for this somewhat peculiar assertion.

Firstly, the obvious: moustaches do not exist to reproduce or to pollinate plants and crops. A scientist has never arrived at the Institute in the morning, to find the exhibited moustaches either copulating or suddenly having multiplied in number. Nor have we received any reports of lurid activities by any of the nightwatchmen.

Secondly, moustaches are not holometabolous: they do not undergo a process of metamorphosis. A moustache does not have an ovum, larva, pupa or imago phase. A moustache may engage in a process of change—for instance, a pubescent moustache is usually fine and sparse, while an adult moustache is commonly thick and coarse—but this development is not perceived as being lineal. That is, we do not speak of the ‘life of the moustache’, as we do of the caterpillar who transforms into a butterfly.

Further, the development of a moustache is never perceived as a wondrous event. It is always associated with a level of personal tardiness and repulsion.

Thirdly, moustaches do not have compound eyes or antennae. A moustache does not see. Nor does it exist upon a lip to provide guidance to humans.

Finally, although moustaches do vary in style, textures and colour, they are never appreciated for their visceral qualities. One will not find a moustache displayed at the Institute that has the same allure of the *Jamides Phaseli*, or the *Hesperilla Ornata*. Which brings me to two further points: moustaches are not attributed with Latin names, nor when handled, do they leave one's fingers with a delicate, powdery residue.

Moustaches are amazingly resilient. When they remain connected to a carefully excised upper-lip, they can be pulled and throttled with the crudest of care.

Let me provide an answer—hopefully a definitive one—as to why this odd comparison may have first arisen. The Institute for the Collection of Moustaches was established in 2010. Over the years we have amassed some two million varying specimens—straight, simple, kempt, narrow, thin, curved, upturned, hooked and brush to name a few—of which only a small percentage are on exhibition.

The major part of the collection is housed in bell-jars, drawers, boxes, cabinets, sachets and external storage facilities. The reality is that the pace of moustaches made available to the Institute far exceeds the limited available space we presently have. Not a single day passes when I do not sign-off for a truck load of moustaches.

In the pursuance of clarity, let me again state the obvious: all of our moustaches are collected from men with moustaches. The birthplace of all moustaches is not in the canopies of a remote tropical jungle, but rather on the upper-lip of any able man.

These individuals, who for some anarchic reason chose to adorn their faces with moustaches, are subdued by the policing branch of our Institute. They are immediately interviewed as to the rebellious motive of their growth. The most common response is laziness, but this I assure you is simply a response to assuage ownership of their wrongdoing.

If convicted of this offence (the legal term is Moustache-Growth), then they are judiciously executed, at which point their moustache is skilfully removed by a surgeon who manages to keep the hair intact with the underlying skin.

Now here is where the moustache does indeed resemble a butterfly! The scientists at the institute treat each moustache with care. They spread the specimen onto a corkboard and pin down each end firmly.

The moustaches are displayed in glass cabinets, positioned in neat horizontal and vertical lines. I have often seen a child enter the Institute, glance absently at the vast collection, and suddenly believe that they have been rewarded with an excursion to the magnificent world of butterflies. In my many years as Chief Scientist, I have also seen many disgruntled lepidopterists.

In the evenings, one of my jobs is to empty and respond to all of the comments left by visitors in the Feedback Box. Let me respond briefly to some of the ridiculous assertions made by visitors who choose to play the role of quiet dissident.



Firstly, this is not the appropriate arena to discuss the ethics of law. So let me assert my position (which I believe is also the view of the greater public): once enacted, the law is to be obeyed. The banning of moustaches is self-explanatory: one is not allowed to grow a moustache.

To the assertion that all men can grow moustaches and are thus all inherently evil, I respond: certainly, most men are capable of growing moustaches, but why would one want to grow a moustache and thus disobey the law?

To the claim that a man who has a moustache in the morning may very well shave it in the afternoon, thus raising the question of remorse, I respond: No, on all accounts. A man who grows a moustache only to shave it has an inherent disposition towards disobedience and thus should be treated accordingly.

To the ludicrous claim that if a man has only half a moustache he is then only half as guilty, I respond: can a woman be half pregnant?

Why ban a moustache and not a beard? I am not the appropriate advisor on the constitution of laws. I will simply say that there is something pervasively suspicious about moustaches. At times, I have stood in front of the bathroom mirror and placed my index finger over my lip and thought my appearance quite peculiar.

Museums offer a mysterious microcosm of our shared universe. How strange it is to see a child stand before the great tusks of a woolly mammoth! It is with no lesser marvel that I greet today's youth who stand inquisitively before the peculiarity that we called 'the moustache'.

I encourage everyone to attend our Institute. Admission is free. To use the common jargon, it is proving to be a 'bumper' season for the Institute. Our scientists recently received word of a new horde of exceptionally rare moustaches that are soon to arrive.

Last week the policing agent stumbled across a community of moustache-bearing men hiding in a forest. These deviants lived solely on pine cones and vermin. They had absconded from the law for months. Our agents found them clinging to trees, quivering in fear, their grand moustaches flapping in unison.



TOBIAS PLEMMONS was the youngest faculty member of New State University. He served as professor of English until 1998. He is the author of *Why Read?* (NSU Press, 1995) and *Theory Today* (NSU Press, 1997). He has published popular fiction under the pseudonym Peter Horn. *The Life of Peter and Tobias* was published by Garland Press in 1999.

“The young must be encouraged to read. They must be told that the effort is worthwhile. In the face of competing technology, books are perceived as a form of graffiti—dogged in its insistence and difficult to eradicate. Authors must continue to write knowing that they are contesting for exposure on a prized territory. The young must be encouraged to offer us their walls, their barricades, their eyes on which to scrawl.”

THEY USED TO CALL HIM MULCH, because he had a rotten face. His knuckles were always bloodied and dirty from all the fights he had lost. Nobody cared for his real name. There wasn't a single thing about him that was spared from ridicule. He was a loser. The school children said that even his own mother refused to give Mulch her breast for feeding.

He came into my dental practice. He looked so beaten. I thought I could hear his tiny bones rattling. Then he dug into the pockets of his shorts and brought out two dirty fistfuls of coins. "Do something with these teeth of mine," he said. "At least with the front ones that you can see."

I didn't have the nerve to tell him that I couldn't help him. "Listen kid," I said. "They're in a bad way and twelve dollars doesn't even cover the price of a single tooth." I made sure to look him in the eye when I said it.

"Can't you do something? Can't you even clean them so that I don't spit blood?"

He was dirty and young. He couldn't stand still for longer than a moment. He was used to fleeing. "You know what kid," I said. "We'll see what we can do. Sit down and sit still."

I put the paper napkin across his bony chest. "Now mister," he said. "Don't worry about any pain killers or nothing, because I've felt it all before." I wanted to say that he was young and that he didn't know anything about pain, but this kid was young and full of suffering.

I looked at his face. It was lit by the harsh light. "Why do you let the kids get at you like this?" I said. He looked at me and all of a sudden, he looked like a normal happy child.

"It isn't the children's fault," he said. He said the word children, as if he too wasn't a child; as if he were something already old and wise. "It's my father that knocked my teeth out. Sure as hell, I'll pay you twelve dollars to fix them as new and

then first thing tomorrow morning, over something little, he'll have them as they were again.”

It was my children that had told me of Mulch. In my head I had my own picture of him. At night, I laughed about all the things they had said. “This Mulch kid sounds like a real piece of work,” I said to my wife.

“You should lay off the child,” she said.

“What? I didn't say anything. I just said that he sounds like a real piece of work that's all.”

It took me two hours to fix him proper. He spent all but half a minute in the mirror like a kid does and then he left. “Take care of yourself,” I said, but he was already gone. That night I sat my kids down and I told them how to treat others and they swore to it.

The next morning I saw Mulch at the park. He was sad and sitting alone. His mouth was bloodied and his teeth were missing. I moved my kids on before they saw him.

It's hard to help someone when you've made promises elsewhere, and when the only name you have for them is a word of scorn.



JOSEPH GAINES completed his Honours in Political Science, working with Sir Harvey Sherman, only to then accept a position as groundskeeper at Harvington Golf Course. He has published three books of poetry, a collection of short stories and more recently, co-edited *Stranger Days* (Wattage, 1998), an anthology of writing on conflict. He was a regular contributor to *What Now?* a bi-weekly publication that focuses on economic forecasts.

“Writing should be perceived as a declaration of war. One should be sad to send words across a page. They are going to a cruel front, lined like a brigade of children waiting to be attacked. If you do not have confidence in your words, then you should recall them and discard the work entirely. There is no use waging a war for a cause that you do not believe in, no use in sacrificing innocent words.”

THERE IS A BATTLE GOING ON and I don't want to go. There is a battle going on and I don't know where it's being fought. There are men cleaving each other with blades, piercing each other with bullets, but I don't know what they're fighting over. There are lieutenants, captains, majors, colonels and generals unfurling battle plans, debating the effectiveness of the pincer movement over the establishment of forts and trenches. Day and night, the streets are full of trucks. Under their khaki tarpaulins sit young men with polished rifles and horses with blinders that are trained to charge steadfast at death. The storekeepers are stockpiling their food; the price of bread is twice what it was before the war. The young men no longer gather on the corners; the old men no longer occupy the plazas; the pigeons are no longer fed; the streetlights struggle to find a soul to illuminate.

I play the dunce well. My inclination: neither left, right nor centre. What on earth does it exactly mean? Left of what? Right of where? I stuff my feet into old school shoes; I grimace, I stagger: who needs a man that can't hold a line, that can't charge a fort? Obey; I disobey. Follow; I lead. My name; I state my age of twenty years ago. There goes a dunce, they say, and I cackle as if it were the most astute compliment. How much he has changed! He used to be so positive and enthusiastic. He studied Law; correction, I say, Law, Physics, Mathematics, Music, Architecture and Medicine. And now look at him! I struggle to look at myself: I can't see me eyes. He rambles, he spits, he falls to the floor in fits of temper. I defecate myself also. When I am shown an enemy corpse, I poke its dull eyes. The fishmonger will be happy; quite a cod. I play in the empty graves. They give me a wooden gun: ba-ba-ba-ba-ba, clack-clack-clack; a timber gun is fine, but a clean femur would be perfect. You're a dumb child, says the gravedigger. He is overworked; unhappy. If only he knew I was a man!

I master the dunce. Each evening I spend hours in front of the mirror manipulating my expressions; I pull at my ears, flare my nostrils, tear out my hair,

pinch my cheeks; I make myself into a grotesque being; I am capable of this. I frequent prostitutes and perform sex miserably, because I know that they will then tell others of my inadequacy. Last month I swallowed the pages of an entire bible; there was quite a crowd and I was sick for a week after. I wear my clothes backwards; sometimes I venture out naked. I carry large flasks of water that strain my back and from which I drink copious amounts, so that I can urinate in public often. I ridicule others and then encourage them to assault me; I stick out my chin, I offer my cuspids, bicuspid and molars. I curse the pigeons. I curse the clouds. Yesterday, I spent an entire morning cursing a twig.

But soon the war will accommodate the dunce. Men are already being drawn from their beds and given loaded rifles. They fight in mismatched pyjamas on the battlefield. Children are already being drawn from their sandpits and given explosives. They plant mines on the front with their plastic shovels. The dunce will soon fail me. I move with skilful deliberateness to playing the madman. How much he has changed! He used to be so comedic and intelligent. He studied Mathematics, Law, Physics, Music, Architecture and Medicine; Wrong, I shout, Gnosticism, Clairvoyancy and Witchcraft in a mystic's cave. And now look at him! I pluck out one of my eyes; I turn it so that I can see myself. He rambles, he spits, he falls to the floor in fits of madness. I defecate myself also. How can we trust him with a gun? He may very well turn on the troops. When I am shown an enemy corpse, I masturbate over its dull eyes. Few know that my father was an ophthalmologist; gone is your cataract, remedied is your glaucoma. I play in the empty graves. They give me a wooden gun: ba-ba-ba-ba-ba, clack-clack-clack; a timber gun is fine, but could I not derive maximum carnage from a disused AK-47? I converse with skulls. I handcuff myself to a ribcage. The horror is too much for them. You're a madman, says the gravedigger. He is disillusioned; melancholic. If only he knew I was a man!



NAOMI KRAPP was a primary school teacher. Her book *The A.B.C's of K.I.D's* was published in 1990 by Working Environment Press. More recently she has focused her interests on horticulture, co-editing *The Encyclopedia of Native Plants* (Green Hand, 1994) and establishing Impoverished Gardens, a program of environment regeneration for poor urban communities.

“It is an odd thing for poets to see flowers in the eyes of people. How strange it seems to say, ‘your eyes are like daffodils’— one cannot help but see the bees swarming upon their faces. But perhaps the eyes are instead a fertile soil: in seeing, they seek the seed; in reading they take the seed; in thought they toil the earth; and in the years ahead, they bloom a precious garden. Writers must tend with a green hand, with sentiments attuned to the cycles of nature.”



WE MAKE PROMISES WITH OUR HEARTS. We break them with our words. Bethany hadn't said a single word since she suffered her second stroke. This gave Harold some hope that the love he was certain she had felt for him was yet unbroken.

He cut the flower stems. He put the flowers in a silver vase. He spread the stems to make the vase look fuller than it was. He sat beside her. Her eyes were open. She looked at the ceiling. He said, "I just wanted to let you know that flowers mean something more in winter." She was silent and outside it was snowing.

Her hospital bed was in a corner. The rest of the room was empty. The linoleum floor was white and clean. In the diffused winter light, her body seemed dispirited. He moved her bed to the centre of the room to make the room seem fuller than it was. He caressed her hand firmly, with waning patience. Her hair was wet and combed and her lips were a gentle pink.

It had taken him forty-five minutes to walk from the florist to the hospital. It would have taken a younger man half that time. He had put the flowers inside his down coat. He walked with his head down. The snow fell in furious spirals. He could smell the dankness of the cut flowers close to his chest. They did not remind him of spring or love.

Later, a nurse came into the room. "Mr. Chalmers," she said. "I'm afraid that six to eight is reserved for family members only." He knew that no one else would come. At first her family had visited nightly. Now they came sparingly. They no longer expected anything from her. They found it difficult to speak to someone that did not respond. It quickly bored them. He leant over her. He smelt her neck. It smelt of Betadine and Alcohol Sanitiser. It did not remind him of how she used to smell.

The flowers were the colour of her lips, but she wouldn't notice. Outside it continued to snow. He wondered why he hadn't married. He could not think of an

answer. He gripped her hand. Her skin gained colour. He gripped harder. “Why won’t you let me love you?” he said. And outside, it began to grow dark.

She took air from two thin green tubes that were fastened to her nostrils. Her left arm was bruised. She wore dark stockings. The catheter bag was full of her urine. She looked at the ceiling. She grunted, choked. She said nothing. Her mouth had long ceased making such words and her heart such short promises.



LAURIE SNIDER was briefly the co-editor of *The International Review of Poetry*. After a long and public dispute with the poet and fellow editor Frederick Dodson, he resigned. He subsequently published two chapbooks of poetry: *Quietly/Loudly* (Verso, 1998) and *Midnight* (Verso, 1999), as well as a book of criticism, *The Modernist Tendencies of T. Philip Randolph* (UOS Press, 1999). Until 1999 he was a regular contributor to FMS Poet Radio Weekly.

“I am not embarrassed to say that I fear death. I dread the thought that there exists a point of inscrutable oblivion. I write because I’m trying to shed light on the darkness that I believe is encroaching on me. I’m like a child that politely asks that all the doors be opened, all the cupboards be checked and the light be left to burn dimly.”

A WINDOW, NOTHING ELSE—a sightless opening in the adobe wall made to overlook an effete garden steeped in soporific heat. The pearl-milk painted frames curdle in the sun.

The walls, nothing else; the robust, rose-washed walls.

A copper rooster. Its cackling tongue quiet, brooding upon its next direction: North, East, South, West.

Eight women, nothing else; each sitting on a chair, hobbled by the heat. Timber legs digging into the dry dirt like a corpse. Black cotton kerchiefs bound in taut knots at their chins. Redolent beads scour for respite in the furrows of each clammy palm.

A child makes indiscernible infinities in the dirt. His arms outstretched mimicking a plane. His lips reverberate like a flooded engine.

A woman cowers in the attenuated shade of a cactus. She sobs. The shadow provides her with more limbs with which to question and scorn the sky.

Mourners at midday.

People come and go from the kitchen. Everyone is dressed in black. Food is served on small, paper plates; it is eaten with plastic forks. Tea is served with sugar and without milk. The children sit in front of a big, old television. They watch cartoons, but the volume is turned off.

Upstairs, people take turns in kissing the dead body. Most people kiss its right hand. Others kiss its forehead. The room is crowded. The weeping is loud. The heat is consuming. The corpse is pale. Condolences. Sentiments. Best regards.

Did he achieve all that he desired? Did he say all that he wished to express? Did he know disappointment? Did he experience happiness? Did he have empathy for those subjugated to poverty, violence and misfortune? Did he share in the joy of the blessed? Did he love? Did he have anger, hatred and prejudices that he could not, or did not

want to hide? Did he question the events of his life or was he content? What is the purpose of our lives? What is the meaning in being?

Life is not a funnel, narrowing as it nears death. Intelligence is limited. The body falters and fails. The universe tends to abstraction. Man defines, imposes limits. The universe provides. It is inexhaustible. Death as the final definition: to be still, to know stillness; or, to be human, but to be apart from humans. To be abstracted from life. It is a decision, but choosing is of no discernable importance. To be human: to be flesh, bone and thought; to be and to proceed; a human, nothing else.



ROSE EKERT is the author of *Say it Loud: A Dialogue on Belief* (Vantage, 1989). She served as visiting professor of comparative literature at Trenton West University. Her latest publication *The Home of Questions* (Vantage, 1998) was praised by David Atkins of the St. Sebastian Post as “embodying an intangible, golden persistence.” Presently, she is head librarian at Trenton Junior library.

“John 18:38 reads: ‘What is truth?’ I don’t know. I have an answer, but I’m scared of writing it. I hesitate. Can truth be captured in a book? Can an author be truthful? Can a person be truthful? I don’t know, and again, I believe I do. What does it mean to be on the side of truth and what then, is the reverse side of truth? A coin is thrown into the air; truth is the smirk on the face depicted when the coin lands with its head facing us.”

IN YOUR HANDS YOU HOLD A BOOK. Go on, browse through it; this may be your last chance. You notice that the first page bears the letter Alpha (A) and the last page the letter Omega ( $\Omega$ ). Don't let that dissuade you; sit down and relax; try and imagine as many of the pages as possible. There won't be a test. Now that you have had some time (too much, or too little), place the book on your coffee-table. Let us imagine that in a moment of decorative inspiration, you willingly eschewed harmony for the timelessness of the 'modern'. As a result, the book you just held now rests on a coffee-table made of two conjoining glass circles ( $\infty$ ).

Seated, what if I were to then reveal to you that the letters A and  $\Omega$  were references to God (*Revelations 21:6*) and that in this instance, they were not simply an appellation of God, but God itself. That is, that God was the very book you held in your hands and perused.

The importance is not so much in the conceived act, but in how you imagined the act and how the process (in light of this revelation) is now affected. How many pages were there between A and  $\Omega$ ? What size was the book? How was it bound? What did the typeset look like? What language was it written in? Is the book (as you conceive it now) larger or smaller? Are its pages few or do they tend towards the infinite? If they are few (even singular) are they then more easily recalled by you? If they tend towards an inconceivable number how did you then manage to hold the book in your hands?

The book rests on your 'modern' coffee-table. Are you worried that its weight will break the glass, or does its few or many pages somehow defy the notions of mass and seemingly mimic at once the timelessness of the design and the impulse of your activating inspiration?



SCOTT GUERRA has completed biographical works on Felisberto Hernandez and Juan Rulfo. His book *Lives we Have Lived* (Scorpion, 1991) documented the life of over a thousand authors and sought to examine the way in which texts permeate the minds of readers. He was a regular contributor to *Literary Tree*, a bi-monthly journal dedicated to literature and memory.

“I believe my purpose is to write realistic stories. To do otherwise, in my mind, would be to deceive the reader; to lure them into a world riddled with falsities. What beauty can be added to a rose? Fantasy disfigures, it gives the rose teeth that bite the hand.”



LOUISE EXPECTED ME TO WRITE A COLOSSAL BOOK. She thought that literary talent was gauged by the number of pages that a writer was capable of producing. Not only were authors who wrote mammoth books more skilful, but their works were also taken with greater seriousness.

Even though I had studied Engineering, she thought that I was clever enough to write a book of a thousand pages, especially seeing as she would be providing me with all of the details.

She offered to pay me fifty cents a page. It wasn't much money. I didn't know if I was a good or bad writer. I felt as if I were somehow cheating her.

I sat on her couch. In front of me were at least ten different plates of food. I complimented her. I told her that she was a good cook. "Of course I am," she replied. "Look at how many dishes I have provided you with."

The crux of the story was simple: Louise's brother George had one day decided to travel across the entire country to make amends to his ex-wife. The problem was that he had decided to make the journey by foot.

So how does one begin to tell a story like this? One could write a long story detailing every city and memorable character that her brother encountered along the way. Or, one could write a short story and highlight one particular event that held special resonance. For instance, how midway through his journey George came across a river. The only way to cross the river was by walking along an old bridge. The bridge was missing many beams. As George crossed the bridge—knowing that if he perished, his quixotic endeavours would forever remain unknown—he thought of how this particular bridge reflected the relationship he had had with his ex-wife and his family. He began to cross the bridge carefully. Halfway along, he broke down and wept.

So how does one choose?

Louise wanted a big book, something fleshed-out, of a thousand pages; a book in whose density one could see the varied idiosyncrasies, follies and illuminations of her brother. George had not made amends with his wife. It was uncertain if he had ever reached her. He certainly failed on one occasion. He returned briefly, recounted some of his misadventures, nursed several of his injuries and then set off again. He had been gone for three years. Louise wanted to hold the book and feel like somehow she held him. She wanted to put this book on her bookshelf and know that it couldn't leave.

In the end, Louise realised that I did not have the capability to write the book she desired. It was not an amicable conclusion. She thought that I was prone to procrastination. She felt that I had cheated her of both time and food. "You are not a creative writer," she told me.

She hired another man to do the job; a public servant who specialised in intricate and lengthy legislative papers. He was much thinner than me and I thought that perhaps he might need the food or company.

At our last meeting, Louise said to me, "Don't try and steal this story from me. You have a vindictive side to you that I didn't notice at first. I should've never trusted you with this courageous tale. You probably would have ruined the story anyway. You probably would have given it a miserable ending."

I promised not to steal the idea. It seemed like a ridiculous thing to say. "I'm not a writer," I said. "I'm an engineer. Besides, I wouldn't know where to start."



DOT THOMAS has lived an adventurous life. At the age of twelve she decided that she wanted to be an explorer. She admits that at the time, she did not know what such an occupation entailed. She has subsequently traveled to over 100 countries, including Libya, Papua New Guinea, Estonia and Mongolia. Her book *What I Have Not Seen* (Horizon, 1992) details some of her misadventures. Presently, she is recovering from a broken foot, but is hoping to return to her explorations soon.

“What is realism? I offer contradictory answers: it is what we see, what we don’t see, it is how we see, how we fail to see. It is seeing; it is blindness. In writing, I grope. I make realism with my hands. I am insatiable in my reach.”

I WAS SITTING IN MY CHAIR when I got the feeling that I was going to die. It was not the sort of premonition that came with startling and ominous visual details. It was rather like a melodic lullaby that gently subdues a tired infant.

At the time, I was sitting in the communal garden. In front of me was a young lady hanging out her laundry. I was admiring her heavily pregnant figure and the skill with which she managed the arduous task. This sight took me then to thinking of my days as a midwife. As often happened to me, I thought firstly of the tragedies I had encountered. I once helped deliver a still-born child with the thickest head of hair I had ever seen. I laid the infant on her mother's breast and she ran her thumb lovingly through the sticky black tuft.

It was a devastatingly sad moment. I was only twenty-three years of age. I remember looking at the dead child and thinking of my own childhood and teenage years. It made me think of all the good and bad things that this unfortunate child would never experience.

One particular, unfortunate memory that came to me then was of standing in front of the junior school principal. I had entered an empty classroom at lunch; for this act of disobedience I was to receive three strokes with the handle of a feather duster. I stuck out my palm and looked down at my shoes. "You'll soon want to forget being a wayward child," said the principal.

Looking down at my black shoes, I remembered how I had worn the same shoes to my parent's wedding a year prior. It was my mother's second marriage. I was only four years of age. I remember thinking that it was odd to have worn my school shoes when I was not at school.

My parents recited their wedding vows. I held the wedding rings. I didn't understand what all the fuss was about. At this moment, I remember thinking of my earliest memory. It was nothing more than a series of feelings; sensations that were so

subtle, I then, and now, easily mistake them as fabrications. Shadows cast on strung sheets; coloured pegs on tussled grass; unmelodious bellowing; the feel of rough, yet dexterous hands—the very first hands that held me, that showed me that in feeling and movement we define the world, carve an existence in this pliable life.

I held the baby in my hands. I knew that I was going to die. I wasn't scared. I knew that this lucky child would live to see many years. There will be nothing as frightening as our own moment of birth. It is the single trauma that forges within us all a common tongue; the first scream does the work of the yet cumbersome limbs, reaching every perceivable space, marking every unperceivable atom with signs of presence.

If I am now capable of remembering all my memories clearly and able to perceive no difference between the newborn and my dying self, it is only because we are all alike, share the same existence, but differ only in the order of our days.



RUSSEL ELLISON served as adjunct professor of Letters at SNU (Broadbeach). He has managed to combine his academic endeavours with a devout interest in balsa wood creations. Since 1981 he has been re-casting the *Tales from the 1001 Arabian Nights* in balsa. In 1992 he exhibited a selection of 400 of these works. ‘The Thief of Baghdad’, perhaps his most prized work, occupied an entire gymnasium.

“A long time ago, I made a promise to someone I loved to tell them a long story. When the time came, I could not think of anything; not a single idea or character came to mind. I failed. The opportunity was squandered. I am now impelled to continue writing.”

ADEL WAS REPLACING A WHEEL from an old station wagon when the phone rang. “You will not believe me,” said his wife, Leena. “But this morning, I saw our son, Arturo.” Adel was silent. “How can that be?” He said. “I saw him,” she replied. “I saw him clearly. I saw his face; his sweet eyes, his lips. I saw him Adel.”

The sound of his son’s name was enough to make Adel weep. She uttered his name with such ease and joy. He wanted to draw his hands across his eyes, but they were covered in grease. “Arturo is dead Leena,” he said. “I know,” she replied. “But he appeared to me this morning in a bed sheet. I saw him. I felt him. I held him in my hands again.”

For the rest of the day, Adel was unable to work. The afternoon light cut through the corrugated roof like blades. He sat alone in his workshop. Everything reminded him of death; the station wagon, raised two metres off the floor, seemed as if it were dismally caught somewhere between this earth and the heavens.

Adel was fixated blankly on his hands when he heard his name called. “Are you Adel?” asked the boy. “Yes,” said Adel without looking away from his hands. “My name is Saad,” said the boy. “And I am here about the job.” Adel raised his eyes. The boy was no older than twelve. He wore a simple shirt and old shorts. His legs were thin and his knees were scathed and dirty. “Did you come here because you want to work, or because your parents want you to work?” he asked.

“I want to work,” replied the boy. “My parents told me that I need to work. I like cars.”

“Have you ever done anything bad with your hands Saad?”

“What do you mean?”

“Have you ever done anything that you shouldn’t have done?”

“Sure,” said the boy. “I threw some stones at a window once. I wanted to break the glass. I didn’t know there were horses on the other side. I got into a lot of trouble for that.”

“You’re honest,” said Adel. “That’s good. If you’ve done anything else, then tell me now. I can pick a liar. I have a skill. One day I will be in town and I’ll hear the engine of a car and I’ll say, Saad fixed that car. It’s unmistakable. It sounds as if it is filled with guilt.”

“I spat on my sister once.”

“Why did you do that?”

“Because she said that I was stupid. It made me feel worse and I had to say sorry a hundred times. Do you know how long it takes to say sorry a hundred times?”

“Yes,” said Adel.

It was the way the boy stood, with his hands by his side, his shoulders slumped, his feet not quite flat on the ground. It was the way that he was dressed; a child’s shirt with a cheap imprint, tiny shorts with useless pockets, mismatched athletic socks, hand-me-down shoes. It was that he was a boy, nothing more than a child; a kid too young for the rigours of work. It was that he was a boy; any boy, but his. He looked at his hands again and was lost in thought.

A year had passed since his son’s death. Adel and Arturo had been working late. After closing the workshop, they had gone for dinner at a local restaurant. It was nearing ten o’clock; the restaurant was very busy. Adel was tired; his son, only thirteen, was loud and restless. In a moment of anger, Adel had said, “Why don’t you shut-up for a moment and give me some peace?” Arturo did not have the chance to cry. An explosion tore through the entire restaurant.

Adel could not remember how he managed to make it outside. He collapsed half a block down the street. He did not realise that he had been carrying his son. His weight crushed the already dead child. He began to wail, cursing his bloodied hands. He did not stop screaming until a merchant from a nearby stall approached him and put a white sheet over his son’s body.



He had not been able to forget his cruel words. Neither had he been able to rid himself of the white sheet. Later, when the blood had dried, he folded the sheet and placed it in the far corner of an old wardrobe.

“Are you alright?” asked Saad. The workshop was filled with sunlight. Adel saw that Saad had a small cut on his cheek and a yellowed bruise under his left eye.

“Do you know that just now,” said Adel, “you could’ve been an apparition?”

The boy was silent. Then he said, “I need to go to the toilet.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. Then he stood up and laughed. He walked beneath the raised station wagon; its battered frame and old wheels would need a lot of work. He wiped his hands clean on his overalls. Then finally he turned to Saad and said, “We will need to get you some new clothes if you are to start tomorrow.”



OLIVER GRAVES is the author of eight books of fiction. He has been the recipient of numerous fellowships and awards. His novel *The Furnace* (Sickle, 1998) appeared in *Trend Magazine*'s list of 'Twenty Books you Should Know' (January, 1999). He enjoys keeping fish, mainly because "fish don't speak".

"People are fickle; they lose interest so quickly. I don't know if the term 'classic' will survive for much longer. Why would a child want to read *The Iliad* when they can turn on the news or watch a ninety minute action film? Books should come with popcorn. At least we would then know if anyone was actually reading, because the pages would be stained with oily fingerprints."

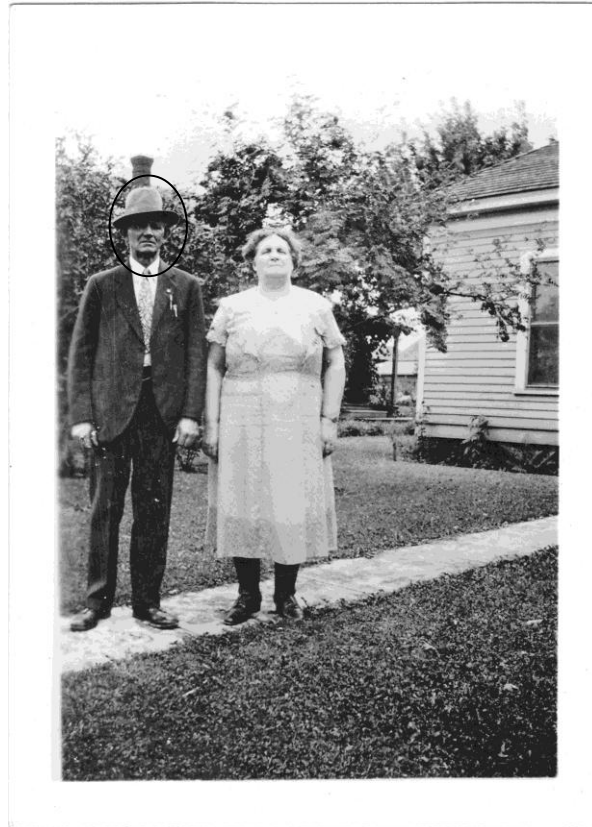
I HAVE TO STAY STILL. If they notice any slight movement on my part, then the entire machine will be prompted into motion. Although I at first appreciated the great convenience the machine offered and held the highest respect for the many diligent engineers and clerical staff employed to manage the intricate buttons, levers and computing systems, I am of late beginning to tire of the outlandish ends to which the machine engages even for the slightest of my actions (I avoid saying demands, for often I request nothing at all. Only moving a finger, say to scratch my temple, is enough to send the loyal staff into a flurry of action and the machine groans robotically, cylinders are activated, lights begin to flash and printers begin to regurgitate reams of data. Certainly, scratching an itch, when one is both capable and willing to do it oneself, can't be classified as a demand. Nor does such an action require such excessive responses). Even though I find all the effort outlandish, as I have said, or stupefying, or farcical, I can't afford to emit even a sigh. Even the slightest quiver of my lips, a sudden determinable palpitation of my heart, a rise of even a half degree in bodily temperature is enough to trigger the machine into believing that it is needed. Nothing slips its observing eye (and here, I say eye, as if it were human. But it is not human, it is only a machine and I perhaps humanize its polished steel frame and colourful electrodes only because the machine has dutifully watched over me like a loyal friend or lover would watch over a sick one, never leaving their bedside. Having said this I am not sick. I am very healthy. I believe that I could run a good distance, keep up with a person even half my age. But running, under these circumstances, although possible, would be incredibly difficult.) That is, if I say that nothing slips its discerning eye, then what I really mean is that there are so many observational tools attached to my body that no change whatsoever goes unnoticed. Once the machine is activated—even on account of an itch or a sigh—all the affable workers in my room apply themselves to their designated tasks with great zeal and

doggedness (it is still quite impressive). It would be possible, but incredibly difficult, to upend or halt the machine's progress and would involve both verbal and written apologies on my part, which would then be followed by numerous clerical apologies, inquiries and possible rectifications of the machine's core engine. In short, one of these cheerful public servants might lose their job just because I had an itch and didn't allow the machine and its workers to carry out their assigned duties (I don't want anyone to lose their job. I willingly offered myself as a subject to this machine. Everyone has been exceptionally cheerful). Over time I have made various—worthwhile or not—observations regarding the nature of the machine (it seems odd for me to suggest that I observe the machine, when the machine and its workers exist solely to serve and observe me). There is an empty computer tower at the end of the bed, about the size of a wardrobe. I believe that this metallic house will one day hold any future upgrades or modifications. But as to the nature of these upgrades, I don't know (I never fancied myself as being technologically savvy and even when I volunteered for this position, and the nature of the machine was explained to me in layman terms, I did not have a complete understanding of what I was engaging in). I do however fancy the writings of certain pulp science fiction writers and if I were to make a somewhat fantastical deduction, I would say that the empty computer tower at the end of my bed will one day hold the rudimentary framework (processing chips and wires) that will provide me with immortality. This is not to say that I have grandiose beliefs that I somehow deserve immortality; simply put, the machine has certain definable key objectives, and one of them seems to be the prolongation of my health and life. Another key objective of the machine is to make my life easier and to this accord, it has been labelled by its chief engineers as The Leisure Machine. There is nothing that I do that is not subject to the assistance of the machine. Further, there is nothing in the world that is not coordinated by—in part or totally—or connectable to the mechanisms of the machine. Though I can only be partially certain of this (I have no way of knowing whether a fisherman in Newfoundland is somehow subject to my reclusive contemplations; that is, I don't know whether the bat of my eyelids can force him to cast his net in a particular direction. It may sound ridiculous, but it can't be ruled out altogether). All the effort involved in meeting my every need has made my life excruciatingly

laborious. I can't, as I have said, bat an eyelid without two silver pincers, each with a tufted cotton end, reaching swiftly for my eyelids. I believe the origin of the machine to be Russian, although I could be wrong (I have never been a worldly sort of person). Needless to say, the craftsmanship of the machine is of a superior grade and therefore any mishaps or falsely registered starts result in the summoning of specialist technicians from abroad, each having devoted their entire careers to a small segment of the machine. Any sort of major or minor overhaul or refurbishment makes my existence unbearable. I don't mean to sound discourteous or ungrateful, but to be surrounded by dozens of specialists with whom I can't share a word (namely because I can't speak Russian—if that is indeed what they are speaking—and also because speaking would trigger the machine), nor with whom I share a speck of common interest, save for the nature of the machine whose workings are in large part beyond my intellectual capabilities, is a nightmare for me. Where at first I saw myself as an enthusiastic citizen, full of pride and positivity, I now perceive myself as something like the chimpanzee in the cage (the scientist is interested in the chimpanzee and not in what the chimpanzee has to say about the cage in which it is kept). The engineers and clerical staff looked upon me with gratitude and reverence. At first it was incredibly attractive and flattering. I now find all forms of devotion repellent. I did not earn this position; rather, I resigned my own life into their hands (here, I would mimic the sound of a chimpanzee if only I did not fear tripping the machine). But, in truth, I am worse than a chimpanzee, because a chimpanzee has no choice in their fate; they are subjugated to the curious cruelty of scientists. I made my choice out of boredom and the need for attention. I would demand everyone out of the room and turn off the entire machine if it were indeed possible. But perhaps it is possible and I just don't want to offend all of the hard-working staff that have been so nice to me. Even if I did question aloud the depression I sometimes experience, I have no doubt that the engineers would try to pin my emotional instability or dissatisfaction to an intricate segment in the machine; as if, for instance, my inability to enjoy a walk alone any longer could be pinpointed to a genetic trait of introversion or retardation, which in turn could be remedied by replacing all of the fuses in segment DX-14-YP (Here I am speaking as if I were a Russian expert, but I am no such thing. I am not even sure if segment DX-14-

YP exists, as I cannot read any of the writing on the machine). Over the years, I have learnt that there is nothing that can't be resolved, no complex or dire matter that a group of specialists can't attend to—all matters both urgent and trivial are inconsequential. I proceed not because I will myself to go on, but because procession is the only impulse this machine knows; and again, please don't think that I am being ungrateful, for in certain ways, the machine has made my life more efficient (I no longer need to tie my shoelaces). The machine has also allowed me to forge a purpose in life that stretches far beyond my egocentric self (I squandered so much time in my prior life. Just now, I say prior life, as if an ordinary human like me were chosen to live two separate lives. No. I have only one life; a life that was truncated by my decision to offer myself to the workings of the machine). I believe that I have been a good subject for the engineers, because I have never complained, nor have I ever threatened to abandon the project. I even offered my complete cooperation when several publicists associated with the early development of the machine suggested I appear on a morning talk show broadcast in Tokyo (needless to say the entire idea was a disaster. Not only did I not speak Japanese or hold a valid passport, but the nature of the machine was so complex and time consuming that in the span of a day, I only managed to put on my pants and my shoes. The plan was postponed and that was the last I heard of it). For the last few months I have laid in bed with my eyes shut pretending to be asleep. Occasionally I will let the pincers open my eyes and I will see the vast machine, made of such high grade steel, and its many dedicated attendants waiting patiently for me to do something, anything at all. I do not know exactly what distinguishes a catatonic state from a meditative one, but my stillness is quite peaceful. My failure to engage with anything, even my own bodily needs, is a great respite. Last month I was visited by a select group of Polish engineers—at least, I believe they were Polish. They attached a metallic arm to the machine, which can freely coil and extend. At the end of the thin arm is a sharp, clean blade about eight inches long. It is curved in the exact manner as my throat. There is no reason to fear this instrument, because the machine exists solely to serve my needs. I understand the purpose of this instrument, but not the reasoning behind its installation (did they install it out of sympathy to my motionless existence? Or, had they simply become bored of me—thought me indolent and

unresponsive—and thus sought to bring a conclusion to this particular experiment?) All I know is that ever since I stopped performing any actions, the printers have remained quiet. Where once it used to take three young employees several trips to deliver the data printed each day, now there is nothing. I am a useless subject and my existence will cost someone their job. In order to be needed, one must be useful; I mustn't be needed. All that I have to do is open my eyes and say, 'the end. No more', or simply, 'no more', or perhaps just, 'no' (I am sure that the machine will correctly interpret the inflection in my voice). Then the blade with great skill will swiftly obey my command. But I will not have it end this way (I am not ungrateful though). I open my eyes. I gaze out the window. I focus on the furthest star that I can see. Just by looking at that star, I am giving them great work in order to make it glimmer just for me.



P.J. HALL spent his youth picking seasonal fruit. It was this experience that led him to establish *Seedling*, a journal of writing that reflects the season of publication. He edited the journal until 1999. His novels include *Black hands* (Vertigo, 1991) and *Pink Ladies* (Vertigo, 1994). He still maintains a large fruit orchard and provides surplus food to various shelters.

“The characters should speak for themselves, and the writer, should not be afraid to be led. But what exactly does this mean, that the characters are somehow more real than the writer? I have often felt that a character has dragged me across the page by a chain fastened around my neck. Is this why all of my writing sounds like a variation on the prison song?”



SOME MEN CAME BEFORE SUNRISE to find a good corner on which to stand and wait. By eight a.m., when men and women walked by in suits rushing for the morning train or bus, the corners were crowded.

There were some women too. But they stood separate from the men.

Most of the jobs offered to women were in factories where they carried out simple electrical tasks like assembling sockets, or in warehouses where they undertook rudimentary sewing jobs. In winter, most of the women hoped that they would be offered a week or more of work in the heat of a laundering or baking factory. It was almost never the case. The jobs for women were menial and paid badly, while those for men were labour intensive and paid no better.

Some days there was no work. Not a single truck or car halted. On these days, when there was no work and no food, the desperation on people's faces was easy to see. They would take anything offered; even working in the refrigerated rooms of a meat-packing factory was a relief from the winter cold.

Enrique stood on the corner. In the past he had worked a number of different jobs. Last summer he spent three weeks in a bagel factory. The heat was incredible. He stood in a factory line beside Pakistani and Indian immigrants, all of them sweating in the relentless heat, packing poppy-seed bagels into plastic bags destined for retail stores.

No matter how lethargic the heat made him, Enrique was not able to stop working. The packing machine never tired. It didn't feel the heat. The conveyor belt moved in a continuous and rapid pace.

Enrique had cleaned toilets in small hotels, helped build extensions on old houses and delivered shopping pamphlets. Once, he had spent an entire day feeding old tyres into a blazing mountain of fire.

This morning he had had no such luck. There was no work. It was approaching evening and he thought about going home. He hated returning home having not worked or earned any money. He hated to know that a full day had been cheated from him, a day when he was not sick, when he was willing. He felt as if they were not just cheating him, but his family also.

As Enrique was about to go home, a car pulled up in front of him. The car was an old station wagon. It was dark brown and heavily rusted. The tyres were worn.

The driver was a thin old white man, who clutched onto the rigid steering wheel as if it were an elaborate walker. "Are you looking for some work?" asked the man.

Enrique would not have got into the car, were it not for the five men who sat uncomfortably in the back. "Get in, please," said a man in the back seat.

"Yes, jump in," said another.

"He said he needs six men. Please come with us. There are only five of us in here."

"What's the job?" asked Enrique.

"Please. I haven't worked all week. Does it matter to you?"

Enrique got inside the car.

The man drove for a long while. They soon left the city limits. The land was sparse and dry. The houses seemed old. The farmlands abandoned.

No one spoke during the entire drive.

The car then turned into a driveway shrouded in part by overgrown shrub and then continued until it reached a timber cottage in front of which was parked a funeral hearse. The man pulled up beside the hearse. Everyone got out of the car. No one complained or enquired about what they saw.

He stood the six men in a single line. It was dark and hot. "My name is Daniel," he said. "What I need you to do for me today should only take you an hour. But I will pay you each an entire day's wage. Then I will offer you a ride back into the city. It isn't pleasant work and in truth, I only need four of you, so if one or two of you do not want to work, I understand."

The men continued to stand in line. They straightened their backs, lifted their chins. "Come along", said Daniel. And all the others followed.

The cottage was small. It was full of rubbish. Piles of newspapers, scraps of food, discarded soft drink bottles, old candy wrappers, torn clothes and old furniture made it almost inaccessible.

There was a rancid smell that made some of the workers stop and gag. Daniel led them through the house. He moved swiftly and the others struggled to keep pace. As they drew closer to the final room, one of the men vomited.

Enrique knew the cause of the smell immediately. He looked at Daniel. "I need the help of all six of you," said Daniel. "I am willing to double your pay."

"What is it that you need us to do?"

"I need you to move my wife's body from the bed on which she died onto the hearse outside," replied Daniel.

"You don't need six men for that job."

"Why did you bring us here?"

"Don't you know we have families?"

"You need the work and I need the help," said Daniel.

"But you don't need six of us."

"I need all of you."

Then Daniel opened the bedroom door. Lying on the bed was a woman. Her body was so large that her head slumped off the edge.

When they saw the body, most of the workers swore aloud. Daniel could not look at the men. Enrique thought the man was fighting back tears.

"What are we supposed to do? How are we supposed to move her?"

"Let's just do it."

"How?"

"You, you and you stand on one side and the rest of us will stand on the other."

"He doesn't want to even help us."

"Leave him alone. It's his wife."

"He should help us."

"Let's just do this."

The workers walked around the body. They each grabbed a part of her. Enrique's hands were clasped to the back of her head. His hands were full of dark, greasy ringlets.

The men counted to three and then lifted her body.

It took great effort to move her. When they came to the door, they had to stand her so that she would pass through the frame. Her naked body was stuck with splinters.

The hearse took the full weight of the body and then sank into the dry soil.

When they finished the work, one of the men said, "Where is Daniel? Do you think he's run away?"

"He's run away."

"Why would he run away?"

"I've been cheated many times before."

"So have I."

"He wouldn't run away. Why would he run away?"

The men returned into the house and into the bedroom. Daniel was lying on the bed, curled like an infant. The body of his wife had left a dark wet mark. Daniel lay there silently in that shadow.



KARL F. BERGER was a member of ‘The Furious Five’, a group dedicated to activism through the arts. He has published widely in the area of social engagement, particularly its relation to literature and photography. His book *The Last Word* (Alpha Press, 1991) details the subsequent dissolution of his group. His work *Congratulations: The Photography of Manuel Alvarez Bravo* (Dark Room, 1997) won the Index Award for Critical Speech in 1998.

“I have never had writer’s block. I have never found it difficult to write. One doesn’t have to be imprisoned or maltreated to gain an impetus to write. There is more than sufficient material in the world. Have you ever been happy? There is a good beginning for you. Now tell me why this feeling ceased.”

THE COMMITTED MAN IS ASLEEP. But we allow him this. In the evening, when a cool change arrives from the sea, we cover his body with a blanket. He is still and quiet. His hands are formed as if in prayer beneath his temple, offering him comfort from the hard pavement on which he rests.

He has been asleep for many years. During the long summers, there are several attendants whose job it is to care for the well being of The Committed Man. They follow the trajectory of the sun, making sure that The Committed Man receives sufficient exposure. They shift his dozing body into the shade during the hottest hours.

Today, he is sleeping at the feet of an *unrealized* statue. I say *unrealized*, because the artist who was commissioned for the work promised a colossal figure: a marble depiction of Atlas captured in an agonising pose with the enormity of the world on his shoulders. According to the imagination of this artist, not even the tallest building would be able to meet Atlas' downcast, enduring gaze.

What in fact resulted was a partially exorcised figure from a gigantic piece of marble that had been incredibly difficult and costly to source. To this day, one can see the half-finished rounded shoulders, the back almost breaking under the weight of an imperfect sphere—there is something deeply unsettling about seeing a man, not completely formed, yet distinguishable, forever trapped in the veined marble.

No one has ever seen The Committed Man awake. No one has ever spoken to him either. We know that he is asleep and not dead, because one is easily able to see his chest rising and falling as he breathes. How he became The Committed Man and not simply The Man Who Is Perpetually Asleep is complex. It is suffice to say that the only discernable reason that someone would sleep so much is if they were dreaming of an action large and revolutionary enough to make or share when they woke.

Over the years The Committed Man has become something of a point of reverence. People come to visit him from all parts of the world. This has offered a

lucrative income to some entrepreneurial locals who have skilfully manufactured t-shirts, banners and other merchandise bearing The Committed Man's sleeping image. The tourists often kneel beside The Committed Man's body, taking pictures of this serene individual and also discussing among themselves the possible and wondrous things that will eventuate when The Committed Man wakes.

In response to the increasing influx of tourists, the government has permanently stationed three guards beside The Committed Man. Their duty is to make sure that he is allowed to sleep undisturbed.

He must not be woken. His thoughts must be allowed to derive their fruition naturally. But what if he is not thinking of a revolutionary or socially beneficial act? What if he is thinking about the colour of a pencil or something just as trivial? What if he were thinking of us and hoping that one of us would wake him from his prolonged sleep with a wayward hand or a jovial scream?

These are some of the varying philosophical thoughts that cross our minds each day. We believe that The Committed Man is devoted to our betterment. In turn, we are dutifully bound to his period of undisturbed sleep. But until we find a definitive answer to such philosophical queries as stated, doctors, such as myself, will continue to feed sleeping agents into his blood stream.



SHELLEY MATHIS began her career as a nurse. After completing studies in psychology, she joined the staff of *REcoverY*, a journal and medical facility that helped treat victims of torture, abuse and post-traumatic stress disorder. In this journal, she published numerous stories, essays and research articles. In 1998 she was awarded the Blevins-Jarvis Certificate of Appreciation. Presently, she works as a school bus driver.

“A writer can be equipped with no better tool than empathy. One must write with an empathic heart, indeed with their chest lifted, their eyes wet with tears, their face grotesque from agony. In turn, a writer needs someone to put a hand on their shoulder, to tell them that they have grieved enough, that they should now lead with a clear and stable mind.”



A GRIEVING WIDOW WAS TOLD by a genie that if he wanted to regain his wife from the realm of death, he would have to endure great suffering.

“What do you miss about your wife?” asked the genie.

“I miss the way that her body felt when we lay next to each other in bed,” replied the man.

“If that is all that you miss, then I can grant you that longing for a thousand lashes of the whip.”

“No. I miss a near infinite amount of things.”

“Then, you will have to endure great suffering.”

At first the man was afflicted by a relentless flu that left him bedridden for two months. His fatigue and inability to move his aching limbs caused bed sores to fester over his entire body. No matter how many different ointments he put on these sores, they never completely healed and caused him continuous pain.

When he finally regained his health and managed to go for a short walk outside, he was mauled by a pack of wild dogs. It was surprising that this vicious attack did not claim his life.

At night he thought of his wife and how much he missed her. No matter how much he suffered, he thought, it would never equate to the pain he felt from her absence.

One night, as he was battling a bout of pneumonia, his house was robbed. The thieves not only stole all of his belongings, they also took joy in beating this defenceless man near to death. Then they set the house on fire.

A close friend of the man, to whom he had confided his struggles, said, “Why don’t you let the dead rest? You are an old man. You will die soon enough. Persevere through your melancholy. Then, God willing, you will share in blissful eternity with your beautiful wife.”

But the man had great fortitude and a resolute will. He wanted to see his wife more than anything else.

One morning he awoke and realised that over night he had aged twenty-five years. His body was afflicted with arthritis and his eyesight failed him. Without a home, he had taken to living in a boarding house frequented by prostitutes and criminals. In such acute pain and misery, he thought for the first time that perhaps the genie had lied to him. He felt sure that death was close.

Then just as he was nearing sleep, he felt a naked body slip into bed beside him. Being blind, he clutched onto the figure, running his old hands across the flesh, trying to find in its form the identity of his wife.

“It’s you my dear,” he said.

“It is me,” she said. “I will always love you.”

“But why have you come to me now, when I am so close to death? I am sure to die tonight. I have suffered so much.”

“You were told by the caring genie that in order to regain me from the realm of death you would have to endure great suffering. You have suffered more than most people. Now you must endure death. Close your eyes. Give yourself to death. And when you next wake, I will be beside you, having visited the same genie, having endured the same suffering. Then we will go on sharing these brief moments before death.”



DONALD WYNN-LEWIS is an artist and writer. He gained notoriety in 1988 when he drove his burning car into parliament house. He said at the time: “No one was paying any attention to me. I wanted to renounce my citizenship. No one wanted to accept my official forms. Man is not free.” He subsequently spent a decade in a mental health institution. He has won numerous prizes for his portraiture work. His novel *A Window to Scream From* (Vantage, 1998) details his experiences.

“The world is grotesque. It repulses me. I write out of disgust with the world, out of abhorrence with myself. My writing seems so simple, so pure and beautiful. It makes me sick.”

I WOKE TO FIND MYSELF BOUND TO A BED. I was told that a girl had been found hurt. They asked me if I had relations with this girl. I tried to free my hands. It was impossible.

“Do you have any recollections of the crime?”

I didn’t know what they were talking about.

“How well did you know Jennifer?”

I had no idea who Jennifer was. Yet, if I closed my eyes and thought carefully, I could imagine a girl, any girl, named Jennifer. It was possible. Further, if I let my imagination run loose a little, I could imagine someone as insignificant as myself having an amicable relationship with this particular girl named Jennifer.

It was an easy thing to do. Jennifer and I walking with our hands clasped on a boardwalk. Jennifer and I laughing over a joke that the two of us alone understood. Jennifer crying over yet another one of my thoughtless stupidities.

“Don’t worry,” they said. “We were hoping that you would have some information to share, but it doesn’t matter.”

It was too late. I felt terrible. Not only had I upset Jennifer, but I had also struck her. I closed my eyes. She sat at the edge of the bed with her back to me. I snuck up behind her and hit her on the back of the head with a wooden lamp.

Then I went to the bathroom and started running the water in the bath. The forceful rush of water made it difficult to hear her weeping.

“I did it,” I said. “And if I did it, then I certainly deserve the most severe punishment.” But, by this time, everyone was gone.

After a few days, I was allowed to walk freely in the yard with the others. Such a strange lot. Everyone wearing the same clothes. Everyone walking around as if they had misplaced their car keys. Yet, not a single automobile in sight.

I met Jerry in the yard. "I don't like to speak," he warned me. "Because every word I say chips away at my face. If I say too much then I won't be able to see. I won't be able to watch television or find the remote control."

What a terrible affliction, I thought. I closed my eyes and saw poor Jerry without a face, or even a head. Then I saw all of his despondent relatives visiting him on Thursday afternoons, unsure of where to place their goodbye kisses.

I told Jerry about Jennifer. He was deeply interested. He said, "I would like to meet a girl named Jennifer. We could have matching bathrobes that said, *J & J*."

"We could swap shoes. I could wear two lefts and she two rights. I would like to be loved by a girl named Jennifer. But I'm afraid that I would probably hurt her too."

After four months I was released. It was explained to me that Jennifer would not take any further action against me. This made me feel worse.

"I did not hurt Jennifer," I said. "I would cut off my hands before I hurt her."

They looked at each other. It seemed as if they thought it grievous enough of an assurance. Jennifer is in safe hands, even if her lover has no hands. What a committed partner!

As I returned to my apartment, a strange and clever thought crossed my mind. If I squinted my eyes a little, then the spiral staircase that led all the way to my apartment appeared like an old book after someone had twisted its spine. I got on my knees and started to look for any writing on the stone treads. It was imperceptible.

When I opened my apartment door, I smelt a scent that was distinctively feminine. It was perfume or apples.

I took a few further steps inside and saw her sitting at the edge of the bed with her back to me. I saw the ridges of her spine. There was a beginning and an end to her spine. But which was which?

I remember reading books as a child and being unable to hold out from reading the last page first. I looked at her spine and all I wanted to do was to twist that book, so that the last page was the first and the first was the last.

I jumped on her. I pounced. I did it.

I must have then lost consciousness. I can hardly remember anything else. I awoke at the hospital bound to the bed.

“Do you have any recollections of the crime?”

“No,” I said.

“Don’t worry. We were hoping that you would have some information to share, but it doesn’t matter.”

“Wait,” I said as they exited the room. “I would like to meet a girl named Jennifer. I would like to be loved. But I’m afraid that I would probably hurt her.”

And having said this, they then left the room.



CYNTHIA WARNER was a journalist for *The International Record*. From 1985 to 1997 she covered conflicts throughout the world. In 1998 she was attacked by an assailant outside her apartment. Presently, she works as a part-time high school teacher.

“Writing is often very difficult. I will spend an entire week struggling over an idea. But then—and this is the inexplicable part of the craft—a stream of confidence and creativity will overwhelm me and I will accomplish a great deal. But it is fool’s gold; most of this work will be discarded. Think of the canary that struggles for breath in the darkness of a mine. Does she not struggle too when she is first brought back above ground, when the surplus of air rushes into her tiny lungs? What is needed is an even temperament.”

THE BOMBS STRUCK AT NIGHT. From her balcony she could see a building ablaze. Not all the bombs hit with speed; some lingered in the sky, falling on the city like lit thistle down.

“We have to go W.,” said Hana. “We have to get somewhere safe.”

But W. didn’t respond. She stared at the television. The news camera was fixed on the city skyline. “Come on W. We might not have another chance.” But again, W. was unresponsive.

The next morning a soldier saw her walking among the rubble. She carried a bag of oranges. “What’s your name?” he asked. She looked at him and said, “W.”

“W. is not a name?”

“It isn’t?”

“No.”

In the camp they gave her tea and bread. She sat alone. The other ladies, some her age, looked at her with suspicion. She seemed profoundly displaced and confused.

A doctor examined her. “Is she dead?” asked an old lady.

“How can she be dead?” replied the doctor.

“She hasn’t said a word.”

“Maybe she doesn’t find you interesting.”

Then one night, W. woke an old lady who slept beside her. “Where are the lions?” she screamed. “Where are the lions?”

“What lions? Are you out of your mind?”

“After the bombs, everyone was gone. There was no one. I was the last widow. The city was full of lions. They paraded themselves so proudly. They climbed the faces of ruined buildings as if they were trees. They attacked cars as if they were game. They knocked on doors. They fooled everyone with their human voices.”

“You’re out of your mind. I’m a widow too. You’re not the last of our kind.”



“I looked up at the sky and saw lions falling. The night was full of howls. Leave us, I yelled from my balcony, leave us. Go and face the mirror, they said. Tell me that your hair is not made from our mane. The next morning I collected some of their heads.”

“Those are not lion skulls,” said the lady. “They are oranges. I think you need some rest.”

The following day there was news of further bombings. The doctor did his rounds. He was approached by a lady. “Doctor,” she said. “Is it possible for someone to believe that they are alive, to go on with daily things as if they were indeed alive, but to be dead?”

“No,” said the doctor.

“What about the white tunnel that everyone speaks about when they return from death?”

“No one returns from death. You are either alive or you are dead.”

“Am I alive doctor?”

“Yes.”

“But how do you truly know?”

“When I say that you are old, very old, do you find me rude?”

“Yes.”

“That is a good sign. The need for cordiality is a vital register of living, human life.”

The doctor continued on his rounds. He found W. dead. She lay in bed with her arms awkwardly raised, as if she were fending off something.

They could not bury her that day because of the continuous bombing. When they did intern her, no one but the doctor attended.

For a long while there was a rumour in the camp that on the night of her burial a lion had sat on top of the strange woman’s grave. It was said that the lion had not been guarding the woman’s plot, but claiming ownership of it. A soldier had eventually scared it away with a single gunshot, a threat or a moment of disbelief.



REBECCA LEBLANC has published 18 volumes of poetry. Her first poem ‘Tell me So’ won the White Leaf Journal Poetry Prize. She says, “I was only ten years of age and not really eligible to enter. Winning came as a surprise. I didn’t know what to do with the \$75 I was awarded.” All of her books have been published by Birch Poetry Press.

“Reading can be monotonous. Often I will, out of boredom, skip a page or two. The turning of a page mimics the movement of the rocking chair, the repetitive lullaby used to quiet a child. I have to find words that stir people awake. I am the cruellest of nannies, willing the child asleep with one hand and shaking them awake with the other.”

IT IS TIME WE TELL SOMEONE that Bertha is dead. For how long have we come to her cot thinking that she has called for us? How many nights have I woken abruptly, stood in the dark, lost, and thought it her cries that had stirred me?

Each morning you send me out for bread and milk while you nurse her. I can no longer bear to see her wrapped in her infant cotton sheets, each day receding further. Her lips are blue and black. Her eyes are as tiny as dark bugs. There is no longer any suck in her lips, no air in the day and no pull in the hours.

I hand the shop owner a few dollars. I am sure that he must see the death in my eyes. Two chocolate bars for four dollars, he says. I am not interested. Two dozen eggs at half price. Just the bread and milk. Eggs are versatile. Chocolate for the children. I cannot understand this life.

I dreamt of God, you tell me. I asked him his true name and he said, I WAS, and it scared me. How far must God walk before we know that he has left us? Is there a child behind him, hiding in his inconceivable shadow, counting his paces? How far does a single pace span? How many universes must separate us before we feel without companionship?

Is not this universe enough? Is not the distance between the bed and the edge of the bed far enough? If God sat at the foot of the bed would this distance not be anguishing to you? You would want him nearer, closer than beside you, within you, indistinguishable from your own being. You would demand him close enough to know all your thoughts, to answer all your questions. You would say and do nothing. To think is to know loneliness.

I eat the chocolate bar. I eat because I must eat. I do not know what I will do with the eggs. The milk will go in the refrigerator and the bread in the breadbox.

Today I might clean the house, so that we might talk again of Bertha. At night we sleep but find only moments of rest. I dream. You ask me if she dreams. I hear the

sound of passing cars through the night. She may dream. I dream. The car lights might wake me. They will not wake her.

Everything I touch goes to hell. We mustn't think like that. We have no choice but to touch things, to keep on feeling our way. And if things break? Things will break. We will make mistakes. But we will better them. We will learn. How far above us are the heavens? Does God miss the touch of his mother's hand? How must it have felt to caress the cheek of God, to have let He who created the world, nurse on her breast? Do the angels ever find their footing in the mist of the great empyrean? Do they break? Are they broken? Do they too learn?

Let's tell someone. No harm will come of it. I've loved too much. I've held her when I should have let her go. She has left us. She can't leave us. I have tucked her into her cot.



SAMUEL GREENBERG served as professor of Sociology at St. Mathew College. He has written extensively on the nature of workspaces. His book *Life in a Cubicle* (New Thought, 1992) was praised for both its critical zeal and accessibility. His short fiction has appeared in many publications. From 1989 to 1999 he was a key contributor to *The World We Occupy*, a journal of design and thought.

“I have always been amazed by the existence of language—this is not to say that I’m an expert in the field of linguistics. What has always surprised me is the fact that I can see something round and green, bite into it, taste its sweet flesh and then discern it to be an apple. There is no greater word than ‘apple’!”

RECENTLY I HAVE BEEN RECEIVING an inordinate amount of mail regarding forthcoming auctions. These invitations are designed with great care and formality. The latest one read:

Anderson & Co.  
62 & 41 Market Street  
The Sir Harold Walter Sinclair  
Collection  
Of  
Fine Works of Art  
Day of Sale  
Monday, November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2048  
at three-thirty p.m. precisely.

I haven't the disposition for auctions. I don't feel the need to accumulate any possessions, even if they are only of the cerebral kind.

The reformations by the present government have been experienced by all alike. *The Purging of Extraneousness Act (2040)* was vehemently debated in the parliamentary and public forum. Its application beyond objects to include certain peoples brought about the ratifications of 2042.

The government believed that the forbiddance of all things deemed unnecessary would rid the public of their consumerist behaviour, which they rightly believed to be detrimental.

2041 was known as the year of detoxification. It was a difficult period that served to show how remarkably adaptive and compliant people can be.

Although in the past I have found the conditions of my life severe, I have now grown accustomed to the strict level of austerity. I can no longer imagine the

constriction I must have felt in owning such superfluous household items. Thus, at my age, I can speak of the ‘distressing sofa chair’, the ‘agonising bookcase’, or the ‘untenable bed’.

The growth of auction houses in the absence of any physical goods represents the addictive persistence of consumerism in our lives. Auction houses bearing fictive names do not sell possessions, but rather the opportunity to own conceptions.

The bidding is as fierce as if the objects existed. Desire does not need to be driven by tangibility. It functions sufficiently on perception and agreeability alone.

I have been invited to many houses, each as bare as my own, at which time the owner has spent several hours proudly listing his invisible possessions to me.

The auctioneers have to be incredible salespeople. They can’t simply rely on clever lighting and the object itself. They must somehow summon a desire from the imperceptible.

Last month I visited an auction of fine works of art sold by Goldsmith & Worthchild. It was an illuminating experience.

I will recount, to the best of my abilities, the way in which Messrs. P. Kiddell and F. Rickett described one such artwork for sale:

Ladies and gentlemen, let me attract your attention for a moment. We are fortunate to have for sale today a major work by the artist Ricardo Bravo.

‘The Knight in the Chamber’ is grand in size, measuring 210 by 150 cm. It is a work of oil on canvas. It is signed and dated on the lower right.

Mr. Bravo was a prolific artist, a master of his craft, whose work never faltered in creativity or intensity. The ‘Ashen Period’, from which this particular work is drawn, represents a brief and unique artistic phase in which Mr. Bravo limited his palette primarily to crimsons, blues and blacks. These colours were then mixed with ash derived from palm leaves.

The faces of the subjects are bone white.

Ladies and gentlemen this is a unique opportunity to purchase a fine work of art by a renowned master.

Let us turn our attention to the details of the painting. Occupying the left lower side is a glass chamber. At the centre of the glass chamber is a bed with a white, ruffled sheet.

On top of the bed is a naked lady. She is attempting to masturbate, but is impeded by an iron chastity belt. Above her is a light and in the far corner of this glass room is a complete suit of armour.

On the right side of the artwork are a group of naked men. Around their necks are bound large keys. They are trying desperately to reach the door of the glass chamber.

There are many men, each in a state of complete arousal. Yet there is only one key that will open both the door and the chastity belt.

The thing that is stopping these men from reaching the lady is an enormous loadstone hanging from the ceiling. The magnetism of the stone pulls them towards its black mass. As you can see there are already many men pinned to the stone.

Each of the men believes that they alone hold the correct key.

No man is deterred by the pitiful attempts at self-pleasure made by the captive lady. They see the sexuality, but not the consequences of the contraption.

They fail to realise that if they were to open the glass door, the lady and the knight would be propelled onto the loadstone.

Instead, they choose to believe that they will free this lady and enjoy a single or many nights of sexual enjoyment. Further, they are driven to continue striving towards the chamber door by a sense of jealousy. Each man believes that within the suit of knightly armour there hides a fortunate individual.

This is a rare opportunity. I encourage you to bid accordingly. This artwork will happily grace the wall of all houses. It will offer you and your esteemed house guests hours of intriguing conversation.

The auction house was full. The bidding was furious. The auctioneer paced across the empty stage with skill. He moved his index finger wildly in the air, summoning great amounts from the eager crowd.



It was mainly men who bid. The women were saving their money for the jewellery.

As I walked home later that evening, I could not help but feel strangely buoyant. The government had effectively eradicated objects, but it had failed in nullifying the desire for things.

In order for its reformations to be complete, it would have to implement a far more rigorous purging. It would have to impose limitations on thought.

Eight years have passed since the grand reformation and the government has failed to find a consensus on what actually constitutes a 'needless' thing.

It may be a further eight years before they implement restrictions on how we are allowed to think.

Until then there will remain a single man in an empty room, who alone envisions an intangible world through the grill of a relic.



COLLETTE YATES has published works on genealogy. *Roots* (1992) and *Forefigure* (1994) were both published by Flying Crow Press. From 1991 to 1999 she served as resident lecturer at the Institute of Family History. Her memoir *When we Close our Eyes* (Flying Crow Press, 1996) detailed the tumultuous experiences that led her to develop a critical interest in genealogy.

“Who owns our memories? I like to believe that in writing I retain ownership of my history. I write how I wish to perceive my past. I have built a fortress around my discourses, to which I alone have the key. But who is not to say that I have built so many rooms, fortified my memories so firmly, that I will never again have access to them? Or worse, that the memories have evaded my stone walls, and that I unknowingly continue to live alone in this barren compound.”

## I

I AM WRITING OF MY EXPERIENCE so as to forewarn others of the troubles I encountered. My name is Paul and I am 43 years of age. I have been married to Sarah for 24 years. She was 19 when we wed.

We both wanted to have children. Both of us came from large, happy families. We were advised by family and friends that although there is no appropriate time to begin a family, it is usually easier to conceive when young.

Like many modern couples, we postponed having children until our mid-thirties. We chose instead to pursue our occupational interests. We were both educated and successful professionals.

At 35 years of age Sarah suffered two miscarriages. The last miscarriage was exceptionally traumatic as it came only a few months from her delivery date. We did not attempt to conceive for another two years. The wound of the prior miscarriages were still raw.

We seldom had sex. We had stopped referring to it as ‘making love’. Perhaps we were still grieving, or maybe we were just afraid of failing again.

At 40 years of age Sarah attempted to conceive through artificial insemination. The process was costly, but above all, it was excruciatingly taxing on our nerves. We tried this path twice, before we gave up.

Our last avenue was adoption. We discussed the issue at length. I feared an open adoption. I did not want the natural parents to ever intervene. I said to Sarah that such a level of access would imbalance the dynamics of our family, but in truth, I wanted to believe that the child was not only solely ours, but that it somehow emanated from both our beings.

The bureaucracy associated with international adoption was deeply dissuading. I would be 46 before I would be able to hold the child. Even then, I wasn’t completely

sure that my love could easily traverse ethnicities. Could I call a child my son, if he looked so different to me?

Sarah seemed to have a far greater certainty in her affections. In her career as a financial controller, she has always had to be both confident and assured of her judgment.

She researched the matter of adoption extensively. If I were to stack all of the pages she had printed into a neat tower, it would surpass the height and weight of a full-grown adult. Then one afternoon she approached me and told me of the scheme which I am here intending to warn you about...

## II

It seems that my husband has been engaging in business that is both deceptive and untrue. He is seeking to demoralise an adoptive procedure that has brought me great happiness.

I can now no longer imagine my life without my son, Terrance.

I believe that it is Peter's emotional inadequacy that has spawned his unethical rant. His belief that everyone need be informed of what is a personal matter, reveals his uncanny ignorance of a plain fact: those who have tried to conceive and failed on many (or even a single occasion) do not want to be besieged with further unwarranted negativity.

I do not mean to play an adversarial role, but when Peter speaks of a happy family, he seems to overlook the suicide of his father, his grandfather and, more recently, his aunt.

His inability to love and accept Terrance serves to reveal an inherent genetic perversion. Not once has he called Terrance 'son'. Not once has he assisted me at feeding time.

At the dinner table, he can hardly look at Terrance. There is an element of repulsion in his look. This aversion may stem from deeply seeded racist tendencies.

Just as a river has many tributaries that we fail to see from our vantage point, so are there as many unseen twists-and-turns ahead when we happily say, 'until death do us part' ...

### III

Peter and Sarah arrived at 'The Offspring of God Sanctuary' on August 10, 2008.

We were enduring an unseasonable heatwave. They seemed tired. Those unaccustomed to this dry, persistent heat are quick to complain of the migraines it induces.

The children were kept indoors on account of the weather. Normally, they are allowed to play freely outdoors.

I took Peter and Sarah for a brief tour of the gardens. We were cultivating Europeana Roses. We have found that the rose's intense crimson flowers are pleasing to the visitor's tastes.

I offered them each a glass of juice. They were nervous. The absence of children concerned them. I did not keep them waiting any longer. The journey to the sanctuary is arduous.

God has not looked favourably on our people and our land. The children of the Sanctuary are in desperate need of love and stability. That is why Peter and Sarah seemed like such appropriate candidates.

At 'The Offspring of God Sanctuary' we try to make the adjustment to our acute plight as palatable as possible. As they entered the first wing of the sanctuary, Peter and Sarah were welcomed warmly by some of the children.

It is a joyous thing for these children to encounter both a foreign face and to find their expressions of love reciprocated. It was easy to see the optimism in Sarah's face.

As the name suggests, the Invalid Wing is where the children who suffer temporary ailments reside. I took this opportunity to express to Peter and Sarah the hardship our Sanctuary endures. I also explained to them that their small adoption fee would be used to purchase better medical equipment.

The path that I take during the tour is deliberate. The intention is to gradually introduce the prospective clients to the harsh realities of our existence. Specifically, the aim is to prepare them for the 'Adoptive Wing'.

When we entered the Adoptive Wing, Peter and Sarah gasped. They found it hard to hide their horror.

The children in this Wing do not sleep in beds. They choose instead to sleep on the floor. In the summer, they find the dust to be quite cooling.

Their bodies are thin. Their limbs are prone to uncontrollable spasms, owing to the deficiencies in their diet. Because of this, they also have varying levels of emotional and intellectual disabilities.

This is not to imply that they are not happy or loud children. Our ratio of staff to children is two to one, whereas in our other Wings it is less intensive.

Their malnutrition comes not through neglect, but through a genetic deformity in their being. They were all born with small mouths. This is not to say that the opening to their mouths was simply smaller than usual (a condition that could easily be remedied by a surgeon), but rather that they have naturally formed small mouths, an excess of sinewy cheek flesh, and a full set of equally small teeth.

Thus, feeding time is a long and excruciatingly laborious process. During dinner, the children often cry from hunger. The voice that seeps from such tiny orifices is like the sound made by small birds.

In hunger, some have sought to cut their own mouths open. They fail to see that it will not open into a hidden, larger mouth. They lay curled on the floor in utter dejection.

In negotiating with a client—such as Peter and Sarah—we can be assured that they too have experienced levels of sorrow and disappointment. I explain that the children are in desperate need of love. I pander to their empathic qualities.

Like all clients, Peter and Sarah were offered continual worldwide assistance by the Sanctuary. They were also assured of no bureaucratic complications in the adoption and relocation of the child.

The specifics of the case were thoroughly explained to Peter and Sarah. Terrance is a lovely 14 year old boy. He spends most of the day curled on the floor. But with the appropriate measure of care and love, he could develop into a happy and productive man.

I showed Peter and Sarah a painting Terrance had done: three parallel lines of blue, red and yellow respectively. I don't know what this rudimentary work symbolised, but I told Peter and Sarah that it was a family portrait.

I also told them that the adoption costs were very low on account of both the nature of the child and the undervaluation of our currency.

I received four letters from Sarah in the months that followed. She told me that Terrance had settled well into his new surroundings. She told me that he slept curled each night by her feet.

There was no mention of Peter in the letters—it isn't uncommon for a couple to struggle at first with the emotional demands of adoption.

Among staff, the children of 'The Offspring of God Sanctuary' are called 'Galley Proofs'. This is why the Sanctuary is called the Offspring of God, rather than the Children of God.

Our religious beliefs tell us that God did not create the earth with a single, masterful sweep of His pen, but rather after many attempts of writing, failing and re-writing. We would all like to believe that God is omnipotent, but our daily reality shows us otherwise.

On December of this year, I received my final letter from Sarah. She had divorced from Peter. Terrance had grown, but shown no signs of intellectual development.

Although she seemed somewhat fatigued, I could detect a persisting optimism in Sarah's tone. She recounted the fact that Terrance had started to unfurl his curled body. At night, he lay stretched out beside her.

She told me how deceptively tall he was, how much of a man he had become. She told me that although Terrance did not have a strong appetite, his body had developed firm muscles.

The letter worried me immensely. I had observed behaviour like Terrance's in other animals.

I wrote to Sarah immediately. I warned her that Terrance was not stretching out beside her because of an increase in affection, but rather because he was sizing her for consumption.

I had heard of bush snakes that deliberately starved themselves in preparation for a big kill. They would stretch their tiny jaws to an unimaginable size. I asked her to notify me immediately.

I received no response. My letter was returned several months later. Sarah had moved houses.

It is a strange custom that I have observed among foreigners: they relocate houses often. It is not that they necessarily dislike where they live, but that they refuse to succumb to the process of attachment nor curtail the impulse for change.





JOY F. WEAVER turned a passion in vexillology into a successful career as a children's author. Her books *'A' is for Flag* and *Colours Unite* (both by Tadpole Press, 1992 and 1993 respectively) won the Brenning Prize for Young Fiction in 1993 and 1994. Her collection of stories *The Mouth of the River* (Escapade Press, 1998) is her first venture into adult fiction.

“There is beauty and then there is the beautiful. It is towards the latter—this eternal, unchanged beauty—that we as writers should strive. Writing should uplift the soul; it should raise the reader's eyes away from the black ink of the page and towards the golden light of the sun.”

IT WAS DARK. He could not see her in the yard. Then lightening shot through and showed her for a second dancing naked in the long grass. He felt like a child peering at something he shouldn't. He squinted. He moved closer to the kitchen window. Each time thunder cracked it drew roars of frightening laughter from her. He wanted to go outside with her. He wanted to share in some of her playfulness, her audacity. But something in his life had bludgeoned the joyful ease with which she carried her own life. Before he acted in any way, he ruminated over whether or not such an act was appropriate.

Then it seemed as if the storm was at its wildest. She paraded gleefully in its epicentre. The lightening did not spare a second; it cut through the wet, dark night. The lightening played with his old, erudite eyes; the rapidity of deep dark and sudden sheer light seemed to slow the universe. He looked out the window. It was as if his wife were multiplied by the storm; he saw her clinging happily on the clothesline, then stomping on the rose bed and then finally splashing her naked body with water from the pond.

It was a trick played on him by the storm. He stood in the kitchen, surrounded by appliances, alone in the steady light. Seeing her multiplied across the yard made him feel increasingly isolated from her. He felt completely detached from her abundant joy. Her happiness distressed him.

When she walked inside she saw him hurriedly undressing. He was trying to undo his belt; he had so many coins and pens in his pockets. The storm had come and gone, she said. His pants were by his ankles. Even though he had stood naked in front of her many times before, and though, they had had children together, he felt old and stupid. Don't worry, she said, I brought you a gift.

She approached him slowly. She was wet and naked. He again felt like a child and part of him wanted to flee. He trembled. He covered his groin. She laughed and stretched out her hand. She opened her palm. A tiny black frog leapt from her hand and latched itself to the tussle of grey hair on his naked chest.



RICHARD BERMAN was a travel writer for *Globetrotter Magazine*. Verso has published two of his works of non-fiction: *No Next Flight* (1995) and *Hallelujah* (1997). His book of poems *Lounge Suite* (Keywords, 1999) had its launch on National Radio in French Guiana.

“I have heard that this is the age of the machine. I still write on paper. I have beside me at all times a cup full of pencils and a good knife. I avoid machines. There is nothing that I hate worse than the sound of a printer. It is like a guest that eats with their hands, their mouth wide open, moaning, struggling to digest a good meal.”

THE BUS RIDE WAS TREACHEROUS. The driver navigated the twisting, unpaved road with unnerving confidence. It did not seem possible that the pass could accommodate two vehicles travelling in opposing directions. On the right side was a sheer drop of shale.

At a plateau in the mountain the driver stopped and all of the locals got out, stretched their legs and ate. Some began trading or selling live chickens, which they had until then carried on their laps.

I didn't understand how the locals could gorge themselves so happily. Unaccustomed to the journey, I had been plagued by a sense of vertigo and doom. The vendors—mainly plump, happy ladies in colourful aprons—sold tortillas of corn or wheat stuffed with *frijoles* or cuts of *carne*. They were cheap and delicious. The locals laughed, smoked and ate. I wanted to turn away, but there was nothing else to face, except for the devastatingly wondrous vista that reminded me only of death.

We arrived several hours later. It was early in the afternoon. For a city that is preoccupied with the ceremony of death, it was remarkably beautiful and lively.

I will not recount the layout of the city in detail, as I suspect that you will one day like to make the harrowing journey yourself. It is an exquisitely delightful thing to feel so close to death and then to arrive into the assuring arms of this colonial city. It is as if you have been gifted with a second life.

There was no disguising the fact that I was a foreigner. The people, which you will one day encounter, have dark, elongated features, as if, over time, their appearances have mimicked the severity of the mountain range.

As soon as I stepped off the bus, I was besieged by children. Each child had a sturdy placard around their neck. I do not want to give away too much; it is suffice to say that the American dollar holds reign even in such remote areas. The *peso* was looked upon by these children as if it were the shoddy work of a disreputable artisan.

There were a group of women standing outside my hotel. They were clad in the most elaborate black attire: frilled dresses with shawls and scarves complete with black beads. There was no way to avoid them. As I neared, they began to weep, each in their own laboured manner. The hotel owner saw that I was caught in this melancholic chorus and ushered me inside. He also wore a wooden placard around his neck.

I paid for my room. He was polite. He spoke in faltering English (though you will find that most of the locals speak near perfect English). He handed me the key to my room and then said, “*Señor*, I do not mean to impose. I imagine that you must be *cansado*.”

I did not know what *cansado* meant, but I nodded. “But may I take *un momento* of your precious time?” He said. “I would like to show you my grief.”

“Go ahead,” I said.

So began a well orchestrated moment of elaborate sorrow, which inspired me not with melancholy, but rather with embarrassment. I knew however to be polite.

“That is terribly sad,” I said.

“Did you notice how I did not fall straight to my knees? Did you see how I did not strike the ground with my fists? My body crumpled like a leaf under heat. I did not learn my grief from the theatre like others do, but rather by watching nature. There is grief in the smallest of things. There can be a harrowing pain in a gnarled twig. I am a student of God’s work.”

The rooms were basic. You must remember to ask for a room with a window; such an essential feature is deemed by them to be a preference of choice. But you, who are accustomed to roughing it in lesser developed corners of the world, will find the rooms more than adequate.

There is the usual paraphernalia you will find in most Western hotels. However in this city it takes a more melancholic slant. Gone are the brochures advertising amusement parks and recreational sites; depicted instead are places of morbid interest that reflect the local’s fixation on death. I suspect that you will laugh.

I ordered three large bottles of water for my room. The young boy who brought them was cheerful. As I paid him and was about to shut the door, he said, “Sorry *señor*.”

I am currently studying Letters at the *Universidad*. Could I show you a letter of condolence?"

At first, I failed to understand him. Did he want me to copy-edit his letter, or judge its sincerity? "Very well," I said.

"Dearest so and so," he began. "I am completely devastated in learning of the sudden death of your so and so. So and so was a man of highest repute. He offered his helping hands to everyone in our city, the poor and the rich alike."

"Stop there," I said. I found the letter to be quite clumsy. I did not want to offend.

"Your letter is deeply moving," I said. "But I am *cansado*, and any further grief will impair my sleep."

"Thank you *señor*," he said and then left.

The city does not warrant an extended stay. You will find better food and as amicable people elsewhere. One's purpose in this city relates solely to matters of death.

It is best to act quickly in this regard. Otherwise, the persistent wrangling can spoil a truly unique experience.

The next morning, I employed the services of the hotel owner as well as the porter. I also recruited the services of the black-fashioned ladies (I have nicknamed them the 'tarantula-mob').

Leisurely walks are difficult at this altitude. But on my morning journeys, I paid for the labour of ten scrawny children and an assortment of despondent locals. I thought that enough. You will encounter the same difficulties. Our natural inclination tells us not to be vain, yet the entire procedure is completely self-centred.

I spent the majority of my money on a local teenage girl. She was thin and incredibly dark. Her hair was jet black and almost reached the base of her spine. She seemed deeply depressed.

Her arms had many self-inflicted cuts. The scarred flesh on her forearms rose like dull-white hills.

She came directly to my hotel room. I sat naked on a chair and she proceeded to wash my entire body with a sponge and a bucket of soapy water. She moved with such

great lethargy. It was easy to mistake it for care. As she cleaned my body, she cried; not the theatrical tears of the others, but what seemed to be genuine tears of sadness.

When she had finished, she asked me what I was going to wear. As a child I was obsessed by American Western films, the variety that they now show each Sunday afternoon on television. I loved all the senseless gun-fighting. It seemed that there was nothing better than catching a silver-bullet for a woman you desperately loved, especially if she was *mullato* and forbidden.

“I will dress as a cowboy,” I said. I put on my outfit, complete with twin silver revolvers and a belt of bronze bullets.

Dressed in this fashion, I then went downstairs to meet all of the people whose services I had rendered. As we made our way to the affixed site, it struck my mind that I would have benefitted greatly from the services of a skilful quartet (I urge you to consider this. You will find that no whim escapes the mind of these entrepreneurial locals).

I walked into the cemetery. I stood in front of the open grave. I had the porter assist me into the plot. There I lay on my back, with my guns drawn and crossed on my chest.

I looked at the clear heavens. I stayed very still and quiet. The others surrounded my grave. Then they began to perform in the manner that they had promised; the children according to their placards, the tarantula-mob weeping, the hotel owner falling to his knees.

Everyone was so sad at my mock-death. I couldn't keep my eyes shut. I had to look. When does anyone get such a chance? These people had perfected the art of suffering. They must have endured great tragedy. I will never forget the experience.

I am glad that I have written this letter to you. It has a matter-of-fact style to it. It is not sentimental at all. In its own way, it is a death letter. Walking to the post-office was a death march.

This morning when I left the hotel, the porter approached me and said, “Thank you for choosing me *señor*. It was an honour to have attended your funeral. Rest assured that I will write to all of your friends and family, notifying them in the most educated prose of my condolences.”

Expect a letter in the mail notifying you of my death. But perhaps by then, I will already be back in your company.





ROSS THORNTON is married with four children. His books *A Fight Lost* (1981), *When the Rain Comes* (1990) and *Velvet* (1993) have been published by Acorn Press. He has been the recipient of numerous fellowships and awards. Presently, he works as an auto-mechanic.

“There is a strong smell of hagiography in a lot of biographies on authors. Writing is not a calling, it is an occupation. Like countless other professions, it demands responsibilities, respect and duty. One of the essential elements of this form of work is the need to record what occurs. This seems like a simple task. People are fooled into thinking that it is an occupation fit for everyone. Certainly it seems easy enough to follow a recipe, but this does not make one a chef.”

ALEXANDER SAT ON THE COUCH. He had never been able to deliver bad news standing.

Laura stood in front of him. Her hands were by her side. Her stomach, large and round, stretched the fabric of the shirt. “You’re telling me that now,” she said. “When I’m seven months pregnant with your child.”

She stormed out. He sighed and stood.

Alexander thought of her often. Not long after, he started seeing another lady. Nicky was ten years younger than him. She was perpetually jubilant. She swung the keys to her new car around her index finger. She begged him to come for a ride. He didn’t have the heart to tell her that he had been driving for fifteen years.

He thought about how good he’d had it with Laura. He had yet to see his new child. He’d heard that she’d had a boy. Some part of him missed her. But it was too late to go back on the decision he had made.

In the summer, Nicky fell pregnant. Alexander again thought of Laura. Not even the severe fluctuations in her hormones could dampen Nicky’s happiness. One day, he told her that he needed to say something important. He sat down. She stood in front of him. “You’re telling me that now,” she said. “When I’m seven months pregnant with your child.” Then she too left and it was the last he saw of her.

Alexander had never been with a man. In the factory where he worked, there were a lot of men. He felt affection towards these men. He stood shoulder-to-shoulder with them all day. He didn’t know why he had said such things to Laura and Nicky. But he knew that he felt loneliest around women.

For a long while after, he lived alone. One night he was visited by a friend who was going through a divorce. “Alex,” said his friend, David. “I can’t take the bickering any longer. I never thought that we could hate each other so much, or that I could hurt so badly.”

They sat next to each other on the couch. Their shoulders were only an inch apart. When David cried, Alexander thought of running his hand across his friend's back. Instead, he went into the kitchen and poured two glasses of wine.

From the kitchen he could hear his friend crying.

Alexander wanted to ask Anthony to stay. He wanted to tell him to stay as long as he desired. But he could not stand the sound of a man crying. He could not bear the sound of anyone crying. Especially when the person crying sounded so much like a wailing child.



ELLEN HERRING was the youngest ever gold medal winner at the National Equestrian Games. She has since gone on to keep and train horses. She is the author of six books for children, including *Milk Teeth* (Open Window Press, 1992), which won The Lady Bird Award for Children's Literature in 1993. Presently, she is saving "every penny to purchase one last Philly."

"I grew up reading stories of fantasy. The wilder, more absurd the story, the better. I read books with great enthusiasm—comics as well. I have since become more critical of texts; reading is no longer a thing of pleasure, but a form of interrogation. How I yearn to again capture those moments of uninterrupted bliss!"

DAD FOUND A SKULL IN THE BACKYARD. He thought it was the skull of a ram. Its horns were large and twisted. He walked around the house showing it to everyone. He was very proud.

Mum knew more about animals than dad. She said that rams don't normally have more than two horns. My younger brother counted the horns with his little hand. He was only just learning to count. He said the number eight twice. There were nine horns on this skull.

I asked dad if I could bring the skull upstairs to my playroom. He didn't seem to be interested in the skull any longer. I think that he was a little disappointed with himself. I could take the skull upstairs, he said, just as long as I didn't dirty the carpet.

I introduced the skull to all my toys. There is nothing to be frightened of Ms. Bear, I said, this is just a skull and he wants to be your friend. I let the skull play with whatever it wanted. In the afternoon I served it tea.

The skull liked my toy-house best. At night, I slept with the skull beneath my quilt. In the morning I found it on the floor, staring at the toy-house. It couldn't wait to play houses.

You will just have to be patient, Mr. Skull. Every good child needs a hearty breakfast. We can come and play houses after we have some porridge. You can help me bathe the children. It's Thursday so we should move Ms. House into the laundry. Mr. House has been in the piano room all week. He has an important recital coming up.

After breakfast, we returned to the playroom. Mr. and Mrs. House, this is Mr. Skull. Pleasure to meet you. The pleasure is all mine. What a lovely house you have; it's very big. I know; we're always cleaning; it's so boring. What's that Mr. House? You want to be moved?

"Don't move them," said the skull.

“What’s that Mr. Skull?” I replied.

“You heard me. Don’t move them. I like them just the way they are. I spent all night arranging them just perfectly. Don’t move them.”

“But they need to do their chores.”

“I’ll tell them what they need to do.”

That night, I tried to put the skull beneath the quilt. It refused. It only wanted to sit in front of the toy-house.

“Leave a light on for me,” said the skull. “Tell your dad that you’re scared of the dark. I’ve got work to do. Everything will change tomorrow. You’ll see.”

The next morning I woke up very excited. “Show me what you’ve done Mr. Skull?” I said.

“You mean you can’t see it already?” said the skull.

I shook my head.

“Incredible. You really are a dumb kid.”

“You shouldn’t speak to people like that.”

“Really? Go and tell your mum. I dare you.”

I ran to my mum’s room. She was in bed. I tried to wake her. Her body was cold and stiff. She had turned into stone. I ran to find my dad. He sat at the breakfast table. He didn’t say a word. He too had turned into stone. My little brother was in his bed, as stiff as a pebble.

“How do you like the changes I’ve made?” asked the skull. “Pretty soon, I’ll have you all just as I want you.”

I couldn’t move. I had turned into stone. Then suddenly a large hand came in through the front door and shifted me upstairs into the playroom. I was positioned in front of the toys.

“You will play,” said a voice.



GABRIELLA PENNINGTON served as McKee Professor of English Studies at Darnell College. She has written critical works on Blaise Pascal and Fernando Pessoa. Her short fiction has appeared in numerous journals including *Directions*, *Discourse* and *Happenings*. At present she is working as a registrar nurse at Wakeley Regional Hospital.

“There is a rhythm in writing—not in the phrases, but in the act itself. There is a process of imaginative or intellectual release, which is followed by an effort of control or restraint. This dualism of freedom and control results in a work that embodies, what I like to call, subdued-ecstasy.”

“I saw the day before yesterday an infant child that two men and a wet-nurse (who said they were its father, uncle and aunt) were travelling about with and exhibiting for its strangeness, so as to make a penny or two out of it.”  
- ‘On a monster-child’. Michel de Montaigne.<sup>4</sup>

WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT IT POSSIBLE for the Monster-Child to grow into a Monster-Boy or Monster-Girl? But the days pass like gawking strangers for all alike, each with equal measure of bestial moons and abnormal suns. It is hard to believe that the Monster-Child could have a Monster-Grandmother, loafing all day in her gowns, knitting lavender scarves to hide her monster offspring, rocking like a behemoth stone on a cliff’s edge, making purl-stitches of the barbaric hours. Or that this Monster-Child once spawned from the cleft of a Monster-Mother, who spent all morning washing and patching trousers and ankle-length dresses, gorging on left-over bread crusts as if they were children’s fingers, peering through frayed curtains at three-thirty for her savage brood to return from school. There too existed a Monster-Father who bemoaned his hellish life, yet kissed his mutant bride flush on the lips and buried his children into bed at eight sharp, suffocating them with enchanting stories.

Bestial moons and abnormal suns, depraved stars and brutish clouds; the Maker keeps time on His celestial clock, up-turning the sand-glass, sending the sand-people tumbling, pummelling their faces, forging more Monster-People.

The Monster-Father painfully accrues holidays as if they were lesions. He drives his family to the beach where they make a spectacle of their oddity, building sandcastles, plunging under waves, examining and collecting sea-shells as if they were

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<sup>4</sup> Montaigne, Michel de. The Complete Essays. Trans. Screech, M.A. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1993. 807.



human hearts. In the afternoons, they eat at restaurants where they exhibit their grotesque customs, filling their mouths with carefully portioned pieces of food, laughing as they share plates between them like starved beasts.

On Sunday afternoon the Monster-Child awaits the coming school week. It lies on its back, flattening the grass in the yard. 'Is it possible that all of the clouds are merely a lesser representation of an unseen, sublime cloud?' It thinks. 'The Maker feeds and re-feeds these white emanations into His loom, but can't make that single glorious cloud that defies characterisation. The beauty of the world eludes even the greatest of thinkers and this failure alone makes our existence so promising'. A neighbour looks over the timber fence. Into what hideous things is the Monster-Child transforming the clouds? What crude, tangible manifestations is it casting upon the clouded sky? Finding no answer, the neighbour fearfully hurries inside.



GLORIA OCHOA'S book *How Little to Go* (White Horse, 1997) won the inaugural Pope-Hubbard Prize for Biography in 1997. Her subsequent work *How Far We've Come* (White Horse, 1998) was short-listed for the same award. Presently, she lives with her husband and daughter and is enjoying raising five Staffordshire Terrier puppies.

"I don't understand why readers are drawn to book signings. Apart from a meagre financial gain, what benefit could my abstract squiggle provide? I have signed hundreds of books and never have I had a reader insist that I stand beside their bookshelf, generously guiding them to my texts. The signature always sufficed. It is the impression of the author that they desire, not my intrusive presence."

WHEN SHE DID FINALLY COME DOWN from the roof, Omar said, “Did you see anything?” She said, “No. But I heard something. I heard horses.”

Omar kept cutting the vegetables. She stood in front of him, arms akimbo, puzzled. He put his weight on the blade and cut through the pumpkin. She sighed impatiently. He laughed and said, “Grace. We live in the city. There aren’t any horses here.”

“Well, that’s what you think,” she replied. “I know what I heard.” Then she undressed and made her way across the kitchen to the bath.

He peeled the parsnips. Then he cut them; the blade made easy work of the thin, stripped root. As he washed the maroon turnips, he heard Grace run the water.

As she filled the bath, she made a sound that was unlike a song. The sound of the water running and her voice, not singing, not speaking, but just resounding, made him think of his childhood. The sight of her clothes, gathered in an unconcerned, rumped pile by the kitchen table, made his reflection more acute.

He had not thought of his parents in a long time. Never had this particular memory forced itself with such great clarity and urgency as that moment.

It had happened many years ago. Omar and his family had been living on a farm. Omar’s father, Ahmed, was a mechanic. He had owned a small workshop in town. “If it weren’t for the out-of-towners breaking down,” he would often say, “I’d have little business. I should charge for directions. I should offer my services as a chauffeur. There would be a market. There isn’t a single taxi driver in this town.”

The idea was absurd. The township was small. There was no need for a taxi driver. In summer, one could go an entire day without seeing a single person on the long dirt roads. But Omar had been too young to realize that men, like his father, who grow up in the city and who then relocate to the country as adults, sometimes carry with them dissatisfactions that are well hidden by buildings, crowds and traffic. In the

country, even the most secretive disquietude is made evident by the prevalence of stark, empty space.

One day, Ahmed did not return from work. Omar remembered playing with his golden spinning-top in the abating light of the day, while his mother, with her arms akimbo, paced the worn boards impatiently. "I'm going to find your father," she said. Omar looked up; the golden spinning-top faltered, then stopped. "How will you find him?" he said. "It will take you all of the night just to get to the fence."

A child, like Omar, that grows up in the country has a different perspective on time and space than those who grow up in the city. The land is not divided into streets and neighbourhoods. The horizon is not abdicated; buildings do not imprison the eye. "You just wait here," said his mother. "I'll be back before you finish the first page of the Qur'an."

Omar had begun to read from the Qur'an aloud. He began at the first page: "In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful." He read as loudly as he could; he made his voice fill the vacant house. He did not hear his mother leave. He did not hear the sound of the barn door being opened, the solitary horse bridled, or the rattle of the struggling hooves as they crossed the farm.

He didn't hear Grace approach him. His hands were marked with the beetroots he had boiled and skinned. Her hands were clean and warm. She came close to his ear and said, "What brings you to the roof Omar?" "It's you Grace," he said, alarmed. He looked at his hands. "I thought I heard my mother calling my father's name in Arabic."



JAYNE AYALA was writer in residence at the Villarreal Art Institute. During her residency she edited *Eat Your Words* (VAI, 1998), an anthology of fiction and poetry from students and alumni of VAI. Her most recent work *The Last Thing* (VAI, 1999) was nominated for The Churchill Literary Prize in 1999. She lives “21½ minutes walk” from VAI, “32½ if I am walking with my daughter.”

“I have always imagined creating a library that could be read simply by following each proceeding book on the shelf. The books would be by different authors and range across all categories of knowledge. But what if a book were to go missing? How would I—or the librarian—ever replace it? I write in prepanc for that event. I write the book that will one day foil the work of thieves.”

A HOUSE IS BUILT BESIDE A RIVER. The river is wide; its waters slow moving. Between the opposing banks is an island. In the wet season, the river rises greatly and the island is submerged. In the dry season, the river becomes a thread of water and what was once an island becomes a dusty hill. In the temperate months, the island is home to a variety of birds; they gather in the shrub with great colour and fervour.

The occupants of the house have a young daughter named Abby. Abby suffers from leukaemia. Her illness was the primary reason her parents, David and Grace, purchased the property. Abby plays happily in the knee-high grass, collects tadpoles and runs along the crackly, dry river bed. David and Grace work hard to maintain the property. They are not originally from the country. They find the nights incomparably dark and quiet.

Abby is enchanted by the island and the jubilant birds. She would like to swim to the island, but she is forbidden from doing so. One day, she disobeys her parents and attempts to reach the not-so-distant land. It is a month before the wet season. Her clumsy strokes stir the birds; she is not sure if they are encouraging or dissuading her efforts. Their loud calls disorientate her. She makes it half-way before she grows frightened and returns to the river's edge. She never loses her fascination with the island, though her brazen courage flees her completely.

Of her only attempt to reach the island, Abby wrote—I quote now from her diary, dated 12 December 2006, a month prior to her death: “I live in a castle beside a river. I often climb one of the four stone turrets and gaze across the silver waters to the land of the Bird-People. For three months of every year they hold sacred ceremonies on this secluded land. They eat and sing and each night they will the moon a different colour.

“On the night of the first yellow moon, I decided to swim to their island on behalf of the Land-People. Although they do not share many of our human features, I believed them to be a friendly race of people.

“I was mistaken. Not long after I began my long journey, they released piranha-stars into the water, which ate my flesh. Fortunately I had left my skin at the shore. I returned to the river bank and filled my body with dried reeds.

“Their happiness makes me upset. I feel like a complete stranger. I will not attempt another visit.”

Abby died on 12 January 2007. It had been raining for several days. The island was lost in the murky water. Her body was removed by two local ambulance workers. Grace accompanied the ambulance. David watched them from the veranda; the sky spat fat droplets of rain, the ambulance trudged across the boggy ten acres slowly.

For a fortnight before her death, Abby was visited by a mysterious stranger. The stranger entered her bedroom through the window at precisely midnight each night. The visitor had the body of a man, but from the shoulders upwards he was vastly different: his neck was thin, almost serpentine; protruding from his face was a large brown beak; his eyes were as dark as volcanic stone, hidden in tufts of white plumage.

This figure sat beside Abby, leant close to her ear and spoke incessantly. Abby was not frightened. Although she was bedridden, she waited eagerly for his nightly visits.

On the final night, the Bird-Man said to her, “We will pray for your safe arrival tomorrow. Do not tell anyone of my visits or of what we have spoken about. Everyone will have their chance.”

The last entry in her diary is dated 11 January 2007. It reads: “The night of 10 January was lit by a turquoise moon; a fine omen to attempt my second and final journey to the island of the Bird-People.

“This time I left my body in bed and attempted the journey with my spirit alone. As a gift of reconciliation, I brought my favourite book, which is made of imperishable pages.

“My spirit took confident strokes. It focused completely on the wondrous festivities ahead.

“On this occasion, I was greeted by an emissary of the Bird-People. He approached me in a vessel no different to a canoe, but made completely of living frogs. He extended his arm and lifted me on board. He explained that he had been sent to stop me from reaching the island.

“He said that the Bird-People were a hospitable community, but that they were also deeply private. This only made me more curious. Then this Bird-Man opened his beak and from his gullet pulled out a giant wasp which attacked my spirit. I fled to the shore and nursed my spirit with the tears of cicadas.

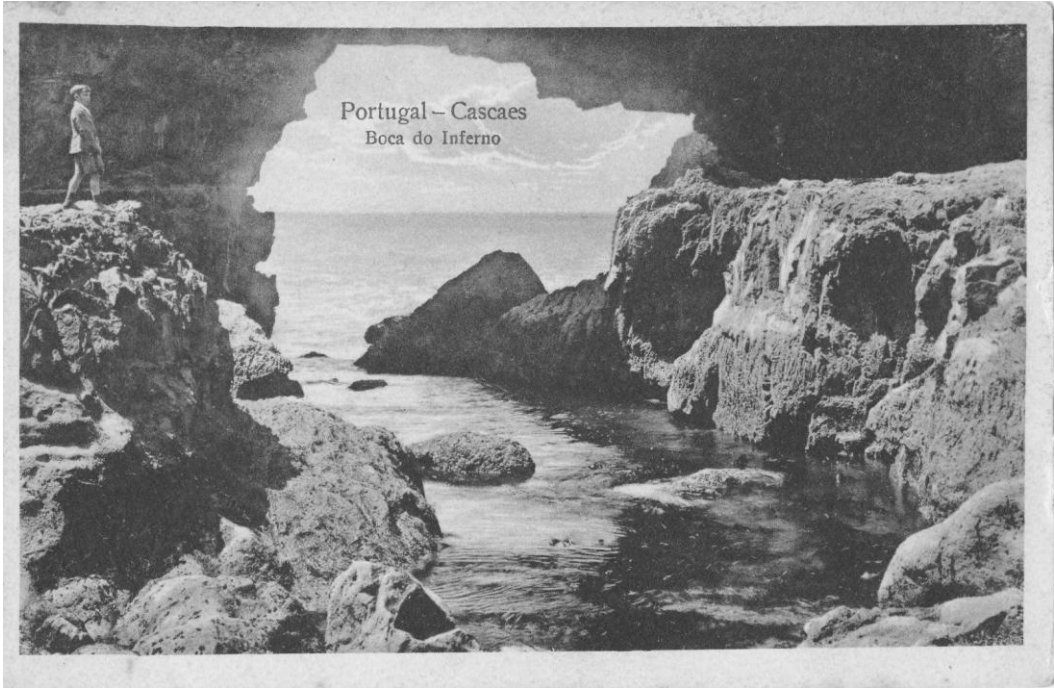
“I stand now before the Royal Commission who graciously have not only paid for my journey, but offered me unfailing patience and support. I know that some of you will perceive my attempts as a failure, while others will commend my courage.

“I have tried. There are others who have certainly fared better. Recently I received word from an independent traveller who claims to have conversed with the Bird-People for an entire season. He has recorded their language and customs.

“Although the translation of the fourteen volumes is currently in progress, I have had the opportunity to read several chapters of the first volume. Needless to say, the work is very exciting and the information it recounts far exceeds our wildest expectations.”



PART TWO – SUPPOSITION.



Dear Felix,

Yesterday I woke to find a child climbing from out of my mouth. The boy was no larger than my thumb and was dressed in a khaki school uniform. He was incredibly dextrous and had an irksome laugh. He attached a thread of green dental floss to my incisors and propelled himself down my chin. He perched himself triumphantly on my laryngeal prominence.

Raising my head a little from off the pillow, I noticed that there were other children of equal size waiting for him on my chest. Some were hiding in the folds of the quilt, while others, of a more brazen character, were jumping on my chest brandishing matchsticks.

Realising my predicament, I sat up quickly, far too quickly really, and was filled with an inexplicable sense of dizziness and nausea. My sudden movement knocked at least a hundred tiny boys to the carpeted floor below.

The nausea soon became overwhelming—I thought that perhaps one of these children had been playing with my uvula while I slept. I rushed to the bathroom. I just made it to the toilet before I vomited. Strangely, I did not bring up last night's dinner—veal with potatoes—but rather, hundreds of miniature children.

Being an educator, I cannot help but refer to the plural of children as a school of children. My stomach convulsed as I ejected these tiny beings and they indeed, at first, did seem like minuscule fish when they dropped into the shallow water below and struggled to the surface.

Soon I had expunged my gut of so many children that they overflowed from the porcelain bowl. Filled with a boisterous life they then took across the tiled floor to join their jubilant peers. I was in a sorry state. It made me sick to think that these children had been playing in my intestines, deep in the winding passages of my bowels. I knew very well what naughty games children could play if they were left unsupervised for prolonged periods—no doubt, the soft lining of my intestines was now riddled with gum and graffiti.

I had three primary objectives: firstly, to notify my supervisor at work that I would not be attending due to my unspecified illness; secondly, to arrange an appointment with some sort of specialist—a gastroenterologist I reasoned; and thirdly, to remedy the dilemma of these children who were now causing havoc in my apartment.

I stepped on the children as if they were vermin. They seemed impervious to the weight of my soles—indeed they derived great pleasure in my increasing sense of futility. Everything to a child is a varying form of game.

Soon I grew tired. I sat on the floor and let the children scale my back and shoulders. They yelled the crudest obscenities from the peak of my head. They danced in my bald patch. I was lost for ideas and felt utterly miserable.

Then there was a knock on the door and when I opened it, believing that it would be the superintendent apologising for the strange infestation, I saw nothing but darkness. It was then that I realised I was staring into an enormous mouth.

“Seek refuge here,” said the mouth, the gigantic tongue rolling as it uttered each syllable.

At first the stench was alarming. But after I climbed over the crooked teeth, I found the fleshiness of the tongue remarkably comfortable. The mouth closed. I could feel myself being lifted. It was quiet and dark. “Say something,” I yelled. But the mouth said nothing.

Regards,  
Professor Emmanuel Huffman.



Dear Felix,

After seeing to my supervisory and research commitments, I have very little time to myself. Often, when I return home from work, I cannot summon the will to prepare myself a hot meal. A can of tuna is all I manage to eat.

At times, I am filled with a sense of self-repulsion and I vow that I must make great changes in my life. Yet the following morning I am the first at work. The photocopiers are still cold, the printers silent and the pigeon holes empty.

On occasions I am so early to work that I am greeted by the nightshift cleaner. This cheerful, hardworking soul is in charge of cleaning ten floors all by himself each night.

He has developed an ingenious method for expediting his duties. He has imported, at his own cost, a one-of-a-kind vacuum cleaner from his home country. Instead of having a single plastic hose, this device has eight separate hoses, each equipped with their own motor and collection bag.

He works the machine with great familiarity and skill. It is impressive to watch. I must confess that at first it seemed a strange device, as if this quiet gentleman was taking a metallic octopus for a walk. Impelled by awe and curiosity, I asked him if I could have a turn of his machine. "It would be inappropriate," he replied and I felt as if I had somehow offended him.

Later, he informed me that during the day, he also worked as a cleaner at The Hotel Imperiale. I had often, in small-talk, spoken to him of my need for a vacation. He proposed that in return for a few lessons in English and philosophical thought, he could arrange a night or two for me in one of the hotel's premier suites.

The exchange was simple enough. He would provide me with pen and paper. As he was not to be seen engaging in extended conversations with guests, he would slip a question under my hotel room door and I, in turn, would respond to each matter accordingly. In return, I would have unlimited access to all the facilities and services provided at no cost.

I readily accepted.

The pen that he provided me with was unlike anything I had seen. The manufacturer had affixed eight pens together, so that instead of having a single ball-point end, there were eight. The writing was no more efficient, owing to the fact that one could not write eight different sentences at once. Anything I wrote was duplicated eight times.

“Surely you have a less elaborate pen,” I said.

He did not respond and I was beginning to think that he was the sort of man that was easily affronted.

“No,” he finally said. “The pen is filled with octopus ink. It is important to me.”

The first page was slipped under my door at 11 p.m. I was in my night gown. I had finished eating a bag of salted cashews and had watched a somewhat entertaining pornographic film.

The first question was: “What is evil?” It was a strange place to start; I had in mind that we would begin with common grammatical structures. Nevertheless, I applied myself with rigour.

“Evil is...” I wrote and was immediately struck by the fact that I had written this assertion eight times down the page. Further, as the sentences progressed down the page, it seemed to resemble my handwriting less and less.

I found it futile. I would soon run out of space to write.

Then came the second, third and fourth question in quick succession: “If there were only one person in the world, could that person be evil?”, “Can we appropriately define varying degrees of evil (i.e., moderate as opposed to grotesque evil)?” and “Can we define an historical event, epoch or person as ‘evil itself?’”

Soon, I was bombarded with questions. They gathered in disordered piles by my door. I had no time to relax and enjoy the amenities. A couple were howling in ecstasy on the television. The mini-bar hummed quietly.

“Must everyone experience a single act of evil in order to understand exactly what evil is?”

“If the prevailing law is unjust, can then an act of goodness be deemed deviant?”

I found the questions to be nonsensical. I waited by the door until another page passed and then I flung it wide open, hoping to catch the demanding cleaner in mid-act.

Instead, I saw the eight-armed vacuum cleaner moving rapidly down the hall, unguided, streaming reams of data from its bulbous, metallic head.

Regards,  
Professor Emmanuel Huffman.





Dear Felix,

I will recount to you an incident that has for many years disturbed me. Perhaps a postcard is not the appropriate forum in which to discuss such an event; the reverse side of the card does not encourage prolixity, and as such, necessitates that I relate only the bare essentials.

I have already wasted too many words, which shows how reticent I am to divulge the nature of this encounter. From here onwards, my writing will be smaller and you will rightly berate me for its illegibility. It is difficult to hide behind words of any size.

In my youth I travelled on several occasions to Mexico. I wanted to be a poet, but felt that I'd had a far too fortunate upbringing. I believed that I now needed to experience unimaginable hardship. I failed to realise that experiencing one single act of wrongdoing was not enough to equate myself with people who knew nothing but oppression.

In a café named 'El Septimo Circulo', I met a pair of Englishmen who, like me, seemed devastatingly out of place. I could speak of their attire, but as was often said in that particular region, a man was defined by the drink he chose. They drank tea.

The two men were of the same age—twenty-something. One of them did all the talking. The other was strangely reserved. Soon we began to converse on philosophical matters.

"What do you think constitutes evil?" I asked.

"Evil?" replied the Englishman. "And we haven't even finished our first pot of tea! By way of an answer, I'll let you in on a secret of mine.

"You have no doubt realised that my friend and I are different from the others, no? You couldn't have failed to notice. That's why you sat near us.

"People leave you alone if you are quiet. My friend Jacob is especially reserved. What is wrong with him? Why is he so quiet? Perhaps he doesn't speak the language, or maybe, the local food or climate does not sit well with him. Here is the secret."

He raised his left arm, drew back the tweed suit and cotton sleeve and showed me his hand. It was gloved all the way to the elbow. Then he placed his arm

underneath the table and into Jacob's anus. Jacob's face seemed to suddenly gain life and his eyes darted about the room.

"Nobody has noticed that my friend Jacob is in fact a latex doll," he said.

"Amazing," I replied.

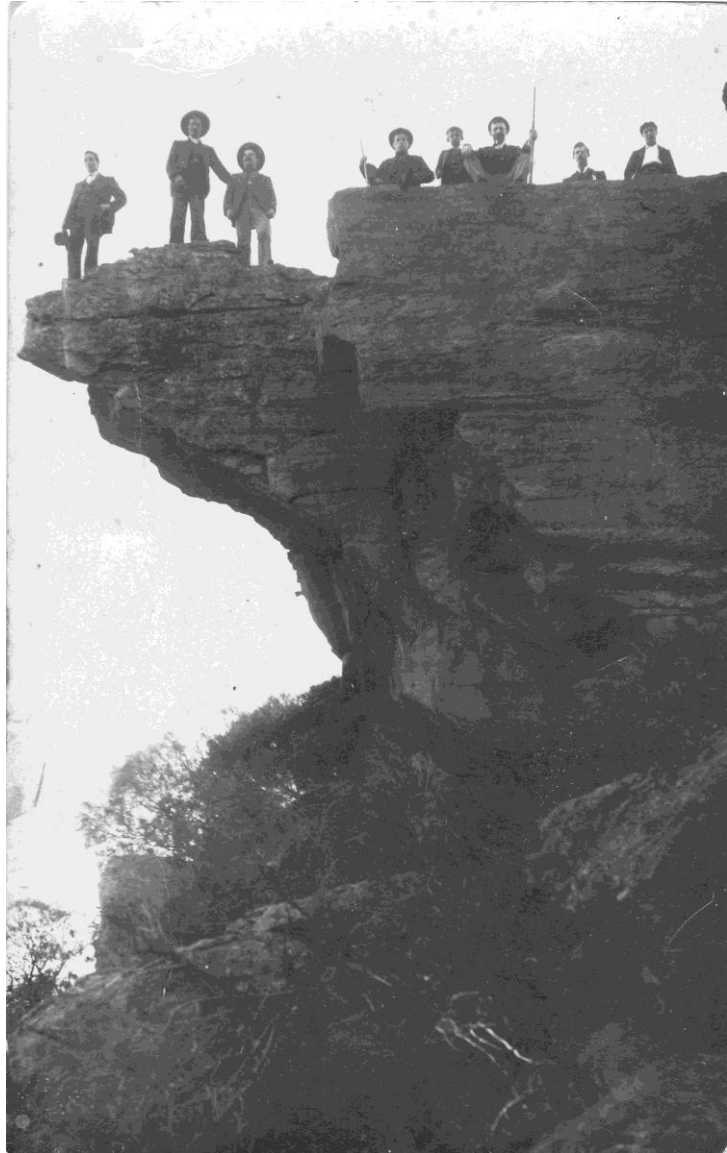
"Now let's just imagine that Jacob were to say something obscene to you or the locals. In fact, let's think of something worse. Say he were to buy a local girl a drink and then take her back to his hotel room and rape her. Would he be held accountable for his actions if I, all the while, stood with my hand deep inside him, manoeuvring his every movement and voicing each word?

"Impossible you say, how could the defiled lady not see me leering at her over the rapist's shoulder? It has happened. It isn't difficult to do. It is an extremely curious thing.

"But if I were to then retrieve my hand and render him lifeless, would the evil action that he committed still reside in his latex flesh? What good would it do to chastise a limp body, a skull without a brain?

"The answer lies in intention. And there is no intent in poor Jacob's body, just an Englishman's hand."

Regards,  
Professor Emmanuel Huffman.



Dear Felix,

In the movies, the villain always has the favourable vantage point. They are always perched on an inaccessible cliff-face, peering at the vulnerable ‘good guys’ as they pass unaware through the secluded valley.

We have become accustomed to thinking of the evildoer as lurking in the shadows, or cloistered in a clock-tower, or forming clandestine terrorist groups in darkened basements or caves.

The villain is always a step removed from us, possessed by an incorrigible villainous nature, aware of our every presence and move, waiting to pounce on us when we least expect.

Even when we are told that the criminal is among us (the common term now is ‘sleeper cell’), living in our very neighbourhoods, frequenting our restaurants, libraries, their children even attending our own children’s schools, we are led to believe that the villain is irrevocably different from us. Although we may share the same physical appearance as them, we are somehow separate from them because they do not share our ideals, a belief in common goodness and justice—they are, so to speak, the bitter stone hiding in the centre of the sweet fruit.

In defining acts of evil (and there have been many in our history) we employ terms like ‘extraordinary evil’, ‘inconceivable acts of evil’, ‘radical evil’, ‘profound evil’, ‘the face of evil’, and even, ‘evil itself’.

Each act that surpasses by a degree what we perceive as justified, acceptable, or normal, is given an appropriate emotive adjective that serves to represent our incredulity. In defining an evil act as such, we are continually creating distances between the reality of the act and ourselves. If something is ‘extraordinarily evil’, it is beyond ‘evil’ and certainly far removed from ‘goodness’—can we not here imagine driving down an imaginary highway where on our left-hand side we encounter routine signs that notify us of the distances between towns, but that in this scenario, the towns bear names such as ‘evil’ and ‘evil itself’?

We do not want to acknowledge that the villain does not lurk on the cliff-face or wait among us, but is us, the face we see in the mirror. It is difficult to accept that you

and I are equally as capable of undertaking cruel acts, that we are thus responsible for both the most intimate and remote tragedies, that indeed there is no intimate or remote, but a single fabric of humanity.

Evil is not a person or territory in itself, but part of the one sheet, which we must wear with both pride and disgrace.

Regards,  
Professor Emmanuel Huffman.



Dear Felix,

I am sending you a curious postcard. I have nothing of great importance to tell. The postcard shows a photo of Petrovsky Palace in Moscow. The card was printed in 1965. One can see a well tended garden, the elaborate red brick facade and silver dome of the palace.

It is not my intention to discuss this building's place in history, but merely to say that it is presently inaccessible to the public.

What drew me to this card was the lady in the lower-left corner. She is making her way to the palace, her shoulders slumped. In her left hand she carries a handbag. What could such a quaint, elderly figure be doing walking towards such an extravagant and seemingly desolate building? Everything else, except for this lonesome soul, has been prohibited.

I have given her a thousand different and unsatisfactory professions: cleaner, cook, nanny, gardener, etc. I have come to the conclusion that this lady, whose face we do not see (will never know), cannot truly exist. I do not mean that she is a ghost, but rather that she was asked (or ordered) to be in the photograph by an artist who needed her human form to extenuate the grandeur of the palace.

She is nothing more than a figure of belittlement. "Send her to a shop in St. Petersburg," they would have said. "And make her return by foot. The more haggard she looks, the greater the building will seem."

It made me realise how insignificant one can be. If she was not ordered to pose (or, perhaps even if she was), she may very well have felt privileged.

Regards,  
Professor Emmanuel Huffman.





PENSIONAAT ST. ANTONIUS, Tegelen bij Venlo

Speelplaats

Dear Felix,

Have you tried foie gras? It is not something that I particularly enjoy eating, but yesterday, in the company of an old acquaintance, I felt it rude to politely abstain.

Fortunately, we were interrupted by a young man and his family who approached my dining partner. The two men soon began to converse. It was an opportune time for me to discreetly spit the foie gras into a napkin.

After the man and his family left, I noticed that my friend seemed perturbed by the unexpected encounter. "What do they expect from me?" he said. "They've ruined a perfectly good meal.

"That man came to my table practically begging to shake my hand. Honestly, he refused to leave until I shook his hand and that of his wife.

"He told me that I had taught him for six years at primary and secondary school and that although I was not expected to remember him, he certainly recognised me.

"What am I supposed to do? Am I to remember every single student that I have taught? Is it expected that I make progress calls on each student for the entirety of their lives? Ms. So and So, how is your husband? Cancer is it. What a shame. Terrible news. I taught him calculus in grade seven. He loved calculus did he? Ridiculous.

"What effect is such a meeting supposed to have on me? If only I could tell them the truth! I'm sorry that I cannot reciprocate your happiness Mr. So and So, because in truth, it was many years ago and you, no doubt, were no different to the other children who stared at me all day with a puzzled, disinterested, pimple face.

"You were attentive only when it was ten minutes before the final bell. I have moved on sir. No more bells for you and me. Honestly, it is ridiculous. What a waste of a meal. I'm sorry."

I implored my friend not to let one incident spoil his day. I even took a healthy bite of my foie gras and moaned in delight.

"It's not his sentiments that upset me," he said. "It's something else, which I am in fact disgusted to reveal. I hope that you will not think badly of me. I don't want to ruin your meal.

“You must think me a terrible teacher anyway. In your eyes I must be the reason for the sorry state of our schooling system.”

I shook my head. I was struggling with the foie gras. I urged him to continue.

“The school that I taught in, and to which that young man attended, was an elite school for boys. I had been offered the position by a professor of mine who thought that my progressive ideas on education would suit the school’s philosophy. What exactly that philosophy was, I did not know; but my first days at work were horrifying.

“Yet, I remained there, mainly because the pay was exceptional and because I thought that I needed experience. In a few years I was not only following the curriculum, but implementing my own radical changes.

“This boy—this man—endured my most extreme pedagogical endeavours. You must understand that the aim of the school and all of the teachers was to raise well-educated children, students of the highest order, who would then go on to lead our nation.

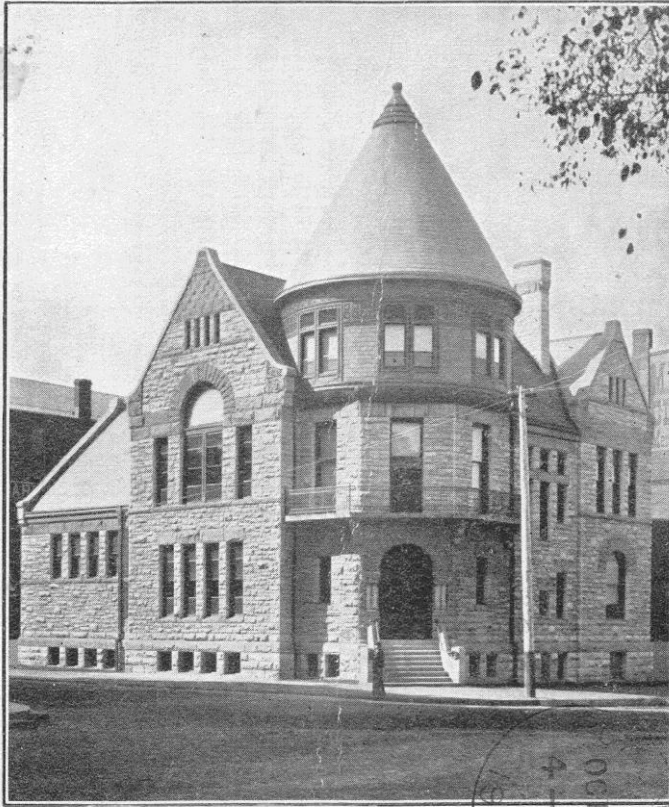
“We tied the boys to a chair. We opened their mouths with steel clamps. We put a plastic funnel down their throats and we fed them pages from the classics.

“The pages would unfurl in their throats and often they would gag and vomit. We would repeat this process four times a day, each day for a year, prior to their graduation.

“I don’t know what I imagined such an act would do. I wanted their pores to sweat ink, their eyes to burn with knowledge. I will never forget how young they were and with what delight I stuffed their throats.

“Ever since then, I have kept to myself. I have long feared the day that one of them would approach me and instead of praising me with quotes from antiquity, reach for my own vulnerable throat.”

Regards,  
Professor Emmanuel Huffman.



Public Library Bldg. 4th & Main Sts.--Quincy, Ill.

Why dont you write are  
you all sick or why do we  
not hear from you. Ma.

Dear Felix,

The postcard that I have sent you shows a photograph of the Public Library building on 4<sup>th</sup> and Main Street in Quincy, Illinois. Below the photograph is a brief inscription (not my own), which reads: “Why don’t you write are you all sick or why do we not hear from you. ma.”

The card is postmarked October 6, 1905. On the reverse side there is a slightly marred one cent postage stamp bearing the face of Ben Franklin. Apart from the address, there is nothing else written on the card.

I am neither a philatelist nor a deltiologist. My interest in the postcard is focused solely on the script written by ‘ma’. The writing is cursive, elegant and easy to read. The sentence, a conjunction of two questions, is written without any visible punctuation.

These characteristics render the brief statement with great intimacy and forthrightness, which is only extenuated by the use of the familial, ‘ma’.

I have spent many nights thinking of this old lady, bereft of company and contact—she is old, because in my mind, her children, to whom she addresses her concerns, are themselves mature in age. A mother would not berate her young children for not communicating. But older children are expected to have outgrown such impoliteness.

Her walk to the post-office must have been lonely. She must have seen other mothers with their children. She must have known that a response to her card would not be immediate, if it were to come at all. It is harrowing to think that the delivery of her card, suffused with grief, would depend solely on the service of strangers.

But why did she choose this particular card? How can one correlate the significance of the public library with the nature of her sentiments?

Did she spend the long, humid Illinois days with her then young children in this library? Did she read her eager children book after book? Does she still visit the library? Or are her children across the country, far away, studying at a university which her hard work paid for?

She may have chosen a card that depicts the library, because by choosing a place of learning, she hoped to forge a connection with her children, kindle a relationship faded by time and distance. I don't know. It's a mystery.

But in the present days of such reserved communication (the telephone, email, etc.) isn't it courageous to think that this mother ('ma') bravely put her words on the card for all to see, unhidden, believing that the truth was impervious to pity or scorn?

Regards,  
Professor Emmanuel Huffman.



Dear Felix,

Yesterday I was woken by a loud noise. I rushed to the window that looks out to the river and there saw two tall-ships engaged in fierce battle.

The larger vessel had taken a devastating hit. Smoke rose high into the air, the masts on the two square-rigs were damaged, and sailors—or pirates, I could not tell—dove into the frigid, ashen waters.

What if I were then to reveal that no such thing had occurred? That in fact, I had been sitting alone at my desk, writing to you this postcard, while staring absently at a gilded painting on my wall that depicted two tall-ships in battle.

You would either commend my imagination for stirring your emotions or bring to note the inconsistencies in my story—namely that infantry, tanks, missiles and airplanes have long since replaced tall-ships in the field of war.

But what if I were to then add that I possessed no such writing room, or owned no such painting, but that I was merely extrapolating such events from an old postcard? You would either laugh at my mischievousness or grow weary of my continual lies.

This does not detract from the reality that, at one time, there existed two tall-ships that waged a war and an artist who depicted this battle. Further, there certainly exists, or existed, a room where such a painting hangs.

I have used my imagination to malign the truth, to twist two separate ends of a historical thread into a complex knot. Does it not amaze you that we are all equally capable of doing such things? That apart from our physical existence, there is within us the capability to conceive of things that have not existed, or did not occur, and to further, imbue these imaginings with such minute details that they can summon real emotion from us? Can you not smell the gunpowder in the air? Do you not feel the cold waters of this nameless river?

But we don't necessarily need intimate details in order to clearly conceive the imaginary. In truth, we only need the most sparing things. I need only say, 'a chair and a noose', for you to believe that a tragedy has occurred, that a man has hanged himself, his feet circling the toppled chair.



What about the world outside this room in which this hanged man gasped for breath? I have made no mention of what this exterior world might look like. What is outside the window? What is beyond the door?

Should it not perturb us that we can conceive the most amazing things, yet disregard the vast gaps in our imaginings? Must we not think of the consequences brought forth when we make such unheeded leaps?

A further example, a statement: "That man is evil." We imagine a heinous act, a crowd of angry people, but worse, we imagine a face: what does that face look like?

Regards,  
Professor Emmanuel Huffman.



Dear Felix,

Prior to becoming a professor, I was offered a position at a private girl's school. I taught in this high school for three years.

The school day was divided into six periods, each of fifty-five minute duration, each varying in subject matter. Between the third and fourth period, the girls had to stand behind their chairs while prayers were broadcast over a loudspeaker.

This procedure was in accordance with the school's religious philosophy. It did not strike me as an odd practice. For instance, I did not worry that the students were being indoctrinated with religious principles. I don't believe any student perceived it in this manner either; or at least, no student ever dared to ask whether such protocol was compulsory.

What I did find strange at the time, was the thought of an old, absent priest reciting prayers into an unperceivable microphone, his voice echoing through the classrooms and playgrounds.

I did not enjoy writing the mandatory report cards for each student at the end of each school term—there were four in an academic year. The report cards showed the subjects undertaken by the student and the final grade that they had achieved.

On the lower half of the reports were eight keywords, which required my response: attendance, health, cooperation, courtesy, promptness, dependability, good work habits and attitude towards school.

There was nothing, or no one, that could not be piecemealed in this education system. The day was divided into periods, knowledge into subjects (math, history, geography, etc.), learning into grades and appetite into meal periods (recess and lunch).

Students were not perceived as whole beings, but rather as fractured souls. It was education alone that rendered a being complete. A child could be divided into eight qualities, each characteristic graded and then reformed, like some human jigsaw.

Jane Q. attended school diligently (because her father paid a great sum of money and because law required her to do so), her health was good (because we told her when to eat), she cooperated (because she feared the punishment of the principal and of her parents), she was courteous (again because the position of power never favours the

child), she was prompt (the bells signifying the beginning and end of each period told her where she needed to be and when), she was dependable (the bells work in the same way as a cow prod, clearing the fields quickly), she had good work habits (she was placed in a room with thirty other children and told to work for fifty-five uninterrupted minutes or face punishment), and her attitude towards school was positive (she is like a prisoner who wants to survive incarceration: she keeps quiet, obeys, stays positive and persists).

I signed those forms with great uneasiness. They had to be returned by the student the following day with their parent's signature.

Those poor children. We forced them to believe that we knew better than they, that we knew all that there was to know, that we could dismantle their souls.

Regards,  
Professor Emmanuel Huffman.



Dear Felix,

An idea for a story:

Heimdal and Loke meet every Tuesday night to play cards. Both of the men find games such as Poker boring. Heimdal suggests that they try chess, but their command of even the most rudimentary rules is woeful. They soon find chess boring too.

“What I don’t understand,” says Loke. “Is how in every game there needs to be a winner. If only there was a game where there was no winner. Indeed, no incentive to compete.”

“Why don’t we invent such a game?” replies Heimdal. “We will see it as a pastime, or form of amusement, rather than as a competition involving rules, tricks and strategies.”

“That’s a good idea. The game will be solely for amusements’ sake. The Oxford English Dictionary defines amusement as a ‘distraction or diversion of the attention from the point at issue’”.

Both men are retired professors of linguistics. They are both widowers. What they are trying to divert their attention from—although neither of them will admit it—is the loneliness and boredom they feel having lost their spouses and left their academic obligations.

Heimdal proposes that they invent a lady whom they can both court. They will use their respective interests in languages and cultures to create an individual of uniqueness and beauty.

“She should be the creation of a lifetime’s work,” says Loke.

“The genes and blood of everyone alive, deceased, extinct or decimated will run through her veins,” adds Heimdal. “We alone will understand her language.”

They begin their amorous task. Soon they are meeting every day, comparing notes, compiling a dossier on this non-existent lady.

They soon arrive at a problem. What should this lady be called? The answer to this question is not simple. The question can be posed in different ways: how will Heimdal refer to this lady? How will Loke refer to this lady? Who will think of the given name and who the family name?

It is decided that Heimdall will be in charge of creating her given name. From that point onwards, he will refer to this lady by that name alone. Loke is responsible for her family name and he will refer to her by that name alone also.

This seems fair to them. They have divided the work. They happily apply themselves to their designated tasks.

Although they don't voice this concern, the two men soon become jealous of each other's role. In envisioning and being able to utter only her given name, Loke believes that Heimdall will share greater intimacy with this lady. He believes that the first name is reserved for lovers; it is the name one whispers into the ear while making love.

In creating and speaking only her family name, Heimdall believes that Loke shares a greater sense of connection with the lady. A given name is suffice for the first encounter (be it sexual or otherwise), but after, there is a need to understand where that person comes from, to which family they belong.

This dilemma threatens to spoil their engagements. Neither man relinquishes the rules that have been set.

Then one day they receive a letter in the mail. The letter is from the imaginary lady. In the letter, the lady says that she is incredibly lonely and bored as she is the only person that exists in her world. She has no one (apart from Heimdall and Loke) with whom to communicate. She finds her existence meaningless. She pleads for both men to create a partner for her, a community, or to erase her from existence.

At first, both men believe that the other is playing a deceitful trick. One of them clearly wants sole ownership of this lady.

A second letter arrives. "Make me a friend," it reads. Now it becomes clear that the letters are real. The men quickly come to a decision.

There is no chance of them creating a community, partner or friend for this lady. Any such act would mean that they would stand a lesser chance of courting this female.

A third letter arrives. "Since I cannot love both of you," it reads. "Then you must compete for me. I will reveal myself to the winner and marry him."

The two men decide to compete. But in the arena of love, a competition is not a game, it is a duel. What weapon will they choose? A knife, gun or plain fists?

“It’s ridiculous,” says Heimdal, “We’re old. We can’t fight each other. Not over an imaginary girl. We must think of some other way.”

They invent a different duel.

The rules are simple. The two men will sit and remain seated. No man is allowed to speak or write. Finally, neither is allowed to open their eyes. The first man to do otherwise loses.

They take their opposing positions: two armchairs in the reading room. Both men shut their eyes and remain silent. The night passes, daybreak arrives and both men are in quiet agony.

Then there is a knock on the door, followed by a knock on the window. “Please open the door,” says the lady.

They both know it is her, because they alone understand her language.

“Please,” she says. “You must help me. I cannot describe what is after me, but I am fearful of it.”

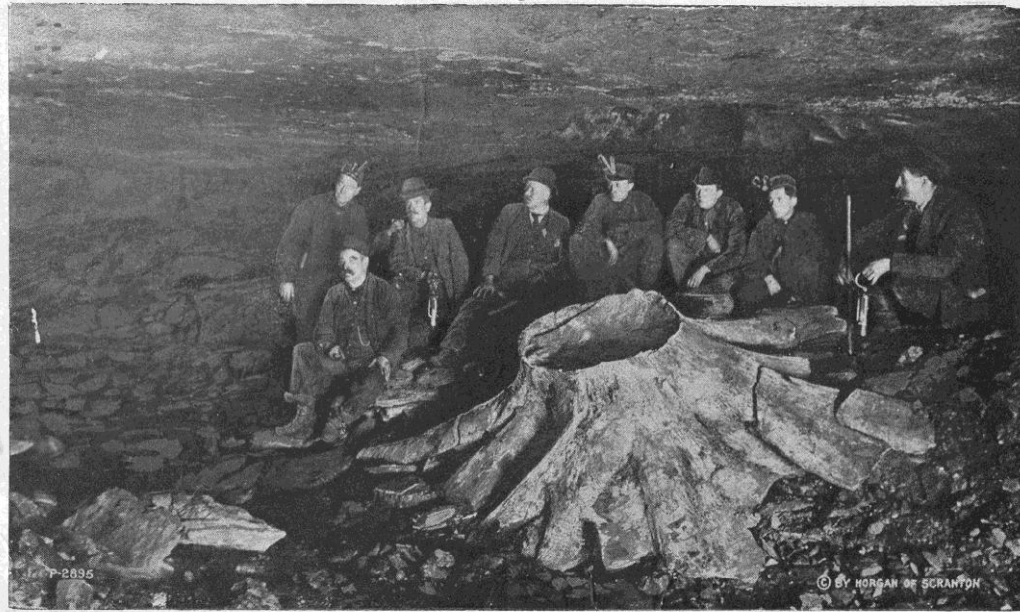
She screams. “Please,” she calls out a final time.

The voice then falls silent and Heimdal and Loke find it easier to continue when there is nothing calling their attention, demanding that they lose.

Regards,  
Professor Emmanuel Huffman.



A Petrified Tree Stump, showing how wood has been turned to coal.



Dear Felix,

As a child, I used to love playing basketball at school. As soon as the bell rang for lunch, I would race down to the court. It didn't matter if it was excessively hot or raining, I would always play. I never imagined that I would later have to contend with students such as myself, who returned from this short break, exhausted, hungry, late with their work and covered in sweat.

On one occasion, lunch was followed by science class. I entered the laboratories happily. I remember being absolutely frightened by what awaited us on the black bench tops.

We were instructed to gather in groups of four. Before us, on a timber board, lay a sheep's eye and a single scalpel.

We all had to take turns in dissecting the eye, cutting along the sclera, around the cornea, popping it open to reveal the mass of vitreous humor.

The eye did not resemble a human's eye. But with the level of fear I felt, it didn't matter. As far as I was concerned, this eye could have belonged to my grandfather.

Some of the kids found the task less grievous than me. Some mimicked the sound of living sheep or claimed that they would be eating roasted lamb for dinner. These kids were often the ones that bullied others, and I couldn't help but worry that they would then apply their new skills in the yard.

I would have to look after my eyes, avert my gaze. I only had two of them.

I had completely forgotten about this incident until recently when I encountered a visiting writer at university. This man had written some masterly novels and almost always under the most oppressive conditions.

Every word that he wrote was subjected to rigorous investigation by the board of censors. Often he would publish his most outspoken work clandestinely, bribing a guard in jail, or by smuggling the work page by page in the most elaborate ways.

He told me that in jail he had conceived of five further books. Now that he was released he could not remember a single line of these works.

He was not a shy man. Nor was he reticent in speaking his mind. He had a moustache that reached his chin, which served to hide two large scars, where his mouth had been ripped open by officials.

“The worst thing about censorship,” he said, before correcting himself. “Do you know what’s fucked up? I can describe a tree, a fucking tree that I have seen every day for twenty-plus fucking years. I can then give that description to the fucking agency and it returns in some mutated form.

“The tree is no longer the tree that I see; the thing I took shade in. It’s as if I were not born with these fucking eyes, as if they were not a blending of my parent’s chromosomes, but rather a set issued to me at birth, collected from a stockade of official limbs, tested on some docile animal, before they found my unopened sockets.

“Do you fucking understand that? Of course you don’t.”

It was then that I thought of my school years and of how easy it had been to cut into an eye when it had the power to stare at you, but to do nothing else.

Regards,  
Professor Emmanuel Huffman.



Dear Felix,

Reading a book to a child is at once the most frustrating and enjoyable experience. I greatly missed the pastime when my children had grown up and did not want to be read to, or found other, more engaging interests before bedtime.

I cannot think of any other word—and it is perhaps not the most appropriate one—but children gloriously pervert the nature of a book and the rules of storytelling. They don't understand that a book (even a picture book) consists of a narrative and a beginning and end page. Even if they do understand this, they fail to see why we restrict ourselves to such a boring tradition.

Further, children fail to realise that although a book may be magical, it has to relate, in some way, to reality—this is already far too analytical; one does not sit a child on their knee and lecture them on the suspension of belief.

A story may begin with the simple phrase, “Once upon a time there was a dog...”, and almost immediately, the child will interject by saying, “and then the dog tickles the sky with its tail.” The rules have been perverted and you submit to their obvious pleasure.

“Yes,” you reply.

“And then the snail goes to the supermarket to buy a song.”

“Yes,” you add.

You close the book having felt that the experience was at once a failure and a success.

This free, and seemingly irrational association of ideas, which most of us outgrow (or subdue), is what the censors fear. They fear that from a single word we may proceed to infer the most spontaneous, nonsensical notions.

They fear this pure, unclassifiable creativity. In response, they attack the writer and the poet, who they believe is the instigator of such free thought. In their minds, the poet brings their pen across the page with unsurpassed, glorious elation. If only they knew how often such poets laboured on each word, and how the greater part of a book's life depended on the reader's capability to imagine and infer.

One need only look at a child who cannot yet read. This does not, in any way, stop them from picking up a book. They will happily flip through the pages and shout any word they know. This is indeed the essence of reading and exactly what they fear.

Regards,  
Professor Emmanuel Huffman.



*Ede.*

*Op de Klinkenberg*

Dear Felix,

The success of any book may be judged by whether it is capable of making the reader believe they are not alone. To this degree, there is no book in my mind greater than *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes.

The edition that I own—an English translation—is a soft-cover book that measures 7.7 by 5 by 1.5 inches in dimension and weighs 1.2 pounds. It consists of 944 pages (including the 126 chapters that make part one and two and the respective dedication and prologue). The pages are yellowish and the print is fine, tightly spaced and black (it is set in Monotype Fournier).

How is it possible that one can derive so much marvellous enjoyment from such a cumbersome book? It's as if every aspect of its physical existence worked to diminish the reading experience.

Immediately we are won over by the knight errant and his misadventures. We instantly forget that in our hands we hold the equivalent weight of two human hearts—that of Don Quixote and his friend Sancho Panza.

To suggest that a book somehow 'wins' or 'garners' our complete attention, is to suggest that we approach books with the same reserve we apply to strangers. Our company has to be earned, our feelings not exploited.

Seldom have I enjoyed such good company. I felt as if I were not reading, but rather, standing beside Don Quixote as he charged the windmills, beside Sancho as he spoke of traversing the hemispheres on the wooden Clavileño.

I felt as if I were not alone in this world.

It was not until I laughed aloud and instinctively raised my head from the page, looking for another person who shared in my joy, that I realised that I was indeed alone. The transition between fiction and reality can be swift, blunt and embarrassing.

I note that the Spanish edition of this book—which I also possess, but am incapable of reading—measures 7.9 by 4.8 by 1.9 inches in dimension and weighs 1.9 pounds. It consists of 1360 pages.



It is easy to imagine that the difference in dimensions between both texts does not reflect a linguistic or format concern, but rather relates to a 'hidden' adventure allowed to only those who are versed in Cervantes's native tongue.

One wants to prolong their company with this chivalrous knight who meets such an unchivalrous end. What then is the sadder scene to imagine, the loved one who runs her hand over a corpse, seeking for a pulse, or, the reader who puts his ear to the cold pages of a quiet book?

Regards,  
Professor Emmanuel Huffman.



Dear Felix,

I experienced a suffocating evening last night. There was no relief from the heat and humidity. I slept naked on top of my bed sheets, while the blades of the ceiling fan spun swiftly.

It was incredibly difficult to sleep. I took to occupying my mind with my academic notes, hoping that such material would bring about an all-consuming lethargy.

I came upon, in my dossiers, a photocopied article from the South Australian regional newspaper ‘The Border Watch’. It was dated 13 November, 1871.

I no longer remember why I copied the article, but judging by my erratic notes in the margin, it must have held some importance to me.

The article related the execution by hanging of Carl Jung, for the murder of the bailiff Thomas Garraway. The punishment was carried out “punctually and privately” at 8 a.m. on Friday morning 12 November, 1871.

The newspaper records that the prisoner “advanced with a firm quickstep to the foot of the scaffold...apparently quite free from the slightest feeling of weakness or terror.”

Carl Jung was allowed a few words before his death. He spoke in his native German, thanking those who had supported him during his incarceration, expressing forgiveness for the severity of English law and providing a bunch of flowers—perhaps he held a cutting of ‘Native Wisteria’, that pale, purple bush that grows so heartedly in that region—which he prayed would be delivered to his “dear wife”.

He continued with his speech (did he speak also without weakness and terror?) until the “bolt was drawn” catching him in mid-sentence.

That the death of this Carl Jung should precede the death of the former Swiss psychiatrist of the same name by some ninety years is perhaps why I archived this article. Perhaps—and here I only speculate—I collected the article believing that man was not limited to this life or body alone; that somehow the soul, in all its spiritual glory, unburdened by human guilt, could transcend this fate and find, at a further time, a new carrier.

There were no clouds in the sky that night and the window panes seemed to weep. I had the most horrific dream, which I hope you don't mind I now recount.

In this dream, I entered a room—let us imagine it is a large chamber—where six men and women sat on wooden chairs that formed a circle. On each of their laps they held a large bust of marble.

The men and women were furiously rubbing the heads of these statues. In the process, they wore away the marble foreheads, giving them a hideous and deformed appearance. Some statues were so corroded by this persistent rubbing that the faces were devoid of anything but the pale eyes and nose. One man, I remember, was rubbing nothing more than a plinth, with broad shoulders, a neck and a strange chin.

In the far end of the chamber was a guillotine. Not far from this device was a stockade of prisoners.

The men and women seated before me were judges. In rubbing the heads of these marble busts they believed that they could draw to the surface a hidden, inscrutable truth.

This process was then carried out on the prisoners. They were grabbed by the guards and their foreheads were vigorously rubbed. Then they were taken to the guillotine, where they were executed.

The judges then ran to the corpse, picked up the decapitated head and spoke to it. They demanded from it a sentence or word of truth.

I witnessed many executions. One of the heads spoke quite calmly, giving a dissertation on the inherent failings of democracies, before his eyes flickered wildly. Finally, he politely asked to be placed by his body.

I awoke with such fright. The heat was excruciating. My bathroom light was flickering. I went to the sink and washed my face.

As I rubbed water onto my forehead I could not help thinking of my dream and of how old I had become. Some water began to gather in the basin. It was then that I noticed that a good clump of my hair had clogged the sink hole.

Regards,  
Professor Emmanuel Huffman.



595

LE HAVRE. — La Plage à l'Heure des Bains

ND  
JHOT.

Dear Felix,

I draw your attention to the figure at the centre of this postcard. Curiously, he is the only perceivable figure with his back towards the viewer. The camera has caught him mid-stride.

In relation to the other people on the beach, he seems to be the person least at leisure. The others are either playing in the shallow water or sitting under tents and parasols in the sand.

His gait is defiant, and although one cannot see his face, judging by his raised shoulders and slightly downcast head one is able to deduce that his mind is not on recreational pleasures, but rather determinately fixed on some internal concern.

Perhaps he has spent all morning in one of the gabled attics by the beachfront. The heat of the day finally forces him outside. He walks the long stretch of beach and finds neither solace nor relief.

He reaches the end of the beach and upon a rock taps the sand from out his shoes. He returns along the same way, skirting the rising tide that has partly washed away his old footprints.

He fills his pockets with stones and shells. He purchases some bread and a few slices of ham on the Boulevard Clemenceau.

Arriving at his attic, he feels tired and yearns for some time alone. He shuts the door. If only he would not have to converse with every soul he met, he thinks. He has been speaking all day and has not had a moment of silence.

But he has spoken to no one at all. He has again confused the conversations that so regularly occupy his mind as company.

He places his stones and shells on the window sill.

He sits by the window and eats his bread with ham. Looking out at the ocean, he says aloud, "When will it end?"

But, when will what end?

He shakes his head. Only he knows.

Regards,  
Professor Emmanuel Huffman.



Dear Felix,

I receive no mail. Each morning I make the short walk to my letterbox and lift its steel lid to find nothing.

Lately I have begun to write to myself. At first, I used other names that I picked from foreign directories. Each day, my letterbox was full of mail. On some days, the mailman even turned off the engine in his motorbike just to stop and talk.

But it was near impossible to convince myself that these letters came from someone else. My handwriting was obvious to me.

For a while, I tried to write with my other hand, the weaker of the two, but the letters that arrived were difficult to read and enjoy. I then tried to pretend I was someone else, simply by writing everything that opposed my beliefs. When I opened the letters, I was sickened by what I could conceive.

Even when I wrote, pretending to be someone else, I found that I could not be completely honest with what I said. If I was sure that no one else would ever read this mail, who did I then have to fear?

The more I realised how dishonest I was, the more boring my letters became. They were full of gossip, platitudes and nonsense.

I wonder if it is possible for anyone to live an honest life. I wonder if humans can ever be honest with each other.

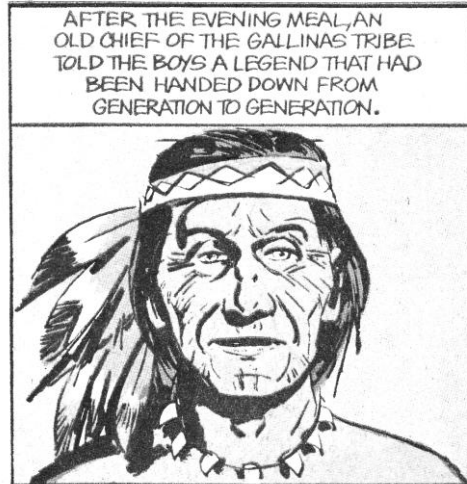
Felix, if you could only answer these two queries for me. I would be a happy man. But you will not respond. Not until I find it within me to speak truthfully.

Regards,  
Professor Emmanuel Huffman.



PART THREE – ERASURE.

# I



THE FIRST MAN ON EARTH had no reason to question the Master's imagination. Being the sole inhabitant of the earth, he had no motivation to marvel at his existence, to query the divine nature of his limbs. He did not inquire as to why the base of his feet were flat and soft, why the ends of his hands were divided like reeds; at night, he caressed the strange, hard matter hidden by his flesh, but he had no inclination to ask the Creator what lay beneath his pliable skin. He was the first man, but he had no way of perceiving himself as an alpha-being, as the figurehead in an unremitting progression of similar beings to come.

It was the creation of a female partner that provided him with the impetus to examine his existence. By looking at her, by feeling her, he was able to see what he was not. Unable to reconcile this dissimilarity, he was impelled to question himself and God. With the birth of their children, and later their children's offspring, he sensed that although they may each be made in accordance with the Divine, they were also expendable.

He was now able to choose any partner he wished. He was also capable of ruminating over his decision, negating those he deemed appropriate to exclude. Humans occupied the earth in large numbers; each had the freedom to make decisions.

He too experienced exclusion, learnt that rejection resulted in agony; that although he was dissimilar to others, a severance from the group made him feel destitute. He now understood the reason for his tears, learnt that by raising his hands to his face, he could hide his pain.

Our present ingenuity at constructing ways to isolate the self from others is astounding. We divide humans into cultures and languages and appearances into customs and trends. We are not satisfied in perceiving others as being simply older or younger than us; we must divide their ages and their faces into generations. In turn, we speak of belonging to, or not being able to comprehend, a certain generation.

What has our primordial instinct to procreate generated but a distressing sense of our own superfluosity? Men and women of no consequential difference are favoured or ostracised by those that wield greater authority.

God may have envisioned a garden of paradise, but what he instead created was an auction house for humans to be paraded in.

## II

### **A ship or a coffin**

**A**LTHOUGH unemployment in Britain today is at a record low some 25,000 men of working age can't find jobs. They are colored men who live on charity, odd jobs or meagre savings in "Little Harlems" in British port cities. Seven thousand Negroes are crowded into the Loudoun Square section of Cardiff and another 8000 are concentrated in South Liverpool. Less pitiful, but subject to indirect segregation, are some 3000 colored students in Britain. "Treat me to a beer," one of the colored workless said, "while I wait to see which I'll get first: a ship or a coffin."

MY NAME IS ERIC GARNETT. It has been 21 days since I was made redundant. I am 63 years of age. I was offered 20 weeks of severance pay for nine years of service.

I didn't imagine that it would be so difficult to leave my cubicle, to never again return to my place of employment. Even now as I write, I have positioned myself into a corner of the room and surrounded myself with books and papers. The proximity of a nearby window and the expanse of space it affords my eyes is enough to frighten me. I have drawn the blinds shut permanently, ensconced myself in my paper garrison, applied myself to the page in front of me, to its restrictions.

I would like to convince myself that I am engaging in meaningful work. I continue to be productive—rising early, taking meal breaks at my desk, not leaving my new workspace until it is late in the evening. Yet I know that I am only producing ruminations, unimportant observations which no one has demanded from me.

No one will ever read this. Nothing is expected of me. I don't even know what I am supposed to do.

I have yet to tell anyone that I have lost my job. I dress for work each morning. I carry my suitcase from the kitchen and take it into my study. I farewell my wife and kids, wish them a good day, even though I don't have a spouse or children.

My arrival to work cannot be instantaneous. I must first contend with the daily traffic. I wait outside my study for 45 minutes and then enter my room feigning exasperation. I hope that my supervisor has not seen me; I cannot afford another reprimanding, not when I am only a month away from my annual appraisal. I quickly scour into my new cubicle.

I would like to believe that I am in a period of transgression, that the surrogate division I have formed in my study was both real and important. I am always anticipating a phone call from the Discipline Inspection Commission, at which time a superior case officer is sure to commend me on my independent and diligent work.

I have thought of procuring the services of a junior secretary, someone whose single duty would be to answer the phone. But I don't feel comfortable entrusting a young, inexperienced girl with such a responsibility. My income does not permit me hiring any one with greater experience. Nevertheless, the phone does not ring.

I am inadequately adapting. Each morning I feel as if I am working inside a phantom limb. I am constantly feeling the ache of my detachment. I am fighting not to be forgotten.

### III

#### Captive Animals Live Longer

Significantly enough, the animals which range over wide territories, such as the elephant, the large ungulates, and the birds of prey, are amongst the longest-lived animals in zoological gardens, and some of the easiest to keep in captivity. It is almost certain that the maximum span of life of many animals is obtained in captivity and not in the wild state. In the wild, very few animals indeed die of old age, whilst the results of post-mortem examinations show that quite a number do so in captivity. This view is also supported by observations on the effect of different conditions on the ages of four common British birds, shown in the following table, taken from Stuart Smith's book *How to Study Birds*:

<i>Species</i>	<i>Greatest age (Aviary)</i>	<i>Greatest age (Wild conditions)</i>	<i>Average age (Wild conditions)</i>
Song-thrush	17 years	9 years	1½ years
Blackbird	20 years	10 years	1¾ years
Starling	15 years	9 years	1½ years
Robin	20 years	11 years	1-1¼ years

FOR SIX YEARS, a man named Earl Adams occupied the cubicle beside me. He was only a few years older than me and had served as a public servant for four separate administrations over three decades.

Although he prided himself on his commitment to work, in the year prior to his retirement he was unusually restive. An afternoon did not pass without Earl interjecting my duties. "Do you know what I'll do when I retire?" he said. "I'm going to go on a cruise around the world. I'm going to collect a little bit of sand from every beach I step on. Are you interested in some sand from Mykonos?"

His plans for retirement changed on a daily basis. "I'm going to eat at good restaurants every night," he said. "No more cafeteria food. God help me if I see another helping of chicken schnitzel with coleslaw again."

A fortnight before his departure from the department, he said, "I've decided that I'm going to buy a house in Alaska; something modest, but comfortable. I want to eat salmon every night; it's supposed to be good for your heart. I would like to live for at least another 30 years."

The department held a farewell party for him, which was well attended. Before he cut into his cake, he was asked to make a speech. He said, "I don't know why I wasted so much of my life as a public servant. I suppose I just didn't have any confidence in my abilities. I was a coward. I spent thirty years doing something I hated. For God's sake do what you love. Don't waste your life. I wish I could do it all differently."

Needless to say, no one enjoyed their cake. A half hour later, Earl was gone. A month later I received a letter from him, postmarked from Montpellier, France. He wrote that he had been forced to cut his cruise expedition short due to severe motion sickness. "The only thing that sickens me more than a wave," he wrote, "is the thought of all the meaningless paperwork I did in my life."

Two months later, I received a second letter. Upon arriving in Anchorage, Alaska, Earl had struggled to find an affordable dwelling for sale. Not only had he misjudged his fortnightly pension, but he had also underestimated the harshness of the Alaskan winters.

His final letter came to me written on a napkin from a Spanish restaurant in Harlem, New York. In part it read, "I do not believe that humans were ever intended to live for so many years. I am 65. I wish I would have died when I was 35. I don't want to go on much longer. There is so much to see and do, but I cannot find the happiness to continue. Please do not reveal any of my feelings to the people at work. It would only make matters worse."

I did not think of Earl again until he walked into the department. He looked like an old circus animal that missed performing and decided to return to the stage. Only this time, it wasn't applause that he garnered from the spectators, but repulsion.

Everyone was frightened of Earl's appearance. He pleaded to be allowed to sit at his desk. He asked if he could touch the shredder, operate the photocopier. Two security guards held him firmly. When he resisted, they were forced to lash him with a long whip until he settled and retreated.

#### IV



**"SEABACKROSCOPE"**  
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SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGEMENT DO NOT ALONE foster effective productivity. The division of labour within my department, each public servant allocated to a varying hierarchical level, has proven to me that there can be no beneficial work without an imminent sense of rejection and failure.

Complacency is not in itself a negative quality. I have encountered many case officers that are completely disinterested in progression, happy enough to examine and produce the same documents year after year. Often, the slight difference between ascending levels of authority is enough to dissuade a person from excelling.

Yet, a pervasive sense of rejection and scorn is what makes even the most apathetic officers nervous, willing to strive harder, think clearer and work longer. Persistent fear is what drives them to ascend the ladder without counting the endless rungs.

I must create within my home office a sense of immanent failure, a quiet and ever-present feeling of menace. I must envision myself to be the lowliest of servants, the sort that is never included in office conversations, to whom all menial tasks are



designated. I must bow my eyes to a non-existent supervisor who endlessly berates me, knowing at once that I despise his character and yet envy his power. One day, I say to myself, I will be the man that accosts others.

I have put up many notes around my office. Each memo demands unreasonable things from me, tasks that I will never complete. I have created fictitious appraisals of my services, each more harsh than the last. In January I was under-achieving, in March I was incompetent, in July it was suggested that I be transferred. I hope that August will bring me relief from my troubles.

As I write, I imagine colleagues heckling me. They ridicule the amateurish nature of my reports, they note grammatical and punctuation errors. They are huddled near to me. They don't care that I can hear them.

I have taken to hiding my belongings. I imagine that there is a cunning thief, a vindictive colleague who has a particular grudge with me. Yesterday, I found a dead rat in my drawers and I screamed in terror, even though it was I who placed it there.

Lately, I have chosen to not set my daily alarm. As I lay in bed, I fear the abuse that I will receive the next day. Yesterday, I arrived to work with no tie, wearing my pyjama pants. I could have walked to my bedroom and changed, but instead, I bore the sustained ridicule all day.



I HAVE NEVER UNDERSTOOD how a sculptor can transform a block of marble into a figure of beauty. By following the vein of the stone, the artist is able to carve the most extraordinary artworks.

I do not have an imaginative sensibility. Nor have the duties of my recent employment demanded that I demonstrate creative flair. I had sought to adhere to the protocols of my department, believing that fidelity to procedures was itself a praiseworthy skill.

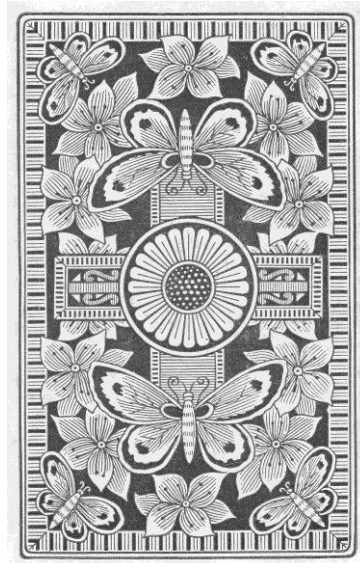
I would often quietly scoff at others—most of a lesser position than me—who sought to introduce small or significant amendments to longstanding traditions. In departmental meetings they would raise their hands, only to have their ideas swiftly rebuffed.

Some officers took to putting photographs of their children or spouses on their cubicle walls. This was against office protocol and I thought that such actions would be quickly halted by superior staff. But soon everyone had pictures tacked onto their walls; some who did not have children or spouses, placed photographs of animals or brief sentences intended to spur motivation. I alone faced my bare walls, focused wholly on my duties.

Soon, I began to believe that everyone thought me morbidly attached to my work, devoid of an exterior life. I now realise that I should have exhibited more creativity; there was an office spirit, a sense of communality that I completely failed to register.

I have placed several photographs on my office walls at home. Like an artist who senses a faint pulse in the vein of a stone, I realised that I too could sculpt my life for exhibition, interpret and forge my own reserved character. But seeing that I do not have any immediate family or friends, I have had to resort to using photographs of strangers, pictures that I have secretively taken on several of my walks.

I fear that one day someone will ask me who these people are, what relation they stand to me. I will have no answer for them. I will be forced to lie and summon false affections.



YESTERDAY I SAT FOR AN HOUR at my desk trying to list all of the interests that I held besides work. I could not manage to think of a single pastime.

Fortunately there was a company that specialised exclusively in discerning and nurturing leisure interests in people without work. The lady from Pass-Your-Time, who answered my call, was courteous. “We can certainly help you Mr. Garnett,” she said. “But first we require some preliminary details. You need to forward us a current photograph of yourself. We will also need to know your precise measurements, specifically your height and weight, but also your exact age. Believe me sir, the effort will be worthwhile. We have had great success.”

I provided what was required. The following morning, as was promised, a leisure consultant arrived at my home.

When I opened the door, I was greeted by a man who looked near identical to me. We sat at the kitchen table and he introduced himself. “I’m so delighted you called,” he said. “My name is Gary Ernett. I have been working for Pass-Your-Time for 10 years now. Unfortunately, due to the specific nature of our services, I haven’t had much opportunity to apply my great skill. I was so surprised when they called and told me

that they had found a suitable client. You and I are unique people. I'm hoping that I can be of great assistance."

We drank our tea quietly. Our mannerisms were even alike. "What is it that your company does?" I asked.

"No doubt you have noticed that we share an uncanny resemblance," he stated. "This is deliberate. My job is to engage in various leisure activities, both of an indoor and outdoor nature. I have a lot of fun. By looking at me, by seeing your own characteristics in me, you too will realise that you are capable of many interesting pastimes."

I watched him complete intricate puzzles on the dining room table. He sang gospel songs, danced, exercised, and baked an assortment of cakes. He spent two hours reading a book. Then he went outdoors and climbed a tree, jumped rope and dug a hole. I do not know what he was searching for, but whatever he did, he seemed to derive great enjoyment from it.

By late afternoon, I grew tired of following him around the yard. He seemed to have limitless energy. I watched him from indoors, frolicking in the shrub, happily catching butterflies with a large net.

Then I went back into my office and recommenced my work. It is tiring to watch another person engage so relentlessly in activities; such observation requires a certain level of personal fitness. Even when it grew dark, I could hear him in the yard screaming like a child, waving a flashlight.

I did not respond when he knocked on the door. He pleaded to be let back inside. "Give me a chance Mr. Garnett," he said. "Let me prove to you that it is possible to enjoy life." I didn't answer, even though it pained me in a strange way to hear his voice, which sounded so similar to my own.

## This WORD CHART gives Astonishing New Mastery of WORDS and IDEAS

**IDEA AND WORD CHART**  
PARTS OF SPEECH VOCABULARY

**BRIGHT**  
FLASHING  
CLEANING  
BRILLIANT  
SCINTILLANT  
SPARKLING  
DAZZLING

**ERUDITE**  
INTELLIGENT  
LEARNED  
LITERATE  
PROFOUND  
SCHOLARLY  
VERSED

**IGNORANT**  
ILLITERATE  
UNEDUCATED  
UNINFORMED  
UNLEARNED  
UNTAUGHT  
UNTAUGHT

**EXCELLENT**  
MATCHLESS  
PEERLESS  
SUBLIME  
SUPERB  
SUPERIOR  
SUPREME  
UNEQUALLED

**KEY WORDS TO ALL SPEECH**  
CONVINCING - IMPASSIONED - RELATIVES

This absolutely new and wonderfully simple Idea and Word Chart is the most stimulating aid to quick thinking ever devised. It gives the word you want—when you want it. It puts words and ideas at your finger-tips. It provides brilliant word power. New ideas spring to your mind. Your imagination is stirred by this simple but marvellous chart. It steers your thoughts and ideas into those amazing word-channels that enable you to make your talks, letters, or any use you make of words, sparkle with brilliance, charm and power. Words and ideas leap into the mind—vitalise the message—grip the interest—sway—convince—compel. Easy—quick—sure. Send 1d. stamp for a copy of this truly remarkable Chart. It will make your ideas more scintillant, your conversation more sparkling, your speaking and writing more brilliant.

IT IS NOT POSSIBLE that my mind could have so swiftly succumbed to senility. A little under four weeks ago my mind was clear and astute. Today, I am doddering over every word. cavernous territories have opened in my brain.

I am ill. I am certainly sick. In a fortnight, I might be completely inarticulate, unable to form even the simplest word. Yet this feeling of dread soon subsides and I am again able to work.

At night, I scour the dictionary and force myself to memorise a hundred new words. My tongue is an old dog; it cowers when I demand from it a set of unusual syllables. It buries its snout on my gums, refuses to say, dis-con-so-late.

I spent nine years learning the language of my department. At my side at all times was a book of acronyms pertinent to my division, as well as a folio of permissible terms for internal and external reports. It took me a long while to acquire this tongue, to converse confidently with colleagues and supervisors.

Now that I am no longer employed, my language is useless. It is not that they have stripped me of my ability to speak, but rather, denied me any further opportunity to utilise this vocabulary. In the company of common people, my language is inaccessible. What does a baker know of A.I.P (Authorised Interrogation Procedures)? How will the post-office clerk respond when I ask her if she has ever encountered an R.S.O.I (Recalcitrant Subject of Interest)?

Senility is a feebleness of the mind, an inability to find a semblance between thought and spoken word. What then is the term that best describes a surplus of words, but no reciprocating audience?

Futility.

## VIII



UP UNTIL FIVE WEEKS AGO, I had been employed as an intelligence officer within the Maragos Acute Counter-Intelligence Department. Principally, I was assigned to the Archives Division.

My role within this sub-branch was to ascertain, engage with, archive and activate all information believed vital to the interest of the Maragos Department of Intelligence.

My duty was to accept all incoming information and to categorise that data in an efficient and easily accessible manner within the archives library. A key component of my work was to attempt to discern what information was critical. This often meant that I had to have the capability to correlate the significance between two or more disparate sources.

Information is defined by the department as any object of perceptible activity that can communicate knowledge deemed of national importance. The expansion of the Counter-Intelligence Department in 1999 and subsequent establishment of the Acute Counter-Intelligence Department saw the reclassification of what information was considered of national importance.

Each day I received shipments of receipts (retail, restaurant, wholesale, etc.), letters (business and personal), bank account statements, taxation forms, microcassette

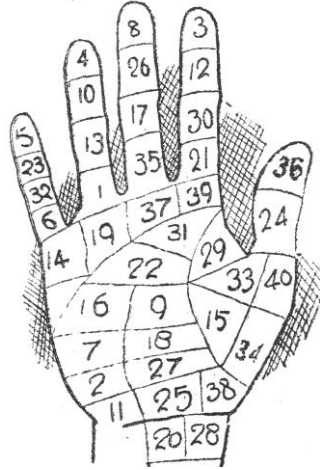


recordings, books (fiction and non-fiction), furniture (chairs, tables, mirrors, etc.), personal belongings (suitcases, wallets, purses, pants, jackets, etc.) and foodstuff (empty cans, wrappers, bottles, etc.).

All things could be collected. There was nothing that evaded surveillance. Everything would prove itself useful if one had the patience and intellectual rigour.

I held this position for nine years. The work was difficult, but intensely stimulating. There is great delight to be found in agonising service.

## YOUR LUCK BY YOUR HAND



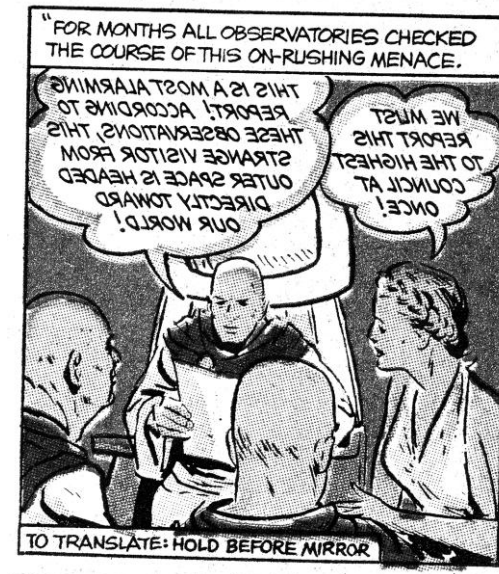
ON MY JOURNEY HOME EACH NIGHT, I would pre-empt the next day's delivery. I foraged in all the garbage bins I encountered, checked in gutters for scraps of information that had been carelessly discarded. There was no item that I considered too insignificant.

Some years ago, I began to leave for work three hours early. I boarded the train, any train, and then found myself the most awkward position in the busiest carriage.

There is nothing I detest more than another person's odour. But I forced myself into every crowd, stuck my nose into armpits and necks. In my breast pocket, I carried a voice recorder. Even though at times I found the closeness to others unbearable, I knew that I was placing the welfare of my department and country before my idiosyncrasies.

Each morning, I arrived to work with a bag full of material and several microcassettes of important chatter. It appalled me to see the others only just entering work, huddled with tired faces around the communal pot of coffee. Did they not realise that acts of subversion did not strictly coincide with departmental hours? Did they not understand that intelligence officers should always be alert?

Nobody approached my desk. They did not have to ask me how my weekend was spent. They only had to look at the papers that surrounded me to know that it had been rewarding.



THE DIVISION WAS CONSTANTLY ASSAILED by information. It was a persistent duel between order and chaos, inclusion and exclusion.

My biggest fear was that I would overlook something of importance. That in a moment of exhaustion or oversight, I would disregard an apple core or cigarette butt, only to later realise that such seemingly trivial objects held information of dire importance.

One day, a colleague approached me and said, "You've been looking at that miniscule advertisement for three hours. What's got you troubled? Why is it of such great importance?"

**THROW YOUR VOICE**  
 INTO A TRUNK, UNDER THE BED.  
 ANYWHERE.

**THE VENTRILO**

An instrument fits into the mouth, cannot be detected! With the aid of this double throat, or VENTRILO, you can imitate birds, animals, etc. Everything for ONE SHILING (1/2 posted), including a FREE booklet, giving you full instructions how to become a Ventriloquist and throw your voice.

SEND THIS CUTTING FOR FREE  
 JOKER'S CATALOGUE.

**WILL ANDRADE,**  
 276 COLLINS ST., MELBOURNE, C.I.,  
 Same building as Allan & Co. Pty. Ltd.

“Last night, I seized this from the rubbish bin of a certain Ms. Janet Raven,” I said.

“Do you suspect her of engaging in something inappropriate?”

“It baffles me as to why someone would want to throw their voice? Why would someone want to imitate something that they were not? What is the advantage of having a ‘double throat’, of imitating a bird or an animal?”

“It’s for amusement sake,” he said. “It’s probably a piece of nonsense. Don’t worry so much about it.”

“But why does Ms. Raven have this advertisement?”

“I couldn’t tell you. Maybe she hates her voice. Maybe she’s bored.”

I didn’t dare tell him what I truly feared. That Ms. Raven might not only be seeking to imitate an animal, but also an officer or politician. She might be planning to infiltrate the department, undertake reconnaissance work for an enemy state. She could adopt the voice of a statesman, deceive even the most inquisitive officers who, enraptured by the authority of her false voice, would disregard her feminine appearance.

“A person is more than just a voice Eric,” he said. “Remember that.”

I archived the information and made a specific note of my concerns in my personal diary. Throughout my employment at the department, I kept two separate diaries. The first was an official journal where I made notes that were then made available to all relevant staff. The second was a private journal where I expressed the extent of my real concerns.

My house is filled with journals. They must number close to a thousand. I live in a house of suspicion.



If your dog is listless, tired without cause or off his food, you cannot do better than give him a course of Barko Condition Powders. Watch for signs of ill health—warm nose, shabby coat, listlessness and poor appetite. These are danger signals that should not be ignored by the careful dog owner.

**BARKO**  
**CONDITION POWDERS**  
 1/6 per box — All Chemists

I HAVE BEEN AFFLICTED BY A DEBILITATING ILLNESS that has rendered me motionless. I have been lying in bed all day and night, incapable of even lifting a limb. I don't know what has brought upon this sickness, but I believe it is related to melancholy.

This morning a thick, black cloud entered my room and lingered on the ceiling. Although it did not have a perceptible face, it seemed to be alive, gauging my listlessness. Soon, it summoned the courage to venture down from the ceiling. It surrounded me. I felt the black mass engulf me and I thought how pleasantly numbing the spirit of melancholia can be. Even though I was not able to communicate with it, it seemed to enjoy my company. How I wished that I had the energy to raise a hand, to greet it, to stroke its black, flowing face. Soon my bedroom was entirely filled by this dark entity.

It was then that I realised that this was no spirit, but simply the smoke emitted by my oven, which I had forgotten to attend to. I opened the windows and doors and then went back to bed. I felt deeply disappointed, believing that somebody, even if it was a spectre, had felt impelled to visit me.

I fell asleep and later woke to find my housekeeper measuring my outstretched limbs. “Goodness me,” she said. “I thought you were dead. You gave me the biggest fright. You were so still and pale. I called your name. I thought you were dead.”

Her German shepherd stood beside her. It looked at me curiously. I had told her not to bring her dog indoors while she cleaned the house and she assured me that she never did. I was never present to verify her claims. But often I would find fine, golden-brown hair on the sofa.

She continued to measure me. “I’m not dead,” I said.

“But you are dying,” she responded.

“I’m not dying.”

“You look gravely ill. My dog has a way of sensing those near to death. We often visit the hospice.”

“I’m sick.”

“I thought you were dead. The walls are black. It’s like a sarcophagus in here.”

“What is your dog doing?”

“She’s hungry.”

The dog brought its snout to my face. I thought that it would lick my cheek, but there was something about my expression that seemed to fill it with repulsion. It backed away. It whined.

“That’s the response she gives at the hospice,” said my housekeeper. “This dumb dog fears death as much as any human being.”

“I’m sick,” I replied.

**CHANGE YOUR THOUGHTS  
INTO THINGS!**



**Do Your Hands  
Follow Your Mind?**

Do you lack co-ordination? Do you find it difficult to translate your ideas into *actions* and *things*? Have you felt the urge to *create*, to *build*—to start something new, and have you failed to organize your thoughts? Would you like to be able to *follow through* on your hunches—make realities out of vague impressions? Learn the truth about will power, concentration, memorizing, the law of suggestion.

YESTERDAY MORNING I STOOD IN THE GARDEN with a butterfly net in my hands, not knowing exactly what I was doing, or when or why I had come to the yard. I was profoundly disorientated.

By my feet were two large monarch butterflies, their wings crushed by my soles. Had I deliberately killed these colourful insects? Was that not the intention of this sordid activity, to entrap the butterfly inside the large net and to then carefully pin its splayed wings onto a corkboard for display? How long had I been in the garden? Had I killed or maimed any other lepidopteron?

I went back inside and made myself a cup of tea. I occupied my time by reading the current Maragos Interrogation Division Practices and Procedures Manual. The book is replete with clear and concise guidelines. I have always found it to be a well constructed and interesting document.

As I read, I noticed that there was a loud humming sound in my house. I continued to peruse the varying forms of interrogation, each adequately illustrated, but soon the sound became incredibly loud and distracting.



Then suddenly hundreds of butterflies filled the room and clung to the timber ceiling beams. Although I had no recollection, I must have caught these insects and without killing them, pressed them inside my private diaries.

I spent the entire afternoon attempting to lure these creatures outside. But even this morning, I saw a resilient one desperately clinging to the leg of a kitchen chair.

### XIII

The darkness inside the nest has resulted in the loss of functional eyes, but the insects have highly developed senses of smell and touch. (Exceptional are some thirty species with functional eyes.) Foreign insects, even of the same species, are immediately detected and destroyed, but if the intruder survives long enough to acquire the odour of the nest it is allowed to remain unmolested. There are exceptions to this general rule, as occurs when different kinds of insects—called termitophiles—live as guests of the termite and share their food; in a few cases two species of termites share a nest as equal partners.

ALTHOUGH IT HAS BEEN 10 WEEKS SINCE I cleared my cubicle at work, I have found it difficult to cease from collecting items of importance. In part, I feel as if I can no longer approach inanimate objects in a superficial manner; my corneas have been cleansed of a thick crust of normalcy. Another part of me continues to fear a lapse in judgement, even though it is no longer expected that I remain persistently vigilant.

There is also an obsessive quality to my information gathering. I do not seek to be known for what I possess. Rather, I feel as if I can only know the world by continually possessing things—the world is a chaotic crumb trail and I must find coherence in each marker or lose myself to chaos completely.

To this extent, I have been rummaging in bins and mailboxes at night on my own accord. Occasionally I am lucky enough to stumble across an unlocked car or a laundry window left ajar. I find the hours between midnight and 5 a.m. to be particularly productive.

Whenever I deem it appropriate, I send the information that I have gathered back to the Archives Division. I never address the package, as I fear that I will be told to politely, or otherwise, desist with my actions.

I have skills that cannot easily be acquired by an apprentice intelligence officer. I showed more enthusiasm than all the recent high school recruits. University graduates, steeped in investigative theory, have little to show in the way of experience.

Each morning the Archive Division receives a new package from me. They gather around the mysterious yellow envelope and collectively sigh with amazement when its contents are revealed.

“Who is this stranger?” they surely say. “Here we have a man of outstanding capabilities. He truly redefines our departmental definition of intelligence gathering. He is in a category far beyond us. He shows a level of ingenuity that we can only hopelessly strive towards. Find this man. Bring him here at once. We have much to learn.”

Tomorrow, I will send a package and provide my initials. I do not dare give them my full name. I find it difficult to hide my desire to be known, to be recognised. My efforts must be lauded.

## XIV

Dear Florrie,—

We have come to pay you an unexpected visit—in fact, we are a surprise party, who have invaded your house to enjoy ourselves and to offer enjoyment to you. We certainly are uninvited, but we feel we are not unwelcome. In view of your departure for a trip abroad, your fellow-members of the tennis club felt that they could not let you go without first expressing to you their love and esteem, mingled, of course, with envy at your great luck in having a tour round the world. First of all, you must do as we tell you to-night, for we have assumed control of you and your house for a couple of hours' fun and frolic.

ON RETURNING FROM AN EVENING of investigative work, I noticed that the lights I left on at home were now switched off. I thought that it was yet another expression of my unremitting illness.

When I entered the house and turned on the lights, I was greeted by uproarious applause. In my lounge room stood all my former colleagues, a few new faces that I did not recognise, as well as several superior officers who seldom mingled socially with staff.

I was so surprised by their presence that I nearly dropped all the papers and personal belongings that I had scavenged that night. "Look at him," said a former colleague. "They say that an intelligence officer never rests. We didn't think we could surprise you Mr. Know-it-all. Did we catch you napping? Are you enjoying your retirement too much?"

"It's certainly an honour and a surprise to see you all here tonight," I said. "I wish I would have known that you were all coming. I would have prepared some food and drink."

"Don't worry about that," said another colleague. "Your housekeeper was in on the plan all along. How she can hide a secret from you is beyond my understanding. Perhaps we should recruit her? How old is she? Just shy of fifty I would guess. Besides Eric, don't you know that we have other ways of entering houses? A locked door has never been an imposition to us—we have keys to all locks."

My housekeeper appeared with plates of sausage rolls. I suddenly feared that my former colleagues had entered my study, searched through my personal belongings, discovered my copious amounts of information and notes. They were likely to berate me, ridicule me for being so stubborn with my work habits.

“I hope that’s not work you’re holding there,” said my former supervisor. “I hope they’re receipts for your next holiday.”

I laughed and ran to my study. Chained to my desk was the German shepherd. It snarled at me as I entered.

Everything seemed untouched. But how long had they been at my premises and was not one of our required skills to be able to investigate thoroughly without the appearance of disruption? Had they already gone through my property and copied or taken what they deemed important? Certainly, if I were in their position, I would have investigated every corner of the house. No one is above inspection.

I quickly returned to the impromptu party and mingled with my colleagues. “The state of affairs is as desperate as ever,” said one young public servant. “By broadening our scope of intelligence gathering, we are discovering more and more acts of dissidence.

“Our government funding has recently been doubled, and we are soon to begin a large-scale recruitment drive. Our aim is not to employ any further public servants, but rather to train intelligence officers directly embedded within the community. The future of intelligence and law enforcement is in the practice of discreet infiltration.”

“Is this not the present role of intelligence?” I said.

“What if I could tell you that I could read your thoughts?” he replied. “That I not only had access to what you were thinking, but also to what you planned to do? What if I could go further than just perceiving your intentions, but truly comprehend the mechanisms of your thought process?”

“I would say that your skills would then border on the magical. And I, for one, have never believed in witchcraft.”

“You have not adjusted well to retirement. You feel as if you were slighted, badly treated. You struggle to find anything of interest in your life. You have no partner, no family or friends. You hope that one day you will find someone to love, but you know,

in your heart, that you would rather be alone and again employed. You despise us for entering your house without permission. It upsets you that your housekeeper did not advise you. You never trusted her anyway and tomorrow you will terminate her services. You are unhappy—grumpy—but you like to imagine that you are fatally ill. You tell yourself that you will be reinstated someday, but you know that this will never happen.”

This monologue brought great applause throughout the room. Everyone seemed to have high admiration for this worker who seemed no older than twenty years of age.

“Let’s get onto a more cheerful subject shall we?” said my former supervisor. “The reason for this surprise party is to congratulate you on your retirement. We failed to provide you with an appropriate farewell—you certainly deserved better. I hope you were not offended.”

“Not at all,” I said. “As you can imagine, I have been enjoying my retirement. It is nice to be able to finally do all the things I’ve always wanted to do. In fact, I’m thinking of travelling.”

“Really?” he said. “You never struck me as a man of hobbies or leisure interests. You were always so single-minded about your work. Maybe I should invite you to my cabin in the woods? You would enjoy it—most of the people here have already been. Do you like mountaineering?”

“I can’t say that I’ve tried it.”

“Not to worry. Believe me, when there is only a thin harness separating you from life or death, you quickly learn to adapt. You comply with the face of the stone. You depend on it. It shows you the way and you have no choice but to take it. You should come with me.”

“I would love to.”

The party continued till late in the evening. Everyone had a lot to eat and drink. I wondered how they would all be fit to work the following morning. I enjoyed their company and the praise that they afforded me. When they left, I was in good spirits.

It was only when I was again alone—save for my housekeeper—that I noticed that my study had been completely emptied of its belongings. My desk was bare and all of my personal journals had been taken.

“I can’t believe they’ve stolen everything,” I said. “They seemed to be having a good time. They certainly drank enough.”

“They were drinking water,” said my housekeeper.

“They were drinking alcohol. I saw them. They were having a good time. Some of them were truly intoxicated.”

“I don’t believe that you can get drunk on water. They were acting. It seemed like a strange night to me.”

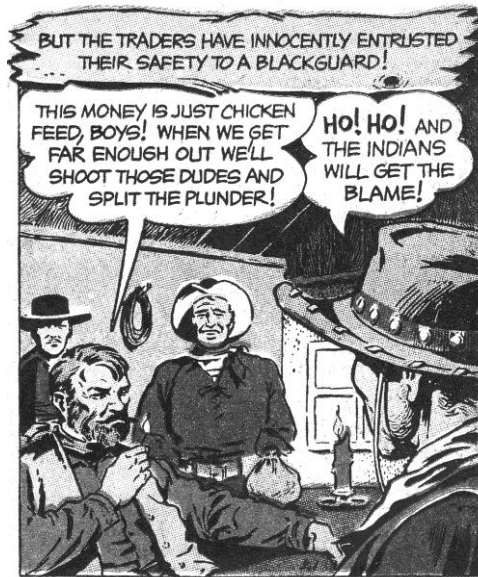
“I can’t believe it.”

“And what about that young man who paraded like a fool in front of you? The nerve of him! He acted as if he could read your mind and you believed him. He spent all afternoon reading your private journals. I brought him cups of tea all afternoon long.”

“How can they steal from me?”

“Don’t worry sir. They steal from everyone. It’s for the best.”

XV



THE EVENTS OF THAT NIGHT troubled me greatly. I was restless, unable to sleep, consumed with anger, feeling completely betrayed. Then suddenly, I heard a voice that startled me. “Quit it,” it said. I froze with fear.

There could be no denying the fact that I was now severely ill. Audible hallucinations were now seeping from my fractured mind. I knew it best not to respond to these imaginary voices, but I could not help myself. “I can’t quit it,” I said. “It isn’t possible to forgive such a thing.”

“Quit it,” said the voice. “Just stay still and go to sleep. You’re making my job unbearable.”

“What about my life, what about all the injustice I have endured?”

“Do you often whine this much? It isn’t an appealing quality. Just go to sleep. Get on with your life and everyone will leave you alone.”

“They terminated my services. I gave them all my life. I gave them my precious time.”

“You gave them nine years. Stop complaining. Are you forgetting Earl?”

“Look at my state of mind. They’ve ruined me.”



“You’re a disgrace. I feel like getting out from under your bed and slapping you across the face.”

It was then that I peered under the bed and saw the intelligence officer hidden in the dark space. He had a voice recorder in his hand and an authorised departmental balaclava over his face.

“Everyone has their end point,” he said. “You should have known that. You should have accepted that you were no longer useful. Besides, you were retrenched for over-stepping your duties. If you had only followed procedures.”

“They could have issued me with a formal warning, an official reprimand. It would have demoralised me, but I would have complied. I would have learnt.”

“You’re incredibly naïve. What if we had to give everyone an official warning? If before we collected data, or rendered a suspect, we had to issue them with an authorised letter of forewarning? What makes you think that we public servants are any different? Their intention is to keep a stronghold on authority. Any kind of warning undermines their status. Now go to sleep.”

“I can’t sleep.”

“You’re a baby. Do you need some breast milk?”

“Why are you being so nasty?”

“Because you have got it into your head that you are sick and that everyone hates you. It’s true, people found you quite odd and even boring. But even though you went well beyond your normal duties, people admire your dedication. You did exactly what others like you do each day. You thought you were doing something exceptional, but you weren’t. It was a routine task. Only it was not your responsibility. You went about it the wrong way. You didn’t let anyone in on your secret—your tendencies.”

“But why did they steal from me today, don’t they trust me?”

“For God’s sake, I’m hiding under your bed. I’ve been here for a week. I’ve been recording everything you say during your sleep. You just don’t get it do you? It’s not about trust, it’s about power.”

“I can help you interpret some of the transcripts if you like? I can make some sense out of my subconscious.”

“It truly baffles me how you were ever employed as an intelligence officer. You’re a dimwit. It doesn’t matter what your transcripts say or whether I can understand them. The only thing that matters is what I infer from them. I could be in a good mood or a bad mood. On most days, I am thinking only of what can better service my career.”

“Why don’t you sleep next to me? There’s room for both of us in this bed. You look uncomfortable.”

“Now you’re beginning to understand.”

## **Animal Encyclopædia**

LEO WENDER

“This volume is just what the publishers claim it to be ‘a complete dictionary of mammals’ . . . altogether a very handy reference book”.—*Discovery*. “This most valuable book . . . is written in such a way that not only will students of biology use it constantly for reference, but the layman will find it easily understandable and helpful.”—*Zoo Life. Illustrated.* 12s. 6d. net

IT HAS BEEN 14 WEEKS since I left work. 14 weeks.

This morning I stood in front of the bathroom mirror and suddenly felt impelled to bark at my reflection. I snarled, showed my decrepit mouth. I toyed with the image, moving from side to side. I then acted dumbfounded when I could not find the canine on the mirror’s reverse side.

In the lounge room, I felt strongly prompted to crawl my way across the carpet like a snake. I stuffed food into my mouth and tried to digest it without masticating. In the garden I dug for worms, extruding their thin, dark bodies from the soil and dropping them into my throat. I rubbed my face against the bark of a tree, pretending that I did not have hands with which to scratch myself.

I am beginning to think that I am not a human being—that I never was. God shook me in His great cradle and upon looking at me said, “Good luck to you my son. Now go.”

Standing in my garden, I gazed at the picture window. My immediate instinct was to charge upon it, to throw my body against its shiny surface. I ran towards it with force and speed.

I lay on the lounge room floor, covered in glass. I could hardly move my wings. I wanted to squawk, prayed that another human would understand my shrill tongue. If only they would extend their hand to a maimed beast. What had they to fear?

I wanted to squawk. I could not do so. Instead, I said, “Help.”

# AN AFRICAN TAMING



She was A GIRL WITH A PAST! That was why every man in Kimba Colony considered her fair game. Well, she wouldn't care! She'd have a good time and never let them see the bruised, aching heart that longed for the real protective love, not the fleeting passion of a moment. Came THE MAN, who told himself that this girl who promised all and gave nothing should be taught a lesson. Then began one of the most amazing conflicts, the struggle between a man who meant to be master, and the girl who could not become a slave!

ONE DAY AT WORK a colleague approached me and said, "I don't know how you do it. I've never heard you talk of having a wife, a girlfriend or even a prostitute. I understand that to some people, this is a private matter. But from you, I get this overwhelming sense of self-imposed abstinence. Your testicles must be the size of planets. I wouldn't be surprised if one day all of the office furniture became caught in their orbit. Don't you want a partner?"

Although I had grown accustomed to such crude talk within the department, I had never myself engaged in such derogatory banter. "I did have a girlfriend once," I said.

"Was that when you were a mortician?" he said. "Don't get me wrong, dead women are still women. Plus they're cheap to take care of. You'll never get prosecuted for slapping a dead woman."

I didn't know what to say. I just wished that he would go away, that he would leave me alone and let me resume my duties.

"You've got a vagina don't you?" he said. "I've been wondering why there's a bin for sanitary pads in the male toilets. You've got an old man vagina don't you?"

I kept quiet. By then, others had gathered around my cubicle. Not one of them offered me any assistance.

“I’ll give you a hundred dollars,” he said. “No, make it a thousand dollars, if you can provide me with solid evidence that you’ve ever kissed a woman.”

Although I do not care to admit it, I went immediately outside and cried. I got into my car, turned on the radio and wept.

I am not uninterested in the opposite sex. Indeed, I do at times feel an overwhelming attraction to women. Often, I will overhear a high-ranking female intelligence officer deliver an update on an active case and be immediately aroused. I don’t know whether it is the fact that there are so few women within the department, or simply the sound of newly gathered information that engages my sexuality.

Over the years, I have had little time to participate in social activities. My occupational duties have been highly demanding. This does not mean that I have not thought about what my future partner might physically look like, or what moral characteristics she might hold.

I have established a personal locker, a chest of sorts, where I put feminine items of interest that I have gathered from my investigations. For instance, I have included a brassiere from a laundry line, a partially used lipstick, a love letter, hair from a comb and a diamond necklace.

The soul of the lady I will someday encounter will be akin to my own. Her desires, her wit and intelligence will be equal to mine. She will open the locker that I have formed and think it a treasure chest.

## XVIII



IN 2006 I ENGAGED IN A RELATIONSHIP with Ms. Barbara Hatfield. Ms. Hatfield was employed as a seamstress at a local dry-cleaning and alteration store. In the past, she had mended several of my pants and jackets.

On one occasion, I inquired—somewhat desperately—about an important document I might have inadvertently left in my trousers. “I was hoping that you would come back,” she said. “My intention was to promptly mail it to you, but we had no record of your address. The others thought you were strange and urged me to read its details. But I promise you that I did no such thing.”

She then retrieved her lunchbox. There, beside her cut sandwich, lay my document, untouched and neatly folded.

Initially, we began to converse on a casual basis. She struck me as somewhat limited in her intellectual capabilities. She fawned over me obsessively. She would not walk with me unless we held hands. I attributed these characteristics to her young age. She was some 30 years my junior. She still lived with her parents.

“A man shouldn’t always have to hold a woman’s hand,” I said. “There is comfort to be found in pockets.”

“But isn’t it nice to hold hands?”

“In some cultures it is considered crass.”

“But in this culture it is fine.”

“There is a lot you still have to learn.”

“Did I offend you? You’re a hard person to understand some times.”

She made my lunch for work each morning. I was amazed that my colleagues did not notice the abrupt change in my demeanour. I felt like saying, “Can you not see that I am eating a tuna sandwich? Do you not know how much I despise the taste? Can you not tell that I am in love?”

Ms. Hatfield’s parents were both on disability pensions. She lived with them in order to assist them with their daily needs. They seemed to be fairly healthy to me, but I am no doctor. One day, Barbara was washing her father’s feet when she looked up at me and said, “Do you know what I’d like to do? I would like to study Law.”

“Are you just saying that because you feel embarrassed about cleaning your father’s feet?” I asked.

“Why would you say such a thing? This is my father. These are my parents.”

“Are you telling me that you have an interest in the law?”

“I don’t know. I believe in justice. I look at the world and see so much cruelty. I want to put my life to good use—I want to make a difference.”

“I think the water is cold. Your father is curling his toes.”

“You’re not listening to me.”

“I know,” I said. “You want to help. But don’t you know that practicing law is not just about helping people resolve injustices. Sometimes it’s about obeying rules that you don’t necessarily agree with. Could you defend a person who you knew was a criminal? I don’t think so. Your character is too weak, far too idealistic.”

“Who are you to tell me what I can and cannot do?” she said, holding that old foot. “I believe I could do it just fine.”

In 2007, my opinion of her changed. One night, we were returning to her parent’s house from a restaurant, when we came across a prostitute being accosted by several males. As it turns out, these men were low-level officers from the Department of Corrections and although they did not recognise me—as they were intoxicated—I knew their faces and names well.

Without any further thought, Ms. Hatfield jumped to the aid of the prostitute. She struck the men across the face with her handbag. “How dare you ridicule this poor lady,” she said. “You men disgust me. She is just doing her job. Who are you to judge her? Look at yourselves, you’re all drunk. I should report you to the police. Don’t think I wouldn’t.”

This brazen action inspired me with great admiration for Ms. Hatfield. I had misjudged her, underestimated her capability to hold firm ideals, overlooked her inherent instinct to defend a decent citizen. I took her back to my apartment and although I had no prior experience of the act, had sex with her. She lay naked in bed for sometime after. I handed her a wet towel and said, “Now that that’s over, could you please leave?”

Three months later, she told me that she was pregnant with my child. I thought it best to be honest with her from the start. I told her that my employment with the department required me to work long hours with almost no days of rest. As I was a well regarded intelligence officer, I was entitled to a generous salary. I gave her a choice. “I could provide you with a stipend,” I said, “which would cover the cost of rearing the child, or you could leave your parent’s house and live with me—though I assure you that I would have little time for you or the child.”

“What makes you think that I want to live with you?” she said.

“What do you expect from me then? Are you going to have the child?”

“What does it matter to you if I abort the child or choose to rear it? You don’t care. You don’t really want to know what I decide to do. You only need to know. You cannot stand uncertainty.”

“Are you going to have the child?”

“This will be the last time you see me.”

Although it would have been easy to locate her, I chose to see if she was a woman of her word. I started making my own lunches again. I have not seen her since.

Often, on my nightly investigations, when I am scouring the space beneath the cot in which a child sleeps, I wonder if that quiet soul is my offspring. Even if I were to stir the child awake, ply it for a response, it would only look at me in a stupefied manner. It would scream, offer me no answer, provide me with no closure.



## XIX

**I**T'S a good three years since he played Tommy Udo, that hopped-up killer with the sadistic laugh, but Richard Widmark is still haunted by the role.

"No matter where I go, I'm still Tommy Udo," said Widmark. "It drives me nearly crazy at times. I've never known a player who had a part that stuck so fast and long. People come up in public and ask me to do that laugh. If I refuse I'm a heel. If I do I'm a jerk. So, what do I do? I find myself trying to keep out of sight."

I HAVE ALWAYS HAD MY RESERVATIONS about the effectiveness of intelligence officers embedded within the community. I don't mean to disparage the select few public servants who produce marvellous work. How these men negate their own self so completely to take on a harrowing alter life is difficult for me to understand.

But the reality is that most covert intelligence officers in Maragos accept the position with a misguided sense of its duties. They are often under the impression that the progression from an office cubicle to clandestine field work correlates with an ascendance in social status. They imagine that they will be mingling with the elite of society, when the reality is that in most instances, deviant groups comprise individuals with fundamentalist ideals, but little or no means of action.

Further, they do not completely understand the psychological implications of adopting a secondary personality. Thus it is not uncommon to see a confused worker weeping to a departmental psychologist, stripped of their initial ideals. It is hard to console such a fractured being.

On one particular day, I arrived at work to find twenty men standing in a single file, waiting to see the department's only psychologist. They were an odd looking group, each dressed in varied ethnic disguises. I felt as if I had surreptitiously walked into a fancy dress party.

At my cubicle, I began my morning's work. But it was difficult to concentrate when all the men were sobbing. Then someone touched me on my shoulder and said, "It looks as if the psychologist will have herself a busy day. I need to talk to someone—anyone. Do you mind if I talk to you? I don't mean to impose."

I looked at this poor individual, dressed in a tweed jacket with leather elbow pads. He had a greying beard and thick-rimmed bifocals. "If it will help you," I replied. "But we should probably go outside if you want to smoke your pipe."

"No. I don't smoke," he said. "But I was told that my character should probably smoke."

"So you do smoke?"

"Only when I am in character."

"And how long have you been this other person?"

"Six years."

"Why don't we go to the cafeteria?"

We sat opposite each other at a small table in the cafeteria. I didn't know what he expected from me. "On Tuesdays they serve beef stroganoff," I said. "Today is not Tuesday."

"I don't know if I believe in the nature of my work any longer," he said. "I don't know if my actions are bettering society or restricting it."

"Haven't you noticed the improvements in our way of life over the last nine years? There have been far fewer attacks on the public. There is a discernable level of peace and happiness."

"I don't think I'm capable of seeing that anymore. Lately I have begun to sympathise with the people I'm informing on. Last week I even took a gentleman out for a social drink."

"You shouldn't be telling me this—it is against protocol; completely unethical. I will pretend that you told me that you took this man out for a drink because you believed that he had further information to offer."

"Is it possible that we are wrong, that the people we are prosecuting are harmless?"

“We are not wrong. We may have been wrong initially, but we are constantly amending our mistakes, our investigation methods, our departmental procedures. That’s why we have independent over-sight bodies. That’s why we have bi-annual updates to our manuals, daily intelligence reports.”

“Yesterday I was a step away from telling someone that I was an intelligence officer. I had great affection for this person; I considered him a friend, a real friend. The consequences of such an action did not even cross my mind. I just wanted to say, ‘How about we meet for a game of tennis, or go to a movie? I told you that I didn’t like sports or going to the cinema, but I was lying’. I miss doing normal things.”

“You need a holiday, some rest time. The department can organise for paid personal leave. They’re incredibly generous and discrete in that regard. They will understand your condition.”

“I’ve already exhausted all my accrued leave. It’s hopeless. When I go on holidays, I feel like an actor that has stumbled on to the wrong stage. Can you understand what it is like to each day wait for the curtains to lift, to have a thousand eyes staring at you, to constantly fear saying a wrong word?”

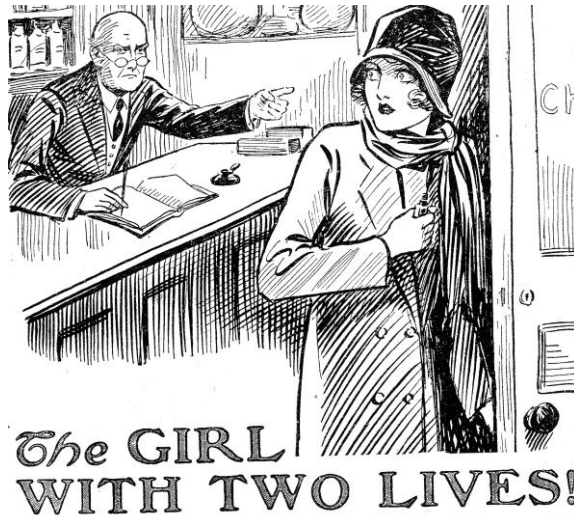
“On Fridays they serve fish in honour of Lent.”

“Do you think it will pass?”

“It must.”

“I hope so,” he said. “You should come and visit me some day. You seem like a decent man. My name is Felix Plumly, but when I’m on duty I respond to Professor Emmanuel Huffman.”

He stood and extended his hand for me to shake. Its grip was soft and fleshy. I wondered whose hand I was shaking and whether or not, in the face of a pertinent decision, it gained fortitude or fell limp.



I VISITED FELIX PLUMLY the following week. He worked in a small office in the department of English and Writing Studies at St. Sebastian University. Upon his door was a small placard. It read, ‘Professor Emanuel Huffman’.

“What a surprise,” he said as he answered the door. His voice was different, deeper and more assured. “I didn’t expect you to come. I thought I had needlessly troubled you with my concerns. You were generous to listen to me.”

“I’ve come to see if you are doing well,” I said. “Your demeanour worried me somewhat.”

“It happens from time to time.” He said. Then he motioned me inside, shut the door and offered me a seat.

“It isn’t an easy job,” he said. “But you have to take things day by day, slowly and with patience. Just like Aesop’s fable of the tortoise and the hare.”

“Is Aesop a colleague of yours?” I said.

“If he was, he would certainly be suffering from acute rigor mortis.”

“You have a lot of books. I don’t suppose you have the time to do much leisure reading.”

“No. And even if I had all the time in the world, it would do me no good. Most of these books are filled with blank pages.”

He walked to one of the bookshelves and retrieved a book called, *The Day has Come*, by Frederic Delgado. “For a man named Delgado,” he said, “he sure knows how to write fat books. But, as you can see, the pages are all empty.

“The title is quite suggestive, and it alone could occupy your interest for an hour or two. But I’m afraid we will never know exactly what day has come, or what importance such a day held. I can’t help but think it’s something ominous. What do you think?”

“*The Day has Come*,” I said. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s a cheerful book. Maybe this Frederic Delgado is confidently waiting for the results of a job appraisal.”

“You’re right. Perhaps I’m too morose. But I’m afraid that Frederic Delgado does not exist. Nor do any of these other fictitious authors on my strange bookshelf. But wouldn’t it be nice to pick their brains, to sit together with all these writers, perhaps at a café somewhere, and to talk?”

“It would be disappointing. How can you share a coffee with someone that doesn’t exist?”

“Point taken. It is the book that matters and not the author. That sort of encounter always ends in disappointment.”

I was not interested in conversing about books. Indeed, I had little interest in Felix’s well being. Our fortuitous encounter in the cafeteria had alerted me to a possible dilemma within the department. That night, I had written all of my concerns in my personal diary; I must have filled some thirty pages.

“There is one book on the shelf that is real,” he said. “That’s *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes. Have you read it? It’s fantastic.”

“I haven’t.”

“It is about a common man who believes himself a knight errant. Along with his friend Sancho Panza, they undertake numerous adventures, most of which end in comic failure. For instance, upon encountering some windmills, this marvellously deluded knight charges them, believing that they are giants.”

“He sounds crazy. How can windmills be giants?”

“I’m failing to capture the beauty of the work.”

“It isn’t your job to do so. You are employed to apprehend dissident students and writers. How is your work going?”

“Fine,” he said. He stood somewhat abruptly. “I have a meeting with a young Australian man whom I employed to compile and edit an anthology of short stories. I met him while on holidays. I could not help myself. I felt impelled to continue with my duties, even though I was well beyond my jurisdiction.”

“Good,” I said. “You seem remarkably better. The Discipline Inspection Commission will be pleased to hear of your swift recovery.”

“I’m going to leave now. I know that you will go through my belongings. You will take whatever pleases you. Even the most trivial thing will stir suspicion in you. You will even take my blank books and spend hours trying to verify the existence of these baffling authors.

“The anthology edited by Patricio Muñoz is in my top drawer. It is called *Testimony*. Every book has its destined reader. I knew under whose eyes this anthology would end up. I named it appropriately.”

“Sit down,” I said. “What makes you think that someone from the department has not already examined this anthology? Why do you assume that we have not already interrogated each writer to the full extent of our authority? That tiny lock on your drawer is hardly a deterrent. You’ve become naïve. You mustn’t trust anyone. Not even the person that cleans your office at night.”

“What do you want from me?”

“I want you to remember that you have a duty to fulfil. This is not a holiday. You are not taking a leisurely drive down the highway. There are no scenic detours here, no lookouts, no points of exit. Do your job.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Why are you so angry?” I said. “Is it the office that we’ve provided you with? Is it too small? Is the view not pleasing enough? Is the placard on your door not to your liking? What if I were to take it off your door completely? How would the students be able to find you?”

As he walked out of the office, I said, “Thank you Felix.” I was happy when he did not respond. He was well again, completely devoted to his duties.

There is thus some evidence that whilst for the most part the honey bee is a creature of habit blindly doing certain things in response to certain stimuli, she is capable on occasion of breaking the general rule and doing the unexpected.

EVEN THOUGH 16 WEEKS HAVE ELAPSED, I cannot yet look upon the events culminating in the termination of my employment with composure. My hand trembles with conflicting emotions, my words scream across the page.

I spent the last nine years ruminating over information, deducing whether such material held critical importance. Often I felt the weight of my nation, the safety of each citizen, firmly upon my shoulders. I shuddered as each piece of data came into my possession; my trepidation was worst when I encountered objects that seemed utterly insignificant.

One has to persevere, to adopt an expression of courage, to hark back to current guidelines. But sometimes, the limitations of the present protocols do not suffice; do not alleviate the heart of its concerns. On these occasions, one has to believe that their training and experience allows them an acute insight into the nature of events, an astute foresight into impending catastrophe.

In these exceptional cases, the prevailing guidelines must not be seen as a standard of excellence to be attained, but rather as a benchmark to be superseded.

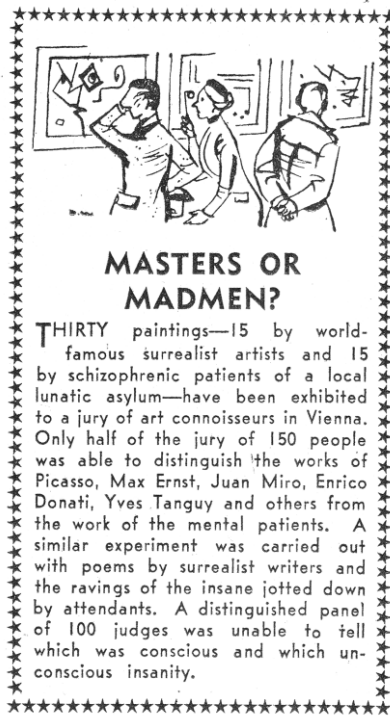
In encountering Felix Plumly, I had arrived at my moment of exceptionality. I had recorded our conversation in the cafeteria. I had emptied his office entirely of its contents. Hidden within each otherwise empty book was a postcard written by Professor Huffman to his real self, Felix Plumly. I could hardly sustain myself while reading these pitiful, morally perverse postcards.

My impulse to exert justice was uncontrollably strong. My sense of personal obligation to my department was only heightened when I carefully read the anthology that Felix and Mr. Muñoz had compiled. Never had I encountered such acts of blatant sedition.

I circled the face of each author, ensnared them in my black net of suspicion. It was my turn to accost others, to exact from them the inexorable truth.

The paths of the righteous are many, yet they lead to a single front. On this amorphous, contested territory awaits the enemy. A man must fight with his regiment. But if he is called to fight alone, he must never refuse. Goodness is not measured by the number of souls, but in the flame that lights the assault.





AFTER LEAVING PROFESSOR HUFFMAN'S OFFICE, I went to the Interrogation Division of the Maragos Acute Counter-Intelligence Department. There I procured a copy of the current Interrogation Division Practices and Procedures Manual. I eagerly returned home and devoted myself to memorising its guidelines.

The effect that this manual had on me was extraordinary. That afternoon, I learnt that I was at best, nothing but a midway man, rummaging through dusty archives. The real work, the information that mattered, was to be garnered from living suspects. No pride could be claimed, no rest achieved, until the pulse of a human body was exhausted.

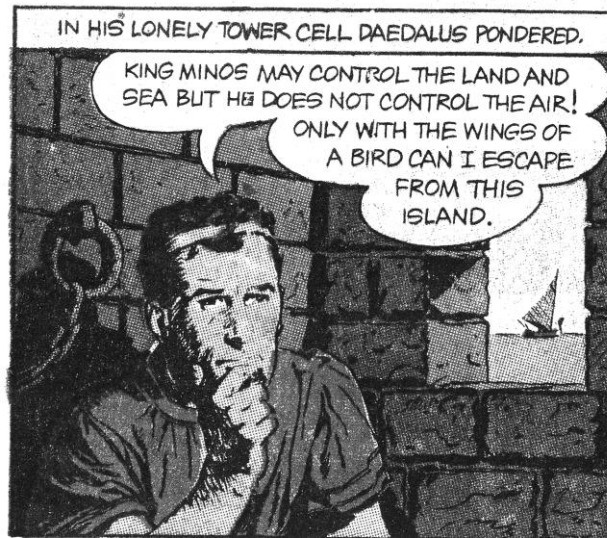
Everything bears the mark and influence of mankind and is thus subject to suspicion. That a tax-receipt has no heartbeat is immaterial. That a cigarette butt, apple core, bus ticket or pencil has no discernible soul is meaningless. That a photograph does not have an audible voice is irrelevant.

A body may scream under the weight of a scalpel, but just like its inert counterpart, it will reveal information. Once it is prized apart and faces no reprieve other than oblivion, a body will omit nothing. It will exhaust itself of effort, of speech, of culpability.

Each concise guideline stipulated what actions were permissible. I was like a man who did not realise that his hands were manacled, his legs chained to a chair, until a gentle and informed soul freed him and offered him a new existence in the real, boundless world.

I was so enthralled by this new information that, while eating an old corn cob, I carelessly broke a weak incisor. I rushed to the bathroom just to see the blood flowing from my gums. I was jubilant. I laughed as my mouth filled with the iron taste of blood, believing that I was seeping the mineral of my untapped soul.

## XXIII



EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, I entered Patricio Muñoz's house. I followed the sound of his restful breath directly to his bedroom. There I stood over him for a while, quiet in the dark of the early dawn.

Beside his bed was a sofa chair, upon which Mr. Muñoz had neatly laid his day clothes. I had decided to bring my housekeeper's German shepherd along with me. I let it jump onto the chair; it arranged Mr. Muñoz's clothes with its paws, before finally settling down on top of them.

It took some effort to wake Patricio. "Wake up," I said. "Mr. Muñoz wake up." Finally, he raised his head from off the pillow, looked at me and said bemusedly, "Why are you panting?"

"It's not me," I said. "It's the dog."

It was then that he realised the gravity of the situation. He immediately sat up and tried to distance himself from the dog.

"Believe me," I said. "This dog has an insatiable appetite. It is a real glutton. Get up. Get out of bed. Let's go into your kitchen and talk. I hope you have prepared for unexpected guests."

He stood. He was naked. He led me to the kitchen, where he turned on the light.

“Sit on that chair,” I said.

He did so.

Then I took the collar off the dog and tied it to his neck. I fastened the leash to one of the legs of the chair. “Don’t try anything silly,” I said. “You would look awfully peculiar running naked down the street with a metal chair bound to your neck. Where do you keep your coffee?”

I put the kettle on. He was quiet. I waited until the kettle whistled. Then I said, “Do you take milk and sugar?” But he remained silent.

“No sugar and milk then,” I said. “It is better to abstain from sugar. It will rot your teeth.”

In all honesty, I had never seen a man shake so violently. In the past, I had briefly worked with a public servant who suffered from recurrent epileptic seizures. He would often stumble off his chair and writhe madly on the floor. The nature of his seizures became so frequent and debilitating that he was forced to resign on medical grounds.

But this was an altogether different matter. Never had I seen a fit and healthy young man shake with such uncontrollable terror.

“I understand that you are naked,” I said. “But you will need to try and gain some composure. Have some coffee. It will make you feel better.”

I put the cup of coffee on the table in front of him. He made an attempt to reach for the cup, but I had mistakenly not given him enough length on the leash. His neck was pulled back and he gasped for breath.

I moved the cup closer to him. But his hand trembled so persistently that he spilt the coffee over his naked legs.

The dog immediately began to lick his thighs. Even this harmless, domesticated gesture was enough to make Mr. Muñoz scream in fear.

“Compose yourself,” I said. “Perhaps a biscuit will do the trick?”

As I looked in his pantry, he continued to scream. I put a shortbread biscuit in his mouth. Then I brought his jaw shut with my hands.

“Masticate,” I said. “There you go. Just like a baby.”

But as soon as I let go of his jaw, he spat out the biscuit and began to scream again. Then, in accordance with the guidelines stipulated by the manual, I slapped him once across the face and then again on his abdomen.

This seemed to have an immediate effect. He bowed his head and fell silent.

I sat down opposite to him. My coffee was still too hot to drink.

“Now,” I said. “Protocol stipulates that I take you to the appropriate intelligence division. There you would be subjected to lengthy interrogations aimed at gleaming information from you. All your possessions would be taken; your passport would be confiscated. You would be remanded in solitary confinement for an indeterminable period.

“I understand that my presence in your house comes as an unwelcomed surprise. I don’t like visitors too much either. I am suggesting that we do not need to go down the normal path, that we could yet forego such procedures. You and I can continue to exist beyond the parameters of the customary, but only if you cooperate with me.”

He refused to lift his head.

I went into his bathroom and returned with a small mirror. I placed it under his face and said, “Boo! Does it frighten you to see what you have become? Here we go again with the shakes!”

I went into his pantry again and retrieved a large can of tinned peaches. Then I made him stand with his back to the wall and his feet upon the can. The leash allowed me a great deal of flexibility.

I imagine that it must have been an uncomfortable position for Mr. Muñoz to sustain. His toes were curled. They were pale. The toenails were slightly blue.

“Let me be truthful with you Mr. Muñoz,” I said. “In my bag, I have a wealth of techniques that are proven to break even the most recalcitrant subject.”

I took out the current Interrogation Division Practices and Procedures Manual from my bag and placed it on the kitchen table.

“Do you know what I like about this manual?” I said. “I like the fact that the language it utilises does not accommodate failure. Its narrative pushes towards a steadfast conclusion, an end point where it is expected you will speak. I’m not much of

a reader, but where else in literature or society do you find such stubborn determination?”

He cupped his groin with his hands. I didn't know what he was doing. Then urine started to run down his hands and his legs.

“Shit,” I said. “You realise that the dog will now want to urinate on you too?”

The room soon began to stink. I struggled to keep my composure. The smell was enough to make me gag.

Mr. Muñoz fell to the floor. He sat in his filth. Then he looked up at me and said, “Why would the dog want to urinate on me? Do you think that it is incapable of knowing that I am a different sort of beast? What malice have I shown it? What reason have I given it to fear me? Even if I were a dog, don't you think that it would be intelligent enough to know that I was in a worse position than it? Or do you think that it is simply impelled to act, that it has no control over its urge to dominate?”

I got a tea towel and covered my nostrils. The stench was alarming.

“The only reason it will attack me,” he continued, “is if you have conditioned it to fear me, to despise me. If, over time, you have pounded it with your fist, wilfully starved it, drummed its ears with the tenor of your alien voice. But even then it may never know why it should abhor me, only that by attacking me, it receives respite from your punishment.”

“Stand up,” I said.

But he refused to stand.

“That's why you don't dare let the dog leave your side. You fear that it will return to the wild, rejoin its pack, and then somehow, inflict its own counter-measures on you. It might choose to put a leather collar around your neck, howl at you day and night, or make you take your food by its paws. Who knows?”

“And that is the point. You fear what you do not know. You dread what you cannot understand. You live in this world like a dumb brute, imposing your will and yet fearing the consequences of your brutality.

“The dog will not return with its pack. It will not seek revenge. It will have been happy to have finally fled your side, to have evaded your abusive ways. Don't you see that when it returns to its pack, it will bring with it a degree of permanent sufferance? It

will never be able to completely rid itself of the conditioning you imposed on it. It will be looked upon as some mutant animal, half dog and half man, but only the worst of both.

“And you have the gall to think that it will seek revenge. Please! God help me, but I would like to think that something in this world was spared the knowledge of that word.”

I sat him on the chair. I put a piece of paper on the table. I gave him a pencil. I wanted to drive that pencil into his throat, to somehow stop him from speaking.

“On this piece of paper,” I said. “You will write down, in meticulous detail, everything that you have wilfully engaged in while under the charge of Professor Emmanuel Huffman. You will describe the true impetus behind the anthology you edited. You will admit that your act was purposefully deceitful, that you intended to incite social unrest, and that to this end, you were guided by the despicable ideals of Felix Plumly.

“You will provide the names and contact details of each author you included in your work. You will also provide any other details that you feel are pertinent to the rendering, interrogation and prosecution of these dissidents.

“You will then state your remorse. You are a writer; you should be more than able to make it seem convincing. You will finish by denouncing your former beliefs, and by openly abiding to the ideals of law and justice as stipulated by our government.”

He looked at the page. He made no effort to reach for the pencil.

“Do you expect me to bark like a dog?” he said. “Should I sit on command, roll on the floor, or play dead? Did you think that if you threw me a name, I would bring you back a skull, a human heart locked in my jowls?”

“Can’t you see that you have drawn me from my bed, that you have terrified me, that you have made me suffer? Don’t you realise that you have already taken these measures to their end?”

“I am not a dog. I do not live in a master’s house, separate from other animals of my kind. I have no pack to return to. This is my place. I am here. I am alive. I have nowhere to go. I have no choice in this matter.

“I may suffer the same abuse as a dog, but it comes at the hands of someone no different to myself; another human being. As long as I am capable of comprehending your actions, I am also able to resist them.

“It doesn’t matter if I do as you demand. I can fill this page with the most glorious words and it won’t mean a thing. I know my measure. You can beat my body, take my words, but there will still remain something within me, something inscrutable, endlessly resilient, something that will exist beyond your grasp, simply because I refuse to articulate it.”

I gripped the pencil.

“Give me the names and details of the authors,” I demanded.

“I have brought them to you,” he said. “They are all here in front of you today. Each of them is staring you in the face. I invented all of them. They were forged from that place of resilience, that womb of hope, inside of me. They are beyond your stranglehold.”

It was then that I drove the pencil into his throat.

He fell to the floor. He tried to unfasten the leash. He attempted to stand. His feet slipped in the urine.

I knelt beside him.

“I have always been a literal sort of man,” I said. “If you cannot articulate something, then it seems to me that you might have a problem with your vocal chords. I hope that this pencil helps you find those elusive words.”

I then stood and walked out of the house. A short while later, I realised that I had left without the dog. I returned to the house and found Mr. Muñoz sitting upright on the kitchen floor. He had a bathroom towel pressed to his neck.

The dog was underneath the kitchen table. It seemed oblivious to what had transpired.

It then occurred to me that I had never bothered to ask my housekeeper what she had called the dog.

“Come on,” I said to it. “Come on. Come here dog. Up you get.”

The dog refused to move.



I approached Mr. Muñoz again. He did not seem bothered by my presence. He still had the dog collar around his neck. I read the dog tag and then said, “Come on Sunshine, let’s go.”

This time it promptly obeyed me.

## XXIV



I HAD NEGLECTED my duties at the Archives Division for too long. That evening, I returned to my cubicle expecting to find a mass of information waiting to be analysed. Instead, I returned to my desk and found that it had been cleared of all my belongings.

I tried to unlock my desk drawer, but my keys no longer worked. I attempted to log on to the computer network, but the password had been changed.

What had I done to warrant such drastic actions? Had I not provided the division with nine years of unparalleled dedication? I had not missed a single day of work. Even when my mother died, I had not asked for leave to attend her funeral. During the subsequent weeks I had been utterly grief stricken and plagued by painful outbreaks of shingles across my neck and chest; yet, I chose to continue to work, offering the division my utmost—a truly unsurpassed level of commitment.

It was then that I was approached by my chief supervisor. “I was wondering when you would return,” he said. “It was out of character. We were starting to worry about your safety. Some of the staff had suggested we inform the police. You didn’t think they cared about you that much, did you?”

“I personally checked your apartment, but everything seemed fine. Then I received word about an incident involving Mr. Patricio Muñoz. Ever since he appeared in Maragos, Mr. Muñoz had been considered a person of interest. A unit from the

Counter-Intelligence Surveillance Division had been following his movements day and night.

“This morning, one of the assigned officers found him bleeding in his kitchen. He was rushed to hospital. They have photographs of you entering the house. You are lucky he is still alive.”

I didn’t know what to say. I felt stupid, incompetent, not worthy of my position within the department. “I don’t know what came over me,” I said. “I scrupulously followed the guidelines of the interrogation manual. But he refused to speak. I don’t understand why it all ended so badly.”

“Why don’t we go into my office to talk?” he said.

We walked to his office. I sat on a chair and he closed the office door.

“What does the ‘pursuit of the public good’ mean to you Eric?” he said. “In Maragos we all share a common vision, upheld by our leaders, based on decency, respect and freedom. Our role within the department is to pursue these values, to implement and encourage them within society, as well as to discipline those who choose, for whatever reason, not to abide by our common principles.

“We have been entrusted with the important and rigorous task of gathering information. Our duty is to gather, analyse and disseminate relevant intelligence. As an employee of this organisation, it is expected that you act with a level of professionalism that embodies the department’s high standard of ethics.

“In return for your service, we seek to provide you with a positive working environment; a place free from discrimination, accepting of both personal and cultural diversity, where performance is measured on merit alone. We endeavour to foster a workplace that encourages communication and cooperation, based on the understanding that we are all working towards the pursuance of the public good.

“These expectations are not new to you. In fact, over the years, you have been an exemplary employee. You must therefore understand that we cannot publically associate ourselves with an individual who wilfully infringes these values.

“You have shown a blatant dereliction of your duties. You are not an interrogation or surveillance specialist. You are an intelligence officer assigned to the Archives Division. You failed to disseminate vital information, you entered a premise

unlawfully, you undertook duties that were beyond your competency and you threatened the life of a human being.

“You acted in a rogue and over-zealous manner. You leave me no choice but to terminate your employment. You will be given 20 weeks of severance pay. You will face a tribunal, where you will have the opportunity to plead your case.”

I bowed my head. I remained silent.

He slid a piece of paper across the table for me to read. It said: “Don’t be so glum! There is someone in the ceiling.”

I looked at him. He was smiling. He motioned me to remain silent. “Why don’t we go for a smoke outside?” he said.

“I don’t smoke,” I said.

“Why don’t you come anyway? I could do with the company.”

I followed him outside. Once we were in the centre of the empty car park, he told me to stop.

He lit a cigarette and said, “Look at all the fucking stars in the sky Eric. So many fucking stars. Have you ever wondered what purpose these stars serve to us humans? I mean, what good are the stars to us? Sure, they’re pretty and shiny, but is that all?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I’ve never thought about it.”

“Let me tell you what I think. The stars offer us a configuration of the universe. They allow us to believe that this immense cosmos can somehow be chartered. As a result, we can look at the sky and not be terrified by the sheer unfathomable magnitude of the world.

“From where we stand, the gap between each star seems small. Indeed, some stars form constellations. But it is only an illusion. As we get closer to the stars, we realise that the space is much larger than we imagined.

“Do you think that I, or any other official, know exactly what constitutes a human soul? Do you think that I know what it means to pursue the public good? I have no fucking idea.

“The laws that we implement and enforce are like these stars. They allow the citizens to believe that we hold the configuration of their souls. Have you ever wondered why our statute books are so thick, why they are filled with so many clauses,

subclauses and definitions? We want to give citizens the impression that the space between each governing stipulation is infinitesimally small.

“But when we examine the law closely, we realise that the spaces between each guideline are deliberately cavernous, cloaked in legal ambiguities and vagueness.

“When I look at the stars Eric, I see what I like. God knows, some fucking people see their future in the stars. Likewise, when I look at a human being, I see what I want to see; I see a loyal citizen or the most repellent foe. It is all a matter of conjecture. Our laws, like the starry sky, accommodate the unexpected nature of each individual, allow us to keep all sorts of surprises within our authority.”

He lit another cigarette. He looked at me. He held my shoulder.

Then he said, “You did the right thing Eric. You followed your instinct. You sought to uphold the beliefs of our people at whatever cost. There is nothing that incenses me more than an enemy to our country—a cowardly maggot that serves to undermine the goodness we stand for. If you were to put me alone in a room with one of these beasts, I don’t know whether I would be capable of restraining myself. I would strangle the last breath out of them.

“We must treat people humanely, but only if their actions are in accordance with the necessity of our vision.”

“But what will happen to me?” I said. “You know how old I am. I have a lot to lose. You can’t just spit me out. You know how hard I’ve worked for you.”

“Don’t you think that I feel badly for you? Have I not told you that I would have done the very same thing? You will face a tribunal. You will be charged with a dereliction of duties, a failure to obey regulations. The courtroom will be closed to the public, save for a few journalists that we can trust.

“You will have a chance to state your case. Who is to say that you will not convince them of the nobility of your actions? These judges sit in their cloistered chambers, high on their timber pedestals, dressed in their regal clothes. Do you not think that they are the ones who most fear the nature of the beast that surrounds us?”

“But when will this happen?” I asked. “In a week? A fortnight? God help me, in a year? When will I know my fate?”

“These things can take time Eric. We are a very efficient organisation. But we can also be exemplifiers of the grandest ineptitude. We do what best serves our colleagues. I hope that we understand each other.”

“But when will this all occur?” I demanded. “You must tell me when the trial will begin. I have to prepare. I have to organise my answers.”

“Eric,” he said. “You must remember that there is not only darkness between the stars. There is also an inexistence of oxygen. You must learn to adapt to this buoyant state. You must try to find happiness in this realm of suffocating inertia.”

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**ISAIAH 10:26**

<sup>19</sup>And the remaining trees of his  
forests<sup>x</sup> will be so few<sup>y</sup>  
that a child could write them down.

IT HAS BEEN 19 weeks since I was made redundant. Next week the payments will cease. I remain alone in my study.

Why have I taken to writing these words? Why have I felt the impetus to express my private ruminations? Why do I seek to document my predicament? No one will ever read these words.

There is something suffocating about a blank page. Somehow, the felling of the grove, the pulping of the timber and the homogenisation of the blank page—its sheer white surface stripped of any sign of the growth rings that once existed—has rid the page of its life giving properties; its oxygen.

I have not disclosed any information about my childhood. Perhaps, I am simply far too engrossed by my present circumstances. Or maybe, I fear what the pen will reveal; sentiments that stem from such a stark adolescence, all of which I have buried within me like a poisoned seed.

Presently, one particular fond memory comes to my mind.

One day, my mother took me for a walk through a wooded area. I must have been no older than 10 years.

We walked for what seemed like hours. We were surrounded by colossal trees. It seemed to me as if the forest was endless; as if the trees knew no unreachable height.

Then, at one point, my mother stopped still. She fashioned herself a bed from the masses of pine needles on the ground. Then she lay on her back, staring at the boughs above her.

I lay beside her. I held her hand. I never let go of her hand.

We lay there quietly. Then she said, “Why is it that in a crowd of strangers, and even among family, we can feel lonely, yet in this grove of trees, we feel as if we were in the sweetest company?”

I looked at her. She had such long, dark hair. “Do you think trees get lonely like you mum?” I asked.

“I don’t think so,” she replied. “They’re happy to be where they are. They set their roots deep. They send their giant pine cones tumbling to the earth. Each year the forest will grow. It will outlive both of us.”

In the high branches, birds made their nests. Sunlight shone through the canopy, forging trunks of golden light.

“The secret to their happiness will continue to evade us,” she said. “Even if we were to fell the entire forest, we would overlook that one resilient seed; that sole carrier of an eternity of happiness.”

I felt no sense of suffocation in that pine forest. I was never happier than when I was holding my mother’s hand.

Then does this page really suffocate me now? Or have I asphyxiated something precious within me, snuffed the light that once allowed me to see my happiness?

I am surrounded by information that I have gathered. The nature of this work is endless. I cannot look at anyone without being suspicious of their character. I can find no solace.

The trees of my childhood—the ones that have now disappeared, who persist to shudder only in my memories—are trying to tell me something.

They are willing to reveal to me their secret. But first they demand that I drop the axe.