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Mandatory Layout of Declaration/Statements

Word Count of thesis: 100,945 DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where ***correction services** have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote(s).

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

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Full title of thesis: **HOW TO MAKE WHITE PEOPLE HAPPY: A SHORT STORY COLLECTION and WHY GO?: CRITICAL COMMENTARY OF HOW TO MAKE WHITE PEOPLE HAPPY**

.....
...

Summary:

'How to Make White People Happy' is a creative and critical thesis that explores the nature of the journeying condition and the realities of cross-cultural immersion. The creative component is a collection of forty-three autobiographical stories that fuse elements of memoir, travelogue, satire and essay. In it, readers find docujournals about Indonesian slum life, hostile New Mexico cowboys, and star-struck pool boys who dream of fistfighting Chuck Norris. Alone in the city of Paris, a bereaved widow discovers some hard truths about travel and escapism, while on the bleak prairie barrens of Montana a grizzled recluse encounters a different kind of child's play in an isolated barn. Readers also meet a dying Newfoundlander who dreams of an unusual cut of steak, two young lovers experimenting with the explicit in someone else's house, and an abandoned Balinese orphan who rises to success in an elitist Anglo society. The exegesis which accompanies the collection focuses on western middle-class travel and discusses the influences and perceptions that drive it, primarily the influence of tourist media and its glorifications of travel life. Drawing from a range of scholars and writers such as Alain de Botton, James Clifford, Mark Twain, Gustave Flaubert and Charles Baudelaire, the commentary emphasizes that any alteration of our human condition occurs foremost through dynamic psychological shifts, rather than geographical ones. Other topics discussed include: belonging and displacement, the relationship between expectation and disillusionment, and aspects of travel narration, specifically humour, satire and point of view.

Acknowledgements

There are several people without whom this PhD would not have been possible. I am deeply indebted to the following souls: My supervisor, Rosie Dub, for her great faith, constant guidance, and for showing me the indispensable value of long walks among the pastures. My surrogate supervisor at Auburn University, Miriam Clark, for her sage advice on the academic life, her Mexican meatballs, and for those precious non-academic conversations about the craft of writing. Finally, the staff of the Department of English at Aberystwyth University, especially Julie Roberts, whose savvy and vigilance prevented me, I am sure, from being deported on two or three occasions.

Stories collected in this manuscript have appeared in: *The New Welsh Reader*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *The Evansville Review*, *The Newfoundland Quarterly*, *The New Quarterly*, *The North Dakota Quarterly*, *Mason's Road*, *Barrelhouse*, *Fourth River*, *Ninth Letter*, *Whiskey Island*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Waccamaw Journal*, *The Kartika Review*, *South85 Review*, *The Saranac Review*, *Reed Magazine*, *The MacGuffin*, and *LIT: Journal of the New School*. The story 'How to Make White People Happy' has also appeared in *Trash: A Southeast Asian Urban Anthology* (Fixi Novo). I would like to express my appreciation to each publisher for their support.

I would also like to thank the following people for their support outside of university. Erin Dowd, for more than I can express in a mere acknowledgment, not the least her confidence in my dream, her patience and understanding when that dream took priority, and for always listening when I needed to talk. My parents, Terry and Barbara, for—well, for everything, of course. And all those who read this collection and kept me going with their enthusiasm, encouragement, and belief. My sincerest gratitude forever.

How to Make White People Happy and Other Stories

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Traveler, there is no path.
The path is made by walking.

~ Antonio Machado

How to Make White People Happy

Way over there on the Asian side of the Earth, on the saddles of two or three tectonic plates that buck like rodeo bulls every couple of months, sits the island republic of Indonesia – a shifting, fractured, shattered dish of a dominion with roughly 17,000 bits and pieces of itself spilled across the eastern equator. A lot of these pieces are unchartably small, some are quite large. A few are greatly inhabited, many are not; but all of them, regardless of size or population, share at least this one thing in common: they are all exceptionally poor, even the ones where white people go.

The most popular and gallivanted of all these archipelagic morsels is undoubtedly Bali, Island of the Gods – a destination famous round the world for its sumptuous resorts and shameless Anglo indulgence, significantly less famous for its native penury, and the home of a thousand other stories not much different from this one right here.

When I knew Ketut Sutapa he was 37-years-old with a rotten front tooth that never gave him any pain or stopped him from smiling. He was the definition of a self-made man, but constantly denied it because no man made himself without the help of God, and because it made other men in his village who weren't self-made a little sad and irritable.

Like a lot of Indonesians Ketut's life began with the kind of cards that couldn't easily beat a fold. At the age of 5 or maybe 6 his widowed mother took him to the busiest road in Bali, gave him five packs of sticky rice wrapped in banana leaf, and deserted him. She got on one knee and told him without tears or memorable grief what she had to do and why: that the family was too poor and fatherless to care for so many children, that sooner or later someone would come along and give him a better life than she ever could, that this was a good road to be left on because white people with money used it all the time.

Two days later Ketut was picked up by the Salvation Army, fed, clothed, inoculated, sent to an orphanage and never adopted. The orphanage wasn't in the business of finding

parents for its children; it was in the business of raising its children *like* a parent, then releasing them back into the poverty from which they'd been rescued.

Once when Ketut was little a beautiful white Australian couple appeared at the orphanage and spent a week taking several of the children for something like a test drive. The couple took Ketut for a walk on the beach and bought him a kiwi milkshake, and when it was all said and done took his best friend to Melbourne. 'His hair was combed and mine wasn't,' Ketut would always joke. 'Now it's the first thing I do when I wake up.'

At 18 the orphanage evicted Ketut via a work placement program that placed him as an apprentice cook at a 3-star resort for less than one US dollar a day, seven 13-hour Indonesian workdays a week. Within a year Ketut had vaulted from apprentice to master, and within a few more years he had mastered the entire cuisine of his culture. He cooked for all the tourists and by and by learned enough English to teach other orphans how to say hello to white people and smile like Christmas morning so that their best friends wouldn't be taken to a better life instead of them, even if their hair wasn't combed. English was a comb toward a better life.

The years passed without occasion until one day when a fat Dutchman checked-in to the resort.

The Dutchman was so rich and important that he'd never learned how to drive. He'd also never booked his own accommodations before and had booked a 3-star resort by accident.

The Dutchman was inconsolable when he arrived at the resort and saw his wretched \$400 villa without all the slightly more exorbitant luxuries of the \$800 villas he was accustomed to, and ordered a heap of Indonesian food as a way of sulking. "Things can't get much worse," he sighed. He was at a place in life where despair and disappointment came with room service.

The Dutchman ordered several traditional dishes like seafood nasi goreng and soto ayam. The dishes were a startling, incomprehensible new enjoyment, like Russian ballet dancing down every part of his pallet, and afterward he was so captivated by the performance that he stormed into the kitchen and demanded to meet the cook and take him back to his restaurant in Holland.

Ketut could hardly believe it. He was very excited and a little afraid.

He went out the next day and bought the nicest bag he could afford and some clothes to put in it. He'd never needed new clothes to stick in a bag before, but he was going to Europe now and in Europe people carried things in bags like new clothes and sometimes watches and nice soaps.

He bought two shirts and a pair of slacks and immigrated to Leeuwarden to work for the Dutchman. The Dutchman gave Ketut a bicycle and a nice apartment, plus a big kitchen in his restaurant where Ketut created all kinds of simple rice dishes that customers called exotic and were more than willing to overpay for.

The Dutchman was so tickled at how much everybody was overpaying that he offered to send Ketut to university just to keep him around for another four years. The plan worked perfectly until it came to an end. Four years later Ketut had a degree in hospitality management and enough money to come home and have children and actually keep those children.

The Dutchman was inconsolable. He offered Ketut anything he wanted to change his mind. He even learned to drive just to drive Ketut to the airport. 'I've never driven or driven anyone to the airport in my life!' the Dutchman begged. 'What do you say?'

'Ik wens jou veel geluk en voorspoed,' Ketut said.

Along with English, he could now speak Dutch.

*

Ketut had departed Bali with one language and one bag of clothes; now he was back with three of each plus some very nice soaps. He also had a nice watch.

The watch was German and kept the time in places nowhere close to Germany like New York and Bogota. It looked very nice but made other people feel bad about themselves, so he didn't wear it. How would he like it if somebody impressed him?

Ketut went back to work at the same resort where the Dutchman had found him. The resort had grown two stars since Ketut had last worked there. It had grown marble floors, bigger rooms and an elite and premium style that included a 50-meter pool with several tinier pools around it. But most of all it had grown white people. The white people were like lullaby daisies that grew around the edges of the pool and swayed back and forth from one end of the resort to the other. They were very pretty and delicate and all the native staff worked and smiled hard to ensure their easy rock-a-bye remained at the resort and was free of aggravation.

One day Ketut was talking to one of the guests and mentioned that he'd gone to school in Europe and that afternoon he was called to the General Manager's office and told to take a seat.

The General Manager looked terribly serious like maybe one of the guests had died from Ketut's cooking.

'Is there a problem?' Ketut asked. He wondered if the guest had an allergic reaction.

'Did you tell one of our guests that you went to school in Europe?' asked the General Manager.

'Yes,' said Ketut. 'I'm sorry.'

'Did you tell them in English?' said the GM.

'I did,' said Ketut. 'I'm sorry.'

'Is it true?' said the GM.

'It is,' said Ketut. 'I'm sorry.'

‘Congratulations,’ said the GM.

‘Thank you,’ said Ketut. ‘For what?’

‘You’re my new assistant.’

Ketut thought it was a joke. He could hardly believe it when he came to work the following morning and found a furnished office just for him. The office had a leather chair on wheels and flowering plants and an old Indonesian woman who wouldn’t leave him alone until she made him coffee and watered the plants. Ketut liked everything except for the woman. The woman was like his German watch and made him feel bad whenever he saw her on the wrist of some menial duty he could’ve done himself.

At any rate: Ketut took on all the duties of Assistant Manager and after a few weeks all the duties of General Manager, too. The General Manager had a problem. The problem had to do with prostitutes, but mostly it had to do with paying prostitutes with resort funds and sleeping with prostitutes in the presidential villa.

One day the General Manager didn’t show up to work and that afternoon Ketut was summoned to the owner’s estate and told to take a seat beside the pool.

The owner looked terribly serious like maybe someone had been paying for sex with his money.

‘Did you know our General Manager was paying for prostitutes?’ asked the owner.

‘Yes,’ said Ketut. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Did you know he was paying for them with resort funds?’ said owner.

‘No,’ said Ketut. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Do *you* sleep with prostitutes?’ said the owner.

‘I don’t,’ said Ketut. ‘I’m Christian.’

‘Congratulations,’ said the owner.

‘Oh Lord,’ sighed Ketut. ‘For what?’

‘You’re the new GM.’

Ketut had absolutely no desire for such a promotion because he was absolutely sure he'd screw it up. He pleaded with the owner to consider all the incompetence he'd bring to the position, but the owner was convinced that not paying prostitutes with his money was the direction his resort needed to go. The next day Ketut became the interim General Manager of a 5-star Bali resort in Seminyak, and the next week the interim part withered off the title like a dead leaf that had never been on the right plant to begin with.

The resort flourished under Ketut's management. It didn't matter that he'd never quarterbacked a front office or controlled an F&B department, for he had mastered the most important knowledge a person in Bali could master: what white people liked.

He was seemingly so educated on the matter that banks and local businesses hired him for seminars to teach the great art of Anglo satisfaction. Ketut went to the seminars and got dozens of different questions all asking the same thing: How do you make white people happy?

Ketut had no idea how to make white people happy. It wasn't anything he'd ever worried about. But it was true that there was a lot of money to be made in doing so, and he felt obligated to offer the best answer he could. The answer usually went something like this:

'Good afternoon. My name is Ketut Sutapa and I am here today to talk about making westerners happy. I do not know what makes them happy all of the time, but I will tell you what happened with me and maybe that will mean something to you.

When I was very little I had much less than any white person. I had almost nothing. I was left on a road and a nice group of white people took me from the road and gave me a home and some food. They did not ask me for money or work. They gave me these things even though I was little and dirty and could not give them anything in return, and that made them happy.

But when I was older my teeth went bad and my hair wasn't nice, and that didn't make them happy. I was still very dirty and poor but they didn't like that anymore. I didn't see them

for a long time. Then I got older and learned their language and they were happy again. I learned how to cook the food of my people and they loved the food and gave me an education for it. They traded their education for my cooking, but when I got my education I took my cooking away and that made them unhappy again.

So when I came home to Bali I went back to the kitchen, but that made them the most unhappy. They didn't want their education cooking for them. They made me leave the kitchen and put me in charge of making them happy. I didn't do anything special. I talked to them and smiled when they asked for things and when they asked about my life I told them the truth, and they were happy and almost grateful.

In conclusion then: I speak to them in their language, I have less than almost any of them, and I smile when they ask for things. And that makes happy. Thank you.'

The audience almost always left Ketut's seminars looking for a refund. It didn't seem like he knew anything about white people. He might've known less than them.

Ketut didn't care. He didn't know what white people wanted. He didn't care what they wanted. There was only one thing Ketut wanted, and that was to find his family, start a family, and keep a family happy and together and away from orphanages.

He went back to the road where his mother had deserted him over 30 years before. He wanted to find his original village and then locate his mother. He wanted to show her his diploma which he kept folded neatly in his wallet, show her the fine paper it was printed on and the elegant European language that was printed upon it. He wanted to hold her hand and tell her things like:

'Now this family has money and can take care of itself. It does not have to leave its children by the road for rich foreigners to take them to better lives. It can give them those lives itself. And we will be proud and have nice soaps and raise our children under God, because I have made people with money happy, and it will take us from nothing to anything.'

Ketut searched all afternoon. Finally he found an old farmer who remembered his family and even a little about him.

‘You look different,’ the old man said.

‘I’m not poor anymore,’ said Ketut.

The farmer led Ketut to his babyhood home, but it wasn’t his home anymore. There were other poor babies and another poor mother there now. The mother had a grove of children and three jobs that had nothing to do with taking care of the children. She didn’t know where Ketut’s family was. She didn’t know where the father of her children was. Two of her children had diarrhoea. None of them had shoes. “Take this,” Ketut said, and gave her a card with his name and number. Two days later her eldest son had a job at the hotel and was talking to white people.

That was as far as Ketut’s story had come at the time that I knew him. He never went back to that road again, not even to drive on it. He made his money and ran his resort, and on nights when the kitchen was short-staffed he got behind the burners and worked his old magic with fervour and joy. He married a girl he’d met long ago at the orphanage and had three children, and he loved going to work because he loved providing for and coming home to children. His face had the life and youth of his children, and looking into it you could not detect any of the poverty or strain of obsequiousness that warps the spirits of others who are born to the soil of identical circumstance. Everything that could’ve been gained from the content of white people, he’d gained.

They’d made him happy.

I’ve lived in a lot of distant places and been to a dozen more, but the memory of my travel life almost always begins and ends with the evening Ketut told me that story, the two of us trading our histories on his terrace, his baby daughter asleep on his lap, slumped and drooling against his chest.

I remember the easy way the story arrived to me from across the wreckage of a neglected childhood, amid a concerto of nearby field frogs and the sombre tones of a Muslim prayer chant rolling a cappella across the mellow warm eve.

I remember the white quality of that moment—the colour white bleeding ink-like from his words, leaking over us, the colour of my skin eating me like the mosquitoes; and in the moments directly afterward, beaming above the head of his dreaming child, that white 1000-watt smile sending its light far into the past, further into the future, one blacked-out bulb that only made the others brighter.

Gym Bag Steak

When I knew Conrad he was a sick old man who drank too much and couldn't walk anymore. He watched cooking shows and World War II documentaries and occasionally listened to Johnny Cash records. He lived with one of his daughters in a house he'd built with his own two hands in 1957, when whiskey cost a dollar and Newfoundlanders still did things like build their own houses.

The house was going to hell because Conrad couldn't walk anymore and none of his sons wanted to get their hands dirty. His sons were all some form of businessman. They wouldn't come over to fix leaks or tighten doorknobs. They didn't have time to deal with it. Conrad had to sit by while his daughter called on sketchy professionals who overcharged for repairs and never showed up on time.

From his chair in the living room he would glower and snort while the repairmen performed their services, and when they left he would point out everything they'd done wrong and tell his daughter to fetch his toolkit, but of course his daughter never listened. He was ancient and out of touch and didn't know what was what anymore.

'It's goddamn awful getting old,' Conrad would complain. 'And even worse getting old around your children.'

Conrad was dying of several conditions of which uselessness was the most malignant. He drank fat glasses of Johnnie Walker and had his own recliner in the front room that nobody else ever sat in because it was always as if he was sitting there anyway. Once he'd been a master craftsman who'd built houses for every member of his family, even the ones he didn't like. Then his knees ran out of cartilage and his hands shrivelled shut with arthritis. Out of ten once nimble and efficient fingers only two had any functionality, a thumb and one finger which could still be peeled open with the help of his daughter and used to grip his whiskies or pull the handle of his recliner.

Conrad had a lot of stories but there was one story he always told. Whenever I came over he would track this story down and spread it out before me like the trophy hide of a rare animal that didn't exist in the United States or even Newfoundland anymore.

It was a story from his youth.

He was a young man, not yet out of his twenties. It was a pleasant summer eve and all the boys were over for a cookout. He'd just gotten married and built their first home. His wife was pregnant with their first son. The future was a pretty nice thought.

There was an old man carrying a gym bag and hanging around the neighbourhood that day. Nobody had ever seen him before.

The old man wandered around the neighbourhood as though he was lost and then he came over to Conrad's fence. He was crippled on one side of his body. Half his face had dipped below the other like a partly fallen banner. Maybe he'd had a stroke.

At first the old timer just stood there, not saying anything. Then all at once he called for the cookout's attention. 'Boys...' he practically groaned. Nobody answered. They didn't know the old man and figured he was drunk and looking for booze.

After a minute the stranger tried again. '*BOYS...*' he moaned, much louder this time, and this time Conrad went over and met him at the fence.

The old man didn't introduce himself. He set the gym bag on the ground, dropped painfully to a knee, then unzipped the bag and presented a dozen fresh raw steaks sealed in plastic just like at the grocery store.

That was because they had come from the grocery store.

The old man had stolen or bought the steaks and was now following the scent of summer barbeques to every house in town, selling them. Conrad was incredulous.

'Are you serious?' he chuckled. 'Gym bag steaks?'

The old man just knelt there, looking up. There was nothing on his face but all the years that had added up to ending his life hawking meat from a bag.

A Christian young man who believed God kept a finger on every life, and two fingers on the lives of the generous, Conrad took out his wallet and bought a gym bag steak for 95 cents. The old man dropped the coins into the bag and handed Conrad a one-pound sirloin. Then he zipped the bag up and faded with the dusk-light into that pleasant summer eve.

Everybody said it was disgusting and probably dangerous. They told Conrad there was plenty of meat from people he knew. His wife even threatened to leave him if he died of food poisoning. But Conrad wasn't about to waste his money. He put that steak on the grill, cooked it medium-rare, and when he took his first bite his mouth rejoiced in the tender succulence. He actually moaned. He cut the steak into pieces and served everyone a bite and they all agreed it was a remarkable cut. The perfect steak for his life.

For the rest of the summer Conrad kept an eye out for the old man. Every time he had a barbeque he'd start the grill early and let the aroma of meat and charcoal carry with the wind, casting a line for the old man and his bag of delicious protein. Maybe it was a one-time only offer, or maybe the old man moved on to other barbeques in other towns. At any rate, nobody saw him again.

Conrad always told that story but I can't say whether or not he liked to tell it. In whichever case, he always made sure to mention that it was the best steak he ever ate. Whenever he talked about his youth you could see that steak in his eyes, warm in his mouth, perfectly cut, fresh and full of juice.

Discovery Channel

8:00pm

At a Super 8 in Sacramento the killer whales are playing with their food. The seals are so cute and cuddly sprawling on the pebbly shore, sunning their spotted bellies, making love along the Patagonian Sea. There's sand in their whiskers.

Suddenly a six-ton orca torpedoes onto the beach.

It rides the rolling waves through a deep sea channel, bursts from the shallows in an explosion of foam and water, snatches a baby seal in its massive jaws, snaps its back, carries it beyond the surf, thrashes and drowns it till its dead six times over, then smacks the pulverized carcass thirty twirling yards into the heavens with its tail.

The seal soars through the stark-grey sky of the Valdes Peninsula, cracks down in the water like a sack of grain. In time another orca comes along. The two whales get together and whack the seal back and forth with their tails. They play a game of pass. When the pastime loses its thrill the whales abandon their prey the way little boys leave their footballs lying in the yard. The sea settles down, the orcas swim away, the listless, lifeless pup sinks gently to the bottom.

Out of all the orcas in the world only seven are known to kill for amusement. And all seven belong to the same pod.

9:00pm

The Americans have a new gun. It looks like an igloo.

The igloo fires 16,000 rounds a second and can tear to shreds an approaching convoy of high-armour tanks in less than a minute. Engineers and military personnel are firm in their pledge that this is strictly an *inbound-missile-harming* igloo, a *keep-you-save-from-harm* igloo. But if the situation should ever arise the igloo can be attached to the bottom of a fighter jet and made to drop its incoming-missile love on enemies of democracy.

Of course the Russians are not easily outdone. They have a new gun too. It's the first automatic rifle with an adjustable barrel that can be fixed to a ninety degree angle so Russian soldiers can kill things in blind corners. The gun has completely eliminated the formality of walking into a room to shoot someone. Now the soldier simply wraps the barrel around the doorway and opens fire on those hard-to-slaughter places.

Experts in the field of human extermination are confident the gun will drastically reduce the number of civilian casualties; and just to be safe, the rifle is attached with an infrared video camera so soldiers can be sure they are only killing the people they are supposed to kill.

10:00pm

Translocated monkeys are attacking the locals in India. The element of human scare being absent in these monkeys, they tend to be aggressive and brutally attack people, children especially.

The monkeys pose a serious threat to their area of translocation. They carry with them the typical strains of diseases, pathogens and deleterious substances, and a decrease in the number of certain jungle fowl has accelerated as nests are raided by these monkeys and eggs consumed.

The Delhi natives are afraid. The monkeys demand food, damage phones, destroy electricity wires. They break into homes and eat infants while they sleep. The people are scared to leave their houses. They carry heavy sticks and kitchen knives.

They don't feed their babies on balconies anymore. They've stopped making pickle. They can't dry papad or clothes on their terrace. It's all science's fault. Haphazard trapping of individual monkeys for biomedical research led to chaotic fissioning within the community. Monkeys formed single units for better safety. These subgroups required more space from each other. The monkeys lost their community spirit.

In the holy city of Vrindavan the devout have been feeding monkeys for centuries. Some sects have even given them the importance of sacred cows. But simian aggression has gone too far. Petitions for monkey translocation pile up. The people demand action. But nobody wants the ghastly monkeys. Forest officers don't want them, zoos don't want them, other countries don't want them. Even biomedical researchers don't want them. Nobody loves the goddamn monkeys, and the goddamn monkeys don't care a bit.

11:00pm

Akmad Hussein is in charge of trafficking dead bodies from the Tigris to the grave. The bodies float down the Tigris from the city of Baghdad and wash up on the banks, most with no papers, some with no limbs or faces.

The bodies are bloated and swollen from where the river has seeped in through the bullet wounds. The waterlogged corpses are a mix of Sunni and Shiite and occasionally a Kurd. Butchered, decomposed, many bearing signs of supreme torture, they are taken to a country hospital, a shanty, where workers try to restore some dignity to the remains. The final ceremony is brief. The gravediggers recite a prayer. The bodies are buried without family claims.

At sundown Akmad stands on the banks of the ancient watercourse.

'Six millennia the Tigris nurtured us. Our people drew their water from it, the children played in it. Now the cattle won't bring their lips to it. Now it gives us diarrhoea and dysentery. Once this was God's river, now everything in God's river is dead. It runs straight from hell and back into it. The only fish you catch are the ones already floating. The only thing in our nets is garbage and human pieces.'

He speaks with his fist by his mouth. The look on his dried-up withered face tells the complete history of man's awfulness to man. The next morning brings a naked fisherman with

his wrists and ankles bound, and I nearly fall asleep as workers drag him from the mud and nudge his testicles with a stick to better examine the cigarette burns.

12:00am

Dark times for the black-footed ferret. The deadly sylvatic plague has brought medieval woe to a huge prairie dog town in the badlands of South Dakota. The prairie dog is the main prey of the ferrets, and the sweeping disease has killed a third of the area's population. The plague, carried by fleas, has the capacity to exterminate more ferret habitat than anything ever encountered.

'It's the most challenging issue ferrets have ever faced,' warns an expert on issues facing ferrets.

These black-foots were once considered extinct, but a colony was discovered in Wyoming in 1981 and a captive breeding program succeeded in increasing their numbers. Since then ferrets have been reintroduced at 17 sites in South Dakota, Wyoming, Montana and Mexico. Reproduction efforts have naturally failed in some locations, and plague has hit most of the ferret colonies to some degree. But establishing reintroduction sites helps protect a population from being wiped out by superior forces.

'It's the old risk management approach,' says the federal wildlife official tasked with saving ferret-kind. 'Spread the weak among many baskets.'

1:00am

I turn off the television and go to the window. I want to have a look at the world where all these things are happening. There isn't much to see from here, of course. Mostly just a parking lot. An old man under a cone of streetlight, getting something from his truck. The night clerk having a smoke by the juniper shrubs. Peaceful diddly and immoveable calm.

What is it that gets us down, living in pleasant conditions? Beyond the Super 8 a huge mysterious world destroys itself with lunatic flare, but there's hardly any mood of that here. One can hardly imagine a bomb or plague or six-ton orca wasting it's time in Sacramento. Where is my Baghdad? My shanty morgue? My curse of rhesus macaques? This is a fortunate space for sure, but my God if it were otherwise, if only for a while, why then I might be something worth listening to, with a voice as holy as sorrow.

The air-conditioner comes on. The air blowing out smells like sanitized piss.

In the morning there will be mini packaged pastries in the lobby, 2% milk from a silver udder, warm old fruit, English muffins, a box-and-tap that pours the proper amount of corn flakes.

Pretty Little Mushroom Clouds for Exclamation Points

In all of North America, there is not a single interstate bloodier or more carcass-décorated than Interstate 90. One cannot drive a quarter-mile down this lonesome road without having to swerve around or tread across the spilled, splattered, decimated remains of one animal or another, omnivore or carnivore, domesticated or feral. Steers, cows, dogs, deer, rabbits, possums, squirrels, foxes, coyotes, cats, bears—if a species makes its home in Big Sky country you can be sure you'll find a few of its members thoroughly mashed of life on the I-90.

I have always been a little OCD about roadkill. I once counted 67 carcasses on a 500 mile haul from Reno to Los Angeles, including a black bear poised in full attack position, jaws wide open, front paws extended, its rigor mortis so ferociously posed that I was sure some taxidermist had dropped something off the back of his truck. I pulled finders-keepers to the shoulder, imagining how cool my apartment would seem with a stuffed bear propped by the door for friends to hang their coats on and pretend to hump when they were drunk, only to find the bear rotted through the mouth with flies, its head screwed on sideways, the likely result of a midnight mauling by some beastly eighteen-wheeler.

Another time on my way to Bozeman I hit a bobcat dead on, veered to a halt and saw it scrambling in a tight circle on the shoulder of the road. The cat had hurled itself across my fender and detonated meteor-like upon impact. Its pain was astounding—the kind of anguish you can't turn your back on though you desperately want to, since it belongs to an injury light years beyond your ability to handle.

The animal will to survive can make a terrible maze of their final moments. There is no way of telling just how much time it will take them to find the way to death, even if the wound is horrific. With that in mind I took the only blunt force object in my car—a 29-inch aluminium softball bat—and beat its skull to pieces in a roadside gully, because its back was broken and its hind legs were shattered and ripped from its body.

The cat knew what was happening and snarled and somehow juked my first two strikes before I landed the third, stunning it momentarily while I cocked back and delivered the hammer stroke, likely the fatal blow, though I struck it several times more to ensure my humaneness. After it was done I rolled the bat in some brush to wipe the mess off the barrel, little white bubbles blistering in the wound slurry that was now the bobcat's face.

It had taken about ten minutes to track the desperate animal down and unleash my mercy. By the time I climbed out of the gully a single-column of flatbed trucks had begun to file down the highway, each truck lugging a cylindrical cask of nuclear waste, each cask apocalyptically decaled with a pair of crossbones and a screaming emaciated skull.

I must've been one hell of a rustic horror standing on that highway holding a murder-smirched aluminium bat, the truly creepy prairie barrens of eastern Montana surging infinitely around me; but the procession never batted a brake light.

The trucks rolled by with the grim severity of a single bead of blood, displaying nothing in their manner of transit that suggested the slightest concern for the peripheral world. Even in the wake of what had just happened it was a sight to stop and watch. A dozen nuclear transports carrying toxic-death into the sunset, keeping strict procedural spacing from one another as they rumbled through the country and finally disappeared over a hill in the highway.

Back at the car I washed my hands with some bottled water, used the rest to rinse the cat-smack off the fender, and continued on to Bozeman, where I would spend the rest of the night slow-boozing in a low-country tavern with 'Nuke Islam' bumper stickers slapped above every urinal in the men's room. Pretty little mushroom clouds for exclamation points.

Thinking about that bobcat sometimes, or that bear, or the etcetera of simple instinct smeared across the world's highways, I can't help but pity the wisdom of animals. They simply have not learned that the world is not theirs anymore, or that it could be again if they just stick to the hills a little while longer, away from the roads, and let us do our thing

January, Newfoundland

This is the season they warned us about. The time of year, they said, when you'll be sorry you're not in California, staring fatuously at a hibiscus flower or watching the breezy rock-a-bye of a Mexican fan palm. December inclined to be quiet and tactful in Newfoundland, but January brought a bleak return to punitive form. We were warned of the year's first big storm by several of our neighbours, and on their word made the customary preparations. We gathered our weapons by the door—our shovels, blowers, scrapers and sweeps—and brought out our most formidable attire, our best boots and thickest mittens, though of course there is no way to fully prepare for an unconscionable invasion. If you're smart, you flee. If you have nowhere to go, you burrow and evade.

The morning began under the usual steel. Not a sky in the cloud.

First signs of trouble appeared shortly after breakfast: a rough lick of wind and sleet out of the north. At 10:30 we noticed turmoil in the pine tops, shivering bushes, wrinkles in the puddles. We heard the flyers slapping their phone poles and several loose or barely fettered contraptions begin to clang and toll outside.

At 11:00 we ran to our car to grab a few books and met with disturbing news from our neighbour, who told us about Holyrood and Foxtrap, stomped flat and swallowed whole, devoured in white. Back inside we drew a fire, put on coffee. We listened to the house and tried to isolate the boards that groaned loudest against the gusts. We did some reading.

At noon the wind turned into a sequence of detonation gasps, the skies opened, and the snow galloped down upon the province like the fabulous hordes of Khan. The veterans found it old-hat, a familiar tantrum sure to run its course. Others stood by the window and marvelled at this interlude of lunatic despotism so abruptly and maliciously visited upon the earth. How quickly it trounced all cheer, and the frenetic lust to punish it showed, as though it were fulfilling a duty with a strict and impossible deadline.

We stayed inside much of the day. But when we heard the mournful bleeps of the snowplough, we were shamed by the vigour of its driver, carrying on despite conditions, and emerged on the excuse of some trivial errand to prove we were not so easily dominated.

The winds rose to meet our rebellion; the wild drifts drove against us. When the wind relented, each breath hung in the air like a white balloon. We found others like us and were heartened to find ourselves part of a community built to withstand. But our satisfaction faded to a death when we saw the stooped and trudging way they performed their perseverance, and our own demoralized hunch reflected in the dark windows of the shops.

Suddenly the day turned into a public flogging. The wind became an implement of punishment, a multi-tailed whipping device that lashed the skin of our noses, tore at our cheeks, lacerating anything pink and exposed.

We made haste, completed our errand without a single courteous noise to the clerk, and with the weight of our stupid insolence heavy in our chests, started home through the same abuse, head bowed, shoulders bundled, cursing at every gust, no longer interested in making a statement or proving anything to ourselves or our oppressor—who, if impressed by anything, was surely only impressed by the absurdity of our pride.

Now it is late and all of Newfoundland is dark, everywhere—dark, cold and wet—and our windows run as though their panes bear the weeping of an injured child. We tried our best to avoid our neighbour, who'd only tell us more we didn't want to hear about our luck, but soon after we came home he delivered fresh rumours of 40 centimetres overnight, power outage, and the cancelation of education throughout the land.

And so it seems we've been thrown back into the flameshadows for an indeterminate time. Our children are without their schools and the power that feeds their diversions, and we will have to humour them with stories by the fire. Even now you can hear the ploughs plodding through the midnight streets like slavish pachyderms, heaping banks of grimy snow

on top of our cars. Tomorrow we will all be excavators. Our footprints will be three inches deep.

But we have no right to complain. We made our choice to be here. It was just a shock, this afternoon, to see how good California looked from across the room of North America, dressed in sun on Spanish-tiled roofs, barefoot as always—like a wonderful brisk girl from our past, whose arm we once held in our own, and for some inscrutable reason let go.

Banjar Anthology

The Dutchman

Bruno van Persie stays away from his kind. He thinks it's just awful what they're doing to Bali. All the development and pollution, the exploitation of the natives. He photographs traditional Balinese habitat before the onslaught of civilization stamps it from existence. He wanders the banjar with his Nikon and tripod, and when he spots something traditional he spikes the 'pod and snaps its picture with seven different lenses.

Rudi Haryaputra just fell out of a coconut palm. He was up there because he doesn't have a job and can make a little money selling coconuts to restaurants. He fell 25 feet into a pile of water buffalo shit and shattered his ass bone and something in his foot.

Rudi is still learning English. He isn't sure what Bruno means by *traditional*.

Using the photo album on his laptop Bruno shows him commercial photographs of flamboyant resorts and luxury villas. Then he shows Rudi photographs of the banjar. The humble tenements, the roads of naked earth, the rustic washwomen with bundles of clothes balanced on their heads, a black and white portrait of an itinerant harvester squatting in a flooded paddy, slashing rice stalks with a hand sickle. The coconut palms.

'Traditional,' Bruno explains. 'Truh. Dih. Shun. Nul. Understand?'

Rudi knows that rice field. The parcel is badly irrigated and yields just one growing season. Rudi knows that harvester. He sleeps in a shack that's missing a wall and sometimes coughs up blood. Rudi knows the cheap tenements that crumble during earthquakes and crush families, the unpaved roads that wash away during rainy seasons, and the disfigured Shudra washwomen with dark beans for teeth and scales for skin. Most of all he knows those coconut trees.

Traditional? Rudi Haryaputra understands all about the traditional. And if the silly bules like it, praise Allah, they can have it.

Elephant Monster

Komang is a wood carver. He carves the deities of his religion. He starts with a block of teak, turns it into an image of Shakti or Shiva or Vishnu the Preserver, then tries to sell the image to people who've never heard of Shakti or Shiva or Vishnu the Preserver.

He has a nice gallery in a prime location, Jalan Legian, but the tourists rarely come in, and when they do it's usually for shits and giggles. The tourists wander through the shop and ask Komang about his gods as though they're mutant superheroes. They want to know their special powers—that dude with the four arms, that yoga weirdo with the eye in his forehead, and that elephant monster.

'Ganesh,' Komang says.

'Yeah, Ganeeze. What can he do?'

There was a time when Komang took these questions seriously. He would talk about the all-pervading essence of Vishnu, the supreme consciousness of Shiva, the magnanimity of Ganesh, remover of obstacles, creator of success. The tourists would stare at him like stupid cows and walk out without a purchase, bored by the stock benevolence of his gods. They didn't care about infinite compassion or inscrutable wisdom. They could find that with their own God back home.

These days Komang is more of a salesman. Whenever the tourists ask about the four-arm dude he makes sure to mention that the dude rides a giant eagle, kills demon kings with a spiked club, and can save mankind in whatever form he chooses—like a magic dwarf. And when they ask about the three-eyed meditating weirdo Komang replies that sometimes the weirdo mediates and other times he opens his third eye and incinerates the universe. And when the half-dressed drunken westerners stumble in and pick up a carving of the elephant monster, Komang points out its super-powered ears that can hear all conversations, its enchanted noose that captures all dangers, and its magic belly where adversity and ignorance is digested.

Komang's wife worries about his next life. There is salesmanship and there is blasphemy. Komang says there is blasphemy and there is editing. He isn't making anything up; he's just giving the tourists what they want.

So maybe there's no mention in sacred texts of Ganesh shooting fireballs from his trunk, or Vishnu winging his lotus flower like a ninja star, or Shiva's third eye emitting a tractor beam. But there's nothing that says they *can't* do these things. They're gods. They can do what they want. And besides, the bules like those little touches. They actually listen to his stories now. Sometimes they cheer at the end. Sometimes they're so tickled and impressed they even buy a carving or two. In the last month he's made enough money to finally fix up the house a little. And with that, at least for now, his wife lets the matter rest.

She still fears for his rebirth, of course, but they could use some new curtains.

Paper Trail

Wayan loves being Balinese because once he visited the West. He stayed three weeks in London and was uncomfortable the whole time at the presence of paper. Everywhere he went, whatever he wanted to do, there was a piece of paper involved—some document or form that had to be stamped, signed, read or written on before anything could get done.

By the time he left England there was paper all over Wayan. Receipts, confirmations, statements, stubs. The papers had a strange unpleasant power. They didn't weigh a thing yet somehow made him feel heavy and strained. When he got back to Bali the first thing he did was make a little fire and toss all the papers in; and when the last document had burned to ash the power lifted and he suddenly felt light again, happy as ever, and officially home from the west.

His brother Nando wasn't so lucky. Two years ago he immigrated to Amsterdam and opened an Indonesian take-out. The restaurant barely breaks even and he has trouble making the lease. He lives in a mouldy storeroom above the kitchen and is harassed constantly by this terrible nuisance called mail. The mail wouldn't be so bad if it brought anything besides

paper, but that is all it *ever* brings, envelope after envelope, bill after bill, an unceasing plague of forms and documents that need to be read, signed, and sent back to wherever they originated.

Now there is almost nothing left of Nando's once bright and lively outlook. It has been pressed from his soul by the great white weightlessness. Every meaningless document spawned from every pithy transaction since he arrived in the west surrounds him. He doesn't need the documents and nobody cares about them, but he keeps them anyway, files them into boxes, stuffs them into drawers, afraid to throw them out, tyrannized and helpless.

It troubles Wayan to see so much paper in Nando's life. Whenever they speak on the phone he urges his brother to build a little fire and burn the papers up, but little fires are not allowed where Nando is living. You need a permit for that.

Revenge of the Cow

Banjar Dalung has a cow problem. The cow is tethered to a mango tree by a 30-foot rope that grants the skinny heifer ample room to graze and shit, and for whatever reason it is fond of shitting in the middle of the road.

Its cow pies are frequent and large. Twice the size of Bundt cakes, dense and creamy with a downwind reek radius of a hundred yards, they are dropped almost tactically, like landmines, all around the narrow road. These slick heaping turds are responsible for two or three wipe outs a week. The villagers come zooming down the road on their motor bikes. They drive through a cow pie and lose control. The scooter careens into the bushes or skids out from under the driver.

The people ask farmer Nanang to leash his cow elsewhere. The accidents are mounting. The dung stench blows into their homes and the flies are dreadful. Some think the fumes cause respiratory problems. But Nanang has no land anywhere else, and the only thing on this land sturdy enough to bind his cow is that mango tree.

A complaint has been made to banjar officials, and in response the banjar has created a traffic sign out of cardboard and posted it to the phone pole. It is a crude illustration of a cow taking a crap. There is a pyramidal dung pile behind it and three plops of dung dropping out of its rear. The sign was made to appease locals, not to warn visitors, and since every local is familiar with Nanang's cow there is no clarifying information. If you didn't live in the area you'd have no idea what the sign meant. You might even think it was funny.

Thus there is a kind of induction for anyone motoring through the banjar for the first time. Newcomers glimpse that sign at 30 kilometres an hour and don't quite know what to make of it. Fifty yards later, scraped and bruised, picking themselves and their bikes off the road, they have a much better idea.

Farmer Nanang doesn't want any trouble. He promises to feed his cow plain yogurt and boiled rice, a known remedy for upset stomachs.

Third Time's a Charm

Panji and Putu are twenty-three years old. They've been married for two years now. For every year of marriage there has been a miscarriage, and for every miscarriage there has been a blame game.

Panji's parents say that Putu watches too much television during pregnancy. The television is full of terrible news. Too much bad news and the child becomes frightened of the world and refuses to be born. Putu's parents accuse Panji of negligence. During Putu's first delivery he did not open the house windows to ease the passage of birth. During her second pregnancy he did not properly fulfil *ngidam*.

In *ngidam* the unborn baby, speaking through the mother, makes a request of the father, who in turn must satisfy the request to show his worth as a provider. Ketut Ardika explains that during Putu's last *ngidam* the baby asked Panji to provide a cow. The request was impossible. There wasn't enough money. Looking to be clever, Panji went to the toy shop

and bought a stuffed cow instead. When the baby came out of Putu and saw the toy cow it was not amused, and died.

But all that is water under the bridge, for Putu is pregnant once again.

The raspy old midwives and village matriarchs harass the young couple with patronizing instructions and nagging reminders. They nag him about his hair, which must not be cut while Putu is pregnant. They nag Panji about being good, since bad deeds cause birth defects. Most of all they remind Panji that soon he will be providing for two mouths, not one. There will need to be more money.

In the evening some of the older family men stop by to offer their blessing. They shake Panji's hand and ask about the future. They are curious about where he will work, what kind of money he will make. As a friendly FYI they warn him about the rising cost of food and the famine of good jobs. Panji listens politely while the men go on and on about the difficulty of times, the strife of fatherhood, and when they are gone his posture deflates with an immense exhalation—a sigh so deep and puncturing that it visibly shrinks him—and he sits on the steps and launches his mind into space, his heavy blank gaze fixed upon the growing sundown, the shriek of pink and crimson stretching over the banjar and all its weary tenements. A tired, shrieking sky tonight.

Beny and Sidarta

Beny and Sidarta are old. No one knows how old for sure, not even Beny and Sidarta.

Their wives have been dead for many years. Some of their children have also passed away. They pre-date every resident of the banjar and most of the surroundings. Only the temple and its banyan tree are older for sure.

Deaf, bald, shaky, stooped, each has been ransacked by their unstoppable lifespans. Every physical gift with which they entered the world is gone. All agility, all elasticity, all sturdiness and strength of breath—all of it is gone. Their weak bones creak and pop. Their muscles sag. Their voices, like their teeth, have almost entirely disappeared. They have been

alive for so long that some believe they have lost the way to death, and must wait for death to find them.

Mobility is uncomfortable, so they don't do much. Mostly they play chess. They have a plastic table outside Ketut's warung and a small handcarved board with Hindu deities for pieces. Morning to night they sit and play, each match taking hours, each move interminably pondered, their baked burlap flesh so withered and heaped with wrinkles that mosquitoes can't drink from them. Between moves they fall asleep in their chairs while the other contemplates the board, and when the one has moved he takes up his walking stick and jabs the other awake. Day after day, week after week, this is what they do. Their lives were over long ago but their existences linger on. They are stuck.

There is nothing to be done but sit and play carefully and wait to be found.

Fanny

Fanny Yulianora has never seen the world. She tends to date white men who have. All the flowering village girls want to know what it's like. How do bules kiss, Fanny? How do they smell? What do they talk about?

In regards to these matters white guys are no better or worse than Indonesian guys, says Fanny. The only special thing about bules is what's in their pants. Those big, thick, beautiful passports.

She talks about her last boyfriend, a German businessman, whose passport was so thick with extra pages he could barely fit it into his pocket. It drove Fanny nuts. Any time they stepped out all she could do was stare at that bulge and think about yanking it out of his pants and wrapping her hands around it. Sometimes she even asked to see it in public.

Her latest boyfriend is a French yogi. His passport isn't as thick as the German's but she still likes to touch it. Sometimes while the yogi sleeps Fanny will lie beside him and just clutch and stroke his passport and imagine what it'd be like to have one of her own. The privilege, the pleasure, the chance to thrust herself repeatedly into the world.

The girls blush and snicker and urge her to tell more, but at 28-years-old and still unmarried Fanny doesn't want to paint a false picture. All things considered it's better to find a good reliable Indo man and make a normal Indo life. White guys with thick passports never hang around long, and when they're gone there's no way of knowing who's handling their documents.

Omens

Merpati Sutapa mourns for her son's penis. She mourns for it like a family catastrophe. Pradana, her only male child, has just turned seven. His name means wealth and reward, but there will be no such fortune for Merpati and her bloodline, for Pradana's penis is very, *very* small.

Many afternoons Merpati sits on her doorstep, knees pulled to her chest. Silent. Listless. Morose. The neighbouring mothers bring lychees and durian. They touch Merpati's shoulder. They leave the fruit at her feet and walk quietly away, shaking their heads.

A small penis signifies a bleak future. It is an omen of weakness and failure, of family ruin. With it will come poverty, lowness, disgrace. From its juice and seed a pitiful tree of wretched descendants will grow. Even the slightest incredulity enrages her.

Silly! Don't believe it, bule!

She calls Pradana over and undoes his pants. She pulls them to his ankles, slides his underwear down, lifts the tail of his shirt. Pradana, a dark and serious boy, stands there unembarrassed, holding a racquet and shuttlecock.

The penis is more like a toe. There is almost no shaft, no wiggle or hang. The testicles could be shot out of a straw. Merpati watches my reaction, a harsh level stare beneath thin dark brows. Then she pulls up Pradana's pants, fastens his belt, and tells him to go play. Watching him run back to his friends she bursts into grief. She has taken the boy to the healer, but there is nothing to be healed. She has fed him ancient remedies, prayed hourly for growth, but the remedies don't work and her prayers are never answered. Fumbling for

encouragement I explain that for many men a small penis is a powerful instigator. Napoleon had a small penis. So did Genghis Khan. Vast and mighty empires are born from tiny pricks.

For a moment Merpati is heartened. A twinkle of hope on her face. Then it is gone and she begins to weep. Out in the street, oblivious of his shame, Pradana plays badminton with the other boys. He smashes the shuttlecock with smooth explosive strokes, leaps as he swings, lunges and darts. Everyone agrees it's a terrible shame. The boy is very good, clearly a natural, and might've had a future had things turned out different.

Aswani's Rankings

Aswani works front desk at the Sheraton Bali. His shit list fluctuates depending on the day, but in general the Aussies sit at the top. The absolute worst.

Kicked around in their own country, empowered by how far their measly budgets can go in Bali, they arrive on the island and become monsters of impunity. Rude, abusive, destructive, intolerant, they care not one cent for the customs or people. The men loose themselves on the island like the pillaging hordes of Khan, drink themselves mean and stupid, drive drunk on their scooters, crash into locals, pick fights on the streets, destroy their hotel rooms, bully staff and break furniture, and complain about the service when they check out. Many come for sex that would land them in jail in their own country. Girls who are too young. Boys who are too young. Boys AND girls who are too young. Aggression and threat is their nearest response to anything that displeases them. They traffic drugs into the country, throw drug parties in their rooms, then stumble around the lobby out of their minds, shouting and babbling, passing out in pool chairs and other inappropriate places. They're also dreadful tippers.

Not far behind the Aussies are the Dutch, the ex-kingpins of the East Indies. Stingy. Fussy. Greedy. Brusque. The trader's icky nature and monopolizing spirit forever thrives in them. In business they are sociopaths, conscienceless and double-dealing. As tourists they whine and complain like no other race of bule. The service is always too slow; the food is

always too spicy. Obsessed with value, every charge is excruciatingly negotiated. They bargain for discounts, deductions, rebates, concessions. They haggle with the lowly street merchants even when the price is easily within their means, and they are merciless nit-pickers, extracting every possible flaw they find, exaggerating every inconvenience so they can get something back for it.

After the Aussies and Dutch the order is interchangeable. There are the Russians, cruel and demeaning; the French, rude and haughty; the Japanese, vain and juvenile; the Kshatriya Indians, twice-born and excessively prejudiced. Each has its own brand of obnoxiousness and snobbery, its own distinct style of being unpleasant.

As far as degraders go, Americans are surprisingly low on the list. But as Aswani points out, having worked for Princess Cruise Lines for six years, Bali is too far for most Americans.

‘The Caribbean is your toilet.’

Product Enhancement

Desperate times call for rainbow chickens. This third foetus will not die in Putu’s belly. She has been to the shaman. He has sanctified the womb, blessed it against black spirits that enter through the orifices and pollute the life cycle. The baby rests easily in a bubble of good magic, and so Putu rests easily too. Everybody except Panji.

‘Spirits may not destroy this child, bule. But hunger is not a spirit.’

He buys a mother hen and six hatchlings from Rudi Haryaputra. He holds the chicks by their legs and dyes them each a different colour—red, orange, green, purple, pink and blue. The chicks trail the hen like a string of Christmas lights. They look like Easter marshmallows.

The local children are his market. All children love cute and fluffy playthings. Now these cute and fluffy things are bright and colourful too. The best part is that the dye is nontoxic. After the colour fades or the children get bored with them, the fluorescent

hatchlings can be raised, slaughtered, and cooked for dinner. At least Panji thinks the dye is nontoxic. He has never actually eaten a rainbow chicken.

Neighbours warn Panji that he is wasting his time. People in Bali have been colouring hatchlings for decades and never make a dime. But Panji has a vision. If the chicks do well then maybe he will dye some puppies and kittens. He could even open an exotic petting zoo. Imagine a place where you could find purple goats and yellow monkeys, rabbits with cherry-red tails, pigeons with the candied plumage of tropical parakeets, mules as pink as watermelon meat. Imagine the money such a place would make.

Imagine how well a family could eat.

Dogs

In no condition to live, not quite unhealthy enough to die. That about sums them up.

Berserk, rotten, stupid and desperate they are not unlike the mutated rummagers one might see in a post-nuclear fiction. A good portion of them have had their fur stripped off their bodies by disease. They are balding and inflamed, hobbled and deformed, ridden with once-treatable disorders that have progressed wildly beyond treatment. Frequently some tropical mite more despicable than a flea (if one can imagine such a thing) has eaten into their flesh and caused pustules or swellings the size of walnuts. Their teeth are rotting out of their mouths; their toenails are falling off their paws; their faces are ripped and scarred from street fights with other free-roaming packs; many are blind or going blind; most are bereft of intelligence from constant fornication within their own litters; and almost all of them are so itchy with mange that they've scratched themselves bloody and raw.

Around Banjar Dalung we have no shortage of notable waste cases. Out here one will find maimed dogs, starving dogs, beaten dogs, insane dogs, dogs that stand by the road like madmen street prophets, barking unceasingly at nothing, and another that eats laundry off Citra's clotheslines, but only girls' underwear. There is one that has done nothing for several days but lick the worms in its anus under the shade of a pomelo tree. There is another that

cannot push its stool and mopes around the neighbourhood futilely popping a squat in one place after another, the expression in its eyes always as if it is about to weep. At the moment our grand attraction is a pair of sweethearts that have inextricably tangled their loins while copulating. The male has gotten its penis jammed inside the female and in its desperation to dismount has somehow twisted completely in the opposite direction, leaving the two hopelessly fastened rump to rump, pitifully whining from both ends.

Despite the sickening pandemic there has never been a thought toward euthanasia. ‘Nobody in the banjar has ever been dead,’ explains Ketut Ardika. ‘So how can we say it is better than life?’

Home Security

Pa Putra is the local rich man. He likes to keep it old school.

He doesn’t believe in guard dogs because a dog’s loyalty is welded to its stomach. He doesn’t believe in guard *men* because a man’s loyalty is welded to his wallet. Both are easily bought off. One with a soupbone or hunk of pig, the other with new curtains or a rice cooker. Alarms? Alarms are complicated and ungratifying. Where is the sense of restitution? Where is the tax of flesh and blood that a thief deserves for dishonouring a man’s home?

Channelling his peasant roots he has placed a ten-foot cinderblock wall around his property. Jagged broken glass, broad and lacerating like shark teeth, has been cemented to the top. Beyond the wall, roaming freely throughout the yard, are huge violent geese with demonic red eyes and sinister hisses. Underfed to ensure optimal malevolence, the nasty pimple-brained fowl despise everything and attack everyone but Pa Putra. On three occasions they have even nipped his wife and drawn blood.

His wife, Ibu Ani, detests the primitive wall and loathes the vicious geese. After three bloody assaults she has finally had enough. She pleads with Pa Putra to install a security system befitting the family wealth. Times have changed. Home security is more than just

protection; it is a symbol of status. Elaborate ironwork gates. Professionally trained guards. Infrared sensors. These are the precautions of the rich and powerful.

But Pa Putra is from another time and island. And in this time, on this island, thieves had their nipples crushed with pincers, their crotches scalded with torches, and were forced to grasp the edge of searing knife blades; and all this was *after* they were beaten within an inch of their lives and *before* they were shunned and banished from the village. No, desecration deserves an injury. Home security should disfigure, not just deter.

Ibu Ani concedes. All that is fair enough, she says. But the next time his home security disfigures her she'll cut off their necks, split their bellies, and feed their gizzards to the strays. He is not the only one from another island and time. She can take it old school too.

Sapto

Second Inspector Sapto Sarjana likes me. I have a good attitude. I don't complain when his daughter picks chilies off the chili tree in my yard. When one of my dress shirts went missing from his wife's laundry service, I didn't lose my temper or make silly accusations. I understood that sometimes things get lost.

'All banjar is family. What is one shirt between family?'

This evening Inspector Sarjana wishes me to understand something else. Many bules have a bad opinion about the Bali Police. They think it is corrupt. The officers target foreigners, detain them on false traffic violations, extort money from them.

But the police are just as poor as everyone else on this island. And just like everyone else their primary income derives from tourists. All over Bali people are free to do business with foreigners, strike deals with foreigners, make money and profit off foreigners.

'Why shouldn't the police?'

Furthermore, there is nothing wrong with paying a fine on the spot. The Denpasar Court has too many cases to handle. Court procedure is bogged, the language barrier is a

problem. Paying the traffic officer expedites process, reduces paperwork, and is almost always a better bargain than the court penalty.

‘All these things are good, no?’

The bules get mad because the violations are trivial. But it is not the officer’s privilege to choose which laws to enforce. If a bule does not wear a helmet or shirt on his scooter, if he drives through traffic signals or on sidewalks, he must answer to justice.

‘It is not honourable to fault a man for doing his service.’

But tonight is my lucky night. Because I am such a good neighbour Inspector Sarjana offers me his counsel. He starts by running me through a typical police stop. When a bule is pulled over by the Bali police he is presented with two options. The first option is to pay the fine on the spot; the second option is court. Choose the second option if you wish, but know that you will be waiting in court for many hours and be convicted on every charge. And because you did not make it easy and pay the officer—something the officer will equate to stealing food from his mouth—you will probably be assessed for several frivolous charges on top of the original.

The more sensible choice is paying the officer directly. Don’t think of it as a shakedown. Think of it as a convenience fee. For this fee you get to avoid court, save time, and avert a steeper fine and any trumped-up charge that would accompany it. A fair convenience fee is 200,000 rupiah—twenty dollars American. Any less and you are getting a good bargain. Any more and you should negotiate. Afterward, if you are friendly and cooperative during the procedure, you will get a free pass in that officer’s area for the rest of the day. No shirt, no helmet, no sobriety—no problem. And if you are really friendly the officer might buy you a beer with your money and drink with you in the police post.

Of course one good turn always deserves another. For this gracious information the inspector requests a small donation, something proper for his magnanimity. After all, ‘The person who is worth a favour is the one who knows how to return it, no?’ I count out the bills.

Second Inspector Sapto Sarjana likes me. I have a good attitude.

Under the Ambarella

Some days Panji finds work as a labourer. Other days he pushes a cart through the banjar and sells banana fritters that his mother makes. He is gone from dawn to dusk and when he comes home he is bleak and exhausted and barely eats or says a word, not even to Putu.

The rainbow chickens do not sell. Two were killed by disease, another was eaten by dogs, along with the hen. The twilight sky grows red while Panji sits with his back against their scrawny ambarella tree, watching the remaining three peck around the yard. The children think they're adorable but don't have the money to buy them. Meanwhile the hatchlings get bigger. Their cuteness fades. He thinks about starving them to stunt their growth, but the birds will age regardless, and starving them will only make them sick and unappealing.

Now the sun is gone and the sky is torched. The clouds are flaming tufts, massive and full. Panji wipes his hands down his face, dragging the bottom eyelids, exposing the red undersides. He brings his fingertips together at the tip of his chin, as though in prayer, then reverses the motion. The calloused palms move upward against the cheekbones, grind into the eye sockets with deep methodical circles, then continue across the forehead, the fingers scraping across his skull, through his heavy black hair that hasn't been cut in months and makes his head hot. Over and over he does this, wiping his face, grinding his eyes, the rough bark of the ambarella jammed against his back bones. Somewhere down the road there is western pop music, vain and happy. Somewhere else the sound of iron being beaten.

The twilight sky grows red.

The Norwegian

Didrik didn't trust hospitals. People went in but they didn't come out. Ketut Ardika suggested that perhaps they didn't come out because they waited too long before going in, but that was Ketut's opinion. Didrik's opinion was that it was more hazardous to visit a hospital

than to stay home and wait a sickness out. So when he caught Dengue fever, that's what he did.

Didrik doesn't live in the banjar anymore. He's got a small room at Kasih Ibu General Hospital. He sleeps 22 hours a day and when he's awake he tends to bleed through his nose and gums. He craps black stools through a hole in his bed because he's too weak to walk to the bathroom or sit on the toilet. Tiny infernos rage in his joints and he's developed a moaning revulsion toward movement. The nurses rub cream on his rashes—big red splotches on his face and neck—and turn him every two hours to prevent pressure ulcers. He is pale, clammy, frail and emaciated, and if he survives the week the doctor warns him that he will live the rest of his life like that.

Didrik isn't conscious often, but when he is he tries to be a good sport. He tells visitors from the banjar to inform Ketut that both of them were right. People go in to hospitals but they don't come out. And yes, they should have gone sooner.

Settlement

Little Dewi can't reach that mango in the mango tree. So she throws a rock at it. The rock misses the mango but smacks a bees' nest. The bees miss Little Dewi but sting the shit out of Citra, the washwoman. A dozen livid buggers chase Citra around the courtyard. She screams and flaps her arms. Blind with panic, she slams into a porch post and breaks her wrist and splits her forehead.

Citra and her husband are some of the poorest in the banjar. They can't afford the medical fees. Little Dewi's parents say they are even poorer. They can't afford the fees either. But Citra's arm is still broken and somebody has to pay.

According to Citra's husband, since it was Little Dewi who threw the rock and angered the bees, it should be Little Dewi's parents who cover the costs. Little Dewi's father disagrees. It is not their fault the bees mistook Citra for their daughter. The bees are part of

nature and answer to God alone. If the bees attacked Citra then it was by God's infallible will, and no one can be liable for the will of God.

The Balinese don't do courts. The law is carnivorous and swallows money and time like a great shark. Legal procedure depletes the family treasury. Inability to resolve a dispute degrades *menyama* (all Balinese are family) and disgraces the banjar. When a case ends up in court the friendly Bali nature disappears. The people get emotional and competitive. Women start to wail. Men throw punches. Sometimes a fire is started.

Instead the banjar head is requested as a mediator. Prominent family members from both sides are called together at Pa Putra's homely-walled estate. The demon geese are driven into their coop. Tiny plastic footstools are provided for seating. Citra sits quietly during the proceeding, six swollen welts on her face, a bandage around her head, her arm in a sling. Behind her Little Dewi watches from her grandmother's lap, ferociously sucking a cheap popsicle, blue syrupy goo dripping over her knuckles.

The mediation is slow and difficult. Pa Putra urges both families to split the charges evenly, but Little Dewi's father swears he cannot even afford that. Impatient and tired, Pa Putra presses Citra's husband to let the matter drop and seek donations from neighbours. Almost miraculously Citra's husband agrees—on one condition. Little Dewi's father must take the sacred oath.

A startled murmur breaks out among the families. The sacred oath is the most serious method of resolution, reserved for only the most serious disputes, such as land rights or fatal accidents. The one who dares take the oath is granted credibility beyond suspicion. But should the oath be taken after one has falsely testified, the consequences are tormenting and eternal. Citra's husband does not wish to make a poor family poorer. If Little Dewi's father is speaking the truth about their hardship he need simply recite the oath and the matter will be settled. As a taste of what's at stake Pa Putra summarizes the vow.

Under penalty of the sacred oath liars and their accomplices will be confounded by every evil and struck by lightning. When they go into the forest they will become entangled in the creepers, losing their way, running here and there without finding the road. On the road they will be crushed by falling trees, their skulls split open, their brains spilt out. In the field they will be struck by lightning from a clear sky and impaled by the horns of buffaloes. They will fall into deep rivers where pointed stones will cut their chests open. Their bones will be smashed against the rocks, the blood will flow from their veins, their corpse will sink to the bottom of the water. In their house they will be the prey of terrible sickness and die unnatural deaths. Their defecations will be bloody and black, they will have stomach pain that does not get better. No one will help them and during their sleep they will die while dreaming. Neither they, nor their children, nor their grandchildren will be men on this earth again. They will reincarnate as maggots, clams, worms, serpents. Such is the cost for all liars and imposters as ordained by the eminent Gods of the East, North, South, West and Centre. They, and all their offspring, will know no further happiness forever.

Little Dewi's father looks sick. It is the most awful thing he has ever heard. Family elders warn him not to do it. No amount of money is worth such a damning, dreadful pledge. But there is little choice. Going to court will disgrace and ruin everyone involved. He calms his frantic wife, kisses Little Dewi on the head, and agrees. Pa Putra sends for an authorized religious man, who recites the official oath from a huge tattered book. The oath takes fifteen minutes to read and contains every form of anguish a person can suffer. Certain parts are so graphic and horrid that some of the witnesses plug their ears. When every ghastly consequence has been recited Little Dewi's father places his hand across his heart and swears by the sacred oath that he has spoken the truth. The dispute is settled.

Leaving Pa Putra's estate there are no hard feelings, no punches or fires. Each family departs respectfully and walks home together. Citra's husband helps his feeble wife to her feet

and escorts her off, while Little Dewi climbs her father's back and rides his shoulders out of the courtyard, wailing for another popsicle, beating his head with her sticky fists.

Little Miss Sunshine

Third trimester and Putu's belly hangs low and large. Every precautionary ritual has been observed, every taboo has been eschewed. The television stays off. No newspapers are permitted. She drinks young coconut milk and keeps away from octopus meat.

To assure the forming child that life is beautiful and worth entering the banjar puts on a kind of fundraiser. Everyone donates a positive vibe.

Wherever Putu goes the people make sure to laugh and joke and make nice comments. There is no talk of sorrowful things. Politics are banned from conversation. Complaints and arguments fall off a cliff. The congeniality is adamant and ubiquitous. It waves from every veranda, smiles from every balcony, wishes her well from every warung; and anywhere Putu goes she is sure to feel the sun and breeze of everyone's disposition. The world is warm and happy, all day, every day, and nothing bad ever happens.

In the whole banjar there is just one shadow, and it sleeps in Putu's bed and sits against her ambarella tree, wiping its face with its hands, watching their rainbow chickens.

Evening at the Warung

Old man Sadewo is Hindu-Balinese. He doesn't like what's been happening lately. Thirteen years ago, before the Kuta bombings, there were six Muslim families in the village. Now there are fifty-seven. And it isn't just Banjar Dalung.

All over the island Muslim presence is intensifying. Make no mistake about it, bule. They are taking over. That is what they do. You let in one and soon there are five, and before you know it, another mosque, another soup dumpling vendor. Then the bombs.

Old Sadewo leans in close. His tattered brown lips have some kind of vitamin deficiency and there is a salivary problem, little white clumps of spittle at the corners of his mouth, wet and hot.

More and more their influence escalates. Already Balinese-Hindus are beginning to pray three times a day. Already their children are being coerced to pray in school while English tourist books ignorantly explain that it is Balinese tradition to pray three times daily. But that is not the traditional Balinese way. Even worse, prayers are now broadcast from loudspeakers around many Hindu temples and on Bali TV, just like the Islamic call to prayer from mosques and the broadcasting of Islamic evening prayer by national networks.

Then there are the dark letters. Evil conspiratory flyers circulated by the hundreds, authored by anonymous Muslim groups that threaten to overrun the island and mock Hindus for their naïve tolerance. The letters speak of villages already in the hands of Muslims, boast of a future when all of Bali is under Muslim control, and are interspersed with sinister *HA, HA, HAs*. Enough is enough!

Bali is for the Balinese! Focused initiatives must be put in place to ensure the safety of its territory. Village councils must stand strong to prevent the sale of land to Muslim outsiders. If Islam is more fanatical than ever, then Hindus must be more fanatical. No inclusion. No intrusion. No dilution. It is cleanse or be cleansed, purge or be purged—though surely he doesn't need to tell *me*. If anyone can understand the situation, it's an American.

I know what these people can do. I know what must be done to them.

Banjar Legend

Budi Santoso has the biggest laugh in the banjar. Ketut Ardika, who lives 1.3 kilometres away, can hear it from his balcony even when the wind is blowing against it. He has even complained that it startles the dogs around his building and makes them bark. No other laughter from this side of the banjar has ever reached Ketut's home, and no laugh originating from Ketut's side has ever been heard over here. Ergo, Budi's laughter is the biggest in the village, at least 1.3 kilometres in size. And traveling downwind it's likely bigger than that.

On the darker side of the lore coin is Yenny Novenia, who is alleged to possess the biggest, most horrifying shriek in the banjar. Rumour says that while giving birth to her first child she screeched so monstrously that from thereon the neighbour's chickens never laid another egg. During delivery of her second child they say she shrieked her cousin into celibacy. The pretty young girl was assisting the birth, cooling Yenny's head with a washcloth. When she heard that hideous screech she fled the room in terror, dumped her boyfriend over the phone, and the next day ran off to join the nunnery.

It is said that several marriageable girls have been rendered religious sisters by Yenny's frightful birth wail. The mothers of the young men fret for their sons, and warn them in deadly earnest to keep their sweethearts away from the banjar the next time she passes child.

Professional Opinion

At a beach bar in Kuta I meet a retired veterinarian from San Diego who is enjoying his time in Bali, but disturbed to his deepest medical sensibilities by the glut of diseased mongrels that are roaming within arm's reach of tourists.

He says he will not walk with his wife after dark because he is certain it is only a matter of time before the dogs shed every last vestige of domestication, instinctively assemble into packs, and attack someone in numbers, if they haven't already done so, and it is his belief that in the more rural areas they probably have.

Two months later the grim prophecy comes true. A toddler girl is found ripped to pieces in a rice paddy outside Dalung. She has been attacked by an animal, or multiple animals, and almost immediately the blame falls upon the stray dogs in the area.

Public outrage is fierce. Fear and retaliation override principle. For the first time ever dozens of wretched mongrels are being rounded up or killed on sight. Around the banjar poisoned meat (strychnine and nux vomica) is placed strategically in uncovered bins, and at

night when the dogs scavenge we can sometimes hear one baying miserably in the dark somewhere, slowly dying in tremendous agony.

This morning a rendition of Romeo and Juliet. The local sweethearts breathe no more. Still joined at the genitals, still rump-to-rump, they are both stone dead on the side of the road. As a final disgrace each has leaked their bowels across the other.

In the afternoon two skeletons in surgical masks come by with a junk cart. Each grabs a dog by its forelimbs and yanks at the same time. They tug and pull, pull and tug, but the bond is unbreakable. As in life, so in death.

The men drop the bodies in the dust. They pick them up and try again. They swing the dogs back and forth by the legs, gathering momentum, then heave the bodies into the cart.

As the jumbled cart wobbles away things shift, other things are seen. Another dead dog and two headless geese. There is also a green chicken.

The Perfect Paris Day

Gloria Chabowska baked a mean quiche Lorraine. Fifty-six years in Winnipeg would do that to a woman.

She was third generation Polish Canadian with three cordial chunky daughters who were married to cordial chunky men. Dispersed between the six of them—her children and their husbands—was approximately 150 pounds of excess rump and gut that could be traced directly back to the dozens of doughy, eggy, starchy goodies Gloria whipped up for them on a weekly basis. She was brilliant with popovers, magical with muffins, and touched genius with her cakes and pies; but her legend was cemented in the family circle by the wonderful things she did with meat and cream. Oh, those quiche Lorraines.

Gloria had never done much travelling. Like her mother and grandmother before her she had married young and nested promptly. She'd been feeding and fattening loved ones from the time she could crack an egg, and had never seriously considered another way of life. If the good Lord had meant for her to explore the world or do anything more exhilarating than raise and overfeed a family, he wouldn't have pitched her smack dab in the heart of Canada, the most natural spot on the planet, she figured, to do exactly and only that.

In Gloria's world, appreciation was a rare and half-ass occurrence. She had the kind of married life that came with \$20 gift cards for Christmas.

One Christmas her husband got her a shopping card to Canadian Tire and told her to get something different for herself, something kooky. So she did.

She bought a vintage travel calendar with posters of European cities at the turn of the century. Just a sprinkle of flair to brighten the kitchen.

She hung the calendar by the kitchen window and every now and then when she was stirring or mincing or whisking or chopping she'd glance up from the task at hand and let her mind be drawn into another existence and ethnicity.

One month there was a poster of Valencia, and she would picture life as a fiery Spanish housewife who cooked paella over an open flame and beat her husband with kitchenware for having a mistress. Another month there was a poster of Naples, and she would imagine herself as a buxom Italian mama who talked passionately with her hands, sung old-world songs over huge pots of bubbling marinara, and slapped her macho sons for cursing at the dinner table.

It was fun.

Gloria didn't know much about the world, but she supposed that every culture had its place on God's spice rack. Some were saffron and chipotle powder. Others were less exotic. Sometimes when Gloria looked around Winnipeg she thought of table salt.

One day while Gloria was out shopping her husband choked on a Dutch pretzel and died on their good carpet. He was an orthodontist and never missed a Leafs game.

After the funeral Gloria's daughters got worried about her. Her quiches didn't taste the same. Depression had gotten into her recipes, they said, had altered the texture and consistency. Sometimes they could even taste a hint of suicide.

Gloria wasn't sure what her children were putting their mouths around. There was no suicide in her quiches. Guilt, anger, fear, confusion, a little too much gruyere maybe—but no unbearable darkness.

Her children were terrified and tried everything they could to get the sorrow out of her baking. One daughter got her a bearded Schnauzer, but the Schnauzer had a brain aneurysm and dropped dead in the yard. One daughter got her a pretty orange cat, but the cat bit her thumb and ran away. The third daughter got her Tango classes for singles at the YMCA, but the classes came to an end when a hefty Greek widower crushed her foot and cost her three toenails.

After that nothing Gloria made tasted right. Her daughters would come over for supper, take one bite of her cooking, then put down their forks and look at each other with grave distress. Later in the sitting room, fretting softly among themselves, they would discuss their mother's uneatable grief and hark back to the days when her meal-making was full of warmth and joy, when her quiches were as light and fluffy as her disposition, and not the jiggly custardy deformities they were now.

Then one day her eldest daughter had the perfect idea. She remembered that old travel calendar Gloria had once kept by the kitchen window—the one with all the European cities. A few days later all three daughters stopped by the house, told Gloria to close her eyes, and placed a single round-trip ticket to Paris in her open palm.

The daughters got very emotional and bunched around Gloria for a group hug. One of them started to weep.

The ticket was actually a full itinerary that included two layovers each direction and a whopping 34 hours of travel time. It was the most random present Gloria had ever received and when the emotion settled down she couldn't help to ask why they'd thought to buy her Paris instead of a \$20 gift card to Canadian Tire or maybe Tim Hortons. Her daughters were stunned.

'Why mother! All your life baking those wonderful quiches! Of course you want to see Paris!'

Gloria was confused. She'd never thought of her quiches as a subconscious yearning for travel. A quiche was a simple economical dish that reheated well and provided generous leftovers. Of all the hundreds she'd ever baked, she promised her daughters that not one had ever resulted from an interest in French culture, and that it really wasn't necessary to fly her to Paris or Europe or any other quiche-related location.

Thoughtfulness aside, the gesture was silly. And for the next three months leading up to the trip Gloria was relentless in trying to reason her way out of it. Every time she spoke to

her daughters she would remind them of how she'd never travelled anywhere by herself. And every time her daughters would remind her that the plane was already paid for, the hotel already booked, and that everything was non-refundable.

‘Honestly, mother! We put a lot of money into this!’

Once when Gloria really got stressed her daughters lost their patience entirely. They marched Gloria to the couch, sat her down like a child, and explained once and for all that there was absolutely nothing to worry about. All she had to do was fly to Toronto, change planes, fly to Amsterdam, change planes, claim her luggage, recheck her luggage, go through customs, go through security, fly to Paris, pick up her luggage, find a cab, check into her hotel, spend five days alone in a strange city across the world where she didn't speak the language or know a single person, then find a cab back to the airport, check her luggage, go through customs, go through security, fly to Frankfurt, change planes, fly to Chicago, change planes, fly to Winnipeg, go through customs, pick up her luggage, and *voilà*—home sweet home.

It was just that simple.

Gloria had never been any further from Canada than her honeymoon in Orlando. Her daughters were well aware of this and over the next few months equipped her with a dozen extra pounds of travel accessories to ensure an easy and convenient travel experience. They bought her a beanbag neck pillow, two fold-out street maps, an art lover's guidebook to Paris, a food lover's guidebook to Paris, plus a handy translation pocketbook with 1000 helpful phrases in French.

The night before the trip Gloria was so nervous she couldn't sleep. She sat in bed and recited French greetings and three different ways to ask for the toilet. The language felt klutzy in her mouth, almost impaired, the way one might talk after a terrible motorcycle accident.

The next morning her daughters drove her to the airport and escorted her to security. They got very emotional and bunched around her for a group hug. One of them started to weep.

They watched her through the check point and waved and blew kisses whenever she looked back. Then Gloria looked back and they were out of sight, vanished behind a wall of bustle, and all the bigness and complexity of travel clamped around her like a fist, and she felt lonesome and vulnerable and already oceans from home.

When she got through security she headed straight for the nearest bathroom, her stomach actually sick.

What unfolded after that would amount to one of the longest, most unpleasant days in Gloria's life. Her first stop was a four-hour layover in Toronto. The airport was efficient and unfriendly and made travel seem like deployment to a hostile land. Nobody looked happy to be there or excited about where they were going.

In the afternoon she flew to Amsterdam and was assailed by every inconvenience economy air travel could throw at someone. The old man beside her broke wind from takeoff to touchdown. The old man behind her kept coughing into her hair. Her tray table was wobbly. Her armrest was sticky. There was a bloody tissue in her seat flap. She didn't like the tone of the stewardess or the fits of turbulence that shook the plane like a can of Reddi-wip and left her clammy and penitent and earnestly preparing her soul for Jesus. Her daughters had booked a window seat so she could admire the enormity of earth from 36,000 feet, but the enormity was blocked by the wing of the plane and the flight attendant's instruction to lower her shade so passengers could watch American crime shows without a glare.

When she landed in Amsterdam she was exhausted and dirty, intimidated and lost. The airport looked the same as any airport in Canada, but not *precisely* the same, and these tiny imprecisions had a powerfully unsettling effect. She was rattled by the plug socket in the

restroom, by the weird plenitude of toilets, by the yellowness of the airport signs and the appearance of the Dutch language, which looked as though somebody had slid their hand across a keyboard, and by the English that was also on the signs, but in subtitles below. It was the first time Gloria had seen English below another language. She didn't like it.

As her transit progressed, Gloria's anxiety evolved. Intimidation became frustration. Why did she have to go through customs when she wasn't staying in Holland? What was the point of claiming her luggage just to recheck it? Why did she have to slog through security when she'd already been scanned and searched in Winnipeg?

By the time she reached Paris she was totally wiped and spacey with fatigue. She hadn't slept since North America. There was airline food on her breath, flatulence in her clothes. When she stepped out of the airport there was no grand scenery or *Paris in the Spring* to greet her. It was the middle of April and bleak and frigid. The taxi cost 52 euros and smelled like a hamster cage. The driver was very African and very unpleasant. He didn't look like anything Gloria had ever imagined about Paris.

'The day is very cold,' Gloria said in friendly, appalling French.

'It is cold every day,' the driver said in perfect, spiteful English. 'Paris is shit.'

After everything she'd just been through, Gloria didn't disagree.

She spent one last miserable hour deadlocked in traffic. Then, in one of the truest miracles of her life, she arrived at her hotel. Three flights, two layovers, and nearly 20 hours after she'd left her happy familiar home, Gloria zombied through the doors of a Best Western in Montmartre, checked into her room, and collapsed into bed without eating or showering or unpacking her clothes. When she woke a few hours later it was dark and raining.

To Gloria, Paris was a vast and churning ocean. The only way she could bring herself to get into it was to wade out slowly.

She spent her first day in comfortable reach of the hotel, checking out Montmartre. She went for a walk around the neighbourhood and by the end of the first block had come face-to-face with the total anti-Christ of everything she'd ever heard about Paris.

The area had the strife-like appearance of Baghdad or Beirut. The streets were crummy and defaced, the buildings covered in spray paint. In front of battered tenements groups of ethnic teenagers lurked in hooded sweatshirts, looking bitterly disadvantaged and ready to throw a trash can through society. Nobody was dressed in high fashion brands. Nobody was reading poetry in front of vivid tulips. It was cold, wet, windy, grey. In six blocks around the hotel she stepped in dog crap twice. There was more dog crap on Gloria's first walk in Paris than on all the walks she'd ever taken in Winnipeg. But even worse was the unfamiliarity itself, her own alien condition. With every moment in public Gloria felt tenser and more paranoid, harassed by the panicky feeling of being out of place and the suspicion that every local she passed was mentally mocking her or sizing her up for a purse snatching. And it only got worse.

For dinner she had her first taste of streetside dining. It was too cold and dismal to eat outside, but that's what her daughters had told her to do. Everybody in Paris ate outside.

She picked an empty cafe near the hotel and wedged herself into a child-sized table that seemed prankishly close to all the other tables. The cafe was sullen and depressing. Each table had a single tea light and each tea light was used and empty. Just little metal cups and some dirty forks and saucers that hadn't been cleared.

She ordered a puny croquet-monsieur with salsa from a jar and blew into her freezing hands between each bite. The wind ripped through the meal and swept the garnish off her plate. It was her first Paris cafe and she had no idea where to find the charm. She felt gouged by the price, unfilled by the portion, and persecuted by the service. She paid 20 euro for a 12 euro meal and never saw the change. When she informed the waiter he told her in English that he didn't understand English. And when she tried talking in French he told her in English that

he didn't understand her French. Back at the hotel Gloria stopped at the desk and complained to the clerk.

'The cafe was very bad,' she said in tired, awful French.

'Every café is bad,' the clerk said in perfect, tired English. 'It's Paris.'

For the next two days Gloria did what any inexperienced traveller would do. She went on tours.

The tours were short and boring and filled with points of interest where famous dead people she didn't care about had once done ordinary things that didn't matter.

She didn't own any fashionable clothing but saw where Coco Chanel had walked her dog. She'd never read any Hemingway, but got a good look at the bar where he'd gotten drunk and punched a Spaniard. She took a walking tour of the Right Bank, and a bus tour of the Left Bank, a boat tour down the Seine with 17 Koreans who took pictures at a rapacious rate and intensity.

Everything was impressive and nothing was accessible. There were luxury shops she couldn't afford, secretive courtyards she couldn't enter. She stood before the Louvre but never inside because the queue was two hours long. She made it to the Eifel Tower but never to the top because the workers were on strike.

The rain never stopped. Her ankles hurt from walking. She had 1000 helpful phrases in French but no confidence to use them. Every Parisian she encountered cocked a snoot at her English and looked repulsed by her French. Cold and lost near the Pompidou she turned a corner and came face to face with a beautiful golden quiche cooling in the window of a patisserie, voluptuous and artisan, heavy with the essence of Paris, and wanted to jam her fist through it.

Each night at the hotel she fought the urge to cry. She wanted desperately to be in love with Paris, to be a good and happy tourist, but didn't know how to do it. The proportions were

beyond her. It was nice to see the Palace of Versailles and the Notre Dame Cathedral, to spend a moment at the peak of wonder and curiosity and feel tingly with amazement. But the truly gruelling valleys of stress and confusion that came before those dazzling summits, and in between and after, were too long and taxing for such a blink of delight.

By day four Gloria had reached her limit. She stayed in bed and watched French television and told the housekeeper to go away. She couldn't stand the thought of another awkward afternoon bumbling through Paris, worrying about where she should go, what she was missing, where she should eat, how she should order. She felt sour and coerced, resentful of her daughters. The whole trip was less an adventure than a checklist of monuments and attractions to be ticked off for their approval and submitted with supporting photographic evidence. She was tired of dog crap, tired of skimpy expensive portions, tired of snotty crooked waiters and pesky street hawkers who latched to her hip and shoved Eifel Tower snow globes in her face.

But most of all she was tired of feeling incapable and intimidated and obligated by the money her daughters had spent to penetrate in depth this cold unfriendly city—always out of place, always conscious of her difference. So morbidly homesick she could punch a quiche.

So far Gloria's best day in Paris was the day she didn't leave her room. She thought she was on to something.

On her last full day in the most cultured and iconic city in the world, she spread her clothes across the bed, opened her suitcase, and squandered as much time as she could packing for check-out the following night.

It was the compulsive act of a desperate woman. Every item of clothing was tucked and folded with excessive fuss, smoothed of every crease, flattened of every rumple, then placed neatly in the suitcase with pointless care. She tidied her shirts into perfect geometric squares, centred their collars exactly between the shoulders; and when there was nothing left

to fold or pack, when her suitcase had been arranged and rearranged as fastidiously as any suitcase in the history of travel, her spirit slumped at the thought that it was still—STILL—only ten in the morning, and she flopped into bed and curled on her side and stared out the window in the gloomiest stupor she'd ever known.

And that's when it happened.

Right in the midst of this crushing funk, at the dreary height of her discouragement and isolation, Gloria began to cry. The tears piled into her sockets, fat and heavy, and as they formed a mysterious new emotion—an audacity unprecedented until now—formed with them.

The emotion came on gradually and powerfully like the coming of a muscle cramp. It wiggled through her system, infiltrated her core, injected her mood with a creative restlessness. Pretty soon it held her in full embrace, and without thinking she was up and on her feet scrounging for a pen, muttering like a derelict, overwhelmed by the weirdest courage to open her gates and unbridle her feelings, to write huge letters to unsuspecting loved ones, and to fill those letters with thoughts and opinions she'd never expressed. It was more than just a whim.

She found a pad of hotel stationary and wrote galloping dispatches to each of her daughters, divulging any random thing she could get her mind on.

She told stories about her childhood, admitted truths about her marriage, confessed sensitive details about their father. It quickened her pulse to share these things. The pressure of pen on paper, the flow of her handwriting, the loops and shapes of the letters, the sight of her most private self going public forever—in some way, by some power, it made her less alone.

She scribbled away for the rest of the morning, depleted the entire pad of stationary, and when she ran out of things to say to her daughters she used the backs and margins of idle documents and wrote letters to herself. In the afternoon she got hungry and ventured out to

look for food. She was determined to starve before she watched another waiter walk off with her change, and instead found a FranPrix grocery store where the floors were rubber-tile and the food was crammed on shelves.

The strange exuberance that had possessed her in the hotel was with her now. She wandered through the aisles in happy perusal, free of anxiety, admiring the items as though they were exhibits at the Orangerie. She liked the FranPrix with its Monets of standard produce, its Renoirs of normal snack foods, and all its Cézannes of familiar impressions that could've been found in any Canadian Tire.

Everything had the right feel, everybody had the right look. She found comfort in the sterile white light that emanated from the glass freezers. She knew that light. She knew the fatty instant food it illuminated and the tired bored faces that pondered the food, that peered through the glass at bags of frozen stir-fry and other easy meal work.

It was different in here. It was plain and coherent. There was coherence in the haggard young working women with packaged salads in their handbaskets, in the slouchy sullen bachelor types who drifted through the store without a plan, picking items off the shelves and putting them back, not knowing what they wanted.

To notice these things in Winnipeg might've lowered Gloria's spirit. But they didn't lower her spirit now. She knew these people. They weren't French to her. Nothing in the FranPrix seemed foreign or French. Not even the French language. Familiarity was the grace—a sense of connection. Standing before a shelf of brand name detergents she thought the perfect day of travel was the day that most clearly reminded you of where you belonged.

Gloria never did fall in love with Paris, but after that she wasn't bent on shutting herself away from it. She bought a chicken panini and a bottle of Snapple and took them to a bench not far from her hotel. The bench wasn't in a park or any place special. It was just a bench on the street, cruddy and obscure, graffitied with marker.

She sat by herself and ate her meal and watched the city with pleasant interest. She watched the people drive by in their cars, watched the busses stop and pull away. Nothing was exciting, nothing was important. The skies were grey and there was a cold wind. Rain fell in a drizzle. For once she didn't mind.

For once it felt alright, almost like home, when the grey skies opened, spattered the city in rain, and made everything feel like table salt.

Impetus for a Sketch

I was sitting in a coffeeshop in downtown Seattle when a bee bumbled in through the open jingle door and began to make everyone very uncomfortable.

The bee was not happy with its situation. There was no curious perambulation to its flight, no capricious honeysuckle hovering. It had flown into enclosure and its wings were charged with fright and confusion. Dazed in the dim brown tones of that caffeinated chat-hole, it zipped and zagged and ripped to shreds the slurping idyll, buzzed the head of the pig-tailed barista, circled the shoulders of the geezers playing chess, split the faces of the two high-school girls speaking a gibberish I used to know. It went berserk in mind-blowing flight patterns, turned tricks in the air that would've made a Blue Angel blush, and rammed its brains against the big God-light window before losing all resolve and settling hopeless in its confusion on the bare white shoulder of the woman sitting next to me.

The woman must've been allergic or phobic, or else terribly unequipped to handle life's little horrors, for as soon as she felt the bee she snapped her head to her shoulder and became paraplegic with terror.

She was married, and until that point had been sitting with her husband quietly decoding the middle distance. They were the kind of couple that looked long accustomed to coming into public places and finding anything to think about besides each other. In the ten minutes since they'd taken a seat neither had spoken a word to the other, and only occasionally had they even glanced at each other.

About the husband there isn't much to say. He was only a very handsome young man who in the fashion of young suburban husbands emitted only the most predictable impressions. He wore a purple Huskies sweatshirt, a pair of pleated Dockers, and sat half-smirking into the steam of his espresso as though each ascending vapour was showing him an episode from Spring Break junior year.

The wife had stumbled straight out of an Edward Hopper painting: young, bored, and imbued with a sad-eyed abstraction in which no longing seemed lacking. She wore a low-cut cotton blouse that displayed her shoulders and breast tops, her hair was gold and streaked with auburn highlights, and of course I had fallen instantly in love with her and was busy ruminating on what lengths of inattention and insensitivity I had to aspire to win a woman just like her.

She sat stock-still, will paralyzed, as the bee staggered across her shoulder in a one-bee rendition of the Baton death march. With any imagination one could have seen the grandiloquent desperation on its face and heard the sad war-movie soundtrack adding depth to the performance. It had made up its mind that all was lost and dragged itself hopelessly along the empty warm-shoulder wasteland, full of dreams of happier times, locked, perhaps, in some nostalgic reverie.

At last it reached the chain of her necklace. There it stopped and spread its wings in a motion that could have meant anything, but to the women must've meant something like *From hell's heart I stab at thee*, for in a twinkling she burst into tears and moaned for her husband.

The husband shook his daydream as slowly as a cow coming out of a concussion. It took him five Mississippi seconds to scrape his disjointed wits together, then his eyes narrowed and he saw the bee. He made no sudden movements. He made no movements, in fact, that were any different than if there hadn't been a bee on the neck of his wife.

He simply shook his head, sipped his espresso, cleaned the froth from his upper lip with the aid of his lower, set the cup down, sighed just hard enough to swirl the steam between their faces, stood up, walked around the table, gripped his wife firmly by the elbow, and said:

‘Anne. You’re being fucking stupid.’

The short rebuke settled the woman impressively. And it calmed everybody else too.

The husband took a napkin off the table, pressed it firmly to her neck, then stood there till the bee climbed on like a tuckered little alien boarding his transport home. The shop was rapt. The geezers, the barista, the twittery girls—nobody moved and everyone stared. In one fluid feat of downplay the husband cupped his hand around the napkin, ushered the bee outside, released it into the sunny afternoon like a wounded pigeon he'd nursed to health, and returned properly blasé to his wife, who by now had regained her composure and was silently seething with mortification.

And that was it. The tense air receded. The little interior regained its form. In a moment everyone returned to their own thoughts and discourses, and after a little more time the couple got up and left. And even for one accustomed to this conclusion, it still stung to watch them walk out together, another bastard and beauty together, and to find myself once more coping through craft, forming the first lines of this minor riposte, as if a bit of authorship was any substitute for what he possessed.

Hunger Bite

*Here I stand upon the scales
a plump and rounded figure.
And if the boys don't like me now
they sure won't like me bigger.*

—*Newfoundland Nursery Rhyme*

The husky young girl traveling with her grandmother has never been kissed by a boy, held by a boy, or wanted by a boy in her life. There's no way of knowing this for sure, of course. But one examines the scene and makes use of what one can and then maybe there is something like this:

The girl and her grandmother drive into a public campground in a 900 Saab stuffed to bursting with junk you might find in the depository bin behind the Goodwill. They are coming or they are leaving but either way they are moving.

They pull into a \$20 day-space surrounded by RV's and clans of cross-country campers pulling shit-beer from Styrofoam coolers, lounging ass-inch-from-the-ground in plastic webbing lawn chairs.

The girl parks the car and helps her grandmother out. She sprays her grandmother's arms and neck with OFF bug spray.

She goes to the trunk and takes out a crooked knuckled walking staff and gives it to her grandmother, which her grandmother takes into a patch of nearby pine wood and begins to slash and hack the air with.

Grandma, in her plain black shirt and blue sweat pants, is wearing her prescription sun-goggles on top of her head. She is dispatching a party of ruffian pine trees with flamboyant Earl Flynn-like strokes while her granddaughter begins the slow chore of pitching camp.

The granddaughter is built like a high-school lineman. She's big, but there's a prophecy in her physique that she will get much bigger. She is dressed in baggy-no-style

clothing and there is a tick-bit, bucksnorting petulance about her that no boy in his right mind would ever attempt to flirt with.

The girl pitches tent, smokes a cigarette, unfolds two lawn chairs, brings out a cooler, takes a beer from the cooler, smokes a cigarette, drinks the beer, hangs three wash cloths over a tree branch, goes into the car, takes out a Styrofoam container and whistles for her grandmother, who instantly ceases her swashbuckling and joins her granddaughter at the lunch bench, head down, dragging her rapier behind her.

The granddaughter opens the container and serves a chunk of breaded chicken plus a plastic cup of applesauce on a paper plate. She shoves the plate across the table and commands the old woman to eat.

There are no utensils. Grandmother peels the foil lid off the applesauce, sticks one finger into the cup, hooks a grainy sweet glob and sucks the finger all the way to the bottom knuckle, her face locked in the kind of lobotomized absorption that comes to little children delighting in their food.

When the applesauce is gone she licks the cup clean, begins to pick at the edges of the foil stuck around the rim of the lid. 'Eat your chicken,' granddaughter says.

Grandmother pokes the breaded chicken with her finger.

From a clearing in the trees a trio of teenage boys appears. The boys are shirtless and wearing Hawaiian-style board shorts. They are thin but nicely blooming—biceps like small hard biscuits and rising pectorals. Warm air swirls around their heads as they emerge from the cool woods and stroll their lean unblemished bodies across the campground, striking the air with their white lightning smiles. Paying zero attention to the girl or her grandmother, they walk with their chests out, wearing wraparound sunglasses, talking about other girls they'd like to bang.

The scene goes on for a moment: grandmother sulkily avoiding her chicken, granddaughter staring after the boys as they dwindle into the trees and out of sight forever.

Without warning the girl's hand flashes across the table and cracks the grandmother's face hard enough to get the paint to fall off a fender. The grandmother shrieks and covers her head with her arms. A few birds scatter from the trees.

'Eat your chicken,' the girl says. Grandmother eats her chicken.

Some time tonight, awake in a tent in the middle of this go-nowhere world, grandmother asleep by her side, the husky young girl will think of these boys and add them to the book of boys who never kissed or touched her in her life, and her gut will not bellow and clench as it does in broad daylight when the blow of neglect—the hardest punch in the game—is first delivered, but will soften in the temple of 2am solitude as she runs her hands along her body with all its tender entrances, and wonders why it hasn't been filled with the same lust and affection that all the pretty boys give so wholly and eagerly to others just like it.

There's no way of knowing this for sure, of course. But sometimes it's excusable to craft presumptions if they serve to remind that every now and then we all need the feast of another's desire—and, Jesus, the way we sink our teeth when we don't get it.

Something Californian

When I was seventeen and living in Los Angeles I worked for a pool cleaning service that cleaned Chuck Norris's pool. And naturally I thought this was pretty cool. I didn't think cleaning pools was cool. But when you're seventeen celebrities are important, and if you have to nurse pools all summer, well, you might as well be nursing one of theirs.

The service that employed me was located in the middle of a high-profile suburb and consequently maintained a few high-profile pools; and though I didn't have the chance to service all of them personally, I usually heard something about them from the people I worked with. There was the pool of Lyle Alzado, which had loose tiles and a bad filter; and the pool of Kurt Rambis, which was thin and long like the gangly odd-goggled Laker centre himself. I remember the pools of business moguls, city-councilmen and college football coaches, but the most meaningful pool I ever tended belonged to Chuck Norris. Not because it was any bigger or nicer than the others, but because Chuck could cave the skull of any pool owner in Southern California. Things like that pull clout with teenage males.

Well, obviously we were high quite a lot. Summer is summer, seventeen is seventeen, and cleaning pools is a crappy job. The guy I worked with was an unremittingly dazed stoner named Matt G, a saggy-panted community college reefer fiend who, in the style of SoCal suburban pot junkies, kept a Batman utility kit of marijuana contraband that regularly included several diamond-speckled nuggets crammed in a film case, a one-hitter concealed in a raspberry Altoids tin, and a glass bowl wrapped in a purple Crown Royal pouch where cops would never think to look unless they were geniuses.

On any given workday there were 10-to-12 houses on our route. Our routine was always the same. In the mornings Matt G and I would rendezvous at the shop, pick up the service truck, then somewhere before our first job, usually right in the customer's driveway, take the one-hitter till we were fogged enough to confront the dull horror of menial responsibility. There was nothing professional, expert or remotely knowledgeable about our

service. I doubt we could've rescued a drowning toddler had we happened upon one. Any installations or repairs were handled exclusively by our employer, a chain-smoking Greek with one black eyebrow that stretched from temple to temple, who was the only person in his whole operation who actually *knew* something about pool care. The rest of us—Matt G and myself, at least—cleaned slime and dumped chemicals, and even that was a severe examination of our competencies.

The morning jobs were a drowsy and humourless slog. But in the afternoons when the sun cut through the coastal marine layer and California became California, our spirits would lift and we would spend our lunch break cruising Pacific Coast Highway for the best displays of female backside, delighting our souls with the greasy heaven of In-N-Out Burger (the only truly indigenous cuisine of Southern Californians). Then we would drive to Torrance Beach and hotbox the truck alongside the esplanade. There, while junior lifeguards did quarter-mile swims around bobbing red buoys and clueless-looking beach geezers walked little dogs, Matt G would pop his film case, remove the chosen bud with his thumb and forefinger and, holding it by its sheer tip to prevent the disturbance of any precious crystals, place it gently in the bowl in the manner of a carefully considered chess move.

Four or five wincing drags later the bud was a dead black star in the centre of our universe, and with our tempers peaceful and gooey, our thoughts trickling out of our mouths like mucus, we'd stash our marble eyes behind wrap-around Oakleys and roll to our afternoon appointments, no less unwilling to work, but far more tolerant toward the evil than during the early morning hours.

Chuck's house was crouched almost at the summit of the Palos Verdes hill. It was a handsome Mediterranean villa, standing well at the end of a long driveway, backed by a million dollar vista that gushed like haemorrhage across the Pacific. To get to it, you had to pass through a retractable gate that could only be opened by entering a passcode from inside

the property. Every Thursday afternoon Matt G would pull the van up to the gate and hit the call button. Seconds later the keeper of the code, an elderly Mexican woman, would emerge from a pair of tall French doors with a little Mexican girl stuck to her hip, punch the code on the mounted keypad, and give us a happy wave of welcome as we pulled around the side of the house and parked, the little girl hugging her leg from behind, peeking bashfully around her thigh.

Chuck was never around when we worked on his pool. At least we never saw him. And I should also say that neither of us possessed any official confirmation that it was actually Chuck Norris's pool we were cleaning. I had gathered the information from Matt G, who had gathered it from a former pool cleaning partner, who had an uncle who knew Chuck personally, which somehow amounted to Chuck owning a house on our pool route. I like to think that even then it was all a little implausible to me; but with no evidence against an exciting thought, why doubt it? If we did have any doubt, we were certainly in no hurry to confirm a reality that would only make an already boring job that much duller.

One afternoon while we skimmed and scrubbed, the patio door unlatched and began to slide open. Out of pure exhilarated reflex I shouted for Matt G and stood stock-still in blinkless anticipation, waiting for Chuck Norris to at last emerge into our lives and naturally invite us inside for domestic beers and a tour of his personal training dojo.

When the door slid open, however, all that appeared was the old Mexican woman and the little girl, dressed in a pink bathing suit and holding a hardcover children's book. Our disappointment in neither one of them being Chuck Norris must've given us some partially uninviting airs, for they seemed uncertain about coming out and joining us. The old woman waited in the doorway with a dishrag curled around the back of her neck. After a moment she gave us her usual wave and nudged the girl outside toward a pair of massive patio loungers. The girl climbed into one of the chairs, immediately deemed it unsuitable, and climbed back out and opened her book on the ground. Lying prone on her stomach, she made two fists, set

one on top of the other, then rested her chin on the top one and mentally vanished into the world of children's literature. The old woman was less discriminating. Easing herself gently into the lounge with an achy gasp, she fiddled with her positioning till she found a pleasing repose. Then, removing the dishrag from her neck, she twirled it into a sausage, placed it over her eyes, and in two minutes was sound asleep with her mouth wide open, one arm listlessly flung over the armrest.

Even for a teenager the impudence was startling. I had no idea who the woman was or what station she occupied, but I was sure she had no connection with the surrounding affluence above the level of staff. Despite the sunny mellowness of the afternoon and my own affiliation with the working schleps of the world, I found myself perturbed that she should slip so easily into such a gaping snooze in light of the generously inflated wages Chuck was undoubtedly paying her.

Ah, but that was the way of the world; and as Matt G sparked the one-hitter and covertly passed it my way, I was filled with a righteous and gratifying pity. Some people took no pride in their work, and it was sad.

As the summer flitted away, our hopes of seeing Chuck grew dimmer and dimmer. After weeks of discussion it was decided that he was a seasonal Californian, summering in Texas and wintering in LA, or else too busy on the set to spend much time at home. My patience, already anaemic at seventeen, could hardly bear my rotten luck. I felt all the perverseness of the mischance that should consistently see me at Chuck Norris's house during the precise time of year or week that he was sure to never be around. Disappointment spurred frustration—the feeling that I, an average suburban scrub, had the impossible opportunity to hang around the grounds of a genuine celebrity, and in turn was getting nothing out of it, not even an autograph. Action was needed; and near the end of summer action was taken.

One afternoon while we tidied Chuck's pool I became either inordinately cocky or impatient and brashly announced that it was time to take matters into my own hands.

Matt G, strolling the skimmer around the rim of the pool with a bazooka joint hanging on his lips, agreed absolutely, then asked me what I was talking about. I informed him that I was going to introduce myself to Chuck Norris. I was sure it was something the old Chuckster would appreciate: an average guy like me having the pluck to stop by and shoot the shit, chew the cud, or walk the pony. Matt G's eyes were so dull and rheumy they looked painted with snot. When I asked if he was coming he confessed (rather shockingly) that he didn't like action movies, but to come and get him if Chuck had beer. Then he passed his joint for good luck.

I headed around the side of the house without a doubt in my decision, crossed an ocean of a lawn, and drove my finger into the doorbell. It was obvious what would happen next. After Chuck and I had gotten to know one another I'd go back and fetch Matt G, and together with the famed winner of fights we'd tour the property. We'd slip off our shoes and ease shyly into the dojo. Reverently speechless, awed by the solemn eastern weaponry hanging on the walls, we'd sit legs crossed on premium takedown mats as The Master ushered the dawn of wisdom to the dark of our immature minds. In raspy soft-spoken tones he'd preach discipline and restraint, poise under duress, and tell us to attack him. Head bowed, hands clasped at his waist, he'd wait in the centre of the room while we stalked and surrounded him, shaking our wrists to loosen them up. With a rebel shriek Matt G would charge and launch an artless overhand right. Like magic Chuck would dissolve into thin air, re-appear a step to the side and shatter his face with a simple palm thrust, splattering his nose like a water balloon. Straight to his knees Matt G would drop, wailing, burying his face in his hands while I jumped Chuck from behind and crowded his windpipe with a sleeper lock. A reverse head butt would disorientate me. Then Chuck would swing his mighty elbow, crack my ribcage with bony thunder, and terminate the lesson with a world-class crescent kick, the

side of his swift and fearsome foot sweeping cleanly across my head, packing my ear with powerful ringing.

Afterward in the billiard room, while I iced my ribs at the bar and sipped Kentucky bourbon, Chuck would plug Matt G's nose with a cloth and tilt his head until the bleeding stopped. 'Mercy is the core of honour,' he would conclude. 'And the brave delight to save.' Then we'd exchange phone numbers.

But nothing so beautiful was meant to be. The stark echo of the doorbell, a no-nonsense monosyllabic *dong*, scattered my confidence like spooked quail, and all at once I was blasted by all the stupidity and impertinence of meeting a Hollywood icon stoned out of my jug. *What if he's here?* the thought came. *What if Chuck fucking Norris actually opens the door?* And while examining this terrifying prospect all my insecurity returned and I nearly wheeled and fled when the old Mexican answered the door eating a piece of microwave pizza.

Once again her behaviour was dubious. Besides mashing a slice of frozen pizza (unseemly enough for the representative of a famous figure) there was also the style of her dress, which included an absence of shoes, a Baja hoodie, and a baggy pair of basketball shorts that quit just short of her ankles. She was shorter up close, brown as ground cinnamon, with the plump-stumpy physique of a jumbo marshmallow. It was instantly apparent that she spoke no English. I said hello, she said it back, and that was the end of any verbal understanding between us. For the next minute I stood in awkward suspense using schizophrenic pantomime to explain my reason for calling. At one point I turned and made a grand gesture toward the estate like a game show bimbo presenting a dreamy new car. When that explained nothing I balled my fists, struck a jujitsu stance, and kicked the air several times while making cockamamie combat noises. The woman chewed her pizza with bewildered amusement until I was done, then opened the door all the way and motioned me inside.

Assured that I'd made my business clear, I stepped into a flagstone foyer and waited to make the acquaintance of the great red-bearded, burly-knuckled ballbuster of the action screen. My blood was buzzing like a locust; my odour was unmistakable. As soon as I came through the door the woman shot me a smirk, threw her nose into my collar, then pitched back with a giddy yelp and began to fan the reek of ganja from her face. I smoothed down my shirt and pushed out my chest with dignity. A swerved, elaborate staircase was attached to the near wall, and my breath tripped at the thought of Chuck Norris appearing at the top like quiet thunder, all guts and gumption, descending to my visit in badass boots and a gallant white Stetson. Mighty and canny Chuck.

Years later I still remember the glory and terror of that split-second vision. I like to think that I would've acquitted myself coolly and gracefully had it ever materialized, but the truth is, only one thing braced my buckling nerves as I neared my first face-to-face encounter with a truly meaningful being, and that was the very obvious, very immediate reality that no one, least of all Chuck Norris, had ever lived in that house.

Fixation on what it would be like to meet Chuck Norris had distracted me from putting much imagination into what it would be like to visit his home, though certain assumptions naturally existed. A few fifteenth century haikus, for instance, printed on their original papyrus, would certainly be mounted on a wall somewhere or have a display room all to themselves. There would also be a gallery devoted to indigenous peoples, a dreamcatcher made by a Lakota shaman, the bullet that killed Custer, and many hides. A meditation chamber, a custom gym, and framed portraits of minor celebrity friends like Louis Gossett Jr. would all be scattered somewhere around the house.

Within ten steps of coming inside, however, it was clear that even the most natural assumption would go wildly unsatisfied. The massive villa, which might've comfortably sheltered a dozen families had it been divided into separate units, was overwhelmingly barren.

Any enclosed room could've been a master bedroom, any open room could've entertained the funeral of a popular man, and none of the rooms—not *one* as the woman escorted me wherever the hell we were headed—gave any sign of having ever hosted human activity. Not a single square foot of herringbone parquet was obscured by furniture; not a solitary cocktail appeared ever to have been served at its multiple cherrywood bars; not one Christmas morning or loving embrace seemed ever to have taken place in front of its several master fireplaces. The house was as empty as a pretty conch, and the golden ocean of fame I thought I'd detected inside had been nothing but a swirly breeze of naivety.

Then the woman brought me to the kitchen: a room dipped in stainless steel and conjoined by a living den that looked out across the backyard through the sliding patio door. Whatever her reason for being at that house, it almost certainly included the duty of maintenance, for at least half the kitchen was stockpiled with a janitor's armoury of disinfectants, cleansers and cleaning equipment—enough spic-and-span munitions to sanitize the Louvre. The other half of the kitchen belonged to the girl. A pink plastic tea table and two pink plastic chairs had been arranged as a play station, where the girl presently sat colouring a picture book, undisturbed by my presence, every crayon in Crayola's repertoire neatly aligned along the table like soldiers at attention. I never saw upstairs or even half of what was downstairs, but I got the distinct impression that under some directive or fear all their living had been restricted to these two rooms. The den had been converted into a kind of hobo's nest. A huge duvet had been spread across the floor in simulation of a mattress, and piled around it were heaps of sheets and blankets, plus a handful of travelling bags spilling toys and rumpled laundry. There was nothing I could think to do but stand there. Edgy and awkward, reeking like the backstage of a summer reggae concert, my impression could not have been very endearing; and yet the old woman seemed genuinely pleased to have me there. Her smile was generous with teeth; her vibe was fond and chill. She went over to the girl and motioned for me to follow, her idea being to show me what the girl was drawing. When I stayed where I

was she slipped the colouring book from under the girl's busy crayon and began to flip through it page by page, presenting every picture the girl had coloured, all of which I admired to best of my articulation, dimly and indistinctly. *Muy excelente* or something.

A natural artist, the girl absorbed the praise without reacting to my existence. Picking up a crayon and looking at it with elaborate interest, she waited for my half-ass admiration to pass, and when the woman finally relinquished the book she turned abruptly to the next blank picture and began to colour it entirely in red. I made no effort to better endear myself. Five minutes into the scene and I still had no idea who these people were or what the hell I was doing with them. So casually had I assumed the woman's subservience that the thought of her having answered the door out of anything but employee obligation hadn't entered my mind. Not until I spotted the half pie of easy-bake pizza cooling on the counter atop its own cardboard packaging, topped with corn and olives, did I begin to suspect my place as their guest.

The easy-bake pizza, of course, is the preferred sustenance of the suburban pothead, and nearly irresistible at every turn and time. Somewhere in the middle of dealing with my skittishness the woman must've forgotten about it, for as soon as she caught me stealing glances she flinched with embarrassment, flashed across the kitchen, tore two slices from the pie and served them to me on a paper plate. And when by courteous reflex I tried to refuse, she shooed the response aside and thrust the plate into my gut adamantly enough to make me grunt.

Taking no pains to check the flow of her Spanish, she gushed into a merry discourse, barrelling through our language barrier as if at any moment I'd remember I was bilingual. Here and there her mood would swerve sharply into another lane and she would make a salty face, point reproachfully at the girl, and explain something serious, the girl ignoring both of us completely, never looking up.

And still, free pizza aside, I was too awkward to allow the encounter to linger. At the first lull in the woman's rambling I wadded my last slice into my mouth, handed her my plate, tipped my head in thanks and pointed toward the patio door to signal that I'd let myself out. Here, thinking nothing about it, I threw a parting glance at the girl and that moment was confronted by a stabbing enigmatic gaze that would've given any portrait of Sitting Bull a run for its money. The girl's expression was so intently fixed that it stopped me cold in my tracks and coerced me to pay it some feeble reaction, a smile or a wink perhaps, or maybe I just waved at her. Whatever I did, I earned nothing for a response. The look did not last long or convey a clear enough message to merit more than this brief mention, yet rarely since that time have I ever been the subject of a more dead-level stare-down. The only clue to the sentiment that inspired it was in the girl's mouth – the tiniest sneer of resentment showing coldly in the tightness of her lips. The next moment, very meekly, I was out of there.

The old woman met me at the door, gave my shoulder a squeeze as I stepped out, and that was the last I saw of either of them. A week later my menial summer came unceremoniously to a close, and with it came the end of my pool cleaning career and the beginning of college, where I'd spend the next four years concerning myself with a far more illicit and distracting recreation than weed or celebrities: the American sorority girl in shorts.

A few moments later when I stepped outside I saw something that got me as close as I've ever come to understanding life as a Californian. Somehow, somewhere in my absence, Matt G had dropped the aluminium skimmer in the pool. Almost two decades have passed since I last lived in California, but I still remember that scene like anything monumental in my life—the way that smooth Pacific vista sailed infinitely beyond him like the back of a goddess, and how truly perfect he looked in the foreground, kneeling by the water serenely puffing his joint, arm outstretched, waiting for the skimmer to drift within reach.

Get Along Little Doggy

Sometimes being a good person is just a matter of hitting rock bottom without any of your pieces kicking up and cracking someone else. I'll tell you what I mean.

It's the fifth or sixth stop on a post break-up shitshow through the American southwest. I'm at the middle urinal in the bathroom of a bar in Gallup, New Mexico—so tanked on whiskey colas I have to stare at my piss to keep from wetting my shoes—when all at once two men bust through the door like *somebody's-gonna-get-their-candyass-kicked* cowboys and take the two end urinals on either side of me.

Actually, the men are cowboys. Two dangerously heterosexual cowboys who would've taken the end urinals even if I hadn't been there using the middle one, the way two teenage boys seeing a movie together will leave a seat between them.

The cowboy on my left is hotter than a charge of buckshot. He's refused to lower his cowboy voice and his voice is slamming off the bathroom walls like a yodel in a canyon.

Apparently his girl has fallen in love with another man and that man is in the bar *right now*. He is pitching ideas to his cowboy buddy on how they should kick the crap out of this guy, and his cowboy buddy is down for any one of them in a disturbingly placid yup-and-nod kind of way.

The cowboy buddy unsettles me. His pissing is hard, powerful, witless; the way a stud buffalo would piss. Even through the reek of the scented urinal pucks I can smell his brute and husky odour: cigarette-sweat musk and something like pencil lead.

I finish my business but stand there shaking a few more drops because I don't want it to look like I've been frightened off by their talk, and because my proximity to their talk has suddenly put the bite back into my venom.

For the first time I feel vitalized by my rejection and anger, though its source is 4000 miles away, romancing the great cities of Europe with a former yoga instructor, sipping wine

in Barcelona, riding gondolas in Venice, making flexible athletic love in Le Marais or the goddamn Latin Quarter.

Suddenly, impatiently, as if I was always part of the conversation and had opted to stay quiet, the scorned cowboy checks me out and says: ‘Well? What about it?’

First impulse is to take zero responsibility for whatever’s about to happen. I’ve no idea who this Casanova beau rustler is; he’s done nothing to me. But all at once that’s no excuse. This is a matter of devotion: a cowboy and his girl. Reckoning is due.

‘Absolutely,’ I say. ‘You wouldn’t let someone steal your truck.’

‘Fuck no,’ the cowboy huffs. And then, thinking more about it, ‘FUCK NO.’

That’s all they need from me. I get a good look at them as they vendetta-ride out the restroom, zipping their flies on the go. They look like they live the way real cowboys are supposed to live. They look like the only women they’ve ever slept with are Shoney’s cashiers. They are each over six-feet tall and packing 200 pounds, and they are *not* pretty. There is no pretty white cowboy hat or sleeveless flannel shirt or dandy black boots topstitched with hearts and clubs. There is no Nashville in these cowboys. Their necks are burned and hairy, their jeans stained and torn; their faces are like old tools you might find banging around in the back of their pickups.

I take my time at the sink, wash my hands of everything that’s gotten on them in the last few minutes. Back in the barroom the cowboys and just about everyone else are gone. The waitress and most of the bar folk are gathered around a screen door at the back, looking out, but I don’t join them. I slip out the front feeling like a sack of broken glass with one jag stuck in the skull of a perfect stranger.

Out in the parking lot three Mexicans are lifting a dead steer from the bed of a Datsun pickup. The steer has a bullet hole in the back of its head and looks a little more excited about the situation than any of the Mexicans.

The Mexicans are standing in the bed loading the steer into a dumpster. One of them puts it in a headlock while the others wedge their shoulders under its belly and squat thrust the carcass into the bin. The steer floats belly-up on the rest of the garbage like some iron dead steer bubble that won't bust no matter how hard they slam the lid on it.

The Mexicans talk it over.

One by one they climb into the dumpster and begin to stomp the hell out of the steer. Standing unsteadily in six feet of fly-ripe waste, gang-pouncing the carcass to make it fit, there's a certain kinship sighted in their struggle that gives me a moment of comfort. It is, of course, a small and pitiful kinship that will never be a great consolation, but I'm glad for its company anyway.

After a minute two of the Mexicans climb out and get in the truck. They tell their compadre to forget about it. They want to go home. Maybe they want to get drunk and find the other man their wives fell in love with. My Spanish isn't so good.

They lay on the horn and call out the window. *Vayamos. Quien cuidados?* But their friend doesn't listen. He grabs the ledge of the dumpster with both hands and jumps on the steer with both feet. He stomps on its belly; he stomps on its neck. He isn't going anywhere until that carcass gets in that dumpster. Something deep and seething demands it.

Something will get better when that lid is closed.

Transit Wives

Whenever I sit beside a pretty woman on public transit I like to imagine that she is my wife and that we are just an ordinary couple travelling to some ordinary destination, so synced and settled in each other's companionship that we don't have a thing to say.

I won't claim it's anything to brag about, but I've been the husband to a pretty female stranger on just about every form of public transit there is. Planes, trains, buses, ferries. Once I was even husband to a woman on a gondola.

Confidants surmise that it's a mark of loneliness, but for me it's just the boredom of shyness and public transportation, and the automatic cinema that always occurs when I am seated beside a good-looking woman with the edge of my leg or maybe my shoulder snoozing gently on the cushions of her physical bedding.

These transit matrimonyes never last for long, sometimes only a few blocks, but they are always enjoyable in their limited dialogue and, in the end, a little portentous too.

I was taking a bus in South Korea.

The bus was on its way to a remote mountain village that was rumoured by Korean travel agencies to have a must-see autumn maple forest, as if the village was a famous local diner and the forest its legendary homemade cobbler.

There wasn't much to admire about the journey because the tourists on the bus had buried themselves under the 5-hour trip to the village.

The bus was like a motorized crypt with occasionally one of the bodies rising from the dead to use the shitter at the back. Nobody talked and everyone slept.

The wheels rolled on and on and then at some point they came to a stop and just like regular western transit magic a pretty western woman got on board and took the seat beside me.

The woman was a cinch to join in matrimony. Trim, dark and leggy with tiny cargo hiking shorts and heavy tumbles of curly black hair crashing down a picturesque summit.

It took a little time to arrange the engagement, but after a while we got to chatting and after a little while more we started to exchange some classic husband-wifey dialogue.

There was talk about the weather and a story about her sister and a small discussion about the importance of bees, and before I knew it, *poof*—there we were: just your average wife and husband traveling toward a foliage renaissance with a full load of boring discourse between us.

It went on like this for a hundred or so miles. The more we talked the longer we were married. We talked for ten, twenty, thirty years until finally we passed our golden anniversary and she got tired of talking and dropped to sleep without a word of pardon, the way any normal wife would fall asleep while her husband of half a century drivelled on about nothing.

The bus lumbered along through industrial rural villages and muddy agricultures. Then almost like an accident it lumbered into autumn.

It drove up a narrow mountain pass, turned a corner, and suddenly there were the autumn maples, dropping leaves like blown kisses, their branches waving in the breeze.

The trees were gathered in legions all along the mountainside, each dressed in royal autumn uniforms of burgundy and gold. They looked sacred and rejuvenating and produced a kind of Lazarus effect. In a twinkling everybody on the bus stirred from their temporary deaths and shoved their faces against the windows. They rolled the boulder from the tomb of that 5-hour slog and let their senses bask in the resurrection colour singing from those trees.

The woman never saw a leaf.

She was totally oblivious in her perfect jouncing sleep and I didn't think to wake her because I was her old man and she was my old lady, and old-fart couples like us didn't wake each other up unless it was an emergency.

A few minutes from the village the bus hung a sharp right and half her sleeping face slid against my shoulder, and that is the way we stayed until we reached the village and the inevitable divorce waiting at that destination. There was nothing to be done. She had friends

she had to meet somewhere in the village and I had to be anywhere else in the village because our journey had come to an end and it was time to let go. I woke her with a quiet remark and we got off.

‘That was a lovely trip,’ she smiled.

‘It was,’ I smiled back. ‘Good luck on your next one.’

We shook hands.

I’ve been the husband to a pretty female stranger on just about every form of public transportation there is, but whenever I think about being a real husband it is always *that* bus, and the departing of *that* wife, which I come back to.

It’s a pleasant but haunted memory that constantly impedes any sustained movement toward permanent union. That last blue moment of loss and arrival when I slid my shoulder from under her sleeping head, and like an old man standing aside the passing of his beloved, leaned down and whispered, *We’re here*.

A Study in LA Handicraft

There was a baby born on a bus yesterday. I heard about it on the news.

The bus was stuck in a 405 freeway crush and couldn't get the baby born in a hospital. The young woman was giving birth right there on the big bench seat at the very back. It was her, the driver, and the almost-born baby.

The woman was an illegal Mexican who spoke no English; the driver was a Korean immigrant who spoke no Spanish; and the almost-born baby was no help at all.

The driver was having issues with the situation. There was no rule against child-bearing on the bus. If there was a rule he could ask the woman to stop or even kick her off if she refused. He could tell her to stop like someone eating a sandwich or drinking a beverage, except this wasn't a hoagie or a cola; it was a human giving birth and he was obliged by human decency (and maybe even American law) to do something about it.

The young woman was actually an older girl, not quite out of her teens. She was delivering on a bus because she was afraid to deliver in a hospital where people with clipboards would ask her about citizenship and insurance and charge her money for reproduction.

Somewhere along the bus route the girl's boyfriend was waiting to jump on the bus and hold her hand while she laboured, but with the bus buried in traffic he could not get to her hand, and now the girl was on her own on a freeway of 10,000 people without a soft palm to squeeze or anything soft to lie on.

In pain and afraid, the girl did the only thing she could: she pushed. She pushed so hard that she pinned herself straight back against the side of the bus, as if that baby had thrown its shoulder into her birth canal and was driving her against the tinted graffiti window—the heads of jutting bolts jabbing at her shoulders, her spine, everywhere hardness against her.

At one point the girl screamed in Spanish at the driver, who yelled back at the girl in English, then cursed at the traffic in Korean. There was no way he could get to a hospital by ploughing through innocent traffic. He could run over two or three cars before too much damage was done to his bus and then where would he be? Two or three cars from where he was now with a broken bus and a revoked license, that's where.

He should've never come to this country. He should've never come to this city where poor Spanish women got on buses to have poor Spanish babies who'd only grow up to speak no English or Korean and impregnate or get impregnated by others who spoke no English or Korean. He was only a driver. If the traffic would just lighten up he could do his job. Every moan and again he'd look back at the girl and tell her to hold on—*Hold on back there!*—then turn back to the traffic and try to glare the cars aside. His powers of glare reached great intensity, but they could not part the 405.

Then a miracle happened. Something I did not expect as I sat in my own clot of traffic listening to the story and waiting for the predictable act of civility when the driver would finally get up and go back to the girl and deliver her baby and refresh everyone's faith in mankind for the day. But this is an LA story, and that is not how this one ends.

The driver did not get up and go back to the girl. He did not take her gently by the wrist or wipe the sweat from her brow or place his stranger's hands between her thighs to centerfield her impetuous miracle. Instead he jammed the bus into park, opened the door, walked down the 405 and knocked on the window of every unmoving vehicle in the city, in the country, in the whole goddamn unreasonable world, asking over and over: 'Hey asshole. You a doctor?'

He walked a quarter mile before he found a plastic surgeon in a Lexus convertible. The plastic surgeon wanted nothing to do with a medical emergency.

'Well what the hell do you want me to do about it?' the surgeon asked.

'You're a doctor, aren't you?'

‘Goddamn it,’ the surgeon sighed, and got out.

The surgeon followed the driver to the bus and peeked between the girl’s legs. ‘Ugh,’ he said. ‘I’ll never look at one of these the same way again. Do you have any gloves?’

‘No gloves,’ said the driver. ‘Watch out for your wristband.’

The surgeon removed his yellow Livestrong wristband and took a deep breath as though he were about to disarm a bomb. ‘What’s Mexican for *push*?’

‘How should I know?’ said the driver. ‘You’re the one from LA.’

‘I’m not from LA,’ said the surgeon. ‘I’m from Topeka. I’m supposed to be having dinner with a Pilates instructor right now. She’s waiting at a restaurant where the drinks are fifteen dollars and the waiters are white. God never made a better set of tits, but I have. This afternoon.’

The driver wasn’t listening. He was paying attention to the white waiters at the restaurant. He’d never seen a white waiter before and wondered about the kind of food the waiters served and whether their tips were more than his monthly wages.

Just then the girl shrieked and a shiny bald head budded like a sunrise between her legs. The surgeon winced. There was no way he could get to bed with the Pilates instructor now. He could get her out of two or three pieces of clothing before the grizzly splendour of nativity snuffed his concentration and then where would he be? Two or three pieces of clothing into a beautiful woman with no erection, that’s where.

He should’ve never taken the 405. He should’ve cut across the 105 and sailed the 110 free and easy to the tingly well-toned kingdom waiting between the Pilates instructor’s thighs. He was only a cosmetic surgeon. If the girl would just drop by his office with low self-esteem he could do his job. Every shriek and again he’d look up at the girl and tell her to keep pushing—*Keep pushing, muchacho!*—then drop his head between her knees and grumble the praises of the 110 and curse the nightmare of the 405.

‘The 110 is backed up to Exposition,’ encouraged the driver.

‘A fucking nightmare,’ the surgeon despaired.

Piece by piece the baby entered Los Angeles. Then with one loud and vigorous wail it was done, and the woman held out her arms in a flood of weeping rejoice as the surgeon passed her the baby and shook his head sadly.

‘If that kid so much as sneezes she’s going to sue the shit out of me.’

‘Well I’ll tell you one thing,’ consoled the driver. ‘I’m not cleaning this bus. This wasn’t a hoagie or a cola.’

The surgeon wasn’t listening. He was paying attention to the lawsuit waiting down the road. He’d never been sued before and wondered how much he stood to lose and whether the kind of women he slept with would sleep with a man who drove a Prius. But that’s beside the point.

The point is there was a baby born on a bus yesterday. The bus was bogged in a work-sick swamp of motorists and with no other choice the girl commemorated the glory of diversity right there on the 405 freeway. And while it probably didn’t feel like it at the time, especially to those involved, it’s hard to imagine the fates of LA sewing together a more appropriate scrap of patches: an alien, an immigrant, a plastic surgeon, and a brand new baby Angelino, freshly cut from its cloth, swaddled and assembled in the quilt of Southern California.

The Verse

Almost any explanation of a region performed by a visitor to that region is certain to be at least mildly ridiculous to people who have spent their entire lives there, and rightly so. One solitary year in a foreign community is hardly enough time to form any irrefutable conclusions about that community's culture; certainly it is hardly enough time to form any on such a singular and idiosyncratic culture as that which you find in Newfoundland.

And yet when you're not born in a place and are not accustomed to it, then it's easy to notice everything it does. One is never so keenly aware of one's *ambito* than when he is not yet ripe for assimilation, and there is always a stretch of time when you first arrive at a new place when your curiosity and diffidence preclude you from obliviousness, and your powers of observation vault to levels equal to or greater than those which belong to the natives, even if you don't quite understand where you are or what you're a part of.

A person could perish of adaptation, so much of it conducted in segregation and confusion. There you are, a new babe in a brand new land, and it's not even close to what you envisioned. No welcoming committee is there to greet you; no parades have been arranged in your honour. There are no opening ceremonies, no festival maenads looping flower necklaces around your head. You are not the breath of fresh air you thought you'd be. Nobody is taking a shine to your strange accent or the novelty of your 'first-timerness'. You're alone, the people are stranger than you imagined, while you yourself remain pedestrian, unheralded, upheaved, in some situations the butt of the joke, a nuisance, a mark. Suddenly all the grandeur of travel is gone and there you are, steeped in disconnect, grasping for communion, wondering how the hell you got here and whether you have the pluck to stick it out.

I've travelled enough to know that homesickness is largely an illness of literacy. Every foreign land possesses a unique poetry, a weird and puzzling doggerel that reads about as easily as the spirals of some ancient Minoan script. You walk around for weeks, sometimes months, poring over that unintelligible succotash, turning it upside down in your head,

looking at it every which way for one line of mercifully plain English, despairing a single decipherable passage that will make words of the symbols and bring everything into a nice and readable state.

I remember when I first arrived in Newfoundland: a ‘blow-in’ from a foreign shore, out of my element and far from home. I was depressed by the weather, dogged by the tag of tourist, socially impaired by a failed marriage engagement. I remember feeling like infertile ground where big achievements would never grow, banged around by various events in my life and needing (really needing) some kind of validation, some proof that Newfoundland wasn’t a mistake, a navigational error, that there was something worthwhile, maybe even necessary, in choosing to live in a land that prided itself on the blunt misery of its Februaries and never seemed to come out on top.

One night near the end of my rope, when I couldn’t sleep and was close to lunacy with loneliness and fret, I went for a walk along St John’s harbour. The look of the lighted waterfront that evening had the calming influence of a prayer: the cones of orange wharf light, the fog creeping on cat’s feet, and the way the boats sloshed and clicked like things tossing in their sleep.

Toward the end of the wharf sat a large boat that had just docked—a tanker of some kind. The boat had machinery on its deck: pulleys, cranes, large iron appendages and giant spools of chain. The men coming off the boat were carrying duffel bags and laundry sacks. Some walked to cars that had women waiting inside; some went to cars without women. Others dipped into taxis waiting on the wharf. I had no idea where the men had been, how long they’d been gone or what job they’d been doing, but the sense of common life contained in their simple weary arrival had the virtue and fervour of poetry.

Whatever they were, they surely weren’t men who earned their daily bread directing a board of executives, producing smash records, or winning the big case. They were seamen, gnarled and briny, worn and whiskey-faced, without strut or shimmer, half-trampled by toil,

bereft of cheer and chatter. They were men who, if they'd been born somewhere else, would've been laying railroad track, erecting phone poles, getting buried alive under collapsed coal mines, and at their trodden sight the code of Newfoundland was partially cracked. In a twinkling clarity was born to me, a window was opened, and they, the ordinary, had opened it.

It is the close kinship between Newfoundland and poetry that keeps me writing about Newfoundland even though I'm no longer a permanent resident there. Whatever else poetry is, it also the spirit of simple living, and though it may occupy only one sad shelf at the back of your local Chapter's bookstore, what elevates poetry above, say, adolescent wizards or pouty vegetarian vampires, is its ability to render the grace and beauty of ordinary living, lest we lose the meaning of the common tasks we spend most of our lives performing. The hammering of our nails, the mowing of our grass, the cooking of our food—these simple acts repeated a thousand times as we make our way to our graves, these can live without glamour, but they cannot live without meaning. Poetry is a necessity for meaning, for achieving significance, and in that sense Newfoundland is an *Oxford Anthology* whose pages read like Whitman and Yeats.

We live in times where the success of one's life is measured largely by the amount of exposure that life achieves. The belief that we are here to get ahead, to grab what we can, to perfect an image, to sell ourselves spectacular, to swim in cash and roll in gold, to shun the menial, to reject the quaint and chase bigness, to heed the old dictum that glory may be fleeting, but obscurity is forever, and to triumph at all cost to our humility and morals.

But legacy-mongering is not the way of Newfoundland. What your life could be, lived without expensive trash and cutthroat ambition, you can discover in Newfoundland. The island, like poetry, is not meant for the triumphant. The golden executive or *Ciao, baby*

publishing mogul cannot glimmer in such a poverty of glitz and pizzazz: for some are meant to flourish, and some are meant to endure.

Drop into any Newfoundland pub on a rainy cold day in the middle of August. In Los Angeles the sun is singing its light along beachfront esplanades. In Monte Carlo the Mediterranean breezes are sighing softly on the backs of topless women. In Australia some hard-body is surfing. In Venice a model of a young woman is sipping the perfect macchiato, reading a book in dark sunglasses. But in Newfoundland the clouds have gathered like crushed steel and the sky is sopping; the neighbourhood pub is occupied by muttering middle-aged boozers, *Barrett's Privateers*, and in a dim corner booth a lone bartender is doing her bills, trying to figure out where the money goes and whether she'll ever have enough to get out of that pub. Walk into the solemn dank of that lonesome drinking hole and find a single flourishing lifestyle or extravagant demeanour, or one detail that speaks more toward thriving and splendour than frayed endurance. You won't find it.

Or look out your window around 2am, an hour after some God-wrath February blizzard has slugged the province into submission, and check out the face of the plough driver, guiding his iron elephant through sub-zero winds and bunkers of street-lit snow banks. Or your bachelor neighbour the following morning—part-time employed, divorced, his ex-wife shackled up with a short-order cook, his son on probation for breaking into cars—watch him wipe the quilt of snow from his windshield with a gloveless hand, scrape away the ice with his fingernails, so steeped in troubles that his shoulders actually slump—and search for the triumphant, the uncommon; it isn't there. Just poetry.

Or stand by the St. John's courthouse some idle afternoon. Wait for the young mother in the sputtering mini-van to pull up to the entrance, deliver her teenage son to his court date, his hat crooked, his punkish young face unremorseful. Watch him slink through the courthouse doors with a seasoned understanding of where to go, who to see and what will happen. Watch his mother call something out just as the door slams in her face. Watch her sit

stock-still and stare across the steering wheel without expression, and then watch expression burst onto her countenance, the muffled sobs, one hand clasped across her mouth to keep her sanity from flying apart.

I was in Newfoundland long enough to learn the knocks against it. They were not unlike the knocks against poetry. It's obscure, it's irrelevant, it deals in sentimentalism, it glorifies the quaint; it's self-absorbed, obnoxiously wholesome, focused only on its own history and significance. What is often overlooked is the vaguer good behind the more easily articulated bad: that the meaning of poetry is to give meaning, and thereby lend encouragement and resilience to strangers. It's the most bracing communication we have, and it's this same bolstering quality—not the charmingly uncultivated accent, or the jellybean row houses, or the lighthouses or icebergs or the easternmost pint of Guinness to Ireland—that inspires cruise-loads of tourists, most sodden to the marrow with their over-accessorized lives, to duck into the pub or linger aimlessly on the streets of this land: the hope of nutrition, the chance that poetry will breach like a humpback from the daily life of Newfoundland and shock their perspectives with glimmer of clarity.

And so when I think back to my time in Newfoundland, I think of every dark and lonely moment in my life that was endured and overcome without fanfare. I think of the shaggy young man standing on the side of the Trans-Atlantic, thumb out, holding a cardboard sign with Grand Falls written in big hopeful letters, who is not a killer, who is actually quite nice with a degree in engineering, who watches the cars whizz by as though he was just another mile marker, and now it starts to rain.

I think of a book of poems printed on ordinary paper, without leafed or gilded edges, its flap jacket missing, or stolen, its pages stained with grubby thumbprints, stuck together, torn and marked, its contributing authors a bunch of gritty no-namers with a plain cadence and simple elegance.

I think of aging men coming home from sea without a lick of recognition or display, without banners or trumpets or wild hugs of affection—men departing a boat in the middle of a cold unmentionable night, swallowed in wool coats, carrying laundry in sacks, men walking to cars with quiet women waiting inside, or stepping into taxis whose drivers already know where they live, and they're never going to forget.

The Whores in Las Vegas

By the time he was 37-years-old English John was having so much trouble getting laid by western women that the only thing to do was to move to Asia and become an English teacher.

He chose Asia to teach English because a good Welsh friend, who'd been laid by western women even less than him, had taken a teaching job in Xinjiang and within two weeks had gotten into the pants of a poor Chinese village girl. The girl had never left her province, owned a television, or been any older than the age of 18, and so naturally had no suspicion that a late-30's western bachelor teaching English for \$350 a month wasn't the most exotic male specimen any girl had ever fallen in love with.

English John was inspired. With no pets, no car, no remarkable job or furniture, and no family that needed him around, he emptied his savings into an online TEFL course, got his diploma in three months, and a few weeks later landed a teaching job in South Korea, where the women were known to be prettier and less Mongol-looking than in China.

In the weeks leading up to his big move English John was so excited he could scarcely focus or keep a single thought in his head. He bought a classic British novel for the 13-hour plane ride and never read a page because every time he opened the book all he saw was the story of his new life as the preferred screw, the mega jackpot, and dare he dream it: the very spit of desirability.

Trouble was, English John *did* dare to dream it, because in three decades of being bad with western women he'd habitually fantasized about another race of women—a race of trim, petite, unsatisfied females whose workaholic men constantly let them down with measly penises, premature balding, and full weekends away at the office. This was the great propelling faith: that every Asian woman kept a constant watch for the bigger and better deal

that was the western male, and would eagerly turn her back on men of her own race if one ever got within reach.

And was it such a wild dream? By virtue of his native tongue he would flaunt an air of sophistication, take advantage of an insular culture, bewitch some young untraveled hottie with facts and tales of western civilization—though he'd never lived anywhere but Ipswich and had only once left the UK to visit an aunt in Baltimore. Promiscuity would be his style. From Seoul to Pusan he would tantalize and stud, score and move on, till at last he was exorcised of his romantic apprehensions and born into swagger and confidence as a form.

If it tickled his interest, maybe he'd do some traveling.

He signed a one-year contract with the Maple Bear English Academy in Seoul, a Canadian language school that provided students with a thorough curriculum of western cartoons and a dozen blonde, blue-eyed teachers to operate the videos.

After the first year was up he re-signed for another year, and when that year was complete he re-signed for another, and another after that, and so on and so forth until he'd been teaching in Korea for so long that he has lost the way back to western employment and any alternative career that will take him seriously as a starting professional. By the time I joined the Maple Bear staff he'd been in South Korea for seven years and still hadn't found his pretty Asian village girl or any other girl who thought enough about the English language to go to bed with him.

In the style of the lonesome and abroad he found comfort in diversions that reminded him of home. He read *The Guardian* online, listened to BBC radio, and bought a copy of *The Economist* every month. He turned to comedy the way other depressed men might've turned to booze or sleeping—or the way that I had turned to booze and sleeping. He knew by heart more sketches, skits, punchlines and classic western hilarity than any westerner at the school, and on almost every occasion would club the fun out of them with garrulous explanations

about why they were funny. His laughter was not attractive. It did not roll from his gut in booming undulations or fill the room brightly with its presence. It was a single guttural release that lasted no longer than a belch. We shared the same floor in a slum tenement provided by our school, and often in the wee hours of the morning, lying sleepless in bed, I would hear that explosive homely laugh echo down the hall like a cry of shock, or the repulsed noise one might make when startled by an ugly bug, hideous and cringing in a small dark place.

There was a story English John told me about a time when the loneliness got so bad that he picked up a prostitute.

The story took place on the night of his 40th birthday. He was celebrating downtown with a pair of bisexual Canadian teachers. The Canadians had promised to get him royally trashed, then laid somehow, but abandoned their promise in favour of a gay disco they hadn't been to in ages. In no mood to humour the novelty of being straight in a gay nightclub, English John bid them goodnight and headed back to his apartment to watch one last episode of *Fawlty Towers* and then introduce a half-bottle of Johnnie Walker to a full-bottle of 10 milligram Ambien.

Suddenly, like a saving grace, he remembered that there are women in the world who didn't care about the bigger and better deal, women who didn't need to be charmed or tantalized or swept off their feet, or even Asian for that matter. From the depths of rock bottom he remembered that some women, many of them quite beautiful, only needed money to unzip a man's pants. In all his life he'd never had the audacity to visit a whore, but neither had he ever turned 40 years old in a foreign country all by himself.

He hopped a train to Itaewon and moused around Hooker Hill till he found a reasonable bargain in a pink bandage mini-skirt. The girl was one-part underage, one-part ancient. Her young body was a shrine, worshipfully tight and smooth, but the life in her eyes

has aged one year for every trick she has turned. When he eeked up to her blackened doorway, squeamishly soliciting, there was no warm reception. She talked brusquely about price, established a time limit, made him open his wallet to prove he had the cash. And when she saw that he did the ancient life in her eyes gained one more year, and she sighed and said, ‘Whatever.’ Just like a real western girl.

He paid for two hours of her time, then spent the first 30 minutes of that time feverishly getting drunk enough to follow through with the remaining hour-and-a-half. There was a place just up the hill, a gentleman’s lounge with some rooms in the back. His hands and voice were shaky. His stomach didn’t feel right. He shot crap tequila at the bar and tried to find his cool. Around candlelit tables grungy ex-pat bachelors and military boys, unsure and full of nervous excitement, sat wasted on cushy floor pillows and chatted up their girls over booze and simpleton English, their uncomprehending girls smiling at the remedial come-ons and interjecting encouraging giggles.

English John didn’t think his girl was so encouraging. He thought she was a little snotty and maybe even hateful. He asked if he could get her name and on the third time he botched it—*Hay Sock? Hey Suck? Eh Suh-kuh?*—she proudly stopped repeating herself and asked with frigid civility if he was ready for his happy time. He wasn’t. There wasn’t enough cheap tequila in Korea to steady his quaking nerves. As suddenly as he’d remembered the utility of prostitutes he now recalled the surely clinical sexual anxiety that had prevented him from ever taking the idea of visiting one seriously. How in God’s name was he supposed to get naked in front of a complete stranger? Would they kiss first? Was foreplay expected? What if she had a disease? Who was responsible for protection? Good God, he thought. How old was this girl?

Half-trashed and wobbly he followed her down a dim corridor of private DVD rooms that doubled as love studios. All at once that Ambien cocktail didn’t look so bad. He wanted

to run, to escape, to excuse himself to the bathroom and slip safely, however disgracefully, into the night. At the last studio the girl fished a single grimy key out of her purse, unlocked the door, and made him wait in the hall while she took a bottle of Fabreeze and sprayed the room down with alarming meticulousness. It was a fitting little dump to pay for sex. On one side of the room stood a karaoke theatre system, unplugged and decrepit; on the other side a lousy twin bed that looked as though it'd hosted some of the crummiest lovemaking in the history of man.

Once inside, the girl she was all business. She chucked her purse on the floor and fixed her hair into a bun. Then she motioned him forward, sat him on the bed, and with total procedural aloofness strip-teased to a pair of transparent G-string underwear. Turning in a cold stiff circle for his appraisal, she modelled all her amazingly lean features without sensuality or spirit, her eyes trained to a spot above his head. When she completed a few turns she put her fist against her mouth and puffed the opposite cheek with an inquiring scowl.

'You like?' she said.

English John nodded. 'Yes. I like.'

'You want?' she said.

English John nodded. 'Yes. I want.'

'You thingy clean?' she asked.

English John nodded. 'Yes. My thingy clean.'

'You put condom it still feel happy,' she said.

English John nodded. 'Yes. Feel happy.'

The sex was quick and awful and instantly worth forgetting. The second it was over a massive awkwardness emerged between them, and they put on their underwear and got beneath the sheets and avoided touching each other, their bodies stiff as planks.

Desperate to lift the tension he asked about her life and what she was into. Did she know about Monty Python? Did she like Mr. Bean? What was her favourite western food? He made jokes and weak flirtations. He told her she was beautiful, asked if she'd ever modelled. He was sincere with his remarks and did his best to seem like a decent chap, but the canyon between them was a generation wide and he knew from the other side the bridge he was building looked cheap and pitiful, besmirched with the usual grease slicks.

After a while she opened up. Her English was dreadful but persistent. In so many attempts she explained how she swabbed her vagina with vinegar to keep it tight, how she hated high heels but liked the way they made her legs look. Her dreams brimmed with cosmetic enhancements. Boob jobs, nose jobs, laser hair removal. She spoke of a new surgery that rounded the eyes of Asian girls to make them more western. She had saved a thousand dollars already. Two thousand more and she could afford the upgrade. After that she would go to America and find the men of her fantasies. She asked about Las Vegas and he told her what he knew and some things he didn't. She wanted to know about the casinos and the heat and the gorgeous escorts who roamed the glitzy Strip and shook their fake chests over craps tables. The pretty, busty, coloured-eyed call girls who cruised the neon boulevards in the front seats of Porsches, danced through the sky roofs of white limousines, partied in the best clubs, fucked in the best hotels, and got treated to the best nightlife. 'They're not that pretty,' he lied, but she was the dreamer, the authority on the matter. They lay together and she explained it.

'In Las Vegas whores very beautiful but no one call them whores. Honest business find you and give nice dress and phone for man to call. Man call private for you, you not on street every people look at you and say bad thing. You stay home and watch TV and he call polite like boyfriend and ask you on nice date. Tell you nice place for meet like hotel, but you not sex right away. He take you rich party first and every people dress nice with jewellery and pretty drink. Maybe his car he put arm around you. Not hide you or say no sit tall because people see you. *In mean voice!* He pride people see you and friends think jealous and wish

they call and give you fun. And you make own rule like yes condom and no hit because honest business own you and send police because you fancy woman. And you tell man no thing in small hole because it pain and make red toilet tomorrow. In Las Vegas whores not treat like toilet. And man call you baby and honey and always treat you nice like real wife.'

She went on about other whores in other cities like Amsterdam and Paris. In every city the men were better and nicer and more handsome than in Seoul. In every city sex was better and nicer and more romantic than it was in a ratty DVD room. In every place but where she was life was special and fun and filled with sensitive rich men who were unfulfilled and looking for something more, something just like her. A better deal.

After that English John didn't say anything. The girl turned to the edge of the bed and watched pop videos on her cell phone, and when their time was up she asked him to leave without opening her mouth, handing him his shirt and jeans and Febreezing his side of the bed while he put them on. It was a strange thing, he thought, even for such an unhappy encounter, to walk out of the room without the merest goodbye, without a single acknowledgement whatsoever, and to watch her clean him from the sheets before she had even put on her clothes.

At the Wedding of a Mutual Acquaintance

At the wedding of a mutual acquaintance, in the gazebo by the swan lagoon, the groom's drunk brother-in-law asked my good poet friend, in these words exactly: *What the fuck happened to your face?* And my good poet friend, as he'd done a hundred times in his life, responded simply with the truth: 'Car accident.' And that was the end of it.

Later, the tanked brother-in-law, now very tanked, cornered my poet friend by the champagne fountain and asked: *Caraccident?* Whereupon my good poet friend, now a little less sober himself, explained with touchy dignity a dark night on a highway outside Des Moines, a drunk father at the wheel, the glass of the passenger window and the stories he told the kids at school about knife fights in parking lots and grappling matches with rabid dogs, intimations through lies that he was not to be fooled with. And that was the end of it.

At the end of the wedding of a mutual acquaintance, in the parking lot outside the vineyard, the now steampigged brother-in-law stumbled all smiles up to my poet friend and exclaimed with arms outstretched: *Face!* At which point my poet friend cocked back and catapulted his fist straight between the eyes of his unsuspecting harpy, who dropped his beer, fell to a knee and, looking up with genuine astonishment, asked in these words exactly: *What the fuck is your problem?* To which my good poet friend tactfully replied, as he'd done a hundred times in his life and one too many times that evening, 'Car accident.'

And that was the end of it.

Fast Food Bad, Fruit Stand Good

First summer after college means a drive up to Davis to visit my only brother. The earth has whirled around the sun five or six times since last we saw each other, and with no job, no urgency to find one, there's really no excuse to remain estranged. He also owes me money.

The drive from LA to Davis takes seven hours and carries you like a partially obstructed oesophagus into the hyper-rustic gut of central California. It's a slow, bug-smattering, 70 mile-per-hour slog through hot bald hills, bovine death camps, and dozens of plowbilly gas towns that feel like breathing with one failed lung.

The first ad appears just after Stockton and is followed by a sequence of homemade signs publicizing the names of the most prestigious of the citrus clique.

Oranges!!! Mandarins!!! Lemons!!! Limes!!! 5 miles!

Oranges!!! Mandarins!!! Lemons!!! Limes!!! 3 miles!

And so on and so forth until finally:

Fast Food Bad, Fruit Stand Good.

Get Off Now!

I normally steer clear of any operation associated with strings of shouting exclamation marks, but this is a few weeks after reading *On The Road* and converting to the Kerouac religion of raw experience, and everything about me is why the hell not.

I slide off the Grapevine at a No Services exit, go jouncing over ruts down a proper country road pecked by crows feeding on particles of 1988 roadkill, and pull into a gravel turnabout staked by an old man in a wooden fruit stand that looks like it was assembled around the time the Okies were coming through.

I step out of the car into a choke of kicked-up dust. The heat is supernatural: a God-wrath triple-digit oven bake.

Already I have a weird feeling about this fruit stand. It is stuffed to bursting with piles of citrus. Oranges, mandarins, lemons, limes; citrus on the counter and back on the shelves; citrus in crates and brown mesh sacks, loose citrus on the ground. A lot of loose citrus.

There is a young woman sitting on a mattress in the back corner. The mattress is lying on the ground and looks like it spent its youth in the cheapest motel in California before retiring to this fruit stand.

The young woman is actually a girl barely out of her teens. She is sitting on the edge of the mattress, bouncing a baby in her lap—her hair back tight, her dark comely legs streaming from a pair of khaki shorts. The baby is slobbering on an unpeeled orange. The tasteless peel is driving the toothless baby nuts and he's using his gooey little tongue to prod it for structural weaknesses. Its head is sort of shaped like an orange, subtly lopsided, and its shabby baby clothes are stained with threads of dried pulp.

The old man has a born-on date from the time California was a Mexican territory. He is the spit of rural stereotype dressed in denim bib overalls minus a shirt, a Miller *High Life* ballcap and two white sideburns like fossilized caterpillars.

I can't tell his exact relationship with the girl. She might be his daughter, she might be his niece. She might even be his wife. In whichever case the girl has overtly committed herself to ignoring my presence in a way that has nothing to do with rudeness, but almost as if I've wronged her in a former life and have one hell of a nerve showing up at her fruit stand in this one.

I stand around a moment pretending to browse the selection. Then I buy a sack of mandarins and two bags of limes for my brother in case he still drinks too much tequila. The old man asks me where I'm headed and tells me about a new kind of loam that's making mandarins sourer, and I boomerang a few forgettable questions that probe the astonishing suspended animation of their lives and just how long they've been out here selling citrus at the speed of grass growth.

After a few minutes of this, our wholesome transaction nearly complete, the old codger spits through the crack of his two front teeth, strokes his grizzled chin, and tells me how right here, just north of the San Joaquin Valley, is the absolute hottest goddamn spot in the state of California that isn't the Mojave. And that one summer it got so goddamn hot that all the ravines and creeks went dry, and there was nowhere for ranchers to water their cattle, so that the cattle went mad, literally insane with thirst, and started fornicating night and day because screwing was the only thing that kept their minds off their throats. All that summer all you saw in the fields was cattle mounting cattle, eyes bulging, tongues hanging out, mounting and humping each other right there in the open sun; because it doesn't matter where you are or how hot it gets. It's never too hot to fuck.

The old man gives me a dead-level gaze. Nobody says a word.

The girl bounces the baby on her lap and stares at the middle distance with perfect calm antipathy, while I stand on the verge of the explicit like all the legends in the Kerouac gospels. From here there is an impossible distance of prudence that my spirit flinches to surmount. It's right there for the taking: the raw and outrageous, the far-famed consciousness expansion that comes as the fruit of uncooked experience. It isn't just temptation, and I'm not talking about lust.

But there is little hope when people use discreet persuasion on me. I'm too trepid for the soft sell. Reluctantly, damn near shamefully, I shrink back from the brink, make one last noise about the weather, then take my fruit and go. The mandarins smell lovely and fill the car with their fragrance.

Almost everywhere I've been I've encountered an opportunity to do the right thing in a meaningful situation, and failed to do it for the right reason on just about every occasion. From this dismal history comes the one and only thing I've learned for certain in my 30-plus years on this planet—that within every human soul there burns two kinds of passion: the passion that loves the good, and the passion that loves the bad. And perhaps the best we can

ever hope to say for ourselves is that we loved the passion that loved the good, and hated the passion that loved the bad.

Execution of Saddam Hussein, Worcester

We went to the pub to watch it because the bartender had a bootleg copy, because it was the kind of historical comeuppance you celebrated as a community.

We stood at the bar pouring tall muddy pints into our faces while others trickled in and began pouring tall muddy pints into their faces, all of us watching the mounted television in the corner, recalling his invasion of poor little Kuwait, the way our Patriot missiles had kicked the stuffing out of his SKUDs, building the peace of mind to hate him to his end by observing all those chemical atrocities against his own people, though they hadn't much bothered us when they were happening.

The execution, filmed by what might've been a cell phone camera, looked like it was taking place in a barnhouse loft. He was dressed in the height of execution fashion. Not the prison rags we might've expected, but a fine dressy coat and creased pants. And he'd been gussied up for the occasion, combed and neatly-shaven, his fugitive mangle groomed back to a stately goatee. Never the handsome deceiver or the reckless psychotic, the way we like our villains, yet never mistaken for incapable. And yes, there was fear in his face.

'Afraid to meet the Maker,' assured the bartender. 'Afraid God's a Kurd.'

And looking at that frightened, succumbed, tenderly dazed expression it was hard not to feel some truth in the remark, for in the eyes of that rascal world-stirrer, teeming with youthful wavering, one could see that few meet death like a man, but like a child summoned to the headmaster's office. *What will happen now? Am I in trouble?*

They'd wrapped a scarf around his neck so it wouldn't be marked. Everything was quick and unflamboyant, the simple straightforwardness of militant proceedings. No unnecessary process or uniformed pomp. Armed men in puffy jackets and black ski masks walked him through a motley crowd of supporters and sympathizers, all anxiously jostling for the best last view of him, then up a wooden flight of stairs and onto the platform. Anticipation

imposed itself and the pub settled as the executioner slipped the noose over his head, slid the knot behind his neck to keep his head from being ripped from his spine, and explained to him as a professional courtesy how it would happen. 'Your neck will break here, here and maybe here if you move. Your height and weight have been determined. You will not be decapitated. Your head will jerk back, the rope will tighten, you will feel a short pain, and it will be done.'

Then they dropped him. And in half a second all his glamorous insolences and inhumanities were settled with a perfect snap that roused the pub into a flash ovation, as though the opposing quarterback had just been sacked. They had not given him a hood, or at least he had not asked for one; nor had he opened his eyes except once just before the lever was thrown, as if to check one last time if this was all really happening. Then his body, like his consciousness, jackknifed into darkness. In a mad scramble to get a shot of the corpse, the footage whipped away from the gallows, legs and feet flashing in and out of the picture, and came to rest on a pale lamblike face now utterly sheered of fear and confusion, bodiless in a perimeter of black space, lips parted in a kind of tranquil dream murmur.

We clinked pints and tapped the necks of our beer bottles, toasting the truly complete rightness of retribution and an identical end to all brutes and murderers and terrorist fiends, all rivals of democracy and the goodness of America. The bartender played the triumph again and again, and with each encore the last look on the condemned's face became more amusing than understandable. By the fourth viewing the execution possessed the intensity of a blooper reel. Bravado thundered through the barroom, trampling any condolence or compassion. After a while we lost interest and the bartender ran the video a final time. Keeping the remote aimed at the television, he waited for that one perfect look just before the trapdoor released, when the eyes winced opened and the face was meekest and most child-like with terror, and when it appeared he paused the tape and left the wretched visage framed on the screen for everyone's humour.

Just at that moment a hammered ex-marine launched his pint above his head and demanded a final salute, and we raised our drinks accordingly and united in one last hoorah in honour of what we stood for. We proud voyeurs of just desserts, we men of indubitable substance, raising our spirits high, laughing at the face of death.

Housesitting

The owner of the house, a co-worker and spinster conservationist, was off to South America to count penguins. The exact ecological importance of counting South American penguins was lost on the girl and she didn't bother to ask about it because frankly she didn't care about penguins or even so much for the environment. She had her own problems.

For starters, the new boy in her life wasn't a boy. For once he was a man; three years older, sensitive, conscientious, goal-minded. He'd published a poem.

Secondly, she wasn't a child anymore. She was 23 (almost 23) and responsible womanhood demanded more fulfilling relationships than she could achieve with the cocky, sulky, vaguely ambitious party boys who until now had peopled her love life.

The time for growing up had come. She was ready for the transition. The house was hers for a month; the emergency phone numbers were on the fridge. There was no time to lose. The Southern Rockhopper population had absolutely crashed.

'It's all the commercial fishing,' the owner seethed, handing over the house key. 'And oil spills.'

'Oh oil spills,' the girl sighed. 'When will the world learn?'

Her first day on the job: short grey skirt, brown leather boots, white turtleneck, electric yellow hair like daffodil lightning. Modern courting protocol was clear. Show no interest, make no move. He acted professional, treated her professionally, neglected her flirtations. He had no idea how to begin.

And when she finally took it upon herself and asked him out to dinner, and afterward to drinks, and then shoved him on the couch and went down on him back at his place, decisive and grinning, it was like getting away with some incredible stupidity, and he understood in one clenching jolt of tingles how a fool might strike it rich and get everything he wanted without ever knowing a thing.

It was exhilarating because it was unexpected. A circumstance scripted by the romantic inks of serendipity. Two interns sharing a season at a distinguished but tedious literary press. He who believed in the job and went about his work in a force-field of monkish professionalism; she who loved openly like the poet's mouth, but would not abide a life of menial duty.

Their main task was entering reader response cards into a database to ensure future solicitation. It was a stabbing waste of time and she didn't understand how he could do it with such diligence, never taking his eyes off the computer screen, never joining her in the break room to flirt and shake the drudgery. She supposed it was characteristic. The foundation of adulthood was accountability. That first night together he'd forgotten a condom and given her oral instead. She thought that was very mature; the kind of thing a man would do.

He was embarrassed by his come, by coming too fast or coming at all, and this weird shame had grounded a dozen would-be affairs in his life and prevented even the most casual intimacies from operating comfortably or functioning with ease. He kept his eyes where she wasn't, clung to the petty work, cowered behind a dutiful manner. It was more than just shyness. His brother told him he took pussy too seriously. Sex wasn't some sacred event. It was common, mechanical, frivolous. If you wanted it to go well, that's how he had to look at it.

He thought he could with a little more experience.

It'd been one week since their first night together, three days since they'd seen each other outside of work, and she wondered whether anything would blossom or if he even wanted something to blossom.

On her first day at the house she got a call from her doctor and was told about a cyst on her ovaries that had the potential to interfere with pregnancy, and she thought this a perfect opportunity to protect her pride and leave the ball in his court.

She phoned and told him the news and confessed with heavy dejected sighs that she wouldn't be very good company and that he didn't *have* to come over if he didn't want to, and of course he said he'd come over, and of course he'd bring some wine.

'Wine would be *wonderful*,' she said.

'I'll get some Pinot.'

Never go out with a loaded gun. His brother told him that. And he followed the advice and masturbated before he left and got as relaxed as he was going to get.

He dressed in casual non-suggestive, old jeans and a three button Henley, and jumped in his truck and stopped at the Safeway and bought two bottles of Columbia Crest and a pack of Trojans, plus mints.

'Durex is better,' the clerk said, bagging it up. 'You can't feel shit with these.'

For the sake of performance, he thought that was best.

It was the kind of lodge-style residence one might've found at some Rocky Mountain retreat. A handsome timber-shrouded property styled toward nature by way of so many rustic touches. She liked how things were stained and distressed. The façade of cedar shakes and painted board. The decorative barn with batten siding. The jacuzzi deck that overlooked a canyon of evergreens, and beyond that the Olympic Mountains, those stark and jagged peaks.

Inside there were timber frames and pinewood floors, a gaping stone fireplace big enough to cook a pig, and a library loft loaded with vital consciousness; Darwin, Thoreau, Neruda. 'It's fine to have guests but please be respectful,' the owner had asked. And of course she promised she would, and of course that meant no fucking in inappropriate places or

forgotten contraceptives lying around where a lonely old homeowner might stumble upon them like graphic Polaroids of wet hot moments she'd never had or was too old to remember happily.

He knocked as he came through the door and called out her name; and she rose from the couch and breezed across the room in a pair of red underwear and a petite white tank top that popped her breasts and flushed her curves to the front of his attention.

Attractive wasn't the word. There was no single word.

Every wonderful synonym related to effeminate was expressed in her half nudity, and having no suave or polished instinct to handle such an expression he stopped dumb in the doorway and merely grinned.

Then she was standing in front of him. And she stood on her toes and kissed him with impact, and he dropped his head and kissed her back. And the grocery bag bumped against her hip, and the bottles of Pinot clinked, and the smell of her shampoo swaddled his head like a scarf, and this was it right here. Good Christ this was it. A bare soft girl to greet and embrace you when you walked through the door, like perfect karma for a past life lived in the service of the wretched, organizing canned food drives or building shelters in Haiti. Or something.

He couldn't quite think at the moment.

They cooked Italian sausage pasta and she taught him how to chop a bell pepper by cutting off the ends and pulling out the heart.

She cooked in her underwear and drank her wine in large reckless sips, and he sat on the counter with a Lowenbrau he'd found at the back of the fridge and watched her boil penne and work the burners with the thick steam rising in tumbles across her face.

He flipped through her CD case, admired her taste in music, talked about the decline of Pearl Jam. Then he put on *Clapton Unplugged* and leaned against the fridge and eyed her wonderful ass while she stood on her toes and dumped the diced onions into the skillet—the spitting sizzling skillet with the sausage and peppers and skunky garlic, and the hiss of cooking meat, and the splashes of Pinot she tossed into the mix straight from her glass, and the acoustic cords of Clapton; the whole scene like a cherry bomb in a poetry tome and a thousand pages of savoury verse falling in shreds around them.

‘Smells good,’ he said.

One thing was clear. It was she who’d have to initiate their pleasure.

She’d given him the unequivocal green light when he’d come through the door and again in the kitchen and he still hadn’t made a move, but this was alright because actually it was nice not to be pawed at or pressured into sex, and to be the mapmaker and not the dominion for once.

They ate dinner in the dining room with two long candles flickering between them, and the second bottle of wine between them, and she loved the conversation between them and his blue uncertain eyes shining hungrily upon her.

He was nervous, so naturally he had a second helping. And she bided her time and waited for him to finish, drinking her wine with her elbows on the table, leaning forward in her chair, smirking as he floundered at the brink of ruder aggression. Not in mockery, but in delight of this genuine prelude that came without cunning or douchy calculation.

Now his plate was clean and there was nowhere for him to hide. And she ploughed her smile into his chitchat and daggered the conversation with a dead-level gaze. She took control of the sexual tension, cranked it to high, and when at last he cracked and reached across the table with a clumsy remark about her beauty it was like the assent of a prophet who’d refused the call, and it was only a moment later she was taking him to bed and stoking him up, huffy

and goosefleshed, grasping for skin, sucking the smell of dinner from his wild and hungry mouth.

The flirting, the gazing, the performance of her ass in the kitchen. All of it had teased and upheaved him, and now it was like tearing open a miraculous present he'd been deprived of for a hundred Christmases.

Incendiary, every nerve primed and volatile, he pulled the pin and hurled the grenade of himself everywhere on top of her. He knelt between her knees, dragged her underwear down her legs, stuffed his mouth with her breasts, and with his face crushed against her shoulder he cursed and came in his boxers and just like that Christmas was over. She smiled.

'That was nice,' she said.

The clumsiness of the first foray. The urgency in their voices when they told her they were coming; the shyness in their manner after they did. At the beginning they were always embarrassed by their come.

She'd expected more but wasn't disappointed. She understood the complications of her beauty and what could suffer because of it.

He took off his boxers and spooned up against her. And his breathing settled down, and his saliva cooled on her breasts, and a dust-like silence gathered around them, and this was it right here. Oh, wasn't this it! A sensitive grown man holding her close in the wake of his life's leaping, tender and thoughtful, evolved from the juvenile, remoulding her in his quiet likeness. His full belly made noises like Super Mario Brothers, but she didn't mention it. She thought that was very mature; the kind of thing a woman would do.

The next day came like a holiday observing human sexuality and they spent it in bed paying homage to the other's body by way of lick, stroke, suckle and pet, and only got up to

pee or gather food or throw away the used condoms, till finally he moved the wastebasket beside the bed.

Her sex drive had a loaded gearbox. She crowded over his body with a hunger to learn his body. She was fearless with positions, poised beyond her age. She issued commands as though speaking to a loving dumb animal, kindly but sternly—*slower, faster, deeper, harder, there, yes, good, easy, easy*.

In the afternoon she snuggled next to him and grilled him about the male condition. What was it like to shave his face? Did every man fantasize about two women at once? The hours passed like minutes as she pressed her cheek across his heartbeat and reminisced about the kind of girl she'd been. She was 10, 12, 15, a freshman in college, an au-pair in France. She was watching her best friend die of cystic fibrosis. She was losing her virginity to a hostel clerk in Montreal, in a public park after a midnight ride on his Vespa. And then all of that was gone and she was there with him, unwrapping another condom and rolling it down his ceaseless erection, kneeling in the sheets like one tending a favourite garden, planting a new kind of flower.

He went back to the store for more Pinot and a bottle of Malbec and that evening they stripped naked and took the wine into the jacuzzi.

They were drunk before they got in and the heat and steam had the effect of deepening their buzz. But the night was clear and the stars were out, and the moon was out with them, fat and confident, belting its light like an opera singer. And in this picture of romance they felt the correctness of a more verbal intimacy, and soaked at opposite ends of the tub, and sipped their wine at proper intervals, and mused with poetic airs upon the vastness of space, the mystery or origin, the excruciating smallness of life. And deep stuff like that.

And when the deep stuff got old their bodies came alive; all their nerves and urges, frisky and alive. And she set her glass on the deck and disappeared into the churning hot

water, sank with that unruly smirk and floated through the glare of the jets, through the dark tickle of bubbles, until she reached his lap.

And when she found it she did not tease or handle with care, but took him fiercely in her mouth, carnally, and he jerked and stiffened at once, bellowed and spasmed, and she raked her hands across his chest and plunged her fingers in his mouth, and he bit her fingers and pressed her head to his release, remembering only at the last second that she couldn't breathe, and then pulling her up with wild embarrassment, kissing wildly at her face, gasping again and again, 'Damn, goddamn. I'm sorry. Goddamn.'

It didn't matter. She was tenacious now, too revved and tingly to stop. She straddled his lap and started to grind. She reached across his shoulder, snatched the Malbec, and with her arm hooked around his neck tipped back and pulled straight from the bottle, kissing him with her mouth full of wine, passing her mouthful into his, dribbling it down his chin and chest, grinding like a pestle in a mortar till the hot shoots climbed her throat and his libido regrouped. He scampered out for a condom and jumped back in, and she locked her fingers around his neck and rode him unsuppressed, unchecked and outrageous, the raucous splashing and his rising moans. And when their gazes met, the silliness of their passion struck them, and she broke out giggling and sucked his eye, and he smushed her close and clutched her ribs as she set her own rhythms, and he came again and it was done.

Afterward she said she was dying for fruit. And they fled into the house, prune and dripping, and foraged the kitchen, finding oranges and mangoes and Mt. Rainier cherries. They sat naked at the table and with his front teeth he plucked the cherries from their stems and revelled in their cold sweet crunch, while she peeled an orange in one winding coil and nibbled each slice. They found a weird conversation about the personalities of fruits. A banana was shy and well-read. A pear was full of envy. A peach was nice to your face but talked behind your back.

There was a single green apple sitting in a bowl on the table, spoiling without help or hope, but it didn't look any kind of fruit they wanted to talk about, so they didn't.

Over the next few days they got to know the house together. They explored the entire property: the guestroom above the garage, the greenhouse and garden, the library loft with its weird overload of *Walden Pond* editions.

The owner's bedroom was upstairs and had the impeccable tidiness of solitary female aging. The bed was unapproachable. So primly arranged were its pillows, so faultlessly unrumpled were its covers, so chaste of lewd and greedy love did it appear, that neither felt comfortable getting close to it. The sad neat bed stood in the room like a warning against a life of shyness and too much Thoreau, and in its presence they grew uneasy and quiet.

'It's a funny room,' he said.

'I think so.'

'It looks like she's the only one who's ever been in it.'

Within a minute of walking in they turned and walked out, and she latched the door behind them and jiggled the handle to make sure it was locked.

'There's no reason to go in there again,' she said.

'We shouldn't have gone in at all.'

2

They kept their relationship secret at work. They arrived at different times and left at different times and even sat on different sides of the table during status meetings.

She wanted to rise to the level of his professionalism, so she acted professional, treated him professionally. She kept her eyes where he wasn't, busied herself with the monotonous tasks, neglected his flirtations. It was strange and slightly hurtful and he didn't understand how she could blow him off with such indifference, never taking her eyes off the computer screen, never joining him in the break room to steal a kiss or sneak a grope. He

supposed it was characteristic. The nature of girls was obliviousness. One night at the house he asked if she ever thought about him at work. ‘Not really,’ she lied. ‘I’m really a very focused person.’

His quick orgasms made him suspicious of her enjoyment. She could sense it in his eyes, the way they studied her grunts and grimaces; and afterward when he nuzzled beside her, barely speaking, pleased but restless.

The scepticism bothered her. She thought it cheapened her.

She wasn’t some hedonistic nympho whose affection depended solely on a happy crotch. She was happy to make him come and pleased at the effort he expended to make her do the same; and though he’d yet to do so, his inelegance around her body delivered plenty of flattery. The way he licked her too hard, how he fumbled with her breasts, the tentative way he moved inside her, like one feeling in the dark something fragile and unfamiliar, learning its texture while trying not to break it—all these touched her like a compliment, and she answered the compliment with encouraging noises that were perhaps a bit generous but certainly not fake.

But that was the nature of men. Always making a molehill in the garden of the heart. Her mother told her that.

Sometimes he tried to explain it. He said his penis was a vagrant who’d suddenly inherited a glorious wealth and didn’t how to manage it and was going around the city splurging in thousand dollar bursts. She thought that was nice of him.

One evening after another hasty splurge he slumped on top of her and heaved a deep sigh, and she strummed his ribs with the back of her fingers and told him she was flattered by the passion, the rapacity, but of course flattery would only get you so far.

Sooner or later you had to perform.

Her mind was a museum of history; his affection the archaeology that supplied it. One night he unearthed an odd relic while enjoying her from behind; a trauma buried deep in her bedrock, disinterred by the rough harmonic motion. Herself a young girl, not even ten, drawn skittishly to her parents' bedroom by the cadenced banging of their headboard. Peeping around the partially closed door and seeing her gentle father bent across her mother's back, gnawing at her spine, the harsh slapping and series of whimpers that were almost sobs when he finished, the only time she ever heard him curse.

Remembering this and recalling how she had turned and fled to her room in tears of mysterious devastation, not understanding her feelings, not even when her father came to explain what she had seen. Not understanding until this instant when she saw that it was thing like jealousy that had thrown her into hysterics. To be cherished above all others, to receive from your dearest loved one the deepest gesture of affection—yes! How it all made sense now. Forbidden and honest sense.

And there was plenty more depth where that came from. Twenty-plus years of unexamined experience packed in her attic. What provocative consciousness had yet to be evoked? What profound and striking baggage awaited discovery?

When he reached his climax she almost missed it, thinking about her complexities, her treasure of puzzles, the impressive museum within.

They decided to spend the weekend apart. He needed to do some reading. She wanted to clean the house. Autonomy was important in a relationship.

He went home and phoned his brother and his brother set him straight. Autonomy was important, but leverage was essential. He had to be the man she'd be crushed not to haunt. That meant no calling, no texting, no emails—no hint whatsoever that she was on his mind when they weren't together. If he wanted her to want him, she had to think she was nothing

special. That was the game of attraction, the psychology of modern women, and the modern man was smart to remember it. Only neglect was taken to heart. Appreciation would get you nowhere.

She poured a glass of wine and took a walk around the property. Her sips were light and leisurely as she entered the pretty barn and had a look, poking her head in the empty horse stalls, pausing here and there to touch the funny tools hanging on the wall.

She wondered where he was and what he was doing, but was intrigued by her isolation. The barn was cool and still and put her in a sensual mood. There was something bawdry about it. Something arousing, mischievous.

The impression got stronger and stronger; and then suddenly her mind took off and she found herself thrust into a fantasy of graphic proportions, into the *mise-en-scène* of an Anais Nin creation or maybe Emmanuelle Arsan. An idle young heiress summering at her family's chateau. A brute quickie with the halfwit caretaker. Right there in the cool still barn, on a horse blanket spread across a pile of straw, long nails in the walls holding bridles and pails, paint cans in the corner, small plants growing at the door.

Lying on her back still in her bra, her dress pushed up to her waist, his pants heaped around his ankles, he pumped her fast and hard, not knowing how to be graceful, not caring, pumped away with his vapid drop-jaw gape, choking her breasts with his calloused hands. And she whined under breath because her nipples were tender, because it was all so frivolous and crude, because there was grime in his sweat and it was grungy and crude; the whole lurid vision informing her intuitively that it was not so much the partner that mattered, but the thrill of the transgression.

And afterward there was no romantic postscript, no soft kiss or sentimental embrace, only an awkward reassembling of outfits, their bodies used and unclean, sawdust in her hair, horses huffing in their stalls, the thick smell of shit.

He bought a box of climax-controlled condoms and worked himself up and tried one on, and it was only a few minutes before the strange desensitization took effect and a funeral swept across his crotch, leaving a nerve-deaf arousal where brilliant sensitivity had once thrived. So be it. He didn't need pleasure as much as he needed to give it.

Unselfish had nothing to do with it.

The weekend passed and she didn't hear from him. It was strange and slightly hurtful and she didn't understand how he could blow her off so completely, never giving her a call, never sending a text to say hello.

She spent Sunday on the couch watching cheesy sitcoms and competitive cooking shows, feeling anxious and plain and nervous about her mind. In bed, naked and close, the adulation poured from his mouth. But when their clothes were on? When their bodies were separate? How seriously did he take her then, the calibre of her mind, the reach of her intellect?

The doubt rotted her gut like bad digestion until finally she went upstairs and browsed through the library and picked out a bible of Neruda poems, hundreds of pages thick.

She took the book outside, to a bench beside the tomato stalks, and read the poems slowly, meticulously, daunted and amazed. Such emotion seemed impossible. Impossible, she thought, to feel the world so intensely, so hugely, and not lose your sense of humour or knack for fun. Was this the substance he wanted to see? *I love you as dark things are meant to be loved, in secret, between the shadow and the soul.*

Impossible.

That evening she stripped naked and took the last of the Pinot into the jacuzzi. The night was cloudy and the stars were gone. She couldn't find the moon.

He showed up Monday night with a bottle of Pinot and two hoagies for dinner. He plated her sandwich and poured her wine and served her at the counter, and she pushed the wine away and ate the sandwich without a plate, petulant and cross, kicking her feet against the lower cabinets. She was miffed about the weekend and it was good to see.

Gradually her mood got better and by the time dinner was through they were back to their usual touchy-feely. The main thing was concealment, a certain subterfuge. He had no intention of letting her know that he'd switched to one of those climax delay condoms, 'specially lubed' for losers who couldn't last.

Instead he urged her to unwind, to have a shower and freshen up, and while she was in there he took one of the regular-style condoms and made a thin neat tear down the edge of the wrapper, careful not to rip the edge off completely. Working quickly, he wiggled his finger into the package and broadened the tear till it was wide enough to pull the condom out. Then, when the regular condom was removed, he opened one of the loser condoms and worked the rubber into the first wrapper, stuffing it through the little tear, then sculpting the tear in such a way that only a faint hairline fissure could be seen.

When the switcheroo was complete he placed the tampered condom on the nightstand and got undressed, and as he waited in bed the thought of what he'd done struck him like a bad gag in a stupid teenage movie, and he shook his head and scoffed with self-reproach. The sad queer efforts of the insecure, but it was done now.

A few minutes later she was standing by the bed wrapped in a pink towel. Then the pink towel dropped and there was her body—that warm, damp, astonishing body, freshly scented in floral bath cream, the shower clutching to her inner thighs in greedy drops. His erection lunged.

He snatched the condom off the nightstand and rolled it on, and she climbed on top of him and keeled forward, sliding back and forth to work up the friction. Then she knelt upright and eased him inside her, and he seized with dread as much as with pleasure to find all his

sensitivity still intact, unimpaired by the benzocaine or whatever it was; to feel almost immediately, as he'd felt on every occasion before now, his tadpoles roiling to a frenzy at the very first thrust; and to understand a moment later, in another hard fit of prematurity, that it wasn't the heap of nerves at the end of his shaft that needed a numbing down, but all his avid senses combined. A numbing of his eyes, a numbing of his ears, a numbing of his mouth and nostrils. All the faculties shocked by the force of her sexuality, singed by her exasperating hotness, a desensitizing sheath wrapped around them all.

There was something evocative about his balls. Their delicacy, their symmetry, the way they brought her back to girlhood and a fallen nest of sparrow's eggs she'd found beneath a tree, how she'd cupped the eggs in her hand and warmed them with her breath, scarcely stroking their shells with her thumb, they seemed so fragile.

She wondered how she might present this to him as a tribute. It was the sort of compliment she thought he'd appreciate. Touching and abstract.

The originality of the praise excited her, and one night in bed, before she had it polished in her mind, she flopped on top of him, kissed his mouth, and whispered with all the tenderness her tone could muster, 'My dear. You have the balls of a sparrow.' He looked at her.

'Oh. Well...that's nice.'

The blood shot to her face. It was a lamebrained attempt and she knew it at once, but the tone of his bewilderment, the quizzical smirk in his eyes, reflected a greater idiocy than what she thought the mistake contained. She rolled off his body, scooped to the edge of the bed, and didn't say a word till he pushed up beside her asked what was wrong.

'Do you think I'm dumb?' she said.

'Why would you think that?'

'Yes or no?'

‘No. Why do you think that?’

She didn’t answer. It wasn’t her fault she liked the things that everybody else liked. There was nothing wrong with sitcoms and cooking shows. Life wasn’t all Neruda and Clapton. She was proud of her tastes and capacities and wouldn’t be made to feel ditzy or inferior for them. She laid there in stubborn outrage as he groped for the source of her mood, trying to placate it with friendly chatter that she stonewalled with one-word replies, till at last he lost his patience and pushed away.

‘For Christ’s sake,’ he snapped. ‘What’s your problem?’

‘Nothing,’ she said. ‘I don’t have the problem at all.’

Sometimes when they spooned he would get a vision of holding her underwater in a tranquil but perilous depth where schools of luminous white jellyfish swarmed around their suspended bodies, growing deadlier in number until there were so many they dared not stir an inch in their embrace for fear of being entangled in stings.

One night while she slept the vision became almost painfully arousing, and he wedged into her backside and pressed his crotch against her rump, feeling anxious and unproven and stressed about his fucking. Out of bed, dressed and chatting, her respect was unmistakable. But when their clothes were off? When their bodies were together? How seriously did she take him then, the calibre of his manhood, the work of his cock?

No doubt she’d had better partners. She was too amorous to own a history of unfulfilling screws. But what could he do? Her body inflamed him. Its codes confused him. Her pleasure made no sense. Sometimes she told him to stay in one place and do the same thing until she climaxed, but when she didn’t climax she changed her mind and told him to move around. And when he was doing well, getting her close, she held absolutely still for fear he’d lose the spot, but when he worked the spot she moved a lot, and he lost it. And he burned to tell her these things, to vent his frustrations and confide his excuses, and to tell her that no

matter his pleasure there was always a greater height of displeasure when he did not see the force of his lovemaking contorting her bones, making her squeal, and lifting her off the mattress in a violent, blasphemous release.

And yet there were things she could do, goddamn it. It wasn't all on him. Those fake and patronizing noises, those weren't helping. And the constant orchestrating, the suggestions and stage commands. Did she think him so inept, so unable? Herself so skilled?

He propped on his elbow and stroked her thigh, fondled her ass, impatient and testy; but the hour was late, his fingers cold, and she whimpered just irritably enough to make him stop. After that it didn't matter, and he turned away and let the jellyfish get him.

She didn't feel like the jacuzzi. The chlorine was bad for her hair. He didn't feel like getting more wine. The cost was adding up. They brought their laptops into the bedroom and watched nature shows on YouTube, a documentary about Bigfoot, the top ten outtakes from Game of Thrones. He fell asleep.

And when he dropped off her mind was still awake, unsettled and wide awake, and she eased out of bed and crept across the room, to the reading chair by the window, and folded her legs beneath her, and wrapped a blanket around her, and watched through the semi-dark as his sleep grew restless without her, as his arm swept across the bed for her, prowled and flopped around for her, as her absence made him search for her, even as he slept.

And she thought, watching this, that she was watching a crucial testimony. If you wanted them to want you, you had to be out of reach. That is what it took to be desired, to be the great emotion of their life, and a girl was wise to remember it. Only absence kept them hungry. Reliability got you nothing.

Not even a kiss goodnight.

His internship ended two months before hers. There was an opportunity in Boston. Something with college textbooks. They talked about making it work, hashed out dates when they might be able to visit, expressed their thoughts on long-distance relationships. She didn't know what she was doing after this. He said there were plenty of graduate schools back east. She said she'd look into it.

3

More and more she eyed the calendar on the fridge and the big red circle around the Saturday of the owner's return. She reviewed the list of cleaning instructions. She made a list of things that needed to be done. On Tuesday she scrubbed the bathroom. On Wednesday she mopped and vacuumed. Once he offered to help. He thought it was something they should do together. She told him she could handle it. There wasn't much to do and anyway it was her job. She was the housesitter.

Something was starting to happen. Things—little things—were starting to change.

Almost every night they'd spent at the house they'd screwed themselves to sleep, often without brushing their teeth, sometimes forgetting to switch off the lights, on some occasions leaving out food or milk. Now there was less abandon, less whim. Now she told him she'd meet him in bed, and while he waited she put away the food and washed the dishes and tidied the kitchen and turned out the lights. And all this sudden fussing and responsible activity had the feel of an evasion, a shirking of intimacy; and he called out from bed and told her to forget it, to leave it for later, irked and threatened, and she called back and said she'd only be a minute, and finished her rigmarole and brushed her teeth, and then came to bed in frumpy pyjamas instead of sexy underwear or nothing at all.

Little things. Just little things. But still...

*

Sensitivity overkill. She never thought it could happen. But there was something to be said for a simple compliment.

He called her the rhetoric of optimal experience. He described her as a sonnet. He told her he could see how a slave might come to love its master. He was determined to appreciate her in a way she'd never encountered and frankly it taxed her. High flattery and deep expression were encroaching on the fun. Walking in the garden one evening he recited 'Somewhere I Have Never Travelled' and when he was finished she wanted to tell a stupid joke or rip a fart. The reaction surprised her. The gesture was thoughtful, the poem beautiful. She didn't understand.

Something had started to happen. Things—little things—were starting to change.

She didn't feel like fooling around. Her stomach was bothering her. He didn't feel like going to sleep. It was only ten o'clock. They watched the Internet in bed, a sushi challenge food show, some episodes of *Friends*. And when she fell asleep his mind was still awake, unsettled and wide awake, and he stared into the dark and thought back to a girl he'd known in college, a nursing student who peed after sex to prevent urinary tract infection. His very first rodeo.

In a matter of weeks they'd fallen madly, stupidly, flagrantly in love. He'd learned about her life and discovered her quirks. He'd bought her gifts. A jewellery box with a Leonard Cohen lyric engraved on the lid, a gold necklace, a corset.

At the beginning he'd written her sprawling, unpredictable love letters celebrating the beauty of birds, the wisdom of children, the way things looked in sunlight; and she had written him back with equal breadth and randomness. Once they'd spent every available moment within tongue's reach of each other, had squandered entire days entwined on rumpled sheets in giddy cuddle pretzels, schmaltzy and blissful. Then it had happened. Something like their own personal climate change. Persistent companionship bringing on a kind of Ice Age

between them. His thoughts and comments lost their sticking power. He couldn't hold her attention. She became a half-presence in his company, never completely there, always abstracted and unengaged. How civilly it had fizzled. No fighting or arguing, no cursing unpleasantness. Just a steady cooling of intensity, a cordial withering of emotion, until at last the heat and light were gone, just gone, and they hugged each other goodbye and wished each other well and it was finished.

And what had it all amounted to? Hundreds of kisses, thousands of words, all that effort and intimacy, and now she was with another guy in another distant life, a million years from the time they'd shared. His relevance in her life had amounted to a mere simulation, a training exercise readying her for the next infatuation. And it would happen again. In God's name, how could it not? How could any blazing affection withstand the slow freeze of familiarity? How could any two people stay hot and famished for one another, or even nice toward one another? What had she meant by that nutty remark? Did she think he had funny balls? Little sparrow balls? Balls were supposed to be small. If she didn't respect his lovemaking, that was one thing. But to quip about his package, to pot-shot what he couldn't control, that was something else entirely. There was nothing wrong with the body he brought to bed. He was fine with his endowments and wouldn't be made to feel weird or inferior for them. How many bottles of wine had *she* paid for in the last month? How many times had Little Miss Sex Pro inquired about *his* life, *his* family, *HIS* thoughts and emotions? Balls of a sparrow. Fuck her.

When she started to snore he got dressed and drove home for the night.

He didn't come over the following day. He sent her a message and said he was busy, and she messaged him back and told him ok.

In the afternoon she tackled the last of the cleaning. She had no idea why she was humming as she went from chore to chore, waiting for those tender pangs of transition she'd

figured she'd experience when their time at the house was up. Instead she thought about other girls in other countries, girls born to conformist cultures, chained to unbreakable customs, coerced by the thousands to marry young and make a family; all those lovely anchored girls who'd never get the chance to taste the different liquors of boys, get drunk on different styles of love, or romp through the world with outrageous abandon, unbridled and exuberant, the miracle of their youth cut down by domestication.

She took apart the burners and scrubbed the greasy stovetop; and as she scrubbed, the plainness and smallness of the chore, the idea of a life spent in the service of small plain activity, heightened the severity of her thoughts. By and by her humming grew louder, bolder, livelier, until finally she was singing the tune at the top of her voice, belting its lyrics, a silly pop song she'd heard the day before, all fluff and foolish. But free.

And when the kitchen was clean she started on the guestroom, their room, stripping the linens off the bed, shaking the pillows from their cases, feeling mindful and resistant and resolved to dig in. How many women had been ripped from girlhood before their time, removed from that happy soil by the sudden tug of an untimely commitment? The harvesters were everywhere, and their hands took a persuasive, exciting grip. But she would not be reaped into that life before she was ready, would not jump into sense and prudence. To be capricious and free, to be stupid and impulsive, to doggedly cling to the dizzy and sentimental ride of youth, this would be the major struggle, and no other would be so vital. The frivolous intimacies, the flippant escapades, the cocky party boys—she had the rest of her life to leave these behind. For Christ's sake.

She wasn't even 23.

He accepted the job in Boston that morning and came over in the afternoon with a bottle of Shiraz because he was sick of Pinot.

He knocked as he entered and called out her name, and she rose from the couch and went to the kitchen to rinse a few dishes that were already drying spotless in the rack. He stood behind her at the sink and gave her the big news, and of course she thought it was great, and of course he popped the wine and suggested a toast, but she still had linens to wash and clothes to pack and anyways Shiraz gave her headaches.

‘Maybe a glass later,’ she said.

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘I’ll leave it out.’

Then there was nothing he could think to say, nothing he could think to do. And he wandered up to the library and perused a volume of Neruda poems while she crammed the bedding into the washer, humming a popular new song.

Let us forget with generosity those who cannot love us.

He shut the book and put it back.

Later in the bedroom, packing her clothes, she started to sing. Her voice was strong and glad.

The owner of the house was on her way home from counting penguins in South America. She was delayed in San Francisco, due back the following morning, and they agreed to leave that evening and spend the night at his place.

They conducted a final inspection of every room. She found a dirty tissue behind the toilet, the corner of a condom wrapper under the bed, and he remembered her Eric Clapton CD still sitting in the stereo and stuck it in her purse. And when they were done the day was still too young to leave alone in the house, and they stood around the kitchen picking crumbs off the counter, making suggestions about how to pass the time, till finally they just sat on the couch, a few cushions apart, and watched without speaking as the evening crept through the windows with its greedy blue hands and robbed the room of its brightness and colour. Here

and there his stomach made noises like Super Mario Brothers, and with nothing else to say, she told him.

‘I wouldn’t know,’ he said. ‘I never played the game.’

And it was only a moment later that she was putting on her shoes, bringing her bag to the door, and opening the door to the last of the day’s light. And he tailed her off the couch, grabbed his wallet and phone, and carried her bag to his car while she wrote a thank-you note to the owner and worked the spare key off her chain. The house was almost dark when she placed the key on top of the note and followed him out, shutting the door firmly behind her, jiggling the handle to make sure it was locked.

Tenement Abroad

When my father whooped my ass he did it with a custom hickory paddle. The paddle was a full inch thick, about two feet long, and was very much like the paddle a fraternity might use to initiate new pledges. There were even some Greek symbols carved in the centre. Thinking back on my general behaviour in those early years, how those symbols aren't presently blistered on my ass is quite a wonder.

My father was a quiet and passive man. Like most quiet and passive men he had very little control of his temper once he finally lost it. There was a two-minute window where the vehemency of hell would hijack his personality, and all the gunk and foulness buried under the earth of his mild disposition would gush into the world in a torrent of fantastic epithets and screwball threats. By and large, this was the only way my old man could impose discipline. He had to lose his shit. And once he did that heavy wooden swat was his reckoning tool, dispensing dues with the corporal harshness of a judicial caning.

I was five or six years old the first time I got a taste of it. I'd taken some shooting marbles and planted them into a container of mint ice cream, thinking it'd be funny when someone bit into the ice cream and cracked their teeth. My father came home from a hard day at work. He was grumbling about the company. I'd forgotten all about the marbles in the mint ice cream. There was a vicious cry, followed by a seething curse. A second later I was summoned to the kitchen. When I got in there my father had jammed his fist into the ice cream and removed all the marbles in one heaping sloppy glob. The marbles looked like buckshot removed from the innards of an animal. There were 13 of them, each gleaming with melted dairy in my father's open hand.

'Are these your fucking marbles?' he demanded. My mother stood uninvolved by the kitchen sink, drying a pot that looked pretty dry already. 'Don't look at her goddamn it! Are they?'

I nodded.

‘Right. And did you put them in this ice cream?’

I nodded.

‘Brilliant. And do you mind telling me *why*—WHY on this goddamn earth!—you’d stick your toys in somebody’s food to be swallowed and choked on and God knows what?’

I didn’t have a nod for that one, only a shrug. It enraged him.

Every home has a room where child comeuppance is privately administered. Ours was the ‘back room’, sometimes called the sewing room, where the ugliest of our furniture was banished like an awful family secret. There was a heinous yellow sofa with floral velvet and broad sloping armrests. The procedure was simple. First I was told to drop my pants, underwear included. Then I was told to lie across the armrest, stomach side down, and lock my fingers behind my head. My father kept the paddle on the top shelf of the sewing room closet, under sweaters he never wore, and when he brought it down a shudder ripped through my muscles and my butt cheeks clenched. Every last appeal for mercy, every final defence of my actions poured out of my mouth at once. I unleashed the wild tears, the miserable whimpers, the huge promises of repentance. And like a true executioner my father proceeded deafly through it all, made his way across the room, found his grip on the paddle, and assumed something of a batter’s stance aside my tilted bare ass.

By now his temper had somewhat cooled. A demure resolve to carry out the sentence replaced his wrath and roaring. Speaking softly, almost remorsefully, he told me how it was going to happen. The count would be to three. On three he would swat my bottom. He would swat it three times as hard as he could, and after the third time, if I wanted it, I could have a hug.

Just before that first crushing stroke I swore to my deepest blood that I’d never speak to the stone-hearted bastard again, let alone hug him. And afterward, shocked, stung, humiliated, I threw my arms around his waist and bawled till I choked.

*

I've been living abroad for a couple of years now, most of that time in poverty and lonesomeness. It's a long story and I'd rather not get into it.

A few nights ago my neighbour, a quiet young Welshman, whooped his boy's ass for the first time. The boy is five years old and also very quiet. The two live next door without a woman in their life, though they've never mentioned why.

Like every other intense human moment in this cheapshit tenement the whooping came through the walls loud and clear. I say it was the first time because each of them sounded new to it. Right before the whooping occurred I heard the young man carefully explain the procedure. I heard him tell his son to bend across the table and lock his hands behind his head. I heard his voice slip out of anger and become tender and patient. I heard the boy beg and make huge promises.

Then there were three hard whacks and the child wailed like a demon. He shrieked and shrieked and shrieked. Then the shrieking stopped and the room got very still, almost delicate, and there was weeping, torrential and deep, several blubbering declarations of hate, and finally more weeping—the whole convulsing outburst partially suppressed as though it were being muffled by a shoulder or big soft belly, getting stifled by embrace.

I listened from my kitchen, drying a pot that was pretty dry already.

Wild Napkins of the Pacific Northwest

One afternoon as a lost young man in the strange state of Oregon, I walked down a beach and came across a very pretty family eating sushi on a lunch bench. On one side of the bench sat a gorgeous mother and a father. On the other side two adorable blonde daughters, ages 7-10. Poised atop a grassy dune ledge, the bench overlooked a cluttered shoreline heaped with petrified logs and weird ropes of alien seaweed that looked like giant sperm.

The family had brought a white tablecloth for the occasion and pinned it down with five nice-looking rocks that looked part of a Martha Stewart rock set. There was a rock for every corner of the table and one for a centrepiece.

Nobody seemed to notice what a harsh and gusty day it was to be dining alfresco. The picnic had been totally full-proofed against any of that. There were no paper cups to blow off the table because everyone was drinking glass-bottled soda. There were no paper plates to fly away because everyone was eating their sushi from a silver platter.

The sushi was sitting on the platter in its original deli log form. The mother and father ate pieces from one end of the log while the daughters ate pieces from the other, like two ends of a sushi continuum coming scrumptiously together.

I must repeat what a poignantly handsome family this was. A 50-foot lighthouse could not have warded ships from the coast as effectively as the mother's flaming yellow hair, which flowed like Ethan Allen drapery down the fronts of her shoulders and stylish black coat. Only slightly less impressive was the father, a man so jutting above the collar that he might've been seen on daytime television portraying anything from a surgeon to a fighter pilot. Yet it was the girls who owned the show—the two girls with their bright yellow heads and high shiny voices and delirious happy babble pouring unstopably from their bottomless youth.

The family paid me no mind as I took a seat on a nearby log and observed the flow of chipper discourse pass between their mouths of rice and raw sea meat. I watched with clueless

fascination, as though watching an important sport whose rules I'd never learned. After a while the wind picked up and the sport of family bonding got old, and I rose to my feet and was just about to get on my way when something happened that plunged the whole scene into that magic mental cauldron where experiences are cooked into memory.

The family had napkins. Big, bright lavender napkins.

The napkins had been pinned beneath the centre rock to keep the wind from blowing them off, but now the sushi continuum had come together and it was time to wipe lips and chins. Just as the mother tipped the rock to retrieve the napkins a sneaky gust leapt across the shore and punted them off the bench. Up-up-and-away the wild napkins flew. Whirling and twirling like drunken bonfire sparks, they rose in writhing arcs above the dunes, crashed down in the wild rye, then caught their breath and rose again.

The girls shocked to life.

Squealing with delight, they begged to be excused to chase the napkins down. The father pondered their request gravely, drawing out the anticipation. Then he flashed a wry smile at the mother, who nodded her consent and loosed the two children like purebred hounds off on a Sunday hunt.

The girls tore into the dunes, laughing, screaming, ruthless with amusement. They stamped the napkins under their feet and snatched them out of the air. With each grab they turned toward their parents and held their catch as high as their arms could reach. The mother and father called to the girls with white lightning smiles, while the girls crammed more napkins into their pockets and tumbled hysterically into the dune grass, dropping out of sight and popping up again, breathless and waving.

A few minutes later the novelty faded and the girls lost interest. They took their captured napkins back to their parents and I took myself back to the beach, with its seaweed torn up by the roots, and its columns of pale driftwood like the ruins of some toppled oracle.

Skydiver

You've thought about it for months and now the moment has come. *You know I love you, baby, but this isn't the right time for us. There's things I need to work out before I commit. I can see myself making a life with you, don't you believe that? But things are complicated right now. It's all so complicated.*

Yes sir. You've thought about it for months. You've gathered the guts for weeks. Now here you are, you're doing it. You're making your jump, abandoning ship, becoming baggage – 187 pounds of emotional carry-on she'll lug around for the rest of her life.

You've never been skydiving but this must be close to what it's like, right there at the lip of the hatch, windshear like God-scream tearing apart your resolution, heart slamming against your ribs, spitless with fear, second-guessing, thinking, *Sweet Christ I'm doing this, I'm actually goddamn doing this.* And goddamn it, you are. The elevation is right. You've hit your final altitude. And the only way to done is all

the
way
down.

But let's not look before we leap or freak ourselves out of this. A plunge is never that long or difficult. The only real difficulty is stepping off the brink, and you can do it. It's now or ever after.

Take her hand for courage, lean forward, breathe in, and fall out.

Relegation, North Sumatra

Even for an act of nature there was something explicit about it. The raging subjugation, the plunging supremacy, the brute thrust of its wind and rain. Face down on the mattress, pillow over my head, I did my best to be asleep. But the adamant claps and climax bellows, the gathering of the rain-roar against the roof, roused me from bed and sat me duly by the window. This was a dress-down that would not be slept through. I would watch it and be meek.

As it goes with psychopaths, there were plenty of false repentances. Time and time again, just as the skies seemed to abate, to mellow and reform, the clouds would crackle hot and white and the rain would crush against the island like some voracious libido loosed upon a long-exalted fixation, the lightning so brazen that in those electrified instants I could see as clearly through the midnight as though it were noon on a perfectly congenial day.

The thunder rocked and resonated. The field toads wouldn't shut up. The wind licked with fearful anger against the window, and the window ran as though its pane bore the tears of a weeping toddler. It was an old-fashioned, Old Testament Earth whoopin'—an avenging deluge holding the whole globe accountable for some momentous infraction.

And when the storm relented, it did not forgive so much as slip into a quiet seething. The temper remained though the fury departed, and the smouldering calm was filled with Niagaras of rooftop drainage that created such a tremendous spattering that, looking away from the window, I could not tell whether my demotion was done.

It was only hours later that this lunatic tyrant at last moved on, fading south as though lapsing into some contemptuous sleep, grumbling thunder, twitching lightning, fitfully descending into another livid dream miles away, leaving me and every local creature properly cut to size, a little unsettled, a little disturbed. A little more aware of our place.

Drowning

That was a frightening little article in last October's *Telegram*, which told about a spontaneous 'death wave' at Middle Cove that snatched a young mother and her children out to sea. We were glad to hear that the victims were rescued without much harm or mental anguish, and that they are now safe and warm and getting on with their lives, but that does nothing to ease our worry of a predator that can pluck its prey from the shore as easily as a berry picker plucks his partridgeberries.

The folklore of drowning is as much a part of Newfoundland heritage as the folklore of fairies and Bob Bartlett. With all the literature I have read about this province, because half my life is spent writing papers about its culture and people, I rarely come across a tale where somebody hasn't drowned, nearly drowned, discovered a drowned body or rescued a person who almost drowned. Thus I'm a little embarrassed to say that I've known more people who've been killed by a shark (two) than people who've drowned in the ocean—embarrassed because I was raised beside the equally perilous Pacific and should have more to share on the topic of life lost to water.

But the fact is the Pacific doesn't take lives the way the Atlantic does. It certainly doesn't take lives in manner of the North Atlantic. It does not form itself into a spontaneous fist and snatch a family from the pleasant shore. It does not freeze the blood, petrify the muscles or squash the breathing like ten grand pianos slowly being placed on your chest. Out west you might lose your life to the appetite of 12-foot Tiger shark, or an unknown allergy to jellyfish stings, or be abducted by a quiet riptide. If you have some money and stupidity you may even pass out drunk on your yacht and roll into the marina. At any rate, a drowning in the Pacific is often a fashionable demise, while a drowning in the North Atlantic is usually a proletarian end full of honour and nerve, a lot of media, and a nameplate on a monument somewhere along a waterfront.

When it comes to the North Atlantic respect is easy; affection is hard. The ocean is so menacing—so purple, bleak and brooding, so constantly, that it is a rare occasion when I'm not persuaded into a kind of grim and edgy malaise when looking at it.

Last summer I went on a date with a young Newfoundland girl who suggested we drive out to Flatrock to hike a jut of shrubby coastland called The Beamer. We packed sandwiches, bottled water, scaled the jagged rock face and found a small bunker built into the cliff. We ate our sandwiches and read the rude graffiti painted on the walls, and afterward we watched the waves lick with fearful anger against the cliffs across the bay.

Somehow we got on the subject of drowning. I told her I couldn't imagine a more miserable way to die and she told me about her brother who'd drowned with friends in Portugal Cove when their boat tipped over in a strong crosswind. Then she told me about her uncle who'd drowned during a fishing expedition off Bonavista North, and her twelve-year-old cousin who'd drowned jumping pans at Pouch Cove, and her great grandfather captain who'd gone into the drink when his freighter went down in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

It was hardly believable. Drowning ran through her family history the way alcoholism ran through mine.

'And for what?' I said. 'A cod, a trout, a seal? All that loss.'

She shrugged. It was the kind of response you give when you understand something more than you can explain it, or care to, and we didn't talk about it anymore.

Some circles of life you can't understand unless you're a part of them. A thousand Newfie fishermen, straight and strong, strike daily out to sea to make their living. And a million lie under the hypothermic waves, and their muscle and flesh feed the fish that lead the thousands to the brink of the same fate.

In that terrifying final book of the Bible we are told that on the Day of Judgment all the seas of the world will give up their dead, and when that day comes, we may be sure that this particular sea will give a mighty and thunderous belch.

Telegraphy

A sunny June day in St. John's, Newfoundland means a school trip to Signal Hill so students can admire the scope of their city in marvellous Mother Nature Technicolor.

The bus reads Eastern School District and looks like the half-tractor/half-Panzer kind of bus that children took to school in 1979, which also happens to be the year I was born nearly four decades ago this lost and jobless afternoon.

It is about two o'clock and I am sitting in my car, eating McDonald's at the top of the hill where Guglielmo Marconi received the first transatlantic wireless signal and then shortly afterward the Nobel Prize.

The children surge from the bus, all squeals and skips in the dazzling elevation. They race across the parking lot and plunge into Cabot Tower, pointing, shouting, running, jumping. Thirty sets of fuel-injected legs firing on all summer cylinders.

The children are at the zenith of the low-maintenance life. There is nothing wrong in their existences that can't be repaired with five minutes of play. They are twenty or thirty years from the disease of nostalgia or any deep long breath born in a car beside a perpetual quarter-tank of gas and two Final Notice statements sitting in the front seat like silent angry wives who'll never leave you no matter how bad it gets.

There is another man like me up here. He is eating a hamburger in his car and sometimes talking to himself. He is wearing an exceptional slouch and the skin is sagging off his face as though it's walking out on him.

He is parked next to me and we are both slouch-eating hamburgers and sometimes talking to ourselves while thirty delirious schoolchildren horse around on Cabot Tower, which always looks cold no matter how much sun it gets.

There is one boy standing by himself at the east side of the tower.

The boy has spotted something in the ocean distance and is very excited as if something unimaginable is sailing his way.

He is leaning over the side of the observation deck where the whole world begins or ends at the fractured cliffs of Newfoundland. His classmates are on the other side of the tower, looking out across the city.

The boy is pointing and calling for them frantically, begging them to look at what he sees ahead.

Maling, Maling

When I first moved to Bali I was told that if my home was ever robbed, which it surely would be at some point, I was to run into the street and scream “Maling, maling”, meaning *thief* in Indonesian, and that moments later the whole Indo-Muslim village would pile to the scene and kick the seven bells out of the perpetrator. I had some doubt about this recourse, whether it would inspire the same gallant community response if put to use by a foreign white guy. Nevertheless it was the only helpful suggestion I’d been given on the matter, and I kept it in mind just in case.

Two months passed without incident. Then one evening around midnight someone began to beat my front door in. There was no subtlety or stealth about it. The blows came three at a time in a steady brazen cadence. They were livid and violent and formed a hellish little verse that went something like this:

WE (BANG)
ARE (BOOM)
POOR (BASH)

YOU (BOOM)
ARE (BANG)
WHITE (STOMP)

THIS (BANG)
WILL (BOOM)
HAPPEN (THUD)

POOR (STOMP)
ANGRY (STOMP)
POOR (SMASH)

Naturally my first response was to do absolutely nothing and hope for the bad noise to go away. I stayed perfectly still in bed and thought of all the harmless events that could be mistaken for someone trying to rob and possibly kill me in my own home. Obviously some poor old woman, ravaged by dementia, had wandered from her home in the middle of the night. It was 1963 in the old woman’s head and she was just a little girl visiting her

grandmother, knocking on sweet grandmother's door, bringing lychees or melon or chilies for the sambal. Something rational like that.

But the murderous pounding only got worse, and within a minute I was out of bed and searching the room for any kind of weapon. The best option was world myth. *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology* was sitting on my desk. I would stuff that bulky resource into my pillow case, swing the case around my head, and sack-beat my attackers with the cultural dreams of the human race. There was no time to think of something better.

I tore out the pillow and dumped the book inside. Then I twirled the case into a rat tail. Shaking in my underwear at the top of the stairs, I sucked in an ocean of breath and gave my loudest, foulest, most psychotic pufferfish impression.

‘Alright you fucking animals!—I’m coming down there now! And when I get there I’m going to beat the crap out of anyone I see. I don’t care if there’s seventeen of you because I am fucking *huge*, got it. The biggest prick you’ve ever seen. YOU WILL ALL EAT MY SHIT!’

The force of my voice was pitiful. The pounding only intensified. I cocked the sack behind my shoulder and started down. This was it, I thought. Jesus Christ this was it. *You’re going to go down there and there’s going to be five of them, man. And they’re going to have poor people’s weapons like box openers and hand sickles. And it’s going to be grizzly, man. Just grizzly.* Down the stairs I crept, one step at a time, breath shortening, balls shrinking. *You’re going to be one of those westerners that other westerners back home hear about on the news. You’re going to get beaten and murdered in your own home and other westerners are going to read about it and cluck their tongues and say, ‘See, that’s why you don’t teach English in developing nations.’*

The terror was more than courage could stand. By the time I reached the bottom of the stairs all backbone was gone and I dropped my sorry sack, threw open the back door, and

hurtled batshit into the night. I shouted for help and made sure to use the word I'd been instructed to use. 'MALING! MALING! MANY FUCKING MALINGS!'

Just as I'd been told several of my neighbours, all shirtless young men wearing knock-off basketball shorts, emerged from their homes and flashed to the rescue. And just as I'd guessed, as soon as they saw that it was the local *bule* crying for help, all their alarm fell off a cliff and the jokes began to fly.

It was high times alright. The ribbing was unbridled, though I didn't understand a word of it. The young men clapped each other's backs, pointed at my funny underwear (a pair of novelty boxers with two mallards on the ass and the words 'Butt Quack' across the top), and shouted me out to their tenements across the road, where their wives and children had collected on the balconies. Sweaty and heaving, spotlighted by a single white sensor light blasting from a neighbouring veranda, I stood in the road and explained in a gush of baby-talk English what had happened. I mimicked the noise of my door being kicked in, repeated the word *maling* over and over, and ploughed along with my stupid performance with such a bewitching array of theatrical gestures that I was eventually treated to an applause.

The spectacle was a smash. In one mesmerizing freak out I had shattered the reputation of the western race forever. No well-meaning white foreigner, teacher or volunteer, would ever be taken seriously by these people again. Wretched and fuming, certain it was some wicked prank, I threw my hands at all of them, told them where they could go, and kept the curse circulating until every heckling clod had been given directions for the afterlife. In the long hard history of that trodden little slum, no man, woman or child had ever produced such a happy diversion—I'll stake my life on it; but that was no joy to me then. I wished them all kidney stones.

Eventually my disgrace lost its thrill. The young men stuck their final jabs, had one last go at my shorts (it would've saved more dignity had I been butt-ass naked), and drifted back to their buildings in a slow and sated spirit, as though departing a heavy meal. Deep

down I knew I should let it go. It was just a tiny village in rural Indonesia. What else was there to do but screw with foreigners? But my temper was too hot for reason. As the scene dispersed I caught one of the young men lagging purposefully behind, grinning like the Cheshire Cat, and this lingering goad scraped my final nerve. Feeling at last exasperated by events, persecuted beyond patience, I squared up and cut loose my inner douchebag.

‘Say it,’ I snapped. ‘Say one damn thing! I swear to Christ!’

My building was just behind me. Taking a step back, suspicious of my forceful tone, the young man bent to the side and took a general view of my back door, then tilted upright and swapped his grin for a sympathetic smile. The expression was unintelligible. Encoded in those consolatory eyes was a message that didn’t compute, and before I could work it out the moment was done. The young man reached for my shoulder, gave it a gentle squeeze, and walked off with a pitying face.

When I got back home everything small and valuable was gone. Wallet, phone, shoes, laptop. Gone. There had been no hoax or prank about it. Part of me was infuriated; part of me was crushed; but when I had a look at my front door both hot and flat parts coalesced into sheer bewilderment. The thunderous assault committed on that cheap slab of ply had sounded hard enough to bust it from its hinges. Yet there it stood, still locked and intact. Nobody had broken it down. No one had forced their way in. Not a scuff, scrape, dent or scratch could be seen. It was only an hour or so later, replaying the event in my head, pausing on that young’s man face—that mischievous and sympathetic face—that the canny of my intruders finally came clear. After all, why break down a man’s door when you didn’t have to? Especially when he left his back door wide open.

Yes sir. The foxes had pulled a fast one—flushed me from my roost and gobbled all my eggs; and for the rest of my life in that village I would never live it down. Barely a day went by that I didn’t see that word twinkling in somebody’s eye, crouching on their grin, waiting to leap as soon as I was near. The old men yelled it from the balconies when I passed

their tenements; the children shouted it from their scooters when they saw me on the road; wherever I went I heard it. ‘MALING! MALING! OH MANY MALINGS!’ The incident never got old, never lost its shine, and I will bet what little money I have that it is still brightening their spirits today, bringing smiles to their gaunt faces, making the hardness of life a little more bearable. I try not to think about it.

As for those wily malings, I guess once was good enough. The devils never tried their luck again, at least with me, which was just as well for them. The next morning I used my propane stove to melt the handle of my toothbrush, and slept the rest of my nights with a shank under my pillow.

A New Kind of Jacket

A pirate, a pilgrim and a Yankee soldier were standing outside a liquor store in Plymouth, Massachusetts. It was just before nine on Thanksgiving morning and I'd arrived at the store before it had opened because that's what you do when you spend 50 hours a week proofreading textbooks and have just a few holidays a year to obliterate the thought of it.

The liquor store was in a strip mall and I was waiting in my car, mulling the specials in the store windows and debating whether to get loaded on bourbon or beer. All three were huddled beneath the awning, sharing a wrinkled cigarette, ducking the month of November and its standard New England-style recipe of freeze/drizzle/breeze. The pirate, a kind of bloated deck swab, wore candy-cane stockings and greasy red headscarf. The pilgrim, a sort of Myles Standish, sported all the classic garments of pilgrim couture, including a pair of puffy breeches. The Yankee looked like he'd just come back from Fredericksburg 1862 to find his wife in bed with General Lee.

The pirate was firing with both pistols. He'd just invented a new type of sports jacket and was trying to convince the pilgrim of its unique market value. The jacket would have *Red Sox* embroidered on one sleeve and *Patriots* on the other, with the logos of each team appearing on the breasts—Pats on the right, Sox across the heart. Stitched on the back would be the dates of each of their most recent championships and the word PRIDE sewn across the shoulders. For just \$69 it was the perfect gift for the ultimate New England sports fan. The design could even be altered to include the Celtics one day if the organization ever got its shit together.

The pilgrim was unimpressed. He was pretty sure he'd already seen a jacket like that and actually, now that he thought about it, he was pretty sure his uncle Maury had one hanging in the closet.

'What do you mean Maury has the jacket?' the pirate snapped. 'Maury don't even go to the games, Lou, why'd he have the fucking jacket?'

‘I just think he has the jacket,’ the pilgrim shrugged.

The pirate was beside himself. He called the pilgrim all manner of hard names, reaffirmed that nobody on the planet had ever thought of such an original idea, and ended with the concrete opinion that Uncle Maury wouldn’t know a good jacket from a kick in the dick.

The Yankee took a drag and exhaled with a sigh.

Just then a church clock struck nine and the complete history of the United States rose from the dead. From all across the parking lot the heroes and peons of American yore came plodding out of their cars and began making their way toward a belt of residential woods behind the strip mall. Yankees and colonists, milkmaids and blacksmiths, geezers with fifes and minutemen with skinny muskets—all of them trudged through the morning fog with the dragging grogginess of awakening dead, some still buttoning their uniforms, cramming their shirt tails into their pants, others slapping cigarette packs against their wrists or sucking down Dunkin’ Donuts coffee.

A stately colonial gentleman, Thomas Jefferson perhaps, ducked behind a Jetta and puked across its fender. Two farm hags in coifs walked by and told him to find a toilet.

‘Jesus Christ, Sean,’ one of them scolded.

‘Piss off,’ Jefferson groaned, and puked some more.

The three men observed the retching gentleman without expression. After a second the pirate turned to the Yankee.

‘What about you, Mikey? You ever seen a jacket like that?’

The Yankee slumped against the wall as if the discussion had physically broken him. Mashing his palm against his eye, he began to massage it in slow penetrating circles. He rubbed and rubbed and rubbed; then he peeled himself off the wall and answered softly, ‘It’s too cold for a goddamn parade.’”

The conversation ended there. The pilgrim crushed the cigarette against the liquor store and all three dragged their asses into the woods and disappeared with the rest of American history.

A spirit is a formidable thing that is broken gradually. Never so much by a single theatrical destruction—life hoisting us above its head like a maniac wrestler and snapping our emotional spine across its knee—but by a steady drizzle of glancing blows that scrape us quietly apart and bring about an incalculable disrepair.

After a minute the colonial gentleman struggled to his feet with the help of the car. Wiping the vomit from his chin with the side of his wrist, he staggered across the lot and into the trees, his face bent to the ground because the wind had picked up and the rain was coming sideways.

A Long Time Ago When Barnes & Noble Sold Porn

A long time ago Barnes & Noble sold porn. I'm not sure if they sell it anymore. I haven't been to one in a while. But back in the day every all-internal, orifice-ridden skin mag could be found in those respectable stores—on the high left corner of the long magazine rack, wrapped in plastic, always within view of the customer service counter.

I was 13 or 14 and enrolled in a summer basketball camp I couldn't stand and never attended. Not because I hated basketball, but because I'd reached that age in athletics where mediocrity is no better than being awful, and coaches are no longer prevented from overlooking it by the *everybody-plays-and-has-a-good-time* dogma that regulates the pee-wee levels. Now the bodies of the true athletes were catching up with the magic abilities born within them. Now the naturals had the proper equipment to dominate and demoralize the herd, deprive it of a coach's inclination, and rather than abide any sort of irrelevance I decided to save face and ditch the camp instead.

Every weekday morning that summer my mother would drop me off in front of my high school gymnasium, and every morning after she was out of sight I would stash my gym bag in the laurel bushes and wander down to the Barnes & Noble bookstore to shoplift porn for reasons I don't think I need to spell out.

Of course, all this was years before you could just pick up the phone or press a button on your remote and have porn magically delivered to your home like a pizza. Back then you had to earn your porn. Nobody was going to give it to you. You had to sneak it from your older brother or barter the crinkled hand-me-downs from your neighbour's deadbeat living-over-the-garage son. And every so often when times were hard you had to steal it.

I've never been so determined, so undaunted by difficult odds or threat of punishment as I was when I was shoplifting pornography, when my sexual ignorance was like a madness tearing at my concentration, and when all day and night I was fiending for visuals of the

female anatomy and any kind of illustrated instruction guide that would educate me on parts or proper technique. I am not talking about lust. Lust is what happens after you possess experience. Before that it is simply a marauding for information.

The trick to stealing porn from Barnes & Noble was picking the right moment. Patience was essential. Almost always there was a roving employee or clutch of customers poking around the magazine rack. Almost always that section of the store seemed insufferably occupied. Inevitably, of course, a moment of better judgment would intrude. But at the first thought of thinking better about what I was doing, the voice in my loins would assail me like an outraged conscious, and I would take a timeout, go read the jackets of the Stephen King books, recover my resolve, and return to task with new determination.

At last patience would pay off. The idle perusers would disperse, the cashiers would get distracted with customers, and I'd reach up and pluck the first skin mag my fingers could grab, stuff it down the front of my pants, and, just to play it cool, linger a moment browsing the sports and gun mags.

Detectors at the entrance made it impossible to take the magazines from the store, so I would take them to the bathroom, ogle them in the stall, judiciously select the best poses, prettiest blow-jobs, most enticing consummations, rip them from the magazine, fold them into squares, stick them in my pocket, conceal the magazine and walk out.

At the back of the store were two shelves stocked with sports books. Some thoughtless publisher had produced a table-sized coffee-table book on the greatest women golfers of the 20th century, which not even the greatest women golfers would probably spend money to read. Every porn mag I swiped and disfigured that summer was stashed behind that great forsaken book, and stayed there unnoticed until God knows what happened to them. I'm pretty sure I grew out of shoplifting before those mangled magazines were discovered.

Basketball camp ended in the afternoon, and I would pass the time until my mother picked me up by wandering the suburban bridal paths around my high school. By and by I'd

find a private spot beside some oaks or oleander bushes, where I'd take the torn pages from my pocket, unfold them like holy parchments, and with the dust of the trail gathering on the glossy images, study the slavish sucking starlets practicing their craft on themselves or each other or some ugly lucky man.

The summer would pass just like that: a lonely weird kid haunting a horse trail smothered in oak shade, shooting the explicit like heroin: trail dust slow-waltzing in sunlight, green-headed flies on fresh horseshit briquettes, and every so often a lithe suburban equestrian queen bouncing by on a palomino or buckskin, blonde hair pouring from a black helmet, tight beige riding pants, boots to her knees.

I've been examining this scrap of lost distant life for several years now. I have no idea by what mysterious reason I keep coming back to it more than fifteen years after its passing, or why I can barely curtail the curious sadness that comes over me when I do.

I know only that there is in us a third memory deeper than the memory of impressions or objects: a long-term echo of ourselves that carries us back to our most baffled and prowling conditions and leaves us there to wander a little more, lonesome as ghosts, a long time ago when Barnes & Noble sold porn.

First Impression

Every so often I'm asked to remember my first impression of Newfoundland. It's a popular point of interest for many of my native acquaintances who've never been to Los Angeles and tend to believe that for a Californian, coming to this province is like Dorothy first opening the door to OZ.

Usually when this question finds me I put on the airs of poetic reminiscence and proceed to recollect a summer afternoon along St John's harbour, watching a crew of lively young fishermen toiling on a crusty vessel, full of curses and derisive camaraderie, tussling with nets and lines and doing important things with rope. If I'm feeling creative I throw in something about the windows of the big glass Scotia building stealing sparkle from the water, the clean salt-breeze on the back of my neck, the sound of construction equipment struggling against a summer project.

Truth is, I never encountered such an impression. But when you are a foreigner in a land you have not lived in for long, you often tell people what you think they'd like to hear about their home, often because you feel it isn't your place to tell them otherwise, but sometimes because the conversation simply doesn't call for any meaningful reflection. The fact of the matter is that I rarely tell people about my first impression of Newfoundland because I rarely enter into a dialogue where there is any place for it. But perhaps there is a place for it here. Perhaps in this little article I can subjugate, or partially subjugate, the difficult to say.

There are 10 million people in the city of Los Angeles; approximately 500,000 in the whole wild realm of Newfoundland. One who has never left this largely unpopulated province cannot easily imagine what an incredible difference of human presence that is, nor fully gather what that difference actually means. It is the difference between living in the reliable

balance of a community linked by common heritage, and living in an aggregate of communities ready to fall apart at the first serious shock.

For Los Angeles, this shock has occurred twice in the last 50 years with cataclysmic splendour: once in 1965 during the Watts riots, and once in 1992 during the Rodney King riots. The former occurred at the height of the American civil rights movement and is considered by many to have been an instrumental disorder in the struggle for equality. The latter occurred at the height of the racial profiling pandemic and is often seen as one of the best dress-rehearsals of the apocalypse ever performed by mankind.

Rodney Glen King was an African American ex-convict who, in March of 1991, led two squads of the Los Angeles Police Department on a high-speed pursuit through the early morning hours of the city of angels.

He was drunk on malt liquor, recently paroled from a robbery conviction, and feared a DUI arrest which would have sent him back to prison on the count of parole violation.

He fled through red lights and boulevard stops, and when at last he realized he couldn't get away and was only accumulating serious charges, he pulled his car over in a quiet residential neighbourhood in the San Fernando Valley.

He was ordered from his car at gunpoint. As an ex-felon who'd fled arrest, this was standard operating procedure. The trouble occurred when King emerged from his vehicle, unarmed, and was tackled, stomped, tasered, and gang-clubbed with nightsticks by four white officers juiced on fear and post-pursuit adrenaline. The behaviour was nothing out of character for the notoriously excessive LAPD, largely considered to be the most dangerous police force protecting and serving Americans, and likely would've gone unreported if it hadn't been captured on video by a resident from his nearby apartment.

The LA District Attorney charged the four arresting officers with assault. The trial was held a year later in the predominantly white city of Simi Valley, the jury drawn from a predominantly white pool of middle-class San Fernando Valley residents. The inequitable

venue and jury selection, coupled with the footage of a black man being beaten by white police officers, became a media sensation and a rallying point for a nation of infuriated minorities.

On April 29th 1992, on the seventh day of jury deliberations, while all of my country gathered around their television sets to see just how much the American judicial system had evolved, if it had evolved at all, a 12-member jury comprised of ten whites, one Hispanic, and one Asian, acquitted each officer of all charges. What happened next is still hard to talk about.

In April of 1992 former Panamanian ruler Manuel Noriega was convicted of assisting Colombia's cocaine cartel, and Pierre Berezogovoy became Prime Minister of France. Serb paramilitaries murdered the peace protestor Suada Dilberovic on the Skenderija Bridge, triggering the Siege of Sarajevo. The oil tanker *Katina P.* ran aground off Mozambique, spilling 60,000 tons of crude into the ocean. At the Baltic Exchange in the city of London, the Irish Republican Army detonated a bomb that killed 3 people and injured a hundred others. And in Simi Valley, California, four LAPD officers accused of excessive force and the videotaped beating of a black motorist were found 'not guilty' by a jury of their white peers, and America's largest, most racially combustible metropolis exploded like a drum of jet fuel.

Hell began that evening after the verdict. First reports of reckoning came shortly after sundown, as the day's last light backed gingerly out of the city like someone creeping away from a coiled asp. Television coverage of the riots would be near-continuous for the next week. Regularly scheduled programming would fall off a cliff. Days later a city-wide curfew and the deployment of the National Guard would begin to control the situation. Federal troops from the 7th Infantry Division, and United States Marines from the 1st Marine Division, would be ordered into the city to squash disorder and rebellion. But at the time I am talking about everything was just beginning.

The acquittals came at 3:00 pm. At 3:30 a crowd of more than 300 protestors rallied at the Los Angeles County Courthouse. It was a peaceful protest, full of chants and harmless marching, but threatening enough to distract much of the LAPD from the real uprising 45 miles away. At 5:00, at the intersection of Florence and Normandie, in the black district of South Central Los Angeles, a meagre unit of two dozen LAPD officers, confronted and greatly outnumbered by a fury of African Americans, retreated back to headquarters. Their withdrawal, broadcasted live by every local and national television station, was the double-barrel blast of the starter's gun. Fifteen minutes later arsonists struck neighbourhoods and vehicles, while others took out their anger on unguarded businesses. Flurries of raging human life blew into the streets, choked all traffic. By 7:30 the area of Florence and Normandie (an area twice the size of historic downtown St. John's) was completely looted, burned and destroyed. Rioters poured into other neighbourhoods of South Central. Copycat riots broke out across the city—in Long Beach, Compton, Inglewood and Watts—like embers that had alighted from the mother inferno and sired their own fabulous burns.

By dark, major department stores were being openly looted. Fires burned unabated. The LAPD ordered all officers to duty, but the disorder was so rampant that many were unseen in broad sections of the city. In sections where they did appear, they typically did more harm than good. Their presence was a flashing reminder of what all the madness was about, and intensified the unrest like dry newspaper on open fire. Their cars were bombarded by bottles, blunt objects, and whatever odd fragments of masonry that could be heaved by a human arm. Other rioters with guns took pot shots at them. When the LA Fire Department tried to respond to calls, looters launched bricks at their trucks and Molotov cocktails. Cars were torched to block intersections. Guns were fired at rescue personnel until finally rescue personnel stopped rescuing people; until finally firefighters stopped responding to fires and police officers stopped policing; until finally, in the eyes of the wrathful masses, all unjust

order, all crooked establishment was driven from the city, and nothing—and I mean nothing—but consequence reigned.

In Norse mythology Ragnarok is the end of the world. All of creation is destroyed by fire, with steam and flames rising to the skies. Fierce battles rage everywhere. Motivated by wrath and greed, man kills man without conscience. No mercy is shown and the ties of human kinship cannot prevent even the most dreadful of acts.

On that same day, just hours after the acquittals, another beating was captured on video. Fidel Lopez, a construction worker and Guatemalan immigrant, was ripped from his truck and robbed of all his money. While one rioter smashed his forehead open with a car stereo, another rioter sliced off his ear. When Lopez lost consciousness the mob spray painted his chest, torso and genitals black. They beat him like a piñata with candy still inside, and might've beaten him to death if not for an African American bystander, a minister, who threw himself between Fidel and his attackers and shouted 'Kill him and you'll have to kill me!'

But the most iconic image captured out of that nightmare was the beating of Reginald Denny, a burly, heavy-metal-looking white truck driver with flowing shoulder-length hair. I was thirteen years old when Denny was pulled from the cab of his rig in the middle of an obstructed intersection and battered to the brink of eternity by a mob of young black men. I remember watching the live feed of the beating, shot from a circling news chopper. My mother was in the cupboards distracted by terror, gathering candles for when the rioters stormed the power stations, or else she never would have let me watch such a thing. Denny was driving a 14-wheel truck and hauling 30 tons of sand to a plant in Inglewood. When he entered the intersection at Normandie, the mob opened the truck door and wrestled him out. One of them held the trucker's head to the ground with his foot while others kicked him in the stomach. When Denny tried to get to his feet, another man hit him three times in the face with a claw hammer. Denny collapsed, covering his head, squirming. Various men threw liquor

bottles at him. A local crack addict went through his pockets. Another took out his pistol and fired at the gas tank of Denny's truck. As my mother appeared from the other room, cradling a bundle of pomegranate scented candles, a 19-year-old gang member circled the haemorrhaging Denny, found the right angle, cocked back, and hurled a fragment of cinder block point blank at the trucker's skull. The man raised his arms in jubilation, flashed a gang sign at the news chopper; and Denny dropped face-first to the pavement, motionless, presumably dead, though in fact he was only in a coma.

My mother made a noise, something between a gasp and a moan. For a moment she looked as though she were about to scold me, the way she did whenever she caught me watching inappropriate programming. But instead she sat down on the edge of the table, lowered the candles into her lap, put her fists to her eyes and sobbed.

At the time I thought it strange that my mother, a devout Christian, would not think to pray right then. It seemed the perfect time. But I think now that there is a limit of terror prayer can assuage: that a point can arrive for every individual when faith becomes nothing but a word, as useless as a call to the police; a point where annihilation seems immutable, and all reinforcement, mortal and divine, seems deaf to your call.

The night sky over Los Angeles is always orange. There is so much electricity coursing through that city that I think a child on another planet, charting the constellations through his bedroom telescope, might mistake it for a star. But that evening the LA skyline was a different kind of orange: a throbbing, milky, mixed incandescence of fireglow and streetlight. Ash from burnings carried with the wind onto our property, and the smell of structure-fire, a different kind of smoke scent, was thick and pervasive, like the smell of a neighbourhood barbeque with unfamiliar meat cooking on the grill.

Between 7:00 and 10:00pm the rioting began to spread, began to draw closer to the middle-class white neighbourhoods and districts. My father kept a .22 pistol in the bedroom

closet. That night while a mob of arsonists set fire to a Korean liquor store two miles from our house, while the owner stood on his roof firing his rifle into a sea of looters, while the city's aristocracy chartered planes and fled to their second or third homes, while the LAPD crumbled like a muffin and street gangs used the riot as an opportunity to settle scores with each other, while security guards abandoned their posts, and properties were sacked and destroyed, that night while all the civilization I knew went to work sending itself to hell, my father brought out that pistol, loaded every chamber, and calmly told my brother to turn off the television and lights.

My brother was at that age where every order from my father was a subordination worth battling, but he did what he was told now. My father set the gun on top of the refrigerator. Then my mother locked the doors and made us peanut butter sandwiches, cut into triangles, and we ate them together off the same plate, silently, the last of the twilight pouring blocks and angles through the kitchen window.

I have seldom seen my father scared, and I have never seen him terrified, even then. But I know now he must've been, for I have been around guns enough to know they only come out when there is terror, stupidity or cruelty—and my father, a computer programmer, was neither of the latter.

We gathered in the family room. The living room, so rarely lived in with its prim furniture and tread-me-not carpeting, lacked the warmth to console us. My mother lit several candles, and though nobody thought it appropriate, my brother threw a Duraflame log in the fireplace and started a fire. There we sat: a white suburban family of four, in pomegranate-scented candlelight, waiting for Ragnarok to reach our lawn. And though I was surrounded by my family, by my invincible older brother and my immortal parents, I cannot remember an instance where I felt more susceptible to all the grim savagery I'd only ever read about in books on distant lands and primitive ages. It was only one night I felt this terror. Over the

following week, though they would peak in intensity, the riots would contain themselves to the districts they broke out in. Rioting for the sake of equal rights would spoil into rioting for the sake of personal gain and the thrill of transgressing with impunity.

One night. It seems like nothing.

But how many of us will ever live a single hour without the security of state? How many will ever experience one moment in the bleak despair of utter social vulnerability and defencelessness, under the law of the biggest tooth? It is a nightmare the likes of which no power of literacy, be it mine or anyone else's, can ever admirably portray.

You may ask what all this has to do with Newfoundland, and I will tell you.

There was nothing to do in the house. Normally this was the time of evening when my brother would hide in his room and listen to rap music, and I would go off with my books or video games, and my parents would sit and watch TV together, talking about their days during commercials. Nobody talked much that evening. The *Cosby Show* aired every Thursday night at 8 p.m., and my father reminded us that Thursday was the last episode of the series. It was just something to say.

The fire was crackling and the flame light spilled into the room and flickered against the shiny surfaces of things. My mother was a third-grade teacher with a subscription to every educational magazine known to man. Beside our fireplace she kept a wicker handbasket stuffed with *Highlight* magazines, *National Geographic*, and various wildlife and adventure journals. She loved the foreign—the raw articles and wild photos of faraway lands—and used them as proof to her students that there was a world outside of America, and it was pretty damn interesting. She called it her dream basket, for stacked inside were images of roaring grizzly bears, Iditarod dog teams, painted African tribes, jungle temples swallowed in vines, and dark tropical women squatting outside huts, stirring anonymous pastes in wooden bowls.

But that evening at the top of the stack, firelight spilled on a much simpler scene: a single red boathouse on the cover of a calendar honouring Newfoundland.

It was only from the across the room that I saw it, sitting on the couch with my mother: a plain, pointy-roofed, barn-like building, one door with white trim, one window above the door, inexpressibly serene beside a purple cove and a crumbling wooden dock that looked as though it would break under the weight of anything. In the background, across the water, stood a clutch of humble white homes keeping quietly to themselves, drawing no attention from the subject of the photo, everything beneath a steely-clean sky that had never seen a column of smoke.

God only knows how a Southern Californian family came to possess any physical material about Newfoundland. It isn't important. Newfoundland meant nothing to me then. But in a house blacked-out with fear, at the edge of that murderous civil unravelling, I remember looking across the room at that picture of solace and wondering if these same terrible things happened there, wherever it was: if in this place called Newfoundland fathers guarded their families with loaded firearms, if mothers wept for their burning worlds, if store owners bunkered themselves on their roofs and fired rifles into mobs of thieves and fire starters, if strangers ripped strangers out of their cars and tortured them without provocation or personal vendetta, if police brutalized the citizens they were supposed to serve, if the poor and the persecuted in that distant land were as angry and vengeful as they were in my own.

No, I suppose I couldn't have wondered all of that then. That is a wonder that comes with 20 years of distance. At the time I was only a scared child, thinking nothing, aware of everything, wishing I was anywhere in my mother's dream basket, somewhere wonderfully apart from the world I knew, and latching onto the nearest available vision of that place: a peaceful boathouse, painted red, one door with white trim, one window above the door. Apart.

That was my first impression of Newfoundland.

Banjar Evening

Early every evening when the work of the day is done, the shanty warungs open their kitchens to the hungry village and serve heaps of nasi goreng for the price of one US gumball. Teenage boys ride the railings of tenement balconies, shout jokes at passing schoolgirls, while street food vendors wheel their wobbly carts of bakso and roti from one home to another, banging bowls with spoons because bells would be stolen around here. In the muddy, rutted alleys chicken-legged slum children huck stones at wild mutts, play badminton without a net; in front of the bike shops, sulky young working men, fresh off work, straddle their parked scooters and talk tough over cigarettes and Bintang beers. Old men misplace their shirts, play chess beneath pale naked patio bulbs, while old women assemble in front of laundry shops to hawk ferocious phlegm bombs and bounce bare-assed toddlers on their knees—every one of us, the entire weary village, passing time in our own way, recovering soul.

Around Banjar Dalung, passing the time takes place after work. It is what the people who live here say they are doing when they are done fighting their poverty for the day—when the snake-laced rice fields have been tended, when the cows have been driven home from the puddle-muck pastures; and it is what they say they are doing when they fill the night's length with the companionship of neighbours, with stories and hullabaloo that return to the mind what the day's gruelling, mundane toil have taken from it.

It is a time for gathering and get-together, for sitting in chatty circles putting together tomorrow's offering packs, or picking chilies to make the sambal, or wadding mincemeat to make the sate. It is a block of day marked by hard laughter and child rumpus, by shop talk, girl talk, gossip and grab-assing—a time for soaping and spiffing the motorbike, for lying on a bare mattress listening to western pop music and perusing impossible starlets in western glamour mags. More than that, it is a time meant for resurrection and for burial, two or three life-stuffed hours that temporarily put in the ground what they must wake up and do tomorrow, what they have woken up to and done all of their lives: hard labour.

Growing up in Los Angeles, not rich but comfortably white, I heard that Mexicans were lazy and believed it without question. As a child riding in the car with my mother, I saw them on street corners: grown men sitting on curbsides and bus benches, sitting against convenient store walls, knees drawn to their foreheads, waiting for something, doing nothing. Later, as a teenager, walking to the park or the corner liquor, I would stop and watch these same men leisure with their families in the courtyard of their dumpy apartment buildings, their sons leaning over balcony guardrails, shouting jokes at girls, their wives bouncing toddlers on their knees, their daughters practicing dance moves, the men in second-hand sweatshirts, telling jokes over cigarettes and MGD beers, cooking on hibachis, drinking, talking loudly, laughing hard, hot-breathed and idle. Always idle, it seemed.

In my youth I observed this jamboree of seemingly jobless immigrants, rambunctious freeloaders more interested in passing time than earning their keep, and took that impression into the fortress of adulthood where it could not be easily removed by reason or education, where only a continuous siege of raw experience could overthrow it. What I did not see then, I see now through the sweat and slog of my Indo neighbours. What I did not see was the weary 4am rise, the stiff walk to the uneventful street corner, the grimy contractor in the trashy pick-up offering crushing labour for abominable wages, the 12 hours landscaping a medical plaza, installing sprinklers, tarring roofs, mixing concrete, laying pipe. And the days when the contractor did not come, the empty wasted hours haunting a ghetto sidewalk, the grit in the bitten exhaust fumes, getting walloped by the sun, loitering in the shade of boarded-up buildings where junkies shot up and pissed in alleys, candy bars and gas station jerky for lunch. What I did not see then was the chore of life their passing of time ameliorated: the hard work they did not get, the hard work they *did* get, and a whole future of either awaiting them; hardness, to the end of their days.

Lounge and invite the soul, Walt Whitman once advised. No truer instruction against the death of spirit has ever been uttered. And though the people of Banjar Dalung have never

heard of Whitman or read this wisdom, in one way or another that is what they say I'm doing when I sweep my soiled doorstep or burn my week's rubbish. When I am wandering these two square miles of tattered villagescape, or sitting about slowly getting drunk, following the way a weird bug walks along my arm, I am inviting the soul with them. And like them its arrival resuscitates me. Like them, it links me to their daily life, brings me closer to a communion—as close as I will ever be to their community.

Far from home on this sweltering island-arc nation, embedded in this work-ravaged smallville, I look back and look around and see that the only thing as meaningful as avoiding starvation is revitalizing the bonds that are depleted by the work that barely makes it possible. Out here, unlike the sick and mighty empires that lie beyond its solitude, the end of the day is not for coming home and going to sleep on the world that has vexed and aggravated, but for waking up to the world and enjoying its bread. It is the time to make chat with the vendor whose banana fritters dress up the same rice supper that has repeated itself for 20 generations, for playing badminton with children who will someday inherit the dirt and lowly field work of their ancestors. And for me, at least this evening, it is for sharing my water spout with an old farmer who has wandered into the yard to wash the soil off his hands, splash the heat off his face, and talk a small while about the rain that has flooded his fields, and will come again tomorrow.

Adoration

Of all the major North American cities, St John's is by far the cloudiest. Our good (and always reliable) friend Wikipedia pegs the number of this city's sunlit hours at a lean 1497 per annum. There are 8736 hours in a year. If we do our figures correctly, the citizens of St. John's endure 7239 hours yearly in which that cheerful little orb is absent from the sky. I've been told by a perfectly unofficial source idling in a pub that the average life-span of the modern Newfoundlander is 74. Assuming one remains in St. John's one's whole life, that is 535,686 life-hours lived *without* sunshine—approximately 83% of one's existence. A near permanent deprivation.

This hasty calculation should hardly be taken for gospel, since it comes from the math of a man who tips waitresses according to their quality of service only because he can't figure 15% of the final bill. I use it simply as a means of warming into a nuance seemingly unique to Newfoundland, one that has become a kind of poultice for me whenever the ache for home arises.

Home, for this foreigner, is Southern California. As any true hatchling of Southern California will tell you, an underexposed problem with life in the Southland is that you easily become emotionally numb to good weather. Not long ago I overheard a radio talk-show host (presumably broadcasting from some place starved of pleasant meteorology) sullenly assert that anyone who grew up in Southern California was a member of the climatic aristocracy, and could not help to regard a good day of sunshine as trivially as a monarch might regard a stray penny in his couch cushion.

The assessment is not far off the mark. For Californians, sunlight is like that old T-shirt you've worn for years, casually swaddling you, fitting you perfectly, yet hardly appreciated or remarked upon unless you can't find it. In Newfoundland, however, sunlight is no common garment. And its influence on people is nothing that can be effectively explained through clever comparisons or witty speech. The effect is far too profound for pithy simile.

However, let us try one anyway. Let us say that when the sun strikes a Newfoundlander, it is not unlike watching someone at the pub doing shots of hard liquor. Gradually, as ray after ray soaks into his system, his mood begins to modify. Some strange commotion starts in his brain. He becomes noticeably unsettled, mentally lighter, given to unconstraint, exuberance. The transformative influence reaches his deepest blood and, for better or worse, he hardly resembles that weary lump of troubles that was sitting stooped at the bar not an hour before.

The best example I've seen of this lively conversion occurred this past summer during an abysmally soppy June in which every St. John's soul was steeped in glum by lingering winter weather. I was sitting at a bistro table outside a coffeeshop. The city was clad in overcast and bereft of summer impressions for as far as the eye cared to look. I'd been sitting there for an hour, waiting to witness something I'd remember, getting nothing but things I'd forget, and was about to get up and go sleep the day away when all at once the sun kicked the clouds aside and torched the city in a marvellous warm pale.

In a twinkling the old man at the table beside me unbuttoned his shirt, shook open the flaps, and moaned the Lord's name as though he were being erotically caressed. The stream of warmth and light hit him like a dram of tonic reaching the stomach, and by natural impulse he shut his eyes, parted his lips, and aimed his bare chest to the sky in a repose that likened to a Renaissance religious image—as though he were guzzling the Light of Glory. And it is with all seriousness when I say that he was, in that moment, getting more pleasure from the sun than I had ever received or thought possible. It was a purely erotic encounter, and I chafed at the thought of this sensuous element whose loving touch did not thrill my nerves or delight my blood.

And how well I recall walking to my car some weeks before, and coming across a clutch of skater boys hovering petulantly by the steps of the Mile One arena, shirtless under partially cloudy skies, and finding myself amused by the measly amount of sunshine that had

seduced them out of their tops. The pale rays of that chilly afternoon were some of the weakest I'd ever encountered in my twenty-eight summers, yet they were good enough for every rogue in that young group to lose their shirts and sun their builds as though it were June in that other St. John's stuffed deep in the Caribbean. I smirked with conceit at their eagerness, at the thought of being gratified by such a meagre clemency, and now I regret my snobbery, for with any sense or humility I might've provided myself a healthier observation and more speedily, more easily connected with my new home.

I believe I never recognized, till I came to Newfoundland, the difference between living in daylight and living in sunlight, and what it meant to live largely under one or the other. By and by this summer I have come to regard sunlight not only an element essential to mental health, but as an occasion as sacrosanct as any day of remembrance, one that calls for tribute. We know that energy from the sun supports almost all life on this earth. That the natives of Newfoundland have been able to support their way of life for a dozen generations and more without ever an adequate deposit of this integral resource, provides mankind with a portrait of itself at its strongest and most obstinate, and is a testament to the deprivations that can be endured, even if this testament does not quite explain why we are enduring them.

The local weather prophets foretell of a February full of snow and early nightfalls. March will not be any better, nor April—though there is hope, as there always is out here, that spring and summer will be quite pleasant everywhere. As we stand at the entrance of the dark season we are consoled, in small part, by the memory of our summer transgressions and all those provocative sensations, which in the heart of the cold months ahead will call out to us again and again, and bring us through. The capricious flings, the luxuriant excursions, the sunburned shoulders and windows of sea vessels sparkling in the harbour, all the ease and frivolity that comes as the fruit of that ever-faltering star, and birds—the warm memory of birds gliding above us, touching the heavens with leisurely pleasure, taking all the time in the world.

Play Date

I spent a lot of my childhood imagining myself in charge of childhood. For starters, I didn't think the adult world was using roll call effectively. I thought the practice was better suited to evaluate emotional attendance, not physical. Instead of asking kids whether or not they were *here*, teachers would ask whether or not they were happy. Each morning would begin with proof of healthy emotional presence.

'Jenny Bennett?'

'Happy.'

'Mary Jacob?'

'Happy.'

'Kyle Jesko?'

'Excellent.'

'Tommy Keese?'

'Sad.'

I had it all figured out. As soon as a kid answered 'sad' an absence mark would be made on the attendance sheet. The sheet would be delivered to the school secretary, who would call the child's parents to confirm the absent happiness. The parents would say, 'Oh yes. I know about Tommy's sadness. We just ran out of cereal this morning.' Or they would say, 'Why no! I had no idea Tommy was unhappy. He had such a good breakfast!'

Either way parents would always know the emotional whereabouts of their children. In addition to knowing where their kids were, they would also know what their kids were feeling. I thought it would solve a lot of problems. I was a weird kid maybe.

Another weird kid in second grade was Danny Gripando. Nobody could figure it out. He had all the right stuff to be happy and popular. He was strong for our age and looked athletic. He didn't wear glasses or stupid clothes or have a funny ethnic smell. By all

standards and appearances he was fit for inclusion; instead he was quiet and apart. He sat at the back of the class and never talked or raised his hand, and when it was recess he sat by himself near the handball courts and never played. I don't remember that he was ever picked on. At least he was never bullied. It was just strange. It was always the weirdest thing when a kid had the stuff to be included, the most precious thing a kid could be, and didn't take advantage of it.

About once a month my mother would throw a little party for some of the other mothers. The mothers would get together in our living room and chat and drink coffee and eat crumb cake with tiny forks. They were a group of six or seven, all with belly fat and too much jewellery. As soon as everyone was settled my mother would shut the living room door so they could discuss adult things in private, and sometimes when there was nothing better to do I would get on my hands and knees, sneak up to the door, and try to eavesdrop. There was rarely much to spy on. The women would talk about discounts at Kohl's or perennials in their gardens. They would talk about mom stuff. Then one day they started talking about Danny Gripando.

'I just don't know what I would do. If it was my child—I really don't. I'd want him to burn.'

'God forbid!'

'An uncle. A cousin. Someone in the extended family. That's usually how it goes.'

'Disgusting. Just disgusting.'

'We have a cousin on Marty's side. Always a little handsy with the kids at Christmas. *Come here and sit on Santa's lap. Oh who wants to give Santa a hug?* Stuff like that. You just have to be careful.'

'*Very* careful.'

‘It’s a horrible thing to think about but we have to think about it a little, don’t we? Isn’t that our responsibility? There’s so many of them now. You turn on the news and they’re everywhere. In the park. The church.’

‘It’s a sick world.’

‘*Very* sick.’

‘Well I just hope they find a good counsellor or someone. That’s what I hope. I hear he doesn’t have a single friend at school. Just keeps to himself all day.’

‘Oh now. He must have *one* friend!’

‘Just keeps to himself. That’s what I hear.’

‘Doesn’t talk to anybody. Not even the teacher.’

‘Tch, tch, tch... What a terrible mess.’

‘Tch, tch, tch... That’s what child molesters do.’

‘Tch, tch, tch...’

‘I just don’t know. Marty and I talk about it sometimes. Marty says he’d shoot the bastard dead. I don’t know what I’d do. I’d want him to burn.’

I wasn’t totally sure what a child molester did. All I knew was that he was something so awful that even adults had trouble speaking about him. I thought about the embankment behind our house. It was just a dinky belt of woods between the highway and our property, but it was dark in there and isolated. It was the perfect place for a molester to lurk. When I thought about molesters I pictured the ways of critters that only came out at night and kept out of the open.

That evening at dinner I couldn’t resist. I asked my mom about molesters. She stiffened visibly and looked confused. Then she realized what had happened.

‘I don’t like being spied on,’ she said.

‘What are they?’ I pressed.

‘They’re sick people who have bad urges. Eat your fish.’

‘Are they men?’

‘Most times they’re men.’

‘Are they evil?’

She didn’t answer.

‘Are they evil,’ I said.

‘They’re not evil. They’re just very sick. Their sickness makes them do evil things.’

‘To children?’

‘Yes, to children.’

‘Have I ever met a molester?’

‘No.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I know. Eat your fish.’

That was usually the way difficult conversations ended back then. I would ask about something odd or secret in the adult world and be told to put something in my mouth.

Why do bad things happen to good people?

‘Here, sweetie. Have a cupcake.’

Why is that dog leaning over that other dog?

‘Hey, who wants a burger? You want a burger, kid?’

My mother wasn’t going to say anything about molesters, but I knew somebody who might. One day during recess I found Danny sitting in the shadow of the handball wall. There was a verge of grass that divided the first handball court from the second. He had this funny thing where he’d rip out a handful of grass and extract the protruding blades one by one from between his fist cracks. That’s what he was doing now.

‘Why do you do that?’ I said.

‘Do what?’

‘Tear out grass and pick it from your fist.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Is it a game or something?’

‘I don’t know.’

I sat down beside him.

‘You’re a weird kid, huh?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Yes you are. You’re a weirdo.’

‘So what?’

‘So nothing. Tell me what a molester does.’

He didn’t answer.

‘I know you know,’ I said.

‘How do you know that?’

‘My mom said so. She said you met one.’

‘How does she know?’

‘Because she knows. Tell me.’

He pulled a long green clover out of his fist. He was pulling out the grass very slowly and letting each blade just tumble to the ground. He didn’t look at me.

‘You own a dictionary?’

‘Yeah I own a dictionary. But I’m asking you.’

‘Go look at your dictionary.’

‘You’re a weird kid, huh?’

He didn’t answer. I got up and left.

*

That night my mom got a call from Mrs. Gripando. They talked for a long time. I heard my mom apologize repeatedly. *I know. I'm sorry. I understand. He won't.* I heard humiliation in her voice.

Then she hung up and summoned me to the room. Her cheeks were flush from the phone call, almost purple. I felt guilty and nervous but didn't know what I'd done. She seized me by the arm, squeezed like a blood pressure cuff, and made it clear.

There were things people talked about and things they didn't. When someone didn't want to talk about something you left them alone. You minded your own business. You didn't pry or ask personal questions. That was rude. Rude little boys didn't have friends. Nobody came to their birthday parties. They embarrassed their parents and got punished very badly.

'There are things people talk about and things they don't,' she said, digging her nails into my bicep. 'Is that clear?'

Like always it was and it wasn't. Adults were remarkable like that. They could make anything clear and never tell you a thing.

The next day at recess I cornered Danny at his usual spot.

'You told on me,' I said. 'Why'd you tell?'

There was a thin ledge of shade from the handball wall and he was just sitting there with his legs crossed, slouched across his lap, pulling grass from his fist.

I sat down next to him and tore out a clutch of grass too. I squeezed the grass in my fist and picked out the blades one by one.

'I know what a molester is,' I said.

He didn't answer.

'I was just testing you yesterday.'

He didn't answer. His face was bent an inch from his fist and every time he removed a blade he'd take a second to examine it before letting it fall, spinning it carefully between his fingertips. I leaned over and dropped my voice.

'There's one near my house, you know.'

Danny froze. He stopped with the grass and looked up.

'I know this embankment where he hangs out,' I said.

'What's an embankment?'

'It's like a forest but smaller. He's always there.'

'How do you know he's a molester?'

'Because I've seen him.'

'Seen him do what?'

I thought fast. I still didn't know what a molester was.

'There are things people talk about and things they don't,' I said.

Danny dropped his head and nodded. It was like uttering the password to a secret club.

For a moment we sat there, not saying anything. Then he asked if I'd told anyone.

'I'm not telling anybody,' I said.

'You have to tell. Why wouldn't you?'

'Because I'm going to kill him,' I said.

Danny's face went deadpan. He opened his fist and brushed the grass from his hand.

'You're not allowed to kill,' he said. 'It's against the Bible.'

'You can kill molesters. You can shoot and burn them.'

Then I told him what I'd overheard from the living room. Except I changed everything. I said I'd heard two pastors talking about it in the church bathroom. The pastors quoted verses from the Bible that specifically permitted the killing of molesters. Danny liked that. He didn't smile or get excited but his eyes brightened up. I saw my chance.

'Do you want to come over and help?' I said.

‘To your house?’

‘We can kill him together.’

‘Ok.’

‘You can spend the night!’

I had no idea what I was doing. I was making a big mess of the little information I’d obtained. All I knew was that I liked the excitement in Danny’s face. I thought I was a weird kid. I didn’t have a lot of friends. At the ripe old age of seven I’d never even had a sleepover.

I was going to kill a molester and it made him like me.

My mother didn’t like anyone screwing around on that embankment. For one thing it was too close to the highway. For another it was crawling with snakes and poison oak. So that weekend when Danny came over I simply asked if we could play outside, and when she let us loose we ducked behind the house and slipped into the bushes.

The embankment wasn’t much to adventure. It was basically a tangled crunchy mess, full of dead dry leaves, broken branches, and these flaky sheets of bark that would peel off the Sycamore trunks. On the whole cluttered slope there was just one interesting spot, a kind of natural bunker where several fallen trees had piled up against each other. This would be our lair of operations. From here we would hide from the evil molester, study his evil ways, and hatch our plan to destroy him.

Even at seven years old I probably should’ve sensed the growing load of bullshit I was burying myself under. But I was too excited, too involved in the guerrilla fantasy to worry about reality or consequence. It was play. Thrilling, spontaneous *play*. We crawled into the den, got down on our knees, and waited. Danny peered across the bank and his eyes were glinting.

‘Where is he?’ he whispered.

‘He’s coming,’ I said.

‘How do you know?’

‘He always comes. He’s horrible.’

‘And we’re going to kill him?’

‘Sure.’

‘You know how to kill a molester?’

‘Sure. It’s easy.’

‘How do you know if you’ve never done it?’

‘It’s easy. There’s a way to do it.’

I made everything up as I went along. I didn’t know my next lie until it came out of my mouth. We sat and waited for the terrible molester and while we waited I described him in vivid detail. I described him like a critter. Sneaky and alert, ugly and nervous, he lurked in the woods where no one would see him. He wore a hooded black sweatshirt, thick black boots, and his face was covered in black hair. His victims were little kids I’d never seen before. He carried them over his shoulder and dumped them into the leaves like sacks. Then he performed his evil on them, whatever that was.

All in all I thought it was a pretty convincing molester. I asked Danny if his had been like that. He shrugged and didn’t answer. Even so I could see his enthusiasm growing. The more elaborate my story got, the more excited he was to be there.

‘We should kill him with knives,’ he suggested.

‘We can use my mom’s.’

‘Or set him on fire.’

‘My dad has lighter fluid.’

‘Or stab him *and* burn him!’

‘Sure. We have all day!’

It was the best.

There was just one problem, of course. There was no terrible molester. No lurking, hooded, sinister bad guy to ambush and assassinate. There was only a peaceful boring embankment with its trees and bark flakes. Ten minutes passed. Then twenty and thirty. We sat there looking at nothing, doing nothing, waiting for nothing.

‘He’s not coming,’ Danny said.

‘He’ll be here.’

‘I bet he won’t.’

‘He will. Do you like any girls at school?’

It was pathetic. All of a sudden it wasn’t play anymore. It was just a lie. A stupid, embarrassing lie. I felt the weight of Danny’s disappointment, watched the glint drain from his eyes. At last he got up and climbed out of the lair. He didn’t look at me.

‘I have to go,’ he said.

‘Do you want to spend the night?’

‘I have to go now. Goodbye.’

A sick feeling shot through me. I didn’t have a lot of friends. He started walking back to the house and the feeling got huge and desperate and brought tears to my eyes.

I scrambled out of the lair and followed after him.

‘We can still kill him!’ I yelled. Danny stopped and turned. ‘We can make booby traps with poison nails then hammer the nails into boards then cover the boards with leaves and then he’ll step on the nails and die. Booby traps!’

‘Booby traps?’

‘You can stay for dinner.’

We went back to the house and found some rotten boards behind the garage. We took the boards into the yard and laid them in the grass. Then we got the nails. My father had all kinds of nails in the garage. Shiny nails and rusty nails, golden nails and pin nails. The nails were organized in mason jars that were screwed into a kind of rotisserie turnspit. I thought it

was impressive. I was proud of my father's nails. I stood there turning the rotisserie for Danny. The nails shifted in their jars and made a cruel, exciting noise.

'We'll make a hundred traps,' I said. 'We'll hide them all over the embankment. He'll step on the nails and the poison will enter his blood and he'll die.'

We unscrewed as many jars as we could carry and brought them out to the lawn. Then we stood on our knees and bashed nails through our boards one after the other. Sometimes I would stop to watch Danny's hammering. It was hard, fast, powerful. There was heat to it. He brought up his arm and slammed the hammer down. One, two, three crushing whacks and the nail was driven through. He finished his share of boards in just a few minutes, and when he did I gave him the rest of mine.

'Now what?' he said.

'Now we poison them.'

We went back to the garage and grabbed all the poison we could find. Spray cans of Raid and Black Flag. Bottles of roach and flea killer. Pest controls that killed on contact.

We went behind the garage so my mother wouldn't see us, stood the boards against the wall, and drenched the nails in poison. Danny sprayed his nails methodically. He poisoned them as hard as he had pounded them through the wood. He held the can of Raid point blank and blasted each nail until it was dripping. Then he took the can of Black Flag and applied a second coat. He didn't say a word.

After that we carried the boards to the embankment and put them in a pile. One by one we dispersed our poison booby traps. We scattered them systematically, one trap every 15 feet, and covered each one under a layer of leaves and debris. It was deadly perfect. The boards blended seamlessly with the embankment. You couldn't see them unless you were looking, and even then it was hard.

When the last trap was placed we headed back to my house. And as we walked I told Danny how it would go. Pretty soon the molester would come creeping into the woods. He'd

be lurking around as usual, sneaky and evil, when suddenly he'd step on a board and shriek to the moon. The nail would skewer his foot completely, but the poison wouldn't hit him right away. First he'd pry his foot off the trap and stagger to the nearest tree, trying to brace himself. Next he'd take off his boot and sock and examine his gory foot. The wound would look strange. So green and swollen. Then his belly would cramp and he'd start to sweat. His vision would blur. 'What happening to me?' he'd whine. Before long his body would grow cold and stiff, and he'd pull himself up and lurch desperately for help, bleeding all over, straining for breath. Confused and shivering, he'd struggle up the bank to the side of the highway and flag his arms. But the cars would zip by. Nobody would stop. Finally the poison would reach his heart and in one convulsing foamy seizure he'd collapse on the road, shaking violently at first, then slipping into a pitiful tremble, then at last lying perfectly still. Later a truck would run over his skull and squish his brains.

'Maybe two trucks,' Danny said.

Back at the house I begged my mother to let Danny spend the night. We stood by the phone while she called Mrs. Gripando for permission. They talked for a long time. My mother seemed embarrassed and awkward again. *I know. Of course. I understand. He won't.*

That night she took us out for pizza and on the way back we stopped by Marie Callender's and picked up a lemon cream pie. I was shocked. Those pies were expensive. We never bought them. Once home things got even stranger. We were allowed to eat in my room. Our horseplay went unadmonished. When bedtime approached we were allowed to stay up and eat more pie. It was a mysterious and splendid occurrence of leeway, the likes of which I'd never experienced, and as the night went on the molester and my murder plot and the whole ridiculous farce disappeared from my mind, erased by the unprecedented treats and privilege.

At nine o'clock it was lights out. We set up sleeping bags on the floor of my room and talked softly in the dark with flashlights. After a while my mother went to bed. The house got still and silent. We clicked off our flashlights and laid in the dark.

'Do you think you're weird?' Danny said.

'I don't know. A little guess.'

'Do you think I'm weird?'

'A little I guess.'

'Do you know what a cock is?'

I paused and thought.

'I think so.'

'It's what your willy becomes when you grow up.'

'Oh.'

'When you're a kid you have a willy. When you grow up you have a cock. A willy is small and doesn't get big. A cock is small too but sometimes it gets bigger. That's the difference.'

'Ok.'

He shifted his feet in his sleeping bag.

'When someone touches a cock it grows like a little plant. First it's soft and floppy. All it does is hang there. Then you touch it and it starts to grow. It gets pointy and hard and after a minute it sticks out like a plant. But when someone touches your willy it doesn't grow.'

'What does it do?'

'It doesn't do anything. It stays soft and floppy. Nothing happens.'

I heard him shift his feet in his bag again. Then everything was still and quiet. From around the corner a car turned onto our street and its pearl coloured headlights squeezed between the window blinds. The headlights wiped across the wall and lit up the room. Then

they disappeared and the dark rushed back and felt thicker than before. For some reason I didn't want to talk anymore.

'Goodnight,' I told Danny.

'Goodnight,' he said.

That was my first and only play date with Danny Gripando. A few weeks later his mother pulled him out of our school. One morning I showed up to class and he wasn't there anymore. His desk was empty. His name wasn't called during roll. The teacher didn't give an explanation and that night when I asked my mother about it, neither did she.

'Eat your chicken,' she said.

The next day at school the janitor came by and confiscated Danny's old desk. It was a small room with a lot of kids and I guess our teacher wanted the space.

The janitor crept into the room in the middle of class, squeezed down the aisle, and picked up the desk as inconspicuously as he could. On his way out he flipped the desk over to make it easier to carry, and when he did a shower of grass blades—hundreds and hundreds of grass blades—sprinkled out of the book cubby and scattered across the floor.

I don't remember how the rest of the class reacted. I suppose there was giggling and a little hysteria. All I remember is the grass—all that ripped up grass dumping confetti-like into the room, pouring out of the desk—and our teacher just standing there, shaking her head, going, 'Tch, tch, tch. Tch, tch, tch. Just look at this terrible mess.'

Letter of Closure to an Indonesia Slum Shower

The first time I ever saw you I knew I was going to write about you. From the second I undressed and stepped naked and cringing into your deranged space I knew this moment would come: the moment I'd depict to anyone who'd listen your perfect resemblance to a Guantanamo nightmare.

And now that the moment *has* come I can honestly say it's a pleasure to berate you, a goddamn therapy, though it won't change anything, will not erase all those times I was obligated by hygiene to come to you like a shuddering bride to the arms of some arranged and vile partner.

I knew I had a soul when you touched me, for something deeper than my stomach was nauseated. Your water was a corrupted lick. Cold, hard, stale, rank. What lousy minerals defiled it? What on earth did it do to the smell of my skin? Everything it touched it turned pungent and orange. And those times when you inexplicably gave no water at all, not a reeking measly drop, and sent me foraging with my pail to the spigots and field pumps of shanty neighbours, all of them grinning at the thought of the dummy white boy, the pretty western surfer doll scrubbing ass with a puny dishcloth, wringing trickles of turbid groundwater down his face and back.

The mornings were the worst. Awaking to your upchuck of dead roaches, scratching at the bites of *Aedes* mosquitoes that hatched in your pipes then rose through your drain to suck from my ankles and wrists and once from my eyelid. My eyelid?

It was you—you and your weeping streaks of black mold, your undying scum fungus that butchered three toenails and left the others flaked and sallow, brittle as crackers (I have never again shown my bare feet in public)—*you* who snuffed the thrill of immersion. By all means give me travel's worst, its petty victimizations, its scams and pickpockets, its crooked

taxi and despotic baggage restrictions, but keep its showers, toilets, sinks and restrooms away from me. I never thought of home so much as when I was with you.

Now I am back in the west. And my God if you could see who I'm with. Mosaic basketweave tile. Textured glass (I'd almost forgotten the delight of glass). Brass fixtures and gentle body jets. The type you could make a beautiful life with, and believe me I will. I want you to know that I am in love. The time we spend together is long, slow, soft and steamy. I am given my space, soothed and caressed, and when we merge I am always willing and joyful, never obliged. Sometimes I sing.

They say resolution is one purpose of narrative. Well, consider us resolved. I may never be able to forget you, but I sure as hell won't think of you. You twisted little horror.

When I slip into senility, may you be my first casualty of mind.

Rennie's Mill Road

A little background before we begin:

Last autumn I applied for a parking permit at the city offices of St. John's and was denied for reasons I won't bother getting into, except to say that it had something to do with the miserably-complicated situation of owning a car in Newfoundland that's licensed and registered in California. Not long after the third time I was ticketed and towed for illegal plates, I got into a nasty obscenity match with the city official in charge of citations against motorists, and now I find myself out of favour with the parking division people. A bad condition when you live downtown.

One cannot easily imagine the burden of automobile ownership until one has owned an automobile in a place where they're not allowed to leave it unattended. For the last half year I have been living the style of a petty fugitive, hiding my car in dark concealing alleys, stashing it in sketchy back lots, making narrow escapes just as parking attendants turn the corner and flip open their ticket pads. I have been aided and abetted by friends—have used their permits illegally, borrowed their driveways when they're out-of-town. Nothing works for long. It is a constant game of hide-and-seek in which \$50 is riding on every contest, and I have been losing two or three times a week. It's almost enough to forsake the downtown scene and find a nice agreeable place in the suburbs.

Almost, but not quite.

From where I live on Water Street, the nearest free unpatrolled parking (as far as I'm aware) is off Monkstown Road. The streets around here lie just beyond the interests of the city and the jurisdiction of parking enforcement. They are narrow, unspectacular residential channels where the houses are rowed and packed together like minor novels in a library nobody goes to. Everywhere you look there is a congenial absence of cranky meters and gruff parking signage. It is a Green Zone where the all-seeing, unceasing St. John's meter maids are

prohibited from fulfilling their duty, and I'm not the only displaced parker who knows about it.

At certain times of the day there is not a single spot or space to be found on these streets, and during these times I generally drive around the corner to Rennie's Mill Road and park along the edge of Bannerman Park and those grand old dormered houses that look the way that Victorian literature reads.

Rennie's Mill Road is the kind of neighbourhood that comes as the fruit of being adept at politics, finances or complicated surgery. Prime Ministers lived on Rennie's Mill Road. So did the inventor of the gas mask. Men of affluence and legacy planted their personal lives here, sought tranquil separation in large, uniquely-styled accommodations strategically removed from the grungy bustle of downtown.

On Rennie's Mill Road the properties don elegant wrought iron necklaces. The houses have polygonal towers and ornate overhanging eaves. The front doors are elaborate and serious like the mouths of poets. The chimneys are monumental. The pillars that support the porches are as thick as the great trees that column the front yards. And sometimes, when the curtains in the bay windows are tied back, you can follow the flow of natural light into the antique gut of opulence, bedecked with fragile lamps, deep fireplaces, hulking armoires large enough to get crushed under, and long lean dining tables that only see action on the holidays.

It takes me longer than it should to walk Rennie's Mill Road because there is something about the street that doesn't quite jive with the rest of St. John's, and architecture is just the half of it. It's a discord you can sense when you peer into the parlours which sit lifeless and untouched like someone who died a virgin. They are pristine spaces that exhibit the inexperience of prosperity: neat as military, bereft of everyday use, free of spills and tasteless jokes and any trace of that sloppy human revelry that makes a home something warm to walk into.

A month ago my mother came to visit Newfoundland for the first time and I took her to Rennie's Mill Road because I wanted to show her that St. John's had rich people. I don't why it was important to me to prove that I'd moved to an area with pedigree, but it was. We walked down the street and took in the gabled grandeur of the domestic castles. We made guesses about their cost and the kind of people who lived in them. After a few houses her interest disappeared. Each home attracted a single approving 'Nice' or 'Lovely' and then we moved on to the next, and the next one after that, until finally we were at the end of Rennie's Mill Road and heading downtown for lunch with all those impressive conceptual structures fading from her regard like breath off a mirror.

A couple blocks later a house party tumbled out of a shabby red row house on Gower Street. The party had come out to watch a pair of its members wrestle on the sidewalk. The men fell to the ground grappling, full of feisty curses and gasping laughter. The rest of the party cheered them on with beers in hand before another young man broke it up and guided the two back inside, each of them still boasting and jawing at one another. That evening, when my mother phoned my father in California, it was the first thing she told him about.

The spirit of something is that animating and vital force within it. I see nothing I've come to recognize of the Newfoundland spirit on Rennie's Mill Road. Beyond the elegant windows, classic asymmetrical facades, and doghouse dormers, beyond the sophistication inherent in any architecture constructed in the style of a more gracious age, appears a vision of the sadder, more placid result of prominence: estrangement. The sidewalk wrestle, the shot of bottom-shelf liquor, the scent of a public restroom that homeless people use, the wicked hangover and bloody face, the anxious intimacies, all the foul-mouthed kinship and wild-hearted waste—all are unhonoured in the architecture of Rennie's Mill Road.

They say these houses are Second Empire and Queen Anne Revival. They say they are recognized landmarks, early intact examples of a planning phenomenon now known as suburbia. To me they are just fancy wooden homes about which there is nothing much to say

once you have admired their age and make: places where the rooms sit by themselves and the curtains are properly tied like pretty girdled debutants staring out the window, hoping for someone, anyone, to take them downtown.

What They Do

One night at the Silver Saddle Café I asked my friend Sean what people did in places where there was nothing to do. In cold blood I was asking him just what the hell anybody did in Basin, Montana—the desolate, dwindling, futureless ex-mining town where he lived with his wife in a handmade cabin without plumbing.

His wife, a nature painter, directed the grizzled little arts refuge where I was staying that winter, and Sean, being a carpenter of dumbfounding skill and versatility, filled the unofficial role of superintendent, overseeing any-and-all maintenance related to the converted vintage fire station where attendees were housed. At the time of my residence there were no other artists at the refuge, and to keep me from going cuckoo with isolation Sean would occasionally drop by and treat me to a bourbon at the Silver Saddle.

To this day I have no idea why I thought my creative process would benefit from spending six weeks alone in a remote Montana settlement in the middle of winter. Whatever picturesque charm or strapping tranquillity Basin might've possessed during those handsome Big Sky summers, in the blunt misery of March it was about as ugly and doleful a town as one could inhabit. No streets I ever walked were as empty or lonesome. On a busy day I might've seen a dozen cars on the main drag. There was no gas station, no library, no theatre, no grocery, and with the exception of the Silver Saddle no real business or shop, just a handful of dusty codgers who pedalled western knickknacks from their homes or trailers. Profound and captivating wilderness was all around me, but I wasn't steely enough to venture into it. The truly deadly cold stifled any thought of nature treks, and even idle strolls were cut short by fanged sub-zero winds that chewed through my baselayer and ate into my bones. Out of 24 hours a day I was apt to pass 23.55 of them indoors. In the mornings I read. In the afternoons I slept. In the evenings I would grind out reams of prose as grey and awful as the slush outside my door. The founders of the refuge had dreamt of providing artists with the height of

reclusion, and so they had; but it wasn't long before unfettered creation deteriorated into unbroken routine—routine that got noxious after so many weeks, shackling, unproductive, depressing.

In short I was bored. Unendurably, overwhelmingly bored. And it was this ferocious boredom, in all its soul-pummelling constancy, that I finally expressed to Sean one night over a double of Roughstock. Sean was raised as a ranch kid near Missoula and had lived in Basin for 27 years. Of the 247 hardcore rustics who called the town home he was perhaps the hardest, most rustic of the bunch. He shot his own food, built his own furniture, fetched and purified his own water, and when the winter dropped its freight he rigged a plough to his F250 and cleared the decrepit Basin roads without assistance. In the same way city-dwellers like me had come to harmonize with bustle and technology, he and his wife had harmonized with seclusion and self-reliance. So when I bitched about his way of life I made sure to do it carefully.

With tact and diplomacy I explained my fondness for Basin, my affection for the locals, my appreciation for the time and privacy and steadiness of quietude that never *ever* relented. Yet all that considered I couldn't help but wonder how people did it.

'How they do what?' Sean asked.

'Well, you know, just thinking about someone young, for example. Someone restless by nature. I mean personally I love it here—don't get me wrong. But just thinking about people who need a little more action, a bit more mischief or recreation. Just thinking about people like that, for example. And with no museums or theatres or stores around here, I just wonder.'

'About what?' Sean asked.

'Well, look. It's not like I have anything against rural living. I don't find it lazy or, you know, backwards. That to me, that's just—I mean, urban or rural environments, I don't discriminate. But just in terms of outlets and diversions I guess I've always questioned—well,

not *questioned*—but just been a little curious, maybe, about what people actually do in places where there isn't—I don't know—anything to *do*.'

Sean was a man with an immense territory inside him. He'd never been anywhere outside of Montana, but it always felt as though he'd been pretty much everywhere within himself. Talking to him you got the sense that his spiritual passport had a lot of stamps in it, with resident visas in some curious and faraway realms of deliberation. He thought about the question for a couple of minutes. Then he signalled the bartender and ordered us another double. After it was poured he said he had a story for me—not a very nice story, but one that might answer my question.

It was 1987, Interstate 90. He was driving home from Bozeman where he'd been visiting one of his sisters. He knew he was low on gas but had just passed a logjam of rigs that had taken an hour of NASCAR jockeying to get ahead of, and the thought of falling behind them again discouraged him from pulling over and fuelling up.

Ten miles from Whitehall his truck sputtered to a quit in a typical stretch of prairie nothingness. He was too proud to hitchhike. It wasn't fit, he explained, for a Montana man to be stranded. He felt pitiful and embarrassed and would not compound that embarrassment by standing along the highway jerking his thumb like any helpless dullard.

Just off the highway, a few hundred yards into the country, stood a single broken farmhouse with an even worse-looking barn adjacent. It didn't look like a place that had a working telephone, but it did look like a place that had a full gas can somewhere, and it was Sean's hope to borrow the can, gas his truck, find a pump in Whitehall, then double-back and return the can with as much fuel as he had borrowed.

He swung his legs over the barbed wire fence and followed a proper dirt road across the prairie. The property looked condemnable, fit for demolition or at least abandonment. The barn had rotted to its final timber and lost half its siding. The little wooden farmhouse was

warped and sunken. In the middle of the yard loomed a single horrible tree that looked as though it had eaten every other tree in the area. A dartboard had been nailed to the trunk and when Sean got closer he could see bullet holes in it. Several of them very close to the bulls-eye.

Things like this didn't faze Sean. In Montana it was perfectly normal for people to set things on trees or fences and shoot the shit out of them. He walked to the house and knocked on the door, and when no one answered he wandered over to the barn, poked his head inside, and found two boys playing some kind of game with a dead border collie.

The collie had been hog-tied and crammed into a disgusting old fridge that easily predated the moon landing. One of the boys wore an oversized football helmet, the other an Air Force Flight jacket. The fridge was soiled and deranged with dark brown crud weeping down the sides and jagged rusty screws where the shelving had been.

The dog looked pretty normal except for being dead. There was no wound or blood or visible inhumane trauma. It'd been flipped on its back and stuffed into the fridge like an upside down bouquet. As far as Sean could tell an interrogation was taking place, with the kid in the flight jacket addressing the dog in a German-Dracula accent and the other kid—the one in the helmet—filling the role of henchmen enforcer, looking on without a word.

Apparently the German Draculas wanted answers, and apparently this dead collie had them. If he talked they'd make it quick. If he didn't things would get nasty.

'Fun vay or anuder, Sargent, vee will get vuht vee vant,' said the kid in the jacket. 'Vee *always* get vuht vee vant.'

The boys were so immersed in the interrogation they didn't notice Sean standing there. At last Sean knocked on the barn and stepped inside; the instant he did the eeriest goddamn feeling of heebie-jeebies shook through him. He'd never been much for chit-chat and he sure as hell wasn't looking for it now. He explained the situation and asked to see their

folks, and when neither boy answered he grew awkward and tense and asked directly for some gas.

The boys didn't say a word. They didn't do anything. Ripped from their make-believe they seemed discombobulated, dazed. The second Sean had knocked each had turned and froze simultaneously, and now just stood there staring at him. The stiff, weird moment was so quiet Sean could hear the barn creak to the wind.

The boys went on standing there, looking at him. Then the kid in the flight jacket flicked his chin toward a red two-gallon gas can sitting on a shelf above a pile of brutalized appliances. Sean remembered that pile well. There was a shot up washer, a shot up microwave, and the decimated remains of a powder blue toilet that had been gun-blasted to chunks. There were toys, most of them burned, a mattress gutted down the middle, and a wreckage of household vanities that included kitchen taps and shower screens and a ripped out medicine cabinet shot twice through the mirror.

Sean stepped around the junk and grabbed the can off the shelf. There was just enough gas to get to Whitehall. Over by the fridge the boys watched and waited, their gazes steady and blank, their mouths a little open. The heebie-jeebies got worse. Sean cradled the can against his gut and stepped back through the junk. He didn't look at the fridge again. He thanked the boys for their help and promised to bring the can back just as full as it was now. The boys didn't answer.

'Well alright then,' Sean said, and left.

That was the only time Sean ever hitchhiked in his life. When he got outside he set the can by the door and walked straight back to his truck. Taking someone's property meant bringing it back, and he wasn't interested in coming back. He stood along the highway jerking his thumb like any hapless dullard till a Frito-Lay rig picked him up and drove him to Whitehall, and when he got to Whitehall he bought a brand new steel gas can and two gallons

of gas. Twenty-three years later he still had that can. He kept it in back of his truck, and it was always full.

Sean paused for a minute to sip his bourbon, but not for effect. He wasn't accustomed to speaking consecutively for several minutes and his throat was dry. He sat there finishing his double and when he was done he turned the glass upside down on the bar and told me what he was getting at.

You're out there on the road and you see these little homesteads in the middle of nowhere. You pass these lonesome-ass towns buried in the mountains or stuck in the desert. You shake your head and wonder how anyone could live there and what the hell they do. Then one day you see it and the answer is pretty obvious.

They use their imagination.

Fixed

I took my dog to get neutered yesterday. It had to be done. He was disgracing things, tall slender objects especially. Poles, legs, saplings, the vacuum, legs. It was annoying.

I dropped him off at the vet and when I picked him up he was different, as you might imagine. A little vague and subdued, a touch of ennui, definitely not his usual self. And naturally, as a fellow member of the male population, the first thought that came to mind was: *What if someone had done this to me?*—when I was a young mutt straying my ass off, sticking my nose in all sorts of shit—had taken me in, strapped me down, and right then as the anaesthetic kicked in, caressed my frantic head and said: Just lie still and relax, kid. This won't take long. One quick snip and life will get nice and simple. No more hyperactivity, no more arbitrary aggression, no inconvenient litters. Focus will come, moderation and restraint. Prudence will rule and your hormones will bow. You'll quit chasing tail. The power of the female rear will diminish, eventually it will vanish. You won't even know it's around. How nice will that be?

That's right. Good boy. *Such* a good boy. How nice will that be? Never doing anything rash or stupid for the sake of some frivolous breeding. Never following the wrong girl halfway around the world for the work of her mouth around your crotch. You'll stop careening, for Christ sakes. No more roving or roughhouse. No more running with the pack in the dead of night, getting into things, eating God knows what, drinking from holes, sleeping in the street. You'll stick to one territory, get a Costco membership card, find a favourite sitcom, lease a compact car and a nice entry-level home with a neat lawn. You'll roam that lawn in flannel pyjamas and designer moccasins. You'll know every inch of it by heart. The scene will never change and neither will you. We'll latch the gate, just in case.

Trust us, kid. It's all for the best, they might've insisted—the way I insisted now, watching in the rearview as my dog curled up in the back and dropped meekly to sleep, repeating again and again: *That's a good boy. Who's happy to be a good boy?*

Flow

If New York is the city that never sleeps, Seoul is the city that will rest when it's dead. Over 10 million people beat out a life in this city, and on any given street during any given rush hour you swear you can feel each and every one of them piling against your back or squeezing your personal bubble.

For two years I called Seoul home. With neither a car nor a nearby metro at my convenience I became wearily intimate with life as a pedestrian commuter in Asia, and almost daily exerted a manic sum of energy renditioning a Super Bowl kickoff return, juking an endless yardage of Korean populace flying at me from all directions and with all intensities.

On the corner of the busiest intersection in the Sinchon division, where I lived, worked and wanted to coldcock anyone who got within five feet of me, stood a high-windowed titan of a Starbucks, four stories high, formidable and annoying. For whatever reason this caffeinated juggernaut recurrently intersected with my daily breaking point, and often on my walk home from work, unhinged and overheated, I would duck inside, order some sloppily assembled latte, climb the stairs to the topmost floor, stake a calm seat along the window wall, and with an odd power of vacant fixation stare like a stupid sheep or cow at the crush of human traffic below.

From my vista overlooking that intersection the hurry-scurry of pedestrians became miniaturized and accentuated like the movement of an ant colony under a high-powered lens. When it comes to urban multitudes ants possess a strong resemblance, for they are always moving with a compulsive obligation to haste, the most efficient ants constantly overcoming the slower ones in some pitiless manner or another, slamming them out of the way, scrambling over their backs, butting and pushing them from behind. Take the observation a step further and you might notice that while some of ants are moving slower than others, none are moving with any appearance of civility. If one ant obstructs the progress of the column,

gets hurt, confused, or pauses for whatever reason, the slower ants stampede over it just as mindlessly as the speedier ones. Pace is no indication of conscience.

If there was any major variance between those little creatures and the ones I studied through the window I was rarely in the spirit to appreciate it. At all times around that popular intersection, though especially in the evenings, the streets would heave with files of black heads sweeping down the sidewalk in opposite directions, fearsomely wiggling past one another, so tightly woven together they formed a human fabric that blanketed a half-mile of footpath at least. Every make and model of citizen the city had to offer could be seen. Bankers, civic workers, delivery boys, schoolchildren, young professionals, old professionals, plus a continuous accumulation of borne-along genres that popped out of taxis or buildings and joined the choke at intervals.

At the corners of the intersection the masses would congeal, and when the light changed they would bleed into the crosswalk, fanning out in an exhalation of breathing room, then draw back together in a stiff breath at the opposite corner before continuing along, knocking and bumping along, every participant greedily manoeuvring for a thread of open space, cramming into space, pouncing on space—cross-checking, shoulder-chucking, back-shoving Seoul. A clear path in front of that old lady? *Take it! Use it!* Jump off the sidewalk and shoot down the street. Hop the curb and cut in front of her. Swerve left and slide right, brake and accelerate, pass and go, every jostling body intensely close and unconnected, every blind mind bent on destination, seeking only destination, block after block, day after day.

The spectacle was like a salmon run minus the payout at the end, be it sex or death: a rude surge through channels of bodies, among a flotsam of food stalls and cell phone kiosks, and its effect on me was as curious as it was dispiriting. What I was looking at intrigued me, yet what I was a part of depressed me, and what I was looking at and what I was part of was a drainage of flushed spirits, purposed and oblivious, perfectly insensitive, a flow.

The purpose of any type of flow is transport, to pick up and deliver similar or disparate elements and deposit them in the places they're best suited. Its only goal is to achieve an arrival. Over and over it slides into an obstacle, divides easily around it, and converges again in an instant, the way a stream surmounts a branch that has dipped down and touched the current. There is no room for patient traversing. Where there is open space it must occupy that space to maintain progress. Like bloodstream it must always maintain progress, never collecting in any one spot, but coursing non-negotiably with incorruptible disinterest toward anything else. I remember this example explicitly.

One evening while I gazed out the window an incredibly old homeless woman, caked in beggar's filth and half-fogged with senility, appeared for the first time in all my observations and planted herself weed-like in the middle of the sidewalk.

She was the weariest object, animate or inanimate, I'd ever seen in that area. Dressed in the second-hand drag of privation, her white hair like twigs, her back so stooped she looked like a question mark, she stood brittle against the rush, one thin palm outstretched, muttering for alms.

At least 500 people passed her before I began to seriously watch the people who passed her without a glance in her direction. Some passed her looking into their cell phones; some passed her talking into their cell phones; some passed her reading a magazine, singing to songs on their iPods, or playing catch with their car keys; some passed her fidgeting with articles of clothing, brushing hairs from their shoulders, smoothing wrinkles in their blouses; some passed her trying to find things in their pockets or sneering at a private thought, while others missed her appraising their reflections in the tinted store windows, peering into their cute shopping bags, or taking out their pocketbooks and counting their cash. But the great majority simply passed her with their eyes aimed squarely upon the tops of their shoes. And it was here I realized that flow is not as oblivious as I'd initially thought. Few who passed this poor woman were unaware of her. There was rarely an instant where she was in danger of

being trampled by the procession. The people saw her and conducted the necessary movements to avoid her. However conscienceless, the flow was not unconscious.

After some time she grew tired and crouched down in the sidewalk. She had two plastic bags loaded with trinkets and meticulously arranged each item in front of her for inspection and purchase. When nobody noticed she placed a small paper cup beside her and jammed her arm into the train of waistlines for alms, and when this, too, inflicted not the smallest disturbance to the stream of unconcern her temper released and she began to swipe at the ankles of pedestrians as quickly and lividly as a cat.

But even aggression only gained her a sporadic regard, until at last, exasperated by her invisibility, she snatched the ankle of a random company man and anchored him mid-stride with a sudden jerk. With the man mired in human need every commuter directly behind him became hindered as well. A bumper-to-bumper pile-up of bodies immediately formed, and now I saw another reality of flow, a dark and dangerously attentive nature: the moment when it becomes unalterably impeded and all apathy goes out the window, when it accumulates gravely in the spot where it has been stopped up and begins to gather the urgency it needs to progress.

There was no indifference now. With the pressure and impatience mounting behind him, the businessman raised his open hand and motioned as if to strike. The woman bowed her head in deference but refused to let go. Then, without a second warning, the hand came down and smacked her across the head with enough violence to break her grip. The man waggled his foot as though kicking off some mud and went swiftly on his way, and just like that the blockage was undone and the flow resumed its course.

Like most writers I am fond of perceiving in myself a nobler difference of principle and being, and so there is no small part of me that is grateful I lived in Seoul, because it taught me to never so far sabotage my opinion of myself as to make my home in a super-

metropolis, where it is only too natural to go with the flow by means of traveling unencumbered by any heavy, tender sympathies. Weeks later on my way home from work I saw that woman again, this time lying foetal on the sidewalk, her hands wedged between her crotch. She did not move or beg, or do anything but gaze eye-level at every oncoming shoe that stepped across her curled body with the naturalness of avoiding a puddle. And while I don't think of the moment often, when I do think of it I remember very clearly the inherited way I stepped across her blatant misery, impelled by a purpose worth nothing but an instant noodle dinner and a few hours of foreign sitcom, and the feeling of my dear singularity taking a crippling blow as I shoved through the anonymous droves and found my usual spot at the top of that Starbucks to watch exactly who I was, and what I was full of, again and again.

What Are You Doing Here, Anyway?

When I first moved from Los Angeles to Newfoundland I found myself recurrently having to explain, and in some instances excuse, my relocation to people. No explanation of my presence here, no matter how reasonable I thought it, was good enough to account for something so peculiar as having been raised in California but not residing there. This is not to imply that California is anymore charming or liveable than Newfoundland; it is just to say that California, particularly Los Angeles, knows how to make a movie, and spares no expense or special effect to ensure that it is a fine and glittery setting in the imaginations of even the most contented locales.

The revenue-mad productions people at the California travel-bureau run a high fever all year round, eloquently boasting of exotic leisure and easy living. Consequently, even Newfoundland, a place as satisfied with itself as any on the planet, is not totally beyond a popped eyebrow and a bit of incredulity when it encounters a defector of that fertile wonderland, where the women are carved from classic MGM marble and winter means Corona beer and Christmas lights in palm trees.

Of course when you are comfortable leading an easy wandering existence, and have no responsibilities to feed or clothe, then it is easy to find yourself just about anywhere on the planet. Destinations pop into your life like whack-a-mole puppets, and it is nearly nothing to move yourself anywhere, and live and work anywhere, for no more an impetus than to pursue the hope that what is wrong with your life is the result of where you are. But over the years I've learned that the language of life should not mimic too closely the language of literature; it is boring; and these days when someone asks me why I've come to Newfoundland, I know they are likely looking for a response that will fit into ordinary conversation—a reason that will touch upon some easily discussable quality of their home—and are not much interested in psychological extrapolations behind unsettledness.

Thus, for the sake of justifying a small part of my immigration in a digestible manner, I will now throw in, in this place, a rather startling encounter that occurred this past July, not long after I first landed on this mystically rugged rock in the wind.

I was sitting in a St. John's coffeeshop pondering the local pejorative *skeet*. I don't remember why I was pondering it, or how the term first came to my attention, but I think now it had something to do with being in a new place and having nothing else to do except wander around and pick up and ponder such things. As I know now, *skeet* is a term used in Newfoundland English to stereotype a loud, generally low-class, disruptive youth. But right then I couldn't put my finger on the definition. After a moment I turned to the man beside me and asked if he could define the term. He thought for a second, then in a bashful sort of way, admitted that he didn't quite know how to explain the phrase, but that I would know what a 'skeet' was when I saw one. I thanked him politely but half-heartedly, for the answer was unhelpful, and that was the end of it. Or so I thought.

Five seconds later I became sensitive to a change in the vibes of the customers around me, an otherwise ordinary batch of coffeeshop spooks who until then had been quietly tending their own thoughts and discourses. All at once the inattentive idyll was broken, split like thin ice, and the little coffee den detonated with participation. Everyone who'd overheard my question began to offer some education on the matter.

A young dreadlocked hippie went on at great length about how his father had used to call him a skeet, and anyone else who didn't have a job, and how a good place for skeet watching was George Street on a Saturday night, but don't go to Christian's because they overcharge for Guinness.

A pretty blonde girl mentioned that her ex-boyfriend was 'skeety' and that she'd never date another one because once during an argument he purposefully smashed his head into the hood of a car outside the Fabulous 50's Nightclub, and the cops came.

A prim, severe-looking old woman sitting in the corner said that skeet was an *attitude*,

not a person, and that her son had once been skeety before going back to school and now he was enrolled in the Marine Institute at MUN, which was one of the best programs because it had a simulation ship deck that could reproduce any harbour in the world, so students could practice navigating through all sorts of treacherous ports.

A scruffy musician with a guitar case slung around his back broke into a story about a skeet he'd almost fought outside Dooley's the week before, but there were too many icebergs hanging around the harbour this summer and he didn't like fighting in the cold, and that actually it'd been a blessing because he was playing at O'Reilly's on Tuesday and didn't want messed up knuckles, if anybody wanted to come check him out.

Another man, the one I'd first asked, made no effort to explain the term at all, but simply asked me where I was from, what I was doing here, and in his own time divulged a great many facts about the weather, the rough winter season, the broken promises of the Atlantic Accord and the pros and cons of Joey Smallwood.

And that is how it went, just like that, for an hour and beyond. Everyone in the room doted on the question as though my elucidation promised a wonderful bounty. In each eye was an eagerness to impart, an enthusiasm to share. Their faces brightened, their voices warmed, their eyes opened like brightly-lit windows into their sewing rooms, and through them I could see their Spinning Jennies working and turning, weaving together all sorts of superfluous information for me.

I hardly remember whether any exact definition of that disparaging term was offered, but that is not the point. From the faint illumination of that simple defamation, to the unveiling and explanation of other expressions like 'around the bay' and 'bayman', to tips on where to eat, places to drink, roads to drive and roads to avoid, I was treated to a complete civic orientation free of charge. Never in my travels had I been embraced by strangers so casually, so informally, with so much trust and delight. I sat there nodding along with every comment, saying little, stunned like the recipient of some act of goodwill that had come out of

nowhere, without solicitation. It was an encounter clean of agenda. They did not lecture me on local code, did not commercialize their hospitality. There was no attempt to teach me any conduct becoming a Newfoundlander, except, perhaps, precisely that conduct which they were showing through example.

At last the conversation lost its thrill. One by one the discussion group dwindled and went their separate ways. The next customers came into the lounge with new murmurs and chats, and all traces of that discourse vanished. But it had happened. I had the glow within me to prove it, the warm sense of human unity. I had communicated with strangers, shared with them and learned from them. God knows it is no small feat to do this even once in the course of a month, but to do it in the course a single afternoon? That is nothing short of a miracle.

If I seem too smitten by an ordinary experience, it should come as no surprise, at least to anyone who has ever led an urban-American existence. The dynamic of an American city is so disconnected, so grossly monkish and mistrustful, that often when a stranger approaches you it is the chief occurrence of the day, and later you can recall everything about the moment and hardly contain the urge to talk about it. It is a shock of human connection, a voltage too often unfelt; and when it suddenly encounters you, it is as though that stranger has taken your finger and jammed it into their human outlet, and you are thrilled, even grateful, to find them coursing with juice, this otherwise anonymous figment, just as plain in the sunlight as you.

In terms of forming relationships, Newfoundland is a place where anything goes, far more than places like New York or Los Angeles, where the only thing the people have in common is how much they are not alike. This sort of characteristic has its benefits, particularly if you're an artist. But what often goes unmentioned in the rich inveigling prose of all those travel ads is the downside, the moment when anonymity yields to loneliness, and the feeling that you are living in a world of phantoms in which union is impossible. What it may lack in captivating perversity, volatile diversity, and fashionably destructive tendencies, Newfoundland makes up for in attention to community. Perhaps this condition is hereditary;

perhaps it is ancestral, an ancient civic consciousness passed down from generation to generation. For all I know, maybe it is something in the water.

In whichever case, the majority of Newfoundlanders simply do not permit a way of life that lacks communion with strangers. It's an admirable intolerance, one I gladly honour and hope to adopt, and will do my best to articulate the next time someone asks me why I am here.

Communitas Lost

It's one or two or three in the morning and it's nothing you haven't seen before or couldn't imagine even if you hadn't. The pool tables are in the back; the touch-screen juke is in the corner; the athletes are stuck in perpetual highlight on seven mounted televisions tuned to ESPN.

Somehow you've made the acquaintance of a bell-tubby little man who's just gotten fired from his job and is happy about it, but concerned about the economy and the thought of looking for another gig. He's weighed 225 pounds since he was twelve-years-old and once worked as a logger in Alaska before he was hit by a tree and shattered like movie glass. "Internal stress reflex," he explains with something in his voice like the latches of Willy Loman's briefcase flipping open.

Apparently internal stress reflex is how most loggers get killed on the job. It starts with a very old tree that has been standing around for hundreds of years. There's a lot of pent up stress in these trees, and sometimes when that stress is released too quickly the trunk jerks out at the speed and force of a Greyhound cruiser and crushes to hell the unwitting little logger that ever started cutting into such a stuck and tired thing.

The tree broke 48 bones in his body including all of his face and six vertebrae, though he hasn't a scar, limp or missing tooth to show for it. In the time you've been sitting together he's also had his throat slit by an Eskimo gangbanger, been attacked by a colony of carpenter ants, and come within nine bee stings of setting a new Guinness world record for bee stings. No doubt he could have easily just barely survived a parachute malfunction or a plane crash in the Andes if, in the middle of all this Looney Tunes ill-luck and indestructibility, he didn't also suddenly develop an extrasensory perception for the histories of strangers.

'I've had it all my life. Like a crystal ball in my head, except with the past. All I have to do is talk with a person and I can tell where he's from, what he does, what his family is like, if he's ever been married, got children. Everything.'

‘Everything?’

‘Like you. I can tell all about you. Like I can tell you got two brothers and that you’re the youngest. And that you’re not from around here. But from like out West someplace.’

‘California.’

‘See. And you’re a teacher or like a writer, right? Something with words. And your parents are still married.’

‘Almost. I’m a teacher, yes. But my parents were murdered in a carjacking when I was a kid. Three Mexicans dragged them from their van outside Dodger Stadium and shot them in the street. They were Giants fans.’

‘Oh yeah. I know some Giants fans.’

‘They found the car in Guadalajara but never the men. So my brothers and I were sent to a Catholic orphanage in Santa Monica, which was very hard for us because we were Jewish. The nuns picked on us every day. They held us down and rubbed sunscreen in our eyes. They made us pray for the Clippers.’

‘Oh. Right. The Clippers.’

It might occur to you at this point that this man has just spent the better part of the evening destroying himself for your companionship, and that the gracious thing to do would be to sip your beer and smile along the way he is used to. But this is one or two or three in the morning and you’re in no position for kindly solicitude.

‘That chick’s got great tits,’ he says with something in his voice like *we could’ve been beautiful*. ‘I think I’ll get her number.’

‘I think I’ll sit here and catch the Dodgers’ score. For my parents.’

The waitress brings another bowl of peanuts. The touch-screen juke plays something by Queen. A single thirty-something slot machine blinks pick-up lines across the bar. Above, the seven mounted televisions have formed a nimbus of Derek Jeter highlights for whatever

hill-of-beans reason and you hate the goddamn Yankees and don't give a piss about Derek Jeter or anything he does.

If Derek Jeter were here right now you wouldn't even act like you knew who he was.

Fireharvest, Plymouth Bay

It was the Fourth of July where America began and I had no trouble feeling what Francis Scott Key must've felt as he stood upon the Chesapeake watching the bombs give their proof. In exchange for a can of Heineken the state trooper turned his head from what must've been five tons of illegal fireworks making war show on the beach, took his beer to the top of Shirley Bean's seawall, and watched thirty stacked pallets crowned with a dead Christmas tree burn as high and rabidly as a house of straw. A forty-foot scorch tower licking the marine layer, flame tops slicked back by the onshore breeze.

Standing on those rocks, flashclad in bursts of flaming balls and fountain-cannon sparklers, his leniency was unassailable. Not a single lost child or frantic searching mother would dare seek his assistance. Not one brawl would be deterred by his peacekeeping touch. And when some uptight citizen at last complained about the truly hazardous incidence of booze and munitions escalating unchecked before him, I heard him explain with crabby horsensense: 'Sometimes you keep the order by not enforcing it. If I broke up this shitshow I'd have a riot on my hands.'

The breeze was tangled in smoke, heavy with sulphur, and each burst of kaleidoscopic colours stirred a hoarse roar of drunken hoopla up and down the beachfront, which glowed like a firefly from countless bonfires pitted in the sands. Now and then a log would shift or split in someone's fire, and a writhing tongue of winking cinders would lift above the scene and flicker out to sea, so that for an evening everything wondrous and ponderable—the sky, the earth, and the sea—was tasted by flame.

It was the Fourth of July where America began and I had no trouble seeing how we will end. Birthed in bomb light, that light is in our blood. But of course I hardly cared about that just then. I was a young man and the world was ignited. The powers were helpless and unconcerned; and I downed my beer and savoured it all with happy awe and stupid grin. The

joy flames and dazzle blasts, the deep booms and rich combustions, the great pleasure of bombs.

Residuals

When I was a kid I lived in one those magical American households where money just appeared and nobody was ever surprised when it did.

I say it was magical because nowadays I live in a household where money does not just appear. I wake in the morning and there is no money. I check on the dresser and under the cushions. I look in my wallet. Perhaps the magic found its way in there. ‘Don’t look at me,’ my wallet says. ‘Get a job,’ the cushions moan. I don’t bother them anymore.

A long time ago, however, I really did live in such a house where such a thing as free money occurred. It was my parents’ house, of course, and I know now that the money had nothing to do with any kind of fiscal enchantment, but with my father’s adeptness at getting corporations to mail us small checks for seemingly no reason other than we had an address where things like checks could find us.

The checks were lowly disbursements from sizable companies I’d never heard of, but which I knew were large and important by the large pink checks important companies send out into the world. They appeared in our house weekly. My mother was in charge of opening the mail and always stuck them on the kitchen counter between the bottles of balsamic vinegar and olive oil, where they’d stay for two or three weeks until my father finally took them to the bank and deposited them.

A small portion of these payments came from the entertainment industry. The checks were residuals: compensations for exploited performances by my famous grandmother who’d once been an actress but was now dead and earning somewhere between fifteen and thirty dollars a month for our family.

My grandmother’s career never amounted to much. Her stardom twinkled as brightly as a wicked stepmother on *Days of Our Lives* in the early 70’s, but nobody much remembers old soaps and her main claim to fame now, according to her residuals anyway, was a small

part in a classic *Twilight Zone* episode that still aired once or twice a week on various cable stations around the world.

The episode, like the show, is probably not so famous now. It stars a young (and I mean *young*) William Shatner, who even then looks every bit like a man created for sexy new galaxies and all the frat-boy promiscuity of the final frontier.

Young Will plays one half of a honeymoon tandem whose car breaks down in small-town Ohio where nothing ever happens except the occasional third-dimensional struggle for self-determination. Taking lunch at the local diner, the couple end up battling a penny-slot, mystic seer fortune-telling machine for control of their own destiny.

The machine has a creepy bobble-headed devil attached at the top. The devil has two horns and a porn-maker's grin and wobbles a sadistic little chuckle whenever it dispenses vague foreboding answers to innocent questions like: 'How much will this club sandwich cost?' *You should have thought about that before you ordered.* 'Is the Oxford English Dictionary really the world's most trusted dictionary?' *Some questions are better left unasked.*

Of course William is too civilized for any hocus-pocus. He's captain of his own starship. It's all just fun and games till some of the fortunes begin to come true. Suddenly William is spooked. Weird powers are working in menacing ways. The honeymoon is over. They're never leaving Ohio. Something awful will happen if they do. The mystic seer foresees it.

Eventually William's wife comes to her senses. She doesn't like the diner, she doesn't like the town, she doesn't like the bobble-headed demon with the bobble-headed chuckle. She wants to *leave leave leave!* One desperate impassioned monologue later, young William reclaims the captain's seat. The car is fixed; the path is theirs. The two walk bravely from the diner, accepting of the uncertain road ahead, just as another married couple walks in and takes the same booth.

‘Go ahead,’ my grandmother says with hushed dread. The husband inserts a gloomy penny and reads their fortune aloud. My grandmother moans. They aren’t going anywhere. They are stuck like slaves of fate in that rinky-dink village and my grandmother is stuck in uncredited spot-appearance syndication while another woman heads boldly into better renown on the arm of an iconic interstellar swagger-muffin.

I’ve always wondered how the history of my family’s economy might’ve turned out had my grandmother landed a role that ended with personal autonomy instead of cosmic bondage, but my mother never gave it a thought. Every 4th of July KTLA Channel 5 ran it’s *Twilight Zone* marathon and she would gather my brother and I around the television to watch the famous episode with the young William Shatner and the stupid devil bobble-head dispensing menacing clairvoyance.

My brother and I were too young to respect the uniqueness of televised lineage. All we saw was the antique absurdity of black-and-white, the corny melodrama, the embellished dismay. We cracked jokes and mimicked lines. We laughed when the women clutched their faces and screamed, we took the piss when the gangly government-looking man spoke into the camera before and after every episode, taking life way too ominously. And when the episode with our famous grandmother finally appeared, we jiggled our noggins like bobble heads and came up with our own potty-parody fortunes.

‘Why does this room smell like ass?’

All signs point to Mom.

‘Why has Dad been on the shitter so long?’

The answer to your question is bigger than you think.

Our smart-assing rarely failed to rankle my mother. Once when we really got rolling she stamped her foot and cried: ‘You think it’s so funny? Well let me tell you something, funny boys. When I was your age that little devil head used to give me nightmares. Terrible, terrible nightmares!’

The fact that we'd never met our famous grandmother was a great tragedy to my mother. It didn't matter that we'd watched her scene a dozen times and knew it wasn't right until the end—to our mother our grandmother's performance couldn't be fully appreciated unless we sat through the entire episode and several episodes prior. Anytime we got up to leave the room for one reason or another she'd call after us to our considerable irritation, 'Hurry or you'll miss your famous grandmother!'

The first time I ever saw any kind of sex device was very early in life and came about like this: In our adolescence my mother would clean our rooms regularly and meticulously, not because she pampered her children, but because cleaning our rooms was the best way to get a lead on the kind of shit we were getting into.

One year when my brother was 14 my mother cleaned his room and snooped across a bag of weed and giant rubber dildo stashed in a tool box at the back of his closet.

My mother was as likely for confrontation as Mahatma Gandhi. She simply flushed the weed down the toilet and left the dildo where it was. She had no intention of discovering what her teenage son was doing in possession of a king-sized synthetic penis, even if it meant not discovering what he was doing in possession of a farmer's harvest of marijuana.

Years later my brother would explain the dildo as a gag memento from a strictly hetero foray into a downtown sex shop, but at the time there was no way he could decry the seizure of his buds without the dildo poking into the discussion with all its homo-erotic intimations and mortifying him completely. So it was that everything settled quietly into repression, unresolved and unremarked upon.

Shortly thereafter came the 4th of July, and my mother gathered her two boys in front of the television for the annual family tradition of watching the KTLA *Twilight Zone* marathon just to see thirty seconds of our Hollywood grandmother. My brother, still smouldering from my mother's intrusion, found the whole thing intolerable, and within a few

episodes began to assault every twist and turn that came on the screen with spiteful asides that chipped at my mother's patience until finally all her Gandhi withered away.

There was a terrible detonation, a terrific blast of sovereignty-seeking adolescence and frustrated motherhood about which I don't remember much except for my brother bolting out of the house, threatening to run away to Mexico, and my mother running after him promising to buy his goddamn ticket.

They stood toe-to-toe in the driveway, cursing each other out. Then my mother fled into the house and came out with that dildo. She shrieked at my brother as he stormed toward the Mexican border. Then she pitched back and hurled the penis in his direction as far as she could, the giant rubber erection soaring awkwardly for five or six feet like the first flight of the Wright Brothers, then crashing to the driveway with a pitiful plop.

A second later every trace of psychotic fury left my mother's face, and she walked into the house, shut the door behind her, and asked me to the couch to watch my famous grandmother and pretty-please enjoy it. We sat in rigid silence until the episode came on, and when it did my mother got up and started making dinner.

She started making dinner even though it was two in the afternoon and we were eating out that night.

She stood up, left the room, and began making dinner just as my grandmother was about to walk into that diner and give the principle performance of her bite-sized career.

I don't remember what was cooked, but I remember clearly the sound of that meal being prepared, the rough handling of pots and drawers, the slamming of cabinets. At one point something dropped and broke into pieces—a bowl or glass. The bowl or glass shattered across the floor and created a powerful silence that I didn't dare investigate because it wasn't the kind of silence you walked in on.

The silence occupied the kitchen and filled the house with its heavy force, and when it passed the sound that replaced it was that of my mother sweeping up the shattered pieces, gathering it all together again.

I am crowded these days by memories from a lost distant life. The memories are very little and rarely seem like they are worth keeping around. In the movie of my existence they would be the deleted scenes, well-acted and authentic, but inessential to the plot or the progression of the story.

I don't know what I can do with them, and I have no idea what they can do for me. They are things that just happened with no great dividends of meaning, small residuals from a dead performance of years, bunched between the oil and vinegar of my brain, and they never stop coming.

Gili Meno

My travel book to Indonesia described the Gilis as a trio of beautiful islands so bare of resources that they were almost unliveable. Yet long before I got on the ferry I was warned by other ex-pats that at least one of the islands, Gili Trawangan, was packed with tourists, while another, Gili Air, was overwhelmed with luxury villas. And so I made plans to visit the third island, Gili Meno, the smallest, most uninhabited of the three.

Each island was no more than a kilometre apart from the one next to it, but for some reason pertaining to the tides the ferry would only stop at Trawangan. It was my good luck to be aboard a boat whose captain was gladly bribed, however, and for an extra ten rupiah I was taken as close to Meno as the vessel could go and told to walk the rest of the way, the water being only neck-deep.

Holding my pack above my head, I waded through the shallows and met the shore of an island whose indigenes had never bathed in anything but saltwater. My senses were instantly alive. Everywhere around me were the same enrapturing screensaver images that had mocked and dejected me during all those soul-stomping office gigs in the States. ‘Keep dreaming’, those images had said in Boston. ‘Not in this lifetime’, they’d told me in LA. Now here I was.

I trekked along the beach through a boneyard of washed-up coral fragments, the ocean so flat and smooth it might’ve been shaved with a razor. The swoop and call of opulent jungle fowl, the skull-faced woman draping laundry across the crab legs of a *jukung* canoe, the snorkelling tourist submarining across the fiercely-clear shallows—never had a place so definitively announced peace and simplicity.

With no trees on this stretch of the island, I crawled into the shade of some shrubby vegetation and opened my notebook, determined to articulate with rich poetic vigour every exotic nuance around me. I sketched one elaborate ode after another, filled my moleskine with sensitive reflections, yet when I read the words back to myself nothing felt right. The pretty

jungle birds weren't as lively or flamboyant; the old washwoman had lost her humble poignancy; the snorkelling tourist was drowned in extraneous description. The translations were a bomb.

Suddenly my enthusiasm fell off a cliff. What good was such beauty if I couldn't subjugate it? What good were pure blue waters, heaps of sumptuous clouds, delicate breezes and tropical aromas if I couldn't extract from them some inspiring perspective that would rouse the weary 9-to-5 world and send it sprinting toward the travel life?

Discouraged, I wandered down the beach until the heat beat me into the shrubs again. Fifty yards from shore a young native couple, no older than a pair of high-school kids, was teaching their baby daughter how to swim. The water was serene and they were barely waist-deep, but that made no difference to the child. To the child the situation was a nightmare, and she clung for dear life to her mother's waist, sobbing hysterically.

The boy-father took his time. Immersed to his shoulders, he bobbed around his daughter like a jellyfish, gingerly calling her name. With soft cajoles and gentle tones he would drift incrementally closer, then quickly drift back when her panicky sobs burst into wild distrustful shrieks. At last he waded over and unpeeled the girl from her mother's body. Hoisting her up by the armpits, he held her above his head and smiled into her shrieking face, still saying her name as she kicked violently at his chest, still saying her name as he lowered her into the water and laid her on her back as though the sea were an operating table. With his arms scooped beneath her shoulders and thighs, he began to move her across the shallows. The child's fearful moans rose to a horrible pitch, then steadily dwindled with each second she didn't sink.

After a while the father turned her over and showed her how to kick. Then he flipped her upright and taught her how to move her arms underwater, and how to stay calm when the ocean got near her mouth. In a matter of 20 minutes a great, lush forest of confidence had

bloomed, and the child was treading water without help or horror, her wailing dread replaced by a silent fascination with being afloat.

It's possible to experience something so complete in beauty that you also see, at the same moment, something of beauty's incommunicable nature. An hour earlier I would've crushed my mind around that scene like a fist, squeezed it of all its succulent juice, and crammed the haggard pulp into my notebook. Now that instinct faded and my notebook stayed shut.

There was no one else on the island to bear witness to the event, no one who would've thought to look at it twice, anyway. Only me in the shadow of some fragrant vegetation, watching with a kind of fixation that had nothing to do with forming a perspective or grasping for a message, but a perfect joy of being there when a bare island child, for the first time ever, drifted off from her parents and floated on her own.

Mile One

At the Mile One Centre in downtown St. John's the pop siren Avril Lavigne is holding a concert. All the young sex-clad revellers are out gathering their grapes. The glossy-lipped girls look wonderful waiting by the steps in their skimpiest outfits, tailbone tattoos peeking between the waists of their skirts and the hems of their tops. The backs of their thighs quiver when they walk. Their toenails are painted like candies. Not far from this action are the boys, of course. Pissed-sulky-cool in their baggy cargo shorts, collars popped, chains out. Cheap bling winking in the streetlight.

The girls stand in groups of threes and fours, stroking their hair, looking around, edgy as gazelles. The guys stand in groups of threes and fours, talking about weed, where to get weed, all the girls they'd like to screw.

One of the girl groups and one of the boy groups have come cautiously together. It is a meeting of expedition parties.

The boys have brought liquor in flasks and plastic water bottles. They are using the liquor as a kind of Christopher Columbus into the undiscovered country of promiscuity.

The booze has sailed the boys like the *Santa Maria* to the breezy new world of female companionship with all its tropical aromas and secret coves of fiercely-blue water shining with chandelier foam.

They take short vigorous swigs and pass the liquor to the girls, who take short delicate nips and fan the air in front of their mouths. The boys tease the girls who can't drink and the girls who can't drink laugh and drink some more. Do I remember this play?

Suddenly the first percussions of the opening act boom from inside. The start of the concert is like a signal calling all hands back to ship, but the boys don't want to go. They want to stay on the beach and get drunk with the girls and pass out in the sand beside their blazing white bonfire smiles.

The girls dash up the stairs in glittery heels, liquored and flushed. 'Where will you be after the concert?' they call back to the boys before they go inside.

'We don't know,' the boys shout back. 'We'll look for you! Hey!' But the girls are gone before the promise can reach them. They move like a wonderful night.

The boys hang by the steps wondering where their booze went and if there's still enough to get wasted. They look very young but a little older standing in the dawn of their new world with all the constellations vanished from the sky.

Why Go?

Critical Commentary for
How to Make White People Happy — A Short Story Collection

Introduction

How to Make White People Happy is a collection of forty-three autobiographical narratives that combine elements of travelogue, memoir, satire and personal essay. For reasons of space it has not been possible within this exegesis to provide an examination of each work, or to comprehensively articulate how each reflects and supports my approach to travel writing. In the following commentary, therefore, I confine myself to a discussion of several select narratives, focusing primarily on four topics: (1) the social and psychological impetuses that compel us toward the 'elsewhere'; (2) the domestic strains that precipitate wilful migration; (3) the occurrence of disillusionment and the schism between anticipation and actuality; (4) and the imaginative travel that occurs through guidebooks and other narrative media. In addition, the commentary examines the lives of several authors whose travel experiences exemplify the themes and ideas expressed in my collection, including Alain de Botton, Mark Twain, Gustave Flaubert, Henry Glassie, James Clifford and Charles Baudelaire.

There is also significant discussion of the narratological decisions involved in the construction of the collection. In Chapter Three, I offer a critical assessment of the use of humour in travel writing. Considering the narratives of Mark Twain and the work of sociologist John Urry, I discuss how humour is incorporated into my stories and how it may effectively and ineffectively be used in the practice of literary cultural representation. This point is further developed in Chapter Four, where I examine the use of satire in travel literature and the longstanding relationship between the two genres. I consider the research of Matthew Hodgart, his principles of satirical writing, the work of William H. Sherman, his survey of how early travel writers put the New World to paper, and again the authorial techniques of Mark Twain to demonstrate how elements of satire emerge in several of my narratives. In Chapter Five, attention is given to point of view and the distance I place between myself and those I am writing about. It is considered that while one cannot achieve

total objectivity when writing about foreign communities, certain steps may be taken toward the approach to limit the damage of exploitation and see through the veils held up for tourists. Further discussion is provided in Chapter Six of the methods through which the travel industry—specifically the adventure and guidebook market—endeavours to cast these veils, and how I act against such methods in my work. The thesis concludes with an overview of the collection as a complete narrative body, specifically: the manner in which I have chosen to arrange the stories, how I perceive the project’s overall identity, and the contribution that each chapter makes to the travel debate.

A few remarks about the thesis as a whole:

First, while nearly all stories in this collection explicitly focus on travel—both my own travel experiences and the experiences of others—there are a handful that approach this theme implicitly. In stories like ‘Something Californian’, ‘Play Date’ and ‘Housesitting’, for example, the nature of memory and moral growth are the central thematic forces, while the concept of travel is represented allusively through the manner in which characters deal with issues of displacement and their cultural identity.

Second, in my examination of Flaubert in Chapter One, Baudelaire in Chapter Two, and Twain in Chapter Three, focus is directed mainly toward their travel lives, rather than their travel writings. These sections investigate how each writer’s biography coincides with my own, with the purpose of more thoroughly investigating the universality of certain social and psychological responses I associate with the onset of the desire to travel. By comparing personal experience I am able to zero in on the matter of impetus, the essential and overriding theme in many of my narratives.

Finally, every reader will find one social group or another that has been omitted from this discussion. The nature of my creative project renders this situation unavoidable. Because this commentary addresses an autobiographical work, it is generally contained to a western-centric focus. As a middle-class Anglo-American, and as a transplant to Anglo-European

middle-class society, my understanding of the ‘travel condition’, ‘the modern tourist’, and the conceptual paraphernalia which surrounds these two are rooted in Western European and North American perspective. In referring predominantly to the attitudes, fantasies and aims of western travellers, I am not ascribing greater significance to western travel experience, but conceding that, at this juncture, my research is ill-equipped to critically interpret non-western perceptions of travel.

The remainder of this introduction will expound upon the nature of the creative element – its origins and organizing principles – and how the project operates as a body of work. I will further identify the principle concerns the following chapters address, and conclude with a brief explanation of my contributions to research and choice of reference material.

The Creative Element: Origins & Organizing Principles

As a child, it is easy to believe that after a full youth of sitting through school and studying texts we will acquire, along with our diplomas, a state of consciousness less infantile and unprepared than when we came squirming and wailing into the world. I have no memory of it whatsoever, but I can imagine my first day of school, being left trembling at the door of the classroom, sick with nerves and ignorance as my mother kissed my forehead and turned for the car. Two decades later, when I walked across the graduation stage and received my university diploma, my condition was hardly different. I knew disturbingly little about how the planet operated. Nothing insightful about economics, science or business; nothing special about retail, tools or computers. The world still boggled and daunted me to an astounding extent, and I was convinced—genuinely convinced—that the surest proof of how far civilization had come, and how surely it was destined to fail, was contained in the fact that someone like me had been able to obtain a college degree instead of starvation.

Terrible thing to live without self-assurance, to wonder from one morning to the next how the world will confound or intimidate you that day. You start to grasp at straws. You tamper with self-interpretations. You begin to tell yourself that you are not without potential or direction, not aimless or clueless; that this is a time for wild belief and uncharted adventure, where everything is under the sway of chance. You think about faraway places and what it might be like to visit them, even live in them, to migrate on your own impulse, perhaps on your own tab, unchaperoned and unobliged to follow any system that isn't your own. You imagine life on that pristine island, or along that romantic canal, or in the breast of that old Victorian seaport, and it isn't so much the vision of new surroundings that excites your soul, but the thought that you might divert your trajectory, elude the mundane work-a-day lifestyle that's been recruiting you for years, and which you know you've been perfectly calibrated to fulfil. You become intensely aware of your conventionality and what happens to convention people. They are destined to be placed, to serve customary functions, to fill general roles in working society that help to keep the great boring machine of civilization operating. Smack-dab in the prime of your youth it's the most unsettling thing you've ever realized.

Enter travel.

As a complete body of work, *How to Make White People Happy* is guided by three organizing principles. Chief among these is the belief that any act of wilful travel is, to some degree, a reaction against home, one that is galvanized by our exposure to, and acceptance of exemplars – emblematic depictions of far-off places and the journeying condition. Narratives such as 'Get Along Little Doggy', 'The Perfect Paris Day', and 'Discovery Channel', give the reader a look at the sense of banality and confinement that domestic life often induces among young middle-class adults, and how these feelings are inflamed over time and how they can lead to unreasonable expectations about how travel can improve our mental and physical condition. It is suggested that while travel is one way that we come to understand the role of

home in our lives – where we are from and why we have developed certain perceptions and habits – it is also a way of reacting against what is *already* understood, of reinforcing or enlarging feelings opposed to the familiar.

The project's second organizing principle is more cathartic. In documenting my travel experiences in Asia, North America and Europe, I use the autobiographical form as a means of reconciling previous attitudes and correcting cultural distortions. Growing up in America, misinformation about other races and countries was bombarded at me from all directions. Confronting this misinformation has been the single largest factor toward evolving as an independent mind and acquiring a deeper perspective. In turn, many of my narratives work off the idea that to achieve a meaningful change of human condition through travel, one must experience an accumulation of conceptual deaths. These continued departures from prior knowledge or belief form the basis of the traveller's emotional and ideological evolution.

And yet, we know that change is not always constructive. Travel books and tourist media are notorious for linking the journeying condition with the debut of the true self – a time where perspective is enlarged and identity determined. But what becomes of a traveller when foreign destinations fail to yield the professional or personal fulfilment he or she set out to find? Reflecting upon my own experiences and the experiences of others, this collection makes the point that for many western travellers, a prolonged life on the road becomes one of fragmented experiences deprived of any totalizing aim, a life where self-restraint is scarce and disillusionment pervasive.

Finally, it is worth restating that this creative project defies any single literary categorization. My life has been a malleable event. My attitudes, philosophies and interpretations have varied according to the nature of my journeys and the effect of my environments. Consolidating these journeys into a single unit of work is my attempt to create a reading experience that reflects the haphazard variety of the travel experience. Thus, while it is true that the collection itself fits inside the market of travel writing – or the more expansive

markets of short prose and autobiography – *within* the collection there is a broad diversity of genres in play. Some narratives are travelogues; some are coming-of-age pieces; many combine all of these elements, with the addition of another component – be it satire, docujournal, place writing, or observational humour.¹

Naturally, when choosing comparative material, I considered authors whose work and/or experience demonstrated a similar response to travel. A full discussion of these authors, as well as their impact on my writing practice, is provided in the following chapters.

The Critical Element: Main Concerns, Contributions to Research & Choice of Authors

I have thus far talked about the origins of the creative element and its organizing ideologies. In clarifying my intentions for the collection's effect on the reader as a cumulative whole, I have suggested that all voluntary travel is initiated to some degree by the traveller's dissatisfaction with domestic conditions. Moreover, I have indicated that the creative work, in its totality, reflects the variety and randomness of my travel life, serving a cathartic purpose as I try to make sense of my journeys and reconcile cultural misunderstandings. As a starting point into the critical commentary, I conclude this introduction by setting out the relevant questions my research addresses. The following list specifies in which chapter(s) I develop these concerns.

- **Chapter 1: Why Go?**
A consideration of middle-class travel and the extent to which images direct definitions of travel, as well as constrain and distort them. Principle questions: What skills of survival and interaction are universal in all our comings and goings? What empowerments and impetuses? Is there a core identity that comes with us wherever we go, and, if so, how is it maintained away from the environment where we were born?
- **Chapter 2: Anticipation and Actuality**
An exploration of the relationship between disillusionment and travel, with continued investigation of how fetishizations give rise to potentially harmful expectations. Principle questions: What stays the same when we travel? What is malleable? What is brought, physically and psychologically, from our home environment and how is it transformed by our new environment?

¹ This topic is basic to the discussion of my creative work and how I perceive its effect on the audience, and is discussed at greater length in the commentary's conclusion.

- **Chapter 3: Finding the Humour**
An examination of the use of humour in travelogues and certain techniques used by travel writers. Principle questions: Is humour an effective/appropriate means of cultural representation? How do travel authors escape the creative shackles imposed by political correctness while remaining respectful of racial and cultural difference?
- **Chapter 4: Satire and Travelogue**
A survey of satire in travel writing, with consideration of travel writing's longstanding congeniality toward the form. Principle questions: What has been the traditional role of satire in travelogue? How has it been effective? How does satire, which is born from a critical mentality, go from a state of mind to a work of art?
- **Chapter 5: Restricting the Self through Point of View**
An exposition of my choice to limit my presence in my autobiographical accounts, plus a survey of other writers who have employed a similar technique. Principle questions: Why might an author choose to be within a foreign environment, yet write as though he or she were without? What is gained by the travel writer (and by the travel reader) by remaining distant from the action?
- **Chapter 6: Writing Against the Imaginative Counterweight**
A look into the ethics of modern travel writing, with a focus on the confessional memoirs of writers Charles Thompson and Thomas Kohnstamm. Principle questions: What are the formulas and practices by which some travel authors manipulate their audience? Why are these practices unethical and potentially dangerous to the reader?
- **Conclusion: Overview and Final Comments**
A final discussion of the creative component and the range of materials and concerns that have been addressed. Principle topics: What has the creative work achieved? How has the commentary contextualized it? How have the narratives been arranged and why? How has each chapter contributed to the critical thesis?

Furthermore, in this exegesis I offer two pertinent contributions to the travel writing debate. In my analysis of my narrative strategy in Chapter Five, I introduce the concept of the peripheral autobiography. The argument is made that because most contemporary travel writing foregrounds the author's point of view, most readers learn more about the writer than the place being written about, perpetuating gaps in knowledge that prevent full cultural understanding. Referring to samples of my work, in which I choose to remain relatively apart from the characters and action I am reporting about, I propose the need for modern travelogue to more aggressively separate the inner journey from the outer one, and to regain some of its informed objectivism of the 18th century.

Secondly, in my analysis of Chuck Thompson and Thomas Kohnstamm in Chapter Six, I make the claim that deceptive or reckless travelogues put readers in real danger. I suggest that while most of us expect some manner of contrivance when we engage a text, it is likewise expected that no text will go out of its way to compromise our well-being. This is the unwritten pact between writer and reader. In my support of this idea, I consider Alain de Botton's concept of the 'imaginative counterweight', a formula whereby travel writers hyper-exoticize foreign destinations so that their images becomes the opposite of the domestic condition. Ultimately, I make the argument that this technique constitutes unethical travel writing because it makes it harder for readers to anticipate other cultural landscapes as a diverse experience, and thus prepare for those difficult points of intersection that travel inevitably forces upon us.

I would like to finish this introduction by articulating the reason behind my choice of reference material, and by addressing the relationship between these materials and my creative work. In the following chapters I make considerable use of historic authors to contextualize my choices and techniques as a travel author – specifically, the lives and ideas of Gustave Flaubert, Charles Baudelaire and Mark Twain. Although these writers are not my contemporaries, and although their modes of travel differ from my own, their approaches and responses to travel, and the psychological conditions that galvanize their journeys, are closely connected to mine, and are thus relevant to the conceptualization my work. Again, focusing on how each writer's biography coincides with aspects of my experience as a traveller enables me to more incisively investigate, and ultimately communicate, the nature of my narratives and themes.

There are, of course, some challenges associated with referencing historic travel authors who are separated from the present-day travel condition by over a century. One question is the extent to which practical advancements affect the validity of cross-generational comparisons. Anyone relying on historic texts to illuminate his or her contemporary travel

experience will be somewhat dogged by the contrast of circumstances. Certainly travel is a substantially different experience than it was during the 19th century. The emergence of commercial aviation has not only standardized the method of international transit, but also certain services and amenities. Numerous lodgings, restaurants and consumer products have become globally ubiquitous since the onset of the 20th century. In turn, the act of travel, particularly for the middle-class, has become a more predictable and controlled activity. In Flaubert, Baudelaire and Twain's time, however, a trip abroad was as much an odyssey as it was a tour. Terrific distances were overcome in weeks by ship, not in hours by plane, and it was no safe bet (unlike today) that vessels would reach their ports in the face of the tempest. Modern comforts could be in short supply; in-country travel was routinely slow, complicated and laborious over poorly-constructed roads. For travellers of the 19th century, who were commonly part of the male elite, a journey abroad was also undertaken to discipline the senses and cultivate aesthetic sensibilities. A primary motivation was to demonstrate deep intellectual and emotional receptivity to the wonders of the beaten track, rather than to simply 'see' them or acquire exotic experience.² Indeed, circumstances have changed. And in forming comparisons between the approaches and motivations of the modern traveller (myself) and those of travellers from the distant past, I recognize the relevance of these practical differences and the legitimacy of the concern as to what extent historic travel accounts can be used to define modern work.

However, it is also the objective of this exegesis to show that in terms of impetus, disillusionment and responding to adversity (three central considerations in my creative project), not much has changed at all. Shadows of Flaubert's yearning for mobility, Baudelaire's disappointment with exotic adventure, and Twain's perspective on cultural immersion and the rigors of travel, are everywhere in my narratives. My literary comparisons

² Ginette Verstraete, 'Heading for Europe: Tourism and the Global Itinerary of an Idea', in *Mobilizing Place, Placing Mobility: The Politics of Representation in a Globalized World*, ed. by Ginette Verstraete and Tim Cresswell (The Netherlands: Rodopi Bv Editions, 2003), pp. 33-52 (p.41).

are thus made because of the connection I see between these authors' attitudes and what I am doing in the creative work.

Chapter 1: Why Go?

Mark Twain, the great peripatetic, believed that travel was essential to goodness.

‘Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one’s little corner of the earth all one’s life,’ he famously wrote.³ It’s a quote that’s become a call-to-arms in American globetrotter culture; an inspiring, ethical, noble-minded reason to never be satisfied with the horizons of home, never settle for the monotonous or familiar, but to bravely and exuberantly drop everything and go. Anywhere. Any place at all. So long as it’s new and away.

And yet breaking it down step by step, what sensible person wouldn’t think twice about striking out for the imperfectly known? The hassles are costly and numerous. Anxiety is inevitably high. We spend hours probing the Internet for bargains and deals, frisking travel sites for the cheapest fare, the timeliest departure, the quickest arrival. We fuss about baggage. What can we take? What fluids are allowed? Are my nail clippers a weapon? If we are leaving for a long stretch, we fret about not packing enough. If we are leaving for a short stretch, we stress about packing more than we need. If an exotic destination is involved, so too are visa arrangements, vaccinations, malaria pills. Certainly the airport is no waltz in the park. We are consumed by the haste, confused by the signage, flustered by the tense and nervous thrust through security, the panicky manner in which everybody must strip off their shoes and cram their belongings into bins. We stand on a cold dirty floor in our most embarrassing socks, waiting for a grumpy lummoX to wave us into a pneumatic x-ray tube so another grumpy lummoX can monitor our nether regions. Then there is the flight. Hours of boredom and discomfort. Cramped seating, babes shrieking, spasms of heart-stopping turbulence, wafts of face-scrunching flatulence, and the inevitable drink trolley blockade just as nature calls.

³ Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad* (United States: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 650.

When we get to our destination we don't know where we are; we don't know how much things should cost; maybe we don't speak the language. The customs elude us. The unfamiliarity disorients us. We are at the mercy of locals whose eyes light up like jackpot sirens when they see a foreigner; and, sensing this, we are naturally restive and unsure, mistrusting of anyone's approach. When our trip is complete we must do it all in reverse: the packing, the airport, the flight, the arrival. To the strictly logical observer it would indeed seem a ritual of lunacy. From the minute we walk out the door, to the minute we come home, we are bombarded with inconveniences. So the question, however simplistic, is critically pertinent: Why go?

There is, of course, no single answer to this. There are as many reasons to travel as there are places to explore. Twain first left home out of sheer envy, coveting his brother's footloose adventure across the American West and resolving to tag along.⁴ Gustave Flaubert first left home out of sheer frustration, despising to his deepest blood the suffocating boredom of civilized France.⁵ Some travel is ordinary: a drive across the county to visit relatives. Some travel is sacred: a pilgrimage to a holy land. There is travel for leisure and travel for business; travel for ceremony and for service. At the moment a Somali refugee journeys to Kenya, fleeing famine and conflict. In Myanmar a Rohingya Muslim departs for Bangladesh, escaping communal violence. And at the same time these dire migrations occur, a married woman in suburban Baltimore, unloved and too long unappreciated by her husband, drives quietly across the city to the home of her attentive lover. Our travels are political and cultural; they are deeply personal. They are real with big suitcases and printed tickets, and they are in our minds—a vivacious flight of fancy while we scrub our plates at the kitchen sink or wallow in our cubicle on a slow afternoon. The multiplicity of modes, routes, reasons and participants is endless.

⁴ Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (United States: Digital Scanning, US, 2001), pp. 19-20.

⁵ Gustave Flaubert, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert: 1830-1857*, trans. and ed. by Francis Steegmuller (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 30.

Because *How to Make White People Happy* is an autobiographical work, the following chapters will exclude all but a fraction of that enormous multiplicity and focus principally on the social group to which I belong and have most intimately observed during my travels: the western middle-class. As a sociological term, ‘western’ typically refers to those cultures derived from and influenced by European cultures; ‘middle-class’ to the social group intermediate between the aristocracy and underprivileged—professional and business workers and their families. More conceptually, however, I use ‘western middle-class’ to allude to what is often depicted in pop culture or viewed through mainstream perspective as the distinctly average: that expansive social stratum less definable by its ancestry or income than by its herd-like characteristics and values; specifically, its inclination toward social convention, its concern for material comfort, and its emphasis on the accumulation of human capital and savings.

For some critics, this definition prefaces specific issues in relation to travel and the construction of western notions about what travel means and why it should be done. Religions scholar Alex Norman points to aspects of sociocultural identity in his discussion of spiritual practice in western society, noting that travel activity, particularly the touristic kind, validates middle-class ideals of financial freedom and consumerism, two driving forces in that cultural arena.⁶ In their survey of contemporary travel writing, *Tourists with Typewriters*, Holland and Huggan further argue that it is perhaps all too natural for western middle-class individuals to want to travel and acquire exotic cultural experiences, given their alignment with so many modern travel writers who deal in the retail of predominantly white, nostalgic, middle-class views of the ‘other’.⁷ Definitions aside, however, to these and other critics it is self-evident that middle-class travellers ‘strike out’ for qualitatively different reasons than other travellers;

⁶ Alex Norman, *Spiritual Tourism: Travel and Religious Practice in Western Society* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2011), p. 93.

⁷ Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. viii.

reasons represented in my stories by the way characters interact with landscapes and cultures, the way they situate themselves spatially, and why they go in the first place.

Writing of a richly-illustrated tourist brochure in *The Art of Travel*, philosopher Alain de Botton notes how easily any one of us might be ‘turned into prey’ by a mere photograph of an exotic locale.⁸ Luxuriant beaches, botanical pavilions, cavorting locals—to Botton, the producers of such visions possess a dark understanding: the ability to intuit the banality and constraint of conventional first-world existence. The images they circulate insult the intelligence, contravene notions of free will, and elicit a longing that is at once a ‘touching and bathetic’ example of how our lives may be influenced or outright coerced by ‘the simplest and most unexamined images of happiness; of how a lengthy and ruinously expensive journey might be set into motion by nothing more than the sight of a photograph of a palm tree gently inclining in a tropical breeze’.⁹

American author Jack London put it another way. ‘The finest specimens now in existence were once all pulpy infants capable of being moulded this way or that,’ he wrote. ‘Let the pressure be one way and we have atavism—the reversion to the wild; the other—domestication and civilization’.¹⁰ A devoted traveller and naturalist, London was fascinated by what he called the ‘awful plasticity of life.’¹¹ Every organic being was inherently malleable, he contended. Every organism reacted to conditions. When conditions were ideal the organism flourished. When conditions were adverse it weakened and suffered. When the environment became unacceptable (assuming it had the capacity to do so), it moved.

But if travel is to be foregrounded as a reflexive practice, a physical reaction to the emotional pricks and jabs of our environment, then the role of home, too, needs to be

⁸ Alain de Botton, *The Art of Travel* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁰ Charmaine London, *The Book of Jack London, Volume II* (New York: The Century Co., 1921), pp. 49-50, in *The World of Jack London* <http://www.jacklondon.net/writings/BookJackLondon/Volume2/chapter26.html> [Accessed 8 February 2016]

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

reconceived—no longer simply ‘a place’ from which the traveller departs and to which he or she returns, but also a sustained incidence of antagonizing stimuli, a source of spiritual inflammation in which the only effective salve becomes the elsewhere. It is this dream of the elsewhere, of worldliness and mobility, that provides, as Botton puts it, ‘an imaginative counterweight to feelings of stagnation and confinement’.¹² And it is, in turn, these endemic psychological strains that travel agencies and tourism promoters often tap into and exploit, constructing in the process tantalizing narratives that yoke the journeying condition with personal renaissance. Travel is not just leisure; it is self-improvement, an activity through which consciousness may be expanded and perspective refreshed. Escape, mobility, renewal, release—these critical human needs are made urgent to the viewer through the exaltation of a destination’s most desirable qualities, lending fantastic power to the dubitable hope that what is wrong with our lives is the result of where we are. Or, more accurately perhaps, where we are not.

There is an enormous body of literature on the subject of why we travel. Yet as Rebecca Solnit suggests in her profoundly intricate book, *Wanderlust*, the answer to this question depends on a vast range of cultural and individual factors, and is one that readily wanders ‘into religion, philosophy, landscape, urban policy, anatomy, allegory, and heartbreak.’¹³

Solnit begins with a question of origins. Where does it start – our compulsion to wander? For her, the answer is walking – the simple expedient of putting one foot in front of the other. It is an appropriate starting concept for this commentary, for in Solnit’s painstaking inquiry into the history and nature of bipedal movement, the fundamental questions of *why* we travel, *how* we travel, and *what* we achieve when we travel (questions that form the core of my creative work) are considered in the same way that I have considered them: as matters almost

¹² Botton, p. 37.

¹³ Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (United States: Viking Penguin, 2000), p. 3.

exclusively determined by the kind of ‘pleasure, freedom and meaning’ that the traveller is searching for.¹⁴

Equally relevant to the discussion of my creative work are several points presented by Yi-Fu Tuan in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Tuan begins his discussion of the human experience with a short, huge question: What is home?¹⁵ Like walking is to Solnit, home for Tuan is a common experience that, when interpreted deeply, raises issues one may never have thought existed. Tuan proposes that it is space and place which make up the basic components of human perspective. ‘Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other.’¹⁶

When thinking about the emotions that gave momentum to my travels, I am drawn to this idea: the thought of how home was at once a *place* of obvious value – of sustenance, shelter and familial support – and a *space* I came to resent, one that seemed to stifle the expansion of my consciousness and hold me back from meaningful growth. Indeed, how the desire for attachment and stability represses the middle-class, and how the desire for release and mobility propels it, is a central theme in my writing. Yet it wasn’t until I came across the travel notes of one of literature’s most celebrated novelists that a critical understanding of this issue began to take form.

In *The Art of Travel*, Botton depicts a young Gustave Flaubert, ‘whose greatest wish was to leave Rouen, become a camel driver in Egypt and lose his virginity in a harem to an olive-skinned woman with a trace of down on her upper lip’.¹⁷ Flaubert, like many adolescents, struggled to tolerate the boredom and petty civic activities that defined his day-to-day life.¹⁸ He shuddered at the thought of his native France, with its placid innovations and stupid aristocracy. He scorned the blandness of his neighbours, the predictability of their lives, and

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁵ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p. 3.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁷ Alain de Botton, *The Art of Travel* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 71.

¹⁸ Gustave Flaubert, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert: 1830-1857*, trans. and ed. by Francis Steegmuller (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 9.

derided the meaning of his own life, which he found sterile, toilsome, incapacitated. His mind was full of hostile melodrama. ‘Often I’d like to be able to blow the heads off passers-by,’ he confessed in his journal. ‘I am bored, I am bored, I am bored.’¹⁹

For the sensual young romantic, civilized France was a fist gradually closing around him, crushing the life from his sensibility. He felt chained to a world that was nothing spectacular, to a life and community that could disappear without much difference to anyone, and the dream of elsewhere, in the garb of the fabled ‘Orient’, was his release. In the autumn of 1849, at the age of 28, Flaubert set out for the shores of Egypt. The narrative drawn from his notes and letters reveals an enthusiasm that soars far beyond a flippant hankering for the picturesque. Flaubert consumed his new surroundings ‘like a donkey filling himself with hay.’²⁰ He wrote rapaciously of bazaars and brothels, of Cairo and the Nile, of the sacred Red Sea. In correspondence with friends he exuded a rhapsodic energy.

‘What can I say about it all? What can I write you? As yet I am scarcely over the initial bedazzlement. It is like being hurled while still asleep into the midst of a Beethoven symphony, with the brasses at their most ear-splitting, the basses rumbling, and the flutes sighing away; each detail reaches out to grip you; it pinches you; and the more you concentrate on it the less you grasp the whole.’²¹

Flaubert’s record of that journey would be reconstructed (largely by the efforts of Francis Steegmuller) as a defining portrait of his formative years. But it is the author’s pre-Egypt languishing that is most relevant to my writing. No story in my creative thesis was inspired by Flaubert’s life. However, my introduction to his background opened new doors to interpreting my work, helping me to define the identity of certain stories that seemed born from similar provocations and emotions. The third piece in the collection, ‘Discovery Channel,’ is one such story.

¹⁹ Flaubert, cited in Botton, p. 72.

²⁰ Gustave Flaubert, *Flaubert in Egypt*, trans. and ed. by Francis Steegmuller (United Kingdom: Penguin Classics, 1996), p. 29.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

Set in a Super 8 motel in suburban California, the story recounts a block of Discovery Channel programming that aired one night while I was a guest. The piece is comprised of six scenes. Each of the first five scenes provides a nutshell synopsis of a different program. Program one features a pod of Orca whales that have learned to kill for sport; program two talks about new eradication technology in the US military; the third program examines radical monkeys in India; the fourth documents dead civilian bodies polluting the Tigris, while the last program investigates widespread disease in ferret colonies in South Dakota. The story's final scene, the only one in which the narrator appears, is a reflection on the evening's content and the powerful sense of longing it has aroused.

At its most basic description 'Discovery Channel' is a portrait of domestic strain: an exploration into the pressure of feeling unexceptional in experience, and how such pressure can engender a fanatical attraction to the exotic. Like Flaubert, the young narrator is lost and disaffected, bored by life and everything he knows about it. He is desperate for someplace different, a place thoroughly and entrancingly foreign—foreign from top to bottom—a destination where the gruelling normalcy of life will fall to pieces and the pattern of average experience will flutter like the needle of a Richter scale. The feeling reaches a boiling point in the insipid lonesomeness of a cruddy motel room when, through a succession of popular science programming, he becomes hyper-sensitive to his privileged condition. In a time when his life feels as relevant as a gum wrapper, even the sorrow of people dredging the Tigris for Sunni and Shia corpses, or suffering the hostilities of killer rhesus macaques, produces a stirring effect. Such experiences are interesting. Their participants know adversity. Adversity gives birth to perspective, perspective to depth, depth to something meaningful to say—a voice worth listening to.

This concept of domestic strain factors heavily into much of my work. 'Tenement Abroad', 'Get Along Little Doggy', 'First Impression' and the title story 'How to Make White People Happy' each feature a narrator wrestling with the values, identity or perceived

inadequacies of western middle-class culture. The underlying focus of ‘Discovery Channel’, however, is how this strain effectively takes hold of the mind. From where does it gain its power and grip? How is that power reinforced over time?

The narrative of Flaubert’s Egyptian journey may suggest a partial answer to these questions. Sailing from Marseilles, the young author was on top of the world. He spent his time socializing with officers, smoking cigars with the captain, promenading the deck with the cocksure airs of a great naval hero.²² When the sun went down he watched the sea and daydreamed. All his life he had gorged his brain on stories from *Arabian Nights*, on Hugo’s *Les Orientales*, and on the memoirs of beloved companion Maxime du Camp, *Souvenirs et Paysages d’Orient*.²³ For Flaubert, Egypt was a cherished homeland he had never seen. Soon enough he would be where he belonged, smoking long pipes and drinking coffee on divans. From his last sight of Provence to his first sight of Alexandria, shimmering hot and silver against the blue Mediterranean, he fixed his mind upon the same meditations and precious visions that had been with him since boyhood. Cleopatra’s baths! Pompey’s column! Sunsets at Luxor!

The decision to travel (not to be confused with the obligation or need) is always, to some degree, a decision against home; a refusal on the part of the traveller to be bound—if only for a short time—to the reality of the familiar. This reaction might be galvanized by a number of issues, but it tends to be most vigorously encouraged by what we see and hear of other places. However willingly and joyfully Flaubert might have engaged the travel literature of Hugo, du Camp, or other authors of the Romantic Age, his experience yet signifies the kind of latent victimization Botton describes in his assessment of the garish travel brochure. The motives for his journey to Egypt may have been immediate (heartbreak, family discord,

²² This is how Flaubert describes himself in letters to Madame Flaubert, his mother. Maxime Du Camp, in his memoir of the same voyage, paints a different portrait. ‘I cannot say that Flaubert had no recurrence of his melancholy,’ he recalls. ‘He stood for a long time leaning against the rail, gazing at the coast of Provence as it gradually disappeared into the fog.’

²³ Gustave Flaubert, *Flaubert in Egypt*, trans. and ed. by Francis Steegmuller (United Kingdom: Penguin Classics, 1996), p. 11.

boredom) but they may also be said to have been historical, the result of a lifelong exposure to visions of the Orient.

‘Discovery Channel’ is predicated on this type of experience. It is less concerned with the act of travel (in fact, no physical travel ever occurs in the story) than how images of the cultural ‘other’ disturb and persuade us. In his book *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, James Clifford reminds us that conceptual definitions use a prototype, such as a visual image, ‘to define a core against which variants are evaluated.’²⁴ Clifford’s focus is anthropologic (the role of travel and physical displacement in the constitution of fieldwork) and he uses celebrated photographs of Bronislaw Malinowski and Margaret Mead as examples of mental images that orient public perspective regarding anthropological field methods.²⁵

Clifford’s argument that images not only direct definitions, but constrain and distort them, is more than loosely relatable to a discussion of travel impetus among the western middle-class. A BBC exclusive on polar exploration, for example, or a National Geographic front page photo of Buzz Aldrin standing on the lunar surface, will make it strange to believe that a holiday trip to the in-laws on the other side of the county constitutes an act of travel—even if what is actually occurring is the voluntary practice of leaving home to visit a relatively unknown place. Images materialize concepts, notes Clifford, producing ideas (in this case, ideas of place) that may seem sharp and attractive from a distance, but ultimately blur the closer one gets.²⁶ Approaching the story from this angle, ‘Discovery Channel’ could be taken to suggest that a fixation with exotic travel and a resentment toward domestic life are both significantly rooted in exposure to exemplars. Just as a dog may seem like a desirable pet when we see a handsome, sportive retriever bounding happily along in a pet food ad, so might certain images of exemplary destinations and cultures anchor our dissatisfaction with the local

²⁴ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (United States: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 54.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²⁶ Clifford, pp. 55-57.

and known. Confronted with exemplars like Botton's travel brochure, domestic intracultural experience may seem less like 'real' or relevant experience.

The aim of 'Discovery Channel' is to evoke in western readers the sensation of being 'hooked'. Eschewing transparency, the story deliberately withholds the narrator's appearance until the final scene. Prior to this, readers have no knowledge of who is speaking or why they are reading synopses of random television programs. They are, in effect, sitting alone in a dreary budget hotel room in suburban America, watching cable television. By allowing readers to 'possess' the point of view of the narrator and encounter exotic dramas wildly distinct from those of conventional western life, the story induces a more powerful connection with the experience of being seduced by the elsewhere.

There is of course no reason to believe that Flaubert—top of the world though he may have been—was painting the picture of his Egyptian journey exactly as it was unfolding. Enrichment through exclusion is a natural element of writing, and any literary travel account inevitably contains severe abbreviations of what reality will force upon us. 'Anticipatory and artistic imaginations omit and compress,' Botton notes. 'They cut away the periods of boredom and direct our attention to critical moments and, without either lying or embellishing, lend to life a vividness and coherence that it may lack in the distracting wooliness of the present'.²⁷

Yet if we intuit that the reality of our travels will not be what we anticipate, rarely does that intuition seem to get the better of our desire or prevent us from taking flight. Perhaps it is partly a matter of one emotion suppressing another, of disappointment with present conditions overmatching our fear of looming adversity. Who in the throes of a drab existence could fail to identify, at some point or another, with that sullen opening passage from *Moby Dick*? There along the wharves of Manhattan stands brooding young Ishmael, adrift in his youth, gripped

²⁷ Botton, p. 15.

by ennui, his restless soul professing its longing for the sea, its desire to flee the grey stagnation of New England and the flattening conventions of life.

‘Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can’.²⁸

For Ishmael, the act of travel was a way of ‘driving off the spleen and regulating the circulation.’ It was a substitute for ‘pistol and ball.’²⁹ And just as it felt to Ishmael and to young Gustave Flaubert, so it has often felt to me. The idea of the elsewhere has been an elixir for disillusionment, an antidote to feeling dejected all the time. In this chapter I have indicated the commonality of this sentiment among voluntary travellers, while also acknowledging the host of singularly personal and disparate reasons that trigger one’s travel impulse. I have particularly considered the travel motive of the western middle-class and suggested how exotic notions of travel serve as an imaginative counterweight to feelings of restricted domesticity, and how these notions might be intuited by the travel industry and implicitly or explicitly exploited. Through the travel writings of Gustave Flaubert and the work of Alain de Botton and James Clifford, I have discussed the formal strategies behind my story ‘Discovery Channel’ and its use of travel exemplars to show how western middle-class experience becomes devalued in the eyes of the western traveller. In the next chapter I continue my discussion on western middle-class travel, with a focus on poet Charles Baudelaire, the schism between anticipation and actuality, and the problem of travel disillusionment.

²⁸ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (Toronto: Random House Publishing Group, 1981), p. 17.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Chapter 2: Anticipation and Actuality

I have articulated my choice of critical and contextual texts in my Introduction. I have stated, in addition, my rationale for the comparisons I make between my narratives (which are contemporary) and the materials I reference (which are largely historic), pointing directly to the connection I feel between certain authors' responses to travel and what I am doing in my creative work. As a starting point for Chapter 2, I would like to add to the framework of this discussion by further clarifying the reason behind my focus on Charles Baudelaire, whose early travel experiences have proven useful in the contextualization of my work on the schism between anticipation and reality: what we hope our journeys will entail, and what they are actually like.

Baudelaire's impetus to leave France is in close alignment with the impetuses that compelled Gustave Flaubert, as well as those that prefaced my own desire to leave the United States. However, unlike Flaubert, Baudelaire's initial foray abroad was fraught with confusion, disorientation, boredom, sensations of displacement, and deep malaise. Indeed, several of my narratives make a concerted effort to trace the psychological implications of the 'failed' journey – of travel that does not fulfil the traveller. 'Get Along Little Doggy', 'Banjar Anthology' and 'The Perfect Paris Day' (the central comparison in this chapter) are all driven by this theme. Looking at samples of Baudelaire's work, and taking from scholar FWJ Hemmings' comprehensive examination of the poet's early life, one finds clear evidence of how failed expectations can obscure a traveller's positive receptivity of a new destination. With a focus on Baudelaire's rejection of travel's rigors, this chapter reveals how the concept of negative receptivity operates in my writing, and how it directs my decision-making in terms of characterization and narrative technique.

*

In the summer of 1839, a morose, inward, eighteen year old Charles Baudelaire found himself stuck in a spiritual cul-de-sac. Like his contemporary Gustave Flaubert, the burgeoning poet had developed a severe disinclination toward his native France, where he felt at odds with his education, diseased with ordinariness, and ‘eternally solitary’.³⁰ He had recently earned his baccalaureate, yet felt drawn in no special direction, uncommitted to any choice of career. In letters to his mother he complained about a monstrous apathy.

‘I’m worse than I was at school. At school I didn’t concern myself with what went on in class, but still I paid some attention; — when I was expelled, that shook me, but still I found a few things to occupy myself with under your roof; — but now *nothing, nothing*, and it’s not a sweet poetic indolence but a glum, stupid idleness’.³¹

Captivated by the prominence of Hugo and Lamartine, Baudelaire would gravitate to Paris and the company of others who shared his literary passion. Yet in Baudelaire’s time the perception of literary artists was, in general, not a respectable one. Writers were seen as deadbeat bohemians. Those who didn’t drink themselves to death or overdose on laudanum were apt to die in public wards, disgraced and obscure.³² Thus, when Baudelaire defied family expectations and announced literature as a career, his mother and stepfather panicked. Desperate to separate him from the sumptuous vice and ‘evil acquaintances’ that had incited this tragic life choice, they booked Charles on a passage to India, where it was hoped that he would at last rise above his black moods, shake his neurotic depression (what Baudelaire would later call the *spleen*), and realize the benefit of a stable middle-class existence.³³

Obliged though he might have been, Baudelaire was at first receptive to the arrangement. As a boy he had fantasized about the prospect of setting out on a great journey abroad—an ecstasy and anticipation that would thrive in him all his days and manifest in much of his work, as it does in the prose poem ‘Le Port’:

³⁰ Botton, p. 33.

³¹ FWJ Hemmings, *Baudelaire the Damned*, (New York: Scribner Book Company, 1982), p. 28.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

‘The slender shapes of the ships with their complicated rigging, to which the surge lends harmonious oscillations, serve to sustain within the soul the taste of rhythm and beauty. And above all, for the man who no longer possesses either curiosity or ambition, there is a kind of mysterious and aristocratic pleasure in contemplating, while lying on the belvedere or resting his elbows on the jetty head, all these movements of men who are leaving and men who are returning, of those who still have still the strength to form wishes, the desire to travel or to enrich themselves.’³⁴

But on that maiden excursion all anticipation for travel faded quickly to a death when, upon sailing out of Bordeaux, Baudelaire took inventory of his fellow excursionists and discovered that he was ‘doomed for the next three months to enjoy no society more lively than that of a small group of businessmen and army officers’.³⁵ Confined to the company of middling professionals, repelled by the insipid conversations and silly coarseness of the sailors, the poet met at once with a crippling disillusionment. Life on board a small ship was systematically monotonous, oppressively cramped, and passing through the tropics it was abysmally uncomfortable. One evening the ship was nearly destroyed by a violent storm, and for two weeks afterward the voyage was delayed on Mauritius while damages were repaired. There was no gainsaying the lush, palm-fringed exoticism that now enclosed him; but the island was too removed from civilization, and what cultural life it offered was only a scant reflection of that of Paris.³⁶ Unable to shake his lassitude and gloom, and convinced that India would do him no better, Baudelaire insisted on sailing back to France. His great trip, which he had dreamt would be so stunning, so splendid, so filled with mystery and adventure, had amounted to a flop. After years of begrudging France its tiresome conditions and stifling routines, the young poet was homesick for it all.

The story of Baudelaire’s first journey abroad gives shape to the sense of malaise the ‘everyday’ often instils in creative personalities. It also gives evidence of how that condition might be neutralized (at least initially) by dreams of distant excursions and the hope of

³⁴ Charles Baudelaire, ‘The Port’, *Twenty Prose Poems*, trans. Michael Hamburger, (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988), p. 65.

³⁵ Hemmings, p. 37.

³⁶ Hemmings, p. 39.

someplace else. More pertinent to the following discussion, however, Baudelaire's example provides a reminder that emotional fulfilment is by no means an automatic outcome of travel. Whatever our human condition may or may not be, it is certainly something that is portable. What we are comes with us wherever we go. In pointing to Baudelaire's voyage my purpose is to emphasize the schism between our anticipation of travel and its actuality, and to identify a parallel between Baudelaire's experience and my own notions of travel disillusionment, as expressed in the story 'The Perfect Paris Day'.

Gloria Chabowska is a doting housewife in the heart of the Canadian prairie. A tepid, regimented, quiche-baking homebody, she accepts her vanilla existence with good humour, conceding little interest in the exotic destinations that lie beyond her household. When her husband unexpectedly passes away, however, she becomes an emotional suspect to her daughters, who stress about her mental health and the onset of depression. As a surprise gift they arrange to send Gloria on a vacation to France, resorting to ridicule and guilt-tripping when she tries to refuse. Bullied by her daughters' belief that an escapade will cure all, pressured by the money they have spent on the trip, Gloria embarks upon a week-long journey through Paris, where the city's aesthetic and material splendour is rendered irrelevant by terrible weather, unpleasant locals, and other unforeseen rigors.³⁷

Narrated with absurdist flair, the story is both a droll lampoon on western escapism and a serious probe into the nature of receptivity—the process in which intervals of stimulus enhance or negate our appreciation of place. I have indicated in the previous chapter that travel is at least part of the way we come to understand the role of home in our lives: where we are from and why we have developed certain sensibilities and habits. But it is also a way—as the travel motives of Flaubert and Baudelaire suggest—of reacting against what is *already* understood, of reinforcing or enlarging feelings, fantasies, hankerings or illusions opposed to the familiar. So writes Baudelaire:

³⁷ I return to this story in Chapter 5 and explain further why I have chosen to remain absent in the narrative and why it still constitutes a personal travelogue despite being told through the perspective of another traveller.

It seems to me that I would always be better off where I am not, and this question of moving is one that I discuss incessantly with my soul.³⁸

In their article *The Trouble with Tourism and Travel Theory*, Franklin and Crang speak of an emergent race of western travellers who are no longer restricted in ways of seeing and sensing the world, but who are rather ‘alerted to, and routinely excited by, the flows of global cultural material all around them in a range of locations and settings’.³⁹ Casually taking in these flows of advertising and publicity—which from one day to the next might involve anything from a neighbour’s travel blog about European castles, to a primetime cable show that follows celebrities to the world’s sexiest beaches—it is particularly difficult, perhaps impossible, to grasp the complete extent or character of a destination, or to form a grounded vision of a cultural landscape as a multifaceted experience.⁴⁰ It is this idea that forms the conceptual foundation of ‘The Perfect Paris Day’.

If our disappointment with another place or culture derives from invalid expectations, then the power of that disappointment stands in direct proportion to the degree in which we have assumed or overlooked a reality. In Gloria’s case no serious inquiry into the long-famed Paris ‘experience’ is ever initiated. Neither she nor her daughters make a concerted effort to confirm popular assumptions. Paris is simply the City of Light. It is the birthplace of the beloved quiche, home of the Eifel Tower, custodian of the finest art and most sophisticated culture. The romantic generalities, hammered into their imaginations by pictures on travel calendars and years of idyllic cultural material, reduce and narrow their conceptions; and although Gloria is ultimately coerced into the trip, she is nonetheless saturated by these unconfirmed virtues of place, thus opening the door to an equivalent saturation of disillusionment when the trip begins to sour.

³⁸ Charles Baudelaire, ‘Anywhere Out of the World’, in *Paris Spleen: Little Poems in Prose* (or *Le Spleen de Paris Petits Poemes*), trans. and ed. by Keith Waldrop (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010).

³⁹ Adrian Franklin and Mike Crang, ‘The Trouble with Tourism and Travel Theory’, *Tourist Studies*, 1(2001), 5-22, (p. 8).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8-9.

Carrer describes this same issue in his book *Atlas of Cursed Places*. He argues that as consumers we ought to be far more wary than we are of exhilarating travel copy and cultural mirages, for they are created mostly by professionals in the tourist industry, ‘a body of people gripped by the mysterious conviction that their clients are incapable of being interested in the reality of the country they long to visit, and that they therefore have to be sold as fantastic a vision of it as possible’.⁴¹ Indeed readers of ‘The Perfect Paris Day’ will probably deduce that Gloria has, in fact, been sold, and that her desire to remain in Winnipeg is rooted in a preference for domesticity rather than a negative premonition about her destination. However intimidated by the travel process, Gloria embarks for Paris with positive preconceptions, unaware that she is headed to a place as celebrated for its disappointments as it is for its attractions, a city artistically and clinically recognized for provoking steep emotional freefalls in many of its visitors.⁴²

In fact, one might safely wager that every sumptuous feature for which Paris is conventionally hyped—its people, its architecture, its society, its art—has been, at some point, denounced or contested by one artist or another. James Baldwin remarked that it was ‘perfectly possible to be enamoured of Paris while remaining totally indifferent or even hostile to the French’.⁴³ Maupassant reviled the Eiffel Tower, calling it a ‘giant and disgraceful skeleton’ and regularly dining in its restaurant so that he wouldn’t have to look at it.⁴⁴ Orwell recorded murders, rapes, swindles and filth in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, the utter and slavish abjection of Paris’s working poor. And when Mark Twain visited the Louvre and looked upon its miles of boring paintings by legendary masters, he saw

⁴¹ Olivier Le Carrer, *Atlas of Cursed Places: A Travel Guide to Dangerous and Mysterious Locations* (United States: Black Dog and Leventhal Publishers, 2015), p. 98.

⁴² Gloria’s reaction shares a symptomatic connection with Paris syndrome, a psychiatric disorder exhibited by some non-European foreigners while traveling in Paris or other places in Western Europe. Viewed casually as a severe form of culture shock, and professionally as a severe ‘reaction to’ culture shock, the condition has been linked to language barrier, jet lag, discrimination and unfamiliarity with European mannerism. It is characterized by feelings of depression and anxiety, as well as psychosomatic manifestations such as trembling, sweating, nausea and speech distress. See Katada Tamami, ‘Reflexions on a case of Paris syndrome’, *Journal of the Nissei Hospital*, 26.2 (1998), 127-132.

⁴³ James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), p. 128.

⁴⁴ Caroline Weber, *Lightning Rods and Sideshow* (United States: The New York Times Sunday Book Review, 2009) http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/31/books/review/Weber-t.html?_r=0 [Accessed: 26 February 2016].

only the ‘cringing spirit’ of poor, genuflecting men whose portraits of eminent patrons surpassed the point of gratitude and became a kind of nauseating status worship.⁴⁵ For many artists and travellers alike, the City of Light might more aptly be titled the City of Letdown.

To illustrate further: Anyone who has been to Paris in April understands that conditions are generally inclement during that month, with skies no less heavy and grey, winds no less frigid and forceful, and weather no more congenial than in the bleak and drizzly Parisian winter. The widespread perception (at least in North America) that April in Paris is a blossoming romantic pleasure, full of budding lovers and flourishing flower beds, descends in part from the classic Yip Harburg melody, *April in Paris*, first composed for Broadway in 1932 and performed on countless occasions by such showbiz luminaries as Louis Armstrong, Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald.

April in Paris, chestnuts in blossom
Holiday tables under the trees
April in Paris, this is a feeling
No one can ever reprise

I never knew the charm of spring
Never met it face to face
I never knew my heart could sing
Never missed a warm embrace

Till April in Paris, whom can I run to?
What have you done to my heart?

If we think past those guttural and seductive voices, into the lyrics of the song, we will see a sample of the ‘dark’ intuition Botton alludes to when speaking about the makers of his travel brochure (see Chapter 1, p. 9). Botton asserts that if we are conditioned to anticipate only good experiences when we travel, and thus inclined to overlook bad experiences, ‘then works of art are perhaps a little to blame, for in them we find the same process of simplification and selection at work as in the imagination’.⁴⁶ Whether they are pictorials we see, like posters or brochures, or pictorials we hear, like Broadway songs, the descriptions that

⁴⁵ Twain, p. 137.

⁴⁶ Botton, p. 14.

facilitate our travels are often meticulously calculated for effect. If Harburg ever saw Paris in April he certainly only *selected* the best impressions to use in his song; a tune composed not for the task of being informative, but to affect the emotional state of an audience, to direct attention to, or accentuate, the mood of a romantic spectacle.⁴⁷ Through creative selection, features synonymous with spring (April, blossoms, warmth) and objects synonymous with Paris (holiday tables and chestnut trees) are effectively mated to spawn what is at once a harmless ideal, sensuous and uplifting, and a duplicitous archetype that predisposes receptivity; a portrayal of place that may only amplify the force of disappointment when actual experience goes awry.

April in Paris does not overtly figure into Gloria's situation. Yet readers familiar with the song may sense its sublime idealism affixed to her consciousness; part of a great inbound flow of pro-Paris material and hype that, over a lifetime of conventional middle-class experience, has conditioned her taste and anticipation. Here, the issue of receptivity evolves into a question of fixity. What stays the same when we travel? What is malleable? What conditions come with us wherever we go, and how are these conditions maintained away from the environment where they were formed and nurtured? Is there, as Clifford puts it, a kind of 'kernel or core identity' that we carry with us wherever we travel? Or is it a question of something else, 'something more like habitus, a set of practices and dispositions, parts of which could be remembered, articulated in specific contexts?'⁴⁸ In the discussion of anticipation versus actuality the issue is a crucial one. 'What is brought from a prior place?' Clifford asks. 'And how is it both maintained and transformed by the environment?'⁴⁹

Questions like these do not lend themselves to definitive answers. Anyone exploring them would have to acknowledge a configuration of possible elements, including race, class, gender and nationality—different combinations of which having an influence on what is

⁴⁷ The song first appeared in the musical revue *Walk a Little Faster*. Harburg claims that producers of the multi-act show wanted a song to match the romantic Parisian set that was featured in some of the sketches.

⁴⁸ Clifford, p. 44.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

brought to another cultural landscape. In Gloria's case, what is 'brought' is a promising but superficial narrative, a mental text compiled of rumours, symbols and fetishizations of the quintessential model of the elsewhere. When she alights in Paris (in the middle of April) it is the notion of spiritual flourishing and romantic frivolity, long ago implanted by the insinuations of popular culture, that is abruptly unembedded from her psyche upon exiting the airport and meeting the dreary weather and depersonalizing cab driver; and it is the sudden loss of this ideal which leaves her forcibly jarred, grasping for coherence, psychologically stunned in a state of negative receptivity.

Our perception of our environment, our ability to react to it, and our capacity to communicate and interact socially generally determine the quality of our travel experience. In this sense Clifford does well to remind us that travelling always presupposes a spatial distinction between a home base and an exterior place of discovery.⁵⁰ It assumes the practice of intentional displacement, the temporary dwelling away from conditions and circumstances we've learned to negotiate. As a tourist, Gloria is thrown into a crisis of environment. She is neither home nor in reach of anything (objects, elements, people) distinctly plain enough to make her *feel* at home. No longer simply mind travelling in her small kitchen in Winnipeg, she is thrust into a dizzying 'cultural laboratory' (to use Lofgren's expression), where she is forced to experiment with new aspects of self-identity and social relations.⁵¹ She sees no distinction between exile and tourism. Her displacement is a product of coercion, not choice, and as such she is unable to adopt the perspective of other tourists, who may view their travels as an ideology of exploration and spiritual growth, or as an expression of financial freedom, rather than a succession of awkward investigations into personal toughness and threshold. It is only when Gloria enters the comforting insipidness of the Fran Prix, with its 'Monets of standard produce, its Renoirs of normal snack foods, and all its Cezannes of familiar

⁵⁰ Clifford, p. 53.

⁵¹ Orvar Lofgren, *On Holiday: A History of Vacationing* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), p. 7.

impressions that might easily be found at any Canadian Tire', that coherence is finally achieved.⁵² The vast spatial distinction between home and away retracts to a manageable distance when at last she perceives the home-like *flânerie*, or 'table salt', of Paris.

Expectations possess a tremendous power, and when they are not regulated disillusionment is never far away. If 'The Perfect Paris Day' demonstrates anything, it's that the journeying mind does not experience an enduring sense of contentment that flows continuously from the moment we leave home to the moment we return. In our travels things are guaranteed only to be varied, not ideal or better. And just as haphazardly as we might find ourselves elated by new actualities, as Flaubert was elated on his voyage to Alexandria, we might also find ourselves dolefully uninspired by them, even depressed, as Baudelaire might have morbidly affirmed departing from Mauritius, sailing home to France.

I have so far talked of impetus and disillusionment in relation to western middle-class travel. In this chapter specifically I have tried to capture the nature of disillusionment by illustrating how it occurs in my story 'The Perfect Paris Day'. Using Baudelaire as an example, I have suggested the concept of receptivity and put forth the idea that satisfaction with a foreign destination may ultimately depend on the perceptions or 'mental texts' that are brought to that destination. Overall I have tried to depict the schism between anticipation and actuality as having its roots in a consumption of cultural material (travel advertising and popular fetishizations) that is too casual and uncritical. And I have further suggested that the shock of displacement might be at least partially mitigated by discovering qualities in a new environment that connect it to where we have come from.

In the next chapter I begin my discussion of the narratological decisions behind the writing of *How to Make White People Happy*. I start by looking critically at the role of humour in my travelogues, as well as its place in the travel literature of Mark Twain, focusing

⁵² Canadian Tire is a retail chain (exclusive to Canada) that specializes in automotive parts and home products. Some stores also carry produce and commercial food items.

foremost on how it may be used to push the boundaries of what is culturally sensitive and appropriate. I also consider my willingness to be made a spectacle in the story 'Maling, Maling', and how I apply that strategy in the name of making a larger point about cross-cultural immersion.

Chapter 3: Finding the Humour

In the summer of 1867 an obscure young journalist booked passage on a deluxe paddle steamer and set out from New York City for Europe and the Holy Land, a voyage hailed by American newspapers as ‘The Great Pleasure Excursion’. The reporter was Mark Twain, and the result of this illustrious departure would be the 234 irreverent, romantic, occasionally palavorous chapters that comprise *Innocents Abroad*, perhaps the first American travel commentary to extensively question what it meant to ‘be’ American, and beyond that, what it meant to be a civilized society. As the ship weighed anchor and set to sea Twain put his feelings about the journey, and more symbolically about the power of travel itself, to paper. ‘All my malicious instincts were dead within me,’ he wrote of that moment. ‘And as America faded out of sight, a spirit of charity rose up in their place that was as boundless, for the time being, as the broad ocean that was heaving its billows about us’.⁵³

However critical of its myriad absurdities, Twain had no ambivalence about the moral benefits of travel. Bigotry, depression, rancour, malaise—all these dispersed like vapours when a new adventure was afoot. For the preeminent American sceptic it was sedentism—not education or religion—that opened a gangway to narrow-mindedness. Those who occupied a single place for too long a time was sure to contract and transmit all the moral and intellectual sicknesses of that place. Flies carried filth, rats carried plague, dogs carried rabies; and the sedentary man was a host pool of spiritually-transmitted disease. Travel was the antiseptic.

Indeed Twain performed every role of traveller one could perform. He was a rambling drifter (*Roughing It*), an avid vagabond (*A Tramp Abroad*), and a rapacious tourist (*Innocents Abroad*). In his lifetime he visited five continents, crossed the Atlantic dozens of times, and made one complete round-the-world circuit; an astonishing sum of globetrotting even by

⁵³ Twain, p. 33.

today's standards. He wrote acutely in his travel books about the behaviour of natives, and even more acutely about the behaviour of fellow foreigners.

'The gentle reader will never, never know what a consummate ass he can become until he goes abroad. I speak now, of course, in the supposition that the gentle reader has not been abroad, and therefore is not already a consummate ass. If the case be otherwise, I beg his pardon and extend to him the cordial hand of fellowship'.⁵⁴

Forever sensitive to pretension, Twain's critical wit flourished on the road, where the oblivious and offensive nature of the tourist was routinely his most enjoyable observation. His own follies tickled him greatly. He lampooned his self-complacency in Gibraltar, where a cunning shop girl flattered him into purchasing a pair of undersized kid gloves, and parodied his craven behaviour in a Carson City boarding house, where a loose tarantula sent him scampering from 'bed to bed and box to box', squealing for his life.⁵⁵ For Twain, travel provided not just a treasury of insight on the human condition, but a Solomon's mine of humourist material. If Flaubert and Baudelaire, by means of their backgrounds, influenced how I classified my work, Twain influenced how I composed it. His colourful yet grounded perspective, his daring and playful prose, his willingness to occasionally paint himself the fool endeared him to me as a travel writer; and in his self-spoof stylings I often found a message worth expressing in some of my own work:

Don't take yourself too seriously abroad, because nobody else is.

One of the pleasures of writing this collection was the opportunity it afforded me to make light of some rather awful travel experiences. Like the sketches that comprise Twain's *Roughing It* and *Innocents Abroad*, several pieces in this collection operate within a short narrative construct, serving as vignettes rather than full stories. Works like 'Transit Wives', 'Mile One', 'Rennie's Mill Road' and 'Pretty Little Mushroom Clouds for Exclamation

⁵⁴ Twain, p. 233.

⁵⁵ For the former, see *Innocents Abroad*, pp. 73-75; for the latter, see *Roughing It*, pp. 155-157.

Points' all depict complex circumstances and emotions through brief accounts, utilizing the sketch form and its congeniality to humour.

Humour, of course, has long been used in the service of communicating sensitive material. An author may turn to humour to more easily express something awkward or painful, to recount a shameful memory, to help reconcile a former attitude or belief, or to simply make a reader more receptive to his or her topic. He or she may also wish to harness its recuperative power. As Langston Hughes bracingly expressed: 'Humour is what you wish in your secret heart were not funny, but it is, and you must laugh. Humour is your own unconscious therapy.'⁵⁶

But humour is also a slippery literary concept, one that should not, as Kerry Mallan points out, be associated solely with making readers laugh.⁵⁷ Mallan proposes a broader understanding of the term when she writes that humour is a 'peculiarly human way' of dealing with the unrelenting pressure of life.⁵⁸ Shaeffer and Hopkins offer a more binary interpretation, emphasizing the ominous power of humour to push the limits of what is acceptable or expected in communication: 'Humour is a magical thing that allows us to endure life's hardships such as death, sickness, hunger, pain and fear. It is the bond that can bring us together and, if used as a weapon, tear us apart.'⁵⁹

In relation to my travel writing, humour has often served as a kind of antihistamine—a way of subduing emotional flare-ups brought on by inflated representations, naïve apothegms, and widespread succotash about places I have keenly experienced. Stories like 'How to Make White People Happy', 'The Whores in Las Vegas' and 'Banjar Anthology' use humour to dismantle simplistic cultural profiles and construct a more complicated portrait illustrative of a globalized Asia. Other stories like 'Mile One' and 'Tenement Abroad' use humour to

⁵⁶ Langston Hughes, *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Volume 9: Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and World Affairs*, ed. by Christopher C. De Santis (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002), p. 525.

⁵⁷ Kerry Mallan, *Laugh Lines: Exploring Humour in Children's Literature* (Newtown, Australia: Primary English Teaching Association, 1993), pp. 7-8.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵⁹ Margaret Shaeffer and Dee Hopkins, 'Miss Nelson, knock-knocks & nonsense: connecting through humour', *Childhood Education*, 65 (1988), 88-93 (p. 89).

illuminate less a physical location than an aspect of the journeying condition itself—the inherent contradiction that pits our celebration of singularity and autonomy against our basic human desire for companionship. To one degree or another, each of these stories operate through humour to more poignantly express the message of their themes.

The short sketch, ‘Maling, Maling’ takes place in the rural Bali slum of Banjar Dalung. Aimed at the notion of native hospitality, for which the Balinese are reputed in the west, the story is a play-by-play account of the night I was robbed by local villagers. As intruders attempt to break into my home I escape through the back door and begin to shout for help. Hearing my cries, the non-English speaking villagers rush to the scene, where instead of providing assistance they are reduced to hysterics by the spectacle of a half-naked westerner inanely pantomiming his distress.

It was high times alright. The ribbing was unbridled, though I didn’t understand a word of it. The young men clapped each other’s backs, pointed at my funny underwear (a pair of novelty boxers with two mallards on the ass and the words ‘Butt Quack’ across the top), and shouted out to their tenements across the road, where their wives and children had collected on the balconies. Sweaty and heaving, spotlighted by a single white sensor light blasting from a neighbour’s veranda, I stood in the road and explained in a gush of baby-talk English what had happened. I mimicked the noise of my door being kicked in, repeated the word *maling* over and over, and ploughed along with my stupid performance with such a bewitching array of theatrical gestures that I was eventually treated to an applause.

Such a situation, with its intimations of mortal violence and home invasion, could not possibly have been humorous at the time. At the time there was only confusion and terror. When I began to reflect upon the event, however, it was humour—specifically hyperbole and self-deprecation—that stood out to me as a means of making sense of the experience; that is, of making a larger point about the nature of immersing in native societies and the standard western assumption that it is a fundamentally positive activity.

Much of what attracts us philosophically to travel, particularly to international travel, centres on the optimism that cross-cultural exchange produces a life-enhancing effect—that it makes us more receptive, enlightened human beings. This is at least partially validated by the

abundance of anti-touristic opportunities and volunteer vacation programs that promote meaningful travel through people-to-people service projects. Immersion travel ventures like Transitions Abroad, Discover Corps, and GoAbroad.com heartily espouse the importance of the practical encounter, imparting the humanitarianist notion that a transformative travel experience derives from unparalleled access to a host community, and that to acquire a fully evolved perspective toward other races and cultures, and thus life in general, one must live as the natives live, endure what they endure, and carry on despite circumstances just as they are obliged to carry on. Quote the marketing folks at Discover Corps:

Recharge your spirit by discovering a country through its people. Immerse yourself in a different culture while giving back, engaging in hands-on cultural activities, and connecting with fascinating people. [...] You'll see the sights, but you'll also dive beneath the surface to truly understand life in a new land and return home inspired.⁶⁰

But if I examined my experience closely, had this actually been the case? Had any of my direct participations with native peoples expanded my consciousness the way I had assumed—the way a lifetime of inspirational travel aphorisms had implicitly or explicitly assured?⁶¹ Or had these direct participations, with their inevitable hassles and challenges, done the opposite? What did adversity in an alien community truly elicit? Did a spirit of tolerance and understanding automatically flourish through integration, no matter what the process of that integration put us through? Or was integration abroad simply a romanticized claptrap, an unsubstantiated hope? Again it was a matter of receptivity. Could our appreciation for travel, for the manners and governing rituals of different cultures be sustained in moments of hardship and crisis? Or were we only capable of seeing the beauty and wonder

⁶⁰ Terra Education, *Volunteer Travel for Adults and Families* (Discover Corps, 2016), <http://discovercorps.com/> [accessed 24 April 2016] (p. 1).

⁶¹ In reference to the ubiquitous travel dictum popularly attributed to St. Augustine of Hippo: 'The world is a great book, and those who don't travel only read one page.' There is no definitive source that traces this quote directly to Augustine, however. A variant appears in *Feltham's English Enchiridion* (1799), which paraphrases: 'St. Augustine, when he speaks of the great advantages of travelling, says, that the world is a great book, and none study this book so much as a traveller. They that never stir from their home read only one page of this book' (p. 2). This passage may have been cribbed by Thomas Fielding in his *Select Proverbs from all Nations* (1824), where he transcribes: 'The world is a great book, of which they that never stir from home read only one page' (p. 216).

of a place when we were pleased by it? Humour was another tool in the exploration of these questions.

For many westerners born into cultures that take the national benefits of travel for granted, mobility isn't just a matter of human nature, it's an indisputable feature of modernity, almost always necessary for the sake of family, friendship, romance, education or work. Pointing to the increased flexibility of contemporary labour markets and the normalizing effect of globalizing trends, Franklin and Crang call attention to the 'routinization' of touristic behaviour, noting that it is no longer a 'shattering blow' for westerners to leave their natal soil, but an accepted aspect of life.⁶² Elsewhere in *Sociology beyond Societies*, John Urry suggests the entitlement of contemporary citizens (not just western travellers) and the proliferating attitude that it is one's undeniable right to pass freely into other places and societies.⁶³

But impetus is only part of the discussion. Equally relevant to the subject of western mobility are the corresponding attitudes that contemporary citizens show toward the places and cultures in which they immerse. Whether inspired by human nature or cultural trend, many of my immersions abroad have periodically triggered a dark side of my personality, provoking episodes of incivility, intolerance, or other obnoxious behaviour wholly in line with Twain's assertion that all who travel overseas—at some point, to some degree—are sure to make an ass of themselves. 'Maling, Maling' is my interpretation of how and why this often comes about.

We know that cross-cultural immersion is a delicate mission taken on by both sides. The pilgrim tentatively probes his new surroundings while the natives tentatively reconnoitre the pilgrim, each side advancing carefully into an understanding of the other. It is rarely a

⁶² Franklin and Crang, p. 10.

⁶³ John Urry, *Sociology beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2000), pp. 49-50.

confident operation, but for the stranger in the strange land it can be downright overwhelming. At the time of this story I was, by my knowledge, the only native westerner living in Banjar Dalung. Tension escalated as the language barrier remained impenetrable, as cultural disparities remained uncomprehended, and as my disconnect increased and my social isolation (which I associated with vulnerability) became more and more conspicuous. Add to this the drastically disadvantaged living conditions—a degree of poverty that exceeded anything I had previously experienced—and humorously retelling any event from that time became a tricky business.

As a writer I worried that humour would compromise the story, degrade it into something kitsch, a cheap anecdote that – as Twain once warned against – built frivolously toward a punchline or *pop*.⁶⁴ As a traveller I worried that it would make me seem condescending or superior. Or worse yet, that it would trivialize the people I was writing about. No doubt humour possessed an extraordinary power, as Hughes observed, but exercised incautiously it could also shame the subject and undermine the story's intended effect. I remembered Bill Bryson's overly-playful treatment of race relations in aboriginal Australia (*In a Sunburned Country*), Chuck Thompson's sneering jollity at the expense of Thai women (*Smile When You're Lying*), and Maarten Troost's snarky characterizations of Chinese locals (*Lost on Planet China*). And I remembered *The Innocents Abroad*, which, despite its reflective exaltations of people and places, too often indulged at the cost of the weak or helpless. Of the Portuguese Twain had written that they were slow, poor, shiftless and lazy. Of Moorish women he had quipped upon their atrocious ugliness, then applauded the wisdom of a society that made them cover their faces. As Mordecai Richler writes in his introduction to the Oxford edition:

Given today's touchy political climate, I suspect there is sufficient kindling in *The Innocents Abroad* to light a fire of protest under Portuguese, Italians,

⁶⁴ In reference to Twain's observation: 'The humorous story bubbles gently along, the others burst.' See, Mark Twain, *How to Tell a Story and Other Essays* (United States: Floating Press, 2008), pp. 4-5.

Muslims, Catholics, Turks, Greeks, feminists, Arabs, American Indians, and other sensitive types. I have no doubt that *Innocents Abroad*, released today, would be banned in schools, the author condemned a racist, and possibly, just possibly, finding himself the subject of a *fatwa*.⁶⁵

The result of all this insecurity was predictable enough. Early drafts of ‘Maling, Maling’ tended to wimp out. Verisimilitude was marred by excessive open-mindedness. I would write the story from the unfiltered perspective through which I had lived it, then lose my nerve and interject contrived rationales that resisted Anglo-centrism by assuming some onus for how the natives were responding to me. On first impulse a passage might have been written: ‘It was high times alright. The ribbing was unbridled, though I didn’t understand a word of it.’ On second thought it might have read: ‘It was high times alright. The ribbing was unbridled, though I didn’t understand a word of it, *for like most privileged westerns I had never learned their language.*’ And so on and so forth until the story was a thousand words overweight with political correctness and tacked-on placations.

Yet the defectiveness of early drafts was more than just a product of gratuitous accountability. In writing ‘Maling, Maling’ I faced immense indecision regarding the style of my self-reflective practice and the practice of cultural representation. On one hand was my role as creative writer, my duty to give narrative voice to personal experience and to compellingly express my reflections. On the other hand was the enormous range of theoretical writings that took critical exception to representational strategies that obscured cultural complexities or encouraged narrow, relatable, entertaining definitions of the ‘other’.⁶⁶ A scholarly audience, conscientious against flippant construals of different ethnicities and races, was certain to be wary of any humorous interpretation of a foreign place, particularly by a western author. The fiery, quasi-militant reactions of theorists like Stuart Hall, who calls on cultural studies to mobilize all intellectual resources to combat the ignorance that keeps

⁶⁵ Mordecai Richler, introduction to *The Innocents Abroad* by Mark Twain (United States: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. xxxv.

⁶⁶ Elfriede Fursich, ‘How can global journalists represent the ‘other’? A critical assessment of the cultural studies concept for media practice’, *Journalism*, 3 (2002), 57-84 (p. 61).

societies ‘profoundly and deeply antihumane in their capacity to live with difference’,⁶⁷ only strengthened my hesitation to write about my experience in anything but the most liberal and sombre tone.

In short, both process and product suffered from too much audience awareness. The true nature of my terror that night—the vulgar and obnoxious persona that had been aroused by my panic—felt too risky to express, too suggestive of everything condemnable about tourists, and in shying away from my true response I lost touch with the observation that had driven me to write the story in the first place: the conditional decency of the western traveller. If the inconvenience was shocking enough, it cut straight to the marrow of our cultivation, releasing biases, prejudices, imperialistic auras, and attitudes of pre-eminence.

In his essay *How to Tell a Story*, Twain testifies to the complexity of narrative humour. ‘The humorous story is strictly a work of art—high and delicate art—and only an artist can tell it.’⁶⁸ Twain regarded the effect of the humorous story as entirely dependent upon the manner of the telling. No form of written or oral narrative was more susceptible to the tastes and background of its audience; and because these tastes and backgrounds alternated so drastically by region, society, education and class, it was only through a calculated focus on manner, rather than content, that the teller stood a chance at achieving broad appeal.

Contemporary writers like Bryson and Troost have forged their mass appeal largely from anecdotal travelogues that centre on the humorous misadventure. In this form, the travel writer presents himself as a kind of hapless, self-deprecating seeker. Arriving at his destination equipped with cliché assumptions or bereft of expectations altogether, he is ripe

⁶⁷ Stuart Hall, ‘Race, culture, and communications: looking backward and forward at cultural studies’, *What Is Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. by John Storey (United Kingdom: Hodder Headline Group, 1996), p. 343.

⁶⁸ Twain, p. 5.

for a zany reality check, and the ensuing and inevitable misunderstandings, cultural bloopers, and unlikely victimizations become sources of amusement as well as lessons learned.

Bryson makes use of this form in *Notes from a Small Island* and *In a Sunburned Country*, as does Troost in *The Sex Lives of Cannibals* and Ayun Halliday in her hyper-bumbling *No Touch Monkey*. Like these books, 'Maling, Maling' utilizes the motif of the misadventure. The romantic western perception that the indigenous life is the 'right' life, the purer method of existence that all the sick and mighty empires try to expropriate as a commodity, offers a wide pasture for humour to play in. Such thinking, relentlessly reinforced by escapism advertising, points to the westerner's quixotic optimism that there are truer forms of culture than western civilization, unspoiled locations that remain ever connected to the rawer, more satisfying activities of human existence, and whose indigenes, by virtue of their simple histories and outlooks, are full of curious appreciation for outsiders. My experience in 'Maling, Maling' taught me otherwise. I had the material; all I needed to do was exercise the right manner.

The answer ultimately lies in divergence. Although 'Maling, Maling' is autobiographical, the narrator and writer do not share identical knowledge. While the point of view is retrospective, I have chosen to tell the story through the persona of an unsuspecting self who formulates judgements as events occur. This practice of restricted hindsight provides a loophole through which the narrative can operate through humour. Because perception after the fact is restricted, the reader is obliged to experience the event as the narrator experiences it, in the heat of the moment, where instinct overcomes reason and civility. The objective is to rouse the raw emotional reflexes dwelling below the surface of the socially conscious psyche. For readers rigidly concerned with PC portrayals of indigenous culture, the natural suspense of a home invasion curtails any grasping after improper content, and when the suspense reaches a confluence with the humour inherent in the narrator's ridiculous spectacle in front of the village, the conception of how a westerner *should* act gives way to the sad but amusing

vision of how a westerner might be *bound* to act in situations that unsettle preconceived assumptions about what western nativeness deserves and how it ought to be treated.

Observing the emergence of my true ‘western colours’, readers are prompted to form a judgment of me, and thus led to imagine how they would act in my place. They may want to denigrate my behaviour as that of a typically entitled tourist, but my gamble is that humour dismantles this self-righteousness, encouraging readers to reflect upon their own feelings and attitudes when they, like the narrator, have felt mistreated by another culture. Humour is the conciliator, alleviating sensitivity toward political correctness while urging patience toward a narrator whose obnoxious reaction would possibly resemble their own.

It would take a lifetime to identify every travel author who, in some attempt at levity and wit, overstepped the border into cultural insensitivity. And yet, for practiced travel readers who differentiate between the *intent* of political correctness (to foster tactful understanding of other races and customs) and what is more often its *effect* (the stifling of our ability to break through courteous depiction and get comfortable with those who are different from us), there is potentially something refreshing about a little irreverence. Twain’s travel sketches may indeed be splashed with flippant bigotries and failed jokes, but they are also a reminder of the panache and confidence that current travelogues struggle to exhibit because of a modern readership that has become too progressive and sophisticated to enjoy the full abundance of a writer’s experience. ‘I offer no apologies for any departures from the usual style of travel writing that may be charged against me,’ Twain wrote in his preface to *Innocents Abroad*. ‘For I think I have seen with impartial eyes, and I am sure I have written at least honestly, whether wisely or not.’⁶⁹

It is by way of humour that I have expressed my honesty in much of this collection. Within most narratives I have endeavoured to show that, however necessary to a well-rounded

⁶⁹ See Twain, preface to *The Innocents Abroad* (United States: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. v.

and active consciousness, the act of travel is not purely beneficial. It is also bland and pointless, monotonous and boring, a gateway to victimization; and it can be all of these things for long durations, with great frequency, in places we once dreamt of as spectacular and wondrously bereft of such negatives. By focusing specifically on 'Maling, Maling' I have sought to illustrate how my travel humour tends to play out and how it urges readers to embrace with amusement the inevitable and natural downsides of intercultural exchange. I will continue this discussion in chapter 4, looking further into elements of humour and the function of satire in travel writing.

Chapter 4: Satire and Travelogue

Any reliable Twain scholar would have to concede that within every Twain travel book lies a not-so-subtle endeavour to debunk (if not flat-out demolish) the lofty, florid, hyper-quixotic celebrations of the era's most fashionable travel writers. As Everett Emerson points out, little got under the author's skin like the excessively gushing exaltations that typified the works of contemporaries like William C. Prime (*Tent Life in the Holy Land*) and Charles Wyllys Elliott (*Remarkable Characters and Places in the Holy Land*), whose unrealistic cliché-sodden accounts were generally regarded as indispensable guides for sojourning in certain regions.⁷⁰ Twain had no intention of being yoked to this tradition. Everywhere he had travelled, from the American frontier to Europe and the Holy Land, he had suffered the villainy of vendors, the babbling of guides, the rigors of transit, and the incessant profiteering of local history by local scammers, who latched like ticks to bollixed foreigners and conned them with fraudulent anecdotes about sacred churches, holy mountains, and one hallowed patch of dirt after another.⁷¹ For all its grandeur and variety, the world of travel was yet a hive of unscrupulous characters and stupid humbug. But Twain was too skilled to simply bemoan the issues that gave him grief. Beyond mere derision and piddling complaint was a more imaginative method of drawing attention to the follies and abuses of a people or place: satire.

Satirical literature, of course, means to do more than just amuse. Its grand intent is to awaken readers and improve their behaviour; to kindle their objection toward an immorality, injustice, or faulty conviction by unleashing upon it a unique force of criticism: a kind of 'special ops' ridicule that enlists such capable soldiers as euphemism, sarcasm, distortion and irony. Speaking of its origins and principles, Matthew Hodgart suggests that the impulses

⁷⁰ Everett Emerson, *Mark Twain: A Literary Life* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 61.

⁷¹ Twain's frustration with mendacious guides and locals is manifest in all his travel books, though especially in *Innocents Abroad*. 'Perdition catch all guides', he writes after being tricked in Genoa (p. 163). Later, 'Their tongues are never still. They talk forever and ever...they interrupt every dream, every pleasant train of thought with their tiresome cackling' (p. 183). See also pp. 290-292, 309.

behind satire are basic to human nature. Hodgart views satire as having its genesis in a state of mind that is both ‘critical and aggressive’, one that is poignantly irritated ‘at the latest examples of human absurdity, inefficiency or wickedness’.⁷² The satirical author responds to these abuses with a ‘mixture of laughter and indignation’, and ameliorates feelings of contempt, as well as satisfies feelings of supremacy, by making abusers lose face.⁷³

But if satire is an impulse, how does it go from being a state of mind to a work of art? According to Hodgart, when it combines denunciation with some pleasurable aesthetic feature.

There is an enormous amount of polemical criticism, invective, political journalism and so on which is intensely critical of social and moral conditions, and may be very well expressed, yet fails to enter that realm ruled over by Juvenal and Swift and inhabited by even the minor masters of the art. I would suggest that true satire demands a high degree both of commitment to and involvement with the painful problems of the world, and simultaneously a high degree of abstraction from the world.⁷⁴

Stories like ‘Maling, Maling’, ‘Banjar Anthology’, ‘A Study in LA Handicraft’ and ‘The Perfect Paris Day’ all contain elements of satire, but they are not principally concerned with meeting its values or striking the balance that Hodgart suggests. In these stories, satire is used primarily as a tool (in tandem with other closely-related tools like irony and farce) to separate my writing from the ligature of brochure-like travelogue and holiday narrative. But in the collection’s title story, ‘How to Make White People Happy’, stylistic distinction is a secondary consideration, and my use of satire falls more in line with Hodgart’s terms, exhibiting a deeper, more explicit involvement with social criticism.

Ketut Sutapa is born into the disadvantaged life of a poor Indonesian. When he is a small boy his widowed mother abandons him by the busiest intersection in Bali, explaining that the family is ‘too poor and fatherless to care for so many children’, and that he is being

⁷² Matthew Hodgart, *Satire* (London: Littlehampton Book Services, 1969), p. 10.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

left beside 'a good road', which by her definition is a road travelled by white foreigners. Ketut grows up in a Salvation Army orphanage. Insecure about his shabby appearance and poor English, he watches from a distance while more 'western-like' children are chosen for adoption. When his closest friend is taken away by a prosperous Australian couple, it triggers within him the service-oriented mentality that pervades his culture: a state of mind in which success and happiness depend upon Anglo approval. By story's end Ketut has worked his way to the top of Bali's hospitality scene, winning favour and privilege from influential *bules* through an unflappably agreeable manner. When he is promoted to general manager at a prestigious resort he becomes unwittingly commodified by his own people and hired for local seminars that teach the most important knowledge a native Balinese can learn: how to make white people happy.

Although based on real incidents and individuals, the story is essentially a work of exaggeration. It utilizes embellishment and hyperbole to underscore western hegemony in Indonesia, the imperialist attitudes toward race and hierarchy that still thrive there, and the exploitation of Indo natives that has, over generations, become inextricably tied to their livelihoods. Eschewing philosophical complexity for plain reason, the general drift of the story is to reduce everything to basic terms. The sad irony of Ketut's Bali, where natives achieve social and economic stature through excellence in servility, is articulated not by lengthy and incisive analyses, but by punchy characterizations and direct statements that appeal to common sense and simple logic.

Readers are aware, for instance, that the self-important Dutchman symbolizes the entitled, bourgeois nature of the tourist class, but need no further representation of this nature than to see him storm into the hotel kitchen and requisition Ketut's culinary talents. And when Ketut is promoted to general manager, the narrator must only mention that the previous manager was fired for soliciting native prostitutes with 'resort funds' and sleeping with prostitutes in the 'presidential villa' to demonstrate that it is neither depravity nor exploitation

that offend the Anglo powers, but the manner in which the depravity is funded and the exploitation carried out.

This method of satiric reduction provided a mixed bag of responses. While some readers appreciated the piece for its snappy tone and swift pace, others criticized it for being too flippant with serious ethical issues, namely child abandonment and Bali's pandemic sex tourism. Such problems were far from simple. They had deeply complicated origins, transnational implications, and by virtue of these complexities deserved a graver, more penetrating treatment. These readers generally offered one or more of the following critiques: First, that the narrative focused too much on tone and voice rather than empathetic portrayal. Second, that it didn't do enough to explicitly denounce Ketut's circumstances or the behaviour of the westerners in his life. And third, that my narrative technique—my decision to render Ketut almost child-like in his view of the touristic world around him—did not feel in place with the duty or tradition of the travelogue form, in which the writer represented his or her encounters (and by extension the host culture) with careful concern for accuracy, factual depiction, and in-depth detail.

From a readability standpoint the criticisms were valid enough. An author's voice and style is always susceptible to personal taste. On the matter of satire's suitability or 'place' within the travelogue genre, however, the feedback was too dismissive. Most if not all literary genres have been taken over for satiric purposes at some point in their legacies. As Hodgart points out:

If satire is marked by its predilection for certain subjects, and by its special approach to those subjects, it is not limited to any special forms. Almost any literary form will serve, provided that it permits the characteristic combination of aggressive attack and fantastic travesty.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Hodgart, p. 132.

There is more than a little evidence of travel writing's longstanding congeniality to satire. In his survey of travel literature between 1500 and 1720, William Sherman notes that from the time of Renaissance Europe 'actual and imaginative voyages' were used to criticize economic and political troubles at home.⁷⁶ Today, the most prominent literary satire to express its ideas through the voyage or journey scheme remains *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift's allegorical commentary on the nature of man, society and political-philosophical activity in 18th century England.⁷⁷ But the genre provides a vastly broader haul of material than that one canonical work. The fact that travel writing possessed features that 'instantly identified a text as travel writing' made it attractive not only as a form for new knowledge, Sherman notes, but as a vehicle to ridicule or parody 'foreign habits, domestic conditions, and even travel itself.'⁷⁸ Sherman's allusion to Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), David Lloyd's *The Legend of Captain Jones* (1631), and Joseph Hall's *Another World and Yet the Same* (1605), which imitated the entire apparatus of a conventional travel book (maps, pictures of foreign currency, catalogues of words and phrases), underscores the enduring interconnectedness between the two forms.⁷⁹ As soon as there were travel writing conventions, there were writers to borrow these conventions to voice their grievances and vent their spleen. As soon as there was a New World to explore, there were writers using it to mock the follies of the Known World. And just as certain authors began to write sincerely of cultural utopias, others began to write satirically of them, and of travel literature itself. More than a hundred years after Twain departed the likes of Prime and Elliot, Binyavanga Wainaina crucifies the western tradition of African travel writing in his essay 'How to Write about Africa'. Using deadpan wit and mordant irony, Wainaina encourages the contemporary travel author to:

[...] treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving. Or

⁷⁶ William Sherman, 'Stirrings and Searchings (1500-1720)', in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, eds. by Peter Hume and Tim Youngs (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 17-33 (p.32).

⁷⁷ F.P. Lock, *The Politics of Gulliver's Travels* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 69.

⁷⁸ Sherman, p. 32.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

it is hot and steamy with very short people who eat primates. Don't get bogged down with precise descriptions. Africa is big: fifty-four countries, 900 million people who are too busy starving and dying and warring and emigrating to read your book. The continent is full of deserts, jungles, highlands, savannahs and many other things, but your reader doesn't care about all that, so keep your descriptions romantic and evocative and unparticular.⁸⁰

But on the subject of my own work the more relevant discussion revolves around the matter of technique, not precedent. The idea behind my use of satiric reduction in 'How to Make White People Happy' is to expose the absurdity of a situation by looking at it through the perspective of an inexperienced participant. Critical judgment is suppressed. So are tirades and rants. Ketut assumes the role of the intelligent outsider. He is interested and even amused by what he sees, but not impressed, and this allows him to be more emotionally honest in his perception of society. However naïve to the complexity of events and their psychosocial implications, he is nonetheless an astute observer of the world in which he is involved.

This same technique is found in just about all of Twain's major travel works, and is fairly exhausted throughout *Innocents Abroad*. In the following excerpt the passengers of the *Quaker City* have made it to the Azores, the first stop on their great pleasure excursion. Having been cooped up at sea for several weeks, one of the happy pilgrims treats his companions to a celebratory banquet at the island's principle hotel, everyone assuming that they are traveling in a cheaper land, but unaware that all costs are estimated in native currency, not American dollar.

In the midst of the jollity produced by good cigars, good wine, and passable anecdotes, the landlord presented his bill. Blucher glanced at it and his countenance fell. He took another look to assure himself that his senses had not deceived him, and then read the items aloud, in faltering voice, while the roses on his cheeks turned to ashes:

“Ten dinners, at 600 reis, 6,000 reis!’ Ruin and desolation!”

“Twenty-five cigars, at 100 reis, 2,500 reis!’ Oh my sainted mother!”

“Eleven bottles of wine, at 1,200 reis, 13,200 reis!’ Be with us all!”

⁸⁰ Binyavanga Wainaina, 'How to Write about Africa', *Granta Magazine: The View from Africa*, 92 (2006), 91-96 (p. 91).

“Total, twenty-one thousand seven hundred reis!’ The suffering Moses!—there ain’t enough money in the ship to pay that bill! Go—leave me to my misery, boys, I am a ruined community.”

I think it was the blankest looking party I ever saw. Nobody could say a word. It was as if every soul had been stricken dumb. Wine glasses descended slowly to the table, their contents untasted. Cigars dropped unnoticed from nerveless fingers. Each man sought his neighbour’s eye, but found in it no ray of hope, no encouragement. At last the fearful silence was broken. The shadow of a desperate resolve settled upon Blucher’s countenance like a cloud, and he rose up and said:

“Landlord, this is a low, mean, swindle, and I’ll never, never stand it. Here’s a hundred and fifty dollars, Sir, and it’s all you’ll get—I’ll swim in blood, before I’ll pay a cent more.”

Our spirits rose and the landlord’s fell—at least we thought so; he was confused at any rate, notwithstanding he had not understood a word that had been said. He glanced from the little pile of gold pieces to Blucher several times, and then went out. He must have visited an American, for, when he returned, he brought back his bill translated into a language that a Christian could understand—thus:

10 dinners, 6,000 reis, or.....	\$6.00
25 cigars, 2,500 reis, or.....	2.50
11 bottles wine, 13,200 reis, or.....	13.20
Total 21,700 reis, or.....	\$21.70

Happiness reigned once more in Blucher’s dinner party. More refreshments were ordered.⁸¹

There are a few things that fail to add up in this scene, intimating that Twain was cashing in on his satirist’s license, rather than depicting events accurately. Why would the landlord deliver the bill before his patrons were through driving it up? Knowing where his guests were from and what currency they were traveling with, why would he not calculate and convert the costs before presenting them? At most there was probably only a little confusion toward the bill; but a little confusion would not have effectively rendered the greater portrait Twain was striving to create: the general cluelessness of the tourist and the national temperament of the typical American, with his tendency to react before deducing.

This kind of embellishment operates through exclusion. Twain dons a mask of obliviousness for the sake of unmasking his fellow innocents, refusing to acknowledge or clarify details that might obscure the message inherent in their folly. Meticulous explanation

⁸¹ Twain, pp. 52-54.

is discarded for the greater good of the commentary, and characters are permitted (if not designed) to abuse and misunderstand things as much as they please.

Similarly, 'How to Make White People Happy' achieves its effect by eliminating the static of extraneous detail. Here, emphasis is placed on distillation. Very little of Bali's scenery or physical landscape is described beyond the opening paragraph. Characters and what they symbolize are developed succinctly through singular action or behaviour, not elaborate explanation, as with Ketut's mother, the Dutchman, and the General Manager. Interaction is concise. Dialogue is restricted from straying too far into expressiveness in order to emphasize the guarded and conciliatory fashion in which Ketut has learned to communicate with westerners, regardless of whether or not he comprehends the situation. In one scene Ketut speaks with his general manager:

'Did you tell our guests that you went to school in Europe?' asked the general manager.

'Yes,' said Ketut. 'I'm sorry.'

'Did you tell them in English?' said the GM.

'I did,' said Ketut. 'I'm sorry.'

'Is it true?' said the GM.

'It is,' said Ketut. 'I'm sorry.'

'Congratulations,' said the GM.

'Thank you,' said Ketut. 'For what?'

'You're my new assistant.'

The fact that Ketut has no idea whether he is being commended or reprimanded is irrelevant. It can have no bearing on his manner either way. There is only one way to converse with white people: tactfully and meekly. One scene later when Ketut is called before the hotel's owner, readers see just how far this conditioning extends when he reacts and responds exactly as he did when confronted by the general manager.

'Did you know our General Manager was paying for prostitutes?' asked the owner.

'Yes,' said Ketut. 'I'm sorry.'

'Did you know he was paying for them with resort funds?' said owner.

'No,' said Ketut. 'I'm sorry.'

'Do *you* sleep with prostitutes?' said the owner.

‘I don’t,’ said Ketut. ‘I’m Christian.’
‘Congratulations,’ said the owner.
‘Oh Lord,’ sighed Ketut. ‘For what?’
‘You’re the new GM.’

And yet the satire in my travelogues is meant to do more than just draw attention to the snares and pitfalls of the travel experience, or to pass commentary on the cultural dynamics between natives and occupiers. It is also meant to undercut the self-conceit, authorial sureness, and seemingly unavoidable sacrosanctity that comes with being a western travel writer. So often during my travels I found myself docile and confused in the face of otherness. In my travelogues I felt no reason to veer away from that position. I wanted to embrace my vulnerability as a foreigner, and acknowledge the difficulty of engaging and representing a foreign culture. The problem was that I was a western metropolitan author: a state of literary being that seemed to automatically establish a hierarchy of perspective between myself and the other. Lisle speaks of a similar conundrum during a backpacking trip through Vietnam in which she comes across a copy of Theroux’s *The Happy Isles of Oceania*:

I had never read a travelogue before [...] I thought Theroux would inspire me on my impending solo journey through Asia and Africa. It was, and I stick to this judgement, one of the worst books I have ever read—boring, nasty and offensive in equal measure. The problem was that I didn’t have a critical language to express my distaste. Intuitively, I knew this just wasn’t a bad book; there was something *wrong* with this book and something *wrong* with travel writing in general. Ultimately, I came to the conclusion that there was also something wrong with my own rite of passage as a smug western backpacker.⁸²

Lisle took issue with Theroux and other travel writers who (in her perception) were content to construct a ‘flimsy veneer of civility’ over the patronizing and occasionally racist stereotypes that populated their narratives.⁸³ For Lisle, this was a serious problem of representation, and while there was no racism in my writing, I, too, could feel something

⁸² Debbie Lisle, *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. xi.

⁸³ Lisle, p. 270.

wrong in the power relations at work in my discourse. Reading over my travel notes I found elements of smugness, condescension and superiority—all of it manifesting in subordinate conjunction with what I assumed were sensitive observations about others and their otherness. Moreover, I began to intuit these elements in the works of western travel authors I emulated—writers like Bill Bryson, for example, whose inclination toward self-parody (the key to his popularity) now seemed indicative of the kind of ‘vener’ Lisle describes: a way of securing the impunity and position to lob cultural put-downs and poke fun at the difference of others.

Thus, to strike a balance in my discourse and avoid the superiority of my predecessors and contemporaries, I began to play around with the satirical form, employing strategies of embellishment, absurdity and over-simplification in an attempt to mitigate the western sureness native to my travel writing. Injecting stories like ‘How to Make White People Happy’ with irony and farce helped to ensure that my language would not obstruct the greater purpose of cultural understanding by seeming too polemic or full of itself. The style is so playful that the origin of the author cannot be threatening.

P.J. O’Rourke’s *Holidays in Hell* is exemplary of this type of strategy. O’Rourke positions himself as an intrepid disbeliever in human kind—a traveller whose only interest in the world is to find out why it is such a lousy place. ‘I wanted to know why life, which ought to be an only moderately miserable thing, is such a frightful, disgusting, horrid thing for so many people in so many places.’⁸⁴ Yet unlike Twain, who occasionally subdues his satiric thrust to educate the reader with sincere explanations of place and culture, O’Rourke’s objective is to be as incessantly confused and absurd as the world itself. Readers find no earnest message or poignant answer as he pursues his futile journeys. ‘Earnestness is just stupidity sent to college,’ he writes. ‘I’m not sure this book contains *any* serious content.’⁸⁵ In this, O’Rourke’s aesthetic is clear. However serious the subject or event, there is no reason to believe that taking it seriously will improve the lives of the people involved. Knowing that his

⁸⁴ P.J. O’Rourke, *Holidays in Hell* (United States: Grove Press, 1988), p. 2.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

identity as a travel writer is based on an unconcern for sincere perception, it is not important to take his perceptions seriously, or to worry whether or not he is writing with the pretence of the western travel writer, imposing the inherited perspective of colonial superiority.

In the twenty-first century, satire has increasingly taken the form of pseudo nonfiction. Hoax reality shows like *The Office* and *Modern Family*, where the absurdities of work-a-day life are put to task with a straight face, and mock news programs like *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report*, in which professional comedians impersonate journalists and outsized broadcast personalities, have become a dominating force in western humour. As electronic media evolves from its print ancestor, pseudo nonfiction flourishes in digital culture, appearing in YouTube videos, imitation magazines like *The Onion*, and parody websites that mimic the information and authority of other websites.

To the narrator of Ketut's story, however, the line between satire and sham must remain distinct. Ketut's life is by no means a fantasy. His struggles are true and painful. The chance that he might be dismissed as a pseudo reality, or fable, is a disrespect the narrator will not risk, and at the last second he cannot stop from taking matters into his own hands, inserting himself into the story, and, through personal reflection of how the account first came to him, lending validity to Ketut's experience and protecting him from readers who might otherwise perceive him as a prop, a mere caricature in a small commentary.

Some readers may feel repelled by this final scene and reject it for seeming formulaic and tacked on. But if nothing else, the ending has this value: it invites the realization that for all its satiric nuance, it is empathy and humanism, not critical humour, that defines 'How to Make White People Happy'. In more places than not, the difference between inheriting privilege and struggling for privilege is as simple as east and west, dark and light, and the ending leaves readers scratching at this reality just as the narrator restlessly scratches at his pasty skin.

‘To respond to the world with a mixture of laughter and indignation is not perhaps the noblest way,’ writes Hodgart, ‘nor the most likely to lead to good works or great art; but it is the way of satire.’⁸⁶ To be sure, it is also the way of most of my travelogues that are set in Southeast Asia. In writing these stories it was my intent to combine ridicule of western predominance with certain artistic features that would evoke a sense of pleasure in the reader. Denunciations of Anglo expansionism and colonial practice are no longer unusual, and ultimately the purpose of this chapter is to indicate that while a reader may share a travel writer’s views on these global issues, there must also be something exciting in the writer’s method, something else besides mere lecture or complaint to enact within that reader a meaningful response, as for example wit and voice, or mischievous description of facts.

In chapter 5 I conclude my discussion on narratological decisions by looking at my use of point of view. I begin by elaborating on the concept of peripheral autobiography, wherein a travel writer restricts his or her involvement in the story for the purpose of accentuating the lives and conditions of others. The point is made that because most travelogues tend to focus on the inner evolution of the travel writer, most readers are destined to learn only about the experiencing mind, as opposed to learning deeply about the people and places with whom the travel narrative is concerned. This point is amplified by looking closely at the work of writer and folklorist Henry Glassie, and by further examining several stories in my collection.

⁸⁶ Hodgart, p. 10.

Chapter 5: Restricting the Self through Point of View

Critical readers will note that in most of my travelogues the autobiographical narrator is a limited participant. In ‘Banjar Anthology’ he is like a whack-a-mole puppet, haphazardly popping up throughout the story and abruptly disappearing again. In ‘How to Make White People Happy’ he is more like a guest at a surprise party, leaping out of nowhere at the very last minute. And in ‘The Perfect Paris Day’ he is physically truant altogether, an invisible force perceivable only through insinuation and tone.

This choice to restrict my presence in my own autobiographical work was the result of a conflicting reticence. While I was eager to explore my personal experience, to better define my journeying condition, I was reluctant to focus predominantly on the self. In the exciting locales where these stories occurred, nothing was so absorbing to me as the people I met, and often it felt as though their experiences possessed a greater value and substance than my own. The adventures that stoked my interest were not *my* adventures. The struggles that seemed so deserving of mention, so flavourful to my imagination, were not *my* struggles. Everything noteworthy originated from another source. By limiting my involvement in the action and relinquishing point of view to those sources, the focus of the narrative was, in turn, not limited to the exploration of my condition, but could expand to more acutely examine the conditions of the people who had captivated my attention.

In other words, the inclination was to be a reporter on events, rather than overtly involved with them. Fulfilling this instinct permitted me to express a central belief about the traveller’s position: that to be a foreigner is to surrender to a state of looking on, to be aware of and around the actions of others, but not always pertinent to their story. By restricting my autobiographical role, I could enforce the idea that the relevance of a travelogue was not strictly contingent upon the author’s participation.

Few have claimed that travel is Mark Twain's *best* subject, yet in his lifetime it was the subject of his best-selling books, and many of his admirers, like Shelley Fischer Franklin and David E.E. Sloane, extol *Innocents Abroad* as one of the most enduring pieces of travel literature ever written.⁸⁷ Considering the age in which it was authored, at least some part of the book's staying power must derive from its narrative mode. And at least some part of that mode's appeal, I would argue, is a product of Twain's point of view—the way he lets readers hear and see what is taking place around him.

Twain stands front and centre in most of his sketches, flexing his writing muscles like a greased up strongman, yet there is little glimpse into the author's inner journey reflected through the exterior trip. Instead, Twain revels in the spectacle of outward things. Descriptions of mishap and adventure, of custom and ritual, of disparities between American and foreign life are far more common than private monologues that speak of his spiritual reaction to travel. This is not to say that the self isn't adequately served. Plenty of passages deal in touching introspections. Yet even in those fits and swells of personal focus his reflections seldom drift too far inward or backward. A railway journey through the countryside of France, for example, does not lead to nostalgic cogitations about his own pastoral upbringing.⁸⁸ A tour through the hideous vault beneath the Capuchin Convent, its chambers and archways constructed of human bones, does not turn into an allusive meditation on his own mortality.⁸⁹ Twain writes of the spectacle in front of him, of things as they are right then, and rarely does he splurge, at least incisively, into the metaphysics behind *why* he is writing of them. The first-person perspective thrives; the autobiographical element is subdued. The eye stays focused on tangible aspects of place and journey.

Hulme notes that the travel writer 'often doubles as a journalist' and that 'a good deal of contemporary travel writing seems to be written by journalists looking for a larger

⁸⁷ See Franklin, *Lighting Out for the Territory: Reflections on Mark Twain and American Culture*; also Sloane, *Mark Twain as Literary Comedian*.

⁸⁸ Twain, pp. 105-106.

⁸⁹ Twain, pp. 298-300.

canvas'.⁹⁰ One might reasonably maintain, then, that Twain's choice of narrative style had little to do with an aesthetic agenda, his urge to reformulate the genre's conventions, but that he was more likely acceding to his training as a press man. In whichever case, it was by way of his part-reporter, part-participant method that the idea of a peripheral autobiography started to gain strength as a viable, satisfying way to communicate some of my travel experiences.

As readers we intuitively understand that a travelogue pivots and transforms the moment the travel writer explicitly enters the story. It is the critic Wayne Booth who reminds us that 'as soon as we encounter an "I" we are conscious of an experiencing mind whose views of the experience will come between us and the event.'⁹¹ Because most travelogues are presented by passing through the consciousness of the travel writer, most readers are inclined to focus on the writer's mental and emotional state, rather than what is happening to the subjects with which he or she is involved. By peripheral autobiography, therefore, I refer to a mode of narration in which the autobiographer either infrequently or never dramatizes his 'experiencing mind'. Readers may perceive that the story is coming from personal involvement and that they are seeing events through the point of view of the author, but also perceive that the author has chosen to remain apart from the action, relatively reticent, and that it is the lives and conditions of other subjects—be them individuals like Ketut Sutapa in 'How to Make White People Happy', or a community at large like Banjar Dalung in 'Banjar Anthology'—which hold the meaning and relevance of the account.

In fiction this technique is common enough. Some of the canon's most celebrated literature is presented through a first-person peripheral narrator who diverts focus from the self in the direction of other players. Any mystery buff will acknowledge how much ground Doctor Watson gives way to the deducer extraordinaire Sherlock Holmes. In *The Great Gatsby*, the ambivalent Nick Carraway reports from the fringes of Daisy and Gatsby's theatre,

⁹⁰ Peter Hulme, 'Travelling to write (1940-2000)', in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, eds. Peter Hume and Tim Youngs (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 87-99 (p.98).

⁹¹ Wayne Booth, 'Distance and Point of View: An Essay in Classification', in *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*, eds. Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy (United States: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 170-189 (p. 176).

electing to spend most of the story detached from events. ‘I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life’.⁹² Ishmael from *Moby Dick* and Somerset Maugham, writing in his own person as the narrator of *The Razor’s Edge*, take similar routes. And certainly there is no shortage of critics who would argue that Conrad’s Marlowe positively defines the form.

Another example is found in Zora Neale Hurston’s autobiographical piece ‘The Eatonville Anthology’, which served as the model for my own ‘Banjar Anthology’. Set in a remote African-American community in central Florida, the story is a cortege of anecdotes about the lives of several citizens in the town where Hurston grew up. Rather than overtly involve herself in the depiction of town affairs—which include wife beating, marital infidelity, and axe-wielding retribution—Hurston remains neutral and ambiguous. She offers no explicit information about her feelings toward the village or her position within it. Nor does she express any particular opinion about the people or events she is portraying. It is only a single pronoun, subtly implanted into a sketch about the town recluse, that formally distinguishes her first-person role,⁹³ and even here there is no strong effort to be singularly visible or central, the pronoun serving inclusively as ‘we’ rather than ‘I’.

In the genre of travelogue the good examples are less abundant, but there. The colossal heap of travel writing produced over the last half-century is well-enough endowed with personal narratives whose authors, for one reason or another, only scarcely foreground themselves in the telling of their experiences, or else only marginally describe the impact of those experiences on their own sensibilities. There is no doubt that Glassie’s *Passing the Time in Ballymenone*, with its pictures of artefacts and local sheet music, its 117 pages of footnotes and appendices, stands foremost as a scientific discourse into the life and folklore of a rural

⁹² F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group, 1999), p. 28.

⁹³ Zora Neale Hurston, ‘The Eatonville Anthology’, in *The Norton Book of American Short Stories*, ed. Peter S. Prescott (New York: Norton, W.W. & Company, 1988), pp. 357-367 (p.359).

Irish community.⁹⁴ One might suggest the same for Gourevitch's *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families*, a brutally penetrating account of the Rwanda genocide in 1994.⁹⁵ Each book exhibits a strong degree of forensic detachment; each relies on extensive interviews, historical knowledge, and an enormous amount of cultural research. Yet neither is your typical scholarly text, exclusive of everything but factual detail. Glassie and Gourevitch's fervid interaction with a people and culture, their artistic devotion to create a deeper awareness of their subject matter—and in Gourevitch's case, his adamant interest in exposing the human destruction caused by the late twentieth century's most inhumane event—clearly distinguish their work from purely ethnographic scholarship. But the line is never too far crossed, the reflective impulse never unloosed. Transfixed by surroundings, bestirred by a geographical area and its human society, neither author can fully refrain from braiding the inner journey into his account; yet rarely is there more than a few paragraphs of self-fixation to come between the reader and the subjects being written about. The personal remains largely in the periphery. The Irish in Ballymenone, the Tutsi in Rwanda are the focus of attention.

In several of my travelogues the restricted point of view symbolizes the role I played in the real-life event. These stories are not actually told as an observer of the action, but as a close confidant who has earned the confidence of the source and gained access to private thoughts and reasoning. In effect, this narrator-confidant has collected the details of the story after it has happened, and as such is capable of relating the subject's actions without presuming the state of mind behind them or divulging information that is only within the right and power of the subject to divulge—a constant issue in any form of reflective writing, but one that can be especially problematic when it occurs in a travelogue.

⁹⁴ Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (United States: Indiana University Press, 1995).

⁹⁵ Philip Gourevitch, *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families: stories from Rwanda* (New York: Distributed by Holtzbrinck Publishers, 1998).

The stories ‘Gym Bag Steak’ and ‘How to Make White People Happy’ provide the best examples of this. Each narrative operates through a quasi-interview format in which the protagonist confides to the narrator-confidant a personal experience many years after it has occurred. In ‘Gym Bag Steak’ this format is apparent from the start; in ‘How to Make White People Happy’ it is revealed at the end. In either case, the nature of actual experience determines the peripheral nature of my narrative. My relationships with Conrad and Ketut (the respective protagonists for each story) were deeply personal. When they confided their experiences this closeness permitted me to probe further into what they were disclosing, to ask more sensitive questions and harvest information that I later used to enhance and drive the narrative. Like Gourevitch and Glassie I am clearly present in my travelogue, recounting personal experience, but only insofar as that experience relates to establishing the frame of the story.

The nature of the relationship that inspired ‘The Perfect Paris Day’ prompted me to restrict my autobiographical presence even further. The protagonist, Gloria, is based on a woman who told me her story during a flight from Frankfurt to Chicago. The woman was returning home after a disastrous trip to Paris, in which she had suffered a nervous breakdown as a result of the stress and confusion brought on by her travels. In this instance, the decision to remove myself from the narrative was rooted in practicality, not symbolism. Because I had no substantial connection with the main character, any appearance or activity in her story seemed superfluous. Unlike the travelogues above, the narrator in ‘The Perfect Paris Day’ elects to be absent altogether, lending tone and commentary without the complication of becoming an existing character.

My use of a limited narrator can also be interpreted as a projection of my creative and cultural limitations. Invariably, to one extent or another, my status as a foreigner prevented me from obtaining all the facts that surrounded the stories I wished to write about. In Indonesia specifically, native communities were generally tight-knit and insular, and even

when a certain trust was gained there was always a cultural barrier (usually language) that impeded my comprehension of matters. Always I was an outsider. Always there was an inner circle I could not fully penetrate. Within this circle were the confidentialities I needed to create the most incisive account I could. As such, this method of paying witness and simply reporting on events is, on some occasions, more the product of a failed connection—of an intimacy I could not establish with my host community—than it is a wilful decision to deflect attention from the self.

Considering the ethical implications of publically revealing someone's life, it is important to mention that, before putting together and publishing 'Gym Bag Steak' and the title story 'How to Make White People Happy', I solicited and received full consent from each subject, taking and using their story only so much as they deemed acceptable. In the case of 'The Perfect Paris Day', where it was impossible to obtain expressed permission due to the circumstance of the encounter (I had not yet decided to write the woman's story when she told it to me), it was necessary to fictionalize certain details (names, participants, events) to shroud the subject from any potentially unwanted recognition. To some degree or another, all travelogues in this collection are filtered through this approach.

The temptation for most travel writers is to connect the outer journey with the inner one—to chart the secret trails of the mind while the body enters and traverses unfamiliar terrain. But if it is only human nature to express our emotional state when we write about our travels, to become incisively autobiographical as we negotiate feelings of transition and displacement, why then might a travel writer choose to repress this instinct, to be *within* a foreign habitat yet write as though he or she were adamantly *without*, as Nick Carraway describes?

For some, the answer might be as straightforward as stylistic taste. Writers like Jon Krakauer, for example, may simply prefer the 'voice' of detached reportage, with its frank

and journalistic tone, over the more literary and discursive voice of personal narrative. These writers may feel that a certain amount of distance gives their work a greater focus and efficiency, cutting down on meandering monologues and clunky insight. In other instances a peripheral point of view may provide the writer with a kind of politically correct failsafe, a way to broach controversial subject-matter without explicitly speaking out against it. In that vein, the form might also cater to an inhibition or weakness, to an author's lack of boldness or self-knowledge, or to an inability to be assertive and open.

And still there might be other reasons, traumatic and complex motives that compel a travel writer to curtail the subjective impulse. As a young folklorist Henry Glassie had published an essay that had 'conformed to academic norms and dutifully cleared a patch of intellectual new ground'; but the paper had affronted the man he wrote about and in the end it had cost him a friend.⁹⁶ Disturbed by the damage his essay had caused, yet committed to writing as his means of expanding culture 'beyond the control of a prosperous, literate minority', Glassie turned away from an interest in individuals and set his focus upon the explanation of objects—objects that were 'placid and unconcerned'—and in this way continued to think and learn and write about people without fear of doing them direct harm.⁹⁷ The decision to limit his subjectivity may have satisfied the narrative conventions of ethnographic discourse, but its genesis was personal and reflexive—a defensive response triggered by an emotional crisis and the wish to avoid another in the future.

Glassie's work was largely ethnographic, true; but the struggle he faced is by no means exclusive to ethnographers or academic researchers. Anyone who writes probingly of other places must, at some point, confront the human implications of their inquest. At least two essays in my collection are deeply influenced by the dynamics of this confrontation. Early drafts of 'How to Make White People Happy' and 'Banjar Anthology' (each set in

⁹⁶ Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (United States: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 11.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, Glassie, p. 11.

Indonesia) found me exceptionally reluctant to assert my views on the social and economic circumstances of a postcolonial Asian culture and individuals within it. The fear was that I would get it wrong, everything, all the sensitive and complicated realities around me: that in my youth and utter westernness I would lack the strength of urgency, power of observation, and depth of sensitivity to sufficiently portray a globalized society that was becoming ever the more subject to economics and the intrusion of capitalist values. The ecology, the language, the food, the commerce—all the fantastic contrasts to western morality and philosophy that eastern culture exhibited—all of it beguiled and amazed me, and in my amazement it seemed impossible that I could relate what I was seeing without somehow mucking it up and inflicting upon the people and culture some level of disrespect.

Against this insecurity my tactic was to play it safe. The imperative was to cause no harm, to neither misinterpret nor misunderstand, and the best way to do that was to avoid the dangerous complexity of human story, to focus instead on the description of facts and features, like the omniscient cataloguing of a guidebook author. The look of a sunset over the Indian Ocean, the style and nuance of native dress, the names and architecture of popular temples—there was nothing flammable about such topics. They were safe, expected, superficial impressions. I could circle around them forever, refining and exploring techniques of description, overloading on lyrical adjectives and decorative speech. And that is what I did.

Over time Glassie came to reject his sheer focus on artefacts. Old barns and broken houses told him much about the culture around him, but by themselves they did not satisfy his need for story. The inanimate world was not enough. ‘I yearned for resistance, conversation, live guidance, a sense of the wholeness of another life so that I could better shape my own.’⁹⁸ Like Glassie, I too yearned for a greater wholeness in my work. Life was lived among people, and it was the story of people confronting and living *within* their world—not just descriptions of that physical world itself—that brought fullness and power to a travel narrative. As the

⁹⁸ Ibid., Glassie, p. 12.

drafting process continued I found the confidence to play with form, and I discovered a way to push my narratives past a basic impression of things. A restricted point of view permitted personal experience without the experiencing mind becoming the story's focus. It enabled an audience to intuit my thoughts and feelings on a topic, my subjectivity, while giving the people I was writing about the full and proper spotlight.

If most contemporary travel writing foregrounds the author's point of view (Bill Bryson, Chuck Thompson, Elizabeth Gilbert, Maartan Troost), then perhaps the approach I take in some of my work is a throwback to another era. We know that the basic contours of travel writing were established by the Grand Tourists of the 18th century. But it is the 19th century when the idea of the 'travel author' as we now understand it begins to emerge, when the audience begins to learn as much about the writer's unique perspective as the actual place. As much as anyone, Twain understood the growing accessibility of travel to the middle class. By the time *Innocents Abroad* was released, larger and larger parties of tourists were embarking upon the same journeys that, historically, had been the sole privilege of the elite. Travel was no longer a tool by which the rich could individuate themselves from others, and travel authors, as commercial writers, began to adjust the focus of their content to meet the tastes of a new generation of tourists who weren't associated with classically trained society.

Yet even in Twain's travel writing we see shadows of the conventions that dominated the genre during the previous century, when going abroad – as *New York Times* travel blogger Matt Gross puts it – served primarily as a kind of 'cultural finishing school,' rather than as a low-budget means of consuming exotic landmarks or escaping domestic routine.⁹⁹ Thus, like Twain, I might say that my style occasionally touches back to the more objective mode of the 18th century, with the exception that I do not pretend to a truly objective or authoritative point

⁹⁹ Matt Gross, 'What is the Grand Tour?', < https://frugaltraveler.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/05/14/what-is-the-grand-tour/?_r=0 > [accessed 10 November 2016].

of view. Stories like ‘Gym Bag Steak’, ‘Banjar Anthology’ and ‘How to Make White People Happy’ present a strong case for the need to get back to a kind of informed objectivism (particularly in postcolonial settings), shifting emphasis away from the author’s experience and placing it more squarely on the manners, customs, cultural practices of the actual destination.

Journey changes the self that travels, but what is too often underexplored—if examined at all—is how it changes the place that is visited.

I have tried in this chapter to convey some sense of my approach to autobiographical travel writing and why a peripheral point of view appeals to me as a way of writing about foreign communities. Moreover, I have indicated my reservations with travelogues that celebrate the experiencing mind in too disproportionate a manner, with writers who focus principally on the importance of the self while spending less attention on the importance of the people they are writing about. Finally, I have suggested that readers of contemporary travelogue might benefit from the kind of work that values knowledge of others, rather than knowledge of ourselves, as the real discovery of travel. In my final chapter I return to Botton’s concept of the imaginative counterweight, concluding my critical commentary with a discussion of my story ‘Banjar Anthology’ and how it acts against traditional methods of cultural representation.

Chapter 6:
Writing Against the Imaginative Counterweight

In April 2008 *The Guardian* reported on former Lonely Planet guidebook writer Thomas Kohnstamm, who admitted in his memoir, *Do Travel Writers Go to Hell?* that he did not always visit the places he reviewed, and that his work on a guidebook of Columbia was actually undertaken while living in San Francisco. Kohnstamm states that most experienced guidebook writers, because of moneygrubbing publishers who pay nothing in expenses, learn ways to ‘cut corners’, mostly in the sense of obtaining information from means and sources other than personal experience.¹⁰⁰ Speaking to the Associated Press, LP publisher Piers Pickard defended Kohnstamm by claiming that many writers in the guidebook industry were hired to write only about a country’s history, not to travel there and encounter it firsthand, and that Kohnstamm’s case was not unusual. But this defence has done little to ease the controversy sparked by Kohnstamm’s book, in which he casually admits to misrepresenting local businesses and customs to create a desired effect.¹⁰¹

Ironically, much of my interest in travel writing derives from a general cynicism toward the travel industry, particularly the luxury and guidebook market. Even before Kohnstamm’s memoir my impression was that too many travel writers worked from a narrative script, based on an agenda their publishers wanted them to follow. In many cases their reports revealed only a fractional, bourgeois part of their destinations, such as accommodations and dining. In other cases their accounts felt scandalously reheated, their research yanked from tourist brochures or travel blogs, the very sources of unreliable information their direct experience was supposed to certify or debunk. And while I understood that brochures and guidebooks were just that—brochures and guidebooks, as

¹⁰⁰ Haroon Siddique, ‘Lonely Planet writer plays down fake reviews’, *The Guardian*, 10 April (2008), <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2008/apr/14/10> [accessed 5 April 2016] (para. 9 of 17).

¹⁰¹ Thomas Kohnstamm, *Do Travel Writers Go to Hell? A Swashbuckling Tale of High Adventures, Questionable Ethics, and Professional Hedonism* (United States: Crown Publishing Group, 2008).

compared to travel narratives—such materials still possessed many of the same literary aspects, and exuded many of the same alluring promises and lofty impressions of travelogue.

Beyond that, I felt mistrust toward the market's typically ebullient, saccharine, advertorial treatment of places and cultures. Like bakers who used too much sugar, the writers of these brochures and guidebooks relied heavily on catchy titles and splashy adjectives that gave their depictions the taste of glorified ad copy. They took trips to Lovely London, Gorgeous Grenada, Beautiful Brazil, and when they got there everything was scintillating, sumptuous, breathtaking, surreal. Representations were more concerned with being yummy and delicious than with producing a cogent testimonial of place. There was no compelling excavation of experience, no powerful penetration of culture, no delving into the truer complications of cross-cultural immersion beyond precautionary depictions of bigger roaches, different toilets, or spicier food.

And the problem wasn't just contained to pamphlets and guidebooks. Reviewing the 'doe-eyed beauty' of the Indonesia archipelago—where 'Banjar Anthology' takes place—a travel column for *The Telegraph* notes this about Bali:

Bali is the complete tropical island; lush, culturally unique and exotic, yet with all forms of creature comforts. It invented tropical luxury, with a signature style of pavilion-like hotels with teak daybeds and handcrafted interiors that is plagiarised in boutique hotels from Anjuna to Zanzibar. An island of Hindu offerings, incense wafts through the air from the second you step off the plane, and colourful, eccentric-looking gods poke their head out of every taxi mirror, shop door, and hotel lobby.¹⁰²

High-distribution travel matter, like the pieces we find in leisure columns and airline magazines, often redistribute the emphasis from place to self. Their writers (faced with industry expectations and the pressure to sell first and inform second) are expected to do one

¹⁰² Guyan Mitra, 'Indonesia's islands: travel guide', originally published in *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 September (2013), article removed from original resource and reproduced by Questex Media Group at <http://www.travelagentcentral.com/indonesia/indonesias-islands-travel-guide-42665> [accessed 5 April 2016] (para. 4 of 42).

thing above all else: arouse interest.¹⁰³ It is not essential, therefore, that they boldly confront the rougher facts and realities of their destinations. What matters is that readers are supplied with an evocative concept of somewhere else. A travel writer like Kohnstamm, for example, may consequently decide to eschew invasive exploration of this elsewhere because it is merely secondary. Establishing an ‘imaginative counterweight’—to return to Botton’s phrase from Chapter 1—is the narrative’s organizing principle.¹⁰⁴

‘Banjar Anthology’ is an antidote to this convention. Using a collage of character portraits to reveal life in a rural Bali slum, the narrator shifts focus away from self and centres it on place. The objective is not to induce romantic notions about a destination, but to provide a trenchant presentation of its inhabitants and events. Glorification of the indigenous is strictly avoided. Though at times playful in tone, the reality behind these portraits is effectively one of desperation and struggle. Immersed in the daily grind of the banjar, the narrator is too familiar with the adversity of conditions, too close to the emotionally warping effects of exploitation and poverty to hype the native experience or ode to native virtue. There are no cavorting locals, no tropical charms, no evocative imaginative counterweight to provoke the reader’s fancy. Social and individual lives are given their proper treatment in a community subject to ceaseless travail.

I lived in Banjar Dalung for over a year. In drafting its story I drew mostly from journal entries recorded near the end of my residence, and rarely from earlier entries, which tended to be impulsively scrawled and filled with ungrounded first impressions. Few of these early entries had a grasp of where I was or what was going on around me. The jottings did not necessarily lack verisimilitude. I recorded my reality as genuinely as I perceived it. But they did lack an informed understanding of environment and causation. Acknowledged but unincorporated, as yet too alien to reap acceptance from the community, I had no access to the

¹⁰³ Chuck Thompson, *Smile When You’re Lying: Confessions of a Rogue Travel Writer* (United States: Holt, Henry & Company, 2008), pp. 172-73.

¹⁰⁴ See Chapter 1, p. 11.

realities of my neighbours' lives beyond that which ordinary surveillance allowed. Without the intimacy necessary for accurate understanding my observations ran away with themselves, manifesting in my notebook as they manifested in the very travel writings I did not trust—as florid lionizations of native culture. There was the *noble ruggedness* of Citra the washwoman, with her mouth of missing teeth; the *lethargic serenity* of farmer Nanang's cow, lolling by the road; the *flourishing jocundity* of inspector Sarjana, always with a neighbourly smile.

As I became closer with my neighbours the exuberance of my observations diminished. My incorporation into the banjar deepened my realization of its problems, grounded my interpretations. I learned that Citra's teeth had been knocked from her mouth during a quarrel with her brother, that farmer Nanang's cow was an incontinent menace, and that the friendly inspector was corrupt to his core, an unrepentant taker of bribes and solicitor of kickbacks. This dimming of romantic perception was not a product of cynicism, but the fruit of induction; and while the story's tone may occasionally tempt the reader to think that I have applied the same satiric approach as I do in 'How to Make White People Happy', this is not the case. With acceptance came familiarity, and with greater familiarity arrived a pressing desire to portray the people around me in conformance with their actualities. As I grew to know my community (its corruption, its lassitude, its paralyzing superstition) it became a kind of perjury for my narrator to exalt it.

This sort of righteousness is not unique among travel writers, of course. The canon is well-stocked with authors who reject the idea that travel writing is somehow obliged to offer an imaginative counterweight; that the genre's foremost concern is to be invigorating to a market, not precise to actual experience, and that certain images, extrapolations and raw material are best left on the cutting-room floor in favour of sufficiently appealing to an audience's taste for snappy info and pretty ideals. I have mentioned the satiric muggings perpetrated by Twain, who scorned the gushing travel books of his time and skewered the contemporaries who wrote them. And I have mentioned, as well, Gustave Flaubert, whose

travel narratives, according to Derek Gregory, do more than just capture the ‘dreams of the fantastic’ and place them on ‘intricate display’, but also dramatize the experience of Egypt with such radiant evocation that the ‘Orient’ still resonates today (for better or worse) as a model of the exotic.¹⁰⁵ In the modern era we have Fermor’s *A Time of Gifts* and Matthiessen’s *The Snow Leopard* (to name a few), both of which snub the service-oriented conventions of more publishable travel literature by placing painstaking emphasis on personal spirituality and environmental data. Yet none of these writers were, in their time, professional travel authors. Twain made his name as a humourist. Flaubert was a novelist. Matthiessen was as notable for fiction as he was for nonfiction, the only writer to ever win the National Book Award in each category. Only Fermor is directly associated with travel writing, and even his work, as Jan Morris points out, is infinitely more than that.¹⁰⁶ With the exception of a few bold rants, the concern of these writers for the integrity of the genre is largely implicit, detectable almost exclusively through the manner in which they practice the craft, rather than by overt claims about what is wrong with it.

For that, there are whistleblowers like Kohnstamm and Chuck Thompson—former snake-oil salesmen who, knowing the industry from the inside out, have turned against the travel writing racket with unmitigated vengeance and glee. In his misanthropic tell-all *Smile When You’re Lying: Confessions of a Rogue Travel Writer*, Thompson sledgehammers the editors and corporate executives who (in his mind) have done more to ruin certain locations than the tourists everybody sermonizes against. Thompson aims much of his vitriol at the market’s servile allegiance to advertisers, pointing out in an interview with NPR that in most travel magazines the ad copy thoroughly dictates the editorial copy, putting pressure on writers to churn out ‘witless puffery’ and ‘sun-dappled barf’ instead of genuine commentary.

¹⁰⁵ Derek Gregory, ‘Between the book and the lamp: imaginative geographies of Egypt, 1849-50’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 20 (1995), 29-57 (p.29).

¹⁰⁶ Jan Morris, introduction to *A Time of Gifts* by Patrick Leigh Fermor (United States: New York Review of Books, 2005), pp. vii-xi.

It's the same words. It's the same buzzers. The advertiser content pushes the editorial content, and what you get when the writers become aware of this [unintelligible] what you get are a lot of writers groping for the language of advertisers. It's all hyperbole.¹⁰⁷

Considering the knavish and puerile transgressions glamorized in their memoirs, it would be over-generous to grant Kohnstamm or Thompson high moral marks for attempting to set the record straight, or to laud them as subversive 'rogue' writers fighting for the veracity of their craft. Neither produces the type of exposé in which one should place good trust. Kohnstamm overstrains in his effort to be ribald and inflammatory, airing plenty of dirty laundry but delving little into the moral conflict of writers held to ransom by the demands of profit-driven publishers; while Thompson's memoir is more a concatenation of men's room anecdotes and faulty demolition jobs, his central justification that the 'most interesting stories' never make it to print considerably undermined by the stories he *does* tell—tales that repeatedly fall short of pointing out anything more illuminating about his destinations than what is already commonly presumed about them.¹⁰⁸ The values of each book are summed up best, perhaps, by the words of Robert Hauptman. 'Imagine how horrific a work would be if its author was fully committed not to amelioration but, rather, to destruction—not the inadvertent harm that may accompany a positive intent but, instead, unmitigated destructiveness.'¹⁰⁹

Equally problematic is the fact that neither Kohnstamm nor Thompson—however committed they are to exposing the oily deeds of a lucrative industry—effectively explicate why such misconduct matters to the travel-reading public. So what if a luxury travel article is packed to the rafters with hyperbole? Big deal if some island getaway is prettified for effect. What does it matter if a guidebook about one country is researched from another country, without personal observation or firsthand experience by the author?

¹⁰⁷ Chuck Thompson, interviewed by Mike Pesca, *The Scrumptious Lies of Travel Writing*, 3 January 2008 <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=17804543> [accessed 6 April 2016].

¹⁰⁸ Chuck Thompson, *Smile When You're Lying: Confessions of a Rogue Travel Writer* (2016) <http://chuckthompson.com/books/smile-when-youre-lying/> [accessed 6 April 2016] (para. 2 of 3).

¹⁰⁹ Robert Hauptman, 'Authorial Ethics: How Writers Abuse Their Calling', *Journal of Scholarly Publishing*, 39 (2008), pp. 323-353 (p. 327).

One possible response is that travel writers who deal in the discourse of the imaginative counterweight create, as Edward Said suggests in his critique of Orientalism, a theatrical stage out of destinations, a 'closed field' in which readers (particularly western readers) may project their fantasies and desires.¹¹⁰ These stages are veneered with props that assume the form of people, landscape, food and other exciting features for which the area might be stereotypically known. Looking at these props from a position of unfamiliarity, one cannot see anything but what is facing back at them. There are no angles, no depth. The pictures are flat, and, however colourful and lurid, without life or substance. On the road, however, these props become strikingly real and multi-dimensional once we are physically situated in a place. They form working mouths that may speak rude things or charge false prices; working eyes that may leer and make us uncomfortable; working arms that may reach out to beg or grope or pick our pockets. The beaches may suddenly come alive with pollution or crowds; the food may suddenly become real with an unappetizing taste; and all the while the memory of the expectations those props engendered darkens our mood and increases frustration.

Of course, all authors to some degree 'manipulate, alter, distort, and create their own version of reality.'¹¹¹ But while most of us accept the inevitability of artifice when we pick up a text, even a work of nonfiction, there is the expectation that no text will compromise our welfare, and it is here where we find much of the controversy that surrounds Kohnstamm's memoir. A text that simply intuits the needs of an audience, rather than supplying them with accurate cultural information, may ultimately put those readers at risk. Not just the emotional risk of disillusionment and confusion (as Gloria experiences in 'The Perfect Paris Day'), but financial and physical risk as well. On the one hand, travellers following a Kohnstamm-like guidebook may walk into a well-reviewed restaurant and find themselves merely

¹¹⁰ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1979), p. 63.

¹¹¹ Hauptman, p. 325.

underwhelmed and overcharged. On the other, they may wander into an area underreported for its crime against foreigners and find themselves in genuine danger.

Then there are those like Hauptman, scholars who consider truth to be ‘the single most important authorial benchmark.’¹¹² For them, professional authors have responsibilities. Like all professionals they are expected to operate within the ethics of their profession, to ask themselves the principle ethical questions—Is this action right or wrong? acceptable or unacceptable?—and act upon the answers at which they arrive. Novelists, poets, journalists, researchers—all writers are adjured to authenticity and integrity, to do no harm to their subjects or audience.¹¹³ And on the subject of travel writers I will also add to witness directly and report without egregious distortion. Refusing to bait readers with calculated prevarication or to base a text in an imaginative counterweight, or to report on cultures and places that were not directly experienced—these are only a few of the ethical commitments that might constitute honest travel writing; and they are scruples I try to uphold in ‘Banjar Anthology’.

And yet like any author I do not uphold them. Not always.

While it is unlikely that the writing in this collection would compromise the reader’s welfare, it is nonetheless appropriate to consider the relationship between my work and the type of resource and luxury travel copy that I criticize, given how closely my travel writing relates to memoir, and how seriously readers tend to care about the honesty of their memoirists.

The fact is inadvertently or purposefully, hyperbole and distortion occur with some frequency in my narratives. In some cases this is the result of poor notetaking or faulty memory. In other instances it is the consequence of favouring style over facts, of leaving out details that disrupt the lyricism of the prose. In writing ‘Banjar Anthology’ distortion was cued by the realization that any account of the banjar would, to some extent, entail its exploitation. Ethical travel writing involved factual writing, this was true; but writing

¹¹² Hauptman, p. 326.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 327.

factually about the banjar meant writing sensitive and distressing material about the people who lived there; people who had become my friends and accepted me into their community. It meant tapping into their poverty and hardship and putting it on public display. Intrigued by these issues but afraid of harming others for the sake of literary gain, I abjured certain stories that felt especially dangerous, including one that involved child prostitution. Yet for other stories (stories that might have been less explicit but no less painful to the people they were about) I did not do this.

Thus, despite authorial intentions, ‘Banjar Anthology’ could be perceived by some readers (as I have occasionally perceived it) as a mutual failure of ethical commitment: an account that neither services the audience with a complete presentation of place, nor fully protects the rights and privacies of its participants.

In the preceding section I have focused on the ethics of travel writing by considering the practices and agendas of some of its contemporary authors. Specifically, I have pointed out that because of industry expectations and the ‘sell first’ demands of editors and publishers, as well a lack of authorial responsibility, many so-called travel writers concentrate foremost on arousing readerships by transforming destinations into delectable, imaginative stages that concurrently reinforce and counterbalance notions of domestic mundanity. I have discussed the potential harm to both travellers and natives when authors disregard the complex experience of other cultures, and in talking about the flaws in my own writing I have also discussed the possibility that one can never fully avoid distorting those cultures to some degree—that whether or not we wish to do so, we are always distorting the ‘other’ through the choices we make in the text. In the final section of the chapter I would like delve a little further into the idea of the imaginative counterweight as it applies to my writing.

Almost all of the portraits in ‘Banjar Anthology’ open with a statement on the personality or habits of the character they feature. This statement more or less defines that

character's reputation and status in the community. At the same time, whenever a portrait opens with a negative quality, the narrator is quick to defend that character's shortcoming with an amendment or justification. In this way the narrative signifies the banjar's solidarity and its acceptance of each member, a concept that is ultimately manipulated by inspector Sarjana when, in an attempt to coerce a bribe from the narrator, he cites the social code of *menyama braya*: All banjar is family.

The inspector is a good example of the type of counterweight this story sets out to reject. If the impulse to associate purity with the indigenous is felt most particularly by those who live within commercially developed, consumer-driven societies—those who would be most likely to be seduced by the soulless travel copy Thompson condemns—then the characters of 'Banjar Anthology' provide a useful reminder that the destinations of our dreams are not imaginary or untouchable. They are real places well within the influence of the emerging global market, locations which have achieved perfection only in the desktop backgrounds of our computers or the posters taped to the windows of travel agencies.

Few of the banjar's residents lead the charmingly simple life that the Dutchman—the quintessential western escapist—condescendingly advocates in the story's opening scene. For him, undeveloped equates to untainted. It is the cultural integrity and human wholesomeness that is being rapidly annihilated by the 'onslaught of civilization'. For the disabled young local he is speaking to, however, undeveloped means adversity. It is the physical and economic reality that enables the deplorable housing, the inadequate infrastructure, the poor healthcare, and the general meagreness of conditions that force him to risk his life by climbing the heights of coconut palms to harvest the barely-profitable fruit. When the Dutchman begins to catalogue the quaint virtues of 'traditional' native life, the incredulous young native scoffs at the naivety and bitterly invites the western race to have it all.

This opening scene bears out a continuum of painful rebuttals. Nothing of the Dutchman's wholesome idea of indigenous Balinese life is ever validated. However tight-knit

and generous, residents of Banjar Dalung suffer boredom, unemployment, Dengue fever and an infestation of diseased dogs. They cunningly disgrace their religion to profit off tourists, sustain fearful and racist beliefs against Muslims and westerners, and reverse the pattern of sexual exploitation by soliciting love connections with visiting foreigners. At the centre of this complex and struggling community are Panji and Putu, a jobless teenage couple who, expecting their first child, suffer the relentless strain of trying to figure out how they will raise and feed it.

In short, the purpose of this story is to present an indigenous community through a range of perspectives, then systematically deconstruct its idyllic stereotype using techniques such as humour, satire, tone of voice, and reflections on personal and cultural motivations. In this way I have tried to position my work in opposition of the counterweight strategy, and refrain from reducing a complex foreign culture to empty, ornamental, emblematic impressions.

Guidebooks and travel columns are not, of course, insidious deceivers by nature, even if their authors sometimes practice deception. They are a specific form of resource material intended for a specific purpose: to help people make informed decisions when they travel. In the end their peccadillo might simply be found in what they go out of their way *not* to remind us of. Location can never exclusively determine happiness. Although we may dream of the pleasure of a congenial climate or the restorative power of a lovely bright sun and a long sandy coast, the truth is that fulfilment is far too extraordinary a condition to be achieved simply by a geographical shift, by suddenly living barefoot in the sand or bathing in tropical rivers, or choosing a life stripped of superfluous luxury, surrounded by foreign culture. Ultimately, the deadly fault of most travel writing is not to be found in its overemphatic rhetoric, but in what it fails to emphasize enough.

Conclusion: Overview and Final Comments

In each of the preceding chapters I have used one story from my creative component to define and validate a particular element of my writing practice. As I arrive at this conclusion, I would like to pivot away from the discussion of individual stories and address why the collection looks the way it does and how it operates as a body of work. Specifically, I would like to articulate the method in which I have ordered my narratives, the reason I have chosen this method, how it helps readers understand my authorial approach, and how I perceive the identity of the collection in terms of genre and intended audience. Afterward, I would like to finish with a discussion of what the creative work has achieved and how my critical commentary has contextualized this work and revealed its essential aspects and strategies.

Arrangement of Collection: Formal Decisions

A key belief in my reflective writing practice is that the things we most remember invariably detach themselves from the embeddedness – the chronology of our lives – and float free to the front of the line. Consequently, the narratives in this collection are not presented in chronological order; rather, they are haphazardly situated to symbolize my attitude toward the autobiographical form and the arbitrary nature of recollection.

A couple of fundamental interpretations are at play here. The first is that memory does not abide to a timeline. It is a freelance operation, digressive and unpredictable. If we were to remember our first day of school, our first kiss, and the first time we met our spouse, we would surely not remember them in that order from one day to the next. The sequence would alternate depending on our daily circumstances and a range of factors. For the autobiographical writer, chronological reflection is a courtesy extended to the audience. It is the subjugation of natural disorder for the purpose of assisting comprehension. But while sequential recollection may enrich readability, it is not a quality of verisimilitude, and in the

course of putting together an autobiographical work (where at least some part of the author's purpose is to reveal his or her life in an emotionally honest way), it can make the creative experience feel like a false effort, a betrayal of genuine human process. Ford Maddux Ford makes a similar point in his biography of Joseph Conrad.

“Life does not say to you: ‘In 1914 my next door neighbour, Mr. Slack, erected a greenhouse and painted it with Cox’s green aluminum paint.’ If you think about the matter carefully you will remember, in various unordered pictures, how one day Mr. Slack appeared in his garden and contemplated the wall of his house. You will then try to remember the year of that occurrence and will fix it as August 1914 because having had the foresight to bear the municipal stock of the city of Liege you were able to afford a first-class season ticket for the first time in your life. You will remember Mr. Slack—then much thinner because it was before he found out where to buy that cheap Burgundy of which he has since drunk an inordinate quantity, though whiskey you think would be much better for him! Mr. Slack again came into his garden, this time with a pale weaselly-faced fellow, who touched his cap from time to time. Mr. Slack will point to his house wall several times at different points, the weaselly fellow touching his cap at each pointing. Some days after, coming back from business you will have observed against Mr. Slack’s wall—At this point you will remember that you were then the manager of the fresh-fish branch of Messrs. Caitlin and Clovis in Fenchurch Street...what a change since then! Millicent had not yet put her hair up. You will remember how Millicent’s hair looked, rather pale and burnished in plaits. You will remember how it looks henna’d: and you will see in one corner of your mind’s eye a little picture of Mr. Mills the vicar talking—oh, very kindly—to Millicent after she has come back from Brighton.”¹¹⁴

Such a disjointed and extraneous style could not, of course, be readable for very long. But Maddux’s example has its value. Life does not narrate; it renders impressions. The effect of memory is not reproduced by chronological reports of past events. On any given day, during any given hour, we make quantum leaps in our head. We jump back to our earliest memories, bound forward to what we did yesterday, vault back to childhood, then to something that occurred five minutes earlier. This psychological principle applies, with some variation, to *How to Make White People Happy*. By producing an unsystematic succession of reflections, rather than a linear progression based on ‘first lived, first told,’ I maintain a

¹¹⁴ *Modernism in Literature*, ed. by Todd Bender, Nancy Armstrong, Sue Briggum and Frank Knobloch (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), pp. 502-503.

formal integrity that not only gives the reader a better sense of the personality of the narrator, but an understanding of the back-and-forth nature of personal development. The implication is that moral and intellectual growth is not a straightforward process. One takes two steps forward in knowledge of himself and others, then one step backward. With every piece of cultural misinformation we confront, we are exposed to another that itself will have to be reconciled down the line. Ultimately, it was not a matter of creating a tidy alphabet of life experiences or ‘lessons learned’ that conveniently began in childhood and concluded in adulthood; but of devising a means to represent the erratic effect of life – in this case, the travel life – in all of its vacillation and seeming inconsistency.

Of course, to arrange the collection in a way that connected memory travel with physical travel, it was important to make sure that narratives about the same destination, or which took place in the same cultural setting, were not grouped too closely together. Readers will therefore notice that a relatively equal amount of distance is placed between those narratives set in Asia, those set in North America, and those set in Europe. The same can be said for pieces set in childhood, or which contain a coming-of-age element, such as ‘Play Date’ and ‘Something Californian.’ This calculated segregation of similarly-set narratives ensures that the symbolic meaning described above remains uncompromised. The reader experiences the circuitous path of memory travel while engaging my travel life.

Defining Identity: Genre and Audience

We are a civilization of readers who are mad for categorization, who are, in fact, obsessed with finding terms to distinguish between the mass of published texts that confront our literary lives. Yet one of the most interesting aspects of *How to Make White People Happy* – and one of its strengths, I believe – is that it blends a range of genres, incorporating a variety of creative styles and narrative techniques in its quest to articulate the complexity of the travel condition.

Indeed, the question of definition poses, and continues to pose, a difficult challenge. If our writings are intended for a public audience, for readers, then presumably it is our readers who – bringing their own experiences and perspectives to the texts – make our narratives function in one genre or another. This is not to excuse myself from ownership of my work; it is only to say that any definition I provide of that work is rightfully subject to debate. My idea of the amount of life that must be revealed for a work to classify as autobiographic may, for example, differ from my readers', who might interpret that work as fiction if they sense too many omissions. Whereas I may view my work as personal essay, a critic may see it as an editorial or article, failing to find the material sufficiently self-revelatory, or too lax in its effort to remove cultural illusions.

It is true that if one sticks to the conventional definitions of autobiography, such as the definition presented by scholar Philippe Lejeune – in which autobiography is 'retrospective prose written by a real person concerning his own existence,' with a focus on his individual life and the story of his personality¹¹⁵ – then *How to Make White People Happy* is fairly simple to categorize. The difficulty begins when one considers that much of my work defies conventional autobiographical standards by making explicit effort to *not* focus on my life or personality (see Chapter Five). Neither do the narrator and protagonists of my narratives always share a common identity ('How to Make White People Happy,' 'The Perfect Paris Day,' 'Gym Bag Steak'), another requisite for autobiography according to critic Linda Anderson.¹¹⁶

Thus, while most of my narratives are autobiographic insofar as they are (a) retrospective in point of view, and (b) about the subject of my individual life – they remain, at most, only *mainly* autobiographic. If a definition must be applied, it is more appropriate to define my narratives as braids: works composed of multiple and distinct literary strands.

¹¹⁵ Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. by Paul John Eakin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 4.

¹¹⁶ Linda R. Anderson, *Autobiography: New Critical Idiom* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 3.

These auxiliary strands – which from one narrative to next assume the form of self-portrait, travelogue, satire, nature writing or culture commentary – are woven tightly around the main autobiographic strand, blurring dividing lines between forms and adding texture to the reading experience. Regarding the conventional terminologies that can be applied to works as a whole, I see these as interchangeable without much consequence. Readers may elect to categorize my pieces as short stories or to call them essays. Or they may simply think of them as narratives, as I prefer to do. What is most relevant is how particular sub-genres interact within the larger, perceived genre. Each narrative is an amalgamation of approaches and styles that, threaded together, illuminate my impression of, and response to, the travel condition.

This segues to another consideration: the question of audience. Being an American author, it is inevitable that my readers will find American qualities in my writing, and that some readers will perceive the collection to be, itself, a uniquely American work. That classification is too restrictive for my taste. While it is true that a good sum of the collection deals in the retail of maleness, whiteness, and middle-class perspective and experience, it is equally obvious that the project does not treat these from a strictly American-centric viewpoint or base its identity on a set of exclusively American values. On the contrary, this collection looks intently at what it is like to be a *westerner* – to observe like a westerner, react like a westerner, anticipate like a westerner, and above all travel as a westerner, something I have indicated in my critical commentary by linking my creative work to the lives and ideas of European authors like Flaubert, Baudelaire and Alain de Botton.

The type of audience likely to connect with my work, therefore, is not limited to white middle-income Americans, even if that is the group from which I originate. It is not, after all, the entitlement of white Americans that is satirized and put to task in ‘How to Make White People Happy,’ but the entitlement of the tourist class in general; more specifically, the behaviour of Anglo-Europeans. And it is not, in ‘The Perfect Paris Day’, the hapless

expectations and travel illusions of an American middle-class male that is parodied, but those of a middle-aged Canadian female. In fact, in many of my narratives – where demonstrating the judgments and identity of the narrator is secondary to depicting the judgments and identity of a separate protagonist – it is difficult to locate content that could be defined as uniquely American. It is more fitting to say that the identity of my work is middle-class Anglo-western (I do not believe it is necessarily masculine), and that it is most recognizable to those with roots in that cultural tradition: Americans, Canadians and western Europeans combined.

Naturally, most readers will place this collection into one genre or another simply because it implicitly states itself to *be* one genre or another. Other readers, noting works like ‘Gym Bag Steak’ and ‘The Perfect Paris Day,’ (where my imagination has obviously filled in certain gaps of detail and dialogue) will feel confident placing it into the realm of fiction. For my part, I do not consider any of my work fiction. No narrative is a precise factual representation of my past self or past events; but given that no author can remember exactly what happened in the past, or describe events with complete objectivity, what is autobiographic need only to be similar to real experience, not identical. We know that words will never be adequate enough to communicate the full power of the human experience. My goal in any self-reflective work is to represent human experience as closely as possible, without gross exaggeration or the use of content that would perpetuate illusions about how life really occurs. I believe *How to Make White People Happy* has done that.

Final Comments: Contribution to Debate

In researching and writing this thesis I have tried to make sense of people going places. I have looked closely at the skills of survival and interaction that are universal in all our comings and goings. Likewise, I have explored the empowerments and impetuses that compel the human spirit, particularly the spirit of the western middle-class, toward the mystery and strangeness of the elsewhere. And above all else, I have strived to communicate that as travellers we carry the potential for growth, stagnation and spiritual disintegration

everywhere we go – that our every emotion and experience is portable. Virtually everywhere we look the act of human journeying is complex. At the same time it is terrifically provocative. For better or worse, travel provides the chance to cut across race, class, gender and history, to meet a brand new set of conditions for human connection. In my writing, the exploration of the travel condition is kindred to the search for self-identity. It is the theme I use to confront my privilege as an American, my position as a white middle-class male, and my cultural sensibility as a westerner.

It is no secret that we live in an age of staggering cultural exchange—a time when countries, languages and traditions are constantly being transformed (and in some cases eroded) by the relentless inbound flow of international goods and people. Most of us recognize this phenomenon as globalization. And while it is by no means a *new* phenomenon, profound changes in economics and technology have enabled it to become more ubiquitous, more engulfing than ever before. As much as anything else in this thesis, I have endeavoured to show that travel accounts are important because they are documentations of cultural exchange, with all its turbulent points of intersection, and they are important to read (especially for westerners) because they inspire self-reflection, encouraging us to think about our own encounters with otherness and difference, and to question just how far western travel has actually come from its imperialist orientations.

Apropos my commentary, I have argued in the preceding six chapters that in terms of the western middle-class, travel might very well be defined as a reaction against the banality and confinement of domestic life, a result of our desire to shake free from ordinary patterns of existence and seek out new knowledge, new experience. In Chapter One I have expanded this argument by considering certain factors that condition our perceptions of travel and exasperate our dissatisfaction with the perfectly known—namely the influence of tourist media and our blind acceptance of emblematic depictions of foreign life—and in Chapter Two I have connected these factors with the onset of disillusionment, the suggestion that

contentment and satisfaction does flow continuously when we travel, and the acute sense of pessimism we may feel when a complicated, expensive journey does not provide the sustained emotional payout we imagined.

Chapter Three has made a strident inquiry into the application of humour in the travel writing genre; specifically, how travel authors effectively and ineffectively use the technique to depict and cope with the challenges of intercultural exchange. I have suggested that in my writing and the writings of many popular travel writers, humour is a primary means of upending stereotypes about the benefits of travel, as well as awakening readers to the grittier realities of cultural immersion. Continuing with this idea in Chapter Four, I have provided an examination of the relationship between satire and travel. I have contributed to this longstanding discussion by introducing the concept of satiric reduction, the practice of illuminating a situation's unfairness or absurdity by stripping away extraneous narrative and electing to relate events through the perspective of an oblivious or child-like protagonist.

My final two chapters have conveyed my recognition of the literary techniques I use to express my vision of other places, techniques through which I also negate common travel industry strategies that, in my estimation, constitute inefficient or unreliable travel writing. In exploring these techniques in Chapter Five especially, I have deployed the idea of peripheral autobiography, and in the process strengthened the argument that a return to a more objective, less author-centric approach to travelogue can enhance reader understanding of cultural identities and ultimately promote greater understanding of our own identities in relation to difference.

It is indeed a scary thing to live without self-assurance. Yet as we have seen through the lives and experiences of Gustave Flaubert, Charles Baudelaire, Mark Twain, and a host of other writers referenced in this commentary, it also an instinctive thing to grasp at straws, to let our daydreams roam beyond familiar borders, and to clutch feverishly at the hope that

there are places in the world where life will begin to make sense and become an act of beauty and adventure.

From the time childhood ends one seeks a third path: a route more purposed than the one that moves in circles, yet not that awful straight course to the grave that speeds ignorantly through life, never weaving or meandering, never drifting into the weird or unseen. The route we desire travels surely toward a spot on the horizon where we have sensed the presence of a satisfying end, but not before veering into mysterious terrains and hugging the edges of startling precipices. It is a route few of us ever find, yet we understand that it must at least be searched for, that paths are found by walking, and that searching is the thing.

Enter travel.

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