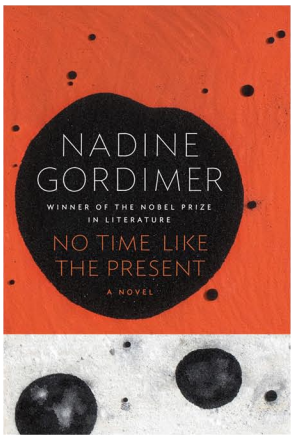
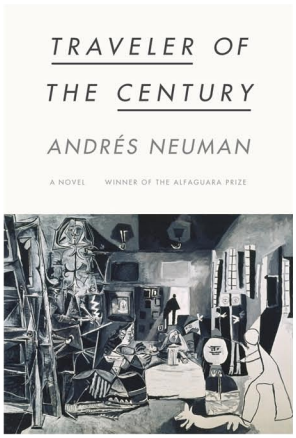
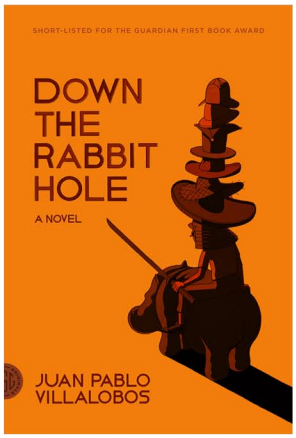
FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

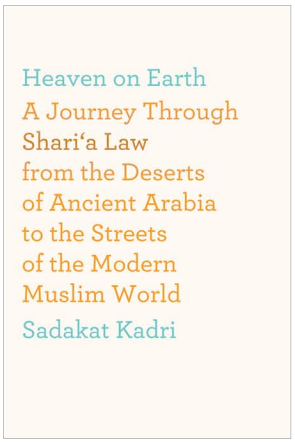
PEN WORLD VOICES

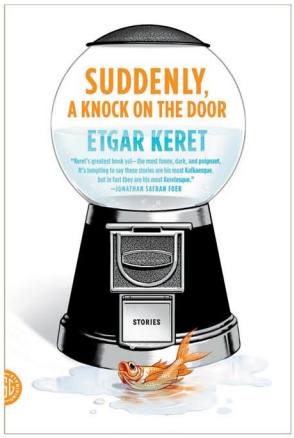
2012 READER

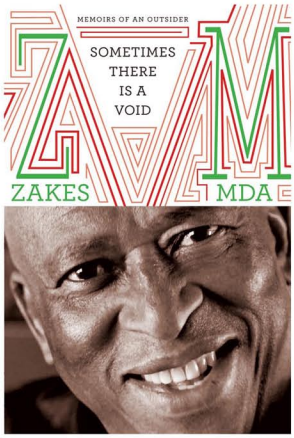


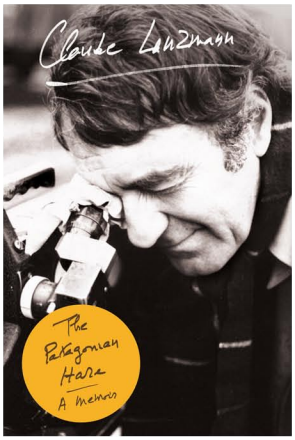


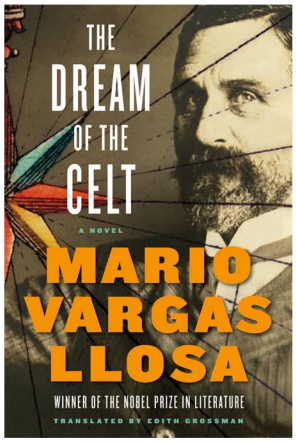


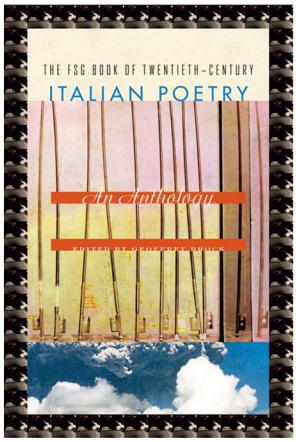


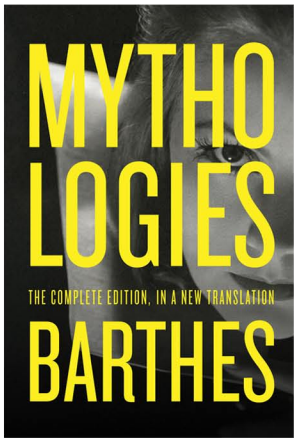












FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX
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NO TIME LIKE THE PRESENT

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NADINE GORDIMER

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

NEW YORK

Glengrove Place. It isn't a glen and there isn't a grove. It must have been named by a Scot or Englishman for features of a home left behind, when he made money in this city at more than five thousand feet and entered the property market enterprise.

But it has been a place. It was somewhere they could live—together, when there wasn't anywhere to do so lawfully. The rent for the apartment was high, for them then, but it included a certain complicity on the part of the owner of the building and the caretaker, nothing comes for nothing when law-abiding people are taking some risk of breaking the law. As a tenant, he had the kind of English- or European-sounding name no different from others usual on the tenants' mailboxes beside the elevator in the entrance; a potted cactus decorative there, if there was no grove. She was simply the added appendage 'Mrs'. They actually *were* married, although that was unlawful, too. In the neighbouring country where she had gone into exile just over the border to study, and he, a young white man whose political affiliations made it necessary for him to disappear from the university in the city for a time, they, imprudently ignoring the consequence inevitable back home, had fallen in love and got themselves married.

Back home in South Africa, she became a teacher at a private school run by the Fathers of a Catholic order tolerated outside state-segregated education, able there to use her natal surname on non-racial principles.

She was black, he was white. That was all that mattered. All that was identity then. Simple as the black letters on this white page. It was in those two identities that they transgressed.

And got away with it, more rather than less. They were not visible enough, politically well known enough to be worth prosecution under the Immorality Act, better to be watched, followed if they might, on the one hand, make footprints which could lead to more important activists, or on the chance they might be candidates for recruitment to report back from whatever level, dissident to revolutionary, they were privy to. In fact, he was one of those who, while a student, had been sidled up to with finely judged suggestions either of the cause of patriotic loyalty or, maybe, youth's equally assumed natural lack of funds, and had it made clear to him not to worry, he'd be ensured of his own safety and no longer be so hard up if he would remember what was said in the huddles where it was known he was present and had his part. Swallowing a gob of disgust and mimicking the tone of the approach, he refused—not that the man recognised rejection not only of the offer but also of the man who had agreed to be a political police pimp.

She was black, but there's a great deal more to that now than what was the beginning and end of existence as recorded in an outdated file of an outdated country, even though the name hasn't changed. She was born back in that time; her name is a signature to the past from which she comes, christened in the Methodist church where one of her grandfathers had been a pastor and her father, headmaster at a local school for black boys, was an Elder, her mother chairlady of the church ladies' society. The Bible was the source of baptismal first names along with the second, African ones, with which white people, whom the child would grow up to have to please, deal with in this world, had no association of identity. Rebecca Jabulile.

He was white. But that's also not as definitive as coded in old files. Born in the same past era, a few years before her, he's a white mix—that was of no significance so long as the elements were white. Actually, his mix is quite complicated

in certain terms of identity not determined by colour. His father was a gentile, secular, nominally observant Christian, his mother Jewish. It is the mother's identity which is decisive in the identity of a Jew, the mother whom one can be sure of when it comes to parental conception. If the mother is Jewish that is the claim for her son within the faith, and of course this implies ritual circumcision. His father evidently raised no objection, perhaps like many agnostics even atheists he secretly envied those practising the illusion of a religious faith—or was it indulgence for the wife he loved. If that's what she wanted, important to her in a way he didn't understand. Let the foreskin be cut.

There was a Pleistocene Age, a Bronze Age, an Iron Age. It seemed an Age was over. Surely nothing less than a New Age when the law is not promulgated on pigment, anyone may live and move and work anywhere in a country commonly theirs. Something with the conventional title 'Constitution' flung this open wide. Only a grandiose vocabulary can contain the meaning for the millions who had none recognised of the rights that go by the word freedom.

The consequences are many among the aspects of human relationships that used to be restricted by decree. On the tenants' mailboxes there are some African names: a doctor, a lecturer at a university and a woman making a career for herself in the opportunity of business. Jabulile and Steve could go to the cinema, eat in restaurants, stay in hotels together. When she gave birth to their daughter this was in a clinic where she would not have been admitted—before. It's a normal life, not a miracle. It was made by human struggle.

He had been interested in science from an early childhood and studied industrial chemistry at university. His parents saw this as at least some hope of antidote, insurance for his future in contrast to the leftist activities against the regime that led to his disappearing apparently over the border somewhere for periods; he would have a respectable profession. They were never to know how useful his knowledge of chemical elements was to the group who were learning how to make explosives for targets such as power installations. When he graduated, the junior post he found in a large paint factory was indeed a useful cover for a suspect way of life, political and sexual.

Ambition. Wasn't a time, then, to think about what you really might want to do with your life. The compass within swung the needle firmly back to the single pole—until the distortion of human life in common was ended, there was no space for meaning in personal achievement, climb Mount Everest or get rich, all cop-outs from reality, indecent sign of being on the side of no change.

Now there was no reason why he should continue to research advances in the durability of paint for new varieties of construction and decorative purposes, from rooftops to jukeboxes, bedrooms to sports convertibles. He supposed he could have returned to a university to further his knowledge of other branches of chemistry and physics, not confined to appearances. But there was a child for whom he and she had to provide a home. He did his work well anyway without much interest, there was no spice left as there had been in knowing that at the same time as (literally) keeping up appearances for white industry he was making explosives to blow up the regime. The firm had a number of countrywide branches, he was advanced in this one, the headquarters where he had begun. If he didn't make a decision, as he kept considering, to reconsider test-tube chemistry and move into the other kind, between humans, non-governmental, non-profit making, he worked part-time voluntarily on a commission for land claims of communities dispossessed under the past regime. She studied by correspondence, economics and law, and was volunteer secretary to a women's action group against woman and child abuse. Their small Sindiswa was in day care; what little time was left they spent with her.

They were sitting on their Glengrove Place balcony just after sunset among the racks of child's clothes draped to dry. A motorbike ripped the street like a sheet of paper roughly torn.

Both looked up from companionable silence, her mouth slewed, the curve of the brows pencilled on her smooth forehead flown up. It was time for the news; the radio lay on the floor with his beer. But instead he spoke.

—We should move. What d'you think. Have a house.—

—Wha'd' you mean—

He's smiling almost patronisingly. —What I say. House—

—We don't have money.—

—I'm not talking about buying. Renting a house somewhere.—

She half-circled her head, trying to follow his thought.

—One of the suburbs where whites have switched to town house enclosures. A few comrades have found places to rent.—

—Who?—

—Peter Mkize, I think. Isa and Jake.—

—Have you been there?—

—Of course not. But Jake was saying when we were at the Commission on Thursday, they're renting near a good school where their boys could go.—

—Sindiswa doesn't need a school.— She laughed and as if in a derisive agreement the child hiccupped over the biscuit she was eating.

—He says the streets are quiet.—

So it is the motorbike that has ripped open the thought.

—Old trees there.—

You never know when you've rid yourself of the trappings of outdated life, come back subconsciously: it's some privileges of the white suburb where he grew up that come to her man now. He doesn't know—she does—lying in his mind it's the Reed home whose segregation from reality he has left behind for ever. How could she not understand: right there in the midst of enacting her freedom independence, when one of her brothers, the elder of course, dismisses her opinion of some

family conduct directed by custom, she finds what her studies by correspondence would call an atavistic voice of submission replacing the one in her throat.

He is saying as he lifts Sindiswa flying high on the way to bedtime (fathering is something the older generation, white and black, segregated themselves from)—She'll need a good school nearby soon enough.—

In the dark, withheld hours of quiet, two, three, in the morning, you don't know what is going on in the mind-rhythm of the one breathing beside you. Maybe there tore through the unconscious an echo of what prompted the idea that sunset a week—some days—ago.

Jake Anderson calls to ask whether he and Isa had been forgotten lately, would their comrades come by on Sunday—whether this was prompted by he who slept against her, she wasn't told. Anyway, it meant that they bundled Sindiswa and a couple of bottles of wine into the car and took the freeway to an exit unfamiliar. It debouched on streets brooded over by straggly pepper trees drooping their age and what must be jacarandas, but not in bloom, whose roots humped the pavements. The houses all revealed somewhere in their improvements their origin: front stoep, room ranged on either side under rigid tin roof, although some had additions, sliding glass-fronted, somehow achieved in the space of each narrow plot within walls or creeper-covered fences defining the limit between neighbours. Apparently following Jake's directions Steve slowed at what appeared to be a small red-brick church peaking among the houses, but as he drove past to take a left turn, revealed a swimming pool contrived where the church porch must have been, and three or four young men or perhaps determinedly youthful older ones, in G-string swimming briefs were dancing and tackling one another in the water to

the sound of loud reggae. In the small gardens of other houses there were the expected bicycles, garden chairs and barbeque jumble. Jake's was one of them. The standard stoep had been extended by a pergola sheltered by a grape vine. There was a car and a motorbike in the street at the gate, a party evidently. Well, no, just a few comrades remembering to get together, out of the different paths their lives were taking.

They're all young but it's as if they are old men living in the past, there everything happened. Their experience of life defined: *now* is everything after. Detention cells, the anecdotes from camp in Angola, the misunderstanding with the Cubans who came—so determinately, idealistically brave—to support this Struggle at the risk of their own lives, the clash of personalities, personal habits in the isolation of cadres, all contained by comradeship of danger, the presence of death eavesdropping always close by in the desert, the bush. Peter Mkize is at this Sunday gathering, taking a hand at expertly turning chops and sausages on the charcoal grill under the grape vine, a beer in the other hand. His brother was one of those who were captured and killed, their dismembered bodies burned at a *braaivleis* by drunken white South African soldiers and thrown into the Komati River, a frontier between this country and Mozambique. That history, may it not come back to him as he flips over the spitting sausages for the comrades.

Now everything is after.

Steve feels a breath of rejection lifting his lungs. What they did then, some of those present much braver and enduring hell beyond anything he risked, anything Jabu, herself black, inevitable victim, took on—it can't be the sum of life experience? To close away from this he tosses a personal distraction. —Jake, where's the house you were telling me about. Like to have a look at it.—

—Sure, plenty time. Have another glass of this great wine you brought, while the sun goes down.—

Jabulile smiles, the patronage of intimacy. —He has a sudden urge to move.—

Move on. Yes, let's move on. —Is it in this street?—

—No, but we'll still be neighbours. It's a couple of houses down from where you turned to our street.—

—Before that weird-looking place that looks as if it was a church? There were some guys dancing in a mini pool there.—

—Was a church, this is an old *ware* Boer suburb, no Kaffirs allowed to come to Jesus at the altar of apartheid, *blankes alleen*.—

Everyone laughing release from the past. Spread hands thrown up and head dropped in mock responsibility for the guilt of the generation of his mother and father, Pierre du Preez is the one who arrived on the caparisoned motorcycle parked outside, as elaborately accoutred as some royal carriage, flashing flanks, sculptured saddle, festooned with flasks and gauges. He's an Afrikaner who no more takes offence at the gibes than Mkize does at the outlawed word, Kaffir.

—Who are the frolicking owners who've taken over?—

Pierre answers whomever's question. —It's one of our gay families.—

More laughter—this is the final blasphemy, housed.

Jake signals to Steve, leaving Isa to take care of the comrades. Jabu in turn signals she is enjoying herself and doesn't want to be interrupted but Steve's arm goes gently decisive around her and the three move unnoticed to follow past the church swimming pool to the next street to look at the house with FOR SALE TO LET board on the wall.

—Shit, it seems it's not a show day, usually at weekends . . . where's the agent got to? I hope it hasn't been snapped up since I told you.—

—Live behind a spiked wall.— Steve hasn't counted on that.

Through the pattern of the wrought-iron gate they saw something of what is behind it. There is a modest representation of the setting of the house he grew up in: a rockery with aloes in flower, a jacaranda tree, a neat mat of lawn either side of a path to steps and the front door. No clue to the previous inhabitants—oh, except a rusted *braaivleis* grill and a kennel with half the roof missing.

—There's a garage at the back, another gate and, believe it or not, an old chicken run.— Jake is standing in for an estate agent's hard sell, in his purpose of making some kind of community out of dispersed comrades, in this suburb claimed against the past.

Back at Glengrove Place Steve holds a towel ready while Jabu coaxes their small girl out of the bath. In the steam haze his voice is softened as reflection rather than question, he doesn't want to press her.

—What do you think of it?—

The gathering, the house, the church as gay commune something to laugh about together; and something not to be avoided, the practical future there was no time to think about from Glengrove asylum, before.

She's a clear-headed person always capable of occupying her hands in some task while active elsewhere in her mind. —It's a nice house, far as you can tell from the outside.—

—Of course I'll get the estate agent to take us, or give us the keys, that'd be better, next week. But the set-up, the place.—

—How can I say. I don't have any comparison, I mean I've never lived in such places, suburbs, whatever, have I.— Smiling, whether at the wriggling child she was patting dry, or for him.

—I rather like the idea.— He doesn't have to explain, taking over from the *Boere*, if even Pierre welcomed the displacement

of his own clan, although everyone is supposed to live together, no ghettos, luxurious or new black-and-white middle class.

Alone, if you can be said to be while those whose being you share are somewhere close by in kitchen or bedroom; not lonely, he wonders whether he really wants to prolong in some way the intimacy between comrades that was survival in detention or the bush, there's a resistance to nostalgia. And at the same time self-reproach; what will there ever be like the bonds between cadres, the rest will always be strangers.

Jake gave him the name of the estate agent and offered to accompany them to enter the house, but they wanted to be without anyone else's observations and went, after work, with Sindiswa; after all, without offering any opinion, she would be subject to any decision made. He found the bedrooms poky, you could knock out the windows and put in something more generous with light. There was a red-brick fireplace thirties-style in the living room and space enough for a good-sized table and chairs along with sofa, television and so on. A rather shaky sliding door, obviously an improvement on the enclosing box that was the original room, opened onto another improvement, a small terrace. They were pleased to walk out and find shrubs beyond that half-hid the wall that was overhung with shade from a neighbour's tree —Acacia.— But she was not interested in the identification. As a kid given every advantage he was taken to plant nurseries with his father and learnt to match botanical names to certain trunks, leaves and bark. She had learnt on walks with her grandmother in the forests of Zululand what wild fruits were safe and good to eat.

The kitchen was a surprise. She tried the four plates on the big electric stove—no result. —Just that the current's cut off, of course.— He reassured, opening cupboards. They moved their feet approvingly on the tiled floor; Jabu peered into the shelves to confirm capacity. The bathroom had a shower

stall as well as a large tub, not bad, ay? The paint throughout was in good condition although candy pink in what was supposed to the main bedroom made him groan. —We could put a lick of white over it, I suppose—I don't know if you're allowed to make any changes in a house you rent?— They toured the rooms again, hand in hand with Sindiswa. —She'd have her own room, toys and all her gear— Jabu touched her head against his shoulder a moment; at Glengrove Place they shared the single bedroom with the child, strange to make love with even a sentient in the room; who knew how much a young child is aware of, perhaps the cries of pleasure sound fearful to an emerging awareness. They checked the sliding door to the terrace and locked the front door behind them in unspoken accord.

But next morning, the reality of Monday, driving the child to the day-care centre—Jabu took a bus to her school from there while he went on to the city—putting a hand down on the keys in his pocket —I'll go to the agency and sign for us.—

She drew her lips hidden between her teeth, her familiar gesture of acceptance. When she got out of the car to deliver Sindi, suddenly kissed him. Coming back to the car, her eyes were held narrowed as if she were seeing some inner vision. He read it as, we'll be happy there.

Decisions always divide into practice. They had to give notice of vacating Glengrove, and it turned out several months' advice in advance was required. He negotiated this successfully and the stipulation was reduced to one month. As for the house, Jake knew the agent well and the rent was not unaffordably higher than the apartment's had been, on the guarantee to the owner that although the woman was black these were reliable tenants who wouldn't fill the house with immigrant refugees or whatever they were from Congo and

Zimbabwe, property values must not be allowed to go down as the result of rowdiness. Well, at least the condition wasn't gender prejudice, they didn't have to worry about moving into a mini-community where that prevailed. The gays could enjoy their holy pool. Some of the things that had been made do with in Glengrove, second- or third-hand necessities given by comrades when they first clandestinely moved in there, were not worth taking; new purchases, in keeping with a house, had to be made. A table and chairs for the living room—at Glengrove they ate in the kitchen or off the coffee table in the all-purpose room. Jabulile wanted a large refrigerator and freezer, to be paid off along with the furniture on the never-never instalment plan, it was the usual way in the communities she knew, but Steve was alert to how business economy worked to its own advantage, charging hidden interest on the amounts the poor paid every month. He would buy only what they had money to pay for on purchase—these are just trivial differences born of background which come up not only between a couple like theirs. The curtains: on the other hand, she knew a woman in Kliptown (old Location), mother of a colleague teacher, who would make them in her home at a cost below any decorator's shop. They were completed and could be hung—Jake and Isa helped, it was fun—before the actual move to the house would take place.

On the morning of the move Jabulile took charge. She bustled authoritatively between the men handling the cardboard cases he and she had filled the night before, herself correcting the carelessness with which they ignored the bold FRAGILE with which some had been carefully marked. Her reproaches were joking, she laughed with the men encouragingly. Displacement made everything unfamiliar to him, out of mind, as if they had never lived there—he was already, as if going home, in the house. He thought it unnecessary when

Jabu made tea for the movers, just a delay. But she took mugs out of one of the boxes, talking in the language she shared with the men and he couldn't follow. To speed things up he broke into her hospitality and quickly took back the emptied mugs with a gesture that they be left behind, not bothering to wash and pack them up again. He became authoritative now, giving a heaving arm to despatch of the boxes to the elevator, ready when it rose again to load it once more. She continued the laughing exchange in their common language with the men, darting back to the kitchen and bedroom to check what she must have already known, that nothing was missed, left behind. With the last batch he squeezed in to go down and help, hasten the loading of the van. The movers had been put in a good mood and took their time, arguing about the placing, how the bed, those chairs, could go here, that box balanced there. At last the double doors were barred across. He and Jabu could follow, with keys to the new kingdom. He had already taken the car out of Glengrove Place's underground garage; for the last time.

The elevator was in use, he bounded up three flights of stairs three steps at a time as if he were a schoolboy again and called out at the top, Let's go!

His stride almost stumbled: she pressed further against the door frame.

—What's been forgotten?—

She moved her head slightly in dismissal, and he was stayed.

It was nothing he could put a name, a cause to, ask what's the matter would be some sort of intrusion. Although it's impossible to accept that there are times when the trust of intimacy fails. She said very distinctly, I don't want to go. It resounded in his silence as if she had shouted. She was so known to him, the pillars of her thighs close together, the line of her neck he would follow with buried face to her breasts,

yet this was someone he couldn't approach in whatever was happening. How say stupidly, what's wrong.

Of course she is thrilled delighted with the house, the terrace where she's looking forward to putting out their child to play in the sun . . . she had planned zestfully how the rooms would serve them, she agreed that he could sign for occupancy. I don't want to go. She knows it has no meaning; they are gone, it remains only to close the door and drop the keys with the caretaker.

Nothing could break the moment. Carrying the bride over the threshold was in his embrace. She didn't cry but took a few rough broken breaths. Her breasts pressed familiarly against him. He didn't ask, she didn't tell.

Leave behind, a drop into space. From the place that took them in when nowhere, no one allowed them to be together as a man and a woman. The clandestine life is the precious human secret, the law didn't allow, the church wouldn't marry you, neither his for whites nor hers for blacks. Glengrove Place. The place. Our place.

Isa, Jake and Peter Mkize surprised them that first night, arriving with Isa's chicken and mushroom stew to heat up for the first time use of the stove, wine for which glasses were dug out of packing boxes. Jabu was putting Sindiswa to sleep alone in her own room. —*Khale, Khale*, take it easy getting her accustomed to things. If I were you I'd keep her at her old day care for a bit before you move her to the one that's nearer.— Isa, the senior resident, wants to be useful. *Slowly, careful*. Comrades, even if white, find expressive the few words in the languages of black comrades they've picked up. The presence of the three neighbours in the impersonal chaos of displaced objects is order of a kind. They slept well, the new tenants.

On Sunday someone shook at the wrought-iron gate for attention and there was one of the dolphin-men from the church pool holding a potted hibiscus. —Hi, welcome to the residents' association, there isn't one but make yourselves at home anyway.— In shared laughter of the unexpected they gestured him in for coffee but he couldn't stay, was due to make a jambalaya lunch, his turn to cook. —Come and swim when you feel like it, it's a teacup, but it's a cooler . . . In the afternoon when they tired of unpacking Jabu decided they should take Sindiswa on a walk and they passed the fondly mock-wrestling water, as they had seen the day they came to find Jake's house. Jabu lifted Sindiswa's little arm to wave a hand at the revellers.

Heaven on Earth

A Journey Through
Shari'a Law
from the Deserts
of Ancient Arabia
to the Streets
of the Modern
Muslim World

Sadakat Kadri

Farrar, Straus and Giroux New York

Prologue: Infinite Justice

The North Indian city of Badaun is barely known beyond the subcontinent, but among the Muslims of India it has a great reputation. Seven ancient Islamic shrines encircle the town, collectively drawing visitors from miles around, and one spiritual specialty has always brought them immense local renown. They are said to facilitate the exorcism of jinns. That is a weighty claim among the poor, the credulous, and the desperate. Genies of the region are not popularly imagined to be the bountiful servants of lamp-rubbing legend. They are mercurial creatures, capable of wreaking havoc, who routinely seize control of people's lives. Victims are suddenly plunged into depression or discontent, possessed of unusual ideas, and urged to speak, to lash out, even sometimes to kill. Entire families suffer as a consequence, and dozens are therefore to be found at the largest of the shrines, where they camp out in a shanty-filled cemetery pending miraculous interventions on behalf of their afflicted relatives. The scene is permanently alive, serviced by a nearby market, and it swells into something of a carnival as day-trippers arrive by the hundreds on the eve of Friday prayers. The spectacle had horrified and fascinated me in roughly equal measure ever since I first visited Badaun—my father's birthplace—in 1979, at the age of fifteen. Elderly relations had warned me then to steer well clear of the place after dark

on a Thursday night. In the spring of 2009, I finally got round to disobeying them.

I reached the shrine long after dusk, and its neem tree glades were pulsating to the drums and accordions of an ululating troupe of musicians. Picking my way through knots of pilgrims, past shadowy figures who babbled in the darkness or lunged from wooden posts to which they had been chained, I eventually reached the marble courtyard at the mausoleum's center. The everyday bedlam of India looked to have merged with a scene from *The Crucible*. In a moonlight that was fluorescent, bright-eyed girls were whipping their hair into propellers while older folk, senile or despondent, chattered to tombstones. As I fidgeted with my camera settings, a teenage girl next to me stepped forward, assisted by anxious relatives, to quiver and collapse into the waiting arms of two shrine employees. Others strode forward to swoon in their turn, and were expertly scooped aside to make way for fresh fainters. Whooping children, barely able to believe their luck, cartwheeled around the hysterics and their helpers throughout. It was hours before the chaos gave way to chirrups and a semblance of peace returned to the sepulchres.

Walking back to my relatives' home across a meadow filled with tottering fourteenth-century funeral vaults, I wondered how to make sense of what had just occurred. I had come to India in search of color after a year immersed in libraries, but it seemed almost as though I had found too much. A survey of Islamic legal history demands flexibility if it is to entertain rather than anesthetize, but fitting tales of jinn exorcism into an account of the shari'a* called for the literary equivalent of a crowbar—until a few hours later. By then, I had found another shrine: a postage stamp of a necropolis, comprising a dusty courtyard, an ancient banyan tree, and a chiffon-draped tombstone. In the afternoon heat, the otherworldly excitements it might ordinarily have inspired had slowed to a crawl. Two women were gazing at the central slab, motionless beneath their burkas, as though it might shuffle away at any moment.

*In the interests of readability, only two transliteration symbols are used in this book: the opening apostrophe ' signifies the slightly strangulated vowel *ain*, and its closing counterpart ' indicates the glottal stop *hamza*. They are included only when they fall in the middle of a word.

A man stood before the headstone, his palms cupped in prayer, while his young son raced around and kissed surrounding memorials. The only sign of any transcendental goings-on at all came from a woman who was chanting breathlessly as she strode to and fro beneath the lush branches of the banyan tree, watched by a squatting husband and mournful children. But when I lined up the scene for a photograph, it turned out to contain far more than met the eye. A mustachioed man who was tending a smoldering sheaf of incense sticks at the gnarled roots of the tree raised his hand forbiddingly. "No photographs," he ordered. "She is making her plea to the king of the jinns."

Throughout the previous night, I had wondered how, precisely, a person possessed by a jinn could expect to obtain relief, and I obediently lowered my camera. The man clearly possessed some kind of authority, for he was selling a selection of holy knickknacks that were neatly laid out next to the green coverlet of the shrine's main tomb, and I decided to strike up a conversation. Using a combination of quizzical gestures and atrocious Urdu, I asked if he had any charms worth taking on the three-month trek to Syria and Istanbul that I had lined up. His first suggestion was an amulet to ward off the evil eye. When I pondered it skeptically, he proffered a leather pouch containing a secret verse of the Qur'an. It apparently guaranteed good fortune, God willing, so long as the purchaser did not try to read the contents. That seemed a bargain, and as rupees changed hands, I seized the moment. Why no cameras? He nodded solemnly toward the thick cluster of banyan roots and explained that they enthroned the king of the jinns—whose court was now in session.

That explained the photography ban—in a sense—but what, I wondered, was the likely outcome of the woman's complaint? "The king will listen to both sides and make a ruling," replied the shrine's custodian. "Will the jinn then leave?" I inquired. "Maybe, maybe not," he replied with a wiggle of his head. "Or maybe a hanging." Startled, I asked how that would work. He laughed, slapped a hand around my shoulder, and pointed to a colorfully decorated bough of the banyan. "The jinn, not the woman." "Physically hanged?" I asked meaninglessly. "Yes . . . actual fact," he replied. "If that is required by the shari'a."

The claim was as surprising to me as it ought to have been predictable. I already knew that the invisible world is considered no less subject

to God's law than the visible one and that jurists have often had occasion to consider the rights and obligations of genies. A tenth-century writer named al-Shibli once wrote about the lawfulness of their marriages with human beings, for example: though aware of unions that had been fruitful, he warned of inevitable antagonisms and urged all readers to stick to their own kind. At many Sunni madrasas, jinns are thought to be so committed to observance of the shari'a that chairs are left empty for them during jurisprudence classes. And as I found out later in the spring of 2009, their activities are still liable to be considered at the very highest level. The realization came in Damascus, at a question-and-answer session chaired by Ayatollah Mohammad Fadlallah. The Lebanese cleric (who has since died) used to be routinely characterized in the Western media as the "spiritual leader of Hezbollah," but opposition to Israel never made him controversial in Syria and Lebanon. There was one aspect of his teachings that did give rise to dispute, however—his relative liberalism when it came to sexual taboos—and at the meeting, the sniggering students of a rival cleric demanded to know whether he thought it lawful to have sex with a jinn outside marriage. "Why are you wasting my time?" he snapped. "It's fine so long as you use a condom. Next question, please."

Some people might find it odd or even offensive that a book about the shari'a should open with a discussion of jinns, let alone a reference to sexual congress with them. Westerners have been exoticizing Islam for centuries, and a work that sets out to scrutinize Islamic jurisprudence by reference to the supernatural can only invite suspicion. But though intercourse with genies is the kind of subject that would certainly have intrigued many an Orientalist scholar in years gone by, the fact that its lawfulness came up for discussion in a twenty-first-century Shi'a seminary is ample proof that it retains legal significance. Ayatollah Fadlallah's response, for all its contempt, also has contemporary relevance—because he was either right or wrong to imply that thousand-year-old legal traditions might have become redundant. And though any respectable Islamic jurist would ridicule the suggestion that jinns should be hanged from a sturdy branch, it is perfectly sensible to wonder what makes an execution so absurd—and what safeguards exist to prevent other people from making similar mistakes about God's law. The question is important. At least eleven of the world's fifty or so Mus-

lim states possess constitutions that acknowledge Islam to be a source of national law—and several invoke the shari'a to punish defendants who are considerably more tangible than a jinn.

I found myself before the king of the jinns in the first place because the tomb at the shrine's center belonged to one of my direct ancestors. Abdullah was an Arab born in Mecca in the twelfth century, and his journey to India had been an eventful one. He left home in around 1192, the same year that Delhi fell to Muslims for the first time, and reached Lahore at the height of a ferocious regional conflict. After marrying off his son and traveling companion and apparently settling down for almost two decades, he then made himself scarce all over again. Crossing the Punjab, he got to Delhi just before the sultan accidentally and fatally impaled himself on his pommel during a polo game in 1210. A succession crisis ensued, and when a battle-hardened slave-general was elevated to replace the sultan the following year, Abdullah set off for the recently conquered outpost in which the new ruler had earned his reputation. It was there, in Badaun, that his wanderings finally came to an end.

Abdullah's journey through war zones to the jungled fringes of the Islamic world was as arduous as it sounds. Although Badaun gave him a wife and at least one more son, it was a very uncongenial place. Two battles, separated by seven years, had left its fields pockmarked by hundreds of graves. Its Muslim conquerors were confined to a garrison, commanders of a militarized cemetery that was surrounded by a seething Hindu sea. But Abdullah was undaunted, because he had come on a mission. He was a Sufi, in an era when Islamic mystics were as fervent as they were introspective—far more like the warrior monks of Christendom than the flying carpeteers of later legend. And though he almost certainly wielded a sword earlier on his journey, his outlook was not a military one. He had come to Badaun to battle for souls.

As far as Abdullah would have been concerned, the task on which he was engaged was a sacred struggle—a jihad—but the way that he and thousands of other Sufis chose to pursue it was distinctive. In their missionary work, they accentuated similarities rather than differences. Instead of condemning Hindus as irredeemable polytheists, they recognized their pantheon to be different expressions of the one God.

They fused Islamic prayer with Hindu mantras to create the ecstatic devotional music known as *qawwali*. And in a country that was littered with pocket temples and accustomed to worship through the senses, they transformed the graves of fallen warriors into the nuclei of magical shrines: incense-wreathed and saffron-threaded portals into an unseen world where it was said that jinns could be tamed, the dead might speak, and supplicants' wishes become saints' commands. The package sold. Bolstered by practical incentives—the enhanced status that Islamic egalitarianism promised low-caste Hindus, for example—Islam won hearts and minds by the thousands. Within a decade of Abdullah's arrival, Badaun itself was on track to become one of the most important centers of Islamic culture in northern India. Abdullah's own legacy was so enduring that eight centuries later, he was still being venerated by descendants of the men and women he had helped to convert.

I had been very pleased to learn about Abdullah from my father, who recited his adventures from an old genealogy shortly before I set off for India. His existence had furnished me with a useful lineage, and though academic texts often insist that Sufism has no connection with the colorful fantasies of Orientalist legend, his reputation turned out to be gratifyingly magical. Abdullah is known in Badaun simply as Pir Makki, or the Holy Man of Mecca, and devout believers assured me that he was a saint of the highest order. His influence over the unseen world was all but unquestionable—why else would the king of the jinns frequent his shrine?—and hundreds of scribbled prayers around his grave testified to intercessory powers that could tackle problems from matrimonial strife to exam nerves. According to the shrine's amulet vendor, his uncanny abilities had been evident even during his lifetime. Anxious not to abandon followers in Mecca, he had taken the trouble to teleport himself back once a week to lead their Friday prayers.

Over the course of my travels, however, it became apparent that Abdullah's standing with the home crowd was no guarantee of admiration farther afield. The saint- and shrine-dominated rituals of Badaun are associated with one particular set of Indian believers—known as Barelvis—and though there are millions of them, they have long been in conflict with another sect named after a famous madrasa town called Deoband. And many Deobandis take the view that pioneers such as Abdullah were actually responsible for vast amounts of damage. Instead

of promoting Islam by cleaving to the path laid down in the seventh century by the Prophet Muhammad,* they had borrowed from the sensuality and menagerie temples of Hinduism. The consequence had been terrible spiritual corruption and the incorporation of innovations ranging from musical prayers to incense sticks. According to the Deobandis, asking saints to intercede with God was not Islamic at all; it was an act of idolatry akin to worshipping a monkey or an elephant. Claims to exorcise people according to the shari'a were equally preposterous: jinns inhabited a parallel universe, and insofar as they might sometimes possess human beings, that was the unchallengeable will of God.

Similar complaints about Sufi heterodoxy date back centuries, and they have some history on their side. Among Abdullah's near contemporaries in late-thirteenth-century Cairo and Damascus were mystical sects of a notoriously inventive sort, known for practices that ranged from cannabis consumption to penis piercing. The willingness of early Indian missionaries to accommodate local customs does not lack for circumstantial evidence either. One of the men who led Badaun's conquest is buried in a mosque alongside his horse—as well as a lion, a snake, and, most mysteriously, a parrot. Another mystic of the era known as Mangho is honored in northern Karachi with a shrine that accommodates two hundred sacred crocodiles, all of them supposedly descended from his head lice, and worshippers often wrap up their prayers at the nearby mosque by sacrificing bags of offal to the reptiles. And though signs of sacred penis piercing are nowadays scant, cannabis retains a degree of popularity: in the anarchic shrine of Sehwan Sharif, narcotic potions are liberally shared as religious ecstasy kicks in, and hopes of spiritual communion in the Sufi mausoleums of Lahore inspire would-be mystics to smoke charas by the fistful.

The eclecticism does not prove that cross-fertilization is inherently irreligious, however. The point is made most vividly with architectural examples. The magnificent turquoise-tiled mosques of cities such as Esfahan and Shiraz owe their existence to the encounter of Muslims with an alien people—the Mongols. Istanbul's skyline, a bubble bath of stone

*It is conventional among Muslims to add "May God bless him and grant him peace" (*sallalahu alayhi wa sallam*) when referring to the Prophet. This book does not use the phrase, although—in case anyone thinks otherwise—no disrespect is intended.

that is about as emblematically Islamic as any sight on earth, visibly mirrors the domed basilicas of Christian Byzantium, and the Ottomans who produced it were steeped in Sufism. Indeed, Islam would have been *incapable* of developing such traditions without a capacity to learn and borrow. That struck me forcefully when I visited the ghostly ruins of a city called Anjar, built from scratch less than a century after the Prophet's death, which now nestles among garlic fields in a quiet corner of Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. Its lizard-infested villas, palaces, and frescoed bathhouses are perfectly Greco-Roman—not only in terms of inspiration, but also, in the case of dozens of Corinthian pillars lining its grassy *cardo maximus*, in terms of materials.

Such ruminations would belong to a travel diary rather than a book about the shari'a were it not for one fact. Conservatives have imagined Islamic law to be as eternal as any other aspect of the faith, and arguments about authenticity have therefore had tremendous legal consequences. That is, to a certain extent, consequent on the very notion of Islam—with its commitment to a revealed text and an inspired Prophet—but it has affected approaches to historical scholarship as well. The idea has become widespread that God's revelations were built into practical rules by people untainted by impurities—companions of Muhammad, heroic early generations, and omniscient jurists—whose probity transcends the vagaries of place and the passage of time.

That claim raises issues similar to those I once encountered in a very different part of the world—the United States. As a law student at Harvard in the late 1980s, I had learned that many American conservatives consider the Founding Fathers of the United States to be possessed of incontestable wisdom. Some went further, arguing that God had manifested His will through their deeds. According to certain lawyers, that could oblige judges to interpret the federal Constitution according to its eighteenth-century meaning, or even require that they consider the Founders' views when resolving contemporary legal controversies: limits to the death penalty, for example, or governmental restrictions on free speech. Back then, I had felt that the deference to ancient vocabularies and dead people's thoughts had the whiff of a séance about it. Pinning down a person's meaning and motives is hard enough when he or she is alive. The collective intention of a large and diverse group of the deceased is difficult to conceptualize, let alone know. The traditionalist

approach toward interpreting the shari'a does not, on its face, look very different. It seems more akin to ancestor worship than any grave-venerating ritual could be—simply because, notwithstanding my personal debt to Abdullah of Mecca, holy wisdom does not automatically pass down through the generations.

My curiosity about the shari'a was not born during my 2009 visit to Badaun. By then, it was almost a decade old, having been sparked off by an odd detail of the U.S. government's response to 9/11. At the time of the al-Qa'eda attacks I had been living in Manhattan, working on a book about the criminal trial in Western history,* and I had watched as anxiously as everyone else while the administration of President George W. Bush geared up to retaliate against Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan. And then, on September 25, 2001, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had announced that the military action was being renamed. It was now to be known as Operation Enduring Freedom, because the title originally chosen might offend friendly nations in the Islamic world. It had previously been called Infinite Justice, and that, observed Rumsfeld, was a prerogative that Muslims attributed to God alone.

It had occurred to me even then that the name of the imminent bombing campaign might not be all that would cause offense, but my primary reaction was simply a vague feeling that the rebranding was appropriate. Whatever other qualities posterity was going to attribute to the Bush administration, it seemed a fairly safe bet that omniscience and omnipotence would not be among them. The next few years did not change my opinion in that regard, but following my return to London, another very inauspicious event served both to rekindle my interest in Islamic law and to illuminate another aspect of the Infinite Justice fiasco: the fact that the United States, without knowing it, almost waged its war on terror in the name of the shari'a.

That realization was occasioned by the bombing of London's subway and bus network by four suicidal killers on July 7, 2005. Those attacks were notoriously committed by Muslims who claimed to be inspired by faith, and in their aftermath claims and counterclaims about

*_The Trial: A History, from Socrates to O. J. Simpson_.

Islamic law reverberated around the media. Having just published the history of Western criminal justice on which I had been working, I was feeling rather redundant—until I realized that no one was actually throwing much light on the subject they were supposed to be talking about. Fiery preachers and more or less random young Muslims were making bellicose assertions about "the shari'a." People who wanted to be angry with them were assuming the word meant what they said. Noise, rather than information, was filling a void, while critical questions were going not just unanswered but unasked. Where was the shari'a written down? To what extent was it accepted that its rules had been crafted by human beings? And what gave the men who were so loudly invoking it the right to speak in God's name?

It took a surprisingly long time to establish even basic answers, but they are so central to the rest of this book that it is worth recalling them here. When the Qur'an was first enunciated by the Prophet Muhammad during the 620s, the term "shari'a" conveyed the idea of a direct path to water—a route of considerable importance to a desert people—and at a time when no one systematically differentiated between the world that was and the world that ought to be, Islam's straight and narrow described as much as it prescribed. Scholars would not write about it for at least another century, and half a millennium would elapse before legal theories settled into definitive form, but Muslims always thought of the shari'a in grand terms—infinite ones, even. The fourteenth-century Syrian jurist Ibn Qayyim (1292–1350) set out the vision well:

> [It] is the absolute cure for all ills . . . It is life and nutrition, the medicine, the light, the cure and the safeguard. Every good in this life is derived from it and achieved through it, and every deficiency in existence results from its dissipation. If it had not been for the fact that some of its rules remain [in this world] this world would [have] become corrupted and the universe would [have been] dissipated . . . If God wish[ed] to destroy the world and dissolve existence, He would void whatever remains of its injunctions. For the shari'a which was sent to His Prophet . . . is the pillar of existence and the key to success in this world and the Hereafter.

As befits so awesome a phenomenon, the science of studying law—jurisprudence, or *fiqh*—came to be considered a duty akin to prayer. No aspect of creation fell outside its scope, and jurists pronounced on questions from the lawfulness of logic to the legal meaning of the moon. They hypothesized fantastically unfortunate dilemmas: what Muslims should do on a desert island, for example, if they ever found themselves pining away alongside a dead shipmate, a pig, and a flask of wine (clue: avoid the pork and alcohol until desperate). While some would always focus on big issues such as criminal justice and jihad, others explored far more specialized aspects of the cosmic order—the calculation of inheritance shares, say, or the jurisprudence of ablutions—and no problem was ever too personal to escape their collective gaze. Al-Ghazali (1058–1111), arguably the greatest of all Sunni theologians, once subjected the intimacies of marriage to rigorous legal scrutiny and attributed to the Prophet himself a commandment on the importance of foreplay. Sex was unholy unless preceded by "kiss[es] and [sweet] words," Muhammad had reportedly warned. "Let none of you come upon his wife like an animal."

By the time I took the plunge and signed up in late 2007 to write an account of Islamic ideas of justice, it was clear therefore that challenges lay ahead. Researching so sprawling a subject posed inherent problems, and the distinction between shari'a and *fiqh*, all too often overlooked in the West, called for careful negotiation. Attempts to critique the shari'a are liable to be perceived by devout Muslims as a denunciation of God rather than an argument. The rules of *fiqh*, on the other hand, can never be more than a human approximation of the divine will. Individual jurists have often tried to blur the difference, but lawyerly ideas in general have never been immune from scrutiny. It was through that gap—the crack between heaven and earth—that Islamic law would have to be explored.

The difficulties moved from the theoretical to the real when, between late 2008 and the spring of 2011, I traveled around South Asia, Iran, and the Middle East and met jurists in person. Suspicion of the Western world in the region has rarely been higher, and my background as a human rights barrister was more often a hindrance than a help: an indictment of the West's hypocrisy rather than an expression of its

values. And although I traded shamelessly on my un-English name and paternal roots, suspicions were often intense. The chief law lecturer of a Lucknow madrasa began by warning me that any attempt to understand the shari'a required a fluency in classical Arabic and proficiency in Qur'anic exegesis, and any questions I had in mind were therefore at least a decade premature. The president of Pakistan's Jamaat e-Islami Party complained that my inquiries about Taliban interpretations of Islamic law sounded like those of a NATO stooge, and that I would be better off abandoning my "agenda" and asking instead about "American napalm, daisy cutters, and helicopter gunships." A particularly memorable put-down came from Muhammad Afshani, the director of fatwas at a militant Karachi madrasa called the Jamia Farooqia. As we sat cross-legged on a threadbare mosque carpet, I outlined the nature of my project and told him that, *insh'allah*, I would fill the gaps in my own knowledge by learning from scholars with different opinions—even conflicting ones. He smiled sagely and murmured that I had taken on a difficult project. I nodded, with what I hoped was humility. "And no one," he continued evenly, "should ever embark on such a journey until they know their destination."

The view that questions were inappropriate until the answers were known was one I felt bound to ignore, and as a consequence I did indeed end up with several unforeseen ideas. Mufti Afshani was wrong to the extent that synthesizing them was productive on my own terms, however, and that is reflected in the relatively straightforward structure of this book. The first part sets out the historical events that informed the creation of Islamic jurisprudence, while the second considers its status today, with a particular focus on four themes: attitudes toward war, modernity, criminal justice, and religious tolerance. It seeks unashamedly to entertain as well as inform, but lest it be necessary to say so—and it probably is—it does not intend at any point to challenge the sacred stature of the Prophet Muhammad, the self-evident appeal of Islam, or the almightiness of God. It seeks instead to recall the history that attended the elucidation of Islamic law and to demonstrate that over the years legal rules have often been rewritten or ignored in the name of the shari'a. It also aims to show that many of the people who nowadays claim the clearest perspectives on seventh-century wisdom form part of a revivalist trend that is in important respects just a few

decades old. Even people who disagree will, I hope, recognize at least that issues so important are worthy of debate.

It is tempting in conclusion to plagiarize al-Jahiz, the wittiest writer of ninth-century Baghdad, who once demanded full credit for a work's strengths while insisting that any inadequacies were the fault of his audience's unrealistic expectations. I grudgingly accept, however, that my own shortcomings cannot be so easily palmed off. All I ask is that readers bear in mind the words of another great Arab, the tenth-century historian and traveler al-Mas'udi: "If no one could write books but he who possessed perfect knowledge, no books would be written."

SUDDENLY,
A KNOCK ON THE DOOR

ETGAR KERET

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SUDDENLY, A KNOCK ON THE DOOR

"Tell me a story," the bearded man sitting on my living-room sofa commands. The situation, I must say, is anything but pleasant. I'm someone who *writes* stories, not someone who tells them. And even *that* isn't something I do on demand. The last time anyone asked me to tell him a story, it was my son. That was a year ago. I told him something about a fairy and a ferret—I don't even remember what exactly—and within two minutes he was fast asleep. But the situation is fundamentally different. Because my son doesn't have a beard, or a pistol. Because my son asked for the story nicely, and this man is simply trying to rob me of it.

I try to explain to the bearded man that if he puts his pistol away it will only work in his favor, in our favor. It's hard to think up a story with the barrel of a loaded pistol pointed at your head. But the guy insists. "In this country," he explains, "if you want something, you have to use force." He just got here from Sweden, and in Sweden it's completly different. Over there, if you want something, you ask politely, and most of the time you get it. But not in the stifling, muggy Middle East. All it takes is one week in this place to figure out how things work—or rather, how things don't work. The Palestinians

asked for a state, nicely. Did they get one? The hell they did. So they switched to blowing up kids on buses, and people started listening. The settlers wanted a dialogue. Did anyone pick up on it? No way. So they started getting physical, pouring hot oil on the border patrolmen, and suddenly they had an audience. In this country, might makes right, and it doesn't matter if it's about politics, or economics or a parking space. Brute force is the only language we understand.

Sweden, the place the bearded guy made aliya from, is progressive, and is way up there in quite a few areas. Sweden isn't just ABBA or IKEA or the Nobel Prize. Sweden is a world unto itself, and whatever they have, they got by peaceful means. In Sweden, if he'd gone to the Ace of Base soloist, knocked on her door, and asked her to sing for him, she'd have invited him in and made him a cup of tea. Then she'd have pulled out her acoustic guitar from under the bed and played for him. All this with a smile! But here? I mean, if he hadn't been flashing a pistol I'd have thrown him out right away. Look, I try to reason. "'Look' yourself," the bearded guy grumbles, and cocks his pistol. "It's either a story or a bullet between the eyes." I see my choices are limited. The guy means business. "Two people are sitting in a room," I begin. "Suddenly, there's a knock on the door." The bearded guy stiffens, and for a moment I think maybe the story's getting to him, but it isn't. He's listening to something else. There's a knock on the door. "Open it," he tells me, "and don't try anything. Get rid of whoever it is, and do it fast, or this is going to end badly."

The young man at the door is doing a survey. He has a few questions. Short ones. About the high humidity here in summer, and how it affects my disposition. I tell him I'm not interested but he pushes his way inside anyway.

"Who's that?" he asks me, pointing at the bearded guy. "That's my nephew from Sweden," I lie. "His father died in an avalanche and he's here for the funeral. We're just going over the will. Could you please respect our privacy and leave?" "C'mon, man," the pollster says, and pats me on the shoulder. "It's just a few questions. Give a guy a chance to earn a few bucks. They pay me per respondent." He flops down on the sofa, clutching his binder. The Swede takes a seat next to him. I'm still standing, trying to sound like I mean it. "I'm asking you to leave," I tell him. "Your timing is way off." "Way off, eh?" He opens the plastic binder and pulls out a big revolver. "Why's my timing off? 'Cause I'm darker? 'Cause I'm not good enough? When it comes to Swedes, you've got all the time in the world. But for a Moroccan, for a war veteran who left pieces of his spleen behind in Lebanon, you can't spare a fucking minute." I try to reason with him, to tell him it's not that way at all, that he'd simply caught me at a delicate point in my conversation with the Swede. But the pollster raises his revolver to his lips and signals me to shut up. "*Vamos,*" he says. "Stop making excuses. Sit down over there, and out with it." "Out with what?" I ask. The truth is, now I'm pretty uptight. The Swede has a pistol too. Things might get out of hand. East is east and west is west, and all that. Different mentalities. Or else the Swede could lose it, simply because he wants the story all to himself. Solo. "Don't get me started," the pollster warns. "I have a short fuse. Out with the story—and make it quick." "Yeah," the Swede chimes in, and pulls out his piece too. I clear my throat, and start all over again. "Three people are sitting in a room." "And no 'Suddenly, there's a knock on the door,'" the Swede announces. The pollster doesn't quite get it, but plays along with him. "Get going," he

says. "And no knocking on the door. Tell us something else. Surprise us."

I stop short, and take a deep breath. Both of them are staring at me. How do I always get myself into these situations? I bet things like this never happen to Amos Oz or David Grossman. Suddenly there's a knock on the door. Their gaze turns menacing. I shrug. It's not about me. There's nothing in my story to connect it to that knock. "Get rid of him," the pollster orders me. "Get rid of him, whoever it is." I open the door just a crack. It's a pizza delivery guy. "Are you Keret?" he asks. "Yes," I say, "but I didn't order a pizza." "It says here Fourteen Zamenhoff Street," he snaps, pointing at the printed delivery slip and pushing his way inside. "So what," I say, "I didn't order a pizza." "Family size," he insists. "Half pineapple, half anchovy. Prepaid. Credit card. Just gimme my tip and I'm outta here." "Are you here for a story too?" the Swede interrogates. "What story?" the pizza guy asks, but it's obvious he's lying. He's not very good at it. "Pull it out," the pollster prods. "C'mon, out with the pistol already." "I don't have a pistol," the pizza guy admits awkwardly, and draws a cleaver out from under his cardboard tray. "But I'll cut him into julienne strips unless he coughs up a good one, on the double."

The three of them are on the sofa—the Swede on the right, then the pizza guy, then the pollster. "I can't do it like this," I tell them. "I can't get a story going with the three of you here and your weapons and all that. Go take a walk around the block, and by the time you get back, I'll have something for you." "The asshole's gonna call the cops," the pollster tells the Swede. "What's he thinking, that we were born yesterday?" "C'mon, give us one and we'll be on our way," the pizza guy begs. "A short one. Don't be so anal. Things are

tough, you know. Unemployment, suicide bombings, Iranians. People are hungry for something else. What do you think brought law-abiding guys like us this far? We're desperate, man, desperate."

I clear my throat and start again. "Four people are sitting in a room. It's hot. They're bored. The air conditioner's on the blink. One of them asks for a story. The second one joins in, then the third . . ." "That's not a story," the pollster protests. "That's an eyewitness report. It's exactly what's happening here right now. Exactly what we're trying to run away from. Don't you go and dump reality on us like a garbage truck. Use your imagination, man, create, invent, take it all the way."

I nod and start again. "A man is sitting in a room, all by himself. He's lonely. He's a writer. He wants to write a story. It's been a long time since he wrote his last story, and he misses it. He misses the feeling of creating something out of something. That's right—something out of something. Because something out of nothing is when you make something up out of thin air, in which case it has no value. Anybody can do that. But something out of something means it was really there the whole time, inside you, and you discover it as part of something new, that's never happened before. The man decides to write a story about the situation. Not the political situation and not the social situation either. He decides to write a story about the human situation, the human condition. The human condition the way he's experiencing it right now. But he draws a blank. No story presents itself. Because the human condition the way he's experiencing it right now doesn't seem to be worth a story, and he's just about to give up when suddenly . . ." "I warned you already," the Swede interrupts me.

"No knock on the door." "I've got to," I insist. "Without a knock on the door there's no story." "Let him," the pizza guy says softly. "Give him some slack. You want a knock on the door? Okay, have your knock on the door. Just so long as it brings us a story."

SOMETIMES THERE IS A VOID

Memoirs of an Outsider

ZAKES MDA

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CHAPTER ONE

THE SMELL OF LIFE is back on the pink mountain. Human life, that is, for other forms have always thrived here even after we had left. Before our return shrubs and bushes flourished, but their fused aromas highlighted an absence. The air was too crisp. Too clean and fresh. In spring aloes bloomed – hence the pinkness – and wild bees busied themselves with the task of collecting pollen for some hive that would invariably be located in a cleft of a dangerous-looking sandstone cliff. Now we have tamed the bees, and are keeping them in supers that dot the landscape. Bees have brought us back to the mountain.

Decades ago my grandfather's estate sprawled out on this moun-

tainside. He, Charles Gxumekelana Zenzile Mda, was the headman of Qoboshane Village in the Lower Telle area, named for the Telle River that separated Lesotho from the Herschel District of the Cape Province in the Union of South Africa. A headman was the chief of a small village, and my grandfather was given that position by his brother-in-law, Edwin Mei, the original headman who pursued a better career as an interpreter at the magistrate's court in Sterkspruit. Edwin also gave Charles a huge chunk of Dyarhom Mountain where he planted vast orchards and built houses for his wife, Mildred Millicent Mda, who never forgot to remind everyone of her true royal breeding by repeating at the slightest provocation: *Undijonge kakuhle, ndiyintombi kaMei mna*. Don't mess with me, I am Mei's daughter.

Soon other families built their homesteads on the mountain, and my grandfather named the settlement Goodwell.

The elite of Qoboshane lived in Goodwell. Across the gravel road, just below my grandfather's estate, lived Mr Nyangintsimbi who, as the principal of Qoboshane Bantu Community School, taught me and my father before me. As a spindly boy of twelve I used to play with his son Christopher, though I was in awe of him because his father was the school principal. My own grandmother used to teach at that school. Her mantra, as she twisted your ear for not performing your tasks properly, was: 'One thing at a time, things done by halves never done right'. She said these words in English. Grandma always spoke in English when she was mad at us, whereas on all other occasions she spoke in her native isiXhosa. We came to regard English as a language of anger.

There were other homesteads on that mountain, but because the houses and kraals blended with the rocky terrain in perfect camouflage you knew of their presence only by the smoke that spiralled from each of them every morning and evening.

That was in 1960.

Today I am walking with Gugu on the ruins. I call them ruins, though nothing is left of the buildings. The stones long since became part of the landscape. Yet I remember where each house used to be. I show Gugu where the main house, *ixande*, stood. It was built of stone and roofed

with corrugated iron. It was pure joy to sleep in that house when it rained because the sound of the raindrops created ear-shattering music on the roof. But when it thundered it got really scary; the rafters shook and we imagined all sorts of fire-breathing ogres dancing in the rain, creating all the mayhem.

As we walk the length of what used to be our yard surrounded by gigantic aloes, I point out to her where each house used to be: the grass-thatched rondavels, one used as a kitchen, another one as a pantry, the big four-walled thatched house with decorative patterns on the red mud walls. You had to climb many stone steps before you got to the mud stoep and the door. This house also served as our living room, except when there were important visitors: they would be welcomed on the sofas in the *ixande*.

We all slept in the thatched four-walled house. There weren't enough beds to go round; some of us slept on mats on the floor. In seasons of scarcity sleeping on the floor became a source of hilarity, like when we woke up one morning and discovered that Cousin Ethel's toes had been nibbled by rats and were caked in red. She had slept through it all.

The kitchen rondavel was the centre of our social life in the evenings. Not only did grandmother cook our food in a three-legged cast-iron pot in the hearth that was in the middle of the hut as fifteen or so grandchildren huddled together around the fire in a cold winter, we also told folk tales in this room. I remember that when my siblings and I were newly arrived from Johannesburg sitting here was an ordeal; we would cry streams from the pungent smoke that filled the hut. But after a few months our eyes, like those of the rest of the cousins, were inured to the smoke.

We each took turns telling stories that had been passed on to us by older relatives, who had in turn learnt them from those who came before them, from one generation to the next, beginning when time began.

We noted whenever Cousin Nobantu came to visit from Johannesburg that her stories would not be quite the same as ours. By that time I had already spent a year or so in this village and thought of myself as one of the villagers as Johannesburg became a receding memory, whereas

Cousin Nobantu only came to visit during school holidays. Although her stories would have the familiar characters that we had grown to love so much and the plots were no different from the plots we knew so well, her characters acquired Johannesburg slickness. Also, they spoke in isiZulu and in a lot of township slang, whereas our characters spoke in isiXhosa as spoken by the village people. Her characters were therefore more endearing than ours. isiZulu gave them the sophistication that villagers envied in Johannesburgers.

And then there was Cousin Nondyebo whose manner of narration transformed even those characters we knew as kind and gentle into bullies, quite reminiscent of her own bullying tendencies. She was older than the rest of us, and had even been to Lady Grey, a town that lay beyond our district headquarters of Sterkspruit. She was therefore the fountain of all wisdom.

But the stories that left us in stitches were Cousin Ethel's. Whereas we all told stories as they were passed down to us, Cousin Ethel invented new events and characters in the tried and tested folk tales. She even incorporated the rats that ate her toes in a story about Mamlambo, the water goddess who lives in the Mzintlava River but travels in lightning to visit other rivers, including the river that runs in a narrow valley between our own Dyarhom Mountain and the eSiqikini Mountain. The true Mamlambo is a beautiful goddess with the torso of a horse, the neck of a snake and the lower body of a fish. But Cousin Ethel added other features to this wonderful water creature, such as hair that was flaming red and spellbinding eyes that hypnotised toe-chomping culprits until she swallowed them. Oh, yes, Cousin Ethel's rats got their comeuppance from Mamlambo!

Stories continued even as we ate *umgqusho* – samp cooked with beans – and *umfino* – wild spinach – from a single basin. As our hands raced to the food and as we stuffed it in our mouths and swallowed without chewing properly so as to fill our stomachs before the basin was empty, storytellers continued unabated. Occasionally grandmother snapped at them, 'Don't talk with your mouth full' or 'If you don't chew your food you will be constipated and I'll have to unblock you with castor oil or an enema'.

Outside the kitchen rondavel was the smooth granite stone that was used for grinding maize, wheat and sorghum into flour, and another granite rock with a hole and a pestle for stamping maize into samp. On the clearing below the *ixande* was the space where the bus that travelled between Qoboshane and Sterkspruit, Dumakude Bus Service, was parked every night. My grandparents rented out the parking space, and a rondavel up the mountain where the driver slept, to the coloured family who owned the bus. The fact that Dumakude slept at our home was a source of pride to the hordes of grandchildren who lived at the estate.

And then there were the orchards; my grandfather's own source of pride. People wondered how he had turned the rocky mountain into a Garden of Eden. There were rows and rows of peach, apricot, quince, pear, apple, orange and pomegranate trees. There were also vines that bore both green and purple grapes, and cacti that bore red and green prickly pears. Figs had great prominence in the orchard, and my grandmother said it was in honour of our grandfather's father whose name was Feyiya, which means fig. In summer yellow cling peaches became our bane because we had to eat them as relish for hard porridge during hard times. Sometimes my grandfather's relatives from Lesotho would wade across the Telle River and bring us wild honey, which also helped in our battle with hard porridge.

It is hard to believe that I lived here for only two years – from 1960 to 1962 – when at the age of twelve I was banished from Johannesburg by my own parents for engaging in gang activities. My father had moved to Engcobo in the Transkei to serve articles under George Matanzima in order to be admitted as an attorney, while my mother remained in Johannesburg working as a registered nurse and midwife at the Dobsonville Clinic.

While she was at work at the clinic, which was just across the street from our four-roomed home, or cycling in the township delivering babies, I was playing truant from school and hanging out on shop verandas where I played the pennywhistle with other delinquent youths. Or I would be fighting in street gangs where I had become famous among my peers as a ducking champion, though my throwing of the

stones that we used as weapons of war was reputed to be weak. On the occasions when I did go to school I spent most of the time in class drawing pictures. My talent was recognised when the teacher asked us to illustrate the poetry we were studying with appropriate pictures and I drew the Zulu warrior uPhoshozwayo as an illustration for a poem in his praise. With crayons, I brought his traditional dress of leopard skins and a shield and a spear to life. Then I signed the picture at the bottom right: 'by Zakes the Artist'.

That was the beginning of the name Zakes. I was given the name by a friend, Percy Bafana Mahlukwana, an artist in his own right, who later died in one of those gang wars. At the time there was a famous jazz saxophonist by the name of Zakes Nkosi in Alexandra Township. With my initials ZK, it seemed the logical thing to name me after this great man.

Sometimes I played truant from gang warfare and spent my time praying. I imagined that one day I would be a Catholic priest and go to heaven. I built an altar behind the house and on Saturdays and Sundays I lit candles and conducted a holy mass for myself. Sometimes the girl next door joined me and marvelled at my Latin chants: *Gloria Patri et Filio et Spiritu Sancto . . . Dominus vobiscum . . . et cum spiritu tuo . . . oremus*.

Because I thought she was my girlfriend, one day I asked her for *isinjonjo* – township slang for sex. She burst out in anger, threatening never to visit my altar again if I asked her to do 'silly things'. That was a relief! I wouldn't have known what to do if she had said yes. I immediately apologised and vowed on my life never to ask for *isinjonjo* ever again.

The last straw for my mother was when I was frogmarched home by a man who claimed I had robbed his daughter. That afternoon I had been loitering on the shop veranda as usual when a man and his weeping daughter, who was slightly younger than me, arrived. The daughter pointed at me as the boy who had robbed her of the money with which she had been sent to the store to buy a loaf of bread. I swear I had nothing to do with it, but when he searched me and found a big knife in my pocket the crime fitted me very well.

Not only had I disgraced my mother by engaging in criminal activities, I had also stolen a knife from her special set of *braai* knives and forks with carved ivory handles. My protestations that I had only carried the knife to impress my friends did not convince her. She had had enough of me, and she wrote to my father to fetch me and take me to his own parents at Qoboshane.

Under normal circumstances I loved visiting my grandparents in the village, particularly because I enjoyed travelling by train. It was always exciting to board at Park Station and then change trains in Bloemfontein after spending the whole night being lulled to sleep by the grinding rhythm of the wheels on iron, or to stand in the corridor looking out at the telephone poles passing very fast. If we were lucky we – my mother, my twin brothers Sonwabo and Monwabisi, my sister Thami, and my baby brother Zwelakhe – would have our own compartment with four berths, like bunk-beds. The greatest joy came from eating *umphako* – provisions for the road – of chicken and steamed bread carried in a cane and wicker basket. Sometimes we shared the compartment with another family, in which case we would share our respective *umphako*. Invariably they would also be carrying chicken and steamed bread in a similar basket. From Bloemfontein the train took us to Zastron, where we would catch a bus to Sterkspruit, and then take our trusty Dumakude Bus Service right to the doorstep of my grandparents' *ixande*.

But on this occasion of banishment the two-day train journey was a very unhappy one. I was leaving my friends in Johannesburg, and I wondered how I would cope in a village. My father didn't make things any better when he snapped at me in a café in Sterkspruit. He was at the counter buying fish and chips for our lunch and I was standing next to him. A mad woman in dirty tattered clothes approached me, smiling. She really scared me, so I moved to the other side of my father. But he thought I was afraid of a white boy, about my age, who had also approached the counter at the same time. He reprimanded me right there in public for giving way to the boy just because he was white and lectured me on how I was just as good as the boy and had no business to be afraid of white people. I just stood there feeling small; I dared not defend myself by saying that I was escaping the mad black woman and not the white boy.

When I came to live here grandfather had already lost some of his marbles, after an assassination attempt by a man called Gazi who stabbed him in the head with a knife. Apparently Gazi had been unhappy about one thing or another in grandfather's administration. After the stabbing Charles was no longer the grandfather I remembered on earlier visits, years before. The grandfather who sat in the shade of a gigantic boulder across the gravel road surrounded by his councillors, settling community disputes; who rode his horse Gobongwana, while singing its praises; who sat at his iron sewing machine making leather shoes while still singing praises to Gobongwana (we were proud that he was not just a cobbler who fixed soles like the old man on the veranda of Cretchley's store; he created shoes right from scratch); who stood in front of *ixande* in his brown riding breeches and gave sweets to a queue of grandchildren whenever he came from meetings in Sterkspruit; who never forgot to give a brief caress to his twenty-year-old dog Ngqawa, as it slept at the door; and who regaled us with stories of our revered ancestor Mhlontlo.

According to him, our clan, the amaMpondomise people, originally came from Qumbu in the eastern part of the Cape Province – the region that was named Transkei by subsequent colonial governments. Then one day Mhlontlo, who was a paramount chief in that area, killed the British resident magistrate. It happened in 1880, the very year my grandfather was born. First, Mhlontlo invited the magistrate to a ceremony at Sulenkama, the seat of the amaMpondomise kingdom. The magistrate, a violent and arrogant man called Hamilton Hope, set off with much pomp, thinking that he was going to be the centre of the ceremony, only to discover too late that the ceremony was about his own ritual murder. My ancestor, who was also a reputable medicine man, conducted the ritual in which parts of Hope's body were to be used as medicine to strengthen his armies. The whole ceremony involved a theatrical performance: Mhlontlo and his people rode back to Qumbu, thirty kilometres away, took over the magistracy and improvised a play where Mhlontlo took the role of Hamilton Hope. Turning over the pages of the big book on the magistrate's bench and adopting a nasal tone in his Anglicised isiXhosa, he mimicked Hope sentencing people.

Well, that theatre didn't last for long. The British forces came to arrest Mhlontlo, but he and his followers escaped to Lesotho, where they were given refuge by Chief Moorosi of the Baphuthi clan.

My grandfather was a baby on his mother's back during that long journey of nearly six hundred kilometres. His parents and the hundreds of Mhlontlo's followers felt very safe because he had strong medicine that protected everyone. Both the British and the Boers feared him; he could make their guns spew water instead of bullets and their cannons explode in their faces.

After some time a white trader lured Mhlontlo with new blankets from his Lesotho refuge to the Telle River that bordered South Africa. He was captured by the British troops who took him back to Qumbu for trial. Grandfather never told us the details of how Mhlontlo won the case, but he did. It must have been his strong medicine at work.

Many of Mhlontlo's followers decided against returning to Qumbu. That is why there are many Mdas in Lesotho today. My great-grandfather – Charles' father, that is – the Feyiya Mda who I mentioned in relation to the orchards, decided to cross the Lesotho border back to South Africa and to settle at eKra Village in the Lower Telle area.

By the time I went to live with my grandfather he could no longer remember the story of Mhlontlo. He had become a cantankerous old man who would tap a tyke's head with a walking stick for no apparent reason. We stayed out of his way.

He could no longer work in his fields either. Grandmother did all the farming with the help of the other villagers in work-parties known as *ilima*. But we were spoilt. We were never allowed to work in the fields like other village kids or like some of her older grandchildren. My siblings – who were already staying with my grandparents even before my banishment – and I were greatly distressed that we could not go to the fields. *Ilima* was so much fun – with food, songs and dances. Once we went with people who were taking food to the workers, but grandmother shooed us away.

'Go away,' she said. 'You, children of Solomzi, will be scorched by the sun.'

We took this as a punishment for being my father's children. After

all, we had seen how partial she was towards her other grandchildren – especially those who were the children of her daughters rather than of her sons. We had seen how she used to hide chunks of pork in her apron pockets for Cousin Bernard, while we had to eat porridge with peaches. We knew that Bernard's mother, who had left the village for Johannesburg many years ago and never came back, did not send any money for his upkeep. Only my father sent money which my grandmother used to support hordes of grandchildren whose parents didn't bother.

That was why I told my father when he paid us a visit once that we were suffering and my cousins were getting preferential treatment at our expense. That afternoon he went to drink brandy with his friends and came back late in the evening. He was drunk and knocked at grandmother's door, yelling that she did not treat his children well.

The next day he was sober and remorseful. He apologised to grandmother for yelling at her, and then upbraided me for telling lies about his dear mother who was sacrificing so much to look after us.

But that was not the end of that story. When my father's younger brother, Uncle Owen, came visiting from Johannesburg many months later he punched me in the face and kicked me in the stomach even though I was already writhing on the ground, for lying about his mother to my father. And indeed my father's oldest sister, Aunt Nontsokolo, who owned a general dealer's store at 'Musong a few miles away, gave me a few choice words about my lies. Aunt Nontsokolo could afford to be self-righteous because she was the only one of my father's five siblings who did not at any stage dump her children with my grandmother but was bringing them up herself.

How could we not take our prohibition from *ilima* as punishment when we were forbidden even from looking after cattle? Granted, our grandfather no longer owned any cattle since the assassination attempt. Only disused kraals remained as evidence of his cattle-owning days. But we so much wanted to join herdboys from neighbouring homesteads in the fun and games that we knew took place out there in the pastures. As it was, our schoolmates who herded cattle after school and during weekends took us for sissies. Worst of all, we were not privy to their

insider jokes and dirty stories whose settings were the great meadows and gorges where the cattle grazed, and the rivers where the boys moulded cattle from clay as the animals drank.

I could only console myself by roaming within the confines of the estate and spelunking the caves that were only a short distance from the rondavels. I was fascinated by the Bushman paintings that were still vivid and I tried to reproduce them in my notebook. This was an illegal act according to my teachers, because notebooks were meant for nothing but notes. I was constantly punished for it – a few whacks on my knuckles with a ruler.

THE REASON FOR RETURNING to this pink mountain is not to relive the past – though one cannot escape a little bit of nostalgia – but to visit the beekeeping project that I started with the village women a few years back. Gugu and I come here occasionally to see the Bee People, as we call them, and to admire the progress they have been making over the years. After taking us on a tour of the hives, especially the two supers that are in an enclosure of aloes between the graves of my grandfather and one of my aunts, we bid the Bee People goodbye and get into my car.

The mountain road is rough and narrow. A Mercedes Benz sedan was not built to negotiate boulders on what passes for a road, and often the rocks that stick out cannot but scrape against the bottom of the car. Fortunately this is not a busy road; otherwise I would be at a loss what to do if another car approached in the opposite direction. I dare not move to the side for fear of rolling down the slope. There are no railings, and already I can see skeletons of cars that must have rolled down over the years. No one could have survived the impact on the rocks hundreds of yards below.

There is a sigh of relief when we reach the village at the foot of the mountain.

It is more like a township than a village really, with modern bungalows, schools and shops. The biggest of the shops belongs to my

Uncle Phakamile, or Press, as we call him. It combines a general dealer's store, a restaurant and a tavern. The villagers call it eRestu. We use it to hold our meetings with the Bee People whenever we visit from Johannesburg or, in my case, from the United States where I now teach creative writing at Ohio University. Sometimes we just hang out to soak in the wonderful atmosphere created by drunken old ladies and various village characters, and by the smell of fish and chips and fat cakes deep frying in oil.

Some of the inhabitants once owned homesteads on the mountain we have now turned into an apiary – at Goodwell. But the Boers – and when we talk of the Boers we actually mean the apartheid government of the time – forced them down from the mountain and resettled them near the Telle River. It would be easier to govern them there and to ensure that they did not hide guerrilla fighters, or terrorists if you like, in their midst.

We branch off to eRestu to say goodbye to Press and his wife as we'll be driving back to Johannesburg. It is a six-hour drive and the earlier we leave the better. I hate driving at night.

'How are the bees doing, son?' Press asks. He is only six years older than me at most, but basks in the glory of being the son of my grandfather's brother. According to tradition, he is a peer of my father's and therefore I am his son.

'The bees are doing fine, Press,' I say. 'Although last winter's snow was not kind at all. The harvest will be small.'

'I do not know why you waste your time doing this honey business from which you gain nothing. You should have invested the money in my shop here. All I need is ten thousand rands to fill these shelves with goods. You would get your money back with a lot of profit.'

He has said this before. We Mdas have worked hard to get where we are. Why should we care about these good-for-nothing villagers?

'It is my time that I put into this honey business and of course my expenses to travel here from Johannesburg occasionally,' I explain to him. 'But many other people have contributed to its success.'

'Johannesburg? But I hear you now live in America,' he says. And he asks one of his daughters behind the counter to give us cold drinks of our choice and some biscuits.

'Yes, I work there now. Just like the migrant workers who go to the mines in Johannesburg. After every few months I return to see my mother. I may as well use that time to see how the Bee People are doing as well.'

Press is a hard-working business man who toiled in the mines in his youth because he did not have any education. To this day he is illiterate. He saved his money, and after a few years he came back to his home village to establish this business. Since he lifted himself up from poverty until he became the richest man in the village, he cannot understand why anyone should waste his time trying to pull others up.

'You see, Press, that beekeeping project will enrich you too,' I say, half-jokingly. 'When the villagers have money they will spend it in your store.'

'I hear you, child of my brother, but still . . .'

'But still we must go now, Press. We have a long way to drive.'

The stretch of dirt road from Qoboshane to Sterkspruit never fails to flood my mind with memories. That is why I turn to look at Gugu and say, 'You know, I am a creation of women. Not only because for nine months I was part of a woman's body, but for the simple reason that every woman with whom I have intimately interacted has contributed something in the moulding – for better or for worse – of who I have become.'

We are driving past St Teresa Roman Catholic Mission about sixteen kilometres from Qoboshane. A minibus taxi in front of us leaves a cloud of dust in its wake, and it remains hanging in the air for quite some time. The buildings look distorted through the combination of dust particles and the heatwaves, creating a very eerie image. I can see twisted nuns in black habits, ghosts of the past, walking silently in the grounds; pacing to and fro; muttering things to themselves; perhaps reading beads on their rosaries.

Among these apparitions I can see Sister Eusebia. She is the only one whose name I can remember, for she was the principal when my father taught at this secondary school from January 1948 to June 1955. She is the one who is still smiling in black and white photographs in my father's album – my only material inheritance from him. That and a number of LPs of Frank Sinatra, Marian Anderson, the Beatles, King

Kong (the South African musical), Ella Fitzgerald, Satchmo, Handel's Messiah, Dark City Sisters, Jim Reeves, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, the Singing Bells and thirty or so others that he collected when he was a member of a record club from 1963 to 1966. The photo album is the only thing that I still have. The music albums went with my furniture and books when an ex-wife sold my stuff after an acrimonious divorce.

Sister Eusebia, a group of other nuns and the secondary school students in gym-dresses and white shirts still smile at me in black and white whenever I don a surgical mask to page through the photo album. The mask is essential because the dust mites that have accumulated between the pages over a period of more than five decades make me cough and sneeze and cry and itch all over whenever I visit those venerable pages. The mask, however, does not prevent the pain I still feel when I look at the angelic picture of a smiling Father Sahr – he of the Order of Mary Immaculate. His car killed my dog Rex when he drove through Goodwell once. Rex liked to bark at cars that drove on the dirt road in front of my grandfather's estate. And Manqindi – the name we gave to the German Catholic priest because one of his hands did not have fingers, the result of an incident in some world war – did not even stop his car after killing my Rex in cold blood. I vowed I would never own another dog for Father Sahr to kill. Since then I have never had another dog, though of course I have long stopped blaming the poor priest.

What strikes me as I drive past the Catholic mission is that it still looks the same. In fifty-five years nothing has been added; nothing has been taken away. All the stone buildings with red roofs are exactly as I remember them. Even the house where we lived when I was born. My father must have celebrated his new job at St Teresa's Native Secondary School with my conception, for I was born on the sixth of October, 1948, nine months after he joined the staff.

I wasn't born in that house, though, but at Mlamli Hospital a few kilometres from the mission station. My father named me Zanemvula, which has the double meaning of 'the rain bringer' and 'the one who has been brought by rain'. I do not think the heavens opened up and wept when I was born. Rather, I was named after a character in *Ingqumbo*

Yeminyanya, the isiXhosa novel by A C Jordan that was published in 1940 and years later translated into English by the author as *The Wrath of the Ancestors*. It was hailed as one of Africa's finest novels. It captivated readers because of its lyrical prose and its treatment of Western intrusion on the culture of amaXhosa. But what captivated my father most was that the novel was about our clan, the amaMpondomise people.

Father Sahr would not baptise me into the Roman Catholic Church without what he called a Christian name, which had to be a saint's name. But my father, an ardent Pan Africanist, insisted that he would not give me a 'white name', so he opted for Kizito, after the youngest of the Ugandan Martyrs. Although Kizito had only been beatified at the time and was not yet a fully fledged saint (he has since been canonised), the priest approved. My third name, Gatyeni, was my father's way of giving a nod to his ancestors by naming me after one of them.

My earliest memory resides in that house. I was three years old when mother and father came home with two babies in fluffy white. They were the twins, Sonwabo and Monwabisi, fresh from Mlamli Hospital and smelling of Johnson's Baby Powder. They were not my favourite people because they seemed to grab all my parents' attention. These usurpers spent a lot of time crying or sleeping. When they were sleeping and there was no one else in the room I opened their eyes with my fingers and inspected their eyeballs. Then I poked their faces just for the heck of it. This practice continued on a daily basis until I heard the radio telling on me as soon as my father switched it on to listen to the news one evening. It was the same radio that once interrupted Glenn Miller's 'String of Pearls' with ear-shattering static and then ratted on me that I had stolen sugar and condensed milk. Fortunately, on all the occasions it decided to be a tattle-tale no one else paid attention. Both my parents carried on with whatever they were doing as if they had not heard it. But I decided to stop all my criminal activities because I knew that one day the radio's snitching would ring loud and clear in their ears and I would be in deep trouble.

Yes, the grounds of the mission station are exactly as I remember them when I played with my friend Bernard Khosi on our tricycles, and when I followed my father around on a path between the buildings, a

newspaper in my pocket. Even though I could not read I always carried a newspaper with me, just like my father. Or a book. Any book from his shelf. It didn't matter that none of its pages was illustrated. The fact that I was walking around with a big book in my hand, just like father did, was satisfaction enough. It could be *Abou Ben Adhem and the Angel*, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* or a tome by George Eliot or one of the Brontë sisters that my father taught in his English literature classes, or the William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley poetry that he made his students recite. During these walks father would himself recite Mark Antony's oration or something from *Macbeth*. I had no idea what the words meant and he never bothered to explain, but his voice still reverberates in my head: 'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day, to the last syllable of recorded time . . .'

My father was also an ardent gardener, and the staff quarters at St Teresa did not give him the opportunity to consummate his relationship with the soil. So, he rented a house at the nearby village of KwaGcina and we moved there. He cycled to work every morning, and after school he worked in his garden, particularly on those days when he was not conducting the school choir. When he was too tired to water the flowers and vegetables he sat on a chair on the stoep and drew pencil portraits of the twins and me and anyone else who happened to be around. People always marvelled at how he was able to bring out a person's likeness exactly as the person was.

Later, he bought a number of Jersey cows and employed village women to churn butter in big jars that were normally used for bottling peaches. I remember rows of women, some in the red-ochre *isikhakha* attire and big *iqhiya* turbans of the abaThembu people, sitting in front of the hatchery and shaking the jars to the rhythm of four-part harmonies. Occasionally a woman would be carried by the spirit, stand up and flaunt a few oscillations of the waist and shoulder, and then sit down to resume churning the butter.

In the hatchery there were batteries of incubators. Father encouraged villagers to raise chickens for meat. They bought day-old chicks from his hatchery.

When my mother got a job as a nursing sister in another village called Dulcie's Nek my parents employed a nanny to look after us. Nontonje was initially a red girl, which meant she wore the traditional red-ochre clothes, but she was soon socialised into floral dresses that were mostly hand-downs from my mother.

I didn't know of my father's activities besides his teaching and farming. Sometimes he was away for extended periods. We heard adults talking about how he had been banned by the Minister of Justice, C R Swart, from attending any gathering in any place within the Union of South Africa. Then we heard that there was a big problem between him and some local villagers, particularly the village chief, Steyn Senoamali, who was supported by Mr Fihla, the primary school teacher. We never got to know the nature of the problem exactly, but it was somehow related to a civil action in which my father was suing Steyn Senoamali for calling him a communist and the Native Commissioner of Herschel, our district, was in full support of the village chief. Perhaps Fihla was going to give evidence on behalf of Senoamali and the Native Commissioner and tell the court that they were not being libellous since my father was indeed a communist as confirmed by his membership of the African National Congress. Anyone who fought against apartheid was regarded as a communist and was likely to be banned under the Suppression of Communism Act, even if he was as anti-communist as my father was. Most likely, Senoamali and Fihla were being used by the Commissioner to spy on my father.

There was so much bad blood between my family and Senoamali that he haunted my dreams. He was reputed to be a powerful *ixhwele* – medicine man – and I feared that he was going to harm my father with his wizardry. Nontonje, who understood these issues better, kept me and the twins abreast of events, particularly on Senoamali's prowess in the field of magic. She painted a vivid picture of a stick that he used to cast spells, which was also capable of transforming into a snake. His name, which is Sesotho for 'the one who drinks blood' or, even more ominous, 'the blood-sucker', added to my anxieties about the safety of my family.

One night I was woken up by a loud knock on my bedroom window.

And there was Senoamali's stick peeping between the curtains. 'Hello, Kizito,' it said. '*Ndiyeza ngapho* – I'm coming over there.' Behind it out there I could see white horses dancing in the dark, flames raging from their hoofs. The next morning I told Nontonje about the visit, and she confirmed that indeed that was clear evidence that you don't mess with an *ixhwele* of Senoamali's stature. Two decades later I wrote a poem titled 'Dance of the Ghosts' based on the incident. It begins: *I dream/ And my dreams/ Are dreams of ghosts/ I see them prancing/ And gamboling/In the moonlight/ Their eyes glow/ With impish pride/ And their feet dance/ To the rhythm/ Of no music.*

As the days for the court case approached, the dream became recurrent. Until Nelson Mandela came from Johannesburg to rescue me. His presence assured me that Senoamali's stick would be defeated.

He was a lawyer from the firm of Messrs Mandela and Tambo and was instructed by my father to handle the case against Senoamali and the Native Commissioner. I liked him because whenever he visited our house he never forgot to mention how handsome I was. He was quite handsome himself, with finely combed hair parted on the right in what we called 'the road'. That was my father's style too – a style that I often asked Nontonje to do on my head. Alas, my mother never allowed my hair to grow long enough to make 'the road' noticeable.

Mandela was not just my father's lawyer but he was his friend as well. When Anton Lembede died in 1947 my father, a founding member of the African National Congress Youth League, took over as its president. But the following year he had to leave Johannesburg because of ill-health and went to teach at St Teresa. He continued with his presidency and periodically made the trip to Johannesburg to catch up with ANC Youth League business. Later he set up a working committee comprising Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo to manage the activities of the organisation in his absence.

Even when we still lived at St Teresa Nelson Mandela would sometimes drive all the way from Johannesburg to consult with my father. One day Mandela came to St Teresa with a briefcase of documents in preparation for some ANC conference where the Youth League was to present its strategy. He was not aware that the Special

Branch cops were following him. When he arrived my father was in his Junior Certificate literature class. Sister Eusebia called him outside, and he and Mandela conferred for a few minutes before Mandela handed him the briefcase. Mandela drove away, but as soon as my father got back to his classroom there was another knock. He opened the door thinking that it was Mandela who had perhaps forgotten to tell him something. But it was the police – both uniformed and Special Branch. They pushed him aside and walked into the classroom. They wanted the briefcase. But it had disappeared and my father did not know where.

'What briefcase?' my father asked.

'We know that Mandela gave you a briefcase,' said an Afrikaner Special Branch officer. 'Where is it?'

My father pretended he did not know what they were talking about. At the same time he really did not know what had happened to the briefcase. The policemen turned the classroom upside down but there was no briefcase. They were fuming because they had hoped to arrest my father with incriminating documents, and then of course arrest Mandela before he got to Umtata where he had clients to defend in a criminal matter.

'Perhaps he didn't leave the briefcase after all,' said a black Special Branch man.

They left in a huff.

No one said anything about the briefcase for three days or so. My father was wary of asking, lest he incriminate himself by admitting ownership of it. One could never be sure whether or not there was a police informer among the students.

One day Sister Eusebia called him to her office.

'Are you not missing something, Mr Mda?' she asked.

Before my father could answer she gave him the briefcase. There was a sigh of relief. She told him that as soon as the students realised that the police were at the door the student in front reached for the briefcase and passed it to the student sitting behind her. It was passed from student to student until the one who was sitting at the window threw it out. Sister Eusebia was there to catch it and hide it.

Some of those students became political activists. Ezra November and Nqabande Sidzamba, for instance, became PAC leaders.

MY MOTHER ALSO KNEW Nel or Nelly, as she and her girlfriends called Nelson Mandela, long before she married my father. She, Albertina Sisulu and Evelyn Mase trained together as nurses. Albertina was the oldest of the girls, and she occupied herself with matchmaking. Thus Nelson ended up courting and then marrying Evelyn, and after about two years my father married my mother.

Nelson and Evelyn were so close to my parents that a few years later they looked after us – me and the twins – at their Orlando home in Johannesburg when politics and then law studies uprooted us from the stability of KwaGcina and our farming activities. At the time the Mandelas had three children of their own: Thembi who was two years older than me; Makgatho, two years younger; and a toddler named Maki. So, three extra kids and their nanny must have been quite a burden, although I never heard anyone complain.

A memory that sticks out during this period is when Nelson Mandela picked us up in his car from Park Station in Johannesburg. We drove to Sophiatown because he wanted to see someone there. In front of us was an old car that looked as if it was going to fall apart any time. It was coughing along and releasing a cloud of black smoke from its exhaust pipe. Our nanny, Nontonje, broke out laughing. I joined in the laughter. So did the twins. Mandela turned to look at us at the back. His face was stern as he said: *Nihleka lemoto yalomntu, kodwa aninayo ne njalo nina* – You laugh at that man's car, yet you don't even have one like that.

That stopped our silly giggles immediately. I had not known that Mandela could be firm. The last time I had seen him was at KwaGcina when he had come for the Senoamali case. He was always smiling and wanting to know what I wanted to be when I grew up. 'Doctor!' I said. He laughed, gave me sweets and said I was going to heal them all.

After that he left in his car with my father, and we didn't see my father for many days. Nontonje looked after us and did very strange

things to us. To me and the twins. Especially to me because the twins' bodies refused to cooperate.

When my mother was at work in Dulcie's Nek and the churning women were done for the day Nontonje took us to her room, which was separate from the main house. She told us she was going to teach us a beautiful game that we were going to enjoy very much. First she stripped the pants and underpants off Sonwabo, placed him on the bed and played with his penis. She jerked her hand in a very fast movement, but stopped when she failed to get the desired result. She did the same to Monwabisi. But fortunately for the twins their three-year-old penises stayed limp. Then it was my turn. It didn't take much effort on her part – moving her hand up and down in a fast motion – for my six-year-old penis to get an erection. She lay on her back on the bed and lifted her dress. She was not wearing any bloomers – girls wore bloomers those days, not panties. She placed me on top and guided my penis with her hand into her vagina. To this day I remember the burning sensation that made me jump up and run out of the room. I tried to pee but I could not. The burning sensation blocked me. I could see something red on the tip.

'Let's try again,' said Nontonje. 'You'll see, you'll enjoy it.'

We tried once more. Even though there was no longer an erection she tried to force it. Once more there was the burning sensation. Nontonje never gave up. She tried again on other occasions without success. Always the burning sensation.

I didn't tell my mother when she came back. For more than four decades I didn't tell anybody.

THE DRIVE TO STERKSPRUIT on the dusty road takes us past Dulcie's Nek. I can see the clinic where my mother worked surrounded by gum trees near the road, and the house where Felicity lived. She was about my age, the first white person I ever befriended. Her mother was also a nurse at the clinic. I never saw her exchange visits with my mother, so I doubt if they ever became friends. But Felicity and I played together.

Her mother had this habit of interrupting our play by calling out from her doorstep every day at 10 a.m. and 4 p.m.: 'Felicity, teatime!' Felicity would stop in the middle of any game we were playing, and without a word she would run to her home for the ritual of tea and biscuits. I wondered why my mother never called me for teatime, and why we only drank tea in the morning when we were having bread and peanut butter for breakfast. The only person who drank tea after every meal was my father.

'Felicity, teatime!' the nasal voice echoes in the dust raised by my Mercedes and the minibus taxies that run to and from Sterkspruit. Another voice that echoes is that of Thandeka, the skinny girl who lived across the barbed wire fence from the clinic. She was my first crush, the girl I was playing house with when the barbed wire scarred my face.

I was marked for life chasing a girl.

I can hear her lonely voice singing while she basked in the sun on the red stoep: *Hamba wena juba lami, nguwe olithemba lami. Hamba wena juba lami, hamba juba lam. Kudala ngihlezi estupini, ngilalel'ingoma yakho, nezintsimbi ziyakhala, hamba juba lam* – Go my dove, you are my only hope, go my dove, go my dove. I have been sitting on the stoep, listening to your song, and the bells are ringing, go my dove.

The voice fades with the village behind us. I am wondering why there is no period in my life that I remember with utter joy – a time to which I would gladly return if at all there was such a possibility. I do remember some happy moments, yes, but there was always a gaping hole that could not be filled. Sometimes I am attacked by a profound pain, the cause or origin of which I cannot fathom. Sometimes there is a void.

I do not express these thoughts to Gugu.

Claude Lanzmann

The Patagonian Hare

A Memoir

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH

BY FRANK WYNNE

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX NEW YORK

Chapter 1

The guillotine – more generally, capital punishment and the various methods of meting out death – has been the abiding obsession of my life. It began very early. I must have been about ten years old, and the memory of that cinema on the rue Legendre in the 17th *arrondissement* in Paris, with its red velvet seats and its faded gilt, remains astonishingly vivid. A nanny, making the most of my parents' absence, had taken me, and the film that day was *L'Affaire du courrier de Lyon* [*The Courier of Lyons*], with Pierre Blanchar and Dita Parlo. I have never known or tried to discover the name of the director, but he must have been very proficient, for there are certain scenes that I have never forgotten: the attack on the Lyon courier's stagecoach in a dark forest, the trial of Lesurques, innocent but condemned to death, the scaffold erected in the middle of a public square, white, as I remember it, the blade swooping down. Back then, as during the Revolution, people were still guillotined in public. For months afterwards, around midnight, I would wake up, terror-stricken, and my father would get up, come into my room, stroke my damp forehead, my hair wet with anxiety, talk to me and calm me. It was not just my head being cut off: sometimes I was guillotined lengthwise, in the way a pit-sawyer cuts wood, or like those astonishing instructions posted on the doors of goods wagons that, in 1914, were used to send men and animals to the front: 'men

40 – horses (lengthwise) 8', and which, after 1941, were used to send Jews to the distant chambers of their final agony. I was being sliced into thin, flat slivers, from shoulder to shoulder, passing through the crown of my head. The violence of these nightmares was such that as a teenager and even as an adult, fearful of reviving them, I superstitiously looked away or closed my eyes whenever a guillotine was depicted in schoolbooks, historical writing or newspapers. I'm not sure that I don't still do so today. In 1938 – I was thirteen – the arrest and confession of the German murderer Eugen Weidmann had all of France on tenterhooks. Weidmann had murdered in cold blood, to steal and leave no witnesses, and, without needing to check, I can still remember the names of some of his victims: a dancer, Jean de Koven, a man named Roger Leblond, and others whom he buried in the forest of Fontainebleau, in the aptly named Bois de Fausses-Reposes – the Woods of False Repose. The newsreels, in great detail, showed the investigators searching the coppices, digging up the bodies. Weidmann was condemned to death and guillotined before the prison gate at Versailles in the summer before the war. There are famous photographs of the beheading. Much later I decided to look at them, and did so at length. His was the last public execution in France. Thereafter, the scaffold was erected inside the prison courtyard, until 1981 when, at the instigation of François Mitterrand and the then Minister of Justice, Robert Badinter, the death penalty was abolished. But, at thirteen, however, Weidmann, Lanzmann – the identical endings of his name and mine seemed to portend for me some terrible fate. Indeed, as I write these words, even at my supposedly advanced age, there is no guarantee that it will not still be so. The death penalty might be reinstated, all it would take is a change of regime, a vote in parliament, a *grande peur*. And of course the death penalty survives in many places: to travel is dangerous. I remember discussing it with Jean Genet, because of the dedication of *Notre-Dame-des-Fleurs* [*Our Lady of the Flowers*] to a young man, guillotined at the age of

twenty – 'Were it not for Maurice Pilorge, whose death continues to poison my life . . .' – and also because Weidmann's name opens the book: 'Weidmann appeared to you in a five o'clock edition, head swathed in white strips of cloth, a nun and yet a wounded airman . . .', and mentioning my abiding fear that I would die by the so-called *bois de justice* [the guillotine]. He replied brusquely, 'There's still time.' He was right. He didn't much like me; I felt exactly the same about him.

I have no neck. I have often wondered, during nocturnal moments of acute bodily awareness spent anticipating the worst, where the blade would have to fall to behead me cleanly. I could think only of my shoulders and my aggressively defensive posture, forged gradually night after night by the nightmares that followed the primal scene of Lesurques' death, which transformed them into a fighting bull's *morillo*, neck muscles so impenetrable the blade glances off, sending it back to its point of origin, each rebound weakening its original power. It is as though, over time, I had drawn in on myself so as to leave for the blade of *la veuve* – the widow, as Madame Guillotine is colloquially known – no convenient place and no opportunity for it to make one. In the boxing world, they would say I grew up in a 'crouch', with a curvature of the torso so marked that an opponent's fists slide off without the punches truly hitting home.

The truth is that throughout my whole life, and without a moment's respite, the evening before an execution (if I was aware of it, as I frequently was during the Algerian War), and the day after in the case of a non-political capital punishment, were nights and days of distress during which I compelled myself to anticipate or relive the last moments – the hours, the minutes, the seconds – of the condemned men, regardless of the reasons for the fatal verdict. The warders' felt slippers whispering along death row; the sudden clang of cell-door bolts slammed back, the prisoner, haggard, waking with a start, the prosecutor, the lawyer, the chaplain, the 'be brave', the glass of rum, the handover to the executioner and his aides and

the sudden lurch to naked violence, the brutal acceleration of the final sequence: arms lashed behind the back, ankles crudely hobbled with a length of rope, shirt quickly slit with scissors to expose the neck, the prisoner manhandled, shouted at, then hauled, feet dragging along the ground, to the door, now suddenly thrown open, overlooking the machine, standing tall, waiting, in the ashen dawn of the prison courtyard. Yes, I know all these things. With Simone de Beauvoir I would be summoned to the offices of Jacques Vergès around nine o'clock at night where he would inform us that an Algerian was to be executed at dawn in some prison – Fresnes or La Santé in Paris, Oran or Constantine in Algeria – and we would spend the night trying to find someone who might contact someone else, who in turn might dare to disturb the sleep of Général de Gaulle, plead with him to spare this poor wretch to whom he had already refused clemency, consciously sending him to the scaffold. At the time, Vergès was head of a collective of lawyers from the *Front de libération national* (FLN) who practised what they called '*la defense de rupture*', refusing to recognize the legitimacy of the French courts' jurisdiction over the Algerian combatants, which resulted in some of their clients being more speedily dispatched to the guillotine. Very late one night, under the cold eye of Vergès, Le Castor (as Simone de Beauvoir was nicknamed) and I, gripped by the same sense of extreme urgency, managed to reach François Mauriac. A man was about to die, he had to be saved, what had been done might yet be undone. Mauriac understood everything, but he also knew that one did not wake de Gaulle and that, in any case, it would make no difference: it was too late, unquestionably. To Vergès, who was well aware of the futility of our attempts, our presence in his offices on the eve of these executions was a political strategy. One to which we consented, given that, from the first, we had militated in favour of Algerian independence, but to me the sense of the irreversible won out over everything else, becoming unbearable as the fatal hour approached. Time divided and negated itself like a gallop seen in

slow motion: this scheduled death was endlessly about to take place. As in that space where Achilles can never catch up with the tortoise, so the minutes and seconds were infinitely subdivided, bringing the torment of imminence to its apogee. Vergès, notified of the execution by telephone, put an end to our waiting and in the early hours of morning, in the rain, de Beauvoir and I regularly found ourselves defeated, empty, without any plan, as though the guillotine had also decapitated our future.

When, in order to demoralize his own people and discourage further plots against him, Hitler ordered that the conspirators of 20 July 1944 be executed one after another, it became clear that the speed at which the executioners would have to work would compromise the precision and the concentration required for the ancient method of beheading by axe, the standard means of capital punishment in Germany. On 22 February 1943, the heroes of *die Weisse Rose* (the White Rose) – Hans Scholl, his sister Sophie and their friend Christoph Probst – died in their twenties beneath the executioner's axe in Stadelheim Prison, Munich, after a summary trial lasting barely three hours, conducted by the sinister Roland Freisler, the Reich's public prosecutor who had come specially from Berlin. Immediately the verdict was announced, they were put to death in a dungeon in Stadelheim, and Hans, as he laid his head on the block still red with his sister's blood, cried, 'Long live freedom!' Even today I cannot call to mind those three handsome, pensive young faces without tears welling in my eyes: the seriousness, the dignity, the determination, the spiritual force, the extraordinary courage of the solitude that emanates from each of them, all speak to their being the best, the honour of Germany, the best of humanity. The 20 July conspirators were the first to die by the German guillotine: unlike its French counterpart – slender, tall and spectacular, lending itself both to being elegantly draped and to literature – the German version is squat, ungainly, four-square, easy to set up in a low-ceilinged room; consequently the blade, which has no time to

pick up speed, is enormously heavy, and I am not sure that, like ours, it has a bevelled edge: its efficacy is due entirely to its weight. It was Freisler once again who acted as prosecutor at the trial of the 20 July conspirators in Berlin. In fact, he held every role: public prosecutor and presiding judge, he made the opening statements, questioned the witnesses and summed up against the accused. Their trial was filmed for Nazi propaganda purposes, to edify the public and ridicule those about to be guillotined.

Fouquier-Tinville during the Reign of Terror, Vychinsky, the prosecutor of Stalin's show-trials in Moscow, the Czech prosecutor Urválek, barking like a dog at the Slánský trial, Freisler – they all descend from the same stock of bureaucratic butchers, unfailing in their service to their masters of the moment, affording the accused no chance, refusing to listen to them, insulting them, directing the evidence to a sentence that was decided before the trial began. In the footage of the 20 July trial Freisler can be seen, his face convulsed in feigned fury, cutting short the élite aristocratic officers and generals of the *Wehrmacht*, who are busy hiking up their trousers, which, having neither belt nor buttons, keep slipping comically to their knees, as the prosecutor moves from outrage to threats of contempt of court. But no one is laughing: the tortures suffered by the poor wretches before the trial, and the knowledge, etched on their faces, that they will die in the coming hours, set their features into unutterably tragic masks in which incomprehension vies with despair. The account of their beheading, in a dungeon in Moabit Prison in Berlin (which still stands, in the Alte Moabit district), is appalling: Freisler's victims had to queue up to die, hands bound, ankles fettered by their own trousers, they were suddenly seized by the stocky executioner's aides, who directed them either to right or to left – using an SS technique perfected elsewhere – for two guillotines were operating side by side beneath the low ceiling, amid screams of terror, the last shouts of defiance, amid the stench of blood and shit. In Moabit, there is no place for the beautiful – too

beautiful – travelling shot the director Andrzej Wajda offers in his film *Danton*, where, in the midst of the Reign of Terror, Danton returns from Arcis-sur-Aube where he has spent several nights of passion with his mistress, arriving at the place de Grève at dawn, his barouche describing a perfect arc around the quiescent guillotine, elegantly draped in a long ribbon of night that, since it does not hide it completely, allows the *'Indulgent'* a glimpse of the bevelled edge of the naked blade, a grim forewarning. Alejo Carpentier's description, in the magnificent opening pages of *El Siglo de Las Luces* [*Explosion in a Cathedral*] is – no pun intended – of a different calibre: there Victor Hugues, a *Commissaire* of the Republic, former public prosecutor at Rochefort and a fervent admirer of Robespierre, brings with him to the Antilles both the decree – enacted on 6 Pluviôse, Year II – that will abolish slavery, and the first guillotine: 'But the empty doorway stood in the bows, reduced to a mere lintel and its supports, with the set-square, the inverted half-pediment upended, the black triangle with its bevel of cold steel suspended between the uprights . . . Here the Door stood alone, facing into the night . . . its diagonal blade gleaming, its wooden uprights framing a whole panorama of stars.'

So many last glances will haunt me forever. Those of the Moroccan generals, colonels, captains, accused of having fomented – or of not having foreseen – the 1972 attempted coup against Hassan II of Morocco and his guests at Skhirat palace, who were driven to their place of execution in covered lorries open at the back. Sitting on facing benches, they stare at one another, and the photographer captured the moment when, in the dazzling sunlight, they see the firing squad that is to execute them. It is an unforgettable photograph, published in *Paris Match*, which captured what Cartier-Bresson called the 'decisive moment': we do not see the firing squad; instead we see the eyes of those who see it, who are about to die in a hail of bullets and who know it. In spite of fables of peaceful passing from life to death, such as Greuze's painting, *The Death of a Patriarch*, or La Fontaine's tale of '*Le Laboureur et ses enfants*' ['The Labourer and

His Children'], every 'natural' death is, first and foremost, a violent death. But I never felt the absolute violence of violent death more than I did as I looked at that photograph, that *snapshot*. In that searing intensity, whole lives were laid bare before our eyes: these men were privileged, well-to-do members of the regime, they did not choose to risk their lives, unlike the heroes of the Resistance who, refusing the blindfold, stood to attention before the rifles and remained valiant even as the guns rang out. Why do I remember one face, one name so particularly – one I would never think to verify – Medbouh? He was, I believe, a general and devoted to his king, but the savagery and the vast spectre of the crackdown would not spare him. It is sweltering hot, sweat beads on his forehead, the irreparable is about to occur, and Medbouh's last glance, frantic with fear and disbelief, evokes the greatest pity.

Another last glance, also from *Paris Match*: that of a hard-faced young Chinese girl screaming her revolt before the judges at the moment that she learns she has been condemned to death. Face contorted, torn between pain and refusal as policemen's hands grab her and drag her away. In China, she knows, executions take place very quickly after sentence is pronounced, and the series of photographs published by *Paris Match* bears witness to the inexorable sequence of moments leading to her death. In the next photograph we see a second hand that, with overpowering force, pushes her head down to expose her neck but also to compel her to die in the position of a penitent. And, since executions there take place in public, to serve as an example, the last photographs show the pistol firing into the back of her neck and her battered, martyred body slowly slipping to the ground. Barely thirty minutes have elapsed between verdict and death. Other photographs, other films regularly reach us from China, all equally terrifying: a line of young men in black prison uniforms shot one by one, through the back of the neck, by a police executioner in white gloves wearing a peaked cap and full dress uniform, who forces each man's head into the same

penitent posture, as though the death penalty were the supreme act of re-education.

Still in China, the same China, the China of today. In Nanjing there is a Chinese Yad Vashem, solemn, simple, poignant, which commemorates the great massacre of 1937, in which the Japanese Imperial army, the moment they had captured the city, murdered 300,000 civilians and soldiers, killing in a thousand different ways, each more inhumane than the last. The goal was to terrorize the entire country and, beyond that, the whole of South-east Asia, all the way to New Guinea. They achieved that goal. Wandering through Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall with the curator who, in his humility, his calm, his lack of bombast in the face of the crushing weight of evidence, his reverence, the present incarnation of ancient suffering, ineluctably reminded me of the Israeli survivors in Kibbutz Lohamei HeGeta'ot in Galilee or at Yad Vashem during my preliminary research for *Shoah*, once again I realized that there is a universality of victims, as of executioners. All victims are alike, all executioners are alike. In Nanjing, to train the Japanese army rabble, bayonets fixed, in hand-to-hand combat, realism was pushed so far as to lash live targets to stakes as instructors gave detailed demonstrations of how and where the bayonet should be thrust: the throat, the heart, the abdomen, the face, all in front of the petrified faces of the guinea-pigs. Accounts and photographs bear this out, they show the faces of soldiers moving from crude laughter to rage and back again as they plunged their bayonets into the victims' bodies. Those lashed to the next stakes awaited their turn, which came as soon as the previous targets breathed their last. The soldiers did not train on corpses; the dead feel no pain.

Through a long tradition, a punctilious codification, the Japanese became masters in the technique – the art, they call it – of beheading by sabre (something that can also be seen at the Nanjing Memorial), and organized contests between their most skilled men. How to describe, beneath the yellow summer uniform of the Mikado's

troops, its curious peaked cap framing with neck-cloths of floating fabric, the astonishing musculature of the swordsmen, steel bands of muscle that seem to be part of the sabre itself in that very moment when, gripped firmly in both hands, brandished high and vertical, it is about to sweep down a mere fraction of a fraction of a second later? Everything happens so quickly that the sabre passes through the neck while the head remains in place: it has no time to fall. What pride, what pleasure in a perfect execution, what smile of satisfaction on the face of the contest winners when, in the minutes after the competition, full of themselves, they posed beside the headless bodies, the bodiless heads.

And yet it is not in Nanjing, but 8,000 kilometres to the south, in Canberra, Australia, that, for me, was the culmination of horror. In Canberra there is a remarkable war museum, the Australian War Memorial, that is like no other in the world. Perhaps it is because Australia is not populous that every life is precious to them, and also because they have never fought a war in their own country, but only in distant lands. During World War I the Australian Expeditionary Force lost – who still remembers? – tens of thousands of men at Gallipoli, in the Dardanelles and on the French front. Between 1939 and 1945, on every front and in every branch of the army, many more selflessly spilled their blood to liberate Europe and Asia from barbarism. In Canberra, in one of the halls of the museum devoted to World War II, I could not tear my eyes from an extraordinary photograph, the work of two artists in the Japanese army: the photographer himself and the executioner. In an incredibly daring, low-angle shot, the photographer has succeeded in framing both executioner and his victim, a tall Australian, on his knees, arms pinioned, wearing a white blindfold. He has a chinstrap beard, his upper body is erect, his neck as long as a swan's, his head barely bowed, hieratic, his face a mask of ecstatic suffering, like those in El Greco's *Burial of the Count of Orgaz*. Above him, in the upper part of the frame, in the yellow uniform I have already described, the killer, face

tensed in a rictus of concentration, arms raised to heaven, hands, white-knuckled, gripping the hilt of his sabre, which forms the apex of this devastating trinity. But though it may begin its trajectory on the vertical, it is on the horizontal that the blade will come to rest, having traced a perfectly controlled arc through space. Such is the mastery. Next to the two photographs of the Australian prisoner, one taken before the beheading, one after, is a letter, preserved like a precious relic, the letter that the executioner wrote to his family in Japan from the theatre of war in New Guinea, in which he gives details of his feat, boasting about the singular skills he required and marshalled to accomplish it (an English translation hangs next to the ideograms of the Japanese original).

But having spoken of the muscular backs of the swordsmen, having mentioned El Greco, I immediately think of Goya, the Goya of *Los fusilamientos del tres de mayo*, which I have so often stood and gazed upon in the Prado, turning away each time only with great difficulty, as though to walk away were to relinquish some supreme, some ineffable knowledge, utterly offered, utterly hidden. And yet in this remarkable painting everything is said, everything can be read, everything can be seen: the impenetrable wall formed by the serried backs of the Saxon fusiliers of the Grande Armée, black shakos pulled down over their eyes, swords slapping against their thighs, calves sheathed in black gaiters, left legs thrust forward, bent slightly in the classic position of a rifleman at drill, bayonets fixed, the barrels of their rifles perfectly aligned. The executioners are anonymous, all we can see are their backs weighed down with the trappings of an expeditionary troop, while the angle of their shakos tilted down over the sights of their weapons makes it clear that they are oblivious to the dazzled, dazzling faces of those they are gunning down. Between killers and victims, the light source, a square lantern, is set directly on the ground, its blazing light illuminating the night-time assassination with a vivid, surreal glow. The genius of Goya is that in the foreground, facing the lantern, the shakos, the rifles, standing

out against the shadows and the hills of Príncipe Pío, and the vague intimation of the city beyond, it is the truly preternatural whiteness of the central figure's shirt itself that seems to illuminate the whole scene. Two rival light sources are at war, that of the victims and that of their killers, the former so bright, so intense that it transforms the lamp into a dark lantern. Around the man wearing this shirt of light, the *morituri* seem grey or black, stooped, shrunken, hunched as though to offer no purchase to the bullets. A huddled mass climbs the steep narrow path to the place of execution. Suddenly, as they reach the summit, they see it all: the bloody corpses of the companions who went before them, the others, fatally wounded, already falling, and facing them, the firing squad relentlessly taking aim at each new group as it arrives. So as not to see, not to hear, they cover their eyes, their ears in a final posture of denial and of supplication. But in the centre, in the midst of those who have been shot, who are falling, at the absolute heart of it all, is he towards whom everything converges; kneeling yet huge, all the more huge because he is kneeling, in the instant before being hit, his shirt of light still immaculate, the man in white gazes, wide-eyed, upon his imminent death. How to describe him? How to depict his chest magnified, offered up to the gun barrels, its incredible whiteness, like an armour for his final hour? How to describe his mad, bulging eyes beneath the coal black of his eyebrows, his arms up, flung wide, not vertically, not crosswise but out at an angle, in a last gesture of bravado and sacrifice, of rebellion and helplessness, of despair and pity? How to convey his mute proffering, the message to his executioners written on his face, in every line of his body? In 1942, 130 years later, at the fortress of Mont Valérien in Paris, joining the ranks of those heroes of the night, the Communist Valentin Feldman addressed his unforgettable last words to the German riflemen about to execute him: 'Imbeciles, it is for you that I die!'

Why is there no end to this? Twenty years pass, and we find ourselves crossing the place de l'Alma towards the Spanish Embassy,

fiercely guarded by a police cordon, to plead, although we have no illusions, for Julián Grimau, sentenced to death for trumped-up crimes supposedly dating back to the Civil War. In reality it was because he was a militant member of the clandestine Communist Party of Spain, a membership he proudly and publicly avowed when he was arrested, before he threw himself from a second-storey window during his interrogation. Cruelly tortured, in spite of his broken wrists, Grimau was hurriedly executed in the dead of night, by the light of car headlamps in the courtyard of the Campamento military barracks in Madrid a few hours after our demonstration in Paris. It was 20 April 1963. El Caudillo was fiercely stubborn and, until he was in his final death throes – as we know, he was kept alive with tubes and wires for months as all Spain held its breath – he continued to send men to their deaths. On 2 March 1974 the Catalan anarchist Salvador Puig Antich was executed by the garrotte in Modelo Prison in Barcelona. This method of meting out capital punishment was codified as the *garrotte vil*, which can be simply translated as the 'infamous garrotte', but '*vil*' in French can also be translated as 'base' or 'lowly': the condemned man dies sitting in a high-backed chair, his feet and hands clamped in vices, making it impossible for him to move; his neck is circled with an iron collar tightened by a screw at the back of the chair – slowly or quickly according to the cruelty or the professionalism of the executioner – crushing the carotid artery and then the spine. There is a specifically Catalan variation of the *garrotte vil*, where the collar is fitted with a spike that pierces the back of the neck as it crushes. Puig Antich was the last man to be garrotted under Franco, and for him too we protested in vain. The death penalty was abolished in Spain in 1978, so there is an end to this sometimes, somewhere.

Even as I write, the death penalty still flourishes throughout the world. I have said nothing of the anti-abolitionist states in the United States of America, each clinging to its own singular inhumanity, whether it be the electric chair, lethal injection, the gas chamber,

the gallows. Nor have I said anything about the Arab countries, about the Saudi executioners who arrive ceremoniously at the place of execution in their white Mercedes, while the prisoner, already kneeling, head slightly bowed, waits for the white flash of the curved blade to behead them in public. They at least are experts, capable of competing with the Japanese executioners I spoke of earlier. Today, the time of the butchers has come (and I ask actual butchers to forgive me, for they practise the most noble of professions and are the least barbarous of men): why have we not been allowed to see the appalling images of hostages put to death under Islamic law in Iraq or in Afghanistan? Pathetic amateur videos shot by the killers themselves, which aim to terrorize – and succeed. Was this any reason to censor such images in the name of some dubious code of ethics, whose sole effect was to hush up an unprecedented qualitative leap in the history of global barbarism, to cover up the arrival of a mutant species in the relationship between man and death? And so these videos circulate clandestinely, and very few of us have been able to witness the true extent of the horror, struggling not to look away.

This is what happens: the film opens with a litany of verses from the Qur'an, which appear on screen as they are recited. As in pornographic films, there is no editing, no connection between the shots, which shift abruptly: suddenly the Tribunal appears, framed against a black background that fills the whole screen. In the foreground, kneeling, ankles shackled, hands tied, is the accused. Behind him, the Grand Judge and his assistants, tall, black-hooded phantoms, Kalashnikovs slung across their chests, meeting at the sternum, barrels pointing upward. The Grand Judge alone speaks. He does so in a deep, droning voice, he reads or does not read, it depends. He goes on speaking for some time, his voice becoming more furious, more sententious, a performance that culminates (he literally 'makes himself' angry) as the moment approaches when sentence is pronounced and carried out. The accused, whether or

not he understands Arabic, knows that his fate is sealed, that at the end of the grandiloquent sequence of justifications adduced for the verdict, his life will be taken. Does he know how it will happen? Does he sense it? In the twenty or so 'films' I have managed to watch – all of them repulsive – I will retain only one. During the black-robed prosecutor's long, furious tirade, the hostage remained completely motionless: no movement, unblinking, his gaze vacant, staring into space, as though he had already left this life and must now suffer the worst so that he could rejoin himself. Utter resignation. He is still a young man, his hair is curly but his face is gaunt, and he has clearly already suffered the most terrible physical and psychological agony, the hellish torture of experiencing hope before losing it forever. He shows no sign of fear, he is the embodiment of fear, made rigid by fear. As soon as the last word of the sentence is uttered, the Grand Judge, who has been standing directly behind the prisoner, brings his right hand to his belt and draws a huge butcher's knife, brandishing it in front of the camera, shouting '*Allahu akbar*' as he simultaneously seizes the prisoner by the hair and throws him to the ground, while one of the hooded henchmen grabs his ankles so he cannot struggle. It is with this butcher's knife that he will behead the prisoner, but not before forcing the poor man to look into the camera, to look at *us*. And so, several times during the procedure, we will see the eyes of the prisoner roll wildly in their orbits. But a human neck, even one emaciated by starvation, is not composed entirely of soft tissue: there is cartilage, cervical vertebrae. The killer is tall and heavily built, but even he has trouble finding a clear path for the blade. So he begins to use it like a saw, sawing for as long as necessary, through the spurts and spatters of blood, an unbearable to-and-fro motion that forces us to live through, right to the end, the slitting of a man's throat, like an animal, a pig or a sheep. When the head is finally severed from the body, the hand of the masked sawyer signs his work by displaying the head, placing it facing us, on the headless trunk; the eyes roll back one last time, indicating, to our shameful relief, that it is over.

But the camera keeps filming, the hooded men have left the scene, a clumsy zoom shot frames the head and the torso, which now fill the screen, alone, in close-up, for a long moment, for our edification and our instruction. The face of the dead man and of the living man he was are so alike that it seems unreal. It is the same face, and it is barely believable: the savagery of the killing was such that it seemed it could not but bring about a radical disfigurement.

MYTHOLOGIES

ROLAND BARTHES

IN THE RING

. . . The emphatic truth of gesture in life's grander circumstances.
—Baudelaire

The virtue of wrestling is to be a spectacle of excess. Here we find an emphasis which must have been that of the ancient theaters. Moreover, wrestling is an open-air spectacle, for the essence of the circus or the arena is not the sky (a romantic value best suited to fashionable celebrations) but the dense vertical character of the flood of light: even in the depths of the dingiest Parisian halls, wrestling partakes of the nature of the great solar spectacles, bullfights and Greek theater: in all these places a light without shadow elaborates an emotion without secrets.

Some people consider that wrestling is an ignoble sport. Wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle, and it is no more ignoble to watch a wrestled performance of Suffering than the sorrows of Arnolphe or Andromaque. Of course there is such a thing as a fake wrestling which goes to great lengths to produce the useless appearances of a fair fight; this is of no interest. True wrestling, incorrectly called amateur wrestling, takes place in second-rate halls, where the public spontaneously adjusts itself to the spectacular nature of the combat, as does the public of B films. These same audiences are subsequently outraged that wrestling matches are fixed (which, moreover, should

mitigate their ignominy). The public couldn't care less that the fight is or isn't fixed, and rightly so; the public confines itself to spectacle's primary virtue, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters to this public is not what it believes but what it sees.

It is a public which is quite aware of the distinction between wrestling and boxing; it knows that boxing is a Jansenist sport, based on a demonstration of excellence; one can bet on the outcome of a boxing match; in wrestling, that would make no sense. The boxing match is a story constructed under the spectator's eyes; in wrestling, just the contrary, it is each moment which is intelligible, not their sum. The spectator is not interested in the development of a prowess, he is awaiting the momentary image of certain passions. Wrestling therefore requires an immediate reading of juxtaposed meanings, without its being necessary to connect them. The rational future of the combat does not interest the fan of wrestling, whereas on the contrary a boxing match always implies a science of the future. In other words, wrestling is a sum of spectacles, none of which is a function: each moment imposes the total knowledge of a passion which suddenly rises straight up on its own, without ever extending toward the consummation of an outcome.

Hence the wrestler's function is not to win but to perform exactly the gestures expected of him. It is said that judo contains a hidden symbolic dimension; even at its most efficient, judo's gestures are measured, precise but brief, carefully drawn but by a stroke having no volume. Wrestling, on the contrary, proposes excessive gestures, exploited to the paroxysm of their signification. In judo, a man who is down is hardly down at all, he rolls over, he withdraws, he evades defeat, or if defeat is obvious, he immediately leaves the match; in wrestling, a man down is exaggeratedly so, filling the spectators' entire field of vision with the intolerable spectacle of his powerlessness.

This emphatic function is quite the same as the one in the

ancient theater, whose resources, language and its accessories (masks and cothurns), concurred in the exaggeratedly visible explanation of a Necessity. The gesture of the vanquished wrestler signifying to the world a defeat which, far from concealing, he accentuates and *holds* like a pedal point, corresponds to the mask in antiquity intended to signify the tragic tone of the spectacle. In wrestling, as on the stage in antiquity, one is not ashamed of one's suffering, one knows how to cry, one has a taste for tears.

Each sign in wrestling is thus endowed with an utter clarity since everything must always be understood on the spot. Once the adversaries are in the Ring, the public is entrusted with the obviousness of the roles. As in the theater, each physical type expresses to excess the role assigned to the combatant. Thauvin, an obese and sagging fifty-year-old, whose type of sexless hideousness is always assigned feminine nicknames, displays in his flesh the characteristics of vileness, for it is his role to represent what in the classic concept of the *salaud* (bastard), a key concept in wrestling, is seen as organically repugnant. The nausea deliberately inspired by Thauvin thus operates very deeply in the order of signs: not only is ugliness utilized here to signify vileness, but furthermore, this ugliness is scrupulously projected into a particularly repulsive quality of matter: the sickly flabbiness of dead flesh (the public calls Thauvin *la barbaque*), so that the crowd's passionate condemnation no longer rises to the level of its judgment but reaches deeper into the zone of its humors. The crowd frenetically smears itself with a subsequent image of Thauvin entirely appropriate to this physical origin: his actions will perfectly correspond to the essential viscosity of his personage.

Thus it is the wrestler's body which is the first key to the combat. I know from the start that all of Thauvin's actions, his treacheries, his cruelties, his pusillanimities will not contradict the original image he presents of infamous behavior: I

can count on him to perform intelligently and to the last detail every gesture of a certain sort of amorphous vileness and thereby to fulfill the image of the worst sort of bastard: the octopus-bastard. In other words, wrestlers possess a physique quite as peremptory as the characters of Commedia dell'Arte who display in advance, in their costumes and their postures, the future contents of their role: just as Pantaloon can never be anything but a ridiculous cuckold, Harlequin a cunning valet, and the Doctor a stupid pedant, so Thauvin will never be anything but a vile deceiver, Reinières (a tall blond fellow with a limp body and wild hair) the disturbing image of passivity, Mazaud (an arrogant little cockerel) that of a grotesque conceit, and Orsano (an effeminate loony who enters the ring in a pink and blue robe), the doubly spicy version of a vindictive *salope* (bitch: I suspect the Élysée-Montmartre public follows Littré in refusing to grant the term *salope* a masculine gender).

Thus the wrestlers' physique establishes a basic sign containing in germ the whole fight. But this germ proliferates, for at each moment of the combat, in each new situation, the wrestler's body affords the public the marvelous diversion of a humor that finds its natural function in a gesture. The various lines of signification illuminate each other, forming the most intelligible of spectacles. Wrestling is a sort of diacritical writing: above the fundamental signification of his body, the wrestler arrays episodic but always welcome explanations, constantly aiding the reading of the combat by certain gestures, certain attitudes, certain mimicries which afford the intention its utmost meaning. Sometimes the wrestler triumphs with a nasty grin as he kneels on his vulnerable opponent, sometimes he woos the crowd with a self-satisfied smile, announcing his imminent vengeance, and sometimes, immobilized on the floor of the ring, he pounds the boards with both arms to signify to everyone the intolerable nature of his situation; and sometimes,

finally, he concocts a complicated set of signs to let it be understood that he legitimately incarnates the ever-entertaining image of the sorehead, endlessly confabulating his displeasure.

We're dealing here with a veritable Human Comedy where the subtlest nuances of intense feeling (complacency, entitlement, refined cruelty, retribution) invariably encounter the most explicit signs which can express them triumphantly to the last rows of the arena. Understandably, at this pitch, it no longer matters whether or not the passion being expressed is authentic. There is no more a problem of truth in wrestling than in the theater. In either world what is expected is the intelligible figuration of moral situations ordinarily secret. Such draining of interiority in favor of external signs, this exhaustion of content by form, is the very principle of a triumphal classic art. Wrestling is an immediate pantomime, infinitely more effective than pantomime onstage, for the wrestler's gesture needs no fabulation, no decor, in short no transference in order to appear true.

Each moment of the wrestling match is therefore a kind of algebra which instantaneously discloses the relation of a cause with its figured effect. The fans certainly experience a kind of intellectual pleasure at *seeing* the perfect functioning of the moral mechanism: certain wrestlers, great comedians, entertain us as much as any character in Molière, for they succeed in imposing an immediate reading of their interiority: a wrestler of arrogant and absurd character (as one says that Harpagon is a character), Armand Mazaud always delights the audience by the mathematical rigor of his transcriptions, carrying the design of his gestures to the extreme point of their signification and giving his combat the kind of transport and precision of a great scholastic dispute whose stake is at once the triumph of pride and the formal concern with truth.

What is thus given to the public is the great spectacle of

Suffering, of Defeat, and of Justice. Wrestling presents human suffering with all the amplification of the tragic masks: the wrestler suffering under the effect of a hold reputedly cruel (an armlock, a twisted leg) presents the excessive countenance of Suffering; like a primitive Pietà, he allows us to see his face exaggeratedly distorted by an intolerable affliction. Understandably, all reserve would be out of place in a wrestling match, since it is contrary to the deliberate ostentation of the spectacle, to that Exhibition of Suffering which is the very finality of the fight. Hence all the actions generating suffering are particularly spectacular, like the gesture of a magician who holds his cards high in the air: we would not understand a suffering which would appear to be without an intelligible cause; a secret gesture which was actually cruel would transgress the unwritten laws of wrestling and would have no more sociological efficacy than a mad or parasitic gesture. Quite the contrary, suffering appears to be inflicted with emphasis and conviction, for everyone not only must observe that a man is suffering but also and above all must understand why he is suffering. What wrestlers call a hold, i.e., some figure which permits the indefinite immobilization of the adversary, holding him at one's mercy, has the specific function of preparing in a conventional hence intelligible fashion the spectacle of suffering, methodically installing the conditions of suffering: the defeated wrestler's inertia permits the (momentary) victor to establish himself in his cruelty and to transmit to the public the victor's terrifying sloth of a torturer certain of the consequence of his gestures: harshly rubbing his powerless adversary's face or scraping his spinal column with a deep and regular movement of his fist, accomplishing at least the visual surface of such gestures—wrestling is the only sport to present such an external image of torture. But here again, only the image is in the field of action, and the spectator does not desire the actual suffering of the losing combatant, he enjoys only the perfection of an

iconography. It is not true that wrestling is a sadistic spectacle: it is merely an intelligible spectacle.

There is another figure still more spectacular than the hold, which is the *manchette*, that loud slap of the forearm, that masked blow of the fist which seems to be overwhelming the adversary's chest with a squashy sound during the exaggerated collapse of the defeated body. In this forearm smash, the catastrophe is brought to its maximum obviousness, to such a degree that ultimately the gesture no longer appears to be anything but a symbol; this is going too far, violating the moral rules of wrestling, in which every sign must be excessively clear but must not reveal its intention of clarity; the public then shouts, "Fake!"—not because the public regrets the absence of genuine suffering, but because it condemns artifice: as in the theater, one ceases to act properly as much by excess of sincerity as by excess of affectation.

We have already seen what store wrestlers set by a certain physical style, composed and exploited in order to develop before the public's eyes a total image of Defeat. The slackness of big white bodies collapsing to the floor in one piece or crashing into the ropes with flailing arms, the inertia of huge wrestlers pitifully reflected by all the elastic surfaces of the Ring—nothing can signify more clearly and more passionately the exemplary humiliation of the vanquished. Deprived of all resilience, the wrestler's flesh is nothing but an obscene mass spread on the ground and vulnerable to relentless insults and relentless jubilations. There is a paroxysm of signification in the style of antiquity which can only recall the luxury of intensions of the Roman triumphs. At other moments, there is another ancient figure which rises from the coupling of wrestlers, that of the suppliant, of the man at his opponent's mercy, on his knees, arms raised over his head, and slowly abased by the vertical tension of his conqueror. In wrestling, unlike judo, Defeat is not a conventional sign, abandoned once it is

achieved: it is not a way out, but quite the contrary a duration, a showing forth, it resumes the oldest myths of public Suffering and Humiliation: the cross and the pillory. The wrestler is somehow crucified in broad daylight, all eyes watching. I've heard it said of a wrestler lying on the floor of the ring: "He's dead, poor little Jesus, lying there on his cross" and this ironic phrase revealed the deep roots of a spectacle which performed the same gestures of the most ancient purifications.

But what wrestling is especially supposed to imitate is a purely moral concept: justice. The notion of payment is essential to wrestling, and the crowd's "Make him suffer" signifies above all "Make him pay." What is involved, then, of course, is an immanent justice. The viler the "action of the bastard," the more satisfied the public is by the blow he receives in return: if the villain—who is of course a coward—takes refuge behind the ropes, claiming his right to do so by a brazen gesture, he is pitilessly cornered there, and the crowd roars its approval at seeing the rules broken for the sake of a deserved punishment. Wrestlers are good at flattering the crowd's powers of outrage, going to the very limits of the concept of Justice, this farthest zone of confrontation, where it takes only a trifle to open the gates to a frenzied world. For the fan of wrestling, nothing is finer than the vengeful rage of a betrayed combatant who passionately attacks not a successful adversary but the stinging image of foul play. Of course it is the image of Justice which matters here much more than its contents: wrestling is above all a quantitative series of compensations (an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth). This explains how the reversal of situations possesses in the public eye a kind of moral beauty: the crowd delights in it as if it were a well-timed episode in a novel, and the greater the contrast between the success of a stratagem and its collapse, the more satisfying the mimed performance is judged to be. Justice is therefore the body of a possible transgression; it is because

there is a Law that the spectacle of the passions transgressing is so gratifying.

Which explains that out of five wrestling matches, only one is "proper." Again, it must be understood that a legal termination here is a usage or a genre, as in the theater: the rules don't constitute a real constraint, but instead the conventional appearance of regularity. So in actuality a regular fight is nothing but an exceptionally polite one: the combatants confront each other with zeal, not with rage, they manage to master their passions, nor do they deem it necessary to punish an already defeated opponent, they cease fighting once they are ordered to do so, and congratulate each other after a particularly arduous episode during which, however, they have not ceased to fight fair. Of course we must understand that all these polite actions are communicated to the public by the most conventional signs of propriety: shaking hands, raising arms, ostensibly avoiding a sterile hold which would ruin a fight's perfection.

Conversely, foul play exists here only by its excessive signs: giving a big kick to the loser's body, taking refuge behind the ropes by ostensibly invoking a purely formal privilege, refusing to shake hands with a partner before or after the match, taking advantage of an official pause to sneak up behind an opponent, or dealing an illicit blow when the referee isn't looking (such a blow is worth dealing only because half the crowd can observe it and be outraged). Evil is wrestling's natural climate, and a fair fight has mainly the value of an exception; the public is startled by such a thing and hails it in passing as an anachronistic and rather sentimental return to a tradition of sportsmanship ("Aren't they fighting fair, these two!"); the fans are suddenly moved by the vision of general kindness, but would probably die of boredom and indifference if the wrestlers failed to return pretty soon to the orgy of bad feelings which is the indispensable condition of good wrestling.

Extrapolated, wrestling as a fair fight could lead only to boxing or judo, whereas true wrestling sustains its originality by all the excesses which make it a spectacle and not a sport. The ending of a boxing match or a judo contest is as decisive as the conclusive point of a demonstration. Wrestling's rhythm is quite different, for its natural meaning is that of rhetorical amplification: the emphasis of passions, the constant renewal of paroxysms, the exasperation of retaliations can naturally lead on to the most baroque of confusions. Certain fights, and the most successful ones, are crowned with a final charivari, a kind of frenzied fantasia in which laws, rules of the game, the censure of referees, and the limits of the Ring are abolished, swept away in a triumphant disorder which overflows into the hall and carries away pell-mell the wrestlers, the seconds, the referee, and the spectators.

It has already been noted that in America wrestling represents a kind of mythological combat between Good and Evil (of a parapolitical nature, the "bad wrestler" always being presumed to be a Red). French wrestling is an altogether different heroization, of an ethical order and no longer a political one. What the public seeks here is the progressive construction of an eminently moral image: that of the perfect bastard. We go to a wrestling match to watch the renewed adventures of a single leading character, as permanent and multiform as Guignol or Scapin, inventive of unexpected faces yet ever faithful to his role. The bastard reveals himself like a character in Molière or a portrait by La Bruyère, which is to say like a classical entity, an essence whose actions are only signifying epiphenomena arranged in a temporal sequence. This stylized character belongs to no nation and to no party, whether the wrestler is named Kuzchenko (nicknamed Mustache because of Stalin), Yerpazian, Gaspardi, Jo Vignola, or Nollières, the fans assign him no other country but that of "the rules."

So what is a bastard for this public apparently composed

of men outside the rules? Essentially someone unstable, who acknowledges the rules only when they are of use to him and transgresses the formal continuity of attitudes—a man who is unpredictable, hence asocial. He takes refuge behind the Law when he supposes it favors him and betrays it when it seems useful to do so; sometimes he denies the formal limit of the Ring and continues to belabor an adversary protected legally by the ropes, sometimes he reestablishes that limit and claims the protection of what a moment ago he failed to respect. This inconsistency, much more than betrayal or cruelty, sends the public beside itself: offended not in its morality but in its logic, the public considers the contradiction of arguments the vilest of crimes. The forbidden hold becomes irregular only when it destroys a quantitative equilibrium and disturbs the rigorous calculation of compensations; what the public condemns is not at all the transgression of insipid official rules, but the lack of revenge, the lack of penality. Hence nothing is more exciting for the crowd than the emphatic kick given to a vanquished bastard; the joy of punishing reaches its peak when it is based on a mathematical justification, at which point contempt is unrestrained: we are no longer dealing with a *salaud*, a bastard, but with a *salope*, a swine, the oral gesture of ultimate degradation.

A finality so precise demands that wrestling be exactly what the public expects it to be. The wrestlers, men of great experience, know just how to inflect the spontaneous episodes of combat toward the image which the public creates out of the great marvelous themes of its mythology. A wrestler may irritate or disgust, he never disappoints, for he always ultimately achieves, by a gradual solidification of signs, what the public expects of him. In wrestling, nothing exists unless it exists totally, there is no symbol, no allusion, everything is given exhaustively; leaving nothing in shadow, the gesture severs every parasitical meaning and ceremonially presents the public

with a pure and full signification, three-dimensional, like Nature. Such emphasis is nothing but the popular and ancestral image of the perfect intelligibility of reality. What is enacted by wrestling, then, is an ideal intelligence of things, a euphoria of humanity, raised for a while out of the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations and installed in a panoramic vision of a univocal Nature, in which signs finally correspond to causes without obstacle, without evasion, and without contradiction.

When the hero or the bastard of the drama, the man who has been seen a few minutes earlier possessed by a moral fury, enlarged to the size of a kind of metaphysical sign—when this figure leaves the wrestling hall, impassive, anonymous, carrying a gym bag and his wife on his arm, who could doubt that wrestling possesses that power of transmutation proper to Spectacle and to Worship? In the Ring and in the very depths of their voluntary ignominy, the wrestlers remain gods, for they are, for a few minutes, the key which opens Nature, the pure gesture which separates Good and Evil and unveils the figure of a finally intelligible Justice.

THE FSG BOOK OF

TWENTIETH-CENTURY

ITALIAN POETRY

An Anthology

EDITED BY

GEOFFREY BROCK

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX

NEW YORK

Eugenio Montale

1896–1981

IN LIMINE

Rejoice when the breeze that enters the orchard
brings you back the tidal rush of life:
here, where dead memories
mesh and founder,
was no garden, but a reliquary.

That surge you hear is no whir of wings,
but the stirring of the eternal womb.
Look how this strip of lonely coast
has been transformed: a crucible.

All is furor within the sheer wall.
Advance, and you may chance upon
the phantasm who might save you:
here are tales composed and deeds
annulled, for the future to enact.

Find a break in the meshes of the net
that tightens around us, leap out, flee!
Go, I have prayed for your escape—now my thirst
will be slaked, my rancor less bitter . . .

WILLIAM ARROWSMITH

EN ROUTE TO VIENNA

The baroque convent, all meerschaum and biscuit,
shaded a glimpse
of slow-moving water and laid tables,
strewn here and there with leaves
and lumps of ginger.

A swimmer emerged, shook himself
under a gnat-cloud,
inquired of our journey
spoke at length of his own, across the border.

He pointed to the near bridge
which can be crossed (so he told us)
for a penny. He waved, dived,
was the stream itself . . .
And in his stead—
blazing the way for us—a little dachshund
bounded out of a garage, barking with joy,

one brotherly voice in the sultry haze.

EAMON GRENNAN

Eugenio Montale

THE EEL

The selfsame, the siren
of icy waters, shrugging off as she does the Baltic
to hang out in our seas,
our inlets, the rivers
through which she climbs, bed-hugger, who keeps going against
the flow, from branch to branch, then
from capillary to snagged capillary,
farther and farther in, deeper and deeper into the heart
of the rock, straining
through mud runnels, till one day
a flash of light from the chestnut trees
sends a fizzle through a standing well,
through a drain that goes
by dips and darts from the Apennines to the Romagna—
that selfsame eel, a firebrand now, a scourge,
the arrow shaft of Love on earth
which only the gulches or dried-out
gullies of the Pyrenees might fetch and ferry back
to some green and pleasant spawning ground,
a green soul scouting and scanning
for life where only
drought and desolation have hitherto clamped down,
the spark announcing
that all sets forth when all that's set forth
is a charred thing, a buried stump,
this short-lived rainbow, its twin met
in what's set there between your eyelashes,
you who keep glowing as you do, undiminished, among the sons
of man, faces glistening with your slime, can't you take in
her being your next-of-kin?

PAUL MULDOON

Eugenio Montale

THE DREAM OF THE CELT

MARIO VARGAS LLOSA

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH
BY EDITH GROSSMAN

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX NEW YORK

I

When they opened the door to his cell, the street noise that the stone walls had muffled came in along with the stream of light and a blast of wind, and Roger woke in alarm. Blinking, still confused, struggling to calm down, he saw the silhouette of the sheriff leaning in the doorway. His flabby face, with its blond mustache and reproachful little eyes, contemplated him with a dislike he had never tried to hide. This was someone who would suffer if the British government granted his request for clemency.

"Visitor," muttered the sheriff, not taking his eyes off him.

He stood, rubbing his arms. How long had he slept? Not knowing the time was one of the torments of Pentonville Prison. In Brixton Prison and the Tower of London he had heard the bells that marked the half-hour and the hour; here, thick walls kept the clamor of the church bells along the Caledonian Road and the noise of the Islington market from reaching the prison interior, and the guards posted at the door strictly obeyed the order not to speak to him. The sheriff put handcuffs on him and indicated that he should walk behind. Was his lawyer bringing him good news? Had the cabinet met and reached a decision? Perhaps the sheriff's gaze was more filled than ever with the anger he inspired in him because his sentence had been commuted. He walked down the long passageway of red brick blackened by grime, past the metal doors of the cells and the discolored walls where every twenty or twenty-five paces a high barred window allowed him to glimpse a small piece of gray sky. Why was he so cold? It was July, the heart of summer, there was no reason for the icy cold that gave him goose bumps.

When he entered the narrow visitors' room, his heart sank. Waiting for him was not his attorney, *Maître* George Gavan Duffy, but one of his assistants, a blond, sickly looking young man with prominent cheekbones who dressed like a fop and whom he had seen during the four days of his trial, carrying and fetching papers for the defense lawyers. Why, instead of coming in person, had *Maître* Gavan Duffy sent one of his clerks?

The young man looked at him coldly. Anger and disgust were in his eyes. What was wrong with this imbecile? He looks at me as if I were vermin, thought Roger.

"Any news?"

The young man shook his head. He inhaled before speaking:

"Regarding the petition for pardon, not yet," he murmured drily, making a face that made him look even sicklier. "It's necessary to wait for the Council of Ministers to meet."

The presence of the sheriff and another guard in the small room irritated Roger. Though they remained silent and motionless, he knew they were listening to everything. The idea oppressed his chest and made it difficult for him to breathe.

"But considering recent events," the blond young man added, blinking for the first time and opening and closing his mouth in an exaggerated way, "everything is more difficult now."

"Outside news doesn't reach Pentonville. What happened?"

What if the German admiralty had finally decided to attack Great Britain from the Irish coast? What if the dreamed-of invasion had taken place and the Kaiser's cannon were at this very moment avenging the Irish patriots shot by the British in the Easter Rising? If the war had taken that direction, his plans would be realized in spite of everything.

"Now it has become difficult, perhaps impossible, to succeed," the clerk repeated. He was pale, and Roger detected his skull beneath the whitish skin of his complexion. He sensed that behind him the sheriff was smiling.

"What are you talking about? Mr. Gavan Duffy was optimistic about the petition. What happened to make him change his mind?"

"Your diaries," the young man hissed, making another disgusted face. He had lowered his voice and it was difficult for Roger to hear him. "Scotland Yard found them in your house on Ebury Street."

He paused for a long time, waiting for Roger to say something.

But since he had fallen mute, the clerk gave free rein to his indignation and twisted his mouth:

"My good man, how could you be so stupid?" He spoke slowly, making his rage more obvious. "How could you, my good man, put such things on paper? And if you did, how could you not take the basic precaution of destroying those diaries before embarking on a conspiracy against the British Empire?"

It's an insult for this fellow to call me "my good man," Roger thought. Ill-mannered because Roger was at least twice the age of this affected boy.

"Portions of those diaries are circulating everywhere now," the clerk added, calmer, though his disgust was constant, not looking at him now. "In the Admiralty, the minister's spokesman, ship's captain Reginald Hall himself, has given copies to dozens of reporters. They're all over London. In Parliament, the House of Lords, Liberal and Conservative clubs, editorial offices, churches. It's the only topic of conversation in the city."

Roger did not say anything. He did not move. Once again he had the strange sensation that had taken hold of him many times in recent months, ever since that gray, rainy April morning in 1916 when, numb with cold, he was arrested in the ruins of McKenna's Fort, in the south of Ireland: this did not have to do with him, they were talking about someone else, these things were happening to someone else.

"I know your private life is not my business, or Mr. Gavan Duffy's, or anyone's," added the young clerk, making an effort to lower the fury that saturated his voice. "This is a strictly professional matter. Mr. Gavan Duffy wanted to bring you up-to-date regarding the situation. And prepare you. The request for clemency may be compromised. This morning there are already protests in some newspapers, confidences betrayed, rumors regarding the content of your diaries. The favorable public response to the petition might be affected. Merely a supposition, of course. Mr. Gavan Duffy will keep you informed. Do you wish me to give him a message?"

With an almost imperceptible movement of his head, the prisoner refused. He turned immediately afterward, facing the door of the visitors' room. With his chubby face the sheriff signaled the guard, who unbolted the door and opened it. The return to his cell seemed interminable. During his passage down the long hall with

the rocklike walls of blackened red brick, he had the feeling that at any moment he might trip and fall facedown on those damp stones and not get up again. When he reached the metal door of his cell, he remembered: on the day they brought him to Pentonville Prison, the sheriff had told him that, without exception, all the prisoners who occupied this cell had ended up on the gallows.

"Could I take a bath today?" he asked before he went in.

The fat jailer shook his head, looking into his eyes with the same repugnance Roger had detected in the clerk's gaze.

"You cannot bathe until the day of your execution," said the sheriff, relishing each word. "And, on that day, only if it's your final wish. Others, instead of a bath, prefer a good meal. A bad business for Mr. Ellis, because then, when they feel the noose, they shit themselves. And leave the place like a pigsty. Mr. Ellis is the hangman, in case you didn't know."

When he heard the door close behind him, he lay facedown on the narrow cot and closed his eyes. It would have been good to feel the cold water from that spout enervating his skin and turning it blue with cold. In Pentonville the convicts, except for those condemned to death, could bathe with soap once a week in that stream of cold water. And the conditions in the cells were passable. On the other hand, he recalled with a shudder the filth in Brixton, where he had been covered with lice and fleas that swarmed in the mattress on his cot and covered his back, legs, and arms with bites. He attempted to think about that, but over and over he kept remembering the disgusted face and hateful voice of the blond clerk decked out like a dandy whom *Maître* Gavan Duffy had sent instead of coming in person to give him the bad news.

II

Regarding his birth—on September 1, 1864, in Doyle's Cottage, Lawson Terrace, in Sandycove, a Dublin suburb—he remembered nothing, of course. Even though he always knew he had seen the light of day in the capital of Ireland, for much of his life he took for granted what his father, Captain Roger Casement, who had served for eight years with distinction in the Third Regiment of Light Dragoons in India, had inculcated in him: his true birthplace was County Antrim, the heart of Ulster, the Protestant and pro-British Ireland where the Casement line had been established since the eighteenth century.

Roger was brought up and educated as an Anglican in the Church of Ireland, like his sister and brothers, Agnes (Nina), Charles, and Tom—all three older than he—but since earliest childhood he had intuited that in matters of religion not everything in his family was as harmonious as in other areas. Even for a very young child it was impossible not to notice that his mother, when she was with her sisters and Scots cousins, behaved in a way that seemed to hide something. He would discover what it was when he was an adolescent: even though Anne Jephson had apparently converted to Protestantism in order to marry his father, behind her husband's back she continued to be a Catholic ("a Papist," Captain Casement would have said), going to Confession, hearing Mass, and taking Communion, and in the most jealously guarded of secrets, he himself had been baptized a Catholic at the age of four, during a vacation trip he and his siblings took with their mother to Rhyl, in the north of Wales, to visit their maternal aunts and uncles.

During those years in Dublin, or the times they spent in London and Jersey, Roger had absolutely no interest in religion, though during the Sunday ceremony he would pray, sing, and follow the service with respect in order not to displease his father. His mother had given him piano lessons, and he had a clear, tuneful voice for which he was applauded at family gatherings when he sang old Irish ballads. What really interested him at that time were the stories Captain Casement, when he was in a good humor, recounted to him and his brothers and sister. Stories about India and Afghanistan, especially his battles with Afghans and Sikhs. Those exotic names and landscapes, those travels crossing forests and mountains that concealed treasures, wild beasts, predatory animals, ancient peoples with strange customs and savage gods, fired his imagination. At times the other children were bored by the stories, but young Roger could have spent hours, even days, listening to his father's adventures along the remote frontiers of the Empire.

When he learned to read, he liked to become involved in the stories of great navigators, the Vikings, Portuguese, Englishmen, and Spaniards who had plowed the world's seas, vaporizing myths claiming that once you reached a certain point, the ocean water began to boil, chasms opened, and monsters appeared whose gullets could swallow entire ships. Yet if he had to choose between adventures listened to or read, Roger always preferred to hear them from his father's mouth. Captain Casement had a warm voice and animatedly described in a rich vocabulary the jungles of India or the crags and boulders of the Khyber Pass in Afghanistan, where his company of light dragoons was once ambushed by a mass of turbaned fanatics whom the brave British soldiers confronted first with bullets, then with bayonets, and finally with fists and bare hands until they had forced their attackers to withdraw in defeat. But it wasn't feats of arms that most dazzled young Roger's imagination, it was the journeys, the opening of paths through landscapes where white men had never walked, the physical prowess of enduring and conquering the obstacles of nature. His father was entertaining but very severe and did not hesitate to whip his children when they misbehaved, even Nina, the little girl, for this was how mistakes were punished in the army, and he had confirmed that only this form of punishment was effective.

Though he admired his father, the parent Roger really loved was

his mother, a slender woman who seemed to float instead of walk, who had light eyes and hair, whose extremely soft hands when they tousled his curls or caressed his body at bath time filled him with happiness. One of the first things he would learn—at the age of five or six—was that he could run into his mother's arms only when the captain was not nearby. His father, true to the Puritan tradition of his family, did not believe in coddling children, since this made them soft in the struggle to survive. In his father's presence, Roger kept his distance from the pale, delicate Anne Jephson. But when the captain went out to meet friends at his club or take a walk, the boy would run to her and she would cover him with kisses and caresses. At times Charles, Nina, and Tom protested: "You love Roger more than us." Their mother assured them she did not, she loved them all the same, except Roger was very little and needed more attention and affection than the older ones.

When his mother died, in 1873, Roger was nine years old. He had learned to swim and won all the races with children his age and even older ones. Unlike Nina, Charles, and Tom, who shed many tears during the wake and burial of Anne Jephson, Roger did not cry even once. During those gloomy days, the Casement household was transformed into a funeral chapel filled with people dressed in mourning who spoke in low voices and embraced Captain Casement and the four children with contrite faces, pronouncing words of condolence. For many days he couldn't say a word, as if he had fallen mute. He responded to questions with movements of his head, or gestures, and remained serious, his head lowered and his gaze lost, even at night in the darkened room, unable to sleep. From then on and for the rest of his life, from time to time in dreams the figure of Anne Jephson would come to visit him with that inviting smile, opening her arms where he would huddle, feeling protected and happy with those slim fingers on his head, his back, his cheeks, a sensation that seemed to defend him against the evils of the world.

His brothers and sister were soon comforted. And Roger too, apparently. Because even though he had recovered his speech, this was a subject he never mentioned. When a relative spoke to him about his mother, he fell silent and remained enclosed in his muteness until the other person changed the subject. In his sleeplessness, he would sense the face of the unfortunate Anne Jephson in the dark, looking at him sadly.

The one who was not comforted and never became himself again was Captain Roger Casement. Since he wasn't effusive and Roger and the other children had never seen him showering his mother with gallantries, the four of them were surprised at the cataclysm his wife's disappearance meant for their father. Always so meticulous, he dressed carelessly now, let his beard grow, scowled, his eyes filled with resentment as if his children were to blame for his being a widower. Shortly after Anne's death, he decided to leave Dublin and sent the four children to Ulster, to Magherintemple House, the family estate, where from then on their paternal great-uncle, John Casement, and his wife, Charlotte, would take charge of their upbringing. Their father, as if wanting to have nothing to do with them, went to live twenty-five miles away, at the Adair Arms Hotel in Ballymena where, as Great-Uncle John let slip occasionally, Captain Casement, "half mad with grief and loneliness," dedicated his days and his nights to spiritualism, attempting to communicate with the dead woman through mediums, cards, and crystal balls.

From then on Roger rarely saw his father and never again heard him tell those stories about India and Afghanistan. Captain Roger Casement died of tuberculosis in 1876, three years after his wife. Roger had just turned twelve. In Ballymena Diocesan School, where he spent three years, he was a distracted student who received mediocre grades except in Latin, French, and ancient history, classes in which he was outstanding. He wrote poetry, always seemed lost in thought, and devoured books of travels through Africa and the Far East. He engaged in sports, swimming in particular. On weekends he went to the Young family's Galgorm Castle, invited by a classmate. But Roger neglected him and spent more time with Rose Maud Young, beautiful, well-educated, and a writer, who traveled the fishing and farm villages of Antrim collecting poems, legends, and songs in Gaelic. From her mouth he heard for the first time the epic battles of Irish mythology. The castle of black stone, with its fortified towers, coats-of-arms, chimneys, and cathedral-like façade, had been built in the seventeenth century by Alexander Colville, a theologian with an ill-favored face—according to his portrait in the foyer—who, they said in Ballymena, had made a pact with the devil, and whose ghost walked the castle. On certain moonlit nights, a trembling Roger dared to search for him in passageways and empty rooms but never found him.

Only many years later would he learn to feel comfortable in Magherintemple House, the Casement family's ancestral home, which had once been called Churchfield and had been a rectory of the Anglican parish of Culfeightrin. Because for the six years he lived there, between the ages of nine and fifteen, with Great-Uncle John and Great-Aunt Charlotte and the rest of his paternal relatives, he always felt something of a foreigner in the imposing mansion of gray stone with its three stories, high ceilings, ivy-covered walls, false Gothic roofs, and hangings that seemed to hide ghosts. The vast rooms, long hallways, and staircases with worn wooden banisters and creaking steps increased his solitude. On the other hand, he enjoyed the outdoors, the robust elms, sycamores, and peach trees that resisted the hurricane-force wind, the gentle hills with cows and sheep where one could see the town of Ballycastle, the ocean, the breakers crashing into Rathlin Island, and on clear days, the blurred silhouette of Scotland. He frequently went to the nearby villages of Cushendun and Cushendall, which seemed to be the setting for ancient Irish legends, and the nine glens of Northern Ireland, those narrow valleys surrounded by hills and rocky slopes at whose peaks eagles traced circles, a sight that made him feel valiant and exalted. His favorite diversions were excursions through that harsh land, its peasants as old as the landscape, some speaking the ancient Irish among themselves, about which Great-Uncle John and his friends sometimes made cruel jokes. Charles and Tom did not share his enthusiasm for life in the open air and did not enjoy cross-country hikes or climbing the rugged hills of Antrim, but Nina did, and for that reason, in spite of her being eight years older, she was his favorite sibling, the one he got along with best. He made several excursions with her to the Bay of Murlough, bristling with black rocks, and its stony little beach at the bottom of Glenshesk, whose memory would accompany his whole life and to which he would always refer, in letters to his family, as "that corner of Paradise."

But even more than walks through the countryside, Roger liked summer vacations. He spent them in Liverpool with his aunt Grace, his mother's sister, in whose house he felt loved and welcomed, by Aunt Grace, of course, but also by her husband, Uncle Edward Bannister, who had traveled much of the world and made business trips to Africa. He worked for the shipping company the Elder Dempster Line, which transported cargo and passengers between Great Britain

and West Africa. Aunt Grace and Uncle Edward's children, his cousins, were better playmates to Roger than his own siblings, especially Gertrude Bannister, or Gee, with whom, from the time he was very young, he had an intimacy never dimmed by any quarrel. They were so close that Nina once joked with them, "You'll end up marrying each other." Gee laughed but Roger blushed to the ends of his hair. He didn't dare look up and stammered, "No, no, why are you talking nonsense?"

When he was in Liverpool with his cousins, Roger sometimes conquered his timidity and asked Uncle Edward about Africa, a continent whose mere mention filled his head with jungles, wild animals, adventures, and intrepid men. Thanks to Uncle Edward Bannister he heard for the first time of Dr. David Livingstone, the Scots physician and evangelist who had explored the African continent for years, traveling rivers such as the Zambezi and the Shire, naming mountains and unknown places, and bringing Christianity to tribes of savages. He had been the first European to cross Africa coast to coast, the first to traverse the Kalahari Desert, and he had become the most popular hero in the British Empire. Roger dreamed about him, read the pamphlets that described his exploits, and longed to be part of his expeditions, facing dangers at his side, helping to bring the Christian faith to pagans who had not left the Stone Age. When Dr. Livingstone, looking for the sources of the Nile, disappeared, swallowed up by the African jungles, Roger was two years old. When, in 1872, another legendary adventurer and explorer, Henry Morton Stanley, a reporter of Welsh origin employed by a New York newspaper, emerged from the jungle and announced to the world that he had found Dr. Livingstone alive, Roger was almost eight. The boy followed the novelesque story with astonishment and envy. And when, a year later, he learned that Dr. Livingstone, who never wanted to leave African soil or return to Britain, had died, Roger felt he had lost a beloved friend. When he grew up, he too would be an explorer like those titans, Livingstone and Stanley, who were expanding the frontiers of the West and living such extraordinary lives.

When he turned fifteen, Great-Uncle John Casement advised Roger to abandon his studies and look for work, since he and his brothers and sister had no income to live on. He happily accepted the advice. By mutual agreement they decided Roger would go to Liverpool, where there were more possibilities for work than in

Northern Ireland. Shortly after Roger arrived at the Bannisters', Uncle Edward obtained a position for him in the same company where he had worked for so many years. He began as an apprentice in the shipping firm soon after his fifteenth birthday. He looked older. He was very tall and slim, with deep gray eyes, curly black hair, very light skin, even teeth, and he was temperate, discreet, neat, amiable, and obliging. He spoke English with an Irish accent, the cause of jokes among his cousins.

He was a serious boy, tenacious and laconic, not very well prepared intellectually but hardworking. He took his duties in the company very seriously, determined to learn. He was placed in the Department of Administration and Accounting. At first, his tasks were those of a messenger. He fetched and carried documents from one office to another and went to the port to take care of formalities regarding ships, customs, and warehouses. His superiors treated him with consideration. In the four years he worked at the Elder Dempster Line, he did not become intimate with anyone, due to his retiring manner and austere habits: opposed to carousing, he practically did not drink and was never seen frequenting the bars and brothels in the port. He did become an inveterate smoker. His passion for Africa and his commitment to doing well in the company led him to read carefully, and fill with notes, the pamphlets and publications dealing with maritime trade between the British Empire and West Africa that made the rounds of the offices. Then he would repeat with conviction the ideas that permeated those texts. Bringing European products to Africa and importing the raw materials that African soil produced was, more than a commercial operation, an enterprise in favor of the progress of peoples caught in prehistory, sunk in cannibalism and the slave trade. Commerce brought religion, morality, law, the values of a modern, educated, free, and democratic Europe, progress that would eventually transform tribal unfortunates into men and women of our time. In this enterprise, the British Empire was in the vanguard of Europe, and one had to feel proud of being part of it and the work accomplished at the Elder Dempster Line. His office colleagues exchanged mocking looks and wondered whether young Roger Casement was a fool or a smart aleck, whether he believed that nonsense or declaimed it in order to look good to his superiors.

For the four years he worked in Liverpool, Roger continued to

live with Aunt Grace and Uncle Edward, to whom he gave part of his salary and who treated him like a son. He got on well with his cousins, especially Gertrude, with whom on Sundays and holidays he would go boating and fishing if the weather was good, or stay home reading aloud in front of the fire if it rained. Their relationship was fraternal, without a hint of guile or flirtatiousness. Gertrude was the first person to whom he showed the poems he wrote in secret. Roger came to know thoroughly the company's activities, and without ever having set foot in African ports spoke about them as if he had spent his whole life among their offices, businesses, procedures, customs, and the people who populated them.

He made three trips to West Africa on the S.S. *Bounny*, and the experience filled him with so much enthusiasm that after the third voyage he gave up his job and announced to his siblings, aunt, uncle, and cousins that he had decided to go to Africa. He did this in an exalted way, and as his uncle Edward said to him, like those crusaders in the Middle Ages who left for the East to liberate Jerusalem. The family went to the port to see him off, and Gee and Nina shed some tears. Roger had just turned twenty.

HHhH

Laurent Binet

TRANSLATED FROM
THE FRENCH BY SAM TAYLOR

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX NEW YORK

1

Gabčík—that's his name—really did exist. Lying alone on a little iron bed, did he hear, from outside, beyond the shutters of a darkened apartment, the unmistakable creaking of the Prague tramways? I want to believe so. I know Prague well, so I can imagine the tram's number (but perhaps it's changed?), its route, and the place where Gabčík waits, thinking and listening. We are at the corner of Vyšehradská and Trojická. The number 18 tram (or the number 22) has stopped in front of the Botanical Gardens. We are, most important, in 1942. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Milan Kundera implies that he feels a bit ashamed at having to name his characters. And although this shame is hardly perceptible in his novels, which are full of Tomášes, Tominas, and Terezas, we can intuit the obvious meaning: what could be more vulgar than to arbitrarily give—from a childish desire for verisimilitude or, at best, mere convenience—an invented name to an invented character? In my opinion, Kundera should have gone further: what could be more vulgar than an invented character?

So, Gabčík existed, and it was to this name that he answered (although not always). His story is as true as it is extraordinary. He and his comrades are, in my eyes, the authors of one of the greatest acts of resistance in human history, and without doubt the greatest of the Second World War. For a long time I have wanted to pay tribute to him. For a long time I have seen him, lying in his little room—shutters closed, window open—listening to the creak of the tram (going which way? I don't know) that stops outside the

Botanical Gardens. But if I put this image on paper, as I'm sneakily doing now, that won't necessarily pay tribute to him. I am reducing this man to the ranks of a vulgar character and his actions to literature: an ignominious transformation, but what else can I do? I don't want to drag this vision around with me all my life without having tried, at least, to give it some substance. I just hope that, however bright and blinding the veneer of fiction that covers this fabulous story, you will still be able to see through it to the historical reality that lies behind.

2

I don't remember exactly when my father first told me this story, but I can see him now, in my public-housing bedroom, pronouncing the words *partisans*, *Czechoslovaks*, perhaps *operation*, certainly *assassinate*, and then this date: "1942." I'd found *History of the Gestapo* by Jacques Delarue on his bookshelves, and started to read it. Seeing me with this book in my hands, my father had made some passing remarks: he'd mentioned Himmler, the leader of the SS, and then his right-hand man, Heydrich, the Protector of Bohemia and Moravia. And he'd told me of a Czechoslovak commando sent by London, and an assassination attempt. He didn't know the details—and I had no reason to ask for them at the time, as this historic event hadn't yet taken hold of my imagination. But I had sensed in him that slight excitement he always gets when recounting something he finds striking. I don't think he was really aware of the importance he gave this anecdote. When I told him recently of my intention to write a book on the subject, all I sensed was polite curiosity without a trace of any particular emotion. But I know that this story has always fascinated him, even if

it never made as strong an impression on him as it did on me. So one of the reasons I am embarking on this book is to reciprocate his gift—those few words spoken to an adolescent boy by a father who, at the time, was not yet a history teacher. But who, in a few awkward phrases, knew how to tell it.

The story, I mean. History.

3

When I was still a child, well before the separation of the two countries, I already knew the difference between the Czechs and Slovaks. How? Because of tennis. For example, I knew that Ivan Lendl was Czech while Miroslav Mečíř was Slovak. And if Mečíř the Slovak was a flashier player, more talented and likable than the cold, workmanlike Czech Lendl (who was, all the same, the world number one for 270 weeks—a record he held until Pete Sampras topped him, holding the number one spot for 286 weeks), I had also learned from my father that, during the war, the Slovaks had collaborated while the Czechs had resisted. In my child's mind, this meant that all Czechs had been resistance fighters and all Slovaks collaborators, as if by nature. Not for a second did I consider the case of France, which called into question such an oversimplification: hadn't we, the French, both resisted *and* collaborated? Truth be told, it was only when I learned that Tito was a Croat—so not all Croats had been collaborators, and perhaps not all Serbs had been resistance fighters—that I began to have a clearer understanding of Czechoslovakia's situation during the war. On one side, there was Bohemia and Moravia (in other words, the current Czech Republic), occupied by the Germans and annexed to the Reich—that is, having the unenviable status of

protectorate, and considered part of Greater Germany. On the other side there was the Slovak state, theoretically independent but turned into a satellite by the Nazis. Obviously, this does not presuppose anything about any individual person's behavior.

4

On arriving in Bratislava in 1996, before going to work as a French teacher in a Slovakian military academy, one of the first things I asked the secretary to the military attaché at the embassy (after asking for news of my luggage, which had gone missing near Istanbul) concerned the story of the assassination. I learned the first details of the affair from this man: a warrant officer who had specialised in phone-tapping in Czechoslovakia and, since the end of the Cold War, had been redeployed as a diplomat. First of all, there were two men involved in the attack: a Czech and a Slovak. I was pleased to find out that a representative of my host country had taken part in the operation—and that there really had been Slovak resistance fighters. I didn't learn much about the operation itself, except that one of the guns had jammed when they shot at Heydrich's car (and I discovered simultaneously that Hedyrich was in a car at that moment). But it was above all what happened afterward that piqued my curiosity: how the two partisans had taken refuge with their friends in a church, and how the Germans had tried to drown them . . . A strange story. I wanted details. But the warrant officer didn't know much more.

5

A little while after arriving in Slovakia, I met a very beautiful young Slovak woman with whom I fell madly in love and went on to have a passionate affair that lasted nearly five years. It was through her that I managed to obtain further information. Firstly, the protagonists' names: Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš. Gabčík was the Slovak, and Kubiš the Czech—apparently you can tell their nationality from their surnames. These two men have become part of the historical landscape: Aurélia, the young woman in question, had learned their names at school, like all the little Czechs and Slovaks of her generation. She knew the broad outline of the story, but not much more than my warrant officer. I had to wait two or three years before I knew for sure what I had always suspected—that this story was more fantastic and intense than the most improbable fiction. And I discovered that almost by chance.

I had rented an apartment for Aurélia in the center of Prague, between the castle of Vyšehrad and Karlovo náměstí (Charles Square). From this square runs a street, Resslova ulice, that goes down to the river, where you will find that strange glass building which seems to undulate in the air and which the Czechs call Tančící dụm: the dancing house. On Resslova Street—on the right-hand side as you go down—there is a church. And in the church's wall is a basement window bordered by stone where you can see numerous bullet marks and a plaque mentioning Gabčík and Kubiš—and Heydrich, whose name is now forever linked with theirs. I had passed this basement window dozens of times without noticing either the bullet marks or the plaque. But one day I stopped and read the words—and realized I had found the

church where the parachutists took refuge after the assassination attempt.

I came back with Aurélia at a time when the church was open, and we were able to visit the crypt.

In the crypt, there was everything.

6

There were still fresh traces of the drama that had occurred in this room more than sixty years before: a tunnel dug several yards deep; bullet marks in the walls and the vaulted ceiling. There were also photographs of the parachutists' faces, with a text written in Czech and in English. There was a traitor's name and a raincoat. There was a poster of a bag and a bicycle. There was a Sten submachine gun (which jammed at the worst possible moment). All of this was actually in the room. But there was something else here, conjured by the story I read, that existed only in spirit. There were women, there were careless acts, there was London, there was France, there were legionnaires, there was a government in exile, there was a village by the name of Lidice, there was a young lookout called Valčík, there was a tram which went by (also at the worst possible moment), there was a death mask, there was a reward of ten million crowns for whoever denounced the gunmen, there were cyanide pills, there were grenades and people to throw them, there were radio transmitters and coded messages, there was a sprained ankle, there was penicillin that could be procured only in England, there was an entire city under the thumb of the man they nicknamed "The Hangman," there were swastika flags and death's head insignias, there were German spies who worked for Britain, there was a black Mercedes with a blown tire, there was a chauffeur and a butcher, there were dignitaries gathered around a

coffin, there were policemen bent over corpses, there were terrible reprisals, there was greatness and madness, weakness and betrayal, courage and fear, hope and grief, there were all the human passions brought together in a few square yards, there was war and there was death, there were Jews deported, families massacred, soldiers sacrificed, there was vengeance and political calculation, there was a man who was (among other things) an accomplished fencer and violinist, there was a locksmith who never managed to do his job, there was the spirit of the Resistance engraved forever in these walls, there were traces of the struggle between the forces of life and the forces of death, there was Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia, there was all the history of the world contained in a few stones.

There were seven hundred SS guards outside.

7

On the Internet, I discovered the existence of a telefilm, *Conspiracy*, with Kenneth Branagh as Heydrich. I eagerly ordered the DVD—only five euros, postage and handling included—and it arrived three days later.

Conspiracy is a historical reconstruction of the Wannsee Conference, where, on January 20, 1942, in only a few hours, Heydrich and his assistant Eichmann set down the methods of enforcing the Final Solution. By this time, mass executions had already begun in Poland and the USSR but they had been entrusted to the SS extermination commandos, the Einsatzgruppen, who simply rounded up their victims by the hundreds, sometimes by the thousands, often in a field or a forest, before killing them with submachine guns. The problem with this method was that it tested the executioners' nerves and harmed the troops' morale, even those as hardened as the SD or the Gestapo. Himmler himself fainted while

attending one of these mass executions. Subsequently, the SS had taken to asphyxiating their victims by cramming them inside trucks and hooking up the exhaust pipe to a length of hose, but the technique remained relatively unsophisticated. After Wannsee, the extermination of the Jews—which Heydrich entrusted to the tender care of his faithful Eichmann—was administered as a logistical, social, and economic project on a very large scale.

Kenneth Branagh's portrayal of Heydrich is quite clever: he manages to combine great affability with brusque authoritarianism, which makes his character highly disturbing. I don't know how accurate it is—I have not read anywhere that the real Heydrich knew how to show kindness, whether real or faked. But one short scene does a good job of showing his true psychological and historical nature. Two men at the conference are having a private discussion. One confides to the other that he's heard Heydrich has Jewish origins and asks if he thinks there might be any truth to this. The second man replies venomously: "Why not go and ask him yourself?" His questioner goes pale at the thought. Now, it turns out that a persistent rumor claiming his father was Jewish did in fact pursue Heydrich for many years and that his youth was poisoned by this. Apparently the rumor was unfounded. But let's be honest, even if that wasn't the case, Heydrich—as head of the secret services of the Nazi Party and the SS—would have been able to erase all suspect traces in his genealogy without the slightest effort.

This is not the first time that Heydrich has made it to the big screen: in 1943, less than a year after the assassination, Fritz Lang shot a propaganda film entitled *Hangmen Also Die!* with a screenplay by Bertolt Brecht. This film recounts the events in a way that is utterly fanciful—Lang didn't know what had really happened, and even if he had he naturally wouldn't have wished to risk revealing the truth—but quite ingenious: Heydrich is assassinated by a Czech doctor, a member of the Resistance who takes refuge in the house of a young girl. Then the girl's father, an academic, is

rounded up by the Germans along with other local worthies and threatened with execution if the assassin doesn't give himself up. The crisis, treated in an extremely dramatic way (thanks to Brecht, presumably), is resolved when the Resistance manages to pin the blame on a traitorous collaborator, whose death ends both the affair and the film. In reality, neither the partisans nor the Czech people got off so lightly.

Fritz Lang chose to represent Heydrich rather crudely as an effeminate pervert, a complete degenerate who carries a riding crop to underline both his ferocity and his depraved morals. It's true that the real Heydrich was supposed to be a sexual pervert and that he spoke in a falsetto voice at odds with the rest of his persona, but his stiffness, his haughtiness, his absolutely Aryan profile were worlds away from the mincing creature in the film. If you wanted to find a more lifelike screen representation, you should watch Charlie Chaplin's *Great Dictator* again: there you see Hinkel, the dictator, flanked by two henchmen, one of them a smug, bloated fat man clearly modeled on Göring, and the other a tall, thin man who looks much colder, stiffer, and more cunning. That isn't Himmler, a coarse little moustached fox, but rather Heydrich, his very dangerous right-hand man.

8

For the hundredth time, I returned to Prague. Accompanied by another young woman, the gorgeous Natacha, I went back to the crypt. (She's French, this one, in spite of her name, and the daughter of Communists, like all of us.) The first day we went, it was closed for a national holiday, but across the road I spotted a bar—I'd never noticed this place before—called the Parachutists. Inside, the walls were covered with photos, documents, paintings,

and posters relating to the assassination. At the back, a large painted mural depicted Great Britain, with points indicating the various military bases where the exiled Czech army commandos prepared for their missions. I drank a beer there with Natacha.

The next day, we returned during opening hours and I showed Natacha the crypt. She took several photos at my request. A short film reconstructing the assassination was playing in the foyer. I tried to pinpoint the places where the drama took place in order to go there myself, but it was quite far from the center of town, out in the suburbs. The street names have changed: even now I have trouble situating the exact location of the attack. On my way out of the crypt, I picked up a flyer, written in Czech and English, advertising an exhibition entitled "Assassination." Beside the title was a photo of Heydrich, surrounded by German officers and flanked by his local right-hand man, the Sudeten German Karl Hermann Frank—all of them wearing full uniform and climbing a wood-paneled staircase. A red target had been printed on Heydrich's face. The exhibition was taking place at the Army Museum, not far from the Florenc metro station, but there was no mention of dates, only the museum's opening hours. We went there the same day.

At the museum entrance, a little old lady welcomed us with great solicitude: she seemed happy to see some visitors and invited us to take a tour of the building's various galleries. But I was interested in only one of them. The entrance was decorated by an enormous pasteboard announcing, in the style of a Hollywood horror film, the exhibition on Heydrich. I wondered if it was permanent. It was free, in any case, like the rest of the museum. The little lady, having asked us where we were from, gave us a guidebook in English (she was sorry to be able to offer a choice of only English or German).

The exhibition surpassed all my expectations. Here, there really was everything: as well as photos, letters, posters, and various documents, I saw the parachutists' guns and personal effects, their

dossiers filled out by the British commanders, with notes, appraisals, and reports. I saw Heydrich's Mercedes, with its blown tire and the hole in the right rear door, and the fatal letter from the lover to his mistress that led to the massacre at Lidice. I saw their passports and their photos, and a great number of other authentic, deeply moving traces of what happened. I took notes feverishly, knowing full well that there were way too many names, dates, details. As I was leaving, I asked the lady if it was possible to buy the guidebook that she'd lent me, in which all the captions and commentaries had been transcribed. Sounding very sorry, she said no. The book was handbound and clearly not intended for general sale. Seeing that I was at a loss, and probably touched by my jabbering attempts to speak Czech, she ended up taking the book from my hands and stuffing it determinedly into Natacha's handbag. She signaled us not to say a word, and to leave. We parted effusively. It's true that given the number of visitors to the museum, the guidebook was unlikely to be missed by anyone. But even so, it was really kind. Two days later, an hour before our bus left for Paris, I went back to the museum to give the little lady some chocolates. She was embarrassed and didn't want to accept them. The guidebook she gave me is so important that without it—and therefore without her—this book probably wouldn't exist in the form it's going to take. I regret not having dared ask her name, so that I could have thanked her a bit more ceremoniously.

9

When she was sixteen or seventeen, Natacha took part two years running in a national essay-writing contest about the Resistance, and both times she finished first—a feat that as far as I know has never been matched, before or since. This double victory gave her

the opportunity to be a standard-bearer in a commemorative parade and to visit a concentration camp in Alsace. During the bus journey she sat next to an old Resistance fighter who took a liking to her. He lent her some books and documents, but afterward they lost touch. Ten years later, when she told me this story—somewhat guiltily as you'd imagine, seeing that she still had his documents and that she didn't even know if he was alive—I encouraged her to contact him again. And even though he'd moved to the other end of France, I managed to track him down.

That's how we came to visit him in his beautiful white house near Perpignan, where he lived with his wife.

Sipping sweet muscat wine, we listened as he told us how he had joined the Resistance, how he'd gone underground, all the things he'd done. In 1943, aged nineteen, he was working at his uncle's dairy farm. Being of Swiss origin, this uncle spoke such good German that the soldiers who came to get fresh supplies had taken to hanging around in order to chat with someone who spoke their language. First of all, our young Resistance fighter was asked if he could glean any interesting information from the talks between the soldiers and his uncle, about troop movements, for example. Then they put him on parachute duty, where he helped to pick up the boxes of materials parachuted down at night from allied airplanes. When he became old enough to be drafted by the STO—which meant he was under threat of being sent to work in Germany—he went underground, serving in combat units and taking part in the liberation of Burgundy. Actively, it would seem, judging by the number of Germans he claims to have killed.

I was genuinely interested in his story, but I also hoped to learn something that could be useful for my book on Heydrich. What exactly, I had no idea.

I asked him if he'd received any military instruction after going underground. None, he told me. Later, they taught him how to handle a heavy machine gun, and he had a few training sessions: dismantling and reassembling the gun blindfolded, and shooting

practice. But when he first arrived, they stuck a machine gun in his hands and that was it. It was a British machine gun, a Sten. A completely unreliable weapon, so he told me: all you had to do was hit the ground with the butt and it went off. A piece of junk. "The Sten was shit, there's no other way of saying it."

You might wish to remember this. It turns out to be important.

TRAVELER OF THE CENTURY

ANDRÉS NEUMAN

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY

NICK CAISTOR AND LORENZA GARCIA

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

NEW YORK

THE LIGHT HERE IS ANCIENT

A-ARE YO-UU C-COLD? THE coachman shouted, his voice fragmented by the jolting of the coach. I-I'm f-fine, th-ank yo-uu, replied Hans, teeth chattering.

The coach lamps flickered as the horses sped along the road. Mud flew up from the wheels. The axles twisted in every pothole, and seemed about to snap. Their cheeks puffing, the horses blew clouds from their nostrils. An opaque moon was rolling above the horizon.

For some time now Wandernburg had been visible in the distance, to the south. And yet, thought Hans, as often happens at the end of an exhausting day, the small city seemed to be moving in step with them, and getting no nearer. The sky above the carriage was heavy. With each crack of the coachman's whip the cold grew bolder, pressing against every outline. I-s the-ere mu-mu-ch f-f-urther t-oo g-oo? asked Hans, sticking his head out of the window. He had to repeat the question twice before the coachman heard him above the din and shouted, pointing with his whip: A-as yo-uu ca-an s-eee! Hans was uncertain whether this meant they were only a few minutes away or that it was impossible to tell. Since he was the only remaining passenger and had no one to talk to, he closed his eyes.

When he opened them again he saw a stone wall and an arched gateway. As they drew closer, Hans sensed something odd about the thickness of the wall, as if it were a warning about how hard it would be to leave rather than to enter. By the dim light of the coach lantern he could make out the shapes of the first buildings, the round-cut tiles like fish scales on some

of the rooftops, the needle spires, the ornaments shaped like vertebrae. He had the impression he was arriving in a place that had just been evacuated, where the clatter of hooves and the wheels jolting on the cobblestones were producing too loud an echo. Everything was so still, it seemed as though someone was spying on them with bated breath. The carriage turned a corner, and the horses' gallop was suddenly muted—they were now on a beaten earth track. They went down Old Cauldron Street. Hans caught sight of an iron sign swinging in the breeze. He told the coachman to stop.

The man climbed down from his perch. When he reached the ground, he looked puzzled. He took a few steps, peered down at his feet, smiled uncertainly. He patted the lead horse's neck and whispered some words of thanks in its ear. The animal replied with a snort. Hans helped him untie the ropes from the luggage rack, pull back the wet canvas, then unload his case and a big trunk with handles on it. What have you got in there, a dead body? complained the coachman, dropping the chest to the ground and rubbing his hands. Not one dead body, Hans said with a smile, several. The man laughed abruptly, although a twitch of alarm flitted across his face. Will you be spending the night here too? asked Hans. No, the coachman explained, I'm going on to Wittenberg. I know a good place to sleep there, and there's a family who have to get to Leipzig. Then, looking askance at the creaking inn sign, he added: Are you sure you wouldn't like to ride on a little farther? Thanks, replied Hans, but this is fine. I need some rest. As you wish, sir, as you wish, said the coachman, clearing his throat several times. Hans paid him, refused the coins he offered in change, and bade him farewell. Behind his back he heard the crack of a whip, the creak of wood, and the thud of hooves moving off.

It was only when he was on his own outside the inn that he noticed a shooting pain in his back, sensed his muscles tremble

and heard a pounding in his ears. He could still feel the jolting coach—the lights seemed to waver, the stones to be shifting. Hans rubbed his eyes. The windows of the inn were steamed up, making it impossible for him to see inside. He knocked on the door, where a Christmas wreath still hung. No one came. He tried the frozen handle, then pushed the door open. He saw a corridor lit by oil lamps suspended from hooks. The warmth drew Hans in. From the far end of the corridor came the crackle of an open fire. He struggled to drag the case and trunk inside. He stood beneath one of the lanterns, trying to warm up. With a start, he saw Herr Zeit staring at him from behind the reception desk. I was on my way to let you in, Herr Zeit said. The innkeeper moved extremely slowly, as if he were trapped between the counter and the wall. He had a huge, barrel-shaped belly, and smelt of musty fabric. Where have you come from? he asked. I've come from Berlin, said Hans, not that it really matters. It matters to me, young sir, Herr Zeit cut in, not suspecting that Hans had meant something else. How many nights do you intend to stay? Just one, I suppose, said Hans, I'm not sure yet. Well, when you've decided, please let me know, said the innkeeper, we need to be sure which rooms will be available.

Herr Zeit searched for a candlestick, then led Hans down the corridor and up a flight of stairs. As Hans watched the rotund figure heaving himself up each step, he was afraid he might come crashing down on top of him. The entire inn smelt of burning oil, the sulphur from the lamp wicks, and a mixture of sweat and soap. They reached the first-floor landing and carried on up. Hans was surprised to see that all the rooms appeared unoccupied. On the second floor, Herr Zeit paused at a door with the number seven chalked on it. Recovering his breath, he declared proudly: This is our best room. He took a battered ring laden with keys out of his pocket, and after several attempts and muttered curses, they entered the room.

Candlestick in hand, Herr Zeit ploughed his way through the darkness over to the window. When he opened the shutters, there was the sound of creaking wood and a cloud of dust flew up. Rather than illuminating the room, the feeble light from outside seemed to seep into the darkness like a gas. It gets quite sunny in the mornings, Herr Zeit explained, because it faces east. Hans screwed up his eyes to examine the room. He could make out a table and two chairs. A camp bed with a pile of folded woollen blankets on it. A zinc bathtub, a rusty chamber pot, a washbasin on a stand, a water jug. A brick-and-stone chimney piece with a ledge that seemed too narrow to accommodate any objects (Only rooms three and seven have a hearth, Herr Zeit announced) and beside it were several tools: a small shovel, a poker, a pair of blackened tongs, an almost bald brush. In the fireplace lay two charred logs. On the wall opposite the door, between table and tub, Hans's attention was drawn to a small painting that looked to him like a watercolour, although he could not see it properly. One more thing, Herr Zeit concluded solemnly, taking the lamp over to the table and sliding his hand along the surface. It's pure oak. Hans stroked the table contentedly. He glanced at the candlesticks with their tallow candles, and at the rusty oil lamp. I'll take it, he said. He was immediately aware of Herr Zeit helping him out of his frock coat and hanging it on one of the nails in the wall beside the door—the coat stand.

Wife! the innkeeper bellowed, as if he had just woken up. Wife, come up here! We have a guest! Instantly there was a sound of footsteps on the stairs. A broad-beamed woman appeared in the doorway, wearing skirts and an apron with a huge pouch over her bosom. Unlike her husband, Frau Zeit moved swiftly and efficiently. In a trice she had changed the bed sheets for a slightly less yellowing set, given the room a cursory sweep, and vanished downstairs again to fill the water jug. When she

reappeared with it, Hans drank greedily, almost without pausing for breath. Will you bring his luggage up? Herr Zeit asked. His wife sighed. Her husband decided the sigh meant she would, and so, after nodding to Hans, he in turn disappeared down the stairs.

Lying on his back on the bed, Hans could feel with his toes how rough the sheets were. Closing his eyes, he thought he could hear scratching sounds from beneath the floorboards. He drifted off to sleep, letting all his cares slide away, and said to himself: Tomorrow I'll gather my things and move elsewhere. If he had examined the ceiling closely with a candle, he would have seen the huge cobwebs between the beams. Hidden among them, a spider watched over Hans's sleep, thread by thread.

He woke up late, his stomach empty. A warm sun was dancing over the table, flowing down the chairs like syrup. Hans washed in the handbasin, opened his case, and dressed. Then he went over to the small painting and confirmed that it was indeed a watercolour. The frame seemed to him rather too ornate. When he took it down to examine it more closely, he discovered a tiny mirror on the back. He hung it up again, this time with the mirror facing towards him. He filled the basin with the water left in the jug, broke off a piece of soap, rummaged for his shaving brush, his razor and his colognes. He whistled while he shaved, unaware of what it was he was whistling.

On his way downstairs he ran into Herr Zeit, who was climbing the steps laboriously one by one. He was carrying a small notebook, and asked Hans to pay for the night's lodging before breakfast. It's a house rule, he said. Hans went back into his room and came out with the exact sum, plus a one-groschen tip, which he gave to the innkeeper with a wry smile. Down on the ground floor Hans had a look around. At the far end of the corridor he could see a large dining room with a blazing

hearth and a big cooking pot over the fire. Opposite it was a sofa, which, as Hans quickly discovered, sank in the middle as soon as you sat on it. On the other side of the corridor was a door, which he imagined must lead to the Zeits' apartment. Next to the door stood a Christmas tree that was so exquisitely decorated he could scarcely believe either of them could have been responsible for it. Out the back of the inn he discovered a courtyard with latrines and a well. He made use of one of the latrines, and returned feeling much better. A raft of smells caught his attention. He strode towards it and found Frau Zeit chopping chard in the kitchen. Hams, strings of sausages and sides of bacon hung like silent sentinels. A pot was boiling on the stove. Row upon row of frying pans, serving spoons, cauldrons and saucepans refracted the morning in whorls of light. You're late, sit down, Frau Zeit ordered, without looking up from her chopping. Hans did as he was told. We usually serve breakfast in the dining room, she went on, but I can't leave the fire now, so you'd best have it in here. On the board were laid vegetables, a basted joint of meat, the rippled skins of potatoes. A tap was dripping into a sink full of dirty dishes. Underneath were piled baskets of firewood, coal and slack. Farther off, stacked among a jumble of pitchers and jars were small sacks of beans, rice, flour, semolina. Frau Zeit dried her hands on her apron. In one swift movement she sliced through a fresh loaf, and spread jam on it. Placing a bowl in front of Hans, she filled it with ewe's milk, then poured coffee in until it slopped over the sides. Will you be wanting eggs? she asked.

Recalling how desolate Wandernburg had seemed the night before, Hans was surprised at the hustle and bustle in the streets when he went out after breakfast. Although all the activity seemed somehow restrained, Hans had to accept the evidence that people did indeed live in the city. He wandered aimlessly around. Occasionally, he thought he had lost his way in the

narrow, steep streets, at other times he realised he had walked in a circle. He discovered that the coachmen of Wandernburg avoided slowing down so as not to pull on their horses' mouths, and only gave him a few seconds to jump out of their way. As he walked, he noticed lace curtains being drawn aside, then closing again. When Hans tried to smile courteously in the direction of some of these windows, the shadows immediately withdrew. Snowflakes threatened to turn the air white, but were quickly engulfed in mist. Even the pigeons fluttering above his head seemed to crane their necks to look at him. Bewildered by the winding streets, his feet sore from the cobblestones, Hans paused in the market square for a rest.

The market square was the place where all the streets of Wandernburg converged, the centre of its map. At one end was the town hall, with its red-tiled roof and pointed turrets. At the opposite end stood the Tower of the Wind. Seen from the pavement, its most prominent feature was the square clock face sprinkling the time over the square below. Yet from the top of the tower, even more impressive was the arrow on its weathervane, which quivered and groaned as it twisted this way and that.

In addition to the stalls selling food, peasants came to the market square from the surrounding region, their carts laden with produce. Others turned up hoping to be taken on as day labourers in the fields. For some reason Hans could not understand, the traders peddled their wares almost in whispers, and haggling was carried out in hushed tones. He bought some fruit at a stall. He strolled on again, amusing himself by counting the number of lace curtains that twitched as he went past. When he raised his eyes to look up at the Tower of the Wind, he realised he had missed the afternoon coach. Resigning himself to the fact, he walked round in circles three or four times more until he found himself back in Old Cauldron Street. Night had fallen like a curtain.

Walking along the streets of Wandernburg after dark, passing mouldy arches and isolated street lamps, Hans experienced the same sensations as when he had first arrived. He could see that the city's inhabitants went home early, almost scuttling back to their houses for safety. Their place was taken by cats and dogs, disporting themselves as they pleased, gnawing at any scraps of food they could find in the streets. As he was entering the inn and reflecting that the Christmas wreath had disappeared, Hans heard the cry of a nightwatchman. He was coming round the street corner, wearing a hood, and carrying a long pole with a dim light on the tip:

Time to go home, everyone!
The church bell has chimed six,
Watch over your fire and your lamps,
Praise be to God! All praise!

Herr Zeit seemed surprised to see him, as if he had been expecting his guest to vanish into thin air without warning. Everything in the inn was as quiet as before, although as he passed by the kitchen Hans counted six dirty plates piled up next to the sink, from which he deduced there were four other guests. His calculation turned out to be wrong, however, because as he headed for the staircase a slender figure emerged from the door to the Zeits' apartment bearing a Christmas tree and a box of candles. This is my daughter, Lisa, said Frau Zeit in a hurried introduction as she scurried down the corridor. Still wedged between the counter and the wall, Herr Zeit himself noted the ensuing silence and shouted: Lisa! Say hello to the gentleman! Lisa smiled mischievously at Hans, calmly shrugged her shoulders and went back inside without saying a word.

The Zeits had had seven children. Three were now married; two had died of the measles. Still living with them were Lisa, the

eldest, and Thomas, a boisterous child who wasted no time in bursting into the dining room where Hans was eating dumplings with bread and butter. Who are you? asked Thomas. I'm Hans, said Hans, to which Thomas replied: Then I don't know who you are. With that he stole a dumpling, wheeled round, and disappeared down the corridor.

When he heard Hans's footsteps going upstairs, the innkeeper struggled to prise his belly free and came to ask if he were planning to leave the next day. Hans had already decided he was, but Herr Zeit's insistence made him feel as if he were being turned out, and so in order to contradict him he said he did not know. The innkeeper seemed extraordinarily pleased at this reply, going so far as to ask Hans whether he needed anything for his room. Hans said he did not, and thanked him. When Herr Zeit still stood there, Hans added in a friendly tone that apart from the market square, the streets of Wandernburg seemed to him rather dark, and he mentioned the gas lighting used in Berlin or London. We don't need all that light here, declared Herr Zeit, hitching up his trousers, we have good eyesight and regular habits. We go out by day and at night we sleep. We go to bed early, and get up early. What do we want gas for?

Lying on his back in bed again, Hans yawned, tiredness mingling with bewilderment. He promised himself: Tomorrow I'll gather my things and move on.

The night barked and meowed.

Atop the Tower of the Wind, piercing the mists, the weathervane seemed about to fly off its hinges.

After another stroll over the frosty ground, Hans had the strange feeling that the city's layout somehow shifted while everyone was asleep. How could he lose his bearings so completely? It was beyond him—the tavern he had lunched at the day before was on the opposite corner from where he remembered it,

the clangs from the smithy, which should have been on the right as he turned the corner, surprised him by coming from the left, the sloping street that went down now went steeply up, a passageway he remembered walking through which should have opened onto an avenue was a dead end. Feeling his pride as a seasoned traveler challenged, Hans booked a seat on the next coach for Dessau, and then resolved to familiarise himself with the maze of streets through which he was wandering. And yet, no sooner had he congratulated himself on two or three successes than he realised to his dismay he was lost again. The only easy place to find was the market square, which he kept going back to in order to get his bearings. Killing time before his coach left, trying hard to memorise the city's cardinal points, he was standing in the square like a sundial, his thin shadow cast over the cobblestones, when he saw the organ grinder arrive.

Moving laboriously yet gracefully, as though as he shuffled along he imagined he was dancing, the grizzled organ grinder came into the square pulling his barrel organ, leaving its track in the fresh snow. With him was a black-haired dog. With an innate sense of rhythm, the dog always kept the same distance from its master, respecting his every pause, stagger, change of pace. The old man was dressed after a fashion in a threadbare-looking dark overcoat and a translucent cape. He came to a halt on one side of the square. Slowly and carefully, he spread out his things, as though miming what he was going to do later. Once installed, he untied the battered umbrella fastened to the cart handle. He opened it and placed it on top of his instrument to protect it from the flurry of snow. This gesture touched Hans, who stood waiting for the organ grinder to play a tune.

The old man was in no hurry, or he enjoyed dawdling. Beneath his beard Hans saw him smile knowingly at his dog, which gazed up at him, its triangular ears pricked. The barrel organ was of modest size—sitting on the cart, it barely reached the organ

grinder's waist, obliging him to stoop even lower to play it. The cart was painted green and orange. The wooden wheels had once been red. Enclosed by a metal hoop barely holding them together, they were not round but a more uneven shape, like the years they had spent rolling. The front of the organ had once been decorated with a naive landscape of a tree-lined river.

Hans never felt nostalgia for anything: he preferred to think about his next journey. And yet, when the organ grinder began to play, something touched the edge of something. When he heard the barrel organ's metallic past, Hans sensed that someone else, some past self, was trembling inside him. Following the melody as if it were words streaming on the wind, Hans experienced something unusual—he was aware of what he was feeling, he could see himself being moved. He was listening because the barrel organ was playing, the barrel organ was playing because he was listening. Hans had the impression that the organ grinder was not so much playing as trying to remember. With an airy hand, his fingers stiff with cold, he turned the handle. As he did so the dog's tail, the square, the weathervane, the light, noon itself, went spinning round and round, and as soon as the tune was approaching the end, the organ grinder's timekeeping hand created not so much a pause, or even a silence, more a slight tear in a fabric, before turning the handle again, so that the music started up once more, and everything carried on spinning round, and it was no longer cold.

Coming back down to earth, Hans found it odd that no one else seemed to notice the barrel-organ music. Used to it, or in too much of a hurry, everyone walked by without even looking. Finally, a small boy stopped in front of the organ grinder. The old man said hello with a smile to which he responded shyly. Two huge shoes planted themselves behind the boy's loose shoelaces; a voice leant over saying: Don't look at the man, can't you see the way he's dressed? Don't bother him, come

along now, come along. In front of the old man was a shiny dish into which people would occasionally drop small copper coins. Hans noticed that those showing this consideration did not stop to listen to the music either, but left the money as if they were giving it to a beggar. This did not seem to spoil the organ grinder's concentration, or the rhythm of his hand.

At first, Hans was content to watch him. After a while, as though waking up from a dream, he realised that he too was part of the scene. He walked over noiselessly, and, in an attempt to show his appreciation, bent over to leave an offering that was twice as much as what was already in the dish. At this, for the first time since he had arrived, the organ grinder straightened up. He smiled openly at Hans with an expression of calm content, then carried on playing, unperturbed. Hans assumed the old man had not interrupted his playing because he knew he was enjoying the music. More matter-of-factly, the organ grinder's dog appeared to think this called for some sort of formal recognition—he squinted as though the sun had just come out, opened his jaws very wide and unfurled his long pink tongue.

When the organ grinder took a break, Hans decided to talk to him. They stood for a while conversing, the falling snow soaking their clothes. They discussed the cold, the colour of Wandernburg's trees, the differences between the mazurka and the cracovienne. Hans found the organ grinder's polite manners charming, and the organ grinder appreciated the deep timbre of Hans's voice. Hans looked at the clock on the Tower of the Wind and calculated that he had an hour left before going back to the inn to fetch his luggage and wait for the coach. He invited the organ grinder for a drink at one of the taverns in the square. The organ grinder accepted with a nod and added: In that case I must introduce you two. He asked Hans's name, then said: Franz, this is Herr Hans, Herr Hans, this is my dog, Franz.

To Hans it seemed that the organ grinder followed him as if he had been expecting him that morning. On their way to the tavern, the old man stopped to greet a couple of beggars. He exchanged a few friendly words that revealed he knew them, and as he took his leave he handed them half the money from his dish, then calmly carried on walking. Do you always do that? Hans asked, gesturing towards the beggars. Do what? said the organ grinder. You mean the money? No, no, I couldn't afford to. I shared what you gave me today so that you know I'm accepting your invitation not out of self-interest, but because I like you.

When they reached the door of the Central Tavern, the old man ordered Franz to wait outside. Bringing the barrel organ with them, they went inside, Hans first, then the organ grinder. The Central Tavern was crammed to the rafters. The stoves, the oven and the tobacco smoke created a blanket of heat that smothered voices, breathing and smells. The smokers blew out spirals like ribcages—a smoke animal devoured the patrons. Hans pulled a face. Doing their best to protect the barrel organ, they managed with difficulty to make a tiny space for themselves at the bar. The organ grinder had a dreamy smile on his face. Less relaxed, Hans resembled a prince watching a carnival. They ordered two wheat beers, and, elbow-to-elbow, raised their glasses in a toast before resuming their conversation. Hans said he had not seen the old man the previous day. The organ grinder explained that in wintertime he went to the square every morning, but never in the afternoons because it was too cold. Hans still had the feeling that they had missed out the main topic, that they were both talking as though they had already said the things that in fact had not even been mentioned. They ordered two more beers, followed by another two. That's good, the old man said, his whiskers covered in froth. Through the bottom

of his glass, Hans's smile was lopsided.

A coachman came here asking for you, Herr Zeit declared. He waited a few minutes then stomped off angrily. Herr Zeit added thoughtfully, as if he had reached this conclusion after a great deal of effort: It's Tuesday already! Playing along with him, Hans replied: Quite right, it's Tuesday. Herr Zeit seemed satisfied and asked whether he planned to stay more nights. Hans paused, genuinely unsure this time, and said: I don't think so. I really must get to Dessau. Then, since he was feeling quite merry, he added: Although you never know.

Ensconced on the sofa in the dining room, her face glowing orange in front of the fire, Frau Zeit was darning a pair of enormous socks: Hans wondered whether they belonged to her or her husband. When she saw him come in, she stood up. She told him his supper was ready and asked him not to make any noise because the children had just gone to bed. Almost at once, Thomas contradicted her by bursting through the door clutching a handful of lead soldiers. Colliding with his mother, he stopped dead, a pale skinny leg flailing in mid-air. And as swiftly as he had arrived he turned tail and ran. A door slammed in the Zeits' apartment. Instantly, a shrill adolescent voice screamed out Thomas's name, followed by some other protests they could not hear. The little scallywag, the landlady muttered under her breath.

Lying in bed, mouth half-open as though waiting for a drip to fall from the ceiling, Hans listened to his own thoughts: Tomorrow for sure, at the very latest the day after, I'll gather my things and leave. As he drifted into oblivion he thought he heard light footsteps padding down the corridor and pausing outside his room. He even imagined he could hear someone breathing nervously on the other side of the door. But he could not be sure. Perhaps it was his own breathing, growing gradually deeper, his own breathing, his own, his.

Hans had gone to the market square to find the organ grinder. He had discovered him in the same place, in the same position. On seeing him, the old man had gestured to his dog and Franz had gone to greet him, tail wagging from side to side like a metronome. They had shared a lunch of warm soup, hard sheep's cheese, bread with liver pâté and several beers. The organ grinder had finished his day's work and now they were strolling together along the River Walk towards High Gate, where Wandernburg ended and the countryside began. After objecting to Hans paying for his lunch, the old man had insisted on inviting him to his house for tea.

They walked side by side, waiting for each other whenever the organ grinder stopped pushing the cart to catch his breath, Hans lagged behind to peer into a side street or Franz paused to lift his leg here and there. By the way, asked Hans, what's your name? Well, the old man replied, switching to a less formal way of addressing him, as if they were already firm friends, it's an ugly name and since I seldom use it I hardly remember what it is. Just call me organ grinder—that's the best name for me. And what's yours? (Hans, said Hans.) I know that, but what's your surname? (Hans, repeated Hans, laughing.) Well, what does it matter, eh? Hey, Franz, will you stop pissing on every stone please? We have a guest for tea today, behave yourself, it's getting dark and we're not home yet, good, that's what I like to see.

They walked through High Gate, continuing along a narrower earthen track. The countryside opened out before them, smooth and white. For the first time, Hans saw the vastness of the U-shaped plain to the south-east of Wandernburg. In the distance he glimpsed the hedges of crop fields, the pastures for the farm animals, the sown cornfields lying in frozen expectancy. At the end of the path he could make out a wooden footbridge, the ribbon of the river, and beyond it a pinewood and rocky outcrops. Surprised at not seeing any houses, Hans wondered

where the old man was taking him. Sensing Hans's thoughts, and at the same time adding to his bewilderment, the organ grinder set down his cart for a moment, took him by the arm and said: We're almost there.

Hans calculated that they had walked more than half a league from the market square. Had he been able to climb the rocks behind the pinewoods, he would have had a panorama of the whole of the surrounding countryside and the city. He would have been able to observe the highway along which he had traveled on the first night, as it skirted the eastern edge of the city—at that very moment, several coaches were making their way north to Berlin, or south to Leipzig. On the far side, to the west of the plain, the air was stirred by the sails of the windmills around the textile mill with its brick chimney stack polluting the atmosphere. In the hedged fields, a few peasants were dotted about, carrying out the first hoeing of the year, slowly scratching at the soil. And snaking through it all, a silent witness, ran the River Nulte. Too shallow for boats, the Nulte was an anaemic river. Its waters seemed worn out, resigned to their fate. Bordered by two rows of poplars, the Nulte trickled through the valley as though in search of help. Looked at from the top of the hill, it was a loop of water flattened by the wind. Less a river than the memory of a river. Wandernburg's river.

They crossed the tiny wooden footbridge over the Nulte. The pinewood and the stony outcrop seemed to be the only things ahead of them. Hans did not dare ask where they were going, partly out of politeness and partly because, wherever they were going, he had enjoyed discovering the outskirts of the city. They walked through the pinewood almost in a straight line. The wind hummed in the branches, the organ grinder whistled to echo the sound, and Franz echoed his master's whistles with barks. When they had reached the first rocks, Hans said to himself that the only possibility left was for them to go through the rock.

And, to his astonishment, that was what they did.

The organ grinder stopped in front of a cave and began unloading his cart. Franz ran inside and trotted out with a morsel of herring in his mouth. Hans's first thought was that this must be some mistake. On second thoughts, it struck him as altogether wonderful. And that nobody in a long while had surprised him as much as this old man. The organ grinder, who was smiling at him again, welcomed him with a sweep of his arm and said: Make yourself at home. Hans responded with a theatrical bow, stepping back a few paces in order to get a better view of the cave's setting. On close inspection, and ignoring the fact that it bore no resemblance to a house, the cave could not have been better situated. There were enough pine trees surrounding it to soften the effects of the wind or the rain, without making it inaccessible. It was close to a bend in the River Nulte, and thus guaranteed a source of water. Unlike other barren, muddy areas at the foot of the hill, the entrance to the cave was blessed with a thick patch of grass. As though concurring with Hans, the organ grinder said: Of all the caves and grottos in the hill, this is the cosiest. As he stooped to enter, Hans discovered that, although undeniably damp, the cave was warmer than he had expected. The old man lit some tinder and tallow candles. By their light, the organ grinder took Hans on a tour of the cave, showing him every nook and cranny as if it were a palace. One of the great advantages to this dwelling is the lack of doors, he began, which means Franz and I can enjoy the view from our beds. As you see the walls aren't exactly smooth, but the irregularities break the monotony and create an interesting play of light, and what light! (The old man raised his voice, wheeling round with surprising agility—the candle he was carrying traced a faint circle on the walls, sputtered, but stayed alight.) Besides, how can I put it, they provide plenty of opportunity to enjoy

some privacy or sheltered sleep. The reason I mention privacy (the organ grinder whispered, winking) is because Franz is a bit nosey, he always wants to know what I'm doing, sometimes it feels like he's the owner of the house. Anyway, sshh! I didn't say a word, let's carry on! Here we have the back of the cave, which, as you can see, is simple, but notice how still, how quiet it is, all you can hear are the leaves. Ah, and as for the acoustics, the echoes are amazing, when I play the barrel organ in here it feels as if you've downed a bottle of wine in one.

Hans listened to the organ grinder spellbound. Although he found the damp, the gloom and the dirtiness of the cave uncomfortable, he thought it would be an excellent idea to spend the evening or even the night there. The old man lit a fire with some broom, dry grass and newspaper. Franz had been down to the river to drink and had come back shivering, his fur standing on end, the flecks on his paws a little paler. When he saw the fire, he trotted over to it, almost singeing his tail. Hans burst out laughing. The organ grinder passed him a demijohn of wine he kept in a corner. Only then, in the glow of the fire the old man had lit, could Hans appreciate the entire cave and study its odd furnishings. A few bits of clothing hung from a rope stretched across the entrance. Beneath the rope, the sharp point of the umbrella was embedded in the ground. Next to the umbrella were two pairs of shoes, one almost in tatters, stuffed with balls of paper. Lined up against the wall in order of size stood a row of earthenware cups, some plates, empty bottles with corks in them, tin pitchers. In one corner lay a straw pallet, and on top of it a heap of sheets and scraps of filthy wool. Scattered around the mattress like a ruined dressing table lay bowls, small wooden boxes and pieces of soap. A bunch of newspapers was hanging between two rock ledges. At the back of the cave was a pile of shoeboxes filled with pins, screws and various pieces of equipment and tools necessary for repairing the barrel organ. Spectacularly out of place in the

midst of all this lay the immaculate rug the instrument sat on. There was not a single book in sight.

There were two temperatures in the cave now. Within a half-yard radius of the fire, the air was warming up, caressing their skin. An inch beyond that, the room was freezing, lending a hard outline to everything. Franz appeared to be asleep, or intent on getting warm. Rubbing his hands together, Hans puffed into them. He pulled down his liberty beret, wound his scarf twice more round his neck, turned up the collar of his frock coat. He gazed at the organ grinder's threadbare overcoat, its baggy seams and worn buttons. Aren't you cold in that? said Hans. Well, it's seen better days, the old man replied. But it brings back good memories, and they keep us warm, too, don't they?

The fire shrank slowly.

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

Juan Pablo Villalobos

Translated from the Spanish by Rosalind Harvey

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ONE

Some people say I'm precocious. They say it mainly because they think I know difficult words for a little boy. Some of the difficult words I know are: sordid, disastrous, immaculate, pathetic and devastating. There aren't really that many people who say I'm precocious. The problem is I don't know that many people. I know maybe thirteen or fourteen people, and four of them say I'm precocious. They say I look older. Or the other way around: that I'm too little to know words like that. Or back-to-front and the other way around, sometimes people think I'm a dwarf. But I don't think I'm precocious. What happens is I have a trick, like magicians who pull rabbits out of hats, except I pull words out of the dictionary. Every night before I go to sleep I read the dictionary. My memory, which is really good, practically devastating, does the rest. Yolcaut doesn't think I'm precocious either. He says I'm a genius, he tells me:

'Tochtli, you're a genius, you little bastard.'

And he strokes my head with his fingers covered in gold and diamond rings.

Anyway, more people say I'm odd: seven. And just because I really like hats and always wear one. Wearing a hat is a good habit immaculate people have. In the sky there are pigeons doing their business. If you don't wear a hat you end up with a dirty head. Pigeons have no shame. They do their dirty business in front of everyone, while they're flying. They could easily do it hidden in the branches of a tree. Then we wouldn't have to spend the whole time looking at the sky and worrying about our heads. But hats, if they're good hats, can also be used to make you look distinguished. That is, hats are like the crowns of kings. If you're not a king you can wear a hat to be distinguished. And if you're not a king and you don't wear a hat you end up being a nobody.

I don't think I'm odd for wearing a hat. And oddness is related to ugliness, like Cinteotl says. What I definitely am is macho. For example: I don't cry all the time because I don't have a mum. If you don't have a mum you're supposed to cry a lot, gallons of tears, two or three gallons a day. But I don't cry, because people who cry are faggots. When I'm sad Yolcaut tells me not to cry, he says:

'Chin up, Tochtli, take it like a man.'

Yolcaut is my daddy, but he doesn't like it when I call him Daddy. He says we're the best and most macho gang for at least eight kilometres. Yolcaut is a realist and that's why he doesn't say we're the best gang in the universe or the best gang for 8,000 kilometres. Realists are people who think reality isn't how you think it is. Yolcaut told me that. Reality is

like this and that's it. Tough luck. The realist's favourite saying is you have to be realistic.

I think we really are a very good gang. I have proof. Gangs are all about solidarity. So solidarity means that, because I like hats, Yolcaut buys me hats, lots of hats, so many that I have a collection of hats from all over the world and from all the different periods of the world. Although now more than new hats what I want is a Liberian pygmy hippopotamus. I've already written it down on the list of things I want and given it to Miztli. That's how we always do it, because I don't go out much, so Miztli buys me all the things I want on orders from Yolcaut. And since Miztli has a really bad memory I have to write lists for him. But you can't buy a Liberian pygmy hippopotamus that easily, in a pet shop. The biggest thing they sell in a pet shop is a dog. But who wants a dog? No one wants a dog. It's so hard to get a Liberian pygmy hippopotamus that it might be the only way to do it is by going to catch one in Liberia. That's why my tummy is hurting so much. Actually my tummy always hurts, but recently I've been getting cramps more often.

I think at the moment my life is a little bit sordid. Or pathetic.

I nearly always get on well with Mazatzin. He only annoys me when he's strict and makes me stick to our study plan rigidly. Mazatzin, by the way, doesn't call me Tochtli. He calls me Usagi, which is my name in Japanese, because he loves everything from the empire of Japan. What I really like about

the empire of Japan are the samurai films. I've seen some of them so many times I know them off by heart. When I watch them I go on ahead and say the samurai's conversations out loud before they do. And I never get it wrong. That's because of my memory, which really is almost devastating. One of the films is called *Twilight of the Samurai* and it's about an old samurai who teaches the way of the samurai to a little boy. There's one bit where he makes the boy stay still and mute for days and days. He says to him: 'The guardian is stealthy and knows how to wait. Patience is his best weapon, like the crane who does not know despair. The weak are known by their movement. The strong by their stillness. Look at the devastating sword that knows not fear. Look at the wind. Look at your eyelashes. Close your eyes and look at your eyelashes.' It's not just this film I know off by heart, I know lots more, four.

One day, instead of teaching a lesson, Mazatzin told me his life story and it's really sordid and pathetic. What happened is that he used to do really good business in TV advertising. He earned millions of pesos by making up adverts for shampoo and fizzy drinks. But Mazatzin was always sad, because he'd actually studied to be a writer. This is where it gets sordid: someone earning millions of pesos being sad because they're not a writer. That's sordid. And so in the end, because he was so sad Mazatzin went to live very far away, in a cabin in the middle of nowhere, on top of a mountain I think. He wanted to sit down and think and write a book about life. He even took a computer with him. That's not sordid, but it is pathetic. The problem was that Mazatzin didn't feel inspired

and meanwhile his business partner, who was also his best friend, scammed him out of his millions of pesos. He wasn't a best friend at all but a traitor.

That's when Mazatzin came to work for us, because Mazatzin is educated. Yolcaut says that educated people are the ones who think they're great because they know lots of things. They know things about science, like the fact that pigeons transmit disgusting diseases. They also know things about history, such as how the French love cutting the heads off kings. That's why educated people like being teachers. Sometimes the things they know are wrong, like if you want to write a book you have to go and live in a cabin in the middle of nowhere on top of a mountain. That's what Yolcaut says, that educated people know lots of things about books, but nothing at all about life. We live in the middle of nowhere too, but we don't do it for inspiration. We do it for protection.

Anyway, since I can't go to school, Mazatzin teaches me things from books. At the moment we're studying the conquest of Mexico. It's a fun topic, with war and blood and dead people. The story goes like this: on one side there were the kings and queens of the Spanish empire and on the other side there were the Indians who lived in Mexico. Then the kings and queens of Spain wanted to be the kings and queens of Mexico too. So they came and they started killing all the Indians, but only to scare them and make them accept their new kings. Well, the truth is they didn't even kill some of the Indians, they just burned their feet. This whole story makes Mazatzin furious, because he wears calico shirts and leather

sandals as if he was an Indian. And he starts with one of his lectures. He says:

'They stole our money, Usagi, they plundered our country!'

It's almost as if the dead Indians were his cousins or his uncles. Pathetic. By the way, the Spanish don't like cutting the heads off kings. They still have living kings and queens with their heads stuck on their shoulders. Mazatzin showed me a photo in a magazine. That's really pathetic, too.

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