Revisiting Trauma: Writing, a ‘Novel’ Approach to Catharsis and Redemption

Tom Trevorrow: A Ngarrindjeri Man of High Degree

Old Wood Best to Burn

Mountains of Blood

European History

The Valley of the Shadow

Things I Carry

Dr Shilling

Footnotes

The Mystery of Zitrou Street
Revisiting Trauma: Writing, a ‘Novel’ Approach to Catharsis and Redemption

Paul Anderson

The writing of Does It Hurt to Die began with a shockingly vivid dream that became a violent reality; a reality so disturbing that it inspired a cathartic, medical-mystery thriller. Reality, many believe, is the essence of great fiction. In the novel reality is separated from fiction by the thinnest of wafer. The story was inspired by a real-life event, which almost cost me my life; the memory of which still returns in recurring dreams. Information about the book can be found at www.doesithurttodie.com

Excerpt 1: ‘The Dream’

With a seismic jerk, I was wide-awake and then in an instant sitting bolt upright in bed with my heart pounding in my chest. A menacing odiferous nightmare had woken me and threatened to play out again as I struggled to focus on the digital clock; its eerie fuzzy green glow showing me it was three am. Never before had I experienced a dream of such intensity or detail. Never had I seen such vibrant ecstatic colours: greens, yellows, gold, and purples each with associated sounds all perfectly pitched, screams stereoscopically deafening, as if coming from a far-off world. It was as though I had been transported to a kaleidoscopic, parallel universe to witness the horror unfolding there before being roughly jerked back to Earth.

‘Jannie go back to sleep,’ Renata said, in a muffled voice next to me, scarcely hiding her annoyance at being woken from a deep sleep.

‘I had an awful dream.’

‘People have awful dreams all the time. Go back to sleep you know you have to be fresh to operate in the morning. Lekker slap.’

Renata my wife turned her back, pulling the sheet tightly up around her neck in case in my awakedness I wanted sex; which I did. I knew nothing else was going to distract me from the horrible dream; irrespective of how selfish it might be; sleep, I knew would be impossible without it. I momentarily considered gently stroking her back. Then I remembered her last two words in Afrikaans lekker slap, which means sleep well. That was not what they meant tonight, or had for the last six months. The two simple Afrikaans words had become the equivalent in English of another two vastly different words. No sex. After six months of marriage, her response had become remarkably familiar and frustrating. Sleep well, were two words, which I had become sick of regularly hearing.

A week after we were married Renata made it clear she did not like sex; it was a chore not something to be enjoyed. A fact she managed to obfuscate before marriage by suggesting that no sex was what the bible demanded. There had been no sex before our marriage because she said God in his written word had forbidden it. After marriage, when God should have sanctioned sex, it turned out that her abstention had been a ruse. She did not like sex in any form; in fact, she detested it. Down there, she said was a no-go zone, and sex was only if reproduction was required. To ensure no misinterpretation, or in case I argued on the grounds of conjugal rights, she had bought full-length Florence Nightingale nightgowns. If there, had been any flickering residual passion the thick calico night gowns killed the

renaissance. As it was they became a barrier even to my deprived imagination. I felt duped, conned into a relationship that delivered her the respectability of marriage but denied me any sex. That I again contemplated tempting rejection dismayed and depressed me.

I pulled the blanket up roughly, covered my shoulders, and put my head back on the pillow. Immediately the essence of the dream returned. Replaying itself in my mind; a large community hall, at the far end of which was a double door with daylight streaming in, hundreds of people milling around in the foreground searching for bargains at a church fete. Serenity and faith clearly on display, each parading its own equipoise. ‘Get down.’ I heard someone scream as four strangely dressed men walked in through the door, creating a sudden blackness in the hall, like a partial eclipse of the sun. People in the hall turned and laughed, thinking these men were part of the afternoon performance, some even began clapping the arrival.

From where I was standing inside the hall, the silhouettes suddenly became something more mephitic; emerging from the silhouettes were hooded black men in camouflage uniforms holding semiautomatic weapons. The terrorists started to fire indiscriminately at those in front of them. People screamed as bullets ricocheted around the room and blood spurted wildly in all directions. Those shot staggered with looks of disbelief, uncertain as to what was happening, others who more seriously injured fell writhing onto the floor; scarlet pools forming beneath them, a panegyric to their unquestioning faith.

The terrorists laughed and advanced throwing grenades, which landed on writhing bodies. I dived to the floor my heart pounding as the grenades exploded on the dying causing abnormal jerky movements. Dead puppets in a St Vitus dance. I looked up, saw a grenade curling through the air in my direction, and lurched upright in bed.

My body shaking I wrenched my eyes open wondering what I would do if confronted with the dream in real life. Dive flat on the floor seemed to be the only thing that I could think of that would perhaps save me in a situation like that. Sleep, I remember came fitfully after that until the alarm woke me at six am. Renata of course had dressed and gone. I was left to shower and to get dressed, a useless erection just a nuisance. Surgery that day would be my only pleasure.

Four weeks later came the frightening reality. Partly because of that dream, I survived the terrorist attack although seriously injured. As in the dream, many unfortunately died. Post-traumatic therapy had not been clinically trialled twenty years ago; counselling for terrorist attacks just did not exist. I started writing primarily to exorcise the demons that would not leave each night; in their place thankfully, a huge enjoyment of writing fiction.

Excerpt 2: The Terrorist Attack and the Church
Jannie started the car and drove slowly towards the church, convinced that no amount of praying was going to prevent a disaster; with the new liver transplant, they were due to do the following day. As he got closer to the church, the rain started to beat down and he had to drive more slowly, struggling with the driving rain to see through the windscreen. The road that led up to St Andrews Church was poorly lit, with the heavy rain all he could see was a scrum of cars parked on both sides of the street, leaving no free parking spaces.
‘Damn,’ Jannie muttered.

There was not a place to park within 800 metres, and having an umbrella, which he knew did not work properly, he would be wringing wet by the time he reached the church. There were two alternatives he thought: go home or brave the rain. Another thought very quickly overrode both alternatives: going to church wringing wet was infinitely preferable to having to deal with Renata’s moodiness. He got out of the car, and half ran, half walked to the old stone church, wondering why it had suddenly become so popular. Despite the weather there would be a thousand people overflowing from the original presbytery into the new wing. Some of the congregation would be blacks and coloureds, which made it unusual for a church, even in liberal Cape Town. Coming from a conservative Afrikaans Boer background, segregation existed, even in churches. St Andrews therefore fascinated him as a church experimenting with racial integration. Attending services was as if one was transported to some foreign country. Not that he ever told Renata, as it was at her insistence that he had first come to St Andrews and he did not want her to think that desegregation worked, even in a church.

As he ran, he held the umbrella half in front of him, his fingers holding the spokes to ensure that it did not blow it inside out. Peering over the top to ensure that he did not run into anyone, he barely noticed several men sitting in a green bakkie in the church car park. A quick glance in their direction unnerved him a little; they seemed to be changing into camouflage uniforms. Unusually they were African men, a thought he then quickly dismissed as insignificant, as perhaps they were part of the service that night. St Andrews he knew was attempting to reach out to the black community and often had services in which they were encouraged to participate. Perhaps that was the reason for its popularity. It was experimental and different, although it was also the message of love that the Minister of the church preached that seemed to attract whites and blacks. Integration was a concept, which he had always struggled to fully grasp. Educated to consider blacks to be an inferior race, it was hard to imagine loving them as an equal. He had tried, unsuccessfully, to imagine some of the workers on his father’s farm in that way; it was difficult even as a concept as they had always been subservient workers. Nevertheless, it still fascinated him that people wanted to try. He was sceptical, but at the same time curious, that black and white people could intermingle and treat each other with equal respect. As his umbrella blew out, he focused on the final fifty-metre dash to the church.

Once inside, one of the ushers tried to show him to a seat in the front row. Most nights he sat at the front, the pastor insisting that someone with his community standing be a focal point of the congregation. However, the way he was feeling tonight, he wanted to disappear among the worshippers. He smiled politely at the youth group usher and made his way half way up the church. The church was able to accommodate about 2,000 worshippers and tonight was two-thirds full. The innovative design of the church meant that the seating was graduated up towards the back of the church, meaning those at the back were seated approximately ten feet higher than those in the front row.

As he sat down and tried to put Renata out of his mind, he wondered whether he could ask God to help ensure the success of his latest transplant. He then reflected that self-interest and hubris was not a good place from which to begin praying. Even with his rudimentary biblical knowledge, he knew God wanted his servants to think of
others first. As he was contemplating the relative merits of prayerful intercession the choir began with a hymn that he had always liked: ‘How Great Thou Art.’ His affection for the song was partly due to the melody but also the words, which contained so much love and passion.

This evening as he listened it was the pureness of the single young voice rising above the harmony of the choir, which captured his attention rather than the words. The notes were so crisp that he felt the hairs on his neck rising as she sang. The beautiful voice belonged to a young woman of about sixteen years of age standing in front of the choir. She was also the leader of the youth group, and had been instrumental in setting up Christian youth groups in the townships. He closed his eyes momentarily as she sang:

\[
\text{When we reach that heavenly home, we will fully understand the greatness of God, and will bow in humble adoration, saying to Him, O Lord my God, how great thou art.}
\]

With his eyes closed and deep in thought he only partially heard the vestry door opening. The door opening during the service was not in itself an unusual occurrence. Quite often St Andrews would have performers enter from a side entrance to give a surprise rendition as a prelude to the sermon. Jannie opened his eyes and looked in the direction of the door; the first person coming in through the door wore a mask. Behind the mask in the spaces around his eyes, he could see the skin was black. That did not disturb him. This was, after all, a growing multiracial church attempting to meet the needs of all ethnicities, a fact that challenged most Afrikaners. However, it did remind him that despite the fact that while religion was interwoven with politics in South Africa; politics was bereft of the love that made a church such as St Andrews work.

Jannie watched as the black hooded mask was followed by a second in a balaclava and overalls. Both carried semi-automatic weapons, and wore pouches tied around their waists bulging forward at the front with hand grenades. Behind the first two, Jannie could now catch a glimpse of three others pulling on hoods. The thought that this was a novel way to introduce a sermon was shattered as the first black man shot the youth group usher and then turned the AK-47 towards the beautiful young singer. Three rapid shots fired at her from point blank range found their mark and she staggered back collapsing on the stage, blood pouring from her neck and abdomen, her white dress slowly turning scarlet as she lay face down on the floor. Someone in the congregation then began clapping; applauding what they understood was a dramatic staged introduction to the sermon.

Jannie was transfixed. Uncertain as to what was really happening, he watched as the other gunmen quickly entered. Two years of army service suddenly flashed before him. From his gun classification classes he recalled that their guns were AK-47 submachine guns. Highly inaccurate guns beyond twenty metres but deadly at close range. The first gunman was by this time twenty metres up the aisle his weapon on semi-automatic, firing indiscriminately at the congregation. People were crying out at the realisation that something horrible and terrible was evolving. The applause abruptly ceased and in its place an eerie silence between the gunshots, underlining the growing disbelief that this was a terrorist attack.

Jannie could feel his fear building as bullets struck people around him, replaced...
by a sense of helplessness at being unable to defend himself. It was a feeling that he had never experienced before. He watched as people less paralysed with fear, scrambled to get out of the line of fire. Others climbed back over pews to try to get away from the advancing gunmen. He tried to subjugate his fear and process his options. Unconscious instructions from deep inside his head screamed at him. Then he remembered the dream and flung himself to the floor behind the pew in front of him.

Lying on the floor, he peered under the pew and between the feet in front of him. The second terrorist advanced in his direction. His firearm was a modern Uzi machine pistol which he held in one hand. With his other hand, he reached into a bag around his waist and pulled out a hand grenade. It was not the type of hand grenade that Jannie had seen and on the practice range during his two years of National Service. This hand grenade was different to all others that he had previously seen. Nails had been crudely stuck to the outer casing, the intention to maim as much as to kill. Whoever the terrorists were, they wanted a bloody massacre.

Tucked tightly beneath the pew, he closed his eyes momentarily not knowing what to do but opened them quickly as he heard the pew splinter. A bullet had embedded itself into the concrete millimetres behind his head. Frantically he looked beneath the pew again for another option. Jannie calculated quickly there were only two realistic options: to stay where he was, or run for the exit twenty metres away to his right.

As he weighed up his choices he looked up and saw one of the youth group members jump up and start running, half crouched-over, heading for the exit. As the young man reached the exit, he did not grab at the release bar, but hit the door with his shoulder in a rugby-style challenge to explode it open. The door shook but did not release; it was locked from the outside. Stunned, the young man turned to look down at the hooded terrorist. For a moment, they faced each other, the terrorists gun pointing at the young man who by now was frantically shaking the release bar, shouting at it to open, and then when it wouldn't dying as the Uzi spat death in his direction.

The gunmen by this time were laughing as they killed. Jannie could see them from under the pew looking around deciding whom to kill next. The first two terrorists stood back to back, laughed, and fired indiscriminately at anyone they could see still moving. The fourth terrorist reached into his pouch, took another nail-filled grenade, and threw it in the direction of a group of visitors. The grenade landed amongst them blowing off arms and legs. One severed leg flew through the air and landed in the aisle next to Jannie. As it lay there, he watched its remaining blood trickle out, staining the carpet in the aisle.

Jannie winced, the memory returning of mercenaries he had killed during in Angola as part of his national service; bodies pockmarked with shrapnel, body parts missing. The despair that he had felt then at such gross human destruction was with him again. The horror of the memories of those disfigured bodies brought with it an inescapable nausea. He closed his eyes and tried to shut out the carnage that had been part of his life in another time, and which now threatened to engulf him again. This was not a place or time to be sick. He fought against the urge to vomit, thinking it may attract the gunmen’s attention. He forced himself to open his eyes and peered again along the line of the pew. There was an eerie quietness. Was it over he wondered, had they left, or were they just reloading? He could see nothing at the end.
of his pew and then scanned a small area underneath the pew in front of him. Something caught his eye, which made him freeze.

Rolling down the aisle ten metres away a grenade had landed in its pre-morbid state. Wobbling as it rolled, nails projecting from its casing caused it to follow a curving irregular trajectory. He watched mesmerised as the grenade veered to the left towards a group of pensioners before stopping next to them. Jannie was about to cover his face when, without warning, Noah Smit, one of the youth group leaders, raced from behind a pew and threw himself onto the grenade.

‘You crazy son of a bitch,’ Jannie said to himself as he saw Noah’s body rise slowly, the explosion muted by his body, at the same time shielding all the pensioners from death or dismemberment. As he ducked, again under the pew he knew that Noah would have died instantly. Where did bravery of that kind come from he wondered, as the nausea took hold again. And why was Jesus, the God of love the supposed protective saviour, allowing all this killing in His house.’ He bit down on his tongue and closed his eyes again praying desperately to a God who he was sure was not listening.

As the muffled explosions and the shooting continued, Jannie wondered whether there would be any end before they were all dead. Clearly, the terrorists plan was systematic killing; they would continue until they had killed everyone in the church. He scanned under the pew again and as he did so, he felt a sickening thud. Shot straight between the eyes, the person who had been sitting behind him had fallen over the pew and now grotesquely starred at him under the pew. Jannie could see eyes frozen open in death, blood slowly congealing as brain tissue oozed out through the bullet hole. He had seen death before but not so close that you could feel and smell it.

Nevertheless, he was strangely thankful that he was partly protected by the body and where it had landed, although now it was also difficult for him to move. As he looked at the lifeless face, he could also see the back of the skull hanging from where the bullet had exited. Blood started dripping onto his forearm. He could control the urge no longer and vomited uncontrollably into the face of the dead man in front of him. It took a few moments before he could stop retching, and could attempt to move his head away from the exploded disfigured head. Bodies had now effectively wedged him behind a pew. He had no option but to wait and pray that the killing stopped.

Resigned to dying, he vainly hoped that the terrorists might be moving to another part of the church. He stole another glance under the pew. What he saw shocked him further. In the distance, he could see the four terrorists were now throwing grenades at random. They were pulling the pins and tossing grenades as they walked amongst the remaining congregation. Jannie watched, as one of the terrorists swung in his direction. He instinctively ducked his head as the terrorist saw him move and lobbed a grenade towards him. Out of the corner of his eye he watched it curling through the air, as if in slow motion, the nails stuck crudely to its casing, rotating wildly. The grenade landed and bounced just in front of where his feet were trapped, before making a vitus-like roll down the aisle of the church. The grenade lurched down the aisle until he lost sight of it. He curled himself up as tightly as he could, thinking that he would not see his son again, that this was where his life as he knew it would end. There was a muffled explosion, intense pain, and then blackness.

Tom Trevorrow: A Ngarrindjeri Man of High Degree

Diane Bell

A proud Ngarrindjeri man of enormous stature – intellectual, ethical, moral, spiritual and political – Tom Trevorrow fought tirelessly for his country and his people. Respect was at the core of his cultural code: respect for stories, family, country and the Old People who had gone before.

As word of Tom Trevorrow’s sudden death on 18 April 2013 swept through the networks of those who had had the privilege of knowing and working with him, grief and shock mingled with a simmering anger. He was not yet 59. How could this be? There was so much more to be done: so much yet to be said. Why could he not have enjoyed the life expectancy of his non-Indigenous counterparts? Lived to see his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren prosper? Why was he not to have the opportunity to sit on the verandah at his leisure and yarn with family and friends? Maybe even pen his memoir of the turbulent times through which he had lived, relish the changes he had helped shape, analyse the sticking points?

Tom Trevorrow’s advocacy for Ngarrindjeri rights and those of Aboriginal people across Australia was grounded in his commitment to practical reconciliation, whereby there would be tangible outcomes rather than rhetorical posturing. With
passion and compassion he provided inspired leadership, always ready with an appropriate story, always attentive to his audience, but driven by a vision of an Australia where we would acknowledge shameful past acts and ‘come to terms’ with our shared history.

I look forward to a time when the impact of Tom Trevorrow’s leadership of his Ngarrindjeri nation will be fully apparent to all Australians. The recognition of his role as a ‘Man of High Degree’ will signal a maturing of the Australian nation. In the meantime, drawing on conversations with Tom Trevorrow, I am setting down some of my reflections. Tom was fondly and respectfully known as ‘Uncle Tom’ and that is how my daughter addressed him. Tom and I called each other ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ and spoke as siblings. I cherish that embrace of Ngarrindjeri family.

Tom Trevorrow was born on his country in Meningie SA on May 1, 1954. In terms of formal schooling, like many of his generation, he left before completing year six at the local Primary School. His education for life was in the Fringe Camps along the River Murray, Coorong and around the Lakes. Surrounded by kith and kin, in places like the Three Mile, One Mile and Seven Mile Camps and Bonney Reserve, he grew wise in the ways for his forebears. It was these hard workers who created homes from hessian sacks and discarded oil drums, who taught him the rhyme and rhythm of Ngarrindjeri lands. This was his university, one from which he graduated with honours. Tom recalled:

"Back in the 40s, 50s and 60s, we weren’t allowed in the towns and my family didn’t believe in being herded up and put onto one place and plus it wasn’t our traditional area of land. It was discussed. I clearly remember raising the matter with Mum and Dad. Why are we living here like this, in an old ramshackle rag hut, living on the land? The answer from Mum and Dad was that we can’t live in the town because they don’t want us there, and we’re not going to live on the Mission under the government control. Mum and Dad made their decision and that was it. And all the other Ngarrindjeri living in the Fringe camps made the same decision; Ngarrindjeri people still hanging onto the land."

Tom Trevorrow’s mother, Thora Lampard, was the daughter of Stephen Lampard and Rose Watson whose mother Ethel Whympie Watson was known as ‘Queen Ethel’, a respected Elder of the south east of Ngarrindjeri country. Tom’s father, Joseph Trevorrow, was the son of Alice Walker and Cornish-born Jim Trevorrow. Tom listened and learned from his ‘Old People’ whose stories sustained him; stories that reached from up River, to the Coorong, along Encounter Bay, across the Lakes, into the mallee and down to the southeast. Tom’s life was shaped by this cultural knowledge. His reading of the world was framed by their wisdom, experience, beliefs and practices. For Tom Trevorrow keeping his cultural heritage alive was a sacred trust. He would say:

"I tell them country is like a big book, and every page we turn as we’re travelling along the road is part of the story, and the story unfolds. We can show them places as we drive to Kingston. Sometimes some of those pages are gone, sometimes whole chapters, but we don’t stop relaying the stories for that"

‘Tom Trevorrow: A Ngarrindjeri Man of High Degree’. Diane Bell. 
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The pelican, Ngori, was Tom Trevorrow’s ngatji (totem). It was his guide and closest friend. When Ngori was healthy, so was his country. But, he would explain:

_If my ngatji is getting sick and dying, it means my country is getting sick and dying. That’s connection to country. We’re all punished because people won’t change. Culturally and spiritually it’s tearing us apart. In my younger days, the Coorong was alive, you could feel it, see it, catch fish, get eggs, get a feed, birds, all fruits and berries were plentiful. Cockles, you could have a good feed, hard to do now, everything’s changing so much. That’s how we feel about it at this time._

Throughout the long drought of the first decade of the 21st century, Tom Trevorrow had cautioned: ‘Don’t be greedy.’ He would rely on the story of Thukeri (Bony Bream), a cautionary tale of fishermen who took too many fish and would not share. This story provided the framework for discussing over-allocation of waters of the Murray-Darling River system. For decades Tom and his older brother George had been pointing to the ailing river and their ailing ngatji as signs that greed was killing the eco-system.

Tom Trevorrow knew how to read the land, how to decode the signs. For him the land was full of signs of significance. He was an astute and avid reader; a spell-binding story teller. His presence continues to pervade Ngarrindjeri lands. At his funeral, a mass formation of pelican flew overhead. His ngatji (totem) was taking him home. When I see a sole pelican swoop low over the Coorong, I know he is close by.

With his wife Ellen, Tom worked for 30 years to develop programs such as the Ngarrindjeri Lands and Progress Association and Camp Coorong that fostered and supported Ngarrindjeri culture, arts and traditions. A visit with Auntie Ellen and Uncle Tom at Camp Coorong and its Museum was a fine opportunity for those wanting to learn more of Ngarrindjeri history and culture. In workshops conducted by Ellen Trevorrow participants are introduced to traditional weaving and learn of her early life on the River Murray. The camp was and continues to be the centre of family activity and to host visits from educational group locally, nationally and internationally.

Tom and Ellen were childhood sweethearts who had been together since 1970. Their marriage in 1981 was a union of a Ngarrindjeri woman of the river and a Ngarrindjeri man of the Coorong. Their love and respect for each other was palpable, their dedication to family deep. Their children, Thomas, Frank (dec.), Bruce, Tanya, Joe, Luke and, Hank; their grandchildren Corina, Thomas, Frank, Jordan, Naomi, Frank, Ellie, Bronwyn, Montana, Dyan, Tessa-Tamara, Wil, Keira, Mia and great-grandchildren Curtis and Blake were a constant source of joy and concern: that we must leave something strong for the next generations was at the core of their
philosophy. Ellen is determined that Camp Coorong will continue to keep the stories alive for future generations. ‘It is what he would want,’ she says.

Tom and Ellen always made room and time in their busy lives for those in need; for those working on collaborative projects; and for those who wanted to understand a better Australia. Their home was a refuge for brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, grannies, nannas and poppas and the stray anthropologist. Many a night I have stayed at Camp Coorong, in the cabins or the dormitory and, after a solid day’s work and an evening around the fire chatting, have snuggled down, listened to the howling wind, scanned the night sky for a glimpse of familiar stars and fallen asleep with a sense that a future Australia guided by Ngarrindjeri wisdom would be a more equitable, fairer place.

As part of the Ngarrindjeri leadership, Tom Trevorrow sought the repatriation of his Old People from Museums around the world (Wilson 2005). The bland narrative that his ‘Old People’ were simply ‘skeletal remains’ that had been held in the name of science was deeply offensive. These were Ngarrindjeri family members who had been forcefully taken – including grave robbing – from their lands. The Ngarrindjeri wanted their Old People to come home to rest in peace, just like soldiers who had fought in world wars. As Tom would say they needed, ‘to have proper, respectful, full honours funerals, because they were disturbed.’

Tom Trevorrow took his responsibility for his nation seriously. After the death of his older brother, George in 2011, and then his Ngarrindjeri brother, Matthew Rigney in 2011, he became the Chair of the Ngarrindjeri Regional Authority (NRA). He said, ‘In this position I must act in the best interest of the Ngarrindjeri Nation in relation to our Culture, Heritage and Beliefs, in connection with our Lands and Waters and all living things and the mental and physical well being of my People in all aspects of the past, present and to the future life.’

The depth of Tom Trevorrow’s fidelity to his country, his Old People and their stories was writ large during the shameful attack on Ngarrindjeri religious beliefs and practices that culminated in the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Royal Commission of 1995 (Stevens 1995). The accusation that a group of Ngarrindjeri Elders had fabricated beliefs regarding the sacred nature of Kumarangk (Hindmarsh Islands) to thwart the building of a bridge from Goolwa to the island tore into the fabric of Ngarrindjeri society. Everyone it seemed had an opinion: media, politicians, local business people, lawyers, academics. Few had deep knowledge of Ngarrindjeri society. The richness of Ngarrindjeri contemporary knowledge was dismissed and disregarded by those who found the journals of early missionaries to be definitive; the designation of ‘memory culture’ by reclamation linguists and anthropologists of the assimilation era to be comforting and; the voyeuristic taunts regarding the contested ‘secret women’s business’ titillating (Bell 1998, 2008; Berndt et al 1993; Hemming 1996; Meyer 1846/1963; Taplin 1873; Tindale 1930-52).

Few of the ‘instant experts’ of the 1990s had bothered to engage in contextual readings of the sources: to whom did the researcher speak, when, what questions, with what agenda. Few had spent time with Ngarrindjeri families, communities and gatherings. The South Australia Museum held the papers of Norman Tindale from the 1930s and 40s in a vice like grip. When I was finally able to access the Tindale archive, I found it contained data that validated the claims of Ngarrindjeri believers that the creative hero Ngurunderi had been at Goolwa, that the Seven Sisters story

was a Ngarrindjeri story. It was clear to me that the fragments of information in the archive supported the stories of contemporary Ngarrindjeri who had not had access to those written records but whose forebears had been the sources of the notes, maps and stories (Bell 1998, 2008; Brodie 2002; Kartinyeri 2006; Kartinyeri and Anderson 2008; Ngarrindjeri Tendi et al 2006).

I had known a number of the Ngarrindjeri women, including Doreen Kartinyeri, one of the custodians of sacred knowledge regarding Kumarrangk, since the 1980s but it was not until 1996 that I met the Trevorrows, Tom, Ellen, their children and grannies (grandchildren). They were generous, reflective, and balanced in their analyses of the situation created by the Royal Commission that had found them to have deliberately fabricated stories to thwart development – a bridge that would facilitate development of Hindmarsh Island. The marina planned for the island could be accessed much quicker by bridge than the existing ferry, a feature of the region much loved by many a visitor and in keeping with the scale of the country.

In the years following the 1995 Royal Commission, I worked intensively with Ngarrindjeri at Camp Coorong, along the Coorong, at Murray Bridge, Tailem Bend, Adelaide, Raukkan, Goolwa and Victor Harbor on their Heritage application of 1996. I researched and wrote Ngarrindjeri Wurrwarrin: A world that is, was and will be (1998), and returned to their stories in Kungun Ngarrindjeri Mimini Yunnan (Listen to Ngarrindjeri Women Speaking (2008). Both books entailed a collaborative style of storytelling. I listened. They read what I wrote. More stories and photographs emerged. I shared items from archives. They provided details on likely sources. More stories and photographs emerged.

The twists and turns of matters Hindmarsh are labyrinthine: cases bounced back and forth from state to federal jurisdictions, to the High Court (Bell 1998, 2008). Throughout these traumatic times, Tom Trevorrow worked to create a dignified world for future generations. The deep rifts in Ngarrindjeri families engendered by the findings of the Royal Commission began to heal. Then, in a case seeking compensation brought by the developers whose plans had been delayed though not thwarted – the bridge was built – Mr. Justice von Doussa (2001) heard from all parties: believers, non-believers, anthropologists, Museum employees, developers. He found that Ngarrindjeri knowledge was not fabricated.

With the registration of the ‘Meeting of the Waters’ site (the waters contested in the Royal Commission) by the State Government in May 2004, Ngarrindjeri cultural beliefs regarding the complex intertwining of localised stories with macro-narratives from the Kaldowinyeri (Creative Era) and the cultural knowledge that knowledgeable Ngarrindjeri had fought so hard to protect, have been acknowledged by the State.

The Apology to the Ngarrindjeri Nation by Paul Caica, then Minister for Sustainability, Environment and Conservation, Minister for Water and the River Murray, and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, and Reconciliation, on 6 July 2010 at Jekejere Park, Goolwa, SA, was an acknowledgement by the state of South Australia of the Ngarrindjeri Nation and a step towards healing the wounds for the people and their country.

These were small steps but Tom Trevorrow could not come to terms with the building of the bridge. Nonetheless he was determined to find ways to move forward, to stay connected. Through the Kungun Ngarrindjeri Yunnan Agreements (Listen to
Ngarrindjeri Speaking: KNYA) as part of the Ngarrindjeri leadership team, Tom Trevorrow helped create and implement a framework for respectful negotiations for the conditions under which certain actions will be undertaken on Ngarrindjeri land and waters. These innovative agreements negotiated with the State begin with an acknowledgement of the Ngarrindjeri as the Traditional Owners of the Land and that, according to their traditions, customs, and spiritual beliefs, the Land remains their traditional country. The KNYA also acknowledge the rights of the Ngarrindjeri to speak for their traditional country in accordance with their laws, customs and traditions (Ngarrindjeri Tendi et al 2006; SA Government 2012).

Tom Trevorrow believed a treaty between Indigenous and non-indigenous people would be a powerful healer of the pain felt by Aboriginal People, past, present and future. He looked to the original promises of a just settlement as contained in the 1836 Letters Patent for South Australia as a foundational document in his quest for justice and healing (Berg 2010). This remains as unfinished business.

The pace of my first interactions with Tom Trevorrow and his family was frenetic, the context fraught. Tom was fighting to protect Ngarrindjeri places and stories and Old People. I was writing ethnography in the eye of a storm. Tom Trevorrow often said to me if we were working on a document and up against a deadline, ‘Keep going. It needs to be done.’ He never flagged, even after a full day’s work he would be prepared to continue late into the night to complete a task. He knew time was precious.

Tom Trevorrow was intellectually curious. He engaged with politics at local, national and international levels. He revelled in serious conversations about social issues. He had a keenly honed sense of justice, for his people and for others. Whenever I wrote about Ngarrindjeri matters, I would try out new ideas and analyses with him. Sometimes he would quiz me regarding the who, where and what of an idea. Sometimes he’d just listen and then some time later would offer an insight that took my thinking to another level, ‘Di, you know when you were talking about that story, well the Old People used to say …’

Tom Trevorrow was a colleague in the full sense of the word. I miss his generosity and his incisive thinking. I grieve that he died before his Native Title could be granted. Working with him on the Ngarrindjeri Native Title claim was a rare honour. Tom was meticulous regarding what he knew and how he knew it and always cited his sources. He had an excellent memory for sources if not a precise filing system. Tom was also an excellent proof-reader and could spot a mis-citation at 100 paces. Tom had a sharp wry sense of humour and although he had every reason to have been embittered by the abuses he had suffered and witnessed, he looked forward. His political style was deliberate and consistent. Whenever he spoke, he provided wise guidance. To be in his presence was to know generosity and care, to be offered a rare opportunity to share, learn and grow. Tom Trevorrow was a friend and colleague: the world is a poorer place for his passing.

Tom Trevorrow was a fine orator. This tall man, dressed in black, kept his audience entranced. His public speaking was always on point. The speech he delivered in 1999 on 26 January (known as ‘Invasion Day’) at Currency Creek, at the ceremony held to mourn the desecration of the Ngarrindjeri canoe tree is often cited by Ngarrindjeri as capturing the mood of the Nation.

‘Tom Trevorrow: A Ngarrindjeri Man of High Degree’. Diane Bell. 
Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013. 
We are gathered here today, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people standing together on an issue that has affected us all.

I myself and my people are not at all happy with what has happened to this old wuri (red gum tree) and we know that many, many people are also not happy with what has happened.

This old wuri was born upon this ground and has stood here for many, many years, tall and proud.

If it could speak it would have so many stories to tell us, stories like:
My roots grow deep in the earth.
My heritage goes back a long, long time.
Over the years I have provided shelter for mother earth.
Over the years I have provided food and shelter for all creatures who wish to live under me or upon me.
I have provided shelter and my branches for fire, for the people who camped alongside of me.
I have provided my skin for the people to make their canoe.
I have shared myself with all living things.

Maybe through what has happened and what is happening today this old wuri is speaking to us. Maybe it’s telling us to come together and respect each other and respect and acknowledge each others’ cultural and spiritual beliefs.

Maybe we could also call this old wuri a reconciliation tree because it has called us here today to show respect and share with each other.

I closing I say to this old wuri: “if you choose for your spirit to leave this earth so be it: if you choose to live on so be it and through this attempt on your life may you create further respect and reconciliation in this land. Tom Trevorrow dreamed of a future where we could all walk together, a future built on mutual respect, where reconciliation was a reality. This is now our task, our work. He has provided the map. This is his legacy for all of us – Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

References
(The literature regarding Ngarrindjeri is voluminous. I invite the reader to explore the following texts and their bibliographies.)
Bell, Diane. (1998) Ngarrindjeri Wurrwarrin: A world that is, was, and will be. (Spinifex Press, Melbourne)
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Old Wood Best to Burn

Mary Byrne

1965

Angel walked northwards – away from his own country, Spain – for the second time in five years, a free man after five years in the French Foreign Legion, a new French passport in his pocket. He kept going for days on end, got lifts on trucks, slept in barns, ate with people working in the fields. He wasn’t sure what he wanted, but he didn’t want to go home.

At St Gervais du Bosc, something made him stop. It could have been the familiar location: garrigue above, vineyards and orchards below, the village crouched at the butt of the hill where the water was available. He entered the café, stood at the bar and ordered a beer.

‘Trabajo?’ he asked the cafetier when the beer was almost finished. His mix of French and Spanish didn’t faze people in the Languedoc, their own language poised somewhere between the two.

‘You missed the grape harvest,’ the cafetier said. Angel knew that. Agricultural work was the only thing he knew besides fighting Arabs.

‘Boismal could use someone who can prune vines,’ another client offered. ‘The last man hung himself from a beam in the kitchen.’

At the upper end of the village stood a big old house on three floors, one above the hill, one below, and one level with the road. A little apart from the other houses, its irregular angles were resisting but nevertheless undergoing severe renovation.

Angel stood at the door and shouted ‘Maison?’ a few times until a disgruntled elderly woman shuffled out in slippers. This was Boismal’s wife. She put him in a sitting-room. Angel realised it was the first real house – with women – that he’d been in for eight years, if you didn’t count the whorehouse in Algiers.

Warts and blotches covered Boismal’s skin. He had a hacking cough. This didn’t stop him being master of the moment. He pronounced the name the French way. Ann-jell.

‘I’ll take you,’ he announced benevolently, ‘lowest hourly rate. Under the table. I’ll deduct a small rent for a house in the village. Start pre-pruning tomorrow.’

No 6, Rue Sans Nom was a three-story house with one room on each floor. The ground floor cellar had a bulging outside wall and contained a toilet. A steep staircase led to a room with a sink.

‘Kitchen,’ Boismal said, as if it were true. A tall dresser kept some of the ceiling from falling in. ‘Hard winter snow lay around attics till it melted,’ Boismal shrugged. ‘Bit of a clean-up and it’ll be fine.’

At the top was an attic bedroom containing a rabbit hutch. Someone had dipped a sponge in deep blue wash and stippled the white walls. Layers of dust covered the forgotten bunches of dried onions that hung neatly from a shelf, and equally forgotten bunches of grapes that hung from big hooks.

Back in the kitchen, alone, Angel didn’t wonder which hook his predecessor had used.

‘Old Wood Best to Burn.’ Mary Byrne.

Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013.

A thorough cleaning of new premises with little or no equipment was something Angel had learned in the Legion. He made a broom from twigs and cord and went to work. Rue Sans Nom, there since medieval times, was narrow and dark. The vaulted cellar bore traces of verdigris which the women had once carried to the market, on foot, 25 kms away. The musty smell reminded Angel of the cellar at home where a few goats were kept. As he scrubbed and dusted, he thought of his journey from home to here.

1957
Home was a small village near Valencia. Angel hadn’t been very good at school, but he liked his old teacher, especially on wet days in winter. ‘Valentia’ in Latin means “strength,” “valour”’ the old man told his unruly pupils. ‘Then the Berbers came and called it Balansiya.’ The boys giggled at his pronunciation. ‘Listen well,’ the old man insisted. ‘Information and ideas will help while away your time in the fields. Some Roman historians were farmers too.’

Angel’s older brother Rodrigo suddenly appeared before the glass window at the top of the classroom door.
‘Sir!’ he burst in, ‘Oh Sir! Please can I have my brother – the floods have carried people away!’

Their parents were never found. Angel left school and he and his brother worked so hard on the little farm that Rodrigo forgot that he bore the same name as El Cid, until his childhood sweetheart, Gloria, reminded him.

Before leaving for military service Angel, a skinny teenager who didn’t even curse, went to see his old schoolmaster one last time. It was winter. He listened outside the classroom door as the master talked about a French monk who had once been bishop of Valencia. ‘For centuries, government of our region seesawed between Spaniards and Moors.’ The boys were quiet, glad to be indoors and resting. ‘Later it was besieged by the English, and even the French. A peasant carries the blood of all cultures, working the land in spite of all the wars carried on around him.’

The boys stirred and Angel knew the master had risen from his desk. ‘Never forget,’ the old man shouted above the noise.

Later, on the train with his fellow conscripts, laughing and joking to hide their fear, Angel didn’t look back or wonder when he would see again the lagoons, the rice fields, the oranges bright in the trees and the garrigue behind. He didn’t understand the proverb his master had imparted before he left: ‘Quemad viejos leños, leed viejos libros, bebed viejos vinos, tened viejos amigos.’

1965
After a sound first night’s sleep in 6 Rue Sans Nom, Angel rose at sunrise and went to meet Boismal’s old vines. Among these lines of tortured old friends, he clipped and trimmed and hummed, feeling the familiar strain on his back. At 10 am he ate olives and bread and drank half a bottle of the local piquette from the village shop. Around two he went home, made a tortilla and salad and had a snooze. Later, back in the vineyard, he watched the gnarled little shadows lengthen. Above the village, the dark garrigue was still in blazing sunlight, but the valley floor was already dark. The bosc, after which the village had been named, had burnt one summer, leaving one side of the mountain looking like an elephant’s hide. Angel could still distinguish the old hill
terraces, each with its little grove of olive trees, many of which were now being re-invaded by surrounding bush. Walls that once contained the terraces, if not tended, would one day crumble. For Angel forthcoming disaster meant two things: one, that he himself was not in trouble even if someone else was, and two, that there’d be work to do in the future, which made him feel secure. As smoke rose languorously from his home-made brazier – a rusty barrel split in two and mounted on wheels – it seemed to him that St Gervais might be OK. He made bundles of clippings for barbecuing chops and sausage and maybe even the odd fish.

1958
After training, he and his fellow-conscripts found themselves in Ifni in the Western Sahara. ‘You are holding Spanish Southern Morocco against bands of guerrillas coming in from Mauritania and Algeria,’ the sergeant said. None of them cared about Saharawi politics, or deals between France and Spain. The sergeant handed them a Spanish communiqué stating ‘You are protecting the zone from those who disobeyed the king of Morocco.’

They knew nothing of the wiliness of the new Moroccan king. They disliked the food, and the night cold. The new uniform chafed Angel’s skin. Comrades were being killed by groups of guerrillas in fierce fights. ‘You will be part of Operation Ouragan,’ the sergeant said, ‘a Franco-Spanish effort. You’ll back up paratroopers dropped into Smara.’

1968
Because Angel was accustomed to adapting to new circumstances, Boismal quickly saw that he knew his job and employed him full time, officially but at low wages. Angel came and went, getting to know Marinette for her stories of the past, as well as Simone for her worries about the present, and enjoying René Boismal Jr’s visions for a shining future with a revamped Coopérative.

‘They’re mixing good and bad grapes and making slop,’ René would say. ‘Now that heavy Algerian wine is finished they’ll have nothing to mix the slop with. I’ll plant new vines, get some quality going. Mark my words, the old man’ll have to give in.’

They’d raise a glass. René would say what a loss Algeria was, although he didn’t really care because he wanted change. Everyone wanted something. Thinking about such things made Angel’s head spin.

When a hot wind blew sand from the south under the door in the Rue Sans Nom, Angel recalled the sandstorms of that early spring as the Spaniards and French swept through the Rio de Oro together, gaining courage as they went. ‘Valour and strength!’ Angel and the others cried. Few of them were killed. When it all became routine, Angel’s dark beard grew faster and he spat and cursed like the older men, although he still didn’t feel quite like the others. Now it seemed that all of his life had been trotting behind everyone else, trying to fit in.

A neighbour rented Angel a small garden next to the irrigation canal. He grew tomatoes and peppers, carrots, turnips, green beans and soggy potatoes for tortillas, his favourite lunch which he usually prepared the night before and ate cold, out among his friends, the vines. His relentless routine betrayed no visible difference between himself and his neighbours or the other men in St Gervais. But apart from
René Boismal – his only real acquaintance – the local men kept their distance. The very real difference was that Angel was the only man without land of his own or the promise of it. Angel was aware of this, but gave as little consideration as he had other such matters in his life, for what could he do about it? He regularly sent money home to Rodrigo, who wrote very occasionally and unsteadily: ‘My hands shake from work. We’re building a two-room place by the sea for renting to tourists.’

All this Spanish news was confirmed in the autumn by the Spaniards who arrived for grape-picking.

Boismal Jr had known them since he was a kid.

‘Same family, been coming for generations. This year one of the boys has brought his new wife.’ Boismal laughed. ‘They work so fast they outpace the lady of the house, La Meneuse; not the done thing at all.’

Angel often sat with the Spaniards on the village square watching the last of the tourists eat out, aware that this would set him further apart from the villagers.

‘France is very expensive, compared to Andalusia,’ they told him.

The new wife did all their cooking from food they’d brought with them, in the small bare house that was their free lodgings. Angel often heard a pressure cooker as he walked by and guessed chickpeas.

‘Near Algeciras,’ they replied, brightening, when he asked where they were from.

‘You’d have passed Valencia on your way up,’ Angel said.

They smiled. They nodded to three boys Angel had seen around the village.

‘From Morocco, Cameroon and Northern Ireland,’ they told him. ‘All students, they argue all day among the vines, then hitch a ride into town in the evenings to drink and meet girls.’

‘That is just the beginning,’ the oldest woman said. ‘Machines will soon take the place of all of us.’

1960

The day the army had let them go, the first thing Angel did was phone his brother Rodrigo. The grocery store, in the same street as their house, had always been everyone’s telephone exchange and message centre. The grocer replied, sent a child with the message, and told Angel to phone back in a while.

By the time Rodrigo finally came to the phone, Angel was almost out of change and Rodrigo was out of breath.

‘I was working.’ He sounded rattled.

‘Well, I’m through here, I could come home and help.’

‘I can manage the farm,’ Rodrigo replied brusquely. The real problem seemed to be that the farm was too small to bring in enough to rear a family. ‘We’re married now,’ he said, ‘me and Gloria.’

Then Rodrigo’s tone changed. ‘Apartments on the coast for tourists are the coming thing.’

Angel waited for more, then realised that was all he was going to get. After waiting for a while, Rodrigo finally said what was on his mind: could Angel keep sending the money?

Angel left the phone booth and walked for a long time without purpose. In a café in Perpignan, a family – their accents markedly different from those of the locals
– described, in a mix of Spanish, French and Arabic, how it was, ‘down there’ and wondered what they were to do now, in this France which was foreign to them.

‘We have French papers but we never set foot in the place before,’ they appealed. ‘Not even our fathers ever visited.’

‘Maybe France hasn’t time, place or money for pieds noirs.’ A man at the bar winked at Angel. ‘Ye got the best of Algeria, but now that ye’re refugees, don’t expect the best of here as well.’

The pied noir father ordered his wife and family out. ‘Fissa!’ he hissed in the Moghrebi dialect learned by his parents and grandparents.

Angel got up too and headed straight to the recruitment centre of the French Foreign Legion. After passing the tough initial physicals and medicals, he only just passed the IQ test. Most of his fellow aspirants were dismissed. After that there were four months of even harder training, walking and running, day and night, carrying heavy packs often containing just sand. The trip in the truck to Marseilles, although hot and uncomfortable, provided a panorama of a hot dry landscape that was familiar.

In no time at all Angel found himself back in North Africa, working in the mess kitchens. This time it was Algeria and once again the enemy North Africans. His colleagues called the locals ‘Arabs’, but more often ‘melons’. ‘Tuer les melons - dadadadada!’ the legionnaires would imitate the sound of gunfire, and laugh.

1980s

By the early 1980s René Boismal Jr was married and refereeing arguments between his wife and mother over the colour of curtains at home. Sometimes, when René talked of ‘ma vieille,’ Angel wasn’t sure which woman he was referring to.

Increasingly, Angel took supper in the local restaurant, his only luxury. He smiled to himself as he handled the knife and fork delicately, relishing fancy desserts like crème brulée or the sweet crêpes they brought flambée’d to his table. That invariably got attention. He always slyly eyed the other diners under the stone vaults.

It was here one evening that Angel’s fancy desserts drew him into talk with an English couple, he of tall military bearing, she equally lanky with a wide-brimmed straw hat and a noisy come-hither attitude. Angel was pleased because they spoke to him, and they liked him because they could understand the peculiar French he spoke.

On the husband’s retirement from a multinational, they had bought a huge old house with vineyards and olive groves in an isolated spot above the village at the back of the cirque formed by the river. Now they lived here permanently and were struggling with everything: climate, farming, house. Very soon all three were watching out for each other in the evenings, having a carafe of rosé or sweet crêpes at adjacent tables, or together if there wasn’t much room. Conscious that they were different, Angel was very careful not to encroach on their time or space. When they used the familiar ‘tu’ he stuck to a respectful ‘vous’.

One evening the couple arrived at the restaurant to find it packed with tourists, a poetry reading in full swing. Angel sat in the middle, odd-man-out in his working clothes and three-day beard. They strained their necks for spare seats and caught his eye. He squeezed them in beside him and yelled for food. He was a little drunk. He was fighting with old Boismal about wages and conditions. He was going to see some sort of tribunal tomorrow and was very nervous: ‘My balls are in a cravat,’ he said. Boismal’s terms were just not good enough. Boismal was ill, and crabby, saying take

‘Old Wood Best to Burn.’ Mary Byrne.

Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013.
it or leave it. Angel was threatening to take it a lot further. It seemed Angel had decided, for the first time, which side he was on.

‘Come over tomorrow evening after the tribunal and I’ll cook you dinner,’ the Englishwoman said to Angel.

Her husband nodded.

For a moment Angel looked puzzled, even shy. Then he raised his glass and said loudly, ‘Viva la Revolución!’ They drank to that, finished the bottle and ordered another.

1960

Angel’s first drinking bouts were among argumentative legionnaires. This involved political discussion – even they understood that de Gaulle’s offer of self-determination to the Algerians had outraged the local French population. ‘Serious trouble brewing – French against French,’ the sergeant warned. ‘Don’t get rat-arsed tonight.’ Newspapers were full of the posturing of generals and statesmen. Rumours and counter-rumours bounced around them of possible army revolt and military take-overs. ‘Tomorrow we leave the desert for Algiers to back up 1st REP paratroopers.’

In Algiers, the legionnaires remained apart from the French row, trained dogs waiting for the order to strike. On those clear cool days, amidst the rattle of trolley-buses and the tapping of glaziers repairing shattered windows, Angel noticed chic French girls and beautiful dark girls. In spite of the tension, many of them eyed the smart young men in their smart white hats. Even wearing his képi, Angel was far too shy to even think of speaking to them.

One evening, carried away by the evening street sounds, by drink, by his companions, he was led to a whorehouse, where the women were subject to checks by Legion doctors.

Angel’s young woman had the unaccustomed features of a South American.

‘Hola,’ she said.

The business between them was dismal. As she buttoned him up again like his mother used to, Angel’s attention was drawn to a reproduction above her bed. He didn’t understand why the girl in the foreground lay stiff and nakedly white against the deep blue, green and red background.

‘What is wrong with her?’ he asked.

‘Paul Gauguin, Loss of Virginity,’ the girl said, matter-of-factly.

‘Is that meant to be a fox at her shoulder?’ Angel asked.

The girl nodded. ‘Where I come from, it is the animal of the devil.’

Angel looked alarmed.

‘Don’t worry,’ she said, ‘you’re no fox. Anyway, the real devil was Gauguin – he got the model pregnant, then walked away.’

Angel had never had such a conversation before, least of all with a woman.

Afterwards in the barracks, he found he couldn’t lie like the others, and said nothing. ‘Angel’s in love!’ they laughed.

1980s

After the tribunal determined the conditions of his job with Boismal (minimum wage, regular hours, written arrangements for the rent of the RueSans Nom), he headed off for the Mas du Cirque, still suffering from a hangover. Two cars were parked in the
avenue. Three German shepherds bounded out the gate and Angel was impressed when the biggest took his wrist in its teeth and led him straight to its master.

The English couple gave him whiskey – ‘Hair of the dog,’ they said – and took him on a tour of the property. The stone walls had been tastefully pointed. There were bright new shutters in pale green. Inside flagged floors, old furniture, patchwork quilts, Persian carpets and books abounded. A superb fitted kitchen opened onto a terrace with a gigantic pool. Angel had never seen so much vegetation used purely for decoration.

Then suddenly through another door it all came to a halt in a series of derelict rooms with a patchwork of cracked terracotta, open fireplaces, old wallpaper, dust. There were ladders, signs of work begun.

‘Our son,’ the Englishman said. ‘Had to go back to college. Be back next year to carry on.’

‘Now – I bet you’re hungry,’ she said.

They dined outdoors. Angel was astonished to find that good cuisine other than Mediterranean existed. There was still enough light to distinguish the cirque floor, once the village wheatfield, now a balding football ground. Olive and fruit trees had been left to their devices for decades.

‘Those olive trees are sick,’ said Angel.

‘Bug of some kind,’ the Englishman said.

‘I might have a cure for that,’ said Angel.

‘Why don’t you come up and have a look at them,’ she asked. ‘Saturday?’

‘Buy the ingredients and I’ll make you a paëlla,’ Angel said. ‘It’s my specialty.’

1962

Angel first learned to cook in the legionnaire’s mess in Algeria. He passed the time experimenting with paëlla and other dishes, adding little touches he had seen his mother use. He also learned to smoke the short untipped cigarettes of dark tobacco he still prefers. The legionnaires waited. They played cards. The French Army was under attack from the French themselves. All that ‘Week of the Barricades’, as it was called later, chaos reigned. There were rumours that some regiments of the French Army might refuse to budge if ordered onto the streets.

Sharing tajine from a large dish one night, Angel was reminded vividly of home, of his mother’s kind eyes and his father’s rough hands as they all dipped their bread in a dinner that was mostly sauce conjured with tasty care from few ingredients.

When the legionnaires had finished the tajine Angel went outdoors and sat on a hummock. He smoked, listened to a dog bark, and felt homesick.

Angel and his comrades trained, dozed, cooked, waited. This was not their war. What did Spaniards, East Europeans and Germans care about firing on French people who sang the Marseillaise and shouted ‘Vive l’Algéria Française’? They told stories, about 65 legionnaires who resisted 2,000 Mexicans in 19th century Mexico and who, down to their last five survivors, had fixed bayonets and charged. Legionnaires were considered not men, but devils. They had captured Algeria for the French. When ordered, Angel and his comrades-in-arms would fire. They would serve France with honour. Most knew why they were in the Legion: passports, jobs, a better life. Some would make a career of it. Many were escaping their past. Most enjoyed

‘Old Wood Best to Burn.’ Mary Byrne.

Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013.

the adventure. Only Angel had no ideas at all.

1980s
Angel abandoned his own garden to plant oleanders among the English couple’s olive groves. An insect on the oleanders ate the beetles on the olive trees. He tidied terrace walls after rain and generally looked after things as best he could.

When old Boismal finally quit work because of his lungs, René Boismal Jr came to see Angel at the Rue Sans Nom.

‘He’s had it,’ he said. ‘You can hear him breathing in the next Département.’

They’d all heard about the effects of pesticides. One farmer wore an outfit like an astronaut when he went spraying.

‘Papa never followed the rules,’ René said. ‘I learned my lesson the day I forgot my watch after spraying. Walked back down the line to get it and woke up flat on my back. Stuff knocked me out cold.’

‘The watch still working?’ Angel smirked.

René didn’t laugh. ‘I’m afraid the joke’s over,’ he said.

Angel had already guessed what was coming. ‘I’m to be let go.’

‘Look at it from my point of view,’ said René. ‘I can manage on my own with the machines now. And my son’s coming up. Besides, the new vines I’m going to plant will take five years to come on.’

‘You’ll still have to prune ‘em,’ said Angel half-heartedly.

‘I’d be glad to pay you by the hour occasionally. It’s the social security no one can afford. I bought Maurin’s next door; the whole lot is to be cleared.’

‘No more slop,’ said Angel with a curl of the lip.

Boismal Jr nodded. ‘I’ll plant Chardonnay and Merlot and if they don’t want to give them Appellation Contrôlée it’ll be the best Vin de Pays in the world.’

‘Que conneria,’ said Angel.

They went to the café and drank a bottle of pastis between them. The next day Angel sent a sick note and stayed in bed for a week. He never worked for old Boismal again and the old man never left his house again, sitting alone coughing and wheezing noisily, watching the valley through a chink in the shutters.

1962-1965
Rodrigo wrote to Angel wherever he was stationed. He wrote of Gloria, now his wife, and of babies as they were born. The paper became less smudged, the writing firmer, more confident. ‘I enclose photos,’ Rodrigo wrote. The photos had different handwriting on the back with the children’s names and three kisses, signed Gloria.

When Algeria finally got independence from France in 1962, Angel and his group went on to spend periods all over Africa and the French Midi: Djibouti, Madagascar and finally various barracks in Carcassonne, Castres, Castelnaudary.

On his walk away from the Legion, his new passport in his pocket, St Gervais du Bosc presented a physical barrier of some kind, stopped Angel on his inland walk, became his home away from home. If something was missing, Angel could not have defined it.

1985
Old Boismal’s death marked other changes in St Gervais: Co-op wine slowly
improved; more and more tourists came from the north, and some bought houses. Change didn’t affect everyone: Simone, continued to worry that late frost might ruin her peach harvest, handling the delicate fruit in her palm like a cloud. Old Marinette continued to tell of past floods and natural disasters. Many sold land to neighbours wanting to expand their vineyards. A gap began to show between the new farmers and the old. René Boismal Jr was one of many who lived in half-built new villas and worked their farms alone with machines and maybe an eldest son. ‘Young people these days have no interest in farming,’ he told Angel, ‘they only want out – to bigger discos in Nimes or even Paris.’ The hippies who had settled in the hills in the late ‘60s to make goats’ cheese had finally gone back to the cities to earn money. A few ageing ones remained, drove big old cars or painted. ‘They deal heroin,’ René Boismal said.

No one wanted the old vines, especially those on difficult slopes that had to be harvested by hand. Angel’s English friends were the only people still producing what Boismal called slop.

‘Would you consider working for us full time?’ they asked Angel, ‘under the table, of course.’

Angel took from them less than it was worth, and drew unemployment benefit as well. He was able to send more money to Rodrigo. With the extra hours he got for helping Boismal Jr he bought two-tone jackets and peaked caps, which he sported in the evening at the restaurant or the café. ‘The boys will continue their studies,’ Rodrigo wrote. There were photos of a Spain Angel no longer recognised, with large white box-like structures sprawling along the coast and over the hills.

Angel shared any vegetables that still managed to grow in his own garden with the English couple, and stopped paying rent for the garden.

‘They deserve it,’ he said to the Englishwoman one evening as they sat together on the terrace. They’d being doing this for several evenings since her husband had left for England on business.

‘Who?’ she asked, turning the cool glass provocatively in her hands.

‘The French,’ he said.

She smiled.

‘I wouldn’t give you a centime for a Frenchman,’ he said.

‘Oh, come on,’ she said.

‘Una mierda,’ said Angel. ‘They think they’re worth more than the rest of us. Do you want to become a billionaire?’

She waited.

‘Buy a Frenchman for what he’s worth and sell him for what he thinks he’s worth.’

She read the Tarot cards for him, holding his hand in candlelight. There was a lot of talk about the Hanged Man. She pronounced his name Ann-hell, and giggled.

Never quite sure why the couple had been so friendly towards him, Angel was now very much at a loss to interpret this new attitude of hers. If anyone had asked, he’d have described himself as the man without a country from a street without a name.

After that he kept out of the Englishwoman’s way until her husband returned, hiding on the terraces towards evening, watching tourists in shorts rush down the mountain, their legs torn from scorpion broom, their arms full of orchids and other rare plants that it was illegal to pull. He listened to the hammering at Boismal’s house.
and the other new villas until it was time to go home.

1990

On his return, the Englishman announced that their son would not be back to continue work on the house. There had been some money disaster. The word equity was used a lot. Angel couldn’t follow any of it although he gathered it was bad.

‘We’ve decided to rent accommodation,’ the Englishman said.

For a while Angel found himself assisting with interior arrangements, hanging curtains and carrying furniture. She was so preoccupied she did not confuse him with strange behaviour and odd signals, and he liked her better that way.

Angel moved into the mazet at the foot of the vineyard nearest their house, and enjoyed living mostly outdoors again. He began to sport a full beard. The two-tone jackets became dirty and were abandoned. Summers were marked by listless people sitting around the pool, walking bareheaded in the afternoon, complaining about local habits and attitudes. ‘Why don’t the French...?’ they would whine. Angel imitated them perfectly for René Boismal. ‘Who burned Joan of Arc?’ René replied. It wasn’t a question.

‘I’m going to stop taking grapes to the Co-op,’ the Englishman announced one day. ‘I want you to rehabilitate the old wine-press – a fine specimen and once the peak of village progress.’

Busloads of people came to taste and grimace. Le Mas du Cirque became synonymous with bad wine.

‘Since when can the English make wine?’ René Boismal asked, sitting on his tractor on the square, waiting for his lunch. ‘When I hear talk of oak casks, I reach for my gun.’

‘Leche,’ Angel spat on the hot flagstones.

Changes came faster now. The Englishwoman took groups for painting holidays, and Sunday painters could be seen all over the village wearing shorts and drinking to excess in the evening. Many of them purchased small houses, drank the worst of the wine and generally boosted the local economy. Angel’s 50th birthday was celebrated at the Mas, overlooking the finest view of the cirque and the valley, with a gigantic outdoors paëlla which he made himself, not talking much to anybody, just tending the giant dish on the fire. When people asked how he was, he replied ‘Comme un vieux.’ Like an old man.

If anyone got into discussion with him after a few drinks, he said, ‘If I’d done 15 years in the Legion instead of five, I’d be retired now with a pension, anywhere I wanted.’

The Spanish families stopped coming to pick grapes. The largest local landowners brought in North Africans to live in the least attractive of the smaller houses and work in the fields, as people like Angel had once done.

In the autumn, carloads of students from the former East Bloc countries drove down for the grape-harvest. Angel and René Boismal watched beautiful, pale, blonde, creased young things piled out of cars on the village square. Angel wondered if farming in Valencia was under similar pressure. He imagined a world of displaced people – his schoolmaster once said there had been economic migrants even in
Roman times.

‘Economic migrants. Caught in other people’s crossfire,’ Angel muttered to René Boismal. René frowned and didn’t reply.

1991

Prices rose, and the French dropped out of the holiday and house market, leaving foreigners the main source of income.

Then one day, a day like any other, the first Gulf War broke out and the world came to a standstill. Foreigners dried up. The international market crash followed. ‘For Sale’ signs went up everywhere. It was a while before the mood at Le Mas du Cirque was finally allowed to slip into despair. By then the English couple owed Angel four months’ pay. He heard drunken quarrels in the night.

Angel wakes from a dream in which his mother is calling him to dinner across a surface of dark green water. He emerges from his mazet to find the two cars, the three dogs and their owners gone. The house is locked. A ‘For Sale’ sign hangs on the gate in three languages.

Angel knows his luck has run out.

For a long time no one will come to ask what he is doing there or if he has any right to draw water, grow vegetables, harvest olives. He will let the vines go wild. They’ll be pulled up anyway, subsidised by government grants whenever a new owner is found. They will make roaring winter fires.

And some evenings, when he sits alone at the door of the little mazet, smoking and watching the sunset, he feels sorry for the vines: these gnarled, dry blackened things may be his only friends – unless you count the Arabs. Angel exchanges the odd word of Arabic with them. Dark, slight women with babies on their backs picnic among the vines, laughing, although they remain subdued in the village. Locals frown on noisy Arab children skipping in the shade of the Rue Sans Nom on summer afternoons. Angel pats the odd little head as he walks by. He doesn’t joke about killing melons. He doesn’t go to the café or the restaurant. He no longer sends money to Rodrigo, who has probably made a tidy income from rentals on the coast. He knows Rodrigo and Gloria will not miss him, although it pleases him to think they may miss his money, now that business is bad in Spain too.

One of the Arab parents, Ahmed, has become a friend and visits regularly. He arrives now, carrying a packet of biscuits, puffed from the climb.

‘Qahwah?’ Angel goes about making coffee in the little ibrik his friend has given him. One of his few, treasured belongings, it doesn’t require electricity.

Ahmed, passionate about words and their origins, draws from his jacket a notebook where he jots the links between Spanish and Arabic. He helps the local children with their lessons. He says the ‘Bosc’ in the village name is from Germanic and Latin roots and means ‘wood’.

Ahmed and Angel study words together. Angel has learnt the Arabic origins of some everyday words, place names and institutions: he has learnt that Gibraltar comes from Jbel Tarik, the mountain of Tarik, the Berber who once invaded Spain, that Montpellier medical school, Europe’s oldest still-active one, based its beginnings on writings of the Arab masters.

‘But we have more than all that in common,’ Ahmed says.
Angel slowly lifts his head from the coffee. ‘We are the lowest forms of life in the village.’
Ahmed points upwards, one hand on his heart, ‘And Allah watches out –’
‘So that neither of us will resort to a big nail on a beam.’ Angel laughs.
They drink good, strong coffee.
Listening to Ahmed and looking out at the vineyards in the blinding sunlight, Angel doesn’t marvel at the confusion and lack of purpose – other than eating and sleeping – of one small life. He repeats for his friend the proverb of the wise king, given him by his old schoolmaster as his only baggage before leaving home forever:
*Old wood best to burn, old books to read, old wine to drink and old friends to trust.*

– ENDS –
Mountains of Blood
Alzo David-West

Blood poured from the mountains
Overlooking the village,
and a hundred thousand brown snakes
coiled around the mounds.
The sun in heaven grieved and became tired
and rested on the earth,
and there, heaving,
it opened its fire womb,
giving birth to a white tiger
with the body of a man.
And the tiger, which was aflame,
carried a sword from Palhae,
and from the sword grew a wind
that turned the hundred thousand snakes
into salt and ash.

***

Major General Ishihara was preparing a report for the office in Manchukuo. It had been four years since the raid on the border village and four years of pursuit in the mountains and wilderness, but Zhuo Jingping, the Chinese Communist army commander who was leading the Korean guerrillas, was now dead and displayed, and the few surviving members of his independent division had fled into the Soviet hinterland.

They were a very small guerrilla group, three hundred at most, fewer than fifty men and some women in the end, mostly illiterates, poorly coordinated, hungry, short of everything, and not well trained. They were a nuisance, like fleas, appearing in the rear, attacking the trains for supplies, cutting the telegraph lines, threatening the peasants for recruits, money and food, kidnapping, stealing. It was only a matter of time. It was only a matter of time.

Cho Myonghee, a peasant woman, dead, an informer, her husband Kim Songnam, dead, was part of the tenant farmers’ movement that was giving the village headmen and landowners a headache. Her son Kim Myongnam and daughter Kim Songhee joined and retreated with the Communist army.

Ishihara looked at the wall clock. He massaged a knot in his right shoulder. The winter morning was cold, and the windowpane was beaded with droplets. He drank some tea and wrote a letter with a poem for his wife and ten-year-old daughter in Kagoshima.

***

‘Private Yano!’
‘Sir!’

‘Mountains of Blood.’ Alzo David-West.
Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013.
The soldier removed his belt and pants and began to rape the girl who had been brought into the interrogation room, all in front of her mother, who was tied to a chair and bleeding from her face and forearms, which were raw from boiling water. Cho Myonghee cried deliriously at the sight of her daughter struggling and wailing on the floor.

‘Mori,’ Nakada, the lieutenant colonel, said to the interpreter, ‘will the woman talk now?’

‘Mother, say something, please.’

But all Cho Myonghee could do was gasp in convulsive, quivering sobs and ask why, why they were doing what they were doing, why they ever came to her village, why they killed her husband, why they were hurting her daughter.

She had become incoherent, Mori told the lieutenant colonel. She knew nothing.

Nakada, frustrated that the three hours of interrogation had gone nowhere, hit the woman’s head with the braided hilt of his sword and, as she fell unconscious, cursed her for staining the fine decoration.

Nakada thought for a moment and finally ordered Mori to get Otomaru to tend to the mother’s and girl’s wounds.

‘What should I tell the villagers, lieutenant colonel?’ the interpreter asked as Nakada was about to leave the room.

‘The Communists are the cause of it.’

* * *

Zhuo Jingping drew his pistol and shot one of the men who lost his hands and feet to frostbite, and the man’s body, shorn of its clothes, boots, and padded socks, was tossed into a ravine, where the forest animals would devour it.

‘We sacrifice ourselves for their party, and they throw us over mountainsides like garbage?’

There was growing discontent and frustration in the unit, but there was no time to bury the man, and he could not be cremated either, since Ishihara’s expeditionary force had been trailing them for weeks, watching for signs of their movement.

‘Our situation is impossible,’ someone muttered, as they made camp deep in the frigid forest.

‘We are already dead,’ remarked another.

Pak Chol, the Korean commander who ranked second to Zhuo, explained to the men that their circumstances were more difficult than anticipated, but nevertheless, they were inspiring the patriotic masses against Japanese imperialism and fascism.

‘We have been fighting for nine years, Chol!’ one of the older fighters exclaimed. ‘Nothing is happening. Where is the revolution the Chinese party promised? We are covered in lice and dirt, and we are emaciated and freezing! We are like bandits and homeless men! We go into the villages here and over the mountains, and all we get is a handful of peasants, and even some of them run away! We go into the towns, and the workers and middle strata call the police! Is this our inspiration?’

‘Don’t be so pompous!’ Zhuo shouted. While he understood the men’s moral fatigue, he could have no pessimism. ‘If you are a member of the party, there is no abandoning the party line.’ He intoned song like and ordered Pak to read the passage

‘Mountains of Blood.’ Alzo David-West.

Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013.

from the political notebook.

‘We Communists strive now to unite all anti-Japanese political parties and the whole people in the just and progressive resistance war, a protracted war for national liberation. Japan is a powerful imperialist country occupying and plundering our two countries, but we will have victory with widespread guerrilla warfare and the people’s anti-Japanese united front. We will harass the Japanese fascist forces. We will disintegrate their morale. We will make their soldiers homesick. We will stir antiwar sentiment and influence their ranks, and we will evoke the sympathy of the people of Japan, whose revolution is soon coming. Japanese imperialism and Japanese fascism will surely be defeated in the united-front war of resistance. These are the objective facts.’

Cold wind smelling of pine trees was cutting the men’s faces.

* * *

Summer in the village was stifling, and the gutters were filled with a fetid, shitty slime. Some old bearded men with top hats and donkeys were smoking long pipes and talking about Yang Heeseng, who was wandering around insensibly, looking in pickling pots.

Sanghee, Ayong, and Kyongmin were making their rounds by the barracks, as children in rags were running restively around the place.

The village, with its thatch-roofed mud houses, unpaved roads, storehouses, and dilapidated pharmacy, sat under the eyes of the mountain range, over which was Manchukuo. Peasants, ancient and young, were harvesting millet, soybeans, and cotton in the surrounding fields, while others were preparing compost.

Mornings came and went, and Kim Songnam visited the neighbouring villages under nightfall, showing the pass for grain deliveries at the checkpoints, holding meetings with peasant leaders about the rent system and how the landowners were claiming too much of the harvest and leaving the tenant farmers with the most unsalable portions.

‘We have been approached by the Communists, brother.’

‘No,’ Songnam said tersely.

‘But their policy of all land to the tiller—’

‘No,’ he said flatly. ‘Look at what happened to the village over the mountains. They set up a youth organisation there, and the whole village was burned down. And the mining village on the other side of the river … the women’s association that was established … they tortured, raped, and killed all of them. No. A man and his family only live once, not twice. Our way is better.’

‘If that is the case, our village group is in agreement that the proposal is too small. Our poverty won’t be alleviated. We say 70 percent for us and 30 percent for them.’

‘We must be more reasonable than this in our negotiations, brother, if we want them to listen.’

* * *

‘An apathetic, half-witted idiot.’

‘Mountains of Blood.’ Alzo David-West,

Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013.
Sakakibara and Yoshida, the enlisted fisherman and farmer from Hokkaido, were eating millet cakes at the small stall the old woman had set up near the barracks. They were talking about Yano, who had gone off somewhere.

‘Maybe to the stream at the foot of the mountain again?’ Yoshida thought aloud.

‘An idiot. An idiot,’ Sakakibara said.

Songhee found him. He was sitting in the shade amid some trees, staring into the rushing water, holding the rifle resting on his thin thighs.

He heard a branch break, turned around, and stood up with his expressionless, long, white face.

She stared into the blank, drooping eyes. He did not say anything, but suddenly, after a little while, looked down, almost as if he was shy.

Myongnam came up from behind and struck him over the head with a stone, and his face fell instantly into the stream.

Songhee ran on top of the body, hitting the mask-like face, whose thin eyes were still staring and mouth open. She removed the bayonet from the rifle and cut open the throat. Her brother took the cap and uniform. She cut off the ears and penis and shoved them into the gash … trembling, laughing, crying.

Myongnam embraced his sister, took her hands, and washed them in the stream, and after he told her everything was okay now, the two ran up into the mountains together.

‘An idiot,’ Sakakibara said again. ‘What? Does he expect us to shiver like our grandfathers, go on our hands and knees for him?!’

‘Hmn,’ Yoshida concurred.

* * *

Her eyes were moving to the left and to the right, blinking.

The clouds were slow moving, capped golden-orange like melon rind and spreading, turning dim blue to a deep dark purple that became black-red.

Below was the outline of the mountain range, cutting across the horizon, and the wall of trees, thick, somber, and dark … dancing, arcing, swaying, with blotches of brown and green, with clusters of naked branches.

What was left of the sun had diluted into a pink haze, and the grass on the plain faded unevenly from green to yellow to ochre to grey.

The clouds were now coming lower, their bottom sides a dark grey-blue, almost touching the mountain summits that looked like lips and shoulders.

A bird shot down swiftly into a bush that had feet. Heeseng smiled.

* * *

‘They are taking Kim Songnam! Everyone, Chief Nakada and his men are taking Kim Songnam!’

Songnam, dusty and bloody, was being dragged through the village at dawn, the peasants hurrying frantically, rushing around, looking, looking with curious,

‘Mountains of Blood.’ Alzo David-West.

Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013.
anxious faces.
‘Where are the Communists?’ Nakada demanded.
‘There are no Communists here, sir. There are no Communists here.’
‘What?!’
‘There are no Communists in the village,’ Mori repeated.
Nakada signaled to the men, who began beating Songnam again with whips and canes, breaking and tearing more of the skin and flesh.
‘Enough!’ rang the order.
Songnam lay in the dirt like a crumpled foetus.
‘Where are the Communists?’ bellowed the lieutenant colonel, gesturing to the interpreter.
‘We don’t work with them, sir. We don’t work with them.’
‘What is this unintelligible illiterate saying?’
‘The suspect said, “We do not work with the Communists.”’
Nakada looked at the sunburned faces around him.
‘Do you think we are fools? All the roads are guarded, and you have been under surveillance. You brought infiltrators into the village and have endangered the lives of everyone here. Burn this Communist alive!’ he ordered.

The soldiers tied Songnam to a stake and doused him with paraffin oil. His eyes went blind from the sharp, stinging liquid seeping into his wounds. He was struggling to open his eyes.
Cho Myonghee was screaming out for her husband, and Myongnam and Songhee for their father, the villagers holding the family back so that they would not be killed, too.
‘Sir, there are no Communists here,’ he said gasping. ‘We don’t work with them. We don’t work with them.’
Corporal Kuwabara, whose wife Songhwa was in Nagasaki, was weeping as the soldiers set fire to the man.

* * *

Mori told Otomaru that things were getting too much.
‘I can prescribe something, but you mustn’t over depend on it,’ said the doctor.
‘What are we doing here, sensei?’
‘What did you say? I couldn’t hear.’
‘What are we doing here … in Chosen, in Manchukuo, in Chugoku?’
‘It is a time of war. We have all been pulled into it.’
‘The woman and the girl, will they be alright?’
‘The woman’s burns are serious. I applied cool water and a dry, clean sheet, but she needs a skin graft. The girl will be okay after a month and twelve days, if the stitching does not become infected.’
‘How long have you been here, sensei?’
‘Since it all began.’
‘Perhaps you understand then.’
‘I understand.’

* * *
They were sleeping around the pit with firewood when the hundred or so guerillas raided the village, shooting the soldiers around the pharmacy and storehouses, taking bags of medicine, rice, and soybeans.

The barracks was smaller then, and they knew where everything was. Thirteen men and two women from the village fled with them, and the village headman, beaten and taken for ransom, was never found.

It was after the raid that the southeastern base in Manchukuo sent Ishihara and Nakada, who had been involved in the mop-up campaign in Jiandao a year after the war began.

Counterinsurgency operations, substantial reward money, and collective punishment soon discouraged the guerrillas from further large-scale raids, but every once in a while, there were hit-and-run attacks on the roads connecting the villages, which had the effect of tightening the checkpoint and pass system.

‘How old are the children?’ Commander Pak asked.
‘The boy is nine. The girl is eleven. They brought a rifle and a uniform.’
‘Have you confirmed that they’re not spies?’
‘Our informants at the village have confirmed it. Their father was the peasant leader who refused to work with us.’
‘We gave him a chance,’ Pak said. ‘Boy, what’s your name?’
‘I am Kim Myongnam, uncle.’
‘Girl?’
‘I am Kim Songhee, uncle.’
‘Why have you two come here into the mountains?’
The children looked at each other.
‘Speak up,’ Pak ordered.
‘We want to kill the Japanese who hurt our mother and killed our father,’ Myongnam let out in a rapid breath. ‘We killed the one who raped my sister.’
‘Can you children read and write?’
They looked at each other again.
‘Speak up.’
‘No, uncle. We cannot,’ Songhee said.
‘Where’s your mother?’ the commander asked.
‘We don’t know,’ they both answered.

* * *

Nakada’s wife was outside the tatami room, in the adjoining room of their small house in Shizuoka, where the box of tangerines were. They had argued again over his sleeplessness.
‘You said you would come. You said you would come.’
‘Get away from me.’
She was pulling at his left shoulder, pushing herself into his chest.
‘Get away!’
‘You said you would come.’
He was trying to complete some documents a month ahead of the overseas
deployment and was becoming more and more agitated the further she insisted. He pushed her away.

‘How do you think I feel?’ she asked, her voice quavering. ‘How do you think I feel?’

He did not say anything and continued writing.

‘Can you hear me? How do you think I feel?’ She went out and left the sliding rice paper door open.

His legs were warm under the low-standing table, with the blankets, and hot coals underneath. But the room was getting colder now and his hands stiff and icy.

Some time passed.

‘Sayako,’ he said, looking into the shadows outside the room, past the frame of the sliding door. ‘Sayako.’

It had been thirty minutes. No other rooms were heated. He heard some noise where the tangerines were and a whimper.

‘Keita …’

She was calling his name. He thought for awhile and, after he got up, saw her crouching in the dark beside the box. He carried her and put her under the table with the blankets so that she would be warm.

* * *

Ayong was returning from the barracks at dusk and saw Heeseng crawling in the dirt, saying something about a white tiger. She shook her head in disgust, Ayong, sighing spitefully, and went to the house where the others were.

Sanghee was complaining that her vagina was burning painfully with a rash, and Kyongmin said she was too sore and swollen to handle anymore men.

‘Sister, you will have to take our places this evening,’ Sanghee said.

Ayong protested angrily, ‘What’s this?! Do you think I’m an open well?! I’ve been servicing the Japanese bastards at the barracks all afternoon! One after another! They take me for an ox! Do you think this is easy?! I need to rest!’

‘Sister, we are not well,’ Kyongmin pleaded.

‘What should I do about it then?! Haven’t you gone to the herbalist at the pharmacy?!’

‘We did,’ Kyongmin answered, ‘but I’m too bloated, and Sanghee is not well there. He said the herbs won’t cure what she’s got.’

Ayong sighed and sighed again.

‘Well, I cannot do this alone! There’re too many of them, too many of them! Thirty in the morning, thirty in the afternoon today! That’s my absolute limit!’

‘We know, sister. We know,’ Kyongmin continued, ‘but they are demanding, and they will complain to Kuwabara that we broke the arrangement.’

‘What, that bastard with a nose like bull’s testicles who was wiping his face when they burned Cho Myonghee’s husband!’

‘Ayong!’ Sanghee screamed. ‘We aren’t well!’

‘Okay-okay!’ she screamed back. ‘You stay there and give it air, and you, sister, had better…’ she stopped suddenly.

‘What is it?’ Kyongmin said.

‘I’ll bring the mad girl and wash her up. There is no sense in there anyway.’

‘Mountains of Blood.’ Alzo David-West.

Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013.
There was no moving the village headmen and landowners, who were meeting outdoors with the peasant leaders from the various villages.

Kim Songnam explained that if the 70 percent of the harvest the landowners extracted could at least consist of 40 percent premium and 30 percent low-grade crops, that would give the tenant farmers more salable options in their 30 percent of the harvest, allowing their families to subsist more ably, handle land rent better, and produce more output.

The men laughed at the proposition and said it was the most foolish thing they had ever heard. How could a peasant who never went to school and barely knew how to read and write think? What did he know about domestic and foreign trade? Could he even use an abacus? They thought these things aloud, as if the meeting was an open-air comedy. His presence was an insult to their dignity.

Songnam, bowing servilely in apology, explained that it was a fair proposal, a reasonable proposal, that the Communist army in the mountains was demanding complete expropriation in comparison.

All the men suddenly became quiet and extremely serious looking.

One of them, village headman Chong Sooho from the mining village across the river, pointed to Songnam: ‘We would listen magnanimously to your unreasonable demands, when there is more important and urgent business that requires our attention, and you would threaten us … with Communist insurrection?’

Songnam did not know what to say and apologised again, saying this is not what he meant. But the meeting was over now, and the village headmen and landowners left in their carriages and buggies.

‘What should we do, brother?’ one of the peasant leaders asked. ‘They had already made up their minds.’

Kim Songnam was at a complete loss. He did not know what to say.

Cho Myonghee dreamed of herself threshing grain in the field in the spring. Myongnam and Songhee were helping her. They said they were hungry, and she brought out a persimmon from a handkerchief. She saw her husband’s face. The sky was very big.

Commander Zhuo and Commander Pak were there, and so was Heeseng, hiding behind a tree. Cho Myonghee became worried and told the girl not to bring the political worker to the village again.

Myongnam ran out of the house when the soldiers broke in.

‘Did you hear people talking? Can you hear people talking, Songnam?’

She closed the stall in the evening and was making her way back to her small mud house on the other side of the village, hobbling slowly, hunched and crooked, along the grungy path. The young man, her adopted grandson, started the fire and was
waiting.

She entered and prepared a meal, and they ate their dinner of millet cakes, roots, and wild grass seeds together.

‘We are grateful, grandmother,’ the young man said. ‘We are grateful.’

She was quiet, biting and working the food with her few remaining teeth to make it easier to swallow.

‘As you see, grandmother, our policy is simple,’ he said, chewing. ‘If you have guns, give us guns. If you have money, give us money. If you have food, give us food.’

She nodded.

‘Our struggle has been long, and our work is difficult,’ he continued, ‘but with your help, we shall create a paradise in our country, and with a paradise here, we won’t need to dream of a paradise in another world.’

Wood from the fire was crackling as small sparks were thrown upward.

‘Our task in the anti-Japanese national liberation struggle is to unite the patriotic masses against fascist colonial rule. We appeal broadly to the peasants, the workers, the middle strata, the national capitalists, the religious people of conscience, the students, and the youth.’

She was listening.

‘As you see, grandmother, we are a mighty force. When our country is liberated, we will liquidate the organs of Japanese imperialist rule. We will ban the activities of the fascists and the anti-democratic groups and individuals. We will confiscate the landholdings of the national traitors, the Japanese nationals, and the Japanese government, and we shall return it to our people, who have toiled for over a thousand years.’

The old woman gave him more food.

* * *

snow falls gently

on the mountains

bordering Manchukuo

‘Mountains of Blood.’ Alzo David-West.

Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013.

It was not a consequence of brain damage that once caused me temporarily to lose my memory. I suspect now it was the traumatic experience of my family history, my European parents and the way in which I had sought to slide over the broader facts of history, simply by rote learning them without understanding anything of that history.

My father’s father had been chief archivist at the Registry for Births, Deaths and Marriages in Haarlem, Holland during the 1930s. He took a particular interest in his own family genealogy and kept accurate records of all those ancestors that had preceded him. He was obsessed with factual memory. At the same time he confused family boundaries by taking his older daughter as his wife, for which he was eventually imprisoned in 1945, the charges brought against him by his then nineteen-year-old daughter. Less than twenty years later on the other side of the world in Australia, my own father behaved similarly with my older sister.

The sliding doors peel open and I feel the pressure of countless bodies urging me forward. The inside of the Exhibition Building is broken into halls filled with desks and chairs lined up in rows. In between the desks large letters of the alphabet signify subjects, and student numbers.

I sit in the row marked E for European History. My desk rattles. I shift it to get a better balance, but it wobbles even more. I look down and see that I have dislodged the cardboard wad someone has put there before me to keep the desk stable. I fiddle with it. I tear it in half, roll it into a thicker piece and stick the bits in two positions under the legs to fix my desk in place.

‘Do not touch your paper until you are given the signal,’ a voice calls over a microphone. I cannot see where the voice comes from, but I do as I am told like all the other students in the Exhibition Building. I am bursting with facts and figures, all the dates I have piled into my mind.

‘You may begin.’

The rustling sound, as a thousand sheets of paper turn in unison. I look at the pages of questions, one after the other.

‘Do not lift your pens until reading time is over.’

For fifteen minutes I look at the pages in front of me. I read through the questions. I cannot write yet. I will not write yet or I will be disqualified. I cannot hear the other students reading the questions on the page. I can only hear murmurs, grunts and sighs as they read and prepare to answer.

I cannot think. I have opened the page and each question swims in front of me. The letters form words, and the words form sentences, but none of it makes sense and I am gripped with terror. My body freezes and my mind empties. There is nothing there.

I suspect I have a strong memory of this – my sixteen-year-old self’s experience of sitting for the European History exam in the equivalent of what is today known as Year Eleven – because it is a memory of a time when my memory failed. My memory let me down. We know now that memory is unreliable, but in those days
I did not. In those days I prided myself on my superior ability to rote learn and to retain facts and figures. It had become my way of learning from earliest days. It was the way we were taught at school in the mid-to-late 1960s in a Catholic convent, a school for girls that valued the acquisition of knowledge as a static thing, that valued the piling in of facts, certain acceptable facts, into one’s memory and then reproducing them as necessary and at will.

As we milled outside the Exhibition Building, hundreds of students, those from ‘modern’ state schools in brightly coloured clothes, those from Catholic schools in uniform; I did not speak to anyone. I was trying to keep all this knowledge inside of my head and I was scared that if I spoke to anyone about anything, it would all come rushing out of me.

For the last week I had walked through the streets near the house in Parkdale where I then lived with my mother and my five remaining sisters and brothers. History notebook in my hand, I walked to the sea. The whole time I kept my head down to read again and again the history dates, about the wars and revolutions that had happened more than one hundred years ago to people whose names I tried to remember and whose dates of birth and death I needed to retain. All these facts. I pushed the information into my head as I walked along the beach. My running shoes squelched in the sand. Sometimes I looked up to get my bearings, to see that I did not walk into a tree or a person or a building, to see that I did not walk onto the road, in front of a car or a bicycle or even a train.

When I walked along the street with my book in my hands and my eyes on my book, the world around me did not exist, only the facts on the page that I forced into my brain. My parents were European. I recognised the characters in these books. They could have been my ancestors. I should remember them.

John Hughes writes about his experience as a second-generation Australian, the business of living in two worlds, and the importance of avoiding actual knowledge, ‘that by knowing just a little, not only was he able to establish his own sense of self, he could also make himself however he wanted’ (Hughes, 2006, 2).

Like Hughes, without actual knowledge, whenever I imagined what life was like before my own began, I saw it as a series of images, in black and white, without sound, flat, one dimensional, like old photographs spilling out of albums, curling at the edges and fading in the centre. I saw a world of war, of bombs and starvation, set against the picture post-card tranquillity of Holland. My mother’s Holland, with its frozen rivers teeming with children on skates in winter and later, in the springtime, lined with tulips and daffodils. Holland, the Netherlands, the land of longing, where it never gets hot and always stays green, even under the snow and ice of winter. In my child’s mind, I heard the name Neverlands, a country I could never come to know myself except in my imagination. I heard it not so much as a place from the children’s story of Peter Pan but as a place forbidden to me. Holland was in the centre of Europe and just as Hughes’s past evoked for him a sense of something foreign lodged within, so it was for me.

My mother had bemoaned her loss of Europe and of all things cultural through her migration to Australia. Memories became my mother’s ‘currency’, at least for the time of my growing up when her difficulties with nine children and an alcoholic and abusive husband were so acute that she could not but fill the gap of her sadness with her memories of a grand European past. Her memories sustained me, too. They

‘European History.’ Elizabeth Hanscombe. 
Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013.
nurtured me throughout my own difficult childhood and created a sense of my family as unique, a uniqueness that resided in the foreign.

But Europe was also a place of war and horror. I knew this from my father. I knew that he had fought in the Second World War, and through this, at least in part, he had become the man he was. So Europe for me became a hybrid – the beauty and the beast of my parents’ past.

How could I then have retained these facts from European history? This longing, this nostalgia as Hughes describes it, ‘for a culture and a place of which we have no direct experience...[is] like having a memory of something you don’t know’ which then overrides memory (Hughes, 2006, 4). It can limit our focus and lead us to forget. We reconstruct ourselves to fit our memories, and the facts become irrelevant.

This falls in line with Marianne Hirsch’s notion of ‘post-memory’, whereby she argues, ‘the past is ...not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment. To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation’ (Hirsch, 2008, 107). More confusion, more forgetting.

Paul John Eakin writes about the links between memory, narrative and identity, the way we spend our lives constantly speaking and reformulating our stories as part of our identity formation. We do so out of our memories and imagination. We do this so naturally we do not even notice we are doing it. It is only when it breaks down, in instances such as in Alzheimer’s, or autism, that we become aware of it in others. This process of self-narration ‘constantly unfolds in our heads in however loose and disorderly a fashion...[We] are always talking to ourselves about ourselves, if to no one else, making plans about the future, what we’ll do, reviewing what we’ve done, thought and felt’ (Eakin, 2008, xiv). Some of us become autobiographers and write our stories down. To do so we create and reformulate new senses of identity. This includes the business of remembering and of forgetting.

The rules of self-narration begin early. In the classroom. In the playground. Deviations from these rules risk censure. When a person offers too much information or too little information when giving voice to their public self-narrations, their audience can register disapproval, whether by rolling their eyes, withholding their applause or shifting in their seats. Failures of self-narration can be far more severe in cases such as in adult amnesias. Eakin uses the story of a certain Mr Thomson from Oliver Sacks’s book, The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat (1985). This man who suffered the brain damage of Korsakoff’s psychosis had truly lost his memory and ‘spent his waking hours in frenetic self invention trying to construct new identities to take the place of the old ones he had forgotten’ (Eakin, 2008, xiv). In Sacks’s words, Mr Thomson had been ‘pithed, scooped out, de-souled by disease’ (Eakin, 2008, 15).

My memory lapse was not a consequence of brain damage, but what sort of memory mal-practice was this that it should have precluded the possibility of real learning, of real understanding? Narrative identity with its links to memory is not something we can simply rote learn. It comes upon us unbidden from the storehouse of our knowledge accumulated over time and through our own idiosyncratic experiences. It is also culturally idiosyncratic and constrained by the broader social practices of the day. It becomes our own unique story. But as John Berger writes, ‘No story is like a wheeled vehicle whose contact with the road is continuous. Stories
walk like animals or men. And their steps are not only narrated events but between each sentence, sometimes each word, every step is a stride over something not said’ (Jaireth, 2009, 78).

Why do I imagine now that I can remember so clearly these events from my mid-to-late teens? The experience is multi-factorial, made up of the way in which I sought to learn then, the facts of my family history and the trauma that my parents had fled in Europe only to repeat the pattern, in the form of my father’s alcoholism and abusiveness, for which reason at that time we were living apart from him.

In the days when I studied European history at school I doubted the value of my own story, based on my memory. This is not uncommon in the young, who have yet to have the wisdom of their years behind them. At sixteen years of age, lacking my own story and bearing a secret I could not tell, I thought I needed somehow to absorb other people’s words and ideas, the facts and figures as presented in the history textbooks of the day. I did not know then that they were not absolute facts, and that to some extent there is no such thing as a fact except perhaps in terms of real physical objects and events. They are constructions, interpretations.

Now I realise that my own interpretation of events, through careful reflection and including some consideration of the thoughts and ideas of others, is of value. In those days however, I thought my own mind was unworthy and unreliable because it contained a secret knowledge that made the outward, known ‘respectable’ story of my family life absurd and obscene. I relied entirely therefore on my serial recall through memorising, which is of course different from memory, and proved dangerous and destructive.

Whenever I engage a memory I situate it within physical space. I must locate myself to remember. The Exhibition Building had been constructed to commemorate grandeur, the glories of the gold rush with a tilt in the direction of mother England. It was built as a venue for the exhibition and display of artefacts. We put things on display to show others what is available and in so doing we create a façade, a carapace. There was once talk of pulling down the Exhibition Building. Instead they restructured the halls, maintained the facade and kept the best, the dome.

I imagine I forgot all the facts I had rote learned for my European history exam as a consequence of spending so much of my time creating a façade of respectability for the rest of the world, while all the time back at home strange things were happening about which I could not think and to which I could not refer. I could not give voice to the depth of my life’s experience. I could only talk about the superficial. My story was crushed beneath a need to create a good impression.

Most often I locate my early memories in the privacy of my childhood home. But when my memories emerge from public spaces, such as the Exhibition Building then my experience expands beyond to take in something of the experience of a foreigner in a strange land, even though Australia is the land of my birth. It is also a land that was once possessed by others in the Dreaming and later stolen. The so-called facts of European history, peppered with tragedies, how could I possibly remember them through rote learning without allowing for an emotional response?

Subhash Jaireth argues that the body carries memory. We need to visit commemorative sites in order to be in touch through our bodies with what it had been like for those who came before us, for those who have suffered pain, or have lost their bodies through ‘the ultimate sacrifice’ of war (Jaireth, 2009). He also locates memory
in language but notes the tendency of language to fail us, ‘because it isn’t transparent as it should be, because its relation with the real is at best tenuous and contestable, because it is inherently heteroglossic, unable to hide the gaps through which alien voices can enter and hence contaminate, distort and disrupt the authorial intention’ (Jaireth, 2009, 76).

In order to allow memory to express itself through language we need first a visual image, for example that of my student-self sitting in the Exhibition Building alongside thousands of other students, who appeared at the time to be able to remember the facts that I had temporarily forgotten. The terror of my failure of memory returns to a terror of losing my ability to tell a story, if not my story then someone else’s story as retold through the images of material events and the passage of time.

Memory makes connections. It provides a link between the past and the future. It allows an overview of events that might otherwise be kept separate and because of the ferocity with which some events or experiences come together in our memories at times we may prefer to forget, we may in fact forget them altogether, especially in the face of trauma.

My memory came back to me eventually as I sat in the Exhibition Building all those years ago, enough to enable me to pass the exam. But my memory of that time is a memory of failure. It is the time I first remember the realisation that my way of working in the world did not work. Even when I had passed my exams well, I needed to develop a different form of memory, one that relied more on my own ideas and experience rather than simply on rote learning the ideas of others. I did not realise this at the time.

When I first began work on this essay my mind went blank, in much the way it did when I read through the questions in the Fifth-Form European history exam in 1968. I cannot do this, I thought. Then I remembered the experience of sitting for that exam, and other events came back to me.

Although I am four years younger, my sister and I shared a bedroom where I witnessed my father’s many visits during the night (Hanscombe, 2013). I then spent the rest of my childhood waiting for my turn. In my mind the two – European history and my father’s history – became confused. The history I had learned at school, the facts, figures and details, the superficial goings on, held the same quality of secrecy as existed within my family. Small wonder then that I could not process these events, other than through the rote learning and regurgitation of historical facts, while behind the scenes the story of my family life, and the multiple hidden stories of other people, nations and cultures within the history of Europe dashed onto the stage and were soon forgotten.

In time the drama of life events fade much like the pain of childbirth fades, but the memories linger and with memories come scars and scar tissue. Memory exerts its effects long after the event has registered even unto the next generation and the next. We carry the weight of the sins and triumphs of our ancestors. Memory is the conduit between the past and the future. As Sue Campbell writes ‘the memory of a time of loss, while re-evoking grief, may also gain overtones of resilience as it takes its place in a personal history where one has struggled to overcome loss’ (Campbell, 2006, 364). But the gaps in experience need to be examined, even those incidences of forgetting by looking below the surface.

‘European History.’ Elizabeth Hanscombe. 
Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013. 
This includes looking at the secrets, which, according to Annette Kuhn, might ‘inhabit the borderlands of memory…They are a necessary condition of the stories we are prompted by memory to talk about our lives’ (Kuhn, 2002, 2). Emotional and experiential memory are the bedrock of ‘living autobiographically’, while my back story includes my family history as it emerged in Europe, and my witnessing of parental abuse. Behind the incidental failure of my actual memory within the Exhibition Building is the story of inter-generational abuse and betrayal of love and trust. It provides some evidence of the redemptive nature of autobiography and its roots in memory. The past and the present move into the future with each new generation, and like the stirrings of memory they stay with us forever.

**Bibliography**


The Valley of the Shadow
(Excerpt from the novel ‘The Makers of Stories and Songs’)
Kate Hayford

In 1727, an epidemic of smallpox wiped out nearly the entire population of the isolated island of Hirta, largest of the St Kilda Islands. Only one adult and eighteen children survived. An additional party of three men and eight boys, who had been ferried to a nearby stack to collect birds’ eggs, were marooned for nine months until rescue came. The landlord of Hirta, clan chief John MacLeod of Dunvegan, resettled the island the following year. The Makers of Stories and Songs is the tale of those who survived.

In the darkest week of the year, a fever swept through Hirta, felling the weak and the strong alike. No one escaped its grasp, but Isbeil’s mother Seana was only lightly affected, as was Neil Clag1.

These two, as soon as they could rise from their crubs, visited every house in the village, nursing the sick as best they could. Seana chased down a ewe that had lambed early, and stripped its teats of as much milk as she dared, not wishing the lambs to go hungry. She boiled the milk in a thin barley gruel and divided it between the children in the village. Meanwhile, Neil slaughtered one of the Hirtans’ precious cattle and from its meat and bones made a rich beef broth, of which there was plenty to go around.

‘Have you gone mad?’ Seana demanded when she found out. ‘That cow belonged to MacLeod’s factor!2 We were to keep it for when the boat comes next.’

‘Would you have the boat arrive to naught but a village of corpses?’ Neil replied in his calm way. ‘Our people have need of the meat, to make them strong again. The steward and his men can dine on fulmar and oat porridge when they come this time. It may well teach them something about the world outside their own circle of wants.’

Isbeil tried to get up each morning to help her mother, but always she fell back on the straw bed, exhausted. She suffered blinding headaches and her limbs felt as though they had turned to water. Still, she was not as sick as her father, who lay sweating and shivering alternately by the peat fire and occasionally croaked out words and phrases from his blistered throat that made no sense. Isbeil had not come across the term ‘delirium’ in her schooling with the Reverend Buchan, and she thought that Faolan had lost his mind. She was terrified that the same thing might happen to her.

More than anything, she longed to be outside, to stand in the clean, salt-rimed winds and tilt her face up to the sun; to throw her arms wide in a circle, feeling nothing but

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1 Abbreviated from ‘Clag a’ bhaile’, which is Scots Gaelic for ‘the town bell’, a common nickname given to someone with a loud voice.

2 Representative of the chief of Clan MacLeod, who was landlord of Hirta and its people. Each summer the factor, or steward, visited Hirta by boat to collect the annual rent payment.
open space. The only walls would be the green slopes of Oiseval, Conachair, Mullach Geal and Ruaival, rearing up in a protective crescent around the village.

As Isbeil slowly came back to health, she began to notice a worried look in her mother’s eyes that had escaped her before. While Isbeil and her father ate their first solid meal in weeks, Seana fed Flòraidh gruel from a tin dipper and Alasdair refused to eat at all. His rasping cough filled the cloying air of the house at night, and the strong brawny arms of which he was so proud now withered away to sinew and bone. One night Isbeil stirred from a fitful sleep and saw the dark shapes of her parents sitting around the fire, murmuring softly to each other.

‘Would this be of any use now?’ Faolan said, and Isbeil heard the dull clink of a stone bottle.

Her mother answered, ‘What ails him cannot be cured by uisge beatha\(^3\) – there is little hope left,’ and began to weep dreadfully, a high keening sound that froze Isbeil’s bones, so that she could not have moved if the straw crub had suddenly burst into flames. But when the sun rose the next day, Seana was her stoic self once more, with no trace of the tears shed in the darkness, and Isbeil was inclined to think she had imagined it all.

There came a morning when Isbeil woke to silence. Her brother’s coughing had ceased in the night. With a rush of gladness, she saw her little sister sitting up for the first time since her illness, drinking greedily from the tin dipper of warm sheep’s milk. Isbeil rolled over on her side and reached across the crub to touch Alasdair’s hand. ‘Are you better, too?’ she asked.

The feel of his skin on hers did not immediately register. It was not burning with fever or clammy with sweat, but cold and smooth as a stone in a cleit\(^4\) wall. Isbeil recoiled with a small shriek. Looking up fearfully, she met her parents’ eyes: her father’s hectic and red-rimmed from weeping, her mother’s dry and hard, though her hands trembled. Seana lifted a finger to her lips and jerked her head slightly towards Flòraidh, who was still drinking her milk innocently, unaware of the tragedy that had befallen the MacIvers.

Isbeil nodded at her mother in return, then rolled back the other way, facing the soot-blackened wall of the crub.

Alasdair was buried two days later. The Hirtans laid their dead to rest in a flat area just beyond the village, encircled by a low stone wall and starred with celandines and marigolds. It was as tranquil and restful a place to be found amidst Hirta’s stark cliffs and austere green hills, but it could not reconcile the grieving islanders to the fact that one so young had been taken from them.

The Hirtans’ way of life was a dangerous one. Seana MacIver’s brothers had both died in accidents while hunting seafowl on Conachair – one had fallen from the cliff after his rope snapped, the other drowned while trying to approach Conachair from the sea in a boat. Isbeil’s friend Finlay had lost his father in a cliff-fall also, and scarcely a family on Hirta went more than a generation without one of its members

\(^3\) In English: ‘lively water’ (whisky). In the 18\(^{th}\) century, the Hirtans used it sparingly for medicinal purposes only; recreational drinking was unheard of.

\(^4\) A cleit (plural: cleitean) was a turf-roofed stone structure built for the preservation and storage of perishable goods. It resembled a large tortoise in shape and was unique to Hirta. Hundreds of them still exist on the island today.
suffering an untimely death. But this did not make their grief any more commonplace or easy to accept.

Isbeil stood with hands clenched at the foot of the freshly dug grave. Behind her, she heard the weeping of the girls who had loved her brother, had flirted and giggled and perhaps dreamt of him as their husband. Isbeil wished that she could cry, too; a hollow had opened up under her breastbone since the knowledge of Alasdair’s death had sunk in, and it ached day and night. Surely the pain would abate if she could only cry or find some other way to release her grief. Somewhere within her there must be sorrow and a sense of loss, but Isbeil could only feel the persistent ache in her chest.

And she was tired, too; it was traditional to hold a wake each night until the dead person was buried, and for the past two nights the MacIver house had been full of mourners and the sound of their keening. Seana had dressed her son’s body herself, refusing the help of the other women. Isbeil, not wanting to look at her mother’s face, had managed to distract herself somewhat from the scene by taking little Flòraidh on her lap and entertaining her with silly repetitive songs, and stories about the ancient huntress of Hirta, who lived long ago – when Hirta and all the Hebrides were joined on the one piece of land – and wore horns of many branches in her hair while she hunted.

There was no church service for the dead; the Reverend Alexander Buchan conducted a burial service in the little kirkyard, with the mourners amassed about the grave. At the conclusion of the eulogy, four of the strongest men lowered the coffin into the grave, while the women’s voices rose in keening. The eerie wails made Isbeil’s hackles rise. Next to her, Flòraidh whimpered and nestled closer to her sister.

Finally it was over. The sky was already growing dark, though it was hardly noon; the dark months lasted from October through to mid-February, and the fever that took Alasdair had struck just after Hogmanay. There were still at least six more weeks of darkness to endure. As Isbeil left the kirkyard, she thought of the long, dull days ahead of her with despair.

The kirkyard had nearly emptied of mourners and the sky was a murky green overhead when the Reverend Alexander Buchan approached the grieving mother, Seana MacIver. She was still standing at the foot of her son’s grave, singing a dirge she had composed herself. Out of respect, the minister waited for her to finish, even though he viewed the singing of graveside laments as a pagan practice, better abolished in favour of Christian hymns.

When Seana ended her song, she bowed her head and stood in silence, giving no sign that she was aware of the minister’s presence. He waited for several minutes in growing embarrassment, before finally clearing his throat to break the stillness.

‘Mistress MacIver? May I intrude?’

Her eyes opened, grey-green like her daughter’s, and full of sadness. ‘You are not intruding, Reverend,’ she said, offering him a tired smile.

‘Aye, you are kind to say so.’ He sighed deeply, looking down at the grave.

‘Your son is in heaven now, Mistress MacIver.’

Seana’s head jerked up; her fingers dug into the folds of her dress, burrowing deep into the thick fabric. ‘Heaven,’ she scoffed. ‘Your teachings mean nothing to

‘The Valley of the Shadow.’ Kate Hayford.
Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013.
me. I have wished I could believe, for I think it would have made my path in life
easier to travel. If you had not come to our island to teach us of your God, someone
else surely would have. People are always trying to change that which they do not
understand. Oh, aye, I’ve been bitter, I admit. But what if others came to you and said
“Your God is meaningless. You must be listening to us now, for only we can guide
you the right way and save you from punishment”? The old ways, the ancient words
of our druids and our bards, are what comfort me now. I would far rather my son’s
spirit lived on in Hirta as a flower or a stone, than in your heaven.’

‘Be that as it may,’ the minister said uncomfortably, ‘I did not come to debate
with you on the matters of the spirit.’

‘You were the first to speak of it, not I.’ Seana knelt to pick a celandine by her
feet; she stroked the yellow petals absently for a moment, then laid the flower on the
mound of earth before her.

‘Aye, I apologise. I came to talk to you about your daughter, Isbeil, and what
your wishes are for her future.’

‘Could this not have waited for another day? I have just buried my son,
Reverend.’

‘There will never be an ideal time to discuss this. I thought it best to speak
with you as soon as possible.’

Seana sighed. ‘What is it you wish to know?’

‘As you are no doubt aware, I would like Isbeil to continue with her schooling.
But she is a clever lass and will soon have reached the limit of what I can teach her. I
would then propose sending her to Glasgow, to the same institution where my own
children have been educated. It is a highly reputable place of learning and I feel that
she would benefit greatly from it.’

‘And never return home, is that what you are saying?’

‘That is not what I am saying, but it is inarguable that Isbeil’s prospects would
be far brighter in a place like Glasgow or Edinburgh.’

‘Aye, her prospects,’ Seana mocked. ‘It is not enough that you have replaced
our beliefs with your God, and denounced our old ways as pagan and wicked. No, you
must be taking our children from us as well, and teaching them to hate the place that
has been home to their families for generations. What is it about our existence that
you find so abhorrent? Why can you not be leaving us alone?’ Her voice rose to a
scream. ‘My son has been taken from me. Would you have me lose another child?’

‘I only meant—’

‘Well, Reverend, I am not interested in what you are meaning. You have made
yourself quite clear. But you will not take my daughter away, do you understand that?
She will be staying here, where she belongs.’

‘But is Hirta where she belongs?’

‘I will not listen to any more of this. Isbeil is my daughter, and you would do
difficult to remember it. She will be staying here, and she will marry Dughall MacDonald
or one of the other lads, and she will be happy. There is nothing more to be said about
the matter.’

Isbeil was indeed her daughter – and if Seana MacIver had given this fact
more thought, she would surely have understood that there was plenty more to be
said.
Things I Carry: Technologies of a Homeless Veteran
John Farrell Kelly

There are many of us homeless ones,
And our strength is
That for us, benighted and blind,
The house of God shines.
—Anna Akhmatova, ‘You will live without misfortune’ from Rosary

Suddenly there is light.
My spirit slowly surfaces, and my mind gently moves and stretches. I pause for a moment to reflect on my dreams.
Then I open my eyes.

Above me, endless white ceiling panels extend in all directions, interspersed with occasional panels of fluorescent lighting. Beside me, endless metal bunks extend in all directions, laden with occasionally moving human forms.
I am covered by an old, white sheet and a thin, grey wool blanket. A neatly-folded black North Face Denali jacket serves as my pillow.
Beside my face, a small, black North Face Recon backpack carries nearly all of my worldly possessions. A navy homeless veteran wristband is attached to one of the zippers. I gather my glasses from a mesh pouch of the backpack, and I unclip a strap of the backpack from a metal bar of the bed.
The room is nearly the size of a gymnasium. Beige walls are lined with old, metal lockers that are reserved for the use of the staff. Four large, cement columns in the centre of the room provide structural support.
The large clock on the west wall reads 4:45 AM. It is a cold morning outside, so I stall for half an hour and then begin to move. I carefully climb down from the top bunk, grasping the side of an adjacent bunk for support, and descend to the cold, concrete floor.

My clothes and shoes remain at the foot of the bunk – I have won another gamble that no one will take them during the night. I quickly slip on an oversized navy tunic shirt, and then add a pair of black leggings over the black boxer-briefs that I am wearing. I quickly finish with black socks and grey Keen Arroyo sandals.

I walk along the painted lines on the floor to the bathroom on the southeast side of this floor. It is a large room that contains numerous stalls (without doors), numerous urinals, and two large, round, communal sinks. I remove a toothbrush and toothpaste from my backpack, and I quickly brush my teeth. Then I walk to the stairwell on the southwest side of the room, descend the stairs, and exit using the west door.


'Things I Carry.' John Farrell Kelly.
Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013.
It is a cold, dark morning. As I walk north and then east around the corner of the large, brick building, I pass beneath a red, glowing neon sign, shaped like a cross, with the words ‘Jesus’ on the horizontal section and ‘Saves’ on the vertical section.

I enter the north door into a reception area. A few men are in line ahead of me, talking through a hole in a glass barrier to a receptionist working on a computer.

When my turn arrives, I state, ‘John Kelly.’

‘I got you,’ the receptionist states, and I am in the lottery for a bed tonight. On a good day, I make the bed list – the odds are around 50 percent. Otherwise, I usually make the mat list and get a mat on the first floor. On a bad day, I don’t get either, and the Denver Rescue Mission turns me away.

I have had bad days.

**Jesus Saves**

*And for us, descending into the vale,*  
*The altars burn,*  
*And our voices soar*  
*To God’s very throne.*

—Anna Akhmatova, ‘You will live without misfortune,’ from *Rosary*

I sit on a low concrete wall on the triangle.

The triangle is a small park, just north of the Rescue Mission, that is formed by the intersections of Broadway, Park Avenue West, and Lawrence Street. It is home for about two hundred crack users and dealers. Most are homeless and sleep on the streets.

A dealer asks me again, ‘You need anything?’

‘I’m good,’ I respond. By now, most of them know that I don’t smoke, but some still ask.

My eyes glaze like a mystic, and I journey into what I call ‘deep water’ for about an hour.

When I return, the crack user sitting beside me appears to be confused. ‘You were really gone,’ he says. ‘Are you sure you’re not on something?’

‘I’m just crazy,’ I reply. But he doesn’t seem quite satisfied.

After a while, Tami approaches me. She is a slender, beautiful woman, who moves like a pigeon – constantly scanning the cement for small, white crumbs. She sits beside me and starts to talk for a few minutes. Her words turn into sound and music, and their meanings escape me.

Finally, I apologise. I look at her and gently say, ‘I’m sorry – sometimes my brain doesn’t work normally, and I don’t understand what people are saying.’

She looks at me with pure compassion and a hint of sadness, and then responds, ‘That’s okay.’

I gently place my hand on her back.

Two long lines are forming – one on the southwest corner of the triangle and one diagonally across the intersection. The men look like they have emerged from photos of the Great Depression. Finally, the front door of the Rescue Mission opens, and the two lines cross the streets and begin to disappear inside.

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When they are gone, I cross the street and enter. Staff direct me to the chapel room, and I find one of the few remaining chairs. Soon, the evening’s guest preacher arrives. He speaks sparingly and plays a number of Christian songs. Some of the homeless men join in song. His words are unexpectedly heartfelt and moving. The chaos of my mind and emotions finds a moment of peace.

As his hour winds down, the guest preacher invites us to be saved by Jesus. I don’t know what that means, but two or three of the men approach him. He looks them in the eyes, one-by-one, wraps his arms around their shoulders, and bows his head with them and prays.

I feel that I have witnessed something essential – something beautiful.

**A Good Day**

*No, not under the vault of alien skies,*  
*And not under the shelter of alien wings—*  
*I was with my people then,*  
*There, where my people, unfortunately, were.*

—Anna Akhmatova, ‘Requiem,’ from *Reed*³

After the first snow, the cold surprisingly dampens my spirit.

As I sit in my place on the triangle, the concrete seems to siphon away all of my warmth. Then Tami arrives. She gives me a long, warm hug, but when I look in her eyes, I see that something is wrong.

‘My guy just died,’ she says with great sorrow.

I look at her with shock and sadness. With immaculate compassion, she touches her hand to my face and caresses away the echoes of her own grief.

After Tami leaves, I struggle with the cold. The black Seirus hood that I wear keeps my head warm, but my coat is a bit thin for prolonged exposure in these temperatures.

For some reason, fragments of Akhmatova’s poetry begin to slip out of my mouth in whispers. Sometimes, the words even emerge out loud – ‘No, not under the vault of alien skies.’ No one recognisesthe lyrics or grasps their meanings.

Eventually, the doors open again to the Rescue Mission. As I sit in the back of the chapel room, the energies of the men and the building begin to overwhelm me. I stare at the tile on the floor – beautiful blue-grey, two-foot squares with a black grout. Adobe accent tiles form a large cross in the center of the room.

When the service is over, one of the staff members gestures to one section of the room. The men in that section rise and disappear to the basement to eat. When my section is called, I travel east down a hallway, north down the stairs to the basement, and then west down a long hallway to the dining area. Volunteers hand us metal trays with a modest dinner. We sit in groups of six at small round tables and eat quickly.

When I finish, I exit up the stairs to the west.

On the first floor, I glance up a long staircase leading east to the second floor and the beds. On the left side of the stairwell, there are two alphabetical lists – the

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first is the bed list and the second is the mat list. I unconsciously hold my breath as I check the bed list. I exhale when I find my name – kelly, john.

I walk up the stairs to claim my bed.

It is a good day.

**A Bad Day**

*I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees.*
*I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees.*
—Robert Johnson, ‘Cross Road Blues’

As I walk on back streets in the early morning light, waves form in my stomach, and I begin to sweat.

I stop by the St. Francis Center and ask for a couple of small plastic shopping bags, and then I head for the Sonny Lawson Park near the Blair-Caldwell African American Research Library on Welton Street.

I don’t make it.

On a quiet back street, I step off of the sidewalk onto a small patch of grass, and I kneel down, like a pilgrim on a journey to a holy land. The contents of my stomach heave free of my body and enter into one of the plastic bags. The pain is terrible. A young white couple walks steadily by me without missing a beat of their conversation. My mind is disoriented for a few minutes, but gradually returns.

I continue a few blocks more to the park, find an inviting area of grass, and lie down to heal and rest. The earth is surprisingly comfortable. I gather the energies of the soil, the grass, the nearby trees, and the sky, and I move them through my body, like a long drink of water from a cold mountain stream. Then I fall asleep.

A few hours later, two policemen wake me. It is illegal to be homeless in Denver these days, even if you are a disabled veteran. Since it is daytime, however, they don’t arrest me.

Fortunately, the library is open, and I make a few trips to the bathroom to throw up again and to drink more water.

I skip dinner at the Rescue Mission, but I show up later to see if I make the bed list. I am so weak that I have trouble walking and standing. Unfortunately, I don’t make the bed list or the mat list. About 70 men stand in an overflow line, hoping that some of the lucky ones won’t show up. The overflow line across the street at the Samaritan House seems to be moving faster, so I decide to give it a try.

Most of the men ahead of me in the Samaritan House line seem to be holding a card from a deck of playing cards. It looks like it is some type of a counting system. In a few short minutes, everyone is admitted except for me and one other man.

The security guards talk briefly to each other, and then one states, ‘We have one mat left, and since there are two of you left, we will use our lottery system.’

The man ahead of me looks like he’s in shock – with glazed eyes – like he is struggling to complete a marathon.

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4 Robert Johnson, ‘Cross Road Blues’ (Vocalion, 1936).
I look at the security guard and state, ‘Not tonight. This is between me and him. He was in line first, and it’s his mat.’ The security guard acknowledges my words, and I head back to the Rescue Mission.

There are about 40 men left in the overflow line at the Rescue Mission. A half hour later, that number is down to ten. Then the security guard makes an announcement. ‘I’m sorry,’ he states. ‘But we are full, and I have to ask you all to leave.’

Another security guard says, ‘Hold on a minute.’ He makes a quick phone call and then makes another announcement, ‘Crossroads says they can take all ten of you.’

Five of the men take off like a shot. The other four talk in Spanish for a minute, and then set off quickly behind them. I bring up the rear. I don’t know where I am going, so I try to keep up with the men ahead of me. They quickly leave me behind, but I try to keep them in sight.

The darkness and the artificial light give the evening an unexpected film-noir sensation. After we travel for a few blocks, we enter into an urban industrial area. I continue to struggle to keep up – to keep the men ahead of me within view. A long, concrete corridor extends beneath a bridge. One of the men stops for a few seconds to urinate and then quickly sets out again. I gain a few metres.

After about a mile, the men break left on a side street, and I see a large building that looks like a warehouse. A single man stands watch in the light outside of the door. The men ahead of me enter the building.

A few minutes later, I arrive at the Crossroads Center. I recognise the familiar Salvation Army logo on the outside wall. As I enter, I am given a couple of sheets and a blanket and directed to a large room with numerous mats on the floor. A man directs me to an empty mat.

I fall down on my knees.

A Beautiful Faith

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St. Francis Center seeks to manifest God’s love by serving those in need and allowing them the dignity and grace to choose their own path in life._

—St. Francis Center, ‘Vision Statement’

Something’s wrong, I think, as I stand at the threshold of the St. Francis Center.

Outside, scores of billion-dollar skyscrapers reach for the heavens. Inside, hundreds of homeless men and women gather for shelter.

_A nation, a state, and a city could do so much better_, I think. Somewhere, people have told a large story as they discard something essential. And in other places, people are creating small stories as they struggle with limited resources in a practice of care.

I step inside.

Two long counters form a wide passageway into a large, gymnasium-sized room. Staff sit at the end of each counter below signs hanging from the ceiling that read ‘Check-in, A-K’ and ‘Check-in, L-Z.’ Behind the staff, there are hundreds of

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homeless men and women sitting in plastic chairs pulled up to rows of folding tables. Mounds of clothing and personal belongings surround them.

As I stand in confusion, people periodically walk up to a counter, check in, and join the larger group.

Beside the check-in counters on a wall to the right of the front door, there is a sign that reads ‘Intake Office.’ I sit on one of the green wooden benches in front of the Intake Office and gather my thoughts.

I stare at the wooden statue in front of me – a bearded man in a monk’s robe holds his hands up in the air, his palms forward. Small birds perch on each of his shoulders. Beneath the statue, there is an aged, brass plaque with words that are so worn that they are almost illegible: For it is in giving / that we receive.

After a few minutes, another homeless man approaches me. He reflexively pauses for a moment to look in a nearby trash can for anything of value.

‘Are you in line?’ he asks me.

‘Go ahead,’ I reply and gesture to the window of the Intake Office.

He talks briefly to the woman at the window, who hands him a clipboard with a few pages of questions to read and answer. He gets an extra clipboard and hands it to me. We take a few minutes to answer the questions.

He finishes first and enters the Intake Office. A short time later, it is my turn.

The woman introduces herself as Dawn. She reviews my questionnaire and asks a few brief questions about some of my responses.

Dawn is a young woman who appears to be in her twenties, with shoulder-length, blonde hair. Her clothes are neutral – simple, classical styles. Around her neck, she wears an understated, slender chain with a small, silver cross.

As our discussion concludes, she hands me a St. Francis Center card and states, ‘you can start getting mail here right away, and we also take phone messages.’ I feel grateful and relieved.

The card contains a logo, an address, and a phone number. The logo consists of two concentric circles. The outer circle contains words – St. Francis Center: A Place of Peace. The inner circle contains an image – a tree of life with a bird on each side. As I gently observe the tree, two faces slowly emerge that were previously invisible.

As I stand to leave, I feel overwhelmed by Dawn’s empathy and compassion. In a nation that worships the opulent lifestyles of the rich and famous, I dream of a story that celebrates a day in her life.

I am astonished by the beauty of her faith.

**Good Samaritans**

*No way out of memory’s
labyrinth.
Slowly life is running out
like drops along a drainpipe.*

—Tove Ditlevsen, ‘Morning’

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Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013.
My endurance begins to wane, and my body slowly begins to break down.
Then I hear good news – I have been selected for a veteran bed at the
Samaritan House homeless shelter.
From the outside, the Samaritan House looks like a contemporary castle or
monastery. On the first floor, a stone fence topped with iron bars outlines the grounds.
A gated portal allows a path of entry.
The second floor contains an open, outdoor area. From the triangle below, the
Samaritan House residents resemble castle guards, patrolling a curtain wall and a
corner tower.
As I check in, I notice a bearded man in a monk’s robe.
I later learn that Brother Joseph is a Capuchin Franciscan – an Order of friars
in the Roman Catholic Church and one of the chief branches of the Franciscans, who
trace their origins to their founder, St. Francis of Assisi. The name Capuchin derives
from the shape of their hood.
I also learn that in Western monastic traditions, there is often a distinction
between monks and friars – monks focus on devotional practices within a similar
community, and friars focus on service to a broader civilian community.
A few days later, I see another Franciscan in robes working at the front desk,
answering phones and attending to the needs of the residents. He is an elderly man
who appears to be in his fifties or sixties. He moves with humility and devotion, and
he answers a few of my questions with a gentle kindness.
I later learn that Father Michael is the religious leader of the Samaritan House.
Slowly, I begin to heal.

Veterans Affairs

One can only wish these young people well.
—Kazuo Ishiguro, An Artist of the Floating World

The light rail slowly brakes to a stop.
Chimes ring, and a pleasant female voice announces familiar words that I
unconsciously ignore.
The doors open, and I step onto a sidewalk. I cross the street and walk north to
a red-clay colored building. A large, white VA logo appears on a glass door. Beneath
the logo, white lettering reads ‘Community Resource and Referral Center.’
I enter into a small waiting room. A handful of veterans are already seated
among the dozen chairs.
‘Hey, Tara,’ I announce, ‘I’m switching the sign to open.’
‘Thanks!’ Tara shouts from behind a reception counter.
I walk to the counter and sign in, and then I find an open chair and sit down.
Large, green landscape photos hang on each wall. Additionally, the south wall has
two official color photographs – one of President Barack Obama and one of Secretary
of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki.
A few minutes later, Tara emerges into the waiting room and hands everyone a
two-page form. Highlighted marks indicate where we need to sign.

References:


'Things I Carry.' John Farrell Kelly.
Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013.
‘We’re having a special visitor today,’ Tara announces with excitement, and she nods at the photograph of Secretary Shinseki. I glance at the consent form, which authorises us to be photographed and recorded, and I sign it without giving it much thought.

Another veteran returns the form unsigned to the counter and states, ‘This means nothing to me.’ Then he turns and walks out the door.

What he means is complex – in part, he has zero tolerance for political rhetoric or theatrics.

I feel differently. This means everything to me – it is an invaluable opportunity to advocate for the well-being of homeless veterans directly to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

I allow my panic to calm, and I ask Sharika at the front desk for a piece of paper. She hands me a yellow legal pad. This would be better in a typed letter, I think, but I make do with available resources. I pause for a moment and try to consolidate my thoughts into six concise recommendations.

Then I begin to write.

Fifteen minutes later, I am finished. I pause for a moment to review what I have written.

Then I fold the paper into thirds, sit back, and exhale deeply.

When the Secretary arrives, he enters the back door, and we do not see him. Tara states that his visit is scheduled to last for two hours. He spends nearly the entire time in the back, talking with staff who have never talked with me or the other veterans in the front. In the last five minutes, photographers emerge and prepare for a photo shoot.

Then Secretary Shinseki emerges.
He approaches each veteran, shakes their hand, and moves to the next. Cameras click and flash. His movements are calm and relaxed, and his eyes are attentive and relaxed.

When our hands touch, something unexpected happens.
I cannot sense his thoughts or feelings.
I feel certain that, as a retired U.S. Army four-star general and the highest-ranked Japanese American in the history of the United States, Secretary Shinseki knows the word samurai.

I also believe that he may not yet have learned the words sadhu or shaman. Instead of a normal layer or two, his mind appears to contain scores of layers, like the rings of an oak tree. His current thoughts appear to be perfectly camouflaged among these layers. This does not concern me – I rarely pay attention to anyone’s thoughts unless they choose to speak them.

However, I always pay attention to everyone’s emotions, in this world or the spirit world, and no one has ever touched me before and successfully masked their emotions. Although I cannot feel his emotions, I can see their shape and color. A large, golden sphere radiates in his upper abdomen – it appears to be the color of great compassion.

As he turns to go, I offer him my list of six recommendations.
I never hear from Secretary Shinseki again.
Human Rights

*Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself [or herself] and of his [or her] family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his [or her] control.*

—United Nations, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* 8

I dream of a story that celebrates the value of human rights.

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Dr Shilling

Lesley Synge

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, tall and intense, is at the controls. He makes adjustments to his dials and gadgets and sends the train hurtling. As Carrie enters the cabin, she and the philosopher exchange a deep look. She joins him, leans her head against his shoulder, and he smiles down at her. He slides a hand across her shoulders and up through her short dark hair then swings his attention back to driving the train. Side-by-side they gaze at the rushing, shiny rails.

Carrie wakes in wonder: Here I am, dreaming about Wittgenstein as if he’s my lover! She knows of Wittgenstein only because of the book she’s reading – one belonging to her ex-neighbour, Kirby Shilling. All Kirby’s books have come to her. Shilling’s bassoon has gone to the oboist from the amateur orchestra; the second violinist – a reportedly beautiful young woman – is the custodian of his CD collection; an obliging bridge partner has taken Kirby’s modest collection of furniture. Most of Kirby’s books are scientific; the only one with strong appeal to Carrie is the biography of the great twentieth-century philosopher. For some time, she has read nothing but memoirs: accounts of drug addiction, paralysis, bi-polar disorder, concentration camps, Russian childhoods. What draws her is the question: how, in the face of suffering, does the individual go on? And now she’s dreaming about Wittgenstein, who enquired about the very same thing.

Five months prior to this dreamy wooing of Wittgenstein, Carrie heard that homestay families were needed during January. A group of teenagers from Seoul would be visiting the Adelaide Hills for a month. At the ‘calling-all-families’ meeting, she discovered that most host families preferred to look after the girls. ‘Korean boys expect you to wait on them hand and foot and they play up if there’s only a woman in the house,’ one warned her. The same homestay mother also said that ‘the boys aren’t used to women running the show’.

Carrie smiled at that. She didn’t expect Korean teenagers to understand where she was at. She knew she was not a woman the average Australian Joe Blow could understand. Did she even comprehend her own life? At the age of thirty-five, at the peak of her career as the public face of Amnesty International, how smart had she been, deciding to have a baby, solo? A handsome Latino guy she met at an international conference had innocently donated his sperm, a guy who still does not know he has a son in Australia. She’d been an ‘I-want-it-all’ sort of a woman but having a demanding career and solo parenting had proved too much. The ‘breakdown’ (or whatever it could be called), had turned her into a recluse; all she’d done this past year was read life stories and work on a gradual recovery. She went ahead and signed up for two homestay boys. ‘They’ll keep my son Jason company,’ she explained to the experienced homestay mother. ‘He’s home from boarding school and still doesn’t know any young people here.’ To herself she said: Three boys in the house will force me to make more effort.

‘Listen to this,’ Jason laughed, reading G’day Homestay! the English version of the booklet the Koreans would receive on arrival: Australians clear their noses into

‘Dr Shilling.’ Lesley Synge. 
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013. 
tissues and make loud noises while doing so. This is called ‘blowing your nose’ and is perfectly acceptable. It is not good manners to make a loud sniffing noise.

Jason was into The Body. More so, since boarding school. Carrie’s instincts had told her that at twelve he was too young to live away from home but her shrink had suggested boarding school as a coping strategy. She liked the phrase ‘my shrink’, said self-deprecatingly. Boarding school was to be a stopgap measure until the insomnia, the domestic ineptitude, the incessant weeping – all that – subsided. But a year on, at the school Speech Night when she told Jason she was ready for mothering again, he said he didn’t want to return. ‘It’s good here,’ he claimed. Carrie had to talk through this unexpected rejection in two urgent sessions with her shrink and discovered that in fact she was immensely relieved that he would come home only during school holidays. She then sold her house in Adelaide to fund future school fees and moved to the hills where living was simpler and cheaper. In the new place, she lived like a cat, gracefully and indolently moving from one comfortable position to another. A human cat, with mug of herbal tea and the inevitable memoir in hand.

Shortly before the homestay students arrived, Carrie took a second initiative and embarked on a platonic arrangement with the divorced man renting the cottage next door. She’d called on him one day to help with a dead car battery. Their bartering arrangement evolved from here when she discovered that he couldn’t cook: he would come to Sunday dinners with a good red and Carrie could call on him to be her neighbourly fix-it man.

‘Doctor Shilling, let me introduce my homestay boys, Sung-min and Jung-ho. You already met my son Jason when his frisbee landed on your roof, didn’t you?’

Jason flung an off-handed g’day the man’s way but the Asian boys bowed, casting their eyes down while extending their right hands and mumbling pleased-to-meet-you, Doctor Shilling. Kirby responded with energetic hand shaking and how-do-you-dos. Carrie was pleased by the Koreans’ formality. She wanted Kirby to think well of her. She wanted him to think her sophisticated and literary because Kirby was a learned man, a Doctor of Physics at the University of Adelaide. ‘Doctor Shilling lives over there,’ she told the Koreans and pointed. ‘Neighbour. Over there. Doctor Shilling.’

‘They’re not retards, Mum,’ whispered Jason. ‘They get the picture.’

It was only the second time that Kirby had come to dine and she felt under pressure. Despite their promising start, the Koreans slurped loudly, oblivious to G’day Homestay advice: Australians find noisy eating off-putting. Jason, finding himself unassailable, slurped too, letting spaghetti strands thrash around his face before sucking them wildly into his grinning mouth.

‘Delicious,’ the homestay boys declared perfunctorily, and all three boys bolted to the living-room PlayStation. There they crouched over the controls and shouted exclamations Korean-style. ‘Uuuuh!’ and ‘Uhhhhh!’ fractured every sentence that Kirby and Carrie attempted.

‘It’s been like this every night since they arrived,’ Carrie apologised. ‘They all make guttural noises then trade insults.’ From the living room, a dispute about the ownership of a world-famous manufacturing company erupted. ‘Hear that? Ssibangsae. Means idiot, I think.’

‘American!’ Jason insisted.

‘Dr Shilling,’ Lesley Synge.
Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013.
‘Korean!’ countered Sung-min and Jung-ho.
‘Tea?’ But after checking that no hammering was needed this week, Kirby drained his glass, thanked her profusely for the spaghetti bolognaise and excused himself, pleading the need to practise.

Kirby was an upper-atmosphere physicist but to relax his scientific mind he played bassoon. He’d explained: Monday was community orchestra, Tuesday wind quartet, Wednesday ensemble. On Thursdays he worked late and on Fridays he played bridge. He devoted Saturdays and Sundays to bassoon practice. As Carrie cleared away their pasta bowls, the *pah pah pah pah pah pah pah pah* of scales came reverberating through the warm night air. Later came Baroque melodies and Mozart. His standard was not impressive, Carrie could tell that, and he could not blame it on the twisted limbs of the old apple trees that separated their places. The bassoon, she surmised, was a new interest, to fill in life without his wife.

The boys bonded in a nightly drama of slurping, saying ‘delicious’ and bolting to the PlayStation. They played chess too. Even though he was youngest, Jason whipped the Koreans and they called out *cheonjae* (genius). *Ssibangsae!* he gloated in return, prompting rancorous wrestling matches. Carrie wondered if *ssibangsae* really did mean idiot or something stronger (like fuckhead). On Thursday, Kirby’s *pah pah pah* indicated that he wasn’t working late after all and she slipped over to beg a few moments of respite.

Kirby was not a man to waste precious practice time so, after a moment of surprise, he filled up his only saucepan with water to make her tea and apologetically resumed. Not minding too much, Carrie sat on the cottage steps and lazily sipped. Bassoon versus cicadas was far pleasanter than the PlayStation duel that awaited her. She furtively noted Kirby’s lovely strong fingers on the keys, their tips like spatulas, and the way his lips disappeared to embrace the reed. ‘At twenty I could have chosen to be a musician,’ Shilling said when he paused before beginning the Mozart pieces, ‘but instead I sacrificed art to science. I lost this expressive aspect of my life. Lost it completely,’ he repeated. ‘It’s been nearly thirty years. The collapse of my marriage has made me come back to it.’ When Kirby’s lips could take no more, he slid the bassoon under the divan in his living room and they talked idly while the moon rose.

On the following evening Kirby surprised Carrie by calling in to say that bridge was cancelled and would she like saucepan tea again? This time he joined her at the steps and when she put her mug down, he kissed her. ‘I’ve got something to tell you,’ he said. ‘I’m going to Antarctica for the next nine months. I’m needed in the team again; another chap was going but that’s off and it’s up to me. I’m moving out in a couple of weeks and heading to the Australian Antarctic Division in Hobart, then to Davis, our base. But if you want – that is, if you would be so gracious and courageous –’and he reached into her hair and gathered a handful of it and gently tugged it and drew her to him shyly again, ‘we could have a fling before I leave.’

Ludwig Wittgenstein fell in love several times. He described it as hardly bearable. The yearning, the suffering: it nearly broke him. As he struggled with the agony of longing he wrote: *There is something I have not yet realised. Some standpoint from which to see the truth more clearly.* A few days later, he broke through to claim: *Being in love affects everybody in the same way. Love means thinking about what the

‘Dr Shilling,’ Lesley Synge.
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013.
other person suffers. For he suffers too, and is also a poor devil.

Kirby had pouchy, sad-set eyes, a great black beard riven with silver, and rosy lips. He said besotted things about Carrie’s beautiful curves, the deliciousness of her breath, the very joy of her. He kissed her on the lips and buried his head between her thighs. Carrie could not get enough of his kisses.

‘You bliss me out,’ she said.

Now every evening Kirby returned from his commitments, raced inside his cottage to shove his bassoon away, and came tapping on Carrie’s window. She sat up in bed, delighted with him, letting Angela’s Ashes drop to the floor, holding out her arms and giggling as he climbed over the windowsill. They whispered and kissed and told each other stories (of amour, Amnesty and Antarctica) until dawn while the three boys under her roof played games then slept. Some nights she went to him and it was often midnight when she resumed the role of homestay host and closed her door dizzily against the hot starry sky.

‘Where’ve you been Mum?’ asked Jason vaguely one night, the only games zombie to lift his head.

‘Having tea with Doctor Shilling,’ she answered, neutral as anything.

But on another night when she waltzed in blustering about how she’d stayed too long drinking tea, Jason cut in to complain that the others had bent his arms back and forced him to say out loud three times: LG Corporation is a South Korean company. LG is not American. ‘And I called out for help,’ he yowled, his handsome face on the verge of tears, ‘and you didn’t hear me.’ On yet another midnight return, all three teenagers stared at her in silence and in the morning she felt compelled to invent an explanation: Doctor Shilling is a very clever man who has to speak at symposiums about green laser probes (and aerosols and things), and last night he had needed someone to practise his talk on, and because she too had been all over Australia and indeed to Paris and Rio de Janeiro delivering papers on such topics as Third World development and political repression she understood something about the challenges involved and understandably he’d called upon her … blah blah blah …

Jason translated tersely this information to Sung-min and Jung-ho as, ‘Doctor Shilling is a cheonjae.’ The boys from Seoul exclaimed, ‘Uuuuh! Doctor Shilling cheonjae? Uhhhh!’ To his mother Jason complained, ‘Have you noticed how hairy that dude’s ears are?’ and he made his arms into gross tendrils, waving them from his ears and then from his nose.

Wittgenstein hated science. He blamed the Second World War on its worship. The savagery, the bombing of the great cities of Europe, the Holocaust – the darkness of those times – all the fault of science. Scientists lacked the ability to focus on more than one thing at a time, he complained. Not understanding connectedness was their immense, tragic failure.

Shilling packed his belongings, vacated the cottage and flew to Hobart to take the ice-ship before summer’s end. The Koreans were wrapping up their Australian experience and Jason began itching for boarding school. An email came from Hobart. Kirby reported that he felt elation. Antarctica is the ultimate place for scientific exchange. And friendships that last a lifetime. I’ll meet the much-younger second wife of a close

‘Dr Shilling,’ Lesley Synge.
Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013.
friend tomorrow. He’s a cosmic ray man; she’s a Doctor of Zoology, a lichenologist, wintering for the first time. He’s staying home to look after their twins so asked me to keep a protective eye on her. Then Kirby warned: I’m not a phoner. When you’re in the most beautiful, desolate place on earth, you can’t beat silence.

Carrie was stunned by his mute vision-splendid. Why hadn’t they talked more about this stuff before he left? What she missed most was the sight of Kirby’s buttoned-up shirts on coat hangers swinging from the clothesline by the apple trees, but she couldn’t have explained why. She replied cautiously: I miss our cups of tea. Sung-min’s gone Anglo and changed his name to Russell. Jung-ho has dyed his hair blonde. All the guys wear sunglasses constantly. The Koreans leave tomorrow and Jason the day after. But you know, it’s been strangely wonderful. We all kinda love each other. Then she waited. No reply came.

Alone in her house for the first time in two months, she fell into an icy crevasse – the kind that Kirby had once described as so monstrous it could swallow up a team of dogs. And people. Mostly people.

One night she dreamt of two scientists: Physics Man and Lichen Woman. Dressed in a king’s ransom of furs they stood in the snow, pressed together. They began to pull at each other’s furry trousers. They moaned into the icy air, fogging it with urgent clouds of warm breath. Kirby cried out aaah! She knew that aaah! and the dramatic slump like a sack of potatoes tumbling off a shelf that followed – and now came Lichen Woman’s contralto, ringing out across the plateaus, the glaciers, the immense white: Shilling. Shil ... I ... ing!

Carrie woke in panic. She wept, I can’t get up.

She hated Kirby for leaving her. This sense of abandonment then transmogrified into a horrible image of his body, lying in the snow, frozen-dead, like the men of the doomed Scott Expedition.

She phoned her shrink, the man with the reputation of hip and cool. Who said, ‘No, can’t squeeze you in for an appointment until next week and we were expecting this weren’t we? Don’t fight it but repeat: Just depression. Just a relapse. I have plenty of strategies for dealing with this. But in bed in the crevasse Carrie resented the shrink’s funky mantras. Her mind shrieked with theories to explain Kirby’s silence.

Lichen Woman is Theory 1. Theory 2 is that Kirby is ill. So ill he can’t tell the Personnel staff at the Antarctic Division about Carrie’s significance and only his ex-wife is informed. Theory 3 also involves his ex-wife: she wants him back and they are reuniting in Hobart right now before he winters. They’d been perennially unfaithful to each other, Kirby had confided one night as he absently ran his fingers along her arms. She saw his struggle to hide his pain. ‘It’s not an unusual Antarctic arrangement. In our case, the dalliance with her manager – she’s a jazz singer – got out of hand. She told me: Darling, you’ve lost your bright plumage.’ Carrie had mused in return, ‘Like Molly Bloom and Blazes Boylan,’ but Kirby hadn’t read Ulysses. Carrie had straddled him tenderly and for the first time that night, they reached orgasm together. Theory 3 comes into Carrie’s crevasse-bed with a ghastly no-holds-barred fantasy starring his jazz singer ex-wife in a sequined gown rediscovering Kirby’s bright feathers.

To relieve (or to prolong?) this mental torture, Carrie threw on a shawl and went to where Kirby’s books were stacked in cardboard boxes in her living room, and unpacked them. Of course I’ll store them for you, she’d said. There were a few that
held mild interest: *Catastrophe Theory, The Tao of Physics, The Dancing Wu Li Masters* but in the end she’d chosen *Ludwig Wittgenstein*.

Wittgenstein said theories were useless. Freud’s theory of the interpretation of dreams, for instance. Waste of time. Understanding arose from making connections. *Don’t think. Look!* he taught. After reading about Wittgenstein, Carrie realised that Kirby’s focus could be called singular. When he played bassoon, he played bassoon; when he kissed, there was nothing but the kiss. When he’d packed to go to Antarctica, there was only the packing. Now he was in Antarctica, there seemed to be nothing in his heart but Antarctica.

It wasn’t until the South Australian days turned seriously autumnal that an email from Kirby arrived. Weirdly, only the heading got through and the message itself was blank. She replied poignantly but it happened again with his next reply. Then again. The messages had titles like *Re: Testing; Re: I Have Sent You Four Emails*. In response to *Re: I Have Sent You Four Emails* she wrote: *It must be a sign not to try anymore*, which was Womanspeak for try harder you jerk: telephone, use carrier pigeon, commission a robotic penguin to waddle across the icy wastes, check the deep sea cable is okay, but Do Something (*Ssibangsae*).

I’m being dropped by a fucking Antarctic explorer with hairy ears, she realised. A man with an embouchure to die for.

Wittgenstein strove to know how human life could be made more bearable: faith and love, he concluded. *What good does my talent do me*, he lamented to his journal, *if, at heart, I am unhappy? What help is it to solve philosophical problems, if I cannot settle the chief, most important thing?*

By winter, when the freezing southerly winds blasted the Adelaide Hills, not only had Shilling@icynews fallen silent but so had Carrie’s correspondents at *hotmail.com* and *ozemail*. Documents ceased to exist, and weird^ squiggly~ symbols popped ~up on the ~edges of things~\`. Before collecting Jason for his mid-year break, Carrie lugged the computer to a technician. The virus removal cost her sixty dollars. You dumbo, you dumbo, she berated herself as she drove home. When she reconnected the cords and logged on, over a hundred messages downloaded. Many were from Shilling. The first said this:

*Have Arrived at Davis*

*My last email must have seemed callous. Forgive me, I didn’t want to exert pressure on you – of course I want to hear from you again. But how could I dare to ask you to wait for me? You say you miss my shirts. I miss your Amnesty stories; well, not only them, everything about you. How starved I am for a woman who cares deeply about the world. My ex-wife was seriously selfish – even our friends say that – but I wasn’t any better. I let science suffocate my soul. You mustn’t idealise me and imagine that I cared deeply about climate change. At the university, I was ambitious – nothing more. Whereas you have cared too much about the world’s problems and have sacrificed yourself for the sake of all of us, and now you must find peace. Am I*
right? With you and music in my life, I feel I am becoming a better man. Carrie my love, there is a wonderful display of the aurora tonight – it is beauty, endlessly manifesting. If all the dreams that lovers dream originate from some place on earth, it is here. It is now.

Re: Testing
Nothing since Hobart? No problem this end. Time to get your computer checked out, I’d say. I’ve reached the Prince Charles out-base, high up on a plateau. There are five of us, an all-male team of physicists and glaciologists. The journey here was exquisite. A butterscotch moon sank through a pink sky to set over the steely-blue frozen sea. Now, stars. Piercingly bright. Lichen Woman (as you dub her) is back at Davis. Turns out to be one of those careerists who barely lifts her head from her microscope. So much for looking out for her – she’s never gives anything, other microbes, a glance. Write again, try again, my love.

Re: Testing Again
No good?

Re: I Have Sent You Four Emails
I’ve seen it so often – the stress of keeping love alive with a man in Antarctica. It’s easier for us here – with the cold our libido plummet, although as soon as we’re back to the warmth, they resurface with a vengeance. When I’m back, don’t expect me to squeeze through your window – assuming that you would want me to – because as the libido drops, the appetite for food soars. Carrie, dearest, your dropping out of communication is a sound survival strategy. But please listen to ‘Song to the Moon’ one evening. Yes! we heard it together – the night that Jason and the Koreans spied on us from one of the apple trees. The devils. I often wonder: does Jason like me at all? I’ll be in luck if he sees me as anything other than a mad old git into classical music. I rather hoped that giving him my elephant seal incisor would win him over, but it didn’t, did it? As for ‘Song to the Moon’, it’s from one of Dvorak’s operas. Listen to it. What more can I say?

Wittgenstein, aging, dying, wrote philosophy until his consciousness departed. Despite his angst and over-thinking, on his deathbed he surprised his friends with: I’ve had a wonderful life. After the recovery of Kirby’s lost emails, Carrie stays up late and finishes Wittgenstein’s biography. As she wakes, she dreams of resting her head against the philosopher’s shoulder, of watching him tenderly while he drives the train fast along the tracks. Along the shining, rushing rails which hurtle them into the future.

Half-awake now and laughing at Wittgenstein’s debut as her dream lover – especially amusing given the philosopher’s homosexuality – Carrie stretches forth an arm and retrieves Ludwig Wittgenstein from the stack. Below it pile up Angela’s Ashes, My Life by the Dalai Lama, stories of living with cancer, wrongful imprisonment, surviving incest. She presses her face against its hard cover and sobs
aloud, ‘Kirby darling, you’re coming back to me. You’re coming back. In a few 
months you will be here. Here.’ When she calms down, she lets the biography drop to 
her chest, and clasps it, and rocks herself a little. ‘I’m utterly pathetic and – God 
knows – as crazy as a cut snake but Kirby seems to love me.’

When the emotion recedes, Carrie searches for the dying words of 
Wittgenstein (1889-1951). Here they are: I’ve had a wonderful life. She takes up a 
pink felt pen and underlines the sentence. Boldly she does it, smug as a cat with a 
prize of a parrot. Bright pink – colour of the Antarctic sky.

I am indebted to Ray Monk’s Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius. London: 
The literal meaning of the Korean word cheonjae is ‘a person of heavenly gifts.’

‘Dr Shilling,’ Lesley Synge.
Transnational Literature Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013.
Adriana knelt on the tarmac when they got off the plane and announced, ‘At last I’ve come back to my Italy,’ before starting to point out things around them in the failing light. It made them late for the bus, whose bad tempered driver drove faster and faster once they got on the freeway, before leaning out when they had to stop at lights to shake a fist—‘Cornuto!’—in a neighbouring driver’s face.

Who growled in response: both vehicles’ gears ground, they edged forward sportily, pelting through unhistoric suburbs, shuddering lights and deepening darkness. They had nowhere to sleep and these people were barely civilized, he realised.

But a neat little man, ‘Excuse me – you are English?’ came to their rescue after they were unloaded, picking his way through a ring of black faces and flashing his I.D.

‘I am from the Tourist Bureau,’ he assured them. ‘Allow me to recommend a very good hotel.’

At a price that made Adriana explode. Too much a gentleman to retort in kind, the man made mollifying noises. ‘Consider your husband…’

She had a sheet of paper out. ‘The bastard’s trying to cheat us’ – she stabbed the list – ‘he says a hundred euros – down here it’s got seventy’ –

‘So it’s out of date,’ George said. ‘You heard where he’s from.’

‘He’s not. He’s a pimp, I tell you.’
‘I don’t care anymore.’ He turned to the embarrassed official who was shrugging in disappointment (‘I wish only to assist’) and asked: ‘Where is the joint mate?’

‘You like a taxi?’

‘No,’ Adriana insisted, picking up suitcases. ‘The bastard’ll try to peel us off for another hundred.’ And she led the way past weary walls and huddles of sinister appraisers, through a tiny floodlit park whose few shrubs clung together, wide awake under their own dusty leaves – and insisted on a passeggiata even after they’d reached the sanctuary of the hotel; pausing in the middle of a pedestrian crossing while toy cars yapped at them for a good look round.

‘So what do you think of Rome my darling?’ she asked.

‘I wish we hadn’t come.’

But next morning, opening the shutters to a courtyard full of foreign washing and the smell of coffee he felt better. In the dining room downstairs each new arrival was greeted formally and responded in kind, while the little girl serving them lingered over her farewells.

‘What’s she so unhappy about?’

‘She’s not. It’s just the way we talk.’ Even Adriana’s voice, reliably raised in rancour, had modulated overnight. ‘They say the Pope is saying Mass. Do you want to go?’

‘Not really.’

‘And guess who I saw on duty at the desk this morning? Your mate from last
night – pretended not to know me, cunt.’

Satisfied now, she led him round the city that in a day or two they would make theirs. Restored by the few hours’ intermission cars drove with furious courtesy; flashing lights, remonstrating, outraged by others’ presumptions, and occasionally slapping against each other without appearing to cause their owners much more distress.

‘How can they park like that,’ he asked, ‘one behind the other?’

‘The ones behind,’ she explained, ‘are only staying for a little while.’

The old city was in poor shape, he soon realised. High up in the Colosseum on scaffolding some men – probably thinking of the job in front of them – were picking half-heartedly at the stonework. Remembering Australia’s reputation for being good jet lagged observers, he tried hard, looking across the de-lioned interior, to record some sense of awe …and noted an invidious similarity to a football ground back home.

‘The gloss of Time and Restoration undoes History,’ he noted in his diary.

‘Find myself increasingly more interested in people’s use of them than in the buildings themselves.’

More interested certainly in the apparitions of women in these grubby streets; in furs splashed with scarves and with masses of hair framing oval faces. Cowering in his serviceable Australian parka he shot covert glances at them before they were lost to some niche.

‘See another fur coat and I’ll scream,’ Adriana muttered enviously.

‘Footnotes.’ Reg Taylor. 
_Transnational Literature_ Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013.
She was nervous about meeting her older sister again. ‘She was always so shy, introverted’ – she said, though Aurora, delicately scented and with large eyes brimming, crushed them to her unreservedly when they got to the station. Then, once she’d got them home and while her husband Gianni busied himself in the kitchen, she hovered over her guests, unable to take her melting eyes away. She held his hands, constantly seeking reassurance– ‘Ti piace, sei contento?’ struggling with his name, ‘Giorgio, no?’ – sighing with pleasure at having them both.

Next morning Gianni heaved up the shutters and rebuked them for sleeping so late. The sun burst in – out on the balcony the morning was crisp; there were red roofs gleaming dewily, and beyond the hills cradling the town, real mountains capped with snow. ‘Bella Italia, no?’ Gianni demanded.

‘Bella Italia, si,’ he could only murmur in reply.

‘Feel this strange, almost spiritual sense of belonging,’ his diary recorded enthusiastically.

If Aurora’s own mood was a little more subdued. She had some health problem that precluded an immediate excursion next morning and some of the first night’s sparkle was lost. He had to suppress his own impatience in a mostly monosyllabic walk to the shop with Gianni, since his host’s English owed everything to the American occupation of Sicily after the War: ‘A-son-of-a-bitch-a-fuck off.’ The next day, in new clothes fitted with many a murmured ‘Permesso?’ from the porcelain-fragile shop assistant, George longed to take them somewhere, but Aurora’s complaint seemed a little worse. For a while it appeared as if it was always going to be too early, too late, or unseasonable to go anywhere, before, out of limbo, and in
failing light for his camera, people began adjusting thermostats, security screens, putting on coats and then, if not relapsing into seats for more food and drink, charging out into the dusk.

‘They’re my family darling,’ Adriana explained. ‘Try and understand.’

‘I do, I do – but, what’s going on?’,

‘Well, I’m not really sure.’

One housebound weekend, not an English Sunday paper in sight, he sneaked out early. But behind him a shutter rattled, and the voice of that guardian against false hopes, Gianni, stalled him in his tracks, ‘No, it’s not good to walk, because... ’ and, once he had his guest back inside, revealed his real reason for recalling him by showing off a wallful of his gift-shop landscapes and drawerfuls of knobbly hand hewn toys. The evening shaped up more promisingly when Gianni set up a screen to show off his home movies with Aurora’s approval. From the air of anticipation George thought they might be pornographic – but they turned out to be a catalogue of family highlights. In the telescoped years Aurora’s daughters bloomed from urchins to soubrettes to dutiful madonnas; strutting round parks nibbling pumpkin seeds, fluttering eyes skittishly in their father’s uncertain focus, lost and found on the impromptu screen. The dead were restored too – Adriana’s mother, expensively dressed but with a familiar look of discontent as if she was already fed up with immortality, threatened to raise the question of their father’s excesses – ‘Mamma’s jewels?’ It was too late to exhume them: touched by the fresh events before them the sisters both reached for his hand in the dark, found each other’s, and withdrew.
‘Got stuck alone with Aurora today,’ his diary more soberly noted. ‘Had a conversation of sorts. She said she was tired of Gianni, he was lazy, he had no feeling – did I ever think I could be happy with a woman like her perhaps?’

Though she only really seemed to be comfortable with her sister Adriana, striding round Italy like distracted water birds, almost equally haughty, bickering and complaining, glaring dissatisfiedly at monuments, and posing arm in arm like friends. While Adriana was absolutely content. Nothing had changed, she said. ‘When I think of my husband dragging me off’ – to the land of roast lamb and lumpy shoes – ‘do you wonder why I was so bitter – why I longed to come home?’

He wondered how their house in Australia was coping…In the middle of a dispute they were having with a builder over renovations Adriana had come home one day and announced, ‘We’re going to Italy’ –

‘But we can’t’ – he reasoned, gesturing at the mess around them, ‘this business, the house -?’

‘Fuck the house,’ she said. ‘I want to see my father again before he dies.’

Aurora had raised her head when the question of catching up with their father was put, set her lips: not yet.

The fabled and possibly bogus dottore – haunter of graveyards, harbourer of partisans, dreamy, charming one handed bed maker – had gone downhill since their mother died, she reminded them; his eccentricities had become perverse. He was living in squalor, not bothering to eat, throwing away his money and blaming thieves. He’d even accused her of stealing once, made a statement to police; there’d been a
shameful interview –

‘But his pension …the property?’ Adriana interposed.

‘ – All gone. Dissipato.’ Now that their brother, Benito – ‘He was born during the war, we call him Nino now’ – was coming from Germany they could do something as a family. Put the old man somewhere safe.

It was a slow trip up between belittling peaks to meet Adriana’s father. She wasn’t confident her brother could help when he arrived. ‘He was always such a sook – I had to bash up kids for him.’ Someone else might have been sent in his place to greet them in the hotel near their father’s apartment – a gangling figure, ejecting itself from a seat before resuming it with a growl, bending double to grin at and embrace his sister before reminding her how old she looked as if she was another of Italy’s deficiencies; tilting recklessly back and forth, while dominating conversation with an imperious forefinger that admitted no argument. Gianni smiled wanly. Nino’s wife, Waltraut, was blonde and lovely, full of soft throaty murmurs, ill-fated requests, patient scoldings …and didn’t appear altogether happy.

Nino had no heart for the job in hand, but relented enough to bully them into his car. They found the cheap and cheerless flats in a patch of scuffed up grass. Through the door of one they saw washing or unwashed clothes piled on a radiator inside and yellow sheets on an unmade bed. The kitchen table was heaped with tomes, long life milk and moribund biscuits; a single globe drooped from some string under the ceiling. Aurora’s nostrils flared in the frizzy glow; she clucked, beyond dismay.

‘Povero Papa,’ Adriana sighed to her husband. ‘My mother used to keep him

‘Footnotes.’ Reg Taylor. 
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013. 

7
so clean. Shirts always starched, suits pressed – now … where could he be?’

‘Anywhere,’ Aurora shrugged. ‘He just goes – forgets …’

Nino chuckled grimly. ‘On the mountain perhaps?’ He started to tell them about some time he’d come looking for his father – flopping down on a hillside when he finally sighted him, and saluting him, ‘Ciao, Napoleon,’ as his father strode on past.

Aurora pouted. The landlady opened her door an inch. Voices were raised:
‘The bitch isn’t saying much,’ Adriana translated. ‘You can bet she’s been fleecing him too.’

Then their father appeared. Tall and spare, an old hat on his head, tie done up under a dirty collar, overcoat dangling on his rangy frame, he looked round uncertainly at these strangers in his home before sitting down to take off a shoe; smiling, if puzzled, when his daughter hugged him. ‘Your daughter from Australia. Do you remember me Papa?’ She looked imploringly at Aurora: ‘God, he doesn’t know me.’

Aurora could only shrug as the old man took a pocket knife to his shoe.

‘Australia,’ Adriana tried again; ‘Ah, si si’ – her father scolded himself, downing tools to study her. ‘E come e’ il Presidente Whitlam?’ ‘Bene, Papa’, bene, si...’ She started to cry – the old man was touched by her confusion…

Aurora wasn’t going to be distracted though. ‘Papa’, why haven’t you been paying your rent? Your money – your bank book – what have you been doing?’

Her father responded to this torrent of enquiries by going very slowly through all his pockets, turning out and examining his wallet, army discharge papers,
newspaper cuttings. ‘He must have some of his pension left,’ Aurora said. He fumbled with delicate, dark skinned fingers, surprised himself with the discovery of a note – ‘Ah…’

‘And where is the rest?’

He looked round him for the vagrant currency.

Aurora turned to him: ‘He’ll lose this too’ – and held it up so they could all be witness.

‘Never thought I’d see Papa’ like this,’ Adriana murmured. She introduced her new husband and the old man looked interested. ‘He says, “What happened to the old one?”’ she translated.

Aurora was becoming impatient. Her father was being obtuse; they searched his desk, shifting pressed flowers, birds’ feathers and ancient correspondence round, while old man made reassuring noises.

‘He’s always been the same, you know,’ Adriana explained. ‘Nothing was too important – everything would be alright – “Ma si, va bene…” he’d say. He used to make my mother scream.’

The sounds Aurora was making might have been familiar: he sniggered as she started going through his pockets. Nino glared out the window at a passerby – his wife, Waltraut – going back to the car, while Gianni tried reason, reminding his father-in-law of his obligations, the authority he should sign perhaps … gave him a pen even.

A change came over the old man’s face at the sight of it. The sensual mouth curved down; his head went back. The bank book, he pointed out, was not lost – its
money was his – who could he trust in these uncertain times? His eyes glittered with a hint of pride.

Poor Aurora, with the memory of the recent calumny her father had visited on her revived, lost patience. His daughter might wash her hands of him, he was told; she’d relinquished her duties, privileges – disowned him. She stormed out into the darkness, Nino yanking at light switches, while the old man was trying to give them a tour.

‘Get in, get in –’ the family screamed as Adriana was saying goodbye. Her father was inviting her to call again, bring children if she had any – ‘Andiamo Adriana, andiamo!’ Aurora screamed in tears of temper.

‘He had a malignant look in his eyes,’ the neglected diary noted (or was it malicious?)

‘Povero Papa’, Adriana shook her head. ‘He must be getting old.’

Next day they were better organised. There was a rush to the Social Security Office for fresh documents before the siesta: ‘The maestro has lost so many,’ the exasperated staff reminded them; another dash to the Post Office when the old man recalled he hadn’t collected his last cheque (the amused teller greeting Napoleon warmly for the second time that week). Aurora was beside herself. She dragged them all off to the Welfare Office, with Napoleon commenting on points of interest along the way. The Signori should realise, they were told, that an attempt had been made to help with domestic tasks, meals – he had driven them away.

‘That’s my father,’ Adriana said, ‘he’d think, “What are these bitches

‘Footnotes.’ Reg Taylor. 
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 6 no. 1, November 2013. 
meddling here for?” Show them the door – “Vai, vai.””

Aurora wasn’t giving in though. They went to inspect an old folks’ home high grey flats set on safe green slopes.

‘It was lovely inside,’ Adriana said. ‘So clean. They said he must understand his movements would be restricted…He’d hate it.’

The old man was nodding approval.

‘I don’t care if he hates it,’ Aurora said. ‘He can endure it.’

Nino took them all for a brotherly drive before he left for Germany, spending most of his time drawing invidious comparisons between Italy and his adopted home.

‘The bastard’s turned into a Kraut,’ Adriana said – his ear was cupped – ‘and he’s deaf,’ while the pacific Waltraut kept alternating English, German and Italian CDs in an effort to appease everybody.

That evening, after extorting directions from a pedestrian, Nino took them to dinner. He was restless, getting up two or three times to retrieve family photos and presents from the car; in his brutal way insisting on paying for everything. Seated, he looked with short sighted disgust at the menu before pushing it away, putting on Adriana’s glasses, and then feeling for them inside the empty case. He twitched, glaring at the sulky Aurora as if trying to place her, looking dangerously at his Australian guest when he put an arm round Waltraut for a family photo (she came closer anyway – they were both strangers here) and saving his last hostile scrutiny of the clientele for when they were getting up to leave.

Aurora was in the middle of a big announcement, reminding them that tomorrow she would be collecting the old man and all his things. ‘And this time you
will remember Mamma’s furs?’ Nino snapped. ‘Or are they already packed?’

But next day Napoleon was missing. He had an appalling image of the old man floundering in snow drifts in his mountains – the doughtiest of St Bernards flinching from the blast – but that night they caught sight of his lean silhouette pacing away from the darkened flat.

Adriana gave chase, ‘Papa’ – Napoleon!’ and made a fuss, but once back inside her father was the perfect host, fossicking for candle stubs and making them sit – ‘I do enough’ – hands drifting in and out of his pockets as he stood near the wall – hat on – swaying tolerantly, ‘Ah si, si,’ his shadow like a brooding witness to his daughter’s story, and only interrupting when he caught sight of their new umbrella.

His own had been stolen – ‘Il Siciliano’ – he hinted darkly. ‘He says the Sicilian, Gianni, steals them all,’ Adriana said. He kept testing the mechanism that flung the umbrella open as they strode down the street.

People made room for them on the footpath – ‘Think what would happen if the earth did not move’ – Napoleon reminded his guests, keen to show them off in his local café once he’d put the umbrella safely aside. ‘Take the maestro home with you,’ two ladies suggested. ‘He’s so lonely here.’ But the old man seemed much restored; posing for photos, proud and tearful; pressing his bristly cheeks – ‘til tomorrow’- against them when they left, and striding after the bus with a firm hand, minus another umbrella, raised in salute, as if he knew where they were all going.

To a strange house…where they drank enough, as the jet lagged do, to sleep. On the edge of unconsciousness though, something – fundamental – intruded, jarring him

‘Footnotes.’ Reg Taylor.
awake. He sat up straining, but the house was still. Adriana (worn out from carting him home, she said – ‘next time I leave you’ – murmured something in her sleep).

Things seemed to be falling into place.

He dreamt.

Of the river, ‘so cold even in summer,’ near the deserted mine. Adriana showed him her father’s old office nearby – ‘I used to come in and catch him playing draughts’ – but their house was neglected. She knocked but wouldn’t go in when some slatternly looking piece answered the door.

‘If my mother could see it …’ Adriana sighed. She waited till they found her old school friend’s place, and they went upstairs, drinking coffee with her till he noticed something, drizzle or sleet, that thickened, slowed outside.

‘You have brought the snow,’ they were told. All afternoon they watched the soft, painstaking flakes find purchase on walls and rooftops in the little town, and made sentimental plans: they’d buy the old house and after they’d tucked the old man in for the night sneak out for a walk under street lights lilting in the gentle fall…Sitting for a while as her father used to do in the Osteria, while they were exchanging leisurely courtesies with its owner…

Knowing they would never be as happy.
The Mystery of Zitrou Street

Jena Woodhouse

Flora and Christos, who owned the small apartment building in Zitrou Street where Sergei and Lola were tenants, and Kyrios Panayiotis, Flora’s brother, were up in arms. The entrance to Number 10 had of late been singled out for attention by a mystery visitor that struck in hit-and-run fashion, under cover of darkness.

Every night, Sergei and Lola observed Kyrios Panayiotis checking his five cars before going to bed. The cars were parked on the street because there was nowhere else to leave them, and he seemed perpetually agitated at the prospect of finding fingerprints, cats’ paw prints and signs of other transgressions that didn’t bear thinking about. He always hosed the vehicles down between midnight and two a.m., before retiring, whether he detected any visible marks or not. He even hosed down the hulk parked permanently under Sergei's and Lola's ground-floor window. In fact, he often spent longer on that than the other four combined. Not that it made any difference. By morning, the street's population of feline strays had left their version of graffiti all over the paintwork, in the form of dusty or muddy paw prints, while in the course of each day the pigeons added their trademarks. As if to circumvent this practice, Kyrios Panayiotis would sometimes return from work for lunch, the traditional siesta time, to exchange one car for another, but he was fighting a losing battle, outnumbered by insolent pigeons and alley-cats who had nothing to do but dirty his duco.

Every night, after inspecting and hosing down his cars and reparking them a few times, then standing back to admire the final effect, Kyrios Panayiotis scanned the narrow street. He had a clear view from end to end, and there was never a creature stirring. In the scenarios Sergei and Lola invented to account for his eccentricity, they imagined him lying in bed, straining his ears, his poodle, Pele, at the ready. Nobody and nothing could escape Pele’s attention. Such an alert, perceptive, vigilant animal! It was during the couple of hours when Kyrios Panayiotis succumbed to sleep that the deed was done. There on the marble doorstep each morning the Romanian cleaning...
lady would find the mark of the miscreant. It was provocative, to say the least. At first the offended parties assumed it was a dog. Well, probably a dog, although with Athens going to the dogs, as it were, who could be sure? With the place overrun with refugees and illegal immigrants, anything was possible. Whoever or whatever the culprit, they were affronted then incensed that they should become the object of such flagrant disrespect.

Flora and Christos and Kyrios Panayiotis held family conferences and sought advice. Sergei and Lola, whose apartment was nearest the front door, were taken aside and warned to be especially vigilant, and to report anything suspicious. Various remedies and deterrents were suggested to the perplexed landlords, to no avail. So it was that the tenants came home to crushed mothballs as a welcome mat. This message apparently made no impression on the nocturnal visitor, and again the cleaner found the offensive offering, garnished with crushed mothballs, in precisely the same spot. The next innovation was to smother the front steps in powdered pepper. The tenants fell about in sneezing fits, but the saboteur was undeterred. Access to other folk wisdom resulted in the porch being covered in steel wool. This was brushed aside, and the inevitable remained as proof that folk wisdom is not infallible.

Powders and gels were applied in the hope that pawprints or footprints would help to identify the culprit, or at least the species. Morning brought the usual unpleasant reminder, but no other trace. The creature revealed no further clue to its identity, just another pathetic little coil of body waste. Kyrios Panayiotis was beside himself. He ranted at Sergei and Lola as he passed them in the lobby. How dare it/he/she! Such insolence! It had to be a foreigner, or at least a foreign animal! Little did he realise how close he was to the truth.

In a frenzy of frustration, he had wet concrete laid all around the porch. He might as well not have bothered, for all the difference it made. Every morning the cleaner doused the marble steps with ammonia. Every night the importunate caller left the usual evidence of trespass.

The situation had become intolerable. Another family conference was called, only this time it took the form of a council of war. In the midst of these grave proceedings,
Sergei knocked at the upstairs door to pay the rent. Flora and Kyrios Panayiotis fell on him excitedly.

‘This is the plan,’ they said. ‘We have hired a private detective to spend the night on the roof of the building opposite. Once we identify the culprit, we shall confront its owner with the evidence, and that will be the end of it!’ They were as jubilant as children on a spree.

The next day, a crestfallen Flora passed Sergei in the lobby, and informed him in subdued tones that, according to the private detective, the nocturnal visitor was actually not a dog, but a small monkey! Sergei, who loved animals, found it difficult to assume a suitably scandalised expression, and could hardly wait to share this latest revelation with Lola. In the meantime, he developed his own hypothesis to account for the monkey’s presence in Zitrou Street.

The monkey, he surmised, was a refugee, just as he himself had been. It had been captured in Africa or Java, and sold to the Ambassador of Spain. The Spaniard had brought the little monkey to Athens, where it became an unwilling inmate of the embassy residence, only one block away from Number 10. There it had spent its days dreaming of escape, longing to find its way back to Africa, or Java. Then one day, when a servant had left a window open, the little monkey had made a run for it.

Now it – actually, she: Sergei was sure it was a she – was hiding out in a derelict house a few doors up the street, marked for demolition since the recent earthquake had sent shock waves across the entire city. And, since monkeys are fastidious creatures, she did not foul her own abode, but sought a convenient place nearby for the necessary purposes. Being too terrified to show herself by day, as Sergei himself had once been, she waited until no creature stirred in Zitrou Street, and then crept out and quickly attended to her needs. What she lived on was a mystery, but probably she snatched food scraps dropped daily in the street, and found pieces of fruit lying outside the greengrocer’s. She must feel so alone and confused, as he could remember feeling when he first arrived in this city, but he didn’t yet have any idea how to help her. The best thing would be for her to somehow be united with other monkey escapees in the public gardens. He resolved to think of a plan to rescue her, as he could well imagine her fear and her bewilderment.
Although Lola, who had initially flown in from Australia with the assurance of a work permit – a very different experience from Sergei’s – warmed to his story, she was inclined to think the monkey’s arrival on their doorstep was somehow connected with the earthquake, which seemed to have sent everyone a little queer. Kyrios Panayiotis, for example, had recently taken to sleeping on the back seat of his car-hulk under their bedroom window, and they couldn't decide whether it was because he'd fallen out with his wife (in which case you'd think he'd be more comfortable in the spare bedroom of his own apartment), or because he was afraid to be caught indoors by the next earthquake, or because he thought someone might steal one of his other four cars. Perhaps he was lying in wait for a glimpse of the monkey. Nor did these speculations exhaust the topic. It could be that he was simply lonely. His wife was a hard-looking, smart-looking woman, and seemed the type who would care more for her own appearance than other people's feelings, so perhaps pot-bellied, soulful-eyed, dishevelled-looking Kyrios Panayiotis was nothing more to her than that sought-after commodity and valuable asset, the Good Provider.

As for the monkey, she'd almost certainly been frightened out of her wits by the earthquake, and, fleeing into the street with her owners when the quake struck, had ended up taking refuge in one of several crumbling nineteenth-century houses a few doors from Number 10. Zitrou Street would probably appeal to a monkey refugee, being too narrow for traffic to flow through. The buildings were mostly old two-storeyed mansions with walled gardens sequestering fruit trees – pomegranates, olives, lemons. The street boasted a bakery and a greengrocer. Certainly Zitrou’s permanent residents thought there was no better place to be.

Before Sergei could intervene with a plan to save the monkey, Kyrios Panayiotis proposed a somewhat different strategy. One evening, bristling with purpose, he approached Sergei, and in a quite peremptory fashion said he would trap the monkey by dangling a mango with a large fish-hook concealed inside it out of Sergei’s and Lola’s bedroom window. Suppressing his sense of outrage on behalf of the persecuted animal, Sergei coldly refused, pointing out that theirs was not the only room on the ground floor facing Zitrou Street.

The following night when Sergei returned home late after his habitual stroll, which helped fill in time until Lola returned from the newspaper where she worked, he was mildly surprised to find the entrance in darkness. As he stepped across the threshold, something lurking there let out a strangled howl as it leapt at him and enveloped him. There was a moan and a muffled crash, a shriek as the lights came on. Sergei peered through the net that enmeshed him, to make out the rotund object at his feet, which turned out to be Kyrios Panayiotis, bruised and sheepish, lying at the foot of the three steps just inside the front door. Flora stood farther back, her hands to her cheeks, giggling and blushing.

‘I tell you,’ said Sergei, ‘it wasn’t me!’ Expecting a jocular response, he encountered speculation in their eyes, and then suspicion, as if a new idea had just occurred to them.

Later the same night, Sergei and Lola started up in bed as blood-curdling howls rent the somnolence of Zitrou Street. It was Pele, howling as if he’d been stung, which proved close to the case. Kyrios Panayiotis had tethered a protesting Pele at the entrance, where they had heard him fretting and yelping before they went to sleep. Now the monkey had struck with a vengeance, defecating defiantly on its chosen spot on the porch, and giving Pele a nasty nip on the neck before running away. Kyrios Panayiotis was seething. This meant full-scale war. First his porch (in a manner of speaking), and now his pooh. It was too much. By the end of the following day he had erected such a formidable barricade around the front porch that some of the timider tenants feared to enter. There were strange smells and chicken wire, barbed wire and nets, alarms and, most probably, concealed booby traps.

That night, even the monkey’s suspicions must have been aroused, since she transferred her activities to the dentist’s porch across the street. Flora and Kyrios Panayiotis could scarcely contain their elation, and waylaid Sergei to regale him with news of the latest development. Christos, Flora’s husband, had apparently long since lost interest.

There was no further mention of the monkey, until one evening the dentist came rushing into the building, blood trickling onto his white collar from his neck. He was bleating in pained surprise, and simultaneously cursing. It seemed that he had

‘The Mystery of Zitrou Street.’ Jena Woodhouse.
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somehow managed to capture the monkey, which had become bolder in her sallies, or perhaps developed more pressing needs. Just as he had been about to anaesthetise her with an injection, she had turned and nipped him on the neck, then fled. And there on Number 10’s porch was a fresh symbol of defiance.

Now the tactics changed again. A thin blue gel was applied to the white marble porch each night, making it a perilous operation for residents to enter and exit. No explanation was offered as to its name or composition. Several evenings passed with the predictable retaliation, and then the monkey seemed to disappear. Nobody said anything. Night and morning, the porch remained bare and clean. If Flora and Kyrios Panayiotis had cause for jubilation, they didn’t show it.

Some months later, while Sergei and Lola were spending a few days on Santorini, something in a corner of the museum caught Lola's eye. It was a fresco of some little blue monkeys.

‘Look, Sergei,’ said Lola. ‘She might have been a Minoan monkey. Perhaps she escaped from a wall-painting, not from the Spanish ambassador’s residence. And now she’s back with the other blue monkeys, safe again. Maybe the blue gel helped her make the transformation. Do you remember? It was the same Egyptian blue.’

‘Maybe,’ said Sergei, entering into Lola's fiction. Surrealism appealed to him, although art had never been anywhere near as surreal as life, in his experience. ‘But I think it is something to do with earthquake. Big earthquake destroyed Minoan city where blue monkeys live. Maybe they are her ancestors, yes? And she has phobia from them. So she panics when big quake comes, like everyone, and runs away when all the people run out in the street. She gets confused, and runs some more, and finds herself on Flora's porch… But still I wonder how she is, and where. And I wish we could know this story, why she came to Zitrou Street…’

Obliquely, Lola, too, was contemplating the fate of a small, frightened, homeless monkey in a hostile environment, among people who could seemingly turn into territorial maniacs at the drop of – well, something messier than a hat, admittedly, but hardly life-threatening. She still felt shaken when she thought of the way their hitherto
benevolent landlords had reacted. ‘Seismic country, seismic people,’ she had told Sergei, trying to shrug it off, but disquieting implications kept sneaking back like the much-maligned monkey. She kept them at bay by reminding herself how easy it would be for people in Sergei’s and her position to succumb to paranoia.

They were both foreigners, here on sufferance, their situation precarious at best. But this was the only place that had so far accepted them both. Although ‘acceptance’ was not exactly the right word, either. They were quasi-legal residents on a temporary basis. She realised that, by current world standards, this represented a generous degree of accommodation. It was probably the best they could hope for, in fact. She would probably not be allowed into Sergei’s country, nor he into hers. It was not a good time for migration. It seemed no country on earth wanted more immigrants. Even little monkeys could be demonised for arriving uninvited and unwittingly breaching local etiquette.

Realising that Sergei was still waiting for her response to his comments, she said brightly: ‘I’ve changed my mind about the recent earthquake theory. I think she has to be Minoan. I wonder if anyone noticed she went missing from the fresco for a couple of months?’

Sergei stood behind her, looking at their reflection in the glass of a museum case. ‘No, Lola,’ he said, his tone sober. ‘No use to pretend. Monkey is like us, and we are like monkey. Her turn today, our turn tomorrow. We want people to tolerate us, but they don't really want us here. Next earthquake is very big. I feel it coming.’