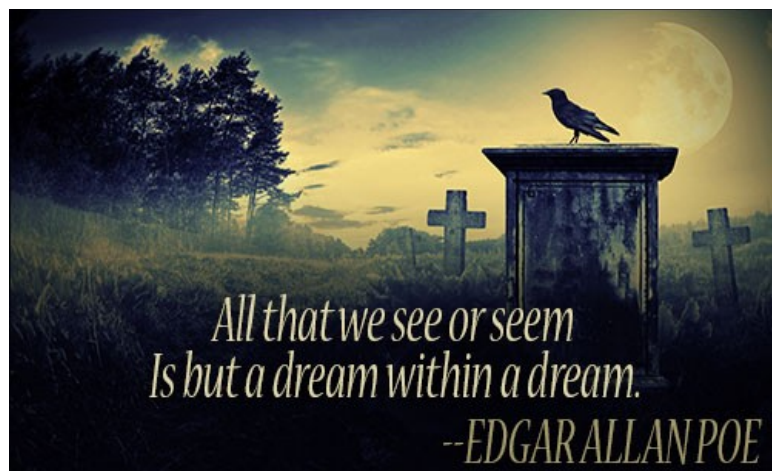


# QUARTERLY PRESS REVIEW

FOR ADVANCED EFL LEARNERS

AUTUMN 2016



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Correspondence: [tarnok.attila@btk.ppke.hu](mailto:tarnok.attila@btk.ppke.hu)

## My Time with Poe

by *Monica Porter*

My introduction to Edgar Allan Poe came about courtesy of the twenty-volume Book of Knowledge, an American children's encyclopaedia which my father acquired for me and my brother Val in about 1961. We were a Hungarian émigré family living in an apartment in the Bronx and my father, a writer, was naturally keen on knowledge and reading, so he encouraged us to dig into the volumes and learn.

They were packed with all manner of well-illustrated entries – on science, geography, history, animal and plant life, the arts, literature and poetry. I suppose parents these days simply point their offspring towards a computer screen to access this kind of all-encompassing educational resource. Are children's encyclopaedias still being published at all? I doubt that many people would now give shelf space to a row of hefty leather-bound books, when Google is so light and ethereal. All I know is that if I still cleave to my beloved physical books – as opposed to the electronic ones – it's largely due to happy childhood memories of lying in bed

in the evening with the Book of Knowledge propped open on my knees, munching an apple as I immersed myself in some intriguing new topic.

As arguably America's greatest and most original poet, Poe featured prominently in the encyclopaedia, with a potted biography, a couple of his short stories and several of his most famous poems, including, of course, 'The Raven'. I can't recall exactly when I first stumbled upon 'The Raven' – I was about nine or ten – but it hooked me at once, and forever. It was accompanied by an entrancing black and white illustration which I gazed upon at length, showing the narrator in his study amongst his books and dripping candles, with the raven perched upon the bust of Pallas above his door ...

*Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak  
and weary,  
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,  
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a  
tapping,  
As of someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber  
door.  
"Tis some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber  
door:  
Only this and nothing more."*

It is a long poem, eighteen eleven-line stanzas, with

a musicality and masterful use of language, a dazzling rhythm and rhyme structure, surreal atmosphere and mounting dramatic tension – all of which raises it high above most other poetry. When it was first published in 1845, the struggling, impoverished Poe was catapulted by this single poem into literary stardom. He was hailed as a genius, albeit a tormented one with a drink problem. The poem's repeated refrain of 'Nevermore' became a national catchword and Poe was even nicknamed 'the Raven' because he always wore black.

As an adolescent I was a fan of spoken-word records and bought an LP of Poe's poems read by, of all people, dear old Basil Rathbone. I listened to it in my bedroom over and over again, the way other kids played their favourite pop music. I was mesmerised by his sonorous reading of 'The Bells', in which Poe magically recreates with words and cadences the sounds of the various pealing bells he is describing:

*Oh the bells, bells, bells!  
What a tale their terror tells  
Of despair!  
How they clang and clash and roar!  
What a horror they outpour  
On the bosom of the palpitating air!*

And to a wistful girl like me, there could be no more stirring love poem than 'Annabel Lee':

*I was a child and she was a child,  
in this kingdom by the sea,  
But we loved with a love that was more than love,  
I and my Annabel Lee.*

My greatest Poe moment came at the age of seventeen, in my final year at high school. I was an ardent member of the school's drama club, and the drama teacher asked me to choose a theatrical piece to memorise and recite at a forthcoming production. I chose 'The Raven.'

Naturally it contained some phrases I didn't understand, such as 'quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe' and 'is there balm in Gilead?' I was equally baffled by 'the distant Aidenn' and 'the Night's Plutonian shore'. All obscure expressions to an American teenager of the Sixties. But somehow it didn't matter because the poem reached me on a far deeper, visceral level. I sensed it to be both heartbreaking and beautiful, and was engulfed by its emotional power. That is, perhaps, the essence of truly great poetry.

I find it almost incredible that I was once able to commit to memory that long and complex work. These days, as they say, I often can't remember what I had for breakfast. But I stood alone in a spotlight on the darkened stage, before a hushed audience, and gave the eighteen stanzas my histrionic best. When at last I reached the end there was a moment's silence before a

schoolmate called out: 'Now can we have the Iliad, please?' Cue general laughter and applause.

At the end of that year I was awarded the annual drama prize, for which I was fairly sure I had my word-perfect Raven to thank.

It wasn't until I read Peter Ackroyd's book, *Poe: A Life Cut Short*, not long ago, that I discovered that the renowned poet himself had been fond of reciting 'The Raven' to rapt audiences. As Ackroyd wrote: 'He would turn down the lamps until the room was almost dark,' one contemporary remembered, 'then standing in the centre of the apartment he would recite those wonderful lines in the most melodious of voices ... So marvellous was his power as a reader that auditors would be afraid to draw breath lest the enchanted spell be broken.'

In some otherworldly way which might have appealed to the author of so many supernatural short stories, I felt that our shared penchant for Raven recitation was a spiritual link between Poe and me across the century-and-a-half which separated us.

And we have a further bond. I'd been vaguely aware that there was a Poe cottage and museum somewhere in the Bronx (I haven't visited the borough for thirty years) but recently found out that the cottage where the poet spent his final years was in the same neighbourhood as my childhood home. When he lived there it was the village of Fordham, a bucolic location

whose tranquil scenery stimulated his writing. And it was the bells of nearby St. John's College (later renamed Fordham University) which inspired his onomatopoeic poem.

During my time, however, this area was the concrete jungle of Fordham Hill, long subsumed into New York City, ruled over by Mafiosi and the far more frightening Catholic nuns who oversaw my Catechism classes at St. Nicholas of Tolentine. Still, although Poe and I had seen vastly different sights and he was a brilliant man of letters while I was a little immigrant kid trying to dodge the playground bullies, we had roamed the same patch and been, in our own ways, moulded by it, and I find that thought very pleasing.

I don't know what became of my old Basil Rathbone record; it got jettisoned somewhere along the way. But I still have every volume of the *Book of Knowledge*, neatly lined up on my shelves. On occasion I turn to 'The Raven', read it again, half-aloud, and gaze at that familiar illustration. It is still the most thrilling poem I know. But now, so many decades on and being perhaps a little jaded, it is another of Poe's poems which speaks to me most profoundly. 'A Dream Within A Dream', first published in 1849, the year of Poe's death, looks at life and wonders whether it isn't, after all, just an illusion. I know exactly what he means.

*You are not wrong, who deem  
That my days have been a dream;  
Yet if hope has flown away  
In a night, or in a day,  
In a vision, or in none,  
Is it therefore the less gone?  
All that we see or seem  
Is but a dream within a dream.*

Poe's short life was filled with despair, disappointment and hardship, the illness and premature death of those he most loved and needed, as well as some self-inflicted troubles. But I doubt he could have produced his immortal works without those tribulations. His poems and stories were forged from lifelong suffering, were a direct reflection of it. He paid a high price for the literary output which so enriched my own mental landscape.

For it seems to me that the spirit of Edgar Allan Poe has accompanied me from those early days in the Bronx when I first chanced upon his writings, to the high spot of my high school career when I briefly embodied his masterwork, 'The Raven', and through the various evolutions (and convolutions) of my life, to the present day. Perhaps it has all been, as he suggests, but a dream within a dream. If so, it has certainly been a strange and beguiling one. And I am grateful to have had his company. ♦

## The Life and Art of Elizabeth Bishop

by Norman Buller

Happiness is not a word readily associated with Elizabeth Bishop. Despite the voluminous accolades and honours showered upon her during her lifetime, she was haunted by a deep sense of unworthiness and guilt, a profound loneliness and was plagued by psychosomatic illnesses. To most of the literary world she was one of the chosen. To herself she seemed one of the damned.

While it is true that none of her female partners in life were blameless in the problems that afflicted their relationships, Elizabeth Bishop nevertheless seemed unable to avoid alienating each of them in turn even though she was entirely dependent on their support. While her chronic alcoholism no doubt had something to do with this, she may also have been involuntarily inflicting upon them her deep resentment of her own frailties. It was as if she looked to them to provide the unconditional love she had craved for in vain as a child

and when each partner eventually tired of playing this one-sided role, problems set in.

As a poet, Elizabeth Bishop was justifiably proud of her powers of acute observation. Her poetry, for the most part, gives an affirmative answer to the question Robert Lowell asks in his poem 'Epilogue': 'Yet why not say what happened?' Her poetry tends to tell it like it was. Critics have drawn attention to the undoubted lucidity of her writing. The trouble is that some of her verse is so lucid, so shorn of everything but what she observes, that, to quote again from Lowell, everything seems 'paralyzed by fact' and comes perilously near the lucidity of prose.

Elizabeth Bishop's formative years, though financially secure, were rendered emotionally unstable due to family loss. She was an only child, born on 8th February 1911 in Worcester, Massachusetts. Her father, William T. Bishop, who had part-Canadian ancestry, belonged to a wealthy Massachusetts family of builders. Her mother, Gertrude Bishop née Boomer, was a Canadian from Nova Scotia whose family were considerably less prosperous than her husband's. William Bishop, who suffered from Bright's Disease, died in October 1911, aged thirty-nine, after a marriage which had lasted a mere three-and-a-half years, his daughter being then only eight months old.

Gertrude found widowhood extremely difficult to bear. Her husband's death meant the loss of her U.S.

citizenship and the bereavement weakened her already frail sensibility. She spent the next five years in and out of mental institutions in both U.S.A. and Canada until eventually she was diagnosed as permanently insane. She was admitted to Dartmouth Sanatorium, Nova Scotia, in 1916 when Elizabeth was five years old and mother and daughter never saw each other again. Gertrude died there in May 1934. This early experience of loss profoundly influenced the way Elizabeth Bishop related to life and the world. It was not until she was in her early forties that she felt able to assess her childhood objectively and transpose it into art.

She spent her early years contentedly with her maternal grandparents in the small town of Great Village in Nova Scotia. However, in 1917, when she was six, her father's parents took her to live with them in Worcester, Massachusetts. One assumes that both sets of grandparents did this with what they saw as the child's best interests at heart. She was the Bishops' only grandchild and only they had the financial means to provide her with the best of everything – everything, that is, except emotional security of which they probably had an imperfect understanding. No-one seemed to think what the effect of yet another family loss would have on the child who had already borne so much.

The effect was devastating. Elizabeth began to suffer chronic bronchitis, severe asthma and eczema and even

symptoms of St. Vitus' Dance – all physical manifestations of profound emotional insecurity. She even had to be sent home from school as being in no fit physical condition for education. After nine months the Bishop grandparents realized that their good intentions weren't working and in May 1918 arranged for Elizabeth to live with her mother's older sister Maud who lived with her husband in another part of Massachusetts.

In later life Elizabeth Bishop said that between them Aunt Maud and her Aunt Grace in Great Village had saved her life. Unfortunately, these early experiences of loss, of having no roots in a true home, of not really belonging anywhere, had such an adverse effect on her that lack of self-confidence and sense of unworthiness, together with the recurring physical ailments, persisted intermittently throughout the rest of her life.

Without the Bishop family's wealth Elizabeth's upbringing would have been far less privileged than it was. After attending day schools from age fourteen to sixteen the Bishops arranged, at their expense, for her to become a boarder at the highly reputed Walnut Hill School in Massachusetts. She had first become interested in poetry at eight years old, when she had made full use of her Aunt Maud's well-stocked library, and at Walnut Hill she had ample opportunity and encouragement to expand on this. She proved herself to be a very intelligent pupil, especially in English and Latin stud-

ies, and wrote by far the best prose and most competent verse in her class. When she left Walnut Hill she had become well-grounded in the work of most classical English and American authors. The poets whose work she most favoured, and most influenced her own, were George Herbert, Richard Crashaw and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

With the continuation of the Bishop family's financial support, in 1930 Elizabeth entered Vassar College, the prestigious women's university. Although she majored in English Literature, she also took four years of Greek and three years of music, specializing in the piano which she had to abandon due to a paralyzing fear of performing. She produced an English verse translation of Aristophanes' play 'The Birds', no mean feat for an undergraduate. She was mostly awarded 'A's in her English studies.

In March 1934 a friend introduced her to the poet Marianne Moore, a meeting which Elizabeth remarked later had changed her life forever. From around August 1936 to October 1940 Moore exercised considerable influence on Elizabeth Bishop's literary career. The older woman introduced the younger and more diffident poet and her work to editors and publishers and generally made the path of advancement more easy.

Another poet whose work had some influence on her own was Robert Lowell. She first met him at a dinner given by the influential literary critic Randall Jarrell

and she and Lowell took to each other from the start. Though six years younger than Elizabeth he was even then much better known. He managed to dispel her shyness and she was fascinated by him and his aura of the charismatic but unstable poet. Lowell was already well established in the inner circle of American literary life and proved a potent advocate of her work where it counted most. They met on several occasions and became frequent correspondents, sending each other drafts of poems and offering criticism of each other's work, influencing each other in the process. Elizabeth's approach was more diffident than Lowell's but when she disapproved of anything he was doing she didn't hold back from saying so. When he sent her a draft of his late collection *The Dolphin*, containing extracts from confidential letters from his divorced wife Elizabeth Hardwick without the latter's permission, Elizabeth was horrified and begged him not to commit such a betrayal of trust. Lowell published the book anyway. Their friendship survived though it was never again so close. After Lowell's death in 1977 she dedicated one of her last poems, 'North Haven', to his memory.

After graduating from Vassar in 1934, Elizabeth set her mind on becoming a writer. A financial legacy from her father meant that she had enough to live on without having to take a paid job. She resolved to work hard and read widely but this commitment was somewhat dissipated by recurring bouts of ill-health, self-

doubt and, even more, by an irresistible urge to travel. It took little to cause her to drop everything and go off somewhere else. Over the years, she periodically visited her mother's relatives in Nova Scotia and travelled widely within the U.S.A., holding teaching posts at several notable universities, including Harvard, and giving highly remunerative readings of her poems. She made several trips to Europe, especially France, and even undertook a voyage round the Galapagos Islands in homage to one of her heroes Charles Darwin, whom she admired for what she called 'his endless heroic observations,'. Rather like the sandpiper in her poem of that name, she was 'always looking for something, something, something.' This identity as a homeless, rootless pilgrim persisted throughout most of her life. She once wrote in a letter: 'I guess I have liked to travel as much as I have because I have always felt isolated ...'

After having spent two months in Florida indulging in her love of fishing, in December 1936 she discovered, and became very fond of, Key West. She and her wealthy Vassar friend Louise Crane set up house together there at 624 White Street in May 1938. This became the first of 'three loved houses' mentioned as 'lost' in her late poem 'One Art.'

In July 1939 she left Key West for an apartment in New York. Little is known of what transpired during that summer and autumn; we have only her cryptic ref-



erence to her 'troubles in New York'. It is possible that difficulties had developed in her relationship with Louise Crane. The depression to which she was subject seems to have taken over and, with it, an increase in her abuse of alcohol. Why she intermittently drank so heavily is open to conjecture but the most likely explanation is in order to lose her awareness of the void at the centre of her life, a problem with which she was poorly equipped to deal. Attempts were made to get her psychiatric help but she always withdrew from it. She often consulted a New York physician and friend, Dr. Anny Baumann, either in person or by letter, who did whatever she could to help.

After returning to Key West in October 1939, Elizabeth put the finishing touches to her poem 'The Fish' which was published in the magazine *Partisan Review* in March 1940. It is her most anthologized poem, so much so that she became tired of its popularity. Its subject is a large Caribbean jewfish which she had caught earlier at Key West but the reader's attention is drawn as much to the catcher as to the caught. We get a literary introduction to the person who caught the fish, to her morality, to her reading of the natural world, to an Elizabeth Bishop who, due to her profound diffidence, we would otherwise probably never have met. We learn that the fish is a survivor and she knows instinctively that she mustn't interfere with that, and we are relieved when she lets the fish go.

Out of the many lesbian partnerships which Elizabeth undertook throughout her adult life, two were the most important. The first was with Maria Carlota de Macedo Soares, known as Lota, whom she had first met in New York in 1942. Lota was at that time in a partnership with Mary Morse and the two women invited Elizabeth to visit them in Brazil should she ever fulfil her desire to explore South America. Lota, a year older than Elizabeth, was the gifted daughter of a Brazilian newspaper magnate. In addition to her native Brazilian she was also fluent in English and French. She served as a landscape architect on a project to refashion part of the Brazilian coast near Guanabara Bay into a leisure area later named *Parque do Flamengo*.

Elizabeth left the U.S.A. in November 1951, ostensibly on the first leg of a voyage around the world, but she disembarked at Santos, Brazil and, apart from habitual trips abroad, remained in that country until 1967. Her finding a new home in Brazil, based as it was on her relationship with Lota, worked an almost magical transformation for the better in her life. She felt valued and loved in a way she had been longing for in vain since the age of five and always remembered her first ten years with Lota as the happiest period of her life.

Despite Lota Soares's enormous funds of energy and enthusiasm, her devotion to the *Flamengo* project, buffeted as it was by schisms and rivalries in Brazilian

politics, took its emotional toll. Elizabeth, who didn't handle loneliness at all well, was left to fend for herself for days or even weeks at a time while Lota expended herself in chronic overwork and nervous exhaustion. This caused Elizabeth to lapse further into destructive bouts of heavy drinking which only exacerbated the situation. The inevitable result was a growing friction between the two women as Lota became increasingly quarrelsome and critical of her vulnerable partner. As a result, both women became periodically hospitalized but any respite in the tension between them was short-lived.

On 3rd July 1967 Elizabeth flew to New York, claiming that she had done so on the advice of Lota's doctors though against her own wishes. The intention was for Lota to join her when her doctors sanctioned it. However, Lota notified Elizabeth that she wanted to come right away and she arrived, though at low ebb, on the afternoon of 19th September. Sometime during that night Lota took an overdose of tranquilizers which, combined with the arteriosclerosis and heart disorder from which she already suffered, proved fatal. Elizabeth, who was advised not to attend the funeral in Brazil, was left with the inevitable grief and sense of guilt. She felt the acute loss of Lota intermittently for the rest of her life.

Elizabeth's second important partnership was with Alice Methfessel whom she met when she arrived at

Harvard in September 1970, aged fifty-nine, to begin a teaching assignment. Alice was then twenty-six years old and the administrative assistant of Kirkland House, the hall of residence containing Elizabeth's flat. She had an outgoing and buoyant personality, a reputation for administrative and secretarial efficiency and was popular with everyone. Alice, an only child, born in New York City but raised in Summit, New Jersey, had wealthy and devoted parents from whom she was keen to establish her independence. She was the ideal person to undertake the management of Elizabeth's somewhat disordered affairs and to serve as her secretary, chauffeur and general factotum. They fitted well together, though Elizabeth's need for Alice was obviously greater than Alice's need for her. Both women treated the intimate nature of their relationship with great discretion, but they soon became recognized on campus as an 'item'. Elizabeth described Alice as 'kind, generous and very funny – she's good for me because she cheers me up.'

However, as with all her relationships, things eventually began to fall apart. The autumn of 1975 was one of the very lowest points in Elizabeth's life, mainly because Alice, no doubt disenchanted with trying to share her life with a demanding and chronic alcoholic, was showing unmistakable signs of moving on. There is no doubt that Elizabeth Bishop when drunk was a sad travesty of the warm and generous-spirited woman she

tended to be when sober. Alice had apparently met a young man who was interested in marrying her and this situation only increased Elizabeth's fear of being left alone in her advancing years of illness and decrepitude. The drinking and ill-health became worse and her ability to carry on teaching became questionable. Whatever rapprochement was reached between them, Alice ultimately didn't abandon Elizabeth, didn't marry and, apart from visits to her family, remained with Elizabeth to the end.

At about 6.00pm on Saturday 6th October 1979 Elizabeth Bishop died, aged sixty-eight, probably instantly and painlessly, of a cerebral aneurysm. When Alice arrived at Elizabeth's Lewis Wharf apartment later that evening to drive her to Helen Vendler's for dinner she found Elizabeth's body where it had fallen, the phone off the hook. Elizabeth was buried in the Bishop family's plot in Hope Cemetery, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Elizabeth had made Alice Methfessel her next-of-kin, literary executor and heir, which meant that she inherited Elizabeth's apartment on Lewis Wharf, Boston and other property. She also had jurisdiction over a mass of valuable papers and unpublished work, much of which has since found its way into the archives of several academic institutions. Not long after Elizabeth's death Alice formed a relationship with another woman and

moved to the Californian coast where she died from lung disease in 2009 aged sixty-six.

Whatever else she was as a poet, Elizabeth Bishop was certainly not prolific. She tended to work very slowly, revising a poem continually, sometimes over periods of years, and beginning many poems which she was unable to finish. She worked intermittently on one of her most famous and highly-regarded poems, 'The Moose', for over twenty-five years and kept revising it up to and beyond the deadline for its publication. The word 'painstaking' hardly does justice to her process of composition. She was herself very conscious of her lack of productivity compared with the lavish rewards it brought her. After she had been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1956 she wrote in a letter: 'I'm sure you know how embarrassed I feel about the Pulitzer.... Never has so little work dragged in so many prizes.'

She published only four poetry collections during her lifetime, each containing far fewer poems than was customary. These were: *North & South* (1946) with thirty poems; *North & South – A Cold Spring* (1955) with nineteen additional poems; *Questions of Travel* (1965) with nineteen poems; and *Geography III* (1976) with only nine poems. She also published *Complete Poems* (1969) which she had wanted to entitle *Collected Poems* but had been overruled on this by her publisher; this contained three additional poems. Not counting translations, these total a mere eighty-four poems and

are almost certainly all those she was willing to publish. All the rest in the posthumous Complete Poems (1991) were published after her death and would probably not have received her approval.

North & South, though her earliest collection, contains some of her best-known poems. 'The Map', the first in the book, signals the emergence of the new and more enduring Elizabeth Bishop and is instantly recognizable as her work – the fascination with geographical phenomena, the fastidious observation of detail, the seemingly rhetorical questions that turn out to be more than rhetorical. Another well-known poem, 'Roosters', is primarily a 'thing made', a deliberate construct from a given pattern set by Richard Crashaw's Wishes To His Supposed Mistress. It begins as a fairly faithful copy of Crashaw's stanza form, with roosters behaving very much as they do in nature – fighting, winning or losing – which she sees as very much what the human male tends to do in the world. Elizabeth claimed it was her condemnatory war poem. The poem then develops into a treatment of St. Peter's denial of Christ. It ends with the roosters having become silent and an essentially temporary peace prevailing in the farmyard. This is the poem which Marianne Moore and her mother didn't like and unwisely chose to rewrite. When she received the altered version Elizabeth politely thanked them but largely ignored it. Though they remained

friends, it signalled the virtual end of her tutelage to Marianne Moore.

Of the nineteen poems in A Cold Spring, the most remarkable and famous is 'At the Fishhouses'. It is set in an area of Nova Scotia where Elizabeth spent her formative years. It begins with a faithful and detailed recording of environmental factors closely observed, written in a matter-of-fact, not to say prosaic, style. As so often in her poems, the language taps into Elizabeth's childhood as her imagination moves through what she painstakingly describes. The larger part of the poem emerges as mainly a preamble to the real thing, the final nineteen lines, which are superb.

*The water seems suspended  
above the rounded and blue-gray stones.  
I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the  
same,  
slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,  
icily free above the stones,  
above the stones and then the world.  
If you should dip your hand in,  
your wrist would ache immediately,  
your bones would begin to ache and your hand  
would burn  
as if the water were a transmutation of fire  
that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray  
flame.*

*If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,  
then briny, then surely burn your tongue.  
It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:  
dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,  
drawn from the cold hard mouth  
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts  
forever, flowing and drawn, and since  
our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.*

Note how the carefully chosen words are skilfully counterpointed throughout the passage, the aim being to convey the author's own experience of what she describes. The line 'It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:' charges the sea near the fishhouses with the task of making concrete the abstraction of knowledge. In achieving this, all traces of prosaic language have been shed; it is pure poetry at somewhere near its best and must rank very highly in the annals of twentieth century poetry in English.

Lack of space forbids comment on poems, such as 'Sandpiper', 'In the Waiting Room', 'Crusoe in England', 'The Moose' and several others which fully deserve it. But at least some attention must be paid to her poem 'One Art' written late in her life.

*The art of losing isn't hard to master;  
so many things seem filled with the intent  
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.*

*Lose something every day. Accept the fluster  
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.  
The art of losing isn't hard to master.  
Then practice losing farther, losing faster:  
places, and names, and where it was you meant  
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.  
I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or  
next to last, of three loved houses went.  
The art of losing isn't hard to master.  
I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,  
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.  
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.  
Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture  
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident  
the art of losing's not too hard to master  
though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.*

Elizabeth Bishop created this poem in the autumn of 1975 when her morale was at rock bottom. She was in her sixty-fourth year, in increasingly poor health and only too aware that Alice Methfessel, exasperated by Elizabeth's drunkenness and craving for attention, had come very near to abandoning her. Elizabeth must have been close to, if not actually in, despair. What could she do to be reconciled with this seemingly unending catalogue of loss? She did what only an artist of distinction could do – solve it in terms of her art. In creating this poem she managed to merge the art of los-

ing with the art of writing about it into ‘one art’ – hence the poem’s title. Her achievement of this precluded the possibility of her lapsing defeated into self-pity. It may, therefore, not be an exaggeration to say that writing it could well have saved her sanity or even her life.

Elizabeth chose to express that crisis in the notoriously demanding form of the villanelle. It is as if the difficulty of her real-life situation had to be matched by the difficulty of her means of solving it. Writing the poem became her way of mastering the experience which engendered it. Irony lies at the very heart of this poem. She chooses to express the truth of her experience by lying about it (see line 17). The poem’s throw-away approach pretends that losing is not important – it’s no more than a trick you can learn to master. Losing things is presented nonchalantly as if it were only a kind of game. The losses she cites become progressively more important until, at the last, the pretence has worn thin. The poem then tacitly acknowledges that the loss of a loved one is the very worst disaster that can happen. When the poet forces herself to (write it!) she also ‘rights’ it, compelling the separate arts of losing and of writing about it to merge into one art. The poem superbly distances the pain of losing and renders it acceptable.

‘One Art’ is a formidable achievement and almost certainly Elizabeth Bishop’s masterpiece. Gone are the

close observations of her geographical surroundings which she used all too often to deflect attention from her inner self. This one, with all the considerable skill at her command, was written from the heart and deserves its place in the canon of great poems in English of the twentieth century. ♦

## Stone Age Sri Lanka

by *John Gimlette*

**A**midst all the ethnic strife of Sri Lanka, it's easy to forget that, hidden away in the interior, there remains the country's aboriginal race. Impoverished, persecuted, and endangered, the Veddahs have often been overlooked.

What lay ahead was not worrying but it did feel unknown. Of all the island's regions, the southeast always seemed the most mysterious and the most remote. The ancient chronicles hardly mention it, and, on early maps, it's just a blank dappled with scrub. It would be defined by what it did not have, in particular, rain, reservoirs and rivers. Victorian mapmakers left huge chunks of it empty, or marked 'Unknown mountainous region'. Where names did appear, they looked hurried and inept, like 'Westminster Abbey' or 'Capello de Frade', The Friar's Hood. Even in the 1920s, visitors like R. L. Spittel tended to think of themselves as explorers, uncertain what they would find.

The region still felt unvisited. If the island were a

clock-face, between three o'clock and six, there was almost nowhere to land a ship. Meanwhile, inland, there were fewer roads than anywhere else, and only one railway veering off to the north. It seemed that anything could be out there, lurking in the bush. In 1924, it was a man-eating leopard, but more recently it's been bands of guerrillas, hiding out in caves. Then there were all the creatures of local mythology. One, called the Gawara, was said to have the head of a buffalo and a tongue so rough it could lick away flesh. Worse, perhaps, were the Nittaewo, a race of miniature cannibals, who attacked in huge numbers, filleting the locals with their long fingernails. To those planning a visit, none of this was particularly encouraging.

But the hostility had also made this land a refuge. Somewhere out there were the last of Sri Lanka's original inhabitants, the Veddahs. It was said that they were hunters or, in some cases, the hunted. I tried to think how I might reach them, and then I remembered an old friend, Anurudha Bandara. He'd made contact with the Veddahs, and often made trips. I asked him if there was any chance of taking me along.

'OK,' he said, 'Meet me in Mahiyangana.'

For almost two-and-a-half thousand years, the Veddahs have been considered half-castes: royalty but with the blood of demons and snakes. It's an insult they have never truly shrugged off, and yet it wasn't always like this. In the preceding fifteen thousand years they

had probably had the island all to themselves, and their waruges, or tribes, had prospered. They may even have benefited from the arrival of the Tamils and Sinhalese, soaking up survivors when their great cities collapsed. But the new arrivals also brought with them a dangerous idea. The Veddahs, they said, were descended from the island's original demon-queen, the product of her nights with Vijaya, the Sinhalese prince. This immediately made the Veddahs both awesome and vile, a royal vermin.

Little had changed in the next two thousand years. The Veddahs would inhabit the margins of Sinhalese society, picking up the language but none of its habits. By the end of the seventeenth century, they were living as honoured outlaws, raiding travellers and fighting their own tiny wars. At night, they would leave meat with the blacksmith and if, by the morning, he had not left them arrowheads, they would kill him. But the Veddahs were also trusted. In times of invasion, they would take care of the Kandyan queens and the royal treasure. They could also be found at all the great battles, pouring their arrows onto European heads. But none of this changed them. In 1821, an English traveller, Dr Davy, described them as 'solitary animals ... resembling more beasts of prey, in their habit, than men.' The same thing might have been written at any time in the previous two millennia.

As far as the British were concerned, the Veddahs

were thrilling. Here were people who had no idea how old they were, who had no sense of time, and who had yet to learn how to laugh and smile. They wore clothes made of bark, and carried a slice of human liver to make themselves more fierce. To the Victorians, it seemed that at last they had linked up with Neolithic man. One writer described the Veddahs' existence as an 'interlude', adding that they were 'due for extinction.' This idea, that the Veddahs were somehow an accident from another age, was still popular, even today. In Colombo, at least one travel agent was offering 'Stone Age' tours.

They were lucky, perhaps, to have anything left to tour. The twentieth century had been particularly cruel. In 1911, there were 5,342 Veddahs, and yet, a hundred years later, there were barely 500. Some had perished in the Spanish flu pandemic, but many others had simply lost their lands and vanished in the mix. In almost no time at all, the veddarata, or Veddah's range – which had once extended to the coast – had shrunk to nothing. The worst year was 1983, when huge tracts of land were swallowed up in a hydro-electric project. At about the same time, the civil war began, and the Veddahs were deprived of their guns. After perhaps 18,000 years of hunting, the Veddahs now had nothing to do, and nowhere to go. Many of them had drifted off to Bintenne, or – as the Sinhalese call it – Mahiyangana, the town now appearing on the plains



ahead.

The next few days felt like a play in which all the actors had become somehow trapped. It was as if a storyline had entered their lives and possessed them, and now all they could do was keep the show going. Anurudha had warned me about this. 'I'm going to take you to Dambana,' he said, 'A few miles from Mahiyangana, and home to about 350 families. We pay them some money, and they show us their lives. If they don't want to take part, they stay out of the way. OK, I know, it's not perfect but it's a livelihood. The Veddahs can't hunt anymore, and have no tradition of farming. It's all they have left, putting on a show.'

In this play, the sequence of events did not seem to matter, and so we began with a curtain call. That night, a cast of Veddahs turned up at our campsite, as if to say goodbye. There were six of them, looking just like the figures the Victorians had photographed: bearded, barefoot men, wearing only loincloths, and each with an axe. Lining up on the rocks, they bowed and danced, and made me a gift of leaves. Then something odd happened – perhaps it was all the lantern smoke – and I was copiously sick. There was nothing in their script about the audience vomiting and running off into the jungle, and so the Veddahs just carried on bowing and dancing, and presenting their leaves. By the time I got back, they had crept off, vanishing into the dark.

'They looked tough,' I remarked to Anurudha.

'Even tougher once. They could separate fighting bears.'

The next morning, three of the Veddahs reappeared, out of the grass. They carried their axes hooked over their shoulders, and moved noiselessly, like cats. The oldest was about seventy, and the youngest had his hair tied up in a bun. But the third one was the most powerfully built, his beard so wild and silvery-black that, for a moment, I thought he was entirely covered in hair. He was also the only one to have a bow and arrow, a knife and a name: Udu Waruge Sudabanda, or 'Sudda'. It was once thought the Veddahs had little use for names, and that people just were who they were – The Fat One, perhaps, Oldie or The Boy.

At first, they hardly seemed to notice me, and merely assumed their roles. Sudda loosed off his arrows, and the others fanned out into the trees, pursuing an imaginary pig, which they then killed in a frenzy of shrieks and gurgles. Later, an interpreter appeared – rat-faced and malevolent with drink – and we all set off, deeper into the forest. After a mile or so, the Veddahs suddenly stopped and listened. I couldn't hear anything but they all padded off through the leaf-mould until they came to an old tree. There, the boy listened again, and then with his axe, he reached up and severed a huge lobe of honeycomb. With their beards now full of bees, they offered me a dollop and

were surprised that I liked it. Did I like the other things they ate, like iguanas and monkeys? They told me hornbills had been popular, and the little swiftlets that went chee-chee-chee when you put them on the fire.

‘And what about porcupines?’ I tried.

The Veddahs all looked at each in horror. Eeugh, they said. They’re for the dogs.

Things changed after the honey, and our day began all over again. Everyone presented their knuckles in welcome, and we clasped each other’s forearms. Sudda even re-introduced himself, with a cluster of stories that never quite finished. He said he made charms out of elephants’ teeth, and that many of the women had gone away to be housemaids, and that it was now dangerous to hunt, and that some of his friends had been shot, and that chewing betel had given him cancer, and that – beneath the beard – half his jaw had gone. Perhaps, he suggested, I’d like a monkey-skin drum? Or maybe he could make a bow and some arrows?

I tried to explain that Veddah bows were too big for the plane.

OK, he said. And now it’s time to see the king.

It was a grim thought, a king. Who would I find at the heart of this performance? A figure of fun, a Pearly King? Or perhaps some half-crazy Asian Lear, busily presiding over his own demise?

But Uru Waruge Wanniya was neither of these things. He lived in a small, thatched house, where he made baskets and bottled honey. He was a ‘king’ in the sense that he was the son of the greatest Veddah, Tissahamy. Like his father, he had also become a champion of aboriginal rights, and across the wall there were photographs of him, shaking important hands and meeting the generals. These pictures were the only furnishings he had, apart from a mat and a chopping block. Nor was he appalled in velvet and ermine. Although his beard was tidier and his eyes were rimmed with fatigue, he was dressed just like the hunters.

I was offered a seat, on a low mud wall.

‘I understand you’ve been to Geneva,’ I said.

This was translated first into Sinhalese and then Veddi basava, and the king nodded. I was away for a month, he said, and spoke at the United Nations. They had never heard of the Wanniyala-Aetto (or ‘Forest People’) before, but things got better after that. My father had said that, if we were moved into communities, we would become beggars, but we are still here. Some changes are good, and some not. We are not sure about the schools, but we do not like the shirts and the shorts

‘And what about the tourists?’ I asked.

They’re alright, as long as they don’t try and change us.

We'd been talking an hour, and the king now looked even more exhausted.

I got up to go. 'Just one thing. How did you like Geneva?'

I know how lucky I am, he said, not to have that noise.

On my last day, we had several visitors to our camp.

The first were two snakes, who came slithering in amongst the tables. One was a rat-snake and the other a krait. Sudda had already given me something to ward off serpents: a cacuna seed, shaped like a python's head. Despite its magic, I still jumped. But Anurudha smiled, and carried on writing. 'One who fears snakes, sees them,' he said.

The next visitor was more welcome, Mr Gunawardene the teacher. He was half-Sinhalese, wore a shirt and carried an umbrella. Under his arm, he had with him some books he had written. These were probably the first stories ever published in Veddi basava, and when Mr Gunawardene read one to me, it sounded like the forest coming to life. He said it was a beautiful language but that it lacked the words to describe our times. Shoes – always hated objects – were merely 'containers', and aeroplanes had become *udanen mangachchana dhandu kachcha* or 'above-going machines'. But the improvisations could be endearing too. A motorbike was a *hootu hootu*, and the English language was referred to as 'birds shouting' because

that is how it sounds.

The last visitor was Sudda himself. I found him a short distance from the camp, crouched in the grass. As I approached, he held something up for me. It was a bow he had made, just the right size to go in a plane. ♦

## Strict Schools

by Sarah Carr

From the moment Summer Duskin arrived at Carver Collegiate Academy in New Orleans last fall, she struggled to keep track of all the rules. There were rules governing how she talked. She had to say thank you constantly, including when she was given the “opportunity” – as the school handbook put it – to answer questions in class. And she had to communicate using “scholar talk,” which the school defined as complete, grammatical sentences with conventional vocabulary. When students lapsed, they were corrected by a teacher and asked to repeat the amended statement.

There were rules governing how Summer moved. Teachers issued demerits when students leaned against a wall, or placed their heads on their desks. (The penalty for falling asleep was 10 demerits, which triggered a detention; skipping detention could warrant a suspension.) Teachers praised students for shaking hands firmly, sitting up straight, and “tracking” the designated speaker with their eyes. The 51-page

handbook encouraged students to twist in their chairs or whip their necks around to follow whichever classmate or teacher held the floor. Closed eyes carried a penalty of two demerits. The rules did not ease up between classes: students had to walk single file between the wall and a line marked with orange tape.

And there were, predictably, rules governing how Summer dressed. Carver Collegiate’s coed code called for khaki pants pulled up to the hip; a black or brown leather (or imitation-leather) belt; a school-issued polo shirt with the collar turned down; a white or black undershirt; and no hats, sunglasses, sparkles, flash, or bling of any kind. Students could be barred from class for wearing the wrong kind of shoe, such as the popular Air Jordans; the code mandated specific colors, styles, and brands, Adidas and Chuck Taylor among them.

Summer was a high-school freshman, 14 years old. “It felt like I was in elementary school,” she said, where in fact she had had it easy by New Orleans standards: she’d been spared the silent lunches and embarrassing punishments her peers at some other schools had endured. At Carver, Summer quietly rejoiced whenever she discovered a way to assert her individuality without breaking code, like wearing purple lipstick.

Over the past two decades, hundreds of elementary and middle schools across the country have embraced an uncompromisingly stern approach to educating low-income students of color. But only more recently have

some of the charter networks that helped popularize strictness, including the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), opened high schools – an expansion that has tested the model in new, and divisive, ways. There’s no official name for this type of school, and not all of the informal terms please the educators in charge: the ethos is often described as “no excuses,” “paternalistic,” or devoted to “sweating the small stuff.” The schools, most of them urban charters, share an aversion to even minor signs of disorder and a pressing need to meet the test-based achievement standards of the No Child Left Behind era or else find themselves shuttered. Front and center in their defense of intensive regimentation for their predominantly minority students is a stirring goal beyond that bottom line: to send all their graduates, many of them first-generation college aspirants, on to higher education.

Yet a growing array of critics is concerned that the no-excuses approach more effectively contributes to very different results: a flagrant form of two-tiered education and a rise in racially skewed suspension and expulsion rates for low-level misbehavior – a trend that Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has railed against repeatedly over the past year. Some go further, arguing that those taped lines point the way to prison rather than to college – that the harsh discipline is a civil-rights abomination, destined to push too many kids out of school and into trouble with the law. For the families

involved, particularly the students, the story is more complicated. Many of them come to appreciate the intense structure, but only if they also come to trust the mostly young educators who enforce it. As school leaders in New Orleans are discovering, forging that trust is far harder than teaching someone to say thank you and toe an orange line.

New Orleans schools, which have taken the experiment with paternalistic public education to a new extreme, have been at the forefront of extending regimented discipline to the high-school level. After Hurricane Katrina devastated the region in 2005, the city became a proving ground for the most popular and contentious reforms. The charter-school movement grew, spreading a heavy reliance on alternative teacher-recruiting programs like Teach for America – and, not least, a commitment to comprehensive, punitive discipline policies very different from the pedagogical flexibility and emphasis on individual expression favored by many traditional education schools.

In step with an energetic breed of charter advocates nationally, the reformers who descended on New Orleans were convinced that progressive pedagogy and discipline had an especially sorry record in low-income districts, where many children faced more than their share of disorder and violence. Chaotic classrooms, the newcomers argued, were a major reason schools

floundered and failed. The controversial broken-windows theory – which holds that a firm response to minor signs of disarray, like broken windows, is essential to inhibiting more-serious criminal activity – was the reigning analogy, invoked by top administrators on down. No infraction was too small to address. A uniform violation, I heard one high-school teacher remark, “means a broken window, which means a broken path to college.”

There was no better place to apply this theory than New Orleans, where, the year before Katrina, about two-thirds of schools failed to meet Louisiana’s standards for acceptable performance, defined largely by test scores. By one estimate, based on a combination of local, state, and federal data, 5 percent of the city’s black public-school students went on to graduate from college. Former students and teachers told too many stories of decrepit buildings where hallways reeked of marijuana, burned-out teachers slept through class, frightened students carried weapons for self-protection, and few people talked about college.

Almost a decade has passed since reformers began overhauling the school system, and academic performance has improved citywide: nearly two-thirds of students in grades three through eight currently meet state proficiency standards. Graduation-rate data, several researchers agree, still aren’t solid enough to cite. Yet along with the growth in

achievement has come plenty of debate about what is driving it. As New Orleans students who entered kindergarten after Katrina make their way into the city’s new high schools, Summer Duskin isn’t the only one questioning the doctrinaire approach to discipline. Some educators themselves are wondering whether it has become an obstacle to progress.

Idealistic and ambitious young charter-school leaders like Ben Kleban and Ben Marcovitz arrived in New Orleans as fervent believers in an unwaveringly firm approach. “In 2007–8, if a student had a stripe on their sock or a mark on a shoe, there was a consequence,” says Kleban, who was 27 when he founded New Orleans College Prep seven years ago, admitting sixth-graders who this year became the first batch of 12th-grade graduates at Kleban’s high school, Cohen College Prep. As a student named Erin Lockley quickly discovered upon her entry into New Orleans College Prep in 2008, her teachers meant business. After hastily pulling on a green undershirt on the first day, rather than the requisite black or white one, she was barred from class until she changed it – and she had to write out her multiplication tables (from one to 14) 10 times that night as punishment.

Ben Marcovitz – now 35 and the CEO of Collegiate Academies, which runs three charter high schools, among them Carver Collegiate, Summer’s school – embraced stringent discipline and character education,

too, when he launched the first of his trio, Sci Academy, in 2008. And in 2010, KIPP opened a high school in New Orleans, among the first for the charter network, which initially focused just on the middle grades and now encompasses more than 160 schools nationally. As part of its college push – KIPP’s current, ambitious target is bachelor’s degrees for three-quarters of its graduates – the network decided to extend its hyper-structured approach straight up to the college door.

At the inaugural parents’ meeting, in late August of 2010, the administrators of the new KIPP high school, called Renaissance, didn’t have a hard sell. Dozens of eager mothers, plus a few fathers, had climbed two flights of stairs on that sweltering evening to listen to the school’s 31-year-old principal, Brian Dassler, describe his vision for the school. Several parents fanned themselves with copies of the school’s so-called discipline matrix, and the audience cheered him on as he outlined the school’s “no idling” policy. After Dassler noted that the Renaissance staff hadn’t been vigilant enough about preventing the students from rolling up the sleeves of their uniforms, a mother shouted, “Get even stricter, Mr. Dassler! Do it!” Another chimed in, “You have to be hard and strict. You can’t be soft, because you know how these kids are.”

For the many parents who shared the charter founders’ big dreams of college, those hopes went along with a more immediate concern: keeping their children

safe. As the sociologist Annette Lareau documents in *Unequal Childhoods* (2003), low-income parents as a group tend toward a firmly directive approach with their children, whereas middle-class parents typically favor a more solicitous tack, encouraging their kids to question adult authority. Lareau takes note of the different effects on behavior: dutiful respect versus a sense of entitlement.

As adolescence arrives, strict enforcement gets harder, but no less urgent in the eyes of many families in urban settings like New Orleans – and for good reason. Children growing up poor and black in the city are more likely to witness gun violence and street drug sales than their middle-class peers are. Once teens, they are more likely to attract the suspicion of the police, to be arrested if they break the law, to spend their lives behind bars, and to die young. If they make a mistake – fall in with the wrong crowd, antagonize the wrong adults, drop out of school – they are less likely to get a second chance. One study found, for instance, that marijuana use among whites is slightly higher than among blacks, yet blacks are arrested for it nearly four times as often. “The margin for error is much smaller in black communities, especially for black boys,” Troy Henry, a New Orleans parent, told me, defending an even tougher approach to keeping kids on the straight and narrow at the mostly black Catholic school where he served as a board member

until this summer: corporal punishment.

Worries about jobs play a role, too. For generations, the New Orleans public schools have graduated countless students straight into low-paying work in the tourism business. With only a few exceptions, the industry's dishwashing, housekeeping, and other positions are nonunionized and come with little job security. Employees who make even a small misstep can be speedily replaced with new hires who don't show up late, forget their uniform, or talk back to customers – as anxious parents are well aware. “If you mess up once at Harrah's [a New Orleans casino], you are going to be fired!” a parent called out during the KIPP Renaissance meeting. A sense of entitlement, she knew, wouldn't take these workers far; a willingness to learn and follow the rules was essential.

Students at KIPP Renaissance liked to joke that the charter's acronym stood for the Kids in Prison Program. But a slim 15-year-old I met in 2010 shared some of the same hopes nursed by resolute reformers: that the no-excuses ethos could be the key to rescuing, rather than winnowing out, the toughest cases. Brice, whose last name I agreed not to publish, signed himself up for KIPP Renaissance because of – not in spite of – the rules. He'd already been expelled from one school and could feel himself getting pulled into the drug scene in Hollygrove, the working-class New Orleans neighborhood where he lived with his mother. He was

desperate for structure that would keep him from getting into more trouble, and keep other troublemakers away from him. Brice told me, “You got to be really big and really on top of your game to make me do what you want.”

Yet a rigid focus on rules also turns out to put students at risk in ways that they and their parents, and educators as well, don't always anticipate. The use of out-of-school suspensions has soared at schools of all types since the 1980s, when a “zero tolerance” policy similar to the no-excuses approach became popular in noncharter schools. Drawing on suspension and test-score data in North Carolina, one economist recently concluded that the approach can help principals “maximize achievement,” because students profit when disruptive classmates are removed. But an American Psychological Association report in 2008 offered a different view. The authors found no evidence that high rates of suspension or expulsion improve either student behavior or school safety, much less the educational climate: even controlling for a variety of demographic factors, the research they cited showed declines in academic achievement.

And the zealous disciplinary tactics at the paternalistic charters that are overrepresented in poor urban districts contribute to persistent racial gaps in students' experience. Starting in preschool, black children are suspended and expelled at far higher rates



than white students are, despite little objective evidence that they behave any worse. The discrepancy persists as children get older and the number of overall suspensions rises. In high school, black students are more than three times as likely as white students to get suspended at least once. Untangling causation and correlation is obviously no easy matter, but one statewide study in Texas reported that students suspended or expelled for a “discretionary violation” – having a bad attitude, for example – were nearly three times as likely to come into contact with the juvenile-justice system the following year. Ramifications like these have spurred several large urban districts (Baltimore, Los Angeles, Chicago) to take aggressive measures over the past couple of years to curb discretionary discipline tactics. Schools have begun banning suspensions, for instance, for vaguely defined offenses like “willful defiance,” which can contribute to the troubling racial disparities, several experts have concluded.

In New Orleans, too, alarming numbers have begun to prompt challenges to and reassessments of charters’ no-excuses regimens. In 2012–13, their first academic year, Carver Collegiate and its sister school in Ben Marcovitz’s trio, Carver Prep, led local high schools in suspension rates – this in a city where suspending more than a fifth of a school’s students each year is not uncommon. At Carver Collegiate the figure was 69

percent, and at Carver Prep it was 61 percent; the national average for high schools was 11 percent. School officials said 80 percent of suspensions lasted for just a single day. Yet several students complained that they were sometimes sent home “off the books,” with nobody documenting the dismissal and minimal or no inquiry into the circumstances that led to the misbehavior. Disputing their accounts, Marcovitz emphasizes that Collegiate Academies strives to be as accurate as possible with its data. At KIPP Renaissance, the discipline so eagerly welcomed soon proved ineffectual, and many parents’ support eroded. Several years after he founded New Orleans College Prep, Ben Kleban became disturbed by a suspension rate that exceeded 50 percent as his first students made their way into Cohen College Prep High School.

Some have called the problem “the progress trap”: when systems designed to help students catch up start holding them back instead. As Elizabeth Green recounts in her new book, *Building a Better Teacher*, educators in some charter schools around the country quietly began questioning the rigidly rule-based mentality – in themselves and in their students – around the time reform in New Orleans was getting under way. If mutely regimented middle-school students turned into rowdy bus riders a couple of years later, what did that say about the no-excuses theory in practice? The students were testing boundaries, as of

course older kids do, yet the no-excuses culture was intended to be cumulative. The overarching goal was not to exact obedience for obedience's sake, or merely to chalk up short-term gains in test scores, and it certainly was not to encourage teachers to be tyrants. The point was to develop increasing self-control in students en route to graduation. In college, after all, the ability to think critically and navigate coursework independently counts for much more than reflexive compliance.

Kleban, who faced a 62 percent suspension rate at Cohen College Prep in 2011–12, found himself reexamining the behavior policies at his charter chain with such concerns in mind: he wanted to prepare his oldest students for autonomy – without scaling back too much on structure. Besides, suspensions weren't working for many students. Fourteen percent of students were barred from campus just once, a single suspension was all it took to jolt them into improved behavior; another 13 percent were suspended twice. But 35 percent of students were sent home three times or more; they clearly weren't getting the message.

“There's a value in being consistent,” Kleban says, and the no-excuses and zero-tolerance approaches have the benefit of clear-cut implementation – a tidy matrix or rule book. “But the reality is, kids are different,” and problems arise “when students feel like something is being done to them and they don't understand why.” At

Cohen, the principal and other administrators held town-hall meetings where they solicited students' views on school rules, and then hammered out compromises. The student government drafted a new outerwear policy (more sweatshirt options) and spelled out the penalties for breaking the revised rules. Behind the scenes, the principal has gotten to know the students well enough to customize discipline when appropriate – overlook a uniform violation, for example, and help a student get an item of clothing when a family is going through a rough patch financially. School officials also inaugurated extracurricular activities students said they wanted, along with more pep rallies and other celebratory events.

Erin Lockley, who had bridled at the punishment for wearing the wrong undershirt as a sixth-grader, is now a senior who credits the no-nonsense ethos with teaching her self-discipline. She feels the approach can work if students are given a voice, particularly as they get older. Teachers – “most of the time ... coming from New York or further out,” she says – understand that “they have to meet us halfway.” Sometimes that's as simple as talking less and listening more. Kleban and his staff still wrestle with the appropriate balance of structure and flexibility. But he says he hears fewer complaints about the charter network's disciplinary practices. And by 2013–14, the suspension rate at Cohen had fallen to 37 percent, with the proportion of

repeat offenders plummeting.

A rocky first year at KIPP Renaissance exposed the discipline matrix as no guarantee of the orderly school parents had been hoping for. Brice was an extreme: a repeat offender who eventually goaded a frustrated young principal to enforce a 45-day suspension, a rare move at even the strictest schools – and a patently risky one. As Brice himself could have predicted, a month and a half at loose ends all but ensured that he would fall deeper into a dangerous scene in his neighborhood, which he did. He returned to school, but soon ended up in jail, and has been in and out of prison ever since. KIPP, meanwhile, has struggled with staff turnover – five principals (among them, one interim and two who shared the role) – further eroding something no less important than disciplinary consistency: a sense of a school community. A spokesperson for KIPP New Orleans says the school has made significant progress in staff retention over the past year, and adds that the school has modified its disciplinary practices, learning from past mistakes. With the goal of suspending students “only as a last resort,” a team of administrators now decides whether the move is warranted. The suspension rate has fallen dramatically, and Renaissance, he says, is in a “very different place than it was in 2010.”

At Collegiate Academies, where Summer Duskin had balked at strictures she felt she’d outgrown, Ben

Marcovitz has been struggling too. On the positive side, he points to Sci Academy, the first high school in his network, as proof of success: though attrition has been high (its initial class shrank 37 percent over the school’s first two years), some of the students who make it through end up accepting – even appreciating – the strictness, and more than 90 percent go on to graduate and enroll in college. Yet last winter, Marcovitz and his staff faced a series of student protests at Carver Prep and Carver Collegiate. At the same time, a civil-rights complaint filed by students and parents asked state, federal, and local authorities to investigate the schools’ disciplinary policies, alleging abuse of students with special needs and overuse of suspensions for trivial matters. Marcovitz says the allegations “were shocking to me and completely uncharacteristic of our entire philosophy and approach.”

Summer – who had received countless demerits and three out-of-school suspensions in her first semester as a freshman – was among the roughly 60 students who walked over to a nearby park wearing orange wristbands that read Let me explain. In a letter of demands she helped write, the teenagers lamented, “We get disciplined for anything and everything.” High on their list of complaints were the stiff penalties for failing to follow the taped lines in the hallways, for slouching, for not raising their hands with ramrod-

straight elbows. “The teachers and administrators tell us this is because they are preparing us for college,” the students wrote. “If college is going to be like Carver, we don’t want to go to college.”

Marcovitz believes some of the students’ claims were exaggerated, and he makes a point of noting the praise that counters the stern rebukes, the warmth that accompanies the structure. But by the summer, he was ready to tackle what he casts as the next challenge in the reform project: if Sci Academy was evidence of what stringent discipline could help achieve, now his high schools would pursue the same results through gentler means. “While it was extremely tough to hear so much concern about our program, we took it as a mandate from the community,” he says, and maintains that high suspension rates already had his attention. He committed the Collegiate Academies leaders to zero out-of-school suspensions in the 2014–15 school year. “We don’t know how to do this yet,” Marcovitz admitted before classes began. There will inevitably be stumbles, he acknowledged, as they explore an array of alternatives, from partnerships with juvenile-justice groups in the city to “restorative justice” strategies that get students talking through problems rather than simply paying penalties. The new ethos will require “relationships being very clearly built” and “love being very clearly expressed.” But apart from that, he and his

staff are forging ahead largely without a rule book, and so far they report having issued a handful of suspensions.

The change came too late for Summer, who had already transferred to McDonogh 35, which opened nearly a century ago as the city’s first public high school for black students. Many of the city’s young school reformers dismiss the contemporary McDonogh 35 as chaotic and poorly run, and its academic reputation has slipped in recent years. But its legendary history – Ernest Nathan Morial, the city’s first black mayor, was one of many local African American leaders nurtured within its walls – undergirds an ethos of pride and engaged purpose that Summer and her family had lost sight of at Carver Collegiate. The strictness wasn’t the main issue, at least not for Summer’s father – he attended an all-boys Catholic high school in New Orleans that was, if anything, stricter. The problem, as he puts it, is that “I can’t get my mind around these folks to see what’s the point.” School disciplinarians had failed to cultivate a shared sense of direction and the trust that goes with it. When that happens, he agrees with his daughter, even the most well-intentioned system can end up feeling like “a blind application of rules.” ♦

## Side by...

### The Collectors (IV) by Rohinton Mistry

PESI WAS NO LONGER to be seen in Firozsha Baag. His absence brought relief to most of the parents at first, and then curiosity. Gradually, it became known that he had been sent away to a boarding-school in Poona.

The boys of the Baag continued to play their games in the compound. For better or worse, the spark was lacking that lent unpredictability to those languid coastal evenings of Bombay; evenings which could so easily trap the unwary, adult or child, within a circle of lassitude and depression in which time hung heavy and suffocating.

Jehangir no longer sat on the stone steps of C Block in the evenings. He found it difficult to confront Dr Mody day after day. Besides, the boys he used to watch at play suspected some kind of connection between Pesi's being sent away to boarding-school, Jehangir's former friendship with Dr Mody, and the emerging of Dr Mody's constant sorrow and despair (which he had tried so hard to keep private all along, and had succeeded, but was now visible for all to see). And the boys resented Jehangir for whatever his part was in it – they bore him open antagonism.

Dr Mody was no more the jovial figure the boys had

## ...by side

### Bélyeggyűjtés (4. rész) fordította Tárnok Attila

PESIT NEM LEHETETT TÖBBÉ látni Firozsha Baagban. Hiánya először a legtöbb szülőben megkönnyebbülést váltott ki, azután kíváncsiságot. Apránként kiderült, hogy Poonába küldték bentlakásos iskolába.

A fiúk továbbra is a megszokott játékokat űzték az udvaron. De általában hiányzott az a tűz, ami korábban a bágyadt bombayi, tengerparti estéket kiszámíthatatlanná tette. Az estéket, melyek oly könnyen rabul ejtettek felnőtten, gyereket egyaránt, körbefonva őket a fáradtság és lehangoltság hálójával, melybe az idő elnehezülten és fojtogatóan kapaszkodott.

Jehangir nem ücsörgött többé a C épület kőlépcsőin. Kényelmetlennek találta, hogy nap nap után összefuthat Dr Modyval. Emellett, a fiúk, akiket korábban játék közben szemlélt, összefüggéseket sejtettek abban, hogy Pesit bentlakásos iskolába küldték, hogy Jehangir eddig jó barátságban volt Dr Modyval és hogy Dr Mody mostanában állandóan szomorú és elkeseredett, amit régebben sikerrel leplezett, de amit most mindenki érzékelt. A fiúk nehezteltek Jehangirra, akármi lehet is a szerepe az események alakulásában, nyílt ellenszenvet tanúsítottak vele szemben.

Dr Mody nem volt többé az a jó kedélyű alak, akit a

grown to love. When his car turned into the compound in the evenings, he still waved, but no crow's-feet appeared at his eyes, no smile, no jokes.

Two years passed since the Mody family's arrival in Firozsha Baag.

In school, Jehangir was as isolated as in the Baag. Most of his effeminateness had, of late, transformed into vigorous signs of impending manhood. Eric D'Souza had been expelled for attempting to sodomize a junior boy. Jehangir had not been involved in this affair, but most of his classmates related it to the furtive activities of their callow days and the stamp-flicking. Patla Babu and Jhaaria Babu had disappeared from the pavement outside St Xavier's. The Bombay police, in a misinterpretation of the nation's mandate: *garibi hatao* – eradicate poverty, conducted periodic round-ups of pavement dwellers, sweeping into their vans beggars and street-vendors, cripples and alcoholics, the homeless and the hungry, and dumped them somewhere outside the city limits; when the human detritus made its way back into the city, another clean-up was scheduled. Patla and Jhaaria were snared in one of these raids, and never found their way back. Eyewitnesses said their stalls were smashed up and Patla Babu received a lathi across his forehead for trying to salvage some of his inventory. They were not seen again.

Two years passed since Jehangir's visits to Dr Mody had ceased.

It was getting close to the time for another transfer for

fiúk megkedveltek. Ahogy az autója befordult a házak között, még mindig integetett, de nem volt már szarkaláb a szeme körül, nem mosolygott és nem tréfálkozott.

Két év telt el azóta, hogy a Mody család Firozsha Baagba költözött.

Az iskolában Jehangir ugyanúgy elszigetelődött mint a Baagban. Korábbi nőies vonásai az utóbbi időben a küszöbön álló férfiasság jegyeit öltötték. Eric D'Souzát kicsapták egy fiatalabb fiúra erőltetett szodomita viselkedése miatt. Jehangirnak ehhez az ügghöz semmi köze nem volt, mégis a legtöbb osztálytársa az esetet az ő éretlen fejvel elkövetett titkos ügyleteivel és a bélyegek elfricskázásával hozta összefüggésbe. Patla Babu és Jhaaria Babu is elkerült az iskola utcájából. A bombayi rendőrség, félreértve a szegénységet megszüntetni kívánó nemzeti programot, időről időre razziákat tartott, melyek során összefogdosták az utcai árusokat, koldusokat, alkoholistákat, nyomorékokat, hajléktalanokat és éhezőket, és mikrobuszokban a város határain kívülre szállították őket. Amikor az emberi törmelék visszaszivárgott a városba, újabb razziát tartottak. Patlát és Jhaariát is egy ilyen alkalommal szedték össze; ők soha nem kerültek vissza a városba. Szemtanuk szerint az asztalaikat összetörték és Patla Babu még egy lathi ütést is kapott az arcába, amiért az áruját próbálta védeni. Senki sem látta őket többé.

Két év telt el azóta, hogy Jehangir Dr Modynál tett látogatásai megszakadtak.

Dr Mody számára elközelt az ideje, hogy újra át-

Dr Mody When the inevitable orders were received, he went to Ahmedabad to make arrangements. Mrs Mody was to join her husband after a few days. Pesi was still in boarding-school, and would stay there.

So when news arrived from Ahmedabad of Dr Mody's death of heart failure, Mrs Mody was alone in the flat. She went next door with the telegram and broke down.

The Bulsaras helped with all the arrangements. The body was brought to Bombay by car for a proper Parsi funeral. Pesi came from Poona for the funeral, then went back to boarding-school.

The events were talked about for days afterwards, the stories spreading first in C Block, then through A and B. Commiseration for Mrs Mody was general. The ordeal of the body during the two-day car journey from Ahmedabad was particularly horrifying, and was discussed endlessly. Embalming was not allowed according to Parsi rituals, and the body in the trunk, although packed with ice, had started to smell horribly in the heat of the Deccan Plateau which the car had had to traverse. Some hinted that this torment suffered by Dr Mody's earthly remains was the Almighty's punishment for neglecting his duties as a father and making Mrs Mody so unhappy. Poor Dr Mody, they said, who never went a day without a bath and talcum powder in life, to undergo this in death. Someone even had, on good authority, a count of the number of eau de cologne bottles used by Mrs Mody and the three occupants of the car over the course of the journey – it was the only way they could draw

helyezzék. Amikor az elkerülhetetlen elérkezett, Ahmedabadba ment, hogy elrendezze a költözködés körülményeit. Mrs Mody néhány nappal később ment volna utána, Pesi még mindig a bentlakásos iskolába járt és a tervek szerint ott is maradt.

Így, amikor Dr Mody szívelégtelenség miatt bekövetkezett halálának híre megérkezett Ahmedabadból, Mrs Mody egyedül élt a lakásban. A távirattal a szomszédba ment, megtörtén.

A Bulsara család segített neki a temetést elrendezni. A holttestet autón szállították Bombayba, ahol hagyományos temetést terveztek, párszi szertartás keretében. Pesi is hazajött az eseményre, aztán visszautazott a bentlakásos iskolába.

Az esemény még napokkal később is beszédtema volt, először a C épület lakói közt, azután átterjedt az A-ba és a B-be is. Mrs Mody iránt mindenki együttérzését fejezte ki, és hogy a holttest Ahmedabadból történt, két napig tartó szállítása benne milyen borzalmakat válthattott ki, végeérhetetlen beszélgetések tárgyává vált. A párszi hagyomány tiltotta, hogy a holttestet illatos kezetekkel dörzsöljék be, így az a kocsis csomagtartójában, jóllehet jegelt ládában nyugodott, a Dekkán fennsík hőségében szörnyű szagokat kezdett árasztani. Néhányan megjegyezték, hogy a kínszenvedés, ami Dr Mody földi maradványainak részévé vált, a magasságbeli büntetése volt azért, mert elhanyagolta apai kötelességeit és szomorúságot okozott a feleségének. Szegény Dr Mody, mondogatták, egész életében egy napot sem hagyott vol-

breath, through cologne-watered handkerchiefs. And it was also said that ever after, these four could never tolerate eau de cologne – opening a bottle was like opening the car trunk with Dr Mody's decomposing corpse.

A year after the funeral, Mrs Mody was still living in Firozsha Baag. Time and grief had softened her looks, and she was no longer the harsh and dour-faced woman Jehangir had seen during his first Sunday visit. She had decided to make the flat her permanent home now, and the trustees of the Baag granted her request "in view of the unfortunate circumstances."

There were some protests about this, particularly from those whose sons or daughters had been postponing marriages and families till flats became available. But the majority, out of respect for Dr Mody's memory; agreed with the trustees' decision. Pesi continued to attend boarding-school.

One day, shortly after her application had been approved by the trustees, Mrs Mody visited Mrs Bulsara. They sat and talked of old times, when they had first moved in, and about how pleased Dr Mody had been to live in a Parsi colony like Firozsha Baag after years of travelling, and then the disagreements she had had with her husband over Pesi and Pesi's future; tears came to her eyes, and also to Mrs Bulsara's, who tugged at a corner of her mathoobanoo to reach it to her eyes and dry them. Mrs Mody confessed how she had hated Jehangir's Sunday visits although he was such a fine boy, because she was worried about the way poor Burjorji was neglect-

na ki fürdés és hintőpor nélkül, halálakor ezt kell elszenvednie. Volt, aki megbízható forrásokra támaszkodva még azt is számon tartotta, hány üveg kölnivizet használt fel Mrs Mody és az autó másik három utasa az út során: kizárólag kölni illatú zsebkendőkön keresztül tudtak lélegezni. És azt is hozzátette, hogy a négy utas ezután soha többé nem tolerálta semmilyen kölni illatát; számukra egy kölnisüvegből felszálló illat egyet jelentett a Dr Mody oszló testét hordozó csomagtartó felnyitásával.

Egy évvel a temetés után Mrs Mody még mindig a Firozsha Baag lakója volt. Az idő és a fájdalom meglágyította vonásait, Jehangir nem annak a nyers, savanyú arcú asszonynak látta már, amilyenek azon az első vásárnapon megismerte. Az asszony a lakást már végleges lakhelyének tekintette, és a Baag képviselő testülete helyt adott kérelmének az előre nem látható szerencsétlen körülmények okán.

Volt, aki ellenezte ezt a határozatot, különösen az olyan családok, akik gyermekeik esküvőjét halasztották el amiatt, mert nem akadt megüresedő lakás, de a többség, Dr Mody iránt egykor érzett megbecsülése jeléül elfogadta a képviselők döntését. Pesi továbbra is a bentlakásos iskola növendéke maradt.

Egy nap Mrs Mody, nem sokkal azután, hogy kérelmét elfogadták, felkereste Mrs Bulsarát. Elücsörögtek és a régi időkről beszélgettek; azokról az időkről, amikor ideköltöztek, arról, hogy Dr Mody mennyire örült, hogy hosszú évek vándorlása után végre egy ilyen párszi kö-



ing Pesi: “But he could not help it. That was the way he was. Sometimes he would wish Khoedai had given him a daughter instead of a son. Pesi disappointed him in everything, in all his plans, and...” and here she burst into uncontrollable sobs.

Finally, after her tears subsided she asked, “Is Jehangir home?” He wasn’t. “Would you ask him to come and see me this Sunday? At ten? Tell him I won’t keep him long.”

Jehangir was a bit apprehensive when his mother gave him the message. He couldn’t imagine why Mrs Mody would want to see him.

On Sunday, as he prepared to go next door, he was reminded of the Sundays with Dr Mody, the kindly man who had befriended him, opened up a new world for him, and then repudiated him for something he had not done. He remembered the way he would scratch the greyish-red patches of psoriasis on his elbows. He could still picture the sorrow on his face as, with the utmost reluctance, he had made his decision to end the friendship. Jehangir had not blamed Dr Mody then, and he still did not; he knew how overwhelmingly the evidence had been against him, and how much that stamp had meant to Dr Mody.

Mrs Mody led him in by his arm: “Will you drink something?”

“No, thank you.”

“Not feeling shy, are you? You always were shy.” She asked him about his studies and what subjects he was

zösségben élhet, mint Firozsha Baag, aztán a férje és közte kipattant nézeteltérésről Pesi fiúk jövőjét illetően. Könnyek szöktek a szemébe és Mrs Bulsara szemébe is, aki a mathoobanoo szegélyével igyekezett a könnyeit felszárítani. Mrs Mody beismerte, hogy rendkívül gyűlölte Jehangir vasárnapi látogatásait, jöllehet olyan rendes fiúnak tűnt, de aggasztotta, hogy szegény Burjorji elhanyagolja Pesit.

– De nem tehetett róla, ilyen volt. Néha azt kívánta, Khoedai bárcsak egy lánnyal ajándékozta volna meg egy fiú helyett. Pesi mindenben csalódást okozott neki, minden tervében, és... – ezen a ponton Mrs Modyn heves zokogás vett erőt.

Végül amikor a zokogása alábbhagyott, azt kérdezte:

– Jehangir itthon van? – Nem volt. – Megmondaná neki, hogy vasárnap jöjjön át? Tízkor. Csak egy kis időre.

Jehangir egy kissé elbátortalanodott, amikor anyja átadta neki az üzenetet. El nem tudta képzelni, miért szeretné Mrs Mody látni őt.

Vasárnap, ahogy készülődött, tudatában felrémlett a Mr Modyval töltött vasárnapok emléke, a kedves ember emléke, aki barátjává fogadta, aki egy új világot nyitott meg a számára, és aki elmarasztalta őt valamiért, amit el sem követett. Maga előtt látta, ahogy a szürkés-vörös sebhelyeket vakargatja a könyökén, és az arcán ülő szomorúságot, amikor nyilvánvaló tépelődés után véget vetett a barátságuknak. Jehangir se akkor, se azután nem vádolta magában Dr Modyt. Tudta, hogy a körülmények

taking in high school. She told him a little about Pesi, who was still in boarding-school and had twice repeated the same standard. She sighed. "I asked you to come today because there is something I wanted to give you. Something of Burjor Uncle's. I thought about it for many days. Pesi is not interested, and I don't know anything about it. Will you take his collection?"

"The album in his drawer?" asked Jehangir, a little surprised.

"Everything. The album, all the boxes, everything in the cupboard. I know you will use it well. Burjor would have done the same."

Jehangir was speechless. He had stopped collecting stamps, and they no longer held the fascination they once did. Nonetheless, he was familiar with the size of the collection, and the sheer magnitude of what he was now being offered had its effect. He remembered the awe with which he had looked inside the cupboard the first time its doors had been opened before him. So many sweet tins, cardboard boxes, biscuit tins...

"You will take it? As a favour to me, yes?" she asked a second time, and Jehangir nodded. "You have some time today? Whenever you like, just take it." He said he would ask his mother and come back.

There was a huge, old iron trunk which lay under Jehangir's bed. It was dented in several places and the lid would not shut properly. Undisturbed for years, it had rusted peacefully beneath the bed. His mother agreed that the rags it held could be thrown away and the

az ő egyértelmű vétkeességét bizonyították, és tudta, milyen sokat jelentett az a bélyeg Dr Mody számára.

Mrs Mody átölelve vezette be.

– Kérsz valamit inni?

– Köszönöm, nem.

– Ne félj! Mindig olyan félénk voltál.

Kérdősködött a tanulmányairól, hogy milyen tárgyakat tanul a középiskolában. Aztán mesélt egy kicsit Pesiről, még mindig a bentlakásos iskolában tanul, már kétszer évet ismételt. Sóhajtott.

– Azért kértem, hogy gyere át, mert szeretnék neked adni valamit. Valamit, amit Burjor bácsi hagyott hátra. Sokáig gondolkoztam a dolgon, Pesi nem érdeklődik és én sem tudok semmit ezekről. Elfogadod a bácsi gyűjteményét?

– Az albumot a fiókjában? – kérdezte Jehangir egy kissé meglepődve.

– Mindent. Az albumot, a dobozokat, mindent a szekrényből. Tudom, hogy jó kezekbe kerül, Burjor is így tette.

Jehangir nem jutott szóhoz. Nem gyűjtött már bélyegeket, és az egész már nem jelentett olyan izgalmat a számára, mint egykor. Mindazonáltal tisztában volt a bácsi gyűjteményének méreteivel, és a gyűjtemény pusztán mérete is lenyűgözte. Visszaemlékezett arra a csodálatos érzésre, ami akkor töltötte el, amikor a szekrény belsejére először vetett egy pillantást, a rengeteg édességes doboz, karton doboz, kekszes doboz látványára...

stamps temporarily stored in it till Jehangir organized them into albums. He emptied the trunk, wiped it out, lined it with brown paper and went next door to bring back the stamps.

Several trips later, Dr Mody's cupboard stood empty. Jehangir looked around the room in which he had once spent so many happy hours. The desk was in exactly the same position, and the two chairs. He turned to go, almost forgetting, and went back to the desk. Yes, there it was in the drawer, Dr Mody's first album, given him by his Nusserwanji Uncle.

He started to turn the heavily laden pages. They rustled in a peculiar way – what was it about that sound? Then he remembered: that first Sunday, and he could almost hear Dr Mody again, the soft inspired tones speaking of promises and dreams, quite different from his usual booming, jovial voice, and that faraway look in his eyes which had once glinted with rage when Pesi had tried to bully him...

Mrs Mody came into the room. He shut the album, startled:

“This is the last lot.” He stopped to thank her but she interrupted:

“No, no. What is the thank-you for? You are doing a favour to me by taking it, you are helping us to do what Burjor would like.” She took his arm. “I wanted to tell you. From the collection one stamp is missing. With the picture of the dancing-lady.”

“I know!” said Jehangir. “That's the one Burjor Uncle

– Elfogadod, ugye? Nekem tennél vele szívességet – fűzte hozzá az asszony, és Jehangir bólintott.

– Van ma egy kis idő? Vagy amikor csak ráérsz, elviheted.

Jehangir azt mondta, megkérdezi az anyját és visszajön.

Az ágya alatt volt egy óriási fém hajóláda, néhány helyen horpadt volt és a teteje sem záródott tökéletesen. Évek óta nem nyúlt hozzá senki, békésen rozsdásodott az ágy alatt. Anyja beleegyezett, hogy a szőnyeget a bőröndből kidobják, és átmenetileg, amíg Jehangir albumba rendezi őket, itt tárolják a bélyegeket. A fiú kiürítette a bőröndöt, kitörölte, barna papírral bélelte ki a belsejét, és visszament a szomszédba, hogy hazahordja onnan új tulajdonát.

Néhány forduló múlva Dr Mody szekrénye üresen állt. Jehangir körülnézett a szobában, ahol egykor anyni boldog órát töltött. Az íróasztal és a két szék ugyanolyan, mint régen. Megfordult, indulásra készen, de aztán hirtelen eszébe jutott a fiók. Igen, ott volt Dr Mody első albuma, amit Nusserwanji bácsitól kapott.

Lapozgatni kezdte a zsúfolásig telt oldalakat. A lapok sajátos hangon suhogtak, mi volt e hang mögött? Aztán emlékeiből előtört az az első vasárnap, és szinte hallotta Dr Mody puha ihletett hangját, ahogy ígéretekről, álmokról beszél. Ez a hang teljesen más volt, mint a jókedvű, tréfálkozó modor, ami a doktort általában jellemezte, és Jehangir emlékezett arra a messzeségbe tekintő pillantásra is, amikor az a bélyegekről beszélt,

lost and thought that I.

Mrs Mody squeezed his arm which she was still holding and he fell silent. She spoke softly, but without guilt: "He did not lose it. I destroyed it." Then her eyes went moist as she watched the disbelief on his face. She wanted to say more, to explain, but could not, and clung to his arm. Finally, her voice quavering pitiably, she managed to say, "Forgive an old lady," and patted his cheek. Jehangir left in silence, suddenly feeling very ashamed.

Over the next few days, he tried to impose some order on that greatly chaotic mass of stamps. He was hoping that sooner or later his interest in philately would be rekindled. But that did not happen; the task remained futile and dry and boring. The meaningless squares of paper refused to come to life as they used to for Dr Mody in his room every Sunday at ten o'clock. Jehangir shut the trunk and pushed it back under his bed where it had lain untroubled for so many years.

From time to time his mother reminded him about the stamps: "Do something Jehangoo, do something with them." He said he would when he felt like it and had the time; he wasn't interested for now.

Then, after several months, he pulled out the trunk again from under his bed. Mrs Bulsara watched eagerly from a distance, not daring to interrupt with any kind of advice or encouragement: her Jehangoo was at that difficult age, she knew, when boys automatically did the exact reverse of what their parents said.

amely tekintet szintén teljesen más volt, mint az a szigorú, haragos pillantás, amit Pesi felé küldött, amikor az Jehangirt molesztálta...

Mrs Mody lépett be a szobába. Jehangir hirtelen ijedtséggel csukta össze az albumot:

– Ez az utolsó forduló.

Köszönetet akart mondani, de az asszony a szavába vágott:

– Nem, dehogy. Nem kell köszönet. Te teszel nekem szívességet azzal, hogy elviszed. Segítesz nekem véghezvinni azt, amit Burjor is szeretett volna.

Átkarolta a fiút.

– Még azt akartam mondani, hogy egy bélyeg hiányzik a gyűjteményből. Ami egy táncosnőt ábrázol.

– Tudom! – mondta Jehangir. – Az az, amelyik elveszett, és amiről Burjor bácsi azt hitte, hogy én...

Mrs Mody megszorította karját, a fiú elhallgatott. Lágyan, büntudat nélkül ejtette ki a szavakat:

– Nem vészett el. Én semmisítettem meg.

Szemei könnybe lábadtak, ahogy a fiú arcán a hitetlenség jegyeit fedezte fel. Még mást is akart mondani, elmagyarázni mindent, de nem volt rá képes, csak kapaszkodott a fiú karjába. Végül szánalmasan remegő hangon annyit préselt ki magából:

– Bocsáss meg egy idős asszonynak! – és megpaskolta a fiú arcát. Jehangir szó nélkül távozott, hirtelen nagyon szégyellte magát.

A következő néhány napban megpróbált némi rendszert vinni a bélyegek körül uralkodó káoszba. Abban

But the night before, Jehangir's sleep had been disturbed by a faint and peculiar rustling sound seeming to come from inside the trunk. His reasons for dragging it out into daylight soon became apparent to Mrs Bulsara.

The lid was thrown back to reveal clusters of cockroaches. They tried to scuttle to safety, and he killed a few with his slipper. His mother ran up now, adding a few blows of her own chappal, as the creatures began quickly to disperse. Some ran under the bed into hard-to-reach corners; others sought out the trunk's deeper recesses.

A cursory examination showed that besides cockroaches, the trunk was also infested with white ants. All the albums had been ravaged. Most of the stamps which had not been destroyed outright were damaged in one way or another. They bore haphazard perforations and brown stains of the type associated with insects and household pests.

Jehangir picked up an album at random and opened it. Almost immediately, the pages started to fall to pieces in his hands. He remembered what Dr Mody used to say: "This is my retirement hobby. I will spend my retirement with my stamps." He allowed the tattered remains of Burjor Uncle's beloved pastime to drop back slowly into the trunk.

He crouched beside the dented, rusted metal, curious that he felt no loss or pain. Why, he wondered. If anything there was a slight sense of relief. He let his hands stray through the contents, through worthless paper

reménykedett, hogy előbb-utóbb feléled majd filatéliai érdeklődése, de a remélt változás nem állt be: a tevékenység örökre hiábavaló, száraz és unalmas maradt. A jelentéktelen papírnégyszögek nem keltek életre, ahogy Dr Mody szobájában minden vasárnap tízkor. Jehangir lecsukta a fedelet és visszatolta a bőröndöt az ágy alá, ahol az éveken át nyugodott háborítatlanul.

Anyja időről időre emlékeztette a bélyegekre.

– Csinálj velük valamit, Jehangoo!

Ő azt felelte, majd ha lesz kedve és ideje. Pillanatnyilag nem érdeklik.

Aztán néhány hónap elteltével újra előhúzta a bőröndöt az ágy alól. Mrs Bulsara reménytelve figyelte távolról, de nem mert beavatkozni se tanáccsal, sem biztatással: Jehangir kritikus korban volt, tudta ezt az aszszony, ilyenkor a gyerek hajlamos egyenesen az ellenkezőjét tenni annak, amire a szülei kérik.

De az előző éjjel Jehangirt egy sajátos, halk, látszólag a bőrönd mélyéről érkező, fűrészelő hang zavarta álmában. Hogy másnap miért rángatta elő a bőröndöt, Mrs Bulsara számára azonnal nyilvánvaló lett.

A felhajtott fedél alól svábbogarak csomói tűntek elő. Megpróbáltak fedezékbe vonulni, de a fiú papucsa néhányval végzett. Az anyja is odaszaladt, a chappal végével odacsapott néhányszor, de a bogarak nagy része eliszkolt az ágy elérhetetlen sarkaiba vagy a bőrönd mélyebben fekvő réseibe.

Egy futó pillantás elárulta, hogy a svábbogarak mellett fehér hangyák is birtokba vették a bőröndöt, az ösz-

scraps, through shreds of the work of so many Sunday mornings, stopping now and then to regard with detachment the bizarre patterns created by the mandibles of the insects who had feasted night after night under his bed, while he slept.

With an almost imperceptible shrug, he arose and closed the lid. It was doubtful if anything of value remained in the trunk. ♦



szes albumot megrongálták. Még azok a bélyegek is elszenvedtek valamilyen károsodást, amelyek nem mentek teljesen tönkre. A perforációjuk sérült, vagy olyan barna foltok jelentek meg rajtuk, amelyet tipikusan házi rovarok hagynak maguk után.

Jehangir kezébe vette az egyik albumot és felnyitotta. A lapok azon mód darabokra hulltak. Eszébe jutott, mit szokott mondani Dr Mody.

– Ez lesz az én nyugdíjas hobbim. A nyugdíjas éveimet a bélyegek rendezgetésével akarom tölteni.

Burjor bácsi szeretett szenvedélyének megtépzott maradványai lassan visszapotyogtak a bőröndbe.

Ahogy a rozsdás, behorpadt bőrönd mellett térdelt, Jehangir érdekes módon nem érezte a hiány fájdalmát. Vajon miért nem, tűnődött. Sőt, inkább egyfajta megkönnyebbülést érzett. Kezével beletúrt az értéktelen papírhalomba, oly sok vasárnap délelőtt munkájának foszlányaiba. Itt-ott megállt a kéz, hogy Jehangir egy tárgyilagos pillantást vethessen a rovarok rágószervei által előállított bizarr mintákra, a rovarokéra, amelyek éjszakaról éjszakára lakmároztak az ágya alatt, amíg ő aludt.

Egy szinte észrevehetetlen vállrándítással felállt és lecsukta a fedelet. Kétsége nem volt, hogy a bőrönd már semmi értéknek nem ad otthont. ♦