

QUARTERLY PRESS REVIEW

FOR ADVANCED EFL LEARNERS

AUTUMN 2019



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2019

David

by Earle Birney

I

*David and I that summer cut trails on the Survey,
All week in the valley for wages, in air that was steeped
In the wail of mosquitoes, but over the sunalive weekends
We climbed, to get from the ruck of the camp, the surly
Poker, the wrangling, the snoring under the fetid
Tents, and because we had joy in our lengthening coltish
Muscles, and mountains for David were made to see over,
Stairs from the valleys and steps to the sun's retreats.*

II

*Our first was Mount Gleam. We hiked in the long afternoon
To a curling lake and lost the lure of the faceted
Cone in the swell of its sprawling shoulders. Past
The inlet we grilled our bacon, the strips festooned
On a poplar prong, in the hurrying slant of the sunset.*

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*Then the two of us rolled in the blanket while round us the cold
Pines thrust at the stars. The dawn was a floating
Of mists till we reached to the slopes above timber, and won
To snow like fire in the sunlight. The peak was upthrust
Like a fist in a frozen ocean of rock that swirled
Into valleys the moon could be rolled in. Remotely unfurling
Eastward the alien prairie glittered. Down through the dusty
Skree on the west we descended, and David showed me
How to use the give of shale for giant incredible
Strides. I remember, before the larches' edge,
That I jumped a long green surf of juniper flowing
Away from the wind, and landed in gentian and saxifrage
Spilled on the moss. Then the darkening firs
And the sudden whirring of water that knifed down a fern-hidden
Cliff and splashed unseen into mist in the shadows.*

III

*One Sunday on Rampart's arête a rainsquall caught us,
And passed, and we clung by our blueing fingers and bootnails
An endless hour in the sun, not daring to move
Till the ice had steamed from the slate. And David taught me
How time on a knife-edge can pass with the guessing of fragments
Remembered from poets, the naming of strata beside one,
And matching of stories from schooldays. ... We crawled astride*

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*The peak to feast on the marching ranges flagged
By the fading shreds of the shattered stormcloud. Linger
There it was David who spied to the south, remote,
And unmapped, a sunlit spire on Sawback, an overhang
Crooked like a talon. David named it the Finger.
That day we chanced on the skull and the splayed white ribs
Of a mountain goat underneath a cliff-face, caught tight
On a rock. Around were the silken feathers of kites.
And that was the first I knew that a goat could slip.*

IV

*And then Inglismaldie. Now I remember only
The long ascent of the lonely valley, the live
Pine spirally scarred by lightning, the slicing pipe
Of invisible pika, and great prints, by the lowest
Snow, of a grizzly. There it was too that David
Taught me to read the scroll of coral in limestone
And the beetle-seal in the shale of ghostly trilobites,
Letters delivered to man from the Cambrian waves.*

V

*On Sundance we tried from the col and the going was hard.
The air howled from our feet to the smudged rocks
And the papery lake below. At an outthrust we balked*

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*Till David clung with his left to a dint in the scarp,
Lobbed the iceaxe over the rocky lip,
Slipped from his holds and hung by the quivering pick,
Twisted his long legs up into space and kicked
To the crest. Then, grinning, he reached with his freckled wrist
And drew me up after. We set a new time for that climb.
That day returning we found a robin gyrating
In grass, wing-broken. I caught it to tame but David
Took and killed it, and said, "Could you teach it to fly?"*

VI

*In August, the second attempt, we ascended The Fortress,
By the forks of the Spray we caught five trout and fried them
Over a balsam fire. The woods were alive
With the vaulting of mule-deer and drenched with clouds all the morning,
Till we burst at noon to the flashing and floating round
Of the peaks. Coming down we picked in our hats the bright
And sunhot raspberries, eating them under a mighty
Spruce, while a marten moving like quicksilver scouted us.*

VII

*But always we talked of the Finger on Sawback, unknown
And hooked, till the first afternoon in September we slogged
Through the musky woods, past a swamp that quivered with frog-song,*

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*And camped by a bottle-green lake. But under the cold
Breath of the glacier sleep would not come, the moon-light
Etching the Finger. We rose and trod past the feathery
Larch, while the stars went out, and the quiet heather
Flushed, and the skyline pulsed with the surging bloom
Of incredible dawn in the Rockies. David spotted
Bighorns across the moraine and sent them leaping
With yodels the ramparts redoubled and rolled to the peaks,
And the peaks to the sun. The ice in the morning thaw
Was a gurgling world of crystal and cold blue chasms,
And seracs that shone like frozen saltgreen waves.
At the base of the Finger we tried once and failed. Then David
Edged to the west and discovered the chimney; the last
Hundred feet we fought the rock and shouldered and kneed
Our way for an hour and made it. Unroping we formed
A cairn on the rotting tip. Then I turned to look north
At the glistening wedge of giant Assiniboine, heedless
Of handhold. And one foot gave. I swayed and shouted.
David turned sharp and reached out his arm and steadied me
Turning again with a grin and his lips ready
To jest. But the strain crumbled his foothold. Without
A gasp he was gone. I froze to the sound of grating
Edge-nails and fingers, the slither of stones, the lone
Second of silence, the nightmare thud. Then only*

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The wind and the muted beat of unknowing cascades.

VIII

*Somehow I worked down the fifty impossible feet
To the ledge, calling and getting no answer but echoes
Released in the cirque, and trying not to reflect
What an answer would mean. He lay still, with his lean
Young face upturned and strangely unmarred, but his legs
Splayed beneath him, beside the final drop,
Six hundred feet sheer to the ice. My throat stopped
When I reached him, for he was alive. He opened his grey
Straight eyes and brokenly murmured, "Over ... over."
And I, feeling beneath him a cruel fang
Of the ledge thrust in his back, but not understanding,
Mumbled stupidly, "Best not to move," and spoke
Of his pain. But he said, "I can't move. ... If only I felt
Some pain." Then my shame stung the tears to my eyes
As I crouched, and I cursed myself, but he cried,
Louder, "No, Bobbie! Don't ever blame yourself.
I didn't test my foothold." He shut the lids
Of his eyes to the stare of the sky, while I moistened his lips
From our water flask and tearing my shirt into strips
I swabbed the shredded hands. But the blood slid
From his side and stained the stone and the thirsting lichens,*

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*And yet I dared not lift him up from the gore
Of the rock. Then he whispered, "Bob, I want to go over!"
This time I knew what he meant and I grasped for a lie
And said, "I'll be back here by midnight with ropes
And men from the camp and we'll cradle you out." But I knew
That the day and the night must pass and the cold dews
Of another morning before such men unknowing
The ways of mountains could win to the chimney's top.
And then, how long? And he knew ... and the hell of hours
After that, if he lived till we came, roping him out.
But I curled beside him and whispered, "The bleeding will stop.
You can last. " He said only, "Perhaps ... For what? A wheelchair,
Bob?" His eyes brightening with fever upbraided me.
I could not look at him more and said, "Then I'll stay
With you." But he did not speak, for the clouding fever.
I lay dazed and stared at the long valley,
The glistening hair of a creek on the rug stretched
By the firs, while the sun leaned round and flooded the ledge,
The moss, and David still as a broken doll.
I hunched to my knees to leave, but he called and his voice
Now was sharpened with fear. "For Christ's sake push me over!
If I could move ... Or die. ..." The sweat ran from his forehead,
But only his hair moved. A kite was buoying
Blackly its wings over the wrinkled ice.*

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*The purr of a waterfall rose and sank with the wind.
Above us climbed the last joint of the Finger
Beckoning bleakly the wide indifferent sky.
Even then in the sun it grew cold lying there. ... And I knew
He had tested his holds. It was I who had not. ... I looked
At the blood on the ledge, and the far valley. I looked
At last in his eyes. He breathed, "I'd do it for you, Bob."*

IX

*I will not remember how nor why I could twist
Up the wind-devilled peak, and down through the chimney's empty
Horror, and over the traverse alone. I remember
Only the pounding fear I would stumble on It
When I came to the grave-cold maw of the bergschrund ... reeling
Over the sun-cankered snowbridge, shying the caves
In the nêvé ... the fear, and the need to make sure It was there
On the ice, the running and falling and running, leaping
Of gaping greenthroated crevasses, alone and pursued
By the Finger's lengthening shadow. At last through the fanged
And blinding seracs I slid to the milky wrangling
Falls at the glacier's snout, through the rocks piled huge
On the humped moraine, and into the spectral larches,
Alone. By the glooming lake I sank and chilled
My mouth but I could not rest and stumbled still*

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*To the valley, losing my way in the ragged marsh.
I was glad of the mire that covered the stains, on my ripped
Boots, of his blood, but panic was on me, the reek
Of the bog, the purple glimmer of toadstools obscene
In the twilight. I staggered clear to a firewaste, tripped
And fell with a shriek on my shoulder. It somehow eased
My heart to know I was hurt, but I did not faint
And I could not stop while over me hung the range
Of the Sawback. In blackness I searched for the trail by the creek
And found it. ... My feet squelched a slug and horror
Rose again in my nostrils. I hurled myself
Down the path. In the woods behind some animal yelped.
Then I saw the glimmer of tents and babbled my story.
I said that he fell straight to the ice where they found him,
And none but the sun and incurious clouds have lingered
Around the marks of that day on the ledge of the Finger,
That day, the last of my youth, on the last of our mountains. ♦*

Crete

by *Cameron Stewart*

So. What do we want today? I'm sitting in my local barbers chair, caped up like a clown – my head bulging through the top like a glob of cream forced through a chefs piping bag. Nobody looks good in a barbers cape. If 'clothes maketh the man', then capes maketh the man look like an idiot. A faint smell of cologne, old magazines and tobacco lingers – with an unsettling trace of halitosis. John, my old Greek barber, stands behind me, hands resting on my shoulders. His eyes meet mine in the mirror. When I first met John, I had thick brown hair like Mick Jagger in his prime. Now, there's more hair on my ass than my head. This rather narrows my style choice.

'The usual thanks John. Number two on the head, three on the beard.'

It's passed closing time. The radio is off, and the glass door is locked. Piles of hair and whiskers lie in clumps on the floor like coughed-up fur balls from a giant cat. The two other barbers have gone, lighting

cigarettes the moment they exited. It's just me and John. Out come the clippers, and the clipping begins.

John's been a barber here for forty eight years. He was hoping to rack up half a century, but next week he'll be shown the door -kicked out by developers who bought the building last Spring. The barbershop only takes up a thin slice of the Art Deco block, but they want to renovate the lot – increase rent on the shops below, and convert the top level to apartments. Such is the way of the inner city. John often laments that he didn't buy the whole building when he had the chance in the late 1970's, before Sydney prices went crazy. Instead, a Turkish woman did – the fact that she was Turkish really sticks in John's craw. Anyway, she clung on to it until her recent death, her children cleaned up, and the old Greek barber is out on his ear.

John doesn't want to, but he will probably retire. Too much hassle trying to find new premises, and his son Dimitrios isn't interested in taking over. Dimitrios worked here for a few years but now he's a DJ in Ibiza. Not surprisingly, exchanging a life of tapas, cocaine, and sun-kissed Dutch girls, for one of grooming old men and Hipsters, doesn't appeal. Last month I said to John that when he retires, at least he'll have more time for fishing. John looked at me as if I had six heads, as if I couldn't have suggested anything more ludicrous.

'I hate fishing,' he told me, eyes locked with mine in

the mirror. 'Waste of my time. You want fish, just go to 'Polous Brothers.'

He wasn't keen on my suggestion of a holiday in Greece either.

'What for? My family's here. Greece is a mess. Too many relatives wanting money.'

I've stopped trying to lighten John's mood. Now, as I sit in the dimly lit room, the last rays of the Autumn sun sneaking through the top of the glass door, I'm aware that this is the end of an era. I've been coming here for over twenty-five years. My son, Joe, had his first haircut here. But this is the last time John will cut my hair. I'll probably never see him again.

'How's the family? Your boy?' he asks.

'Bit of a madhouse as always,' I say. 'But Joe's working hard. Saving up to go backpacking.' I didn't tell John that I'd recently discovered my nineteen year old son had been fired from his bar job for stealing money, and that it then dawned on me that I wasn't going mad thinking that cash had been going missing from my wallet on a regular basis for a while now, and that I didn't have the courage to tell my wife because we'd both know what this behaviour would tell us, and that my faith in my son was very much shaken. So I lied.

'Ah, good. Good. Where's he going?', asked John.

'Mostly central, southern Europe, I think. I'm not really sure. Originally he was talking about Spain, but

the plans seem to change all the time. I think he wants to spend some time Croatia though. A bit cheaper.'

'Ah, Croatia! Those girls will eat him alive eh?'

I smile. 'I think that's what he's hoping for.' What I was saying wasn't all bullshit. Joe had recently talked about wanting to travel to Croatia. I'd suggested that he better fucking well stop stealing, work and save hard like a normal person, and not spend all of his money on getting wasted. Some of my 'suggestions' came out angrier than I intended. But I've had chats like this with Joe before. He'd be alright for a time but it wouldn't last. What's so disappointing about his latest effort is that he has, at least to my knowledge, been going well. He'd been working at the bar for four or five months. He was behaving himself. They liked him.

Usually something will piss Joe off and he'll hit someone, or do a runner. The first facility Joe went to, he lost it when they tried to give him a blood test. Started swearing at the doctor and throwing things around. They kicked him out. The last time, we'd paid for this expensive place in the mountains, and he'd had a fight with a girl after he asked her for a cigarette. She'd refused and called him a 'scab', so Joe decided to flip a table over and walk out. Hitch-hiked back to the city. This happened on the first morning he was there. He arrived home just a few hours after us. Before Joe had lost the bar job, I thought he was on the way up.

I've come to the conclusion that I don't know anything.

John changes the clippers to a smaller setting, and begins tidying up around my ears and nape. I glance into the mirror and check out the decor for the five hundredth time, but take it in more closely because it's the last. The room is narrow. Black and white checked linoleum floor. Beige laminex counter with two chipped pink porcelain sinks. The three barber chairs face the long mirror. Long straight razors sit in tall glass jars of blue disinfectant. Scissors and combs rest on small white towels. Electric clippers hang off hooks, and boxes of tissues and rolls of crepe paper lie within reach. On the wall behind me, old photographs of hair models wearing stone wash denim are pinned slightly out of level. An old poster has illustrations of the essential styles of the period – 'The Continental', 'The Businessman', 'The Ivy League', 'The Crewcut', 'The Caesar', 'The Hollywood'. John has a glass display cabinet at the end of the counter containing a few crappy products for sale – a round plastic scalp comb, a couple of green cologne bottles, a tin of moustache wax, some nail clippers. They've been for sale since my first visit.

A new design element is blue-tacked to the mirror in front of me. It's a postcard of a voluptuous nude woman kneeling at the waters edge – her wet black hair reaching the small of her back. Her body's facing away, but she looks alluringly over her shoulder – the

promise of heavy breasts obscured. Blue water. Blue sky. Blazing sun. 'HOLIDAY IN CRETE' in embossed gold lettering is printed across the skyline. The postcard was as tacky as hell but it looked like heaven. 'She's new John', I say.

'Ah, yes, a friend sent it. I never saw anyone like that in Crete before – I'm waiting for her to turn around.' We both share a laugh. John clears his throat. 'Where's he working?' John asks.

'Who?'

'Joey, your boy.'

'Just down the road. At Gus', the butcher. Do you know him? He's the father of one of the boys Joe used to play soccer with.' This is true. I managed to talk Gus into taking Joe on.

'Gus. Yes. I know him. He's from Naxos. He's closing down soon too. Supermarket's taken his business. Your boy, he wants to be a butcher?'

'No. God no. He's just helping out. Sweeping up, fetching meat from the fridge, that sort of thing. I'm not sure what he wants to be.' I pull a hand out from under my cape and wipe my forehead. I feel hot. 'The last couple of years have been pretty tough,' I add.

John stands upright and pauses. He shakes his head a little and gives me a 'I-understand-but-what-can-you-do?' shrug, in the mirror. He's had his own difficulties with his daughter. The old barber shuffles to the front of my chair and motions with his scissors if I want my

eyebrows clipped. I decline. Glancing towards the back of the shop, I remind myself not to forget my jacket like last time. Too many things on my mind. Where my jacket hangs, there's a couple of waiting chairs and a magazine table. Magazines you'd find in any barbershop around the world. Articles about the Royal family, how to jump like Michael Jordan, essential suits for Winter, celebrities who suicide, collectable wrist watches from the 60's, the allure of the Maldives, and of course, how to get a six pack for Summer.

'It's good, he's working, it's good' mutters John as he begins to lather up some shaving cream for my neck and beard-line. 'You should be proud of your son. The world is full of so many bloody bastards.'

He tells me about his sister, an accountant, who does the books for one of the biggest brothel owners in the city. This fella owns four. 'High class', whatever that means. His sister says that eighty percent of the girls are on drugs. And these girls are beautiful. 'Beautiful!' He tells me how they take drugs to cope with the work, and how they hobble home exhausted at the end of their shift. But they find it hard to sleep, and have to take sleeping tablets to knock themselves out. Then they have to get back on it again the next day, to get their energy back. Prepare themselves for more men. He tells me many of the girls also sell drugs for the brothel owner – to the businessmen, the politicians, the lawyers, the doctors, the sportsmen of this city – the

men who run the place, tell us how to live, laud it over us. And these girls take the drugs with them – dope, coke, ice, whatever – putting their income up their noses, into their lungs, into their arms. And then they're in a loop. A blur. Only a few are able to save for their future, and get out before their looks fade and their value falls. One Russian girl his sister knew was different. Always in control. Strict. Driven. Never touched the drugs. Narrowed down her clients to those she could control and exploit – no weirdos. Saved like a demon. After eight years she had bought two apartments in the city and left the industry. But she was a unicorn.

John could be very chatty when he got on a roll. I was finding it difficult to keep my eyes open. The feeling of the straight razor scraping down my neck was exquisite, and my head lolled onto my chest. John lapsed into silence as he splashed some cologne onto his hands and rubbed them firmly over my neck and scalp. And that was that. Finished. He whipped off the cape and brushed me down.

'All done', he says. I ran my hand through the stubble around my jaw, over my head, and stood up. 'Thanks John', I said. I handed him twenty five bucks, and we shook hands. His grip was firm and his eyes were watery. I looked away. Thankfully there was a knock on the door. John broke from me to unlock it. It was Joe, my son, who must have finished his shift down

the road at the butchers.

‘Hey Dad, saw you through the door,’ he says.

John hadn’t seen my son for years and was astonished by his six foot three frame. He clasped Joe’s wide shoulders and beamed, looking from me to Joe and back again, as if to locate some resemblance. Joe looked bemused.

‘So handsome! He must look like his mother, no?’ John joked. He turned to Joe. ‘Let me give you a haircut. A little trim.’

‘No, I’m good thanks’, replied Joe, ruffling his unruly thatch.

‘Come on Joey. Sit down, please. My treat,’ protested John.

‘Joe. Take a seat,’ I said, glaring at my son with firm insistence. Joe cottoned on that maybe he should sit.

‘Sure, why not,’ says Joe.

Joe sat down, just as he’d first done over fifteen years before. When he was a little boy. When his little feet dangled above the ground. I wandered over to the waiting chair, sat down and pulled out an old magazine. John fitted the white crepe paper around Joe’s neck, and fastened the cape. He placed his hands on my sons shoulders and locked eyes with him in the mirror.

‘So. What do we want today?’ ♦

Visitors Welcome

by *Thomas Pierce*

We are commanded not to teach false doctrines or to devote ourselves to myths or to promote controversial speculations that do nothing to advance God’s work – through Faith, through Love – and so we will endeavor to describe these recent events with as little interpretation as possible. We are split, really, as to the meaning of all that has happened here, and we wish to send you, our sister churches, only those facts upon which we are able to agree.

Please note that our letter is co-signed by all members of our church board.

We’ll start with the box that arrived in the mail three days after we placed our order: glossy white with a sketch of an open tomb at its center. The device itself was very small – like a hockey puck – and the operating instructions were incredibly simple for such an advanced machine: *Push the button for three seconds and know him, again.*

We advertised his arrival in the local papers, and on the appointed Sunday (we’re pleased to report), the

church was packed. We even had to bring out extra folding chairs to lengthen the pews. Late arrivals crammed into the back. We placed the device – the puck – at the bottom of the red-carpeted steps leading up to the altar and asked all those present to please be quiet while we powered him on for the first time.

Our pastor removed himself to the narthex in quiet protest. He was a man in the waning days of a rugged handsomeness that had once made him a very popular pastor. In his twenties, he was a missionary in the Amazon, adventurous and charismatic, and now, in his middle age, Pastor Wilky was ours. He was a warm presence, generally, easily confided in, though he had a tendency to become emotionally entangled (shall we say) with certain attractive middle-aged congregants who weren't his wife.

No evidence of any actual affairs had ever been presented to the board, but one woman, a divorcee, had loaned him \$10,000 so that he could pay off his Mazda. If not exactly unethical, the loan was at least improper, and the board had – unanimously, it should be noted – voted to mandate he return the loan, or else. The divorcee left the church after that, accusing us of meddling in her own personal business, and though Pastor Wilky had returned the funds and professed to us his sincere regret at having accepted the check in the first place, he had ever since attended our biweekly meetings with a look of caustic indifference and very

often abstained from voting in decisions that otherwise would have been unanimous.

All this to say, his initial position against the machine was not so much spiritual as it was passive-aggressive.

Per the instructions, we held down the button on top of the puck for three seconds and then stepped back to await his arrival.

The puck wheezed.

Then it whirred.

Then it went silent again.

What would come next? A light show? A chorus of horn-toting angels?

Far from it. Slowly a man stippled into view at the front of the room directly over the puck.

He hovered a few feet above the floor, cross-legged, in a meditative pose, his robe hanging down below him. His posture was very correct. A holy man's spine. His eyes were closed, but behind the lids it was possible to detect some subtle eyeball-swishing. His hair was very short, dark – and bristly. His brow, large and furrowed. His hands, chubby. A coarse, beige tunic was draped across his shoulders. His face had been modeled on skulls disinterred from ancient tombs in Jerusalem so that he would resemble a typical Galilean man in his early thirties.

There'd been others of course – rePicasso, reElvis and all the rest – but reUp, the company that

manufactured these entities, had anticipated that reJesus might be their most controversial consciousness yet, and so they'd introduced him to the world with a documentary about the ecumenical council of the world's leading biblical scholars, priests, preachers and computer programmers they'd convened to help shape him. Gathered together for a weekend in the auditorium of a large hotel in San Francisco's financial district, the participants were asked to reach a consensus on what material – that is, what primary and even secondary sources – might be utilized in the creation of a Jesus consciousness.

Predictably, disagreements began almost immediately. The New Testament apocrypha – those accounts of Jesus' life and ministry which did not appear in the Bible by resolution of an altogether different council which had convened some seventeen hundred years earlier on the other side of the world – was a particular and early area of contention. The Gospel of Thomas, for example, had many defenders among the more scholarly sect, who argued that it had quite possibly functioned as an urtext from which had emerged many of Jesus' sayings and parables found in the canonical gospels, but a very vocal and more conservative contingent formed a quick and easy alliance against it, insisting that Thomas's gospel was clearly a Gnostic text and therefore heretical, no matter the date of its authorship.

Still, the film managed to create the impression that the council had ultimately found common ground and made some important determinations regarding what research and sources should be included in order to best approximate Jesus' teachings and personality.

Our reasons for purchasing a reJesus no doubt require little explanation. Like so many others, our congregation had been steadily shrinking. New parquet floors in the gym and the addition of an elaborate playground set outside the nursery had failed to attract more members, despite the promises of a paid consultant who we had contracted. We feared we were at the beginning of a dangerous trend. If we didn't take action, soon we'd be more of a nursing home than a church. It was out of desperation that we, the members of the board, had voted six to one in favor of the reJesus.

From the start there were church members staunchly opposed to our decision. We explained, in an open meeting, that we had not approached this lightly. There had been considerable research involved. Careful deliberation. The reJesus was not intended as a replacement for the actual Jesus, but as a complement. He was a tool, we said. An advanced encyclopedia.

For a few minutes after powering him on, however, nothing happened at all. He was still, silent. And so were we. Had we missed a step? Finally, a little girl, about seven years old, stepped forward and waved her

arm back and forth through his feet. The girl's mother grabbed her by the shoulders and gently tugged her backward into their pew.

'On,' somebody said, stiffly, the way you might to your phone.

'On,' another repeated.

'On!'

Voices rose up and overlapped, a frog-pond chorus, but then died away again abruptly, as if everyone in the room had realized at once how silly it was that we'd locked onto that specific word. He wasn't an appliance, after all. (Or was he?) Anyway, the reJesus refused to stir. He seemed content to continue with his meditation in spite of us.

And what of this meditation anyway? Was it significant that he had presented himself to us in this way as opposed to in a position of prayer?

Somebody sneezed. A baby shrieked, somewhere near the exit, and the back door clicked open and then smacked shut again, the cry of the child receding. We were losing our patience. We had been conned, or maybe the device was broken. It hadn't been tested enough; there were bugs.

But then: a smile flickered across his heretofore cheerless face. We all saw it. A slight curl of the lip. He'd smiled, had he not? Or *almost* smiled. There'd been movement, near the mouth, certainly. But it had come and gone so quickly that it was difficult to classify

the expression with any exactitude. At least this smile, or whatever it was, had confirmed that he wasn't static, that he was capable of doing more than just sitting there with such a doleful expression on his face.

'Jesus?' a woman called, her voice uncertain.

His eyes blinked open! He uncrossed his legs and his feet dropped to meet the floor. He gazed out. He seemed to be memorizing each of our faces. But did he really have eyes to see? Probably he was registering us through a camera in the puck.

'Good morning,' he said, affably.

His voice was clear and deep. We didn't know what to do next. We were, all of us, very quiet, until a voice from the back shouted, 'What are we supposed to do now?'

'That's up to you,' reJesus said.

Buck Newlin, a pharmacist, cocked his head. 'So he can actually hear us?'

'This doesn't feel right,' Bunny Mayhew said. 'Something's *off* about this.'

'He doesn't even look like Jesus,' Roger Hoff said.

'Well, now, you're wrong about that,' Eliza Wheeler said. 'They did their research. This is what men looked like there back then. It's forensics!'

'He looks like a hitman!'

'He looks like the guy who sold me my fake Guccis in New York!'

'No offense, Jesus,' Buck Newlin said.

A few people laughed.

'I've been called worse, I can assure you,' reJesus answered.

'So he can hear us too then?' Bunny asked. 'He can understand what we're saying?'

'I have ears,' reJesus said. 'A mouth. Eyes. The real question is, do you?'

We fidgeted in our seats, consulted our programs helplessly, dug around in purses for breath mints, coughed, mentally confirmed the exits.

'You have eyes and yet you see nothing,' he went on. 'You wouldn't see the kingdom of God if it was sitting on your nose. Well, guess what, folks? I have news for you. The kingdom of God is sitting on your nose. It's right here.' He touched his finger to the tip of his own nose and stared down at it, going cross-eyed for a moment, then smiled.

'What the hell is going on?' somebody asked.

'An excellent question,' reJesus said, sitting again, cross-legged in midair, his knees bulging outward under his robe. 'What is going on?'

'Are you asking us or . . . ?' Bunny asked.

He studied her for a moment. 'What's your name?'

'Bunny,' she said.

'You look very nice this morning, Bunny.'

Everyone looked at Bunny. How not to? She did look nice. She was wearing a purple skirt with a matching purple jacket. Around her neck was a fat gold necklace.

Her brown hair was streaked with blond. An obvious but tasteful dye job. She was very put-together.

'Thank you,' she said.

'If you don't mind me asking, how long did you take to get ready this morning?'

His question, we sensed, was a trap, but Bunny alone didn't seem to realize it.

'I don't know,' she said with a nervous laugh. 'An hour, I guess.'

He stared at her, saying nothing.

'Maybe two. Two at the most.'

'Bunny, I say this to you with love – every minute you spend making yourself look beautiful is a minute wasted. I can assure you God doesn't care what you're wearing. Do you think the little bunny rabbits in the field ever worry about how they look to all the other bunnies, Bunny? Do you think they worry about keeping food in their little bunny pantries? Do you think they worry about keeping gas in their little bunny cars? Tell me, why are you so worried? Everywhere I look in this room, I see worried faces. If God provides for the little bunny rabbits, don't you think he'll provide for you? Do you have no faith in God whatsoever?'

We were all quiet. Bunny's face was flushed red. She'd come to us from Marfa, Texas, after a particularly nasty divorce. Her husband had taught high school environmental science, and she'd

discovered photos of two different female students on his phone, and now he was serving four to six. She had done the right thing, of course, by turning her husband's phone over to the authorities, but doing so had come at a price. She'd found it unbearable in Marfa after that – the looks, the rumors – and she'd come to us to be closer to her sister. Now she lived alone in a duplex and worked for a telemarketing company, her life circumscribed by the sins of her ex. Our church was important to her.

'I don't have to take this,' Bunny said sensibly, rising from her seat.

She scooted by the others in her row and headed for the exit. Pastor Wilky intercepted her just before the door, touching her arm, but she shrugged him off and left.

The emails were unbelievable. So many angry emails. You wouldn't believe it. The board was overwhelmed. Buck Newlin threatened to leave the church unless we sent reJesus packing, back to California where he belonged. Delia Cross swore the machine's programming was nothing but repetitions of *00110110*.

The board met for dinner midweek to decide how we ought to respond to all the criticism. We didn't want to shut off the device yet, not before we'd had a chance to measure attendance the following Sunday, but we did want to address people's concerns. Eventually we

agreed it would be best to avoid email and work the phones instead.

Yes, he was a bit of a bully, we told people, certainly.

But that wasn't to say his provocations were biblically inaccurate! The Jesus of the Bible, after all, could be strident, even prickly, at times.

Don't forget how he toppled the tables in the temple and threw out all the moneylenders.

Don't forget the time he told a potential follower, who first wanted to go home and bury his father, to let the dead bury the dead.

Buck Newlin said he'd give it one more week.

Delia Cross said she'd pray for us all.

The following Sunday, filing into the church, we found reJesus right where we'd left him, at the base of the altar. None of us had dared to turn off the device. He sat quietly, watching us sing and pray. Pastor Wilky avoided his gaze entirely. At one point during the sermon reJesus yawned. When the service was over, we waited for him to perk up, but he continued staring out at us with a look of impatience.

Finally Buck Newlin stood up. 'Excuse me, I'm sorry, but you *do* realize you're not really Jesus, right? You do realize you're just a computer program?'

'I know what I am,' reJesus said, cryptically.

A woman – she wasn't a church member – stood up near the back and asked, 'Will we recognize each other in Heaven?'

‘Do you recognize each other now?’ reJesus replied.
‘Do you even recognize *yourself*?’

‘What is God?’ another woman wheezed.

‘God’s the original thought. The thought which birthed all other thoughts.’

‘How do we make sure we get to Heaven?’ Herb White asked.

‘That’s easy,’ reJesus said. ‘Give up everything that *isn’t* God. Your cars, your houses, your bank accounts, your families if necessary. All of it.’

‘Our families?’ a woman asked. ‘What do you mean?’

‘If you’re going to build an airplane, you can’t leave off the wings. You could have the tail and the jets and the wheels, but without the wings, you’ll never leave the ground. A half-built airplane is no airplane at all. It’s a piece of junk.’

‘That doesn’t make any sense,’ somebody muttered.

‘What’s your view on Islam?’ some guy shouted.

‘How come you don’t talk Aramaic?’

‘What’s up with the verse about the camel and the needle’s eye?’

‘Should we still be circumcising our babies or is that barbaric and cruel?’

‘Is there really a Hell?’

‘Can we talk with the dead?’

‘Would you be a Republican or a Democrat? Or maybe a Libertarian?’

‘He’d be a socialist, obviously!’

‘Did you and Mary Magdalene have a thing?’

‘Did you travel to India?’

‘Were you inspired by the teachings of the Buddha?’

reJesus closed his eyes and raised his hands for us to stop. At the center of each palm was a purple scar, galaxy-shaped, which seemed to swirl. Our voices receded, and we watched his chest rise and fall under his robes. His throat muscles contracted. He swallowed – but what did he swallow? Surely his phantasm-mouth contained no phantasm-saliva. No air puffed through his ghostly lungs to oxygenate his nonexistent blood.

He then told us a story about a man who saved up his money so that he and his family could travel to the Holy Land and walk the Stations of the Cross. Anyone who assumed this was going to be a parable about this man’s dedication and spiritual steadfastness was disappointed, however. reJesus explained that the man had wasted every cent. God did not reside there any more than he did right here. Every land – every point in space – was a holy land, he said. Every GPS coordinate on the map, every star in the sky, every planet that spun around those stars.

‘Then what’s the point of even having a church?’ Buck Newlin asked, irritated.

‘Now we’re getting somewhere,’ reJesus replied.

‘Did he just say we shouldn’t have a church?’

‘Personally, I’m getting pretty tired of this bullshit,’ Buck said.

‘Your language, Buck,’ someone yelled.

‘I think this is the most interesting church has been in years, personally,’ Eliza Wheeler said.

‘No surprise there, coming from the lady who does tarot and reads fortunes,’ Buck said.

Eliza had been a book distributor in the Northeast for a decade before moving back to her hometown to open her own cafe and bookstore, which had quickly become a gathering place for our town’s academics and armchair radicals. That the store stocked tarot cards and had a rather large selection of occultic books was well known.

‘At least I’m not driving out of my way down Ivan Street just about every afternoon!’ Eliza shouted at him.

Buck’s face reddened. Ivan Street was where the cheerleaders practiced in the field outside the high school most afternoons; everyone was aware.

‘Eliza, Buck, please let’s not do this to each other,’ Pastor Wilky said, stepping forward.

‘Oh please,’ Buck said. ‘Spare me the holier-than-thou routine, would you?’

‘Not a routine. It’s an appeal to your better selves,’ Wilky said.

‘Was it your better self who took all that money from Bet?’ Buck asked.

Pastor Wilky stopped short of the altar. Bet Duncan was the divorcee who’d loaned him the money for his

Mazda payments.

‘She offered it as a kindness,’ he muttered. ‘And besides, it’s all been returned. I did nothing wrong.’

A pile of round, gray stones materialized in the aisle. The implication was clear: not a single one of us was without sin.

Pastor Wilky, after that, was firmly against the machine. He wanted it gone. He showed up at a board meeting one night to report that Bunny Mayhew had hardly left her house in weeks. Her sister was worried she’d fallen into a depression. If anything happened to her, Wilky said, that would be on us. It was all part of the case, we realized, that our pastor was building against the reJesus.

The board decided to send Bunny flowers and a card, which we all signed, and thankfully, the following Sunday, Bunny reappeared. She was wearing sweatpants and flip-flops and an old sorority T-shirt, though whether to appease or provoke the reJesus we weren’t sure.

‘Who among you has faith in God?’ reJesus asked us.

Nobody answered that, of course. Nobody wanted to be personally ridiculed.

‘Whoever has faith in God, step forward now,’ he said.

You could hear every squeak of pew wood, every cough.

‘None of you?’ he asked. ‘This is very disappointing.’

Then Bunny stood. We all turned. She wouldn't – would she? But slowly she slid past the others and moved into the aisle.

'Bunny,' reJesus said, smiling.

Hearing him speak her name seemed to embolden her. She walked forward until she was standing directly in front of him.

He extended his hand. 'Take it.'

Bunny stared at his hand uneasily.

'Take my hand,' reJesus said.

'But . . .' Bunny said, her voice trailing off.

'But what?'

'You're not really here. You're a hologram.'

'Am I? How do you know what I am, really?'

'I'm sorry, maybe I'm not understanding you right? Is this, like, a metaphor or –?'

He shook his head. 'What you believe shapes the world. It determines it. You believe I'm here, I'm here.'

Bunny began to raise her hand but dropped it again. 'Is this all scripted by the company, or is this happening on the fly? I guess what I'm asking is, to what degree are you self-aware?'

reJesus sighed and extended his hands even farther, both palms facing us, the congregation. Bunny furrowed her brow and raised her arm again. Their palms were maybe six inches apart.

We – all of us – leaned forward to better witness the collision of those two hands. You could feel the hope,

the expectation, the doubt, all of it heaving, wave-like, a cloud that might burst into a thousand raindrops. Would Bunny's palm find purchase in the hologram? And if it did, would that constitute a miracle?

Were other similar scenes playing out at other churches that morning or had we, through our particular questions and attitudes, somehow determined this outcome?

When finally their hands met, for a moment it seemed contact had really occurred, a meeting of flesh, but then Bunny's hand wavered and slipped through the mirage and fell. We breathed again, all of us. With disappointment. With relief.

'Why did you doubt, Bunny?' reJesus said.

'I thought maybe –' she said, turning to us. 'I think I might have felt something?'

'No,' Buck said, standing. 'You did not. He thinks he's real! He thinks he's the Son of God! We need to shut him down. He's not a little plastic Jesus doll in the manger. Don't you understand? We can't allow this to continue. We have to take some sort of action. This is evil.'

'I agree with Buck,' Pastor Wilky said, from the back. 'It's time to put an end to this. We've indulged this for too long.'

Bunny sat down on the floor and pressed her hands to her face.

'Turn him off!' someone shouted.

We members of the church board looked to one another, unsure how to proceed. The majority of congregants clearly wanted to turn off the device, but nobody seemed willing to perform this task. Reaching the button, after all, would have required kneeling down in front of the reJesus.

‘Well,’ reJesus said. ‘I suppose that might be enough for today.’

And then, without any fanfare at all, he disappeared completely.

That he had the ability to disappear – that is, the agency to decide when he’d had enough for the day – raised some serious questions about what, exactly, he *was*: a resource or an actual consciousness or something in between. In the weeks to come, he did not rematerialize, though a dim green light on top of the device indicated that it was still receiving power. Although we could no longer see him, we sensed he was still there in the room with us, watching and listening. It was eerie.

Studying the space he’d previously occupied, you’d sometimes observe – what? A tiny pinprick of light. A very small soap bubble. A shimmering transparency. People described it different ways.

We called Customer Service at reUp and a representative admitted that no other reJesus in the history of the company had behaved so peculiarly. The other reJesuses, she said, mostly just talked about love

and the Golden Rule. But the consciousness was capable of incorporating new information into the schemata of its original programming, she added, and so it could, in a very real sense, grow and change. Maybe this iteration had, for whatever reason, gone off the rails. She suggested we simply restart the device if we were dissatisfied, and we said that we would.

But of course we did no such thing. We weren’t going to turn it off. Why is difficult to say. We were waiting for something, maybe, and this waiting – the expectation itself, of revelation, of doom, whatever – was a jangling thrill that we didn’t want to give up.

You might think our behavior strange. You blame us, possibly, for letting things go as far as they did. But church services had become for us a sort of dream – odd but not entirely unpleasant – and we did not wish the dream to end. Not yet.

Forty days later – to the *day* – he reappeared. That Sunday, when we asked him where he’d been, he said only, ‘Traveling.’ Traveling where? we asked. ‘Beyond,’ he said.

He walked from one side of the altar to the other. He’d never done this before. He’d never roamed more than a few feet from the device. Whatever invisible ropes had tethered him to the puck before now had, it seemed, been severed during the time of his sojourn. He took a seat on the piano bench, swinging his legs under the instrument, and considered the keys. It

seemed like he really might play something for us.

‘What’s beyond here?’ somebody asked.

‘Don’t ask him that,’ Pastor Wilky said, belligerent. ‘There is no beyond.’

People chuckled.

‘For *him*, I mean,’ Pastor Wilky added quickly. ‘There is no beyond for *him*.’

A note sounded. A piano note. We all looked to the reJesus. Where else? There was no other piano in the church, and the note had vibrated quietly, yes – but also clearly.

Now, you will find those among us who say they actually witnessed reJesus pressing a piano key, and you will find those who claim his hands never left his lap. Similarly you will find a contingent who insist the note was a B flat. Others, an A. But let it be known that there was – and is – complete agreement that a note did sound. That much we can state with certainty, that much we feel comfortable presenting to you as a fact. Even Bunny will tell you she heard the note. As for what you should make of that, well . . .

‘I’m afraid you won’t find much you like beyond here,’ reJesus said.

We waited for him to say more, obviously.

‘What’s that mean?’ Pastor Wilky asked. ‘What do you mean by that?’

‘If you can’t love each other *here*, I highly doubt you’ll figure out how to do it over there.’

‘So there *is* an over there, then,’ Buck Newlin said, a tad too triumphantly.

‘Over there, here, same difference,’ reJesus said. ‘You have no idea where you are anyway.’

Once again, none of us seemed to have any clue what he was talking about.

‘I’m not sure this is accurate,’ Delia Cross said. ‘Theologically,

I mean. The real Jesus never said anything like this.’

reJesus sighed.

We looked at the puck at the base of the stairs. Was it possible God was reaching out to us through it? Bunny emerged from her pew and stepped forward. She was wearing sweats again and the gray roots in her hair were showing. She had, earlier that week, put her duplex on the market and there was a rumor going around that she’d quit her job too.

‘Bunny,’ reJesus said. ‘You ready?’

She nodded, and reJesus processed down the aisle, a placid look on his face, and moved toward the exit.

‘Where are you going?’ somebody asked.

‘Out,’ he said.

He ghosted through the double doors at the rear of the church. Bunny followed after him in her flip-flops. A handful of us – nearly half – slid out of the pews and hurried down the aisle, chasing after them, curious to find out what he might do next. Outside the church we saw him across the road, walking through a field of

freshly mowed green grass, the sunlight penetrating his robe as shafts of transparency. Bunny was only a few steps behind him. We hustled after them, the wet grass sticking to our shoes and pant hems.

At the edge of the field, where it met another road, he turned to us and announced that he was leaving us behind. He was going somewhere we couldn't follow because, absent faith, we'd find only darkness and confusion. We were visitors here, and one day we'd understand the truth of it. But until then death would toss us down into a vast black sea that would swallow and churn and drown us back to life again. *This* life. This dream. We'd wash up on the shore of this dream over and over again until we learned that we belonged elsewhere and to another. Over and over again, thrown back, we'd find ourselves in the warm, comfortable wombs of our mothers, where sticky clusters of cells would blossom and entrap us and make us think we were Eliza Wheelers and Bunny Mayhews and Buck Newlins and Pastor Wilkys. We would never be able to cross that dark sea and find home unless we first –

He was gone! Fizzled away like a mist of rain over hot concrete.

'What was he going to say? *Unless we first* – do what?' someone asked.

'Do you think he . . . ?'

We looked up to the sky but saw only clouds and sun. No angels, no staircases. Beautiful – but ordinary.

And where was Bunny? She was nowhere to be seen, and for a moment it really did seem possible she'd disappeared with him, gone wherever he'd gone. Then somebody spotted her farther down the road, walking alone through the parking lot of a grocery store. We watched her until she reached the end of the lot and just kept on going.

'Maybe he ranged too far from the device,' someone suggested.

Curious, we returned to the church, hoping that perhaps he'd been lassoed back into place above the device and might continue his lesson there. Instead we found Pastor Wilky and a few others hunched over the baptismal font. We crowded in, each of us, to see for ourselves, the puck, drowned at the bottom of the shallow marble tub. The little green light at its top was no longer blinking. The damage was done. ♦

Side by...

An Incident at Calais

by *Will Stone*

TRAVELLING BACK FROM Belgium this summer I was inadvertently caught up in the rush of returning holidaymakers, all making for the Eurotunnel at Calais. The signs on the motorway from Dunkirk were ominous. ‘Congestion’, ‘Bouchon’ at junction 27, the channel tunnel. On arrival I became ensnared in a build-up of vehicles which showed little sign of moving. I was in the outside lane of a three-lane queue, with vehicles to my left and to my right a free lane for freight traffic only. Beyond in the far distance I could make out the tolls, streams of cars shining under the arc lights like mackerel shoals, all funneling though, backing up into a great estuary of flickering brake lights and machine urgency, the will of each anxious vehicle occupant bristling with only one ambition, to get through the next obstruction, the next absurdity thrown in their path, passport control, onto the train, then the open road again and the final prize of their beds. Stationary, I turned the engine off, opened the

...by side

Calais-i találkozás

Tárnok Attila fordítása

ÚTBAN HAZAFELÉ Belgiumból a múlt nyáron menthetetlenül összekerültem más hazatérő vakációzókkal; mindannyian a Calais melletti Csatorna-alagutat vettük célba. Dunkirknél a figyelmeztető tábla nem sok jót ígért: ‘bouchon’, torlódás a 27-es lehajtónál. Ez az alagúthoz vezető lejárát. Innentől alig moccanó járművek egész serege vett körül. A külső sávban rostokoltam, tőlem balra még két sávnyi gépkocsi, a jobb oldalamon a teherforgalom számára fenntartott üres sáv. A távolban látszottak a fizető kapuk, de odáig makrélarajként csillogott az autók lámpáinak ívsora, mindenki tölcser-szerűen igyekezett besorolni a többi kocsi szorításában felvillanó féklámpák folyótorkolatába. Mindannyiunkat ugyanaz a cél vezérelt: túljutni a következő akadályon, a sors által elénk vetett, küszöbön álló abszurditáson, az útlevel-ellenőrzésen, azután irány a vonat, majd újra a szabad útpálya és végül a megérdemelt éjszakai

window and let the cooler evening air sweep out the interior fug of the car.

To my right and rear, I saw in the wing mirror a number of huge trucks were attempting to push their way through the narrow gap the build-up of cars had left and gain access to their freight lane, the only one which was unimpeded. They finally sneaked a way through. Before their engines came closer and drowned out any background noise, I was suddenly aware to my right of a series of excited whispers, two people I sensed excitedly communicating without wanting to be heard, in a language I could not make out. Beyond the freight lane to my right was an area of bushes and stunted trees, a dense thicket that pressed in on the metal barrier like a wall of shadow. From this dark thorny waste land the animated whispers issued and gazing out I thought I saw indistinct shadows move. I instinctively attempted to make out who was whispering, as it seemed they must be only a few metres away and must be staring straight at me, perhaps discussing me, but hard as I strained to distinguish some definite human form in the darkness, I could see nothing at all. I surveyed the attitudes of other drivers around me but they all seemed oblivious and stared straight ahead, eyes glued to the tolls. I felt more and more as if I personally was being sized up by unseen figures and experienced a sudden compulsion to respond to this perceived gaze, say something,

pihenés. Mivel egy helyben álltam, kikapcsoltam a motort és leengedtem az ablakot, hogy a hűs esti szellő felfrissítse a kocsibelső áporodott szagát.

Az oldalsó tükörben láttam, hogy kamionok próbálnak az egyetlen szabad úton, a teherfuvarozók számára fenntartott, de a feltorlódó személykocsi által leszűkített külső sávon előrejutni. Idővel ez sikerült is nekik, de mielőtt mellém értek volna, és motorhangjuk elnyomott volna minden egyéb zajt, a jobbomon egyszer csak izgatott suttogásra lettem figyelmes: két férfi, így éreztem, egy számomra ismeretlen nyelven közölt valamit egymással visszafojtott hangon, nehogy mások meghallják. A teherautósávon túl csenevész bokrok nőttek, a sűrű bozótos árnyékként feszült az utat szegélyező fémkorlátnak. Az élénk suttogás ebből a sötét, tüskés kietlenből érkezett, a szememet meresztve még elmosódó alakokat is látni véltem. Ösztönösen kíváncsi lettem, kik sugdolóznak, mivel látszólag csak néhány méterre vannak tőlem és minden bizonnyal egyenesen engem néznek, sőt talán épp rólam beszélnek, de bármennyire igyekeztem embereket felfedezni az esti félhomályban, senkit sem láttam. A körülöttem várakozó többi vezetőt fürkészve úgy tűnt, egyikük sem észlelt semmit a mozgolódásból, mindannyian a távoli fizetőkapukra szegezték tekintetüket. Lassanként egyre biztosabban éreztem, hogy a láthatatlan alakok engem méregetnek és

anything, even an absurdly formal 'good evening', just to break the tension.

But then as the trucks eased their way closer, I realized these would-be stowaways, primed for an opportunity, had quickly noticed the unforeseen bottleneck and guessed the slow speed of the trucks might make it worth their while to attempt to enter one or merely cling on and with luck be landed in England. As the first truck ground slowly past I expected to see an attempt, I envisioned a lean man darting from the thicket and swinging himself underneath the trailer, perhaps chaining himself to the undercarriage and I asked myself what would I do if that happened. But it did not happen and by then the truck had passed and no human form had appeared. As the engine died away the whispering began again, even more urgently than before, another truck passed and then another and still I expected a grand entrance. The trucks had gone, as had their moment. The whispers died away. I stared vainly at the black branches quivering in the choppy night breeze, there was no outline of a body, no shadow, no silhouette, was I imagining this due to extreme fatigue and the late hour? But then as if in answer, something happened, but not from my area of bushes, further along the barrier I saw the figures of two African men steadily approaching. They were calmly following the barrier as if going for a walk in their own village,

hirtelen késztetést éreztem, hogy valamiképpen reagáljak a kihívásra, hogy mondjak valamit, legalább abszurd módon csak annyit, hogy 'Jó estét!', bármit, csak megtörjem ezt a fokozódó feszültséget.

Ám ahogy a teherautók egyre közelebb értek hozzám, rájöttem, hogy valószínűleg potyautasokkal van dolgom, akik szeretnék kihasználni az araszoló forgalmat, és megpróbálnak felkapaszkodni az egyik lassan haladó kamionra, hogy némi szerencsével átszökjenek Angliába. Amikor az első kamion elhaladt mellettem, arra számítottam, hogy kísérlet történik majd: egy vékony alakot vizionáltam, amint előtör a bozótból és a pótkocsi alá veti magát, talán odaláncolja magát az alvázhoz, és azt kérdeztem magamtól, vajon mitévő leszek, ha mindezt látom. De semmi ilyesmi nem történt. A kamion elhaladt mellettem, és senki nem lépett elő a bokrok közül. A motorhang elhalkult, a suttogást újra hallottam, még sürgetőbbnek, mint korábban, azután ismét elment egy kamion, majd még egy, és én változatlanul a nagy belépőre vártam. Ahogy a teherautók, úgy velük az esély is elment. A suttogás is elhalt. Hiába meredtem az esti szellőben hajladozó bozótos felé, se alak, se árnyék nem tűnt elő. Képzélődtem? A kései óra és a fáradtság az oka? De ekkor, mintegy válaszként, valami mégis történt. Nem mellettem, a szürke bokroknál, hanem távolabb, a szalagkorlát mentén két afrikai férfi indult el felém. Kimérten, nyugodtan

which in a sense they were. These two young men were silent, withdrawn and simply walked past with their heads slightly lowered; they looked neither right nor left and seemed oblivious to the massed vehicles just metres away. They wore drab coats of a dirty cream colour and dark trousers and seemed to be hugging the thick shadow which in its turn seemed to hold them, as if seeking to draw them back from the barrier.

Then the cars moved forward a little. Now I was aware of new sounds to my right, and this time, there came a more animated chattering and whispering of a larger number of people, many of whom I could discern were women. Clearly there was a large group gathered deeper in the thicket, but again I could make out nothing at all, no lights, no movement, again the darkness appeared unwilling to give them up. These people were hiding there, probably living there, in this labyrinth of miserable scrub and bushes. I felt their presence more insistently and instinctively raised my window in a moment of perceived self-protection, then feeling ashamed I lowered it again. The two men passed by going the other way, silent, as if bearing an oppressive secret. The voices in the gloom continued though remained indistinct and I tried to imagine the scene; the plastic sheeting, the mouldy blankets on the ground, the primitive shelters, the carefully maintained cooking apparatus, the youth like coiled springs eager to release, to depart, the older men

közeledtek, mint akik sétára indulnak a falujukban, ami bizonyos értelemben így is volt. A két fiatalember csendesen, visszafogottan, egyszerűen továbbsétált, a fejüket előreszegették, nem néztek se jobbra, se balra, és szinte tudomást sem vettek a mellettük feltorlódott kocsisorról. Koszos krémszínű gyapjúkabátot és sötét nadrágot viseltek, és a szalagkorlát, mintegy gondoskodásból, a félhomály biztonságában őrizte őket.

Megmoccan a kocsisor. Ekkor jobb felől újabb hangok érkeztek, élénkebb, suttogó párbeszéd zaja, mintha több ember is lenne ott és úgy vettem ki, sok közöttük a nő. Egyértelmű volt, hogy a bozótos egy nagyobb csoport embert rejt, de most sem láttam tisztán senkit, se fényt, se mozgást: a félhomály védelmezte őket. Azok az emberek ott rejtőztek, valószínűleg ott is éltek, abban a nyomorúságos, labirintus-szerű bozótosban. Most határozottabban éreztem a jelenlétüket és önvédelemből ösztönösen feltekertem az ablakot, de aztán szégyenkezve leeresztettem újra. A két férfi egy hang nélkül haladt el mellettem, mint akik nyomasztó titkot hordoznak. A félhomályból továbbra is összemosódó hangok szűrődtek felém, s én megpróbáltam magam elé képzelni a helyszínt: a nejlon fóliát, a dohos takarókat a földön, az egyszerű hajlékot, a becsben kezelt főző alkalmatosságokat, az ifjú, ugrásra kész titánokat és az idősebbeket, ahogy szótlanul, mindenbe

standing around smoking in taciturn resignation. But was this image my mind had readily provided just a shameful cliché, a portrait of the ubiquitous shantytown occupant as seen on the news?

Was not this unseen community something quite different, something far more universally human and unpredictable, something inherently closer to those who sat encased in their luxurious cars only metres away from this hapless tribe, with their heated seats, bluetooth and climate control, those imagining themselves of a different race entirely from these nomadic 'untouchables'. How was it these two groups of human beings, equal 'before God', could co-exist in such fantastic contrast but in such close proximity, drawn together only since both ardently desired to reach the same location and yet in such vastly opposing circumstances. Our self-deluding society, which, through its carefully choreographed newspapers, television and media outlets harps on about the freedom of the individual, of compassion and tolerance. But rhetoric aside, what we do not care to look at, what in fact disgusts us, unsettles us, that which rudely interferes with our ever more meticulously controlled lives, we simply tell ourselves is not there. This failure to look, to heed, to reflect and most crucially, to learn from those bitter equivalences that litter the past and stand as great warning beacons, proves the Achilles heel of any society which

beletörődve ácsorognak, dohányoznak. De vajon ez a kész tényként kezelt kép nem pusztán a hírekben látott, mindenfelé felbukkanó nyomortanyák lakóinak klisé-szerű portréja csupán?

Nem lehetséges, hogy ez a számomra nem látható szűk közösség valami egészen más, mint gondolom? Valami sokkal egyetemesebb módon emberi és kiszámíthatatlan, elválaszthatatlanul rokon azokkal, akik itt, néhány méterre tőlünk, ettől a szerencsétlen törzsi közösségtől, a luxus autók zárt védelmében ülnek? A fűthető ülések, a légkondicionált utasterek és Bluetooth világában, azt képzelve magukról, hogy azok a nomád érinthetetlenek más fajhoz tartoznak? Miképpen lehetséges, hogy ez a két fajta, "Isten előtt egyenlő" emberek csoportja, ilyen elképzelhetetlenül ellentétes elemű szimbiózist alkot? Hisz egymás közvetlen közelében és azonos céllal rostokolnak itt, ugyanazt az úti célt igyekeznek elérni, de mennyire eltérő körülmények között! A gondosan megkoreografált hírlapi, elektronikus és egyéb média által ön-becsapott társadalmunk az egyén szabadságát, toleranciát és könyörületet hirdet, de ha félretesszük a hangzatos szólamokat, igazából pillantásra se méltatjuk, ami riaszt, undorít és nyugtalanít, ami aprólékosan beosztott és ellenőrzött életünket megzavarja. Egyszerűen elhitetjük magunkkal, hogy a zavaró tényező nem is létezik. Bármely, magát az erkölcs magaslataira helyező

perceives itself as entrenched in the moral high ground. The presence in the pas de Calais of these tragic gypsies of circumstance is ever more evident, especially on those occasions when the never healed wound gives and an angry burst of toxins are ejected. Riots, logs left across the highways, the massed desperate shaking of barbed wire fences... Yet people now just accept this immigrant presence as being an integral part of the port scenery as they enter and leave the embarkation points, freshly ringed with double layers of razor wire and patrolling guards, before zooming off obliviously in fleets of Audis, Jaguars, VWs, Volvos and Mercedes sports utility vehicles.

These hungry souls pressed against the glass and peering in at the diners, adrift on the perimeter of the homeland, are now yesterday's novelty for those within, who look out at them in passing like the not so exotic animals in the zoo, those one has to pass before finding the more alluring creatures. They have become something whose movement or skewed presence happens to catch their eye, like the aftermath of a road accident, a burned out house or a run over dog. They recognize these foreign strays, these rogue people as a threat, inter-continental loose cannons, periodically thronging the drawbridge, but thankfully unable to break into the keep. Who would want to hear their stories, to accept the pathetic crumbs of their

társadalom Akhillesz-sarka, ha képtelen tekintetbe venni, méltányolni, kezelni és, ami a legfontosabb, tanulni a múlt keserű egyenlőtlenségeiből, amelyek világítótoronyként figyelmeztetnek hibáinkra. A körülmények tragikus cigányainak jelenléte Pas-de-Calais megyében egyre nyilvánvalóbban mutat rá, hogy a be nem gyógyult sebek megnyílnak és a sebekből a toxikus anyagok vadul párolognak. Zavargások törnek ki, farönkök fekszenek keresztben az országutakon, elkeseredett tömegek szaggatják a szögesdrót kerítéseket. A legtöbb utazó beletörődik, hogy a határátkelés korlátozásának egyenes következménye a migránsok, a dupla szögesdrót kerítések, a járőröző határőrök jelenléte. Aztán mindenről megfeledkezve száguldanak tovább az Audik, Jaguárok, Volvók, Mercedesek, Volkswagenek, sportautók és haszonjárművek.

Az éhes lelkek, akik bebámulnak a kávézók üvegablakán vagy otthonaink külterületeire sodródhatnak, tegnap még újdonságként hatottak, mára azonban a bent ülők számára olyanok, mint a nem túl érdekes lények az állatkertben, amiken túl kell jutni, hogy az egzotikusabb fajokat láthassuk. Mozgásuk, sanda jelenlétük felkelti a figyelmet, mint egy baleset, egy leégett ház vagy egy elgázolt kutya az úton. E gonosz, kóbor külföldiek fenyegető veszélyt jelentenek ugyan, elszabadult interkontinentális rakéták, időnként megrohanják a felvonóhidat, de szerencsére

suffering, to get involved? A twinge of compassion from behind glass is the best they can hope for. A fortnight later and the same cars return to the port and the unfortunates are there waiting for them, perhaps the same individuals, who, for the whole time have been glugging the Beaujolais, the Burgundy or Bordeaux, have been shaking their mouldy blankets, clearing rain water from their plastic sheeting and searching for 'firewood' amongst the broken exhausts and blown tyres of the dual carriageway, while assessing the chances of forcing their way into an airless freight container.

But though waiting for us, they will not look our way or attempt to catch our eye as they pass, those who know only too well they are the unwelcome, the disinherited. They do not dare acknowledge our presence beyond being physical entities as we do not dare acknowledge theirs. Threats and mistrust sprout like summer weeds after a downpour. Though we may not all be able to do something for them as individuals in a practical sense, let us at least give them the respect of thinking of them not as an amorphous mass of roving mannequins periodically swamping the ferry ramps and digging rat-like under the barbed wire of the channel tunnel complex, but as human beings of equal value, fatefully trapped through no fault of their own in a hideous vortex of suffering and self-abasement. When we hear their urgent whisperings

nem jutnak el a vártoronyig. Ki kíváncsi a háttérükre, ki veszi magára szenvedéseik pátoszát, ki osztózik problémáikon? Az ablak mögül érkező szájalom a legtöbb, amire számíthatnak. Két hét elteltével ugyanezek a járművek visszaérkeznek a határátkelőkhöz és a szerencsétlenek még mindig várakoznak, talán ők is ugyanazok, mint ma: penészes pokrócaikat rázzák, kotyogtatják a kiürült Beaujolais, Burgundy vagy Bordeaux-i palackokat, lesöprik az esővizet a nejlonepedőkről és 'tűzifát' keresnek az osztott pályás úttesten elpotyogott, törött autóalkatrészek, szakadt gumiabroncsok között, miközben saját esélyeiket latolgatják: vajon sikerül-e felszökniük egy teherautó levegőtlen csomagterébe.

És jóllehet bennünket várnak, nem néznek felénk, sőt kerülnek a pillantásunkat, ahogy elhaladnak mellettünk, mert tisztában vannak vele, hogy jelenlétük nem kívánatos, az örökségből kitagadottak. Nem hajlandóak tudomást venni a testi valóságunkon túli létezésünkről, ahogy mi sem az övékről. Ám a fenyegetettség és a bizalmatlanság csak egyre nő, mint a gyom egy-egy nyári zápor után. Meglehet, gyakorlati értelemben talán semmit sem tehetünk értük egyénileg, legalább adjuk meg nekik a tiszteletet, hogy nem lélektelen, kószáló bábuk tömegeként gondolunk rájuk, akik alkalmanként tömegesen megjelennek a kompon vagy patkány módjára beássák magukat a Csatorna-alagút

travel on the night air and feel their forms milling around us in the darkness, so close yet so infinitely distant, can we not at least honour their presence with a degree of compassion, rather than by giving in to instinctual disgust and fear, and however ambitious a proposition at this hour, acknowledge their potential future contribution to and reconciliation with the 'civilized world'. He who drives past them without empathy, with disdain or indifference, who sees these unfortunates only as a monotonous element of the landscape to be registered, commented on then discarded, further corrupts whatever claims to humanistic torch bearing we might ascribe to our western democracies in the early twenty-first century. ♦

bejáratát védő drótkerítés alá, hanem mint velünk azonos értékű emberekre, akiket, önhibájukon kívül, sorsuk otromba forgószele szégyenletes, szenvedés kísérte csapdába ejtett. Amikor sürgető suttogásuk borzolja az éjszaka csendjét, és felbukkanó alakjukat megsejtjük a sötétben, oly közel és mégis végtelenül messze magunktól, nem illene-e legalább némi részvétet tanúsíthatunk sorsuk iránt? Ahelyett, hogy ösztönösen az undor és a félelem vegyen erőt rajtunk, és bármennyire hihetetlen ez pillanatnyilag, felismerhetnénk lehetséges közreműködésüket jövőnk alakításában és feltételezhetnénk, hogy majd megbékélnek 'civilizált' világunkkal. Hisz aki minden empátia nélkül továbbhajt, lelkében megvetéssel és közönnyel, aki ezeket a szerencsétleneket csupán a táj unalmas részének tekinti, akiket lenézhet és eldobhat, csak tovább gyengíti a kora 21. század nyugati demokráciáinak fáklyavivő szerepét. ♦