

QUARTERLY
PRESS REVIEW
FOR ADVANCED EFL LEARNERS

SUMMER 2012



Memoir 2
Oxford Revisited *by Pico Iyer*

Dispatch 4
A Monastery in the Gulag *by Jeffrey Tayler*

Fiction 7
Old Mrs. J *by Yoko Ogawa*

Feature 19
Starving to Health *by Steve Hendricks*

Side by Side 26
The Mimic Men (IX) *Pantomim (IX)*
by V. S. Naipaul *fordította Tárnok Attila*

QUARTERLY PRESS REVIEW is an electronic magazine consisting of texts found in the public domain abridged for educational purposes.

Free subscription: <http://pressreview.atw.hu>

Correspondence: tarisz@hotmail.com

Oxford Revisited

by Pico Iyer

Places don't change easily inside our heads. We rarely allow them to. So often they're just the way they were when we first knew them, much as my old school friends, whether captains of industry or grandfathers now, are always the scruffy, shifty, misbehaving boys I first met at fourteen. If you're surrounded by a place, you don't notice its changes; and if you're exiled from it, you refuse to accommodate the ways it's grown if they don't fit the story you tell about your life.

Growing up in Oxford I looked out the window and saw low grey skies and red-brick walls, a deeply fixed and bounded place. 'Can't complain' was the brightest affirmation I heard; 'could be worse' spelled almost ecstasy. My parents, eager products of British India, took me to see *King Lear* at Stratford and we all noticed the power the old patriarch wielded at the play's beginning, even if he was notionally dividing up his kingdom. We didn't see that the broken, weeping, almost posthumous king at the end might be closer to the spirit of the land around us.

We moved from north Oxford to southern California in 1964 – when I was seven – and suddenly I noticed that living in the future tense could be as treacherous as living in the past; it was ideal so long as you were young and on the move, but it could be exasperating if ever you wanted to lay foundations underneath your feet. Small places were more conducive to enmities and smugness, I came to see, as soon as I was in the devouring open

spaces of the Far West, but they were also home to idiosyncrasy, a sense of fun and to privacy.

I went to see *Lear* again when I returned to school in England, and now it spoke to me of how Britain treated its imperial stepchildren; the old king was cruelest on those innocents who loved him most. These days I fly back to Britain and see another Shakespeare play unfolding in which everyone is in disguise, princes as vagrants and fools as wise men, boys as women (though played by boys), and all reminding us daily that the course of true love, even when it comes to empires, never did run smooth.

The heads I see as soon as I disembark at Heathrow are turbaned, and the voices don't even begin to sound like the ones in Colin Firth movies exported across the globe. I stop off at a newsagent's and recall that British food was always redeemed – at times – by British snacks, a reminder that it was the grace notes, not the accepted text, that gave British life its savor. Along the racks of magazines, the same lesson is everywhere: since they're not much interested in factual accuracy, British papers are most engaging when they take wild liberties with the truth. I sheepishly fork out for a copy of *Private Eye*.

Wheeling my luggage cart down the long sloping ramp towards the Underground, and then through long empty passageways – no attempt is made to welcome the newcomer or to brighten or distract him – I come to the ticket machines and see that it's America now that seems old-fashioned. Britain has moved into the age of technological convenience with more readiness and élan. The view through the streaked windows of the train is just the one I recall from boyhood: the porridge-grey buildings with their cramped gardens, the narrow, pinched high streets, the damp, dank no-colour that hangs over everything.

But the people around me are importing brightness and hope, even if – and largely because – they're mostly not speaking

English. Two kids in leather jackets are embracing as fervently as if they were in Paris. Big blond boys in Harvard T-shirts, well-coiffed women from the Bay Area with copies of Jane Austen peeping out from their carry-ons are peering into the gloom to get traces of the *Domtton Abbey* world they've come here to inhale. Poles, Jamaicans, Nigerians make space for one another with the reflexive camaraderie of fellow outsiders, who accept that all of them are sharing a home that may never be their own. The ads along the wall – 'adverts', I'd have called them once – are irreverent, cool and hip.

I follow the veiled ladies and high-booted girls from Taiwan up to the crowded street at Knightsbridge, and clatter off down a line of boutiques, where the voices I hear suggest Tokyo, Milan. It may again be only for export, but the country is in places so far from the dowdiness I recall that I wonder who ever expected London to grow young so fast? I walk through still-elegant, leafy squares – mostly peopled by Pakistanis, it seems, and Muslims from Java – to a dusty B & B that does its best (with little golden plaques on doors saying 'Clarendon', or whatever) to serve up the image of a never-never England where Hugh Grant might feel at home.

But the friendly girl at the desk is from Italy, and the burly man beside her has the gravitas of Bulgaria. The nightwatchman might well have been a reggae maestro's cousin. Of course they're serving classic English breakfasts, buffet-style, in the basement; the tall guests in ill-fitting suits are from Bangalore, Moscow, Istanbul and no less eager to consume the England they've devoured from afar, as fixed in time as the Queen upon a stamp.

The Britain I grew up in was one where everyone could be placed within a second of opening his mouth; the privileged may affect the demotic now, while newcomers from Calcutta can sound as if they've just stepped out of a Wodehouse novel, but it

will take longer to change people's reflexes, as we ask innocent-seeming questions or fish for cadences so we know where we stand in relation to those around us. Once – though this has happened everywhere from Nara to LA – I found myself in a tiny guest-house in the Paraguayan jungle several hours from the nearest town. It was dark and I'd just got off a long-distance bus, and I needed to have dinner before I slept.

I went into the deserted garden of the place and sat down. There were two other travellers there, and they came over to say 'hi'. But they were from Britain, and so was I, and someone's accent was too high or too low, so they retreated to their dark corner of the courtyard to eat alone, while I ate alone in mine.

In a little self-service cafeteria in southern France another evening, I sat next to an old Frenchman as a white Bentley swooped into a parking place. 'Ah,' he said, 'good product of the Old World. In America a man will see that and say, "That could be me." Here we see it and think, "Why does it have to be him?"'

Britain produced all kinds of brilliant, talented and original individuals, I thought, but the best Brits were precisely the ones who could never live in Britain. Lady Hester Stackpole, dressed as a Turkish man (and later a Bedouin) on her way to a life near Britain produced all kinds of brilliant, talented and original individuals, I thought, but the best Brits were precisely the ones who could never live in Britain. Sidon or D.H. Lawrence criss-crossing the world on his 'savage pilgrimage'; David Hockney imbibing Californian light and innocence with a newcomer's unblinkingness, or Peter Brook working to rewrite the classical tradition in a global vein, in Paris, as he could best do, he felt, far from Shakespeare's birthplace; Somerset Maugham writing, 'I never felt entirely myself till I had put at least the Channel between my native country and me' and returning to the France where he'd been born, to live down the coast from where Graham

Greene sat among his dry, melancholy stories of old boys in the tropics sending love-poems to their school magazines and treacherous charmers trying, through polish and manners alone, to conceal their lack of faith.

England was as good at producing ex-Englishmen, I came to feel, as Tonga was at producing expats. Of course the British had a tonic sense of humor; they had so much to be funny or dismissive about.

Now I take myself by Tube to Paddington and, having purchased an unreasonably cheap ticket online, in faraway Japan, I get on the train to hear the funereal call of my boyhood: 'Reading, Didcot Parkway, Oxford.' When Natsume Soseki lived in England, from 1900 to 1902, he saw in 'everything the flavour of the past' and took the Thames – a lone boatman standing on water that never seemed to move – to be a perfect image of the Styx.

Yet as I make my way into the heart of Oxford now – in the public eye the city has always done a good job of blocking out its industrial heart and the long, bleak streets that spread out around the dreaming spires – I notice something I could never see when I was in the midst of it: it's no wonder that Alice's Wonderland and Middle Earth and Narnia had their origins here. The university is a children's fantasy of secret gardens and gargoyles and quaint old customs and puzzles. As a boy I'd looked to it for signs of the adult world, and come away disappointed (it seemed such a refuge for old boys hiding in their bachelor rooms in the cloisters); now, as a seeming adult, I see how idyllic it can be for those who want a break from life, an escape.

A student town can be invigorating so long as you're not a student; in the days when I was seeking out a future in Britain, I was asking for the wrong thing (akin to looking for ghosts and medieval mead-halls in California). Oxford – in its official, postcard self, at least – is wonderful so long as you don't expect to

find reality there.

It's also, I can more easily recognize now, my past, whether I like it or not. All my boyhood dramas and changes took place along these slushy streets; I can no more turn from them than from my parents. Most of us devote so much of our energy, when young, to making our own way in opposition to our forebears only to find, somewhere along the line, that we have become them.

Of course Oxford is inert and insufferably true in places and in love with its most capricious and often nonsensical traditions; that's its place in the national pageant. To ask it to be something else is to request of the Fool in *Lear* that he play the King. In any case, the story has moved on and the parts are being taken by other hands.

I go back to my own college and find that there are girls there now (there weren't in 1978) – relaxed, attractive, happy-looking girls – and Oxford – in its official, postcard self, at least – is wonderful so long as you don't expect to find reality there. The boys look more normal, too, as if they were in a college anywhere else; one, to my delight, is attending breakfast in his pyjamas. The porters are as benign as London cabbies. The guest rooms in the newly built structure near the Deer Park are inexplicably warm and comfortable, complete with their own showers and reading literature by the beds, as in any good hotel. It's hard to recall how, as a ten-year-old at school down the street, I'd known only showers that were cold and a maximum of two baths a week (this even before the gas shortages and blackouts I knew when I was fifteen).

It's not just that Britain has acquired a tan, I slowly realise; it's that it's had to let the stepchildren and foster kids take over – as at the end of *Lear*, perhaps. I've watched the same thing happen in Sydney and Toronto and Paris and LA over the past few decades,

but here the difference is more pronounced, as if Virginia Woolf's placid certainties have been replaced by Zadie Smith, writing brilliantly about the paradoxes of accent and the shape-shifting possibilities of half-outsiders like herself. I recall how Soseki, walking around the inscrutable country a hundred years ago, saw a 'strangely complexioned Tom Thumb' in a window and only realized, a little later, that it was him.

I wonder if that's how England feels these days as it regards itself; its image in the shop window is shifting and wavering with every hour (and every passerby). It doesn't know what it is or what it will become, as new possibilities come streaming in. Oxford always seemed to me a haunt of long-dead phantoms, living off its past and alien to anyone with energy and a mind on the future; now I walk among its ghosts and see them as my own.

'This thing of darkness' – I hear myself invoke the very words we had to learn in all our dusty classrooms here – 'I acknowledge mine.' ♦

A Monastery in the Gulag

by *Jeffrey Tayler*

From the upper reaches of the whitewashed belfry – between the gunmetal onion domes of the Spaso-Preobrazhensky Cathedral – a giant bell announced the evening liturgy. Scarved women in loose woolen skirts and shaggy-bearded monks in black frocks hurried across the cobbled courtyard of Solovetsky Monastery, passing me, their eyes averted.

I turned to face the sun above the massive stone walls, seeking a warmth that's fleeting here in Russia's farthest-flung holy citadel, located on the largest of the Solovetsky Islands amid the gale-lashed White Sea, just outside the Arctic Circle.

The Solovetsky Monastery ranks as one of the country's most important. But the monastery, and indeed the Solovetsky Islands (Solovki, for short) themselves, also played host to Joseph Stalin's most notorious prison, the gulag to which he banished many of his ideological opponents. This dual purpose has made Solovetsky Monastery a kind of Russian Golgotha, a temple-graveyard haunted by both the holy and the horrifying. Mass graves are scattered across the island. My guide summed up the experience of living here: "Wherever we go here, we feel we're stepping on bones."

Even from Moscow, where I live, a trip to the Solovki, almost 650 miles due north, is a long one – and tough on new arrivals. A choppy flight landed me on a runway plagued with Arctic mosquitoes; a kidney-bruising ride from the airport by four-wheel-

drive van took me down a pitted dirt track into the shack-and-barrack settlement of fewer than 1,000. My hotel, tranquil and half-embowered in alder trees and birches, stood by an abandoned prison open to the winds, with skulls and crossbones still painted on cell doors. Almost everywhere I went during my stay, I heard the wind, not voices, and was alone or almost alone or felt alone – a sublime, and at times eerie, experience. But perhaps not a new one.

The prospect of solitude drew the first Russians here. Early in the 15th century, two monks debarked on the island's northern coast, seeking a place of religious retreat amid pristine taiga and bog. They initiated cloistral traditions that led, soon after, to the founding of Solovetsky Monastery. But almost from the beginning, the Solovetsky Islands were also abodes of exile and detention. The isolation and severe climate well suited the penal needs of an authoritarian state ruled by a czar. Monks both served God and acted as prison wardens. In the monastery's darkest corners, they built cells that would hold a spectrum of prisoners, from the dissident gentry and errant clergy, to rebellious Cossacks and Decembrist revolutionaries.

I climbed stairs above the monastery's granary and examined a few of the cells – low, vaulted brick chambers with tiny barred windows overlooking the desolate, churning Bay of Prosperity. The experience created by the monks was easily outdone when the Bolsheviks instituted a reign of sadistic terror that earned the Solovki infamy throughout the Soviet Union. Behind glass in one of the monastery's chilly, damp corridors, an exposition of photographs and documents displays that regime's grisly legacy – twisted corpses strewn across fields, stacked skulls, ransacked churches, smashed church bells, and orders of execution. In 1923, the authorities reconstituted the monastery-prison (and the rest of the island) as the country's first concentration camp, designed to

“rehabilitate” the most potentially dangerous “enemies of the people” – writers, poets, academics, and anyone else who fell afoul of the revolution. During the 1930s, when Stalin and Hitler enjoyed cordial, if wary, relations, German officers visited the island and studied its “correctional” regimen, gleaning elements that they would soon put to use on a far more horrific scale.

The macabre cruelties of all the Soviet gulags have been well documented, but even so, those of the Solovki stand out. Camp officials welcomed each group of arriving inmates by immediately shooting two prisoners dead, and pummeling the rest with shovels. Locked in unheated cells in the winter, the prisoners slept in piles three or four deep for warmth. Guards doused some in water and made them huddle for hours in the cold. Of the 80,000 Soviets condemned to the Solovki between 1923 and 1939, some 40,000 died here.

Finally, even for Stalinist authorities on the mainland, the Solovki's unsanctioned atrocities exceeded the acceptable. In 1939, the camp was closed, and some of its administrators were executed. The remaining prisoners were moved to the mainland. As another tour guide, the historian Oleg Kodola, pointed out, “By 1940, the whole country had been turned into a prison camp. It made no difference which side of the barbed wire you were on.”

It does now, of course. In 1967, Soviet authorities opened a museum in Solovetsky Monastery, and monks returned in 1990. Judging from the conservative dress of most of the Russian tourists around me in the courtyard, a good number were on a pilgrimage of sorts, something the former, atheistic regime would never have countenanced. Their presence, and that of the monks heading to church for evening services, reminds one that, to survive in the Solovki's austere setting, faith may be the one constant. ♦

Old Mrs. J

by *Yoko Ogawa*

Mnew apartment was in a building at the top of a hill. From my window, there was a wonderful view of the town spread out like a fan below and the sea beyond. An editor I knew had recommended the place.

The hillside was planted with fruit: a few grapevines and some peach and loquat trees. The rest was all kiwis. The orchards belonged to my landlady, Mrs. J, but she was elderly and lived alone, and she apparently left the trees and vines to look after themselves. There was no sign of workers, and the hill was always quiet. Nevertheless, the trees were covered with beautiful fruit.

The kiwis in particular grew so thick that on moonlit nights when the wind was blowing, the whole hillside would tremble as though covered with a swarm of dark-green bats. At times I found myself thinking they would fly away in a cloud at any moment.

Then one day I realized that all the kiwis had disappeared from one section of the orchard, though I had seen no one picking them; and after a few days the branches were again covered with tiny new fruit. But since I was in the habit of writing at night and sleeping until almost noon, it was possible I had simply missed the workers.

The building was three stories tall and U-shaped. In the center was a spacious garden, with a large eucalyptus tree for shade when the sun was too bright. Mrs. J grew tomatoes, carrots, eggplants,

green beans, and peppers, which she shared, I gathered, with her favorite tenants.

Her apartment was directly across the courtyard from mine. A single curtain hung in her window; the other was missing and no one seemed to be in a hurry to replace it. When I looked up from my desk, I was staring directly at her window and the orphaned curtain. From what I could tell, Mrs. J led a quiet, monotonous life. As I was getting up each day, she would be sitting down in front of her TV to wearily eat her lunch. If she happened to spill something, she would wipe it up with the tablecloth or her sleeve. After lunch, she would pass the time knitting or polishing pots or simply napping on the couch. And when I was at last beginning to get down to work, she would be changing into a worn-out nightgown and crawling into bed.

I wondered how old she was. Well past eighty, I imagined. She was unsteady on her feet and was constantly bumping into chairs or knocking over something on the table. But she was a different woman in the garden; she seemed years younger and much more at ease when she was watering or staking the plants, or plucking insects with her tweezers. The clicking of her shears as she harvested her crop echoed pleasantly through the courtyard.

A stray cat turned out to be the reason for my first gift of vegetables from Mrs. J.

“Nasty thing!” she screamed, brandishing a shovel. I caught a glimpse of a cat slinking off toward the orchard. It looked nearly as old as Mrs. J and seemed to be suffering from a skin disease.

I opened the window and called out that she should spread pine needles around the beds, but in response she just turned and walked toward me, apparently still quite angry.

“I can’t stand them!” she said. “They dig up the seeds I’ve just planted, leave their smelly mess in my garden, and then have the nerve to make that terrible racket.”

“Pine needles around the beds would keep them away,” I repeated.

“Why do you suppose they insist on coming here and ignore all the other yards? I’m allergic to the hair. It gives me sneezing fits.”

“Cats hate prickly things,” I persisted. “So pine needles...”

“Someone must be feeding them on the sly. If you see anyone leaving food out, would you mind telling them to stop?” As she made this last request, she came marching into my apartment through the kitchen door. Having finished her diatribe against cats, she looked around with poorly disguised curiosity, studying my desk and the cupboard and the glass figurines on the windowsill. “So, you’re a ‘writer,’ ” she said, as though she found the word difficult to pronounce.

“That’s right.”

“Nothing wrong with writing,” she said. “It’s nice and quiet. A sculptor used to live in this apartment, but that was awful. I nearly went deaf from all the pounding.” She tapped on her ear and then went over to the bookcase and began reading out the titles as she traced the spines with her finger. Yet she got them all wrong – perhaps she was losing her eyesight, or simply did not know how to read.

Mrs. J was extremely slender. Her hair was thinning, her face narrow, and her chin long and pointed. Her flat nose and widely separated eyes left an unusual amount of empty space in the middle of her face. When she spoke, her bones seemed to grind together with each word, and her dentures seemed about to drop out of her head.

“What did your husband do?” I asked.

“My husband? He was nothing but a lousy drunk. I’ve had to manage for myself with the rents from the building and the money I earn giving massages.” Bored with the bookcase, she went next to my word processor and tapped gingerly at a key or

two as though it were a dangerous object. “He gambled away everything I made and didn’t even have the decency to die properly. He was drunk and went missing down at the beach.”

“I’d love to get a massage when you have time,” I said, eager to change the subject for fear she would go on forever about her husband. “I sit all day and my neck gets terribly stiff.”

“Of course,” she said. “Just let me know when you’re ready. There’s some strength left in these old hands.” She cracked her knuckles and the noise was so loud I thought she might have broken her fingers. As she left, she gave me five peppers she had just picked.

When I got up the next day, the whole courtyard was covered with pine needles. They were scattered from the trunk of the eucalyptus to the storage shed – everywhere except in the vegetable beds themselves.

I heard one of the tenants ask about the needles, and Mrs. J explained that they were to keep the cats away. “Cats hate pine tar,” she said. “My grandmother taught me that years ago when I was a girl.” I wondered whether she had ever been a girl; somehow I felt she had been an old woman from the day she was born.

One evening, Mrs. J had a visitor – apparently a rare occasion. A large, middle-aged man appeared at her apartment. The moon, full and orange, lit up her window more brightly than ever. The man lay down on the bed, and she sat on top of him.

At first I thought she was strangling him. She seemed to have much greater strength than usual; her legs pinned him down while her hands grabbed him in various places. As I watched, it seemed as though he was withering away while she grew more powerful, sucking the energy from his body through her hands.

The massage lasted a long time. The odor of pine needles faded into the darkness.

Mrs. J began to come to my apartment quite often. She would have a cup of tea and chatter on about something – the pain in her knee, the high price of gas, the terrible heat – and then go home again. In the interest of preserving good relations with my landlady, I did my best to be polite. And each visit brought larger quantities of vegetables.

She also began receiving letters and packages for me when I was out.

“This came for you,” she’d say, arriving at my door almost before I’d had time to put down my purse. Just as I could see everything that went on in her apartment, she missed nothing that happened in mine. “A delivery truck brought it this afternoon,” she added.

“Thank you,” I said. “It looks like a friend has sent me some scallops. If you like, I’ll bring some over for you later.”

“How kind of you! They’re quite a delicacy.”

But I nearly became ill when I opened the package: the scallops were badly spoiled. The ice pack had long since melted, and they were quite warm. When I pried open a shell with a knife, the scallop and viscera poured out in a liquid mass.

I checked the packing slip and found that they had been sent more than two weeks earlier.

„Look at this!” Mrs. J called as she came walking into my apartment and made her way to the kitchen at the back.

“What is it?” I asked. I was making potato salad for dinner.

“A carrot,” she said, holding it up with obvious pride.

“But what a strange shape,” I said, pausing over the potatoes. It was indeed odd: a carrot in the shape of a hand.

Five fingers, with a thick thumb and a longer finger in the middle, quite plump, like a baby’s hand. It was perfectly formed and natural in appearance, and the greens, which were still attached, looked like a scrap of lace decorating the wrist.

“I’d like you to have it,” Mrs. J said.

“Are you sure?” I said. “Something this rare?”

“Of course,” she said, and put her lips close to my ear to whisper: “I’ve already found three of them. This one is for you. But don’t mention it to anyone; some people might be jealous.” I could feel her moist breath. “Is that potato salad?” she added. “Then my timing is perfect: a carrot is just the thing!” She laughed with delight.

I sensed the lingering warmth of the sun as I washed the flesh of the carrot. Scrubbing turned it bright red. I had no idea where to insert the knife, but I decided it would be best to begin by cutting off the five fingers at the base. One by one, they rolled across the cutting board. That evening, my potato salad had bits of the pinkie and the index finger.

A strong wind had blown all day and continued now deep into the night. Whirlwinds formed high in the sky and swept down on the hillside. Even through my locked door, I could sense the trembling of the kiwis.

I was in the kitchen, reading over a manuscript I had completed. When I finish a piece, I always read it aloud one last time. But that night I was probably reading to cover the frightening sound of the fruit trees.

When I looked up at the window over the sink, I caught sight of a figure in the orchard. Someone was running down the steep slope in the dark. I could see only the back, but I could tell that the person was carrying a large box. When the wind died for a moment, I could even hear the sound of footsteps on the grass. At the bottom of the hill, the figure emerged into the circle of light under a street lamp and I could see that it was Mrs. J.

Her hair was standing on end, and the towel she had tucked into her belt fluttered in the wind, threatening to blow away at any moment. The bottom of the carton she carried was bulging from

the weight of its contents. The load was clearly too heavy for a woman of Mrs. J's size, but she seemed to be managing without much difficulty. Eyes front, back straight, she balanced the load with amazing skill – almost as if the box had become a part of her.

I went to the window and stared out. A stronger gust of wind blew through the trees and for a moment Mrs. J lost her footing, but she quickly recovered and moved on. The rustling of the kiwis grew louder.

Mrs. J went into the abandoned post office at the foot of the hill. I had passed it from time to time when I was out for a walk, but I had no idea what it was being used for now or that it also belonged to my landlady.

When she finally came back to her apartment, the sea was beginning to brighten in the east. She got undressed with apparent relief, gargled, pulled a comb through her hair, and put on her old nightgown.

She was once again the Mrs. J I knew – the one who bumped into furniture on the way from the bathroom to her bed, who had trouble simply buttoning her dress. I returned to my reading, the manuscript damp now from the sweat on my palms.

Many more hand-shaped carrots appeared in the days that followed. Even after everyone in the building had received one, there were several left over. Some were long and slender, like the hands of a pianist; others were sturdier, like those of a lumberjack. There were all sorts: swollen hands, hairy hands, blotchy hands...

Mrs. J harvested them with great care, digging around each carrot and pulling gently on the top to extract it, as though the loss of a single finger would have been a great tragedy. Then she would brush away the soil and hold the carrot up in the sunlight to admire the form. „You're terribly stiff,” Mrs. J said. I tried to answer, but she had me so completely in her grip that I could manage nothing more than a groan.

I lay down on the bed, as she had instructed, my face buried in a pillow. Then she climbed on my back, exerting a tremendous force, making me feel as though I had been covered with an iron blanket.

“You sit all day. It's not good for you. Look here, it's knotted up like a ball.” She jabbed her thumb into the base of my neck, biting deep into the flesh. I tried to move, to squirm free of the pain, but she had me pinned tight, completely immobilized.

Her fingers were cold, and I felt no trace of skin or flesh. It was as though she was massaging me with her bones.

“We've got to get this knot loosened up,” she said. The bed creaked and the towel on my legs slid down. Her dentures clattered. If she went on much longer, her fingers would scrape away my skin, rip my flesh, crush my bones. The pillow was damp with saliva, and I wanted to scream.

“Nothing to worry about, though. It's just the two of us, so I can really get in here and work this out.” Her grip seemed to grow tighter.

„That's right. Stand just a little closer together. Now, a big smile!”

The reporter's voice echoed through the courtyard as he focused his camera. Perhaps he thought Mrs. J was hard of hearing. “Hold the carrot just a bit higher... by the greens so we can see all five fingers. That's it, now don't move.”

We were posing right in the middle of the vegetable bed, the reporter trampling on pine needles as he positioned himself for the shot. The other tenants peered curiously from their windows.

I tried to smile, but I couldn't. It was all I could do to keep my eyes open in the blinding sunlight. My mouth, my arms, my eyes – everything seemed to be coming apart and I felt terribly awkward. And, thanks to the massage, I hurt all over.

“Pretend you’re saying something to each other. Just relax... and turn the carrot this way... It’s all about the carrot!”

Mrs. J had done her best to dress up for the occasion. She had put on lipstick and wrapped a scarf over her head to hide her thinning hair. The hem of her dress came almost to her ankles, and she wore a pair of old-fashioned high heels instead of her usual sandals.

But the scarf only emphasized her narrow face, the lipstick had smeared, and somehow her dress and heels seemed to clash with the carrot.

“Make us look good,” she told the reporter. “In all my years, I’ve never once been in the newspaper.” She gave a hoarse laugh, sending a ripple of wrinkles across her face.

The article ran in the regional section of the paper the next morning: curious carrots! hand-shaped and fresh from granny’s garden!

Chest thrust forward to compensate for her slight frame, Mrs. J stood, listing a bit to the right as her high heel dug into the earth; and though she had laughed during much of the photo session, in the picture she looked almost frightened. But the carrot cradled in her hands was perfect.

I stood next to her, holding a carrot of my own. In the end, I had managed a smile of sorts, but my eyes were unfocused and my expression was tense.

The carrots looked even stranger in the photograph, like amputated hands with malignant tumors. They dangled in front of us, still warm and still dripping with blood.

„Did you ever meet her husband?” the inspector asked.

“No, I just moved into the building,” I answered.

“Did she tell you he was dead?” asked another officer.

“Yes, she said he had been drinking and had fallen in the sea and died... Or maybe she just said that he was missing. I don’t really remember. We weren’t really very close..”

I glanced out at the courtyard. Mrs. J’s apartment was empty. The single curtain fluttered in the breeze.

“Any little detail could be helpful. Did you notice anything suspicious?” said a young policeman, bending down to meet my gaze. “Anything at all?”

“Suspicious?” I murmured. “Suspicious... Once, in the middle of the night, I saw someone running down through the orchard... carrying a heavy box. They took it into the post office, the abandoned one at the bottom of the hill.”

The post office was searched and found to contain a mountain of kiwis. But when the fruit was removed, it revealed only the mangy body of a cat. Then a backhoe was brought in to turn up the garden, releasing a suffocating odor of pine needles. The tenants at their windows covered their noses.

As the sun fell behind the trees in the orchard, the shovel uncovered a decomposing body in the vegetable patch. The autopsy confirmed that it was Mrs. J’s husband and that he had been strangled. Traces of his blood were found on her nightgown.



Starving to Health

by *Steve Hendricks*

Two weeks after a Fourth of July at the end of Reconstruction, a doctor in Minneapolis named Henry S. Tanner resolved to end his life. His wife had left him some years earlier in favor of Duluth, which may have spoken to the quality of his husbandship, and his efforts to reacquire her had failed. He had been a lecturer on temperance but not a rousing one, he had owned a Turkish bathhouse but not a successful one, and his health was poor in a manner not specified. The usual methods of self-destruction being too painful or too messy or too likely to succeed, Tanner decided to starve himself. At the time, the consensus among men of science was that a human could not survive more than ten days without food. Christ may have fasted forty, but his was thought a special case.

On July 17, 1877, Tanner drank a pint of milk and repaired to bed. He passed some days, hungrily. His physician, one Dr. Moyer, urged him to eat, but Tanner was firm. Only water crossed his lips. Presently odd things happened. His hunger vanished, and he ceased to think of food. With each new day his ailments, whatever their origin, diminished, and by the tenth day – which should, by the wisdom of the moment, have been his last – the ills that had plagued him were completely gone. Far from nearing death, he was possessed of a renewed strength. It had been his custom to walk one to three miles twice daily, and after the tenth day he resumed these constitutionals. If his step was shaky at first, it quick-

ly grew steady. He judged his recovery complete and bade Dr. Moyer, who had kept a nervous vigil, bring him food.

But while the food was being prepared, Tanner turned to a thought that had lately come to him: If a man might not only survive but indeed thrive after ten foodless days, what would be the limit of his unfed endurance? Twenty days? Thirty? More? And what would the answer say about us? Did it imply, for example, that we were meant to go without food for long periods? If so, why? Was fasting perhaps a healing mechanism, like sleep? It was the sort of *pons asinorum* that will gnaw at a person of a certain turn of mind until he must have an answer. By the time Moyer brought his meal, Tanner had come to a resolution. He would forgo gratification of the stomach for gratification of the mind.

Ten fasted days became fifteen, then twenty, then twenty-five. He noted no great changes in his person save loss of weight. (Reconstruction was an era of proud midriffs, and doctors did not regard slimming as a benefit per se.) Tanner did acknowledge a slight slowness in cogitation, chiefly on complicated subjects, but otherwise his mental powers were undiminished. On reaching four foodless weeks, he celebrated by walking ten miles of riverbank to Minnehaha Falls and back. He later walked Lakes Calhoun and Cedar, but after drinking from those bodies, he contracted gastritis, and Moyer again urged him to end his fast. On the forty-first day Tanner relented, taking a small glass of milk. He had bested Christ.

Tanner's fast might have been lost to history but for a challenge issued one year later by a Manhattan doctor named Hammond. Dr. Hammond had reservations about the well-publicized claims that one Mollie Fancher, a Brooklynite, had lived for years without food and achieved powers of clairvoyance. He wrote Miss Fancher a \$1,000 check, sealed it in an envelope, and announced that the draft was hers if she could divine the number of the

check and the name of the issuing bank. Furthermore, if she would fast for a month under the observation of doctors, he would add an equal sum to her fortune. Miss Fancher spurned the check-reading challenge on grounds that her divinational powers could not be rented, and she declined the fasting challenge on grounds that decency did not allow her to be examined by (male) physicians. Learning of Miss Fancher's demurral, Tanner traveled to New York to take up the fasting half of the challenge.

When he and Hammond failed to come to terms, Tanner proceeded without the incentive, raising the dare from a month to forty days. He arranged for the use of a public hall in which to fast and for lecturers and students of the United States Medical College to monitor him. Because the college was what would be described today as naturopathic (the term then was eclectic), and because Tanner was himself a naturopathic doctor, establishmentarian doctors eschewed the affair. Establishments like nothing so little as progress not established by themselves.

Thus it was that on a summer's morning in 1880 the unlikely Tanner, his person having been examined for hidden food and his vitals recorded for statistical baselines, took the stage at Clarendon Hall on East 13th Street. His furnishings consisted of a cot, a cane-backed rocker, and a gas-fired chandelier. The spareness of the set and the light of the chandelier were meant to dispel suspicions that he had secreted food about him. At the stroke of noon, he took a seat in the rocker and proceeded to do – nothing. This he supplemented, as the hours passed, with a little reading, a little drinking of water, and a little chatting with his public, the size of which would be familiar to a short-story writer on book tour today. A week into this regimen, he had lost more than a dozen of his 157.5 pounds.

His audience grew with the approach of the lethal tenth day. At the dawn of the eleventh, with Tanner still extant, the public's

curiosity became wonder, and more spectators appeared, at two bits a head. News of Tanner's survival traveled the continent by telegraph and newspaper. Well-wishers near and far sent him gifts of flowers, slippers, mattresses, exercise gear, roast beef, canned milk, gin, and claret. As many as four hundred letters arrived daily, each screened by the collegians for contraband comestibles. Among his correspondents were a gentlewoman in Philadelphia, who proposed marriage should he live, and the director of a museum in Maine, who proposed to stuff and display him should he not. The ladies of New York arrived to serenade him at piano, and learned gentlemen sounded him on matters of health. Soon telegrams from Europe were congratulating him on his feat. Toward the end of his allotted time, Tanner was drawing roughly a thousand spectators a day. His share of the gate would come to \$137.64.

On the fortieth morning, the collegians weighed him at 121.5 pounds, thirty-six fewer than when he had begun. His other vitals were interesting only for being uninteresting: normal pulse, normal respiration. At noon, he ate a peach, which went down without trauma. He followed with two goblets of milk, which the collegians thought imprudent on a stomach so long inactive. But the milk not troubling him either, he ate most of a Georgia watermelon, to his colleagues' horror. In succeeding hours he added a modest half-pound of broiled beefsteak, a like amount of sirloin, and four apples. His lubrication was wine and ale. By the following evening he had reclaimed eight and a half pounds. After three days he had regained nineteen and a half, and after five more he had recouped all of the lost thirty-six. The question of which was the greater marvel – surviving his starvation or surviving his wanton refeeding – remains, in light of later learning about fasting, open to debate. In the age of Victoria, however, his ability to re-

cover bulk was a credit in fasting's ledger, proof his famine had not sapped him.

Tanner had hoped to persuade skeptics that fasting was curative, but in New York he had no disease to heal. He was a pitchman without product. Scientists ignored him, the laity did not experiment at home, and the Times synopsisized his feat as "Tanner's folly," echoing Seward's of a decade earlier. But Tanner knew that such benightedness had long greeted men of genius, from Socrates to Galileo. Time, he doubted not, would vindicate him.

It is a thin imagination that would not be titillated by Tanner's tale, and at the time I became acquainted with it I was thin of neither body nor mind. Several years earlier, for reasons now puzzling, I had been a distance runner, but a pitiable knee injury ended all that, after which lard came upon me. Its accumulation was so gradual that I didn't perceive it until I saw a couple of family photographs. Who was that shapeless man holding hands with my wife? That doughy guy with his arm around my brother?

Vanity was not my only concern. Fat, in our era, is disease, decrepitude, and death. The odds of incurring diabetes or high blood pressure, respiratory or kidney failure, thrombosis or embolism, gout or arthritis, migraine or dementia, cardiac arrest or stroke, gallstones or cancer, all increase with one's ballast. Although by American standards I could not properly be called fat – my weight being somewhere in the loftier 160s – even this mass the World Health Organization deemed unhealthy for a man five-foot-nine, and some distant athletic part of me was compelled to agree. Had my weight seemed likely to settle there, my concern might not have been great, but my gains gave no sign of slowing. As in a bad novel, I could see where the plot was headed. I resolved to fast.

My ambitions were at first un-Tannerly. I fasted a day, and all went well. Two weeks later I repeated the performance, with a

similar result. A few weeks after that, I fasted again, then again. Soon I felt myself master of the one-day fast. I upped the stakes to two days, then three, and eventually, in what was a marvel to me, a week. I lost a few pounds, and ambition crept up on me. I thought of a fast of weeks. The plural excited me.

I would aim for 140 pounds, my collegiate weight, although to reach it I would have to fast to 135. Fasting is mildly dehydrating, and the faster, on returning to food, rapidly re'accrues a few liquid pounds; he also again carries a semi-constant pound or two of solids in his gut. The typical long-haul faster (so I had read) loses about a pound a day, so I figured I could reach 135 in a bit over three weeks. I made my preparations. The short fast requires little or no groundwork, but longer deprivations (I had also read) are best undertaken after a week or so on a fibrous, low-fat diet. Vegetables, fruits, and whole grains are counseled, meat and dairy discouraged, the idea being to smoothly move out what is in one's interior. To do otherwise is to invite meals to linger in the bowels long after the fast starts, which can be painful at best, damaging at worst. I ate according to plan and on a Sunday night had a last supper of whole-wheat rigatoni and marinara, bland but purgative. I weighed myself. The scale read 160 pounds – a round 160, you might say. I went to bed with visions of a lesser me dancing in my head.

In the early 1900s, after a couple of fallow decades, fasting enjoyed a brief revival, chiefly by way of Bernard Macfadden. In books and in magazines of his founding – *Physical Culture*, *The Miracle of Milk*, *Superb Virility of Manhood* – Macfadden propounded then-radical ideas about health, from the salutary effects of salad and vigorous sex to the evils of processed food and "pill-pushers." He recommended fasts of a week, and to show that they invigorated rather than enervated, he published photographs of his finely carved self at the end of his fasts, lifting, one-armed,

hundred-pound weights above his head. Thousands of disciples followed his advice – fasting either at home or in his “healthatorium” – and for a while it seemed fasting might spread into the broader national consciousness. But in time Macfaddenism faded from public attention, and fasting with it.

Out of the public eye, however, a few scientists, less known than Macfadden but more methodical, had become intrigued by the art. One was Frederick Madison Allen, a physician at New York’s Rockefeller Institute who was renowned for his work on childhood diabetes. Allen theorized that since diabetes was a disease of excess glucose, taking glucose away – by, say, fasting – might ease a diabetic’s symptoms. He further theorized that any improvements achieved by fasting might be maintained afterward by a diet very low in carbohydrates, the raw material of glucose. Allen fasted dozens of children for a week or more, and it seemed to him that they did not fall into diabetic comas as readily as patients treated with the standard palliatives. Allen, however, had no control group, and his conclusions were more impressionistic than scientific. The chief deficiency of the Allen Plan, as his therapy became known, was that a large portion of his patients died. With the discovery of insulin a few years later, the Allen Plan fell into disuse.

Contemporaneously, one H. Rawle Geyelin, a professor of medicine at Columbia, was puzzling over the severe seizures of a boy who had not responded to bromide or phenobarbital, the leading epileptic treatments of the day. His parents decided to fast him, and on the second day without food his seizures ceased. Three more times over as many months the child was fasted, and he remained seizure-free for two years, at which point his case record ends. Impressed, Geyelin proceeded to fast twenty-six epileptic subjects for lengths of five to twenty-two days, then fasted some a second and a third time. The great majority of them

stopped seizing during their fasts, and the seizures of the rest diminished to one degree or another. Alas, seizures returned in full to six patients on breaking their fasts, but the other twenty had few or no seizures for weeks or months, and two remained seizure-free for at least a year.

A handful of researchers, expanding on Geyelin’s work, hypothesized that since fasters survived by “eating” their own fat, perhaps putting epileptics on a fatty diet would also help them. The researchers fasted patients, then fed them high-fat foods, and over the long term the majority of patients had improved dramatically. Many hospitals adopted the treatment, but after a new generation of anticonvulsants was developed in the 1930s, it fell, like the Allen Plan, into disuse. A consumerist pattern was emerging: starvation, a remedy that cost nothing – indeed, cost less than nothing, since the starver stopped purchasing food – was abandoned whenever a costly cure was developed. Decades later, studies would show that fasting followed by a high-fat diet was as effective against seizures as many modern anticonvulsants and that variants of the Allen Diet were effective against diabetes. But America, then as now, preferred the promise of the pill over a modification of menu.

I passed Monday morning, the first of my fast, with no evidence of appetite. By afternoon, however, my stomach – I use the term in its general, non-clinical sense – was encircled by emptiness. Soon I felt it contracting, and now and then it murmured aggrievedly. For recompense, I felt none of the sleepiness I usually feel after lunch. Indeed, I was sharply alert, presumably because my body, not needing energy to digest food, was sending the surplus to my brain. My stomach grew increasingly resentful as the afternoon progressed, but I felt no hunger. This must sound odd to anyone who has skipped a meal or two, but I had learned a few tricks of the anti-hunger trade. One of my earliest teachers was

Gandhi, veteran of seventeen hunger strikes and deviser of a set of precepts about fasting. The majority of the precepts – take regular enemas, sleep out of doors – I honored in the breach. Two, however, I held close. One was to drink as much cool water as possible, a rule that later fasters improved on by recommending that the faster drink whenever a thought of food arises. Gandhi's other worthy precept was simply to banish thoughts of food the instant they spring up. At first I had thought this advice insipid. It seemed to me that a faster – at least a non-Mahatma faster – could no more will away a mental masala than an alcoholic could a mental whiskey sour. But latter-day fasters had again helpfully elaborated, in this case by likening thoughts of food to Internet pop-up ads, which disappear with a simple click on the red X. A faster, my teachers said, had only to click the X, and they would go away. It worked just so for me, to my appreciative surprise.

For nearly half a century after the 1930s, only the odd doctor, often in both senses of the adjective, prescribed the hunger cure for illness. What few fasting “healthatoriums” and clinics remained were chiefly in Europe, particularly Germany. An American exception was Herbert Macgolfin Shelton, a Macfaddenite who set up a fasting clinic in San Antonio. The location, deep in longhorn steer country, testified to Shelton's attitude toward convention. From the 1930s through the 1970s, Shelton fasted perhaps thirty thousand patients. Along the way he preached raw foodism, accepted the presidential nomination of the American Vegetarian Party, received an invitation from Gandhi (not consummated) to explore fasting together, and collected a grant of \$50,000 from the creator of the Fritos corn chip, who possibly hoped to make amends. In his copious writings, Shelton claimed to have fasted away the ailments of dyspeptics and depressives, rheumatics and cardiacs, epileptics and diabetics, the cancerous

and the gouty. He had even, he wrote, made one or two of the lame rise and walk again.

A historian of fasting, had one existed, might not have looked askance at Shelton's claims. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Hippocrates, and Galen all advised short fasts to rid the mind of clutter and the body of malady. “Instead of employing medicines,” Plutarch counseled, “fast a day.” It is said that Pythagoras, on applying to study in Egypt, was required to fast for forty days. He grumpily complied but afterward declared himself a man reborn and later made his matriculating pupils fast. The ancient belief in curative fasting dribbled down to a few of Tanner's contemporaries, among them Shaw and Twain, the latter of whom wrote, “A little starvation can really do more for the average sick man than can the best medicines and the best doctors.... I speak from experience; starvation has been my cold and fever doctor for fifteen years, and has accomplished a cure in all instances.”

To a perceptive twentieth-century researcher, the line of sages who claimed vigor through fasting might have suggested a topic worthy of study. But perception was rare, and science largely dismissed curative fasting. Shelton in turn dismissed science – or, as he styled it, Science – as unscientific. “Science,” he opined, “stubbornly clings to its errors, and resists all effort to correct these. Once an alleged fact has been well established, no matter how erroneous it is, all the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

On Tuesday morning, thirty-six hours into my fast, I felt not quite right but in a way that is difficult to capture in words. I felt a little weak, or maybe it was a little light, and I had the sensation that my being was centered in my head or was trying to be, but that my head was too full of other things to hold all of me. I did not, however, have a headache. My discomfort was remote, although the alertness I had enjoyed the day before had abandoned me utterly. In its place was a heavy, insistent somnolence. I

napped in the morning and again at teatime but did not awake from either respite refreshed. I stumbled through the day lethargic.

Endurance fasters say the hardest part of their labor is from roughly the second through fourth days. During this time the body is exhausting its store of glycogen, the compound that is broken into glucose in order to fuel, among other organs, the brain. The brain is ravenous. Though just 2 percent of the body's mass, it uses 20 percent of its resting energy, and the body's other main sources of energy – amino acids, which are broken down from proteins, and fatty acids and glycerol, which are broken down from fats – cannot power the brain. This is a bother, because we store pound on pound of fat, which most of us would just as soon burn for fuel, whereas we store only a few ounces of glycogen. Our brains are thus on a nearly constant prowl for sugar.

There is, however, a fallback: ketone bodies, which are highly acidic compounds created when fatty acids are broken down for energy. The best-known ketone is acetone, as in the clear flammable liquid used to remove nail polish and scour metal surfaces before painting. Once thought to be waste products, ketones are in fact fuel – and fuel that can power the brain. There is evidence that the brain may even run more efficiently on ketones, perhaps because ounce for ounce they contain more energy than glucose. If so, this may account for the heightened sense of well-being and even euphoria that some fasters describe. From the faster's perspective, the only drawback to ketones is that the starving brain does not start using them immediately upon exhausting all available glucose. Instead, it nibbles on muscle for a while – two or three days – with dolorous results.

While my brain was dithering thus, further changes were occurring within me. My sense of smell had grown fantastically

sharp. And the blood vessels of my temples had begun pumping heartily. Previous fasts had taught me that over the next few days the pumping would become so robust that I would be able to count my pulse without putting finger to head. The first time I had experienced such throbbing, I worried that it portended stroke. But that proved hypochondriacal. My heart, I later learned, was merely working harder to compensate for a drop in blood pressure. Although the drop was harmless in the main, it had one danger: if I stood up too quickly, my blood might not stand up with me. The few doctors who prescribe fasting today say the greatest risk in a fast lies not where the layman might suppose – damage to stomach, say, or to liver, heart, and other such organs – but in a contusion or concussion brought about by fainting. The remedy is simple: when feeling light-headed, the faster sits or lies down immediately. I found this precept more sensible than a daily enema and honored it punctiliously.

In June of 1965 a Scotsman of twenty-seven years and thirty-two and a half stone, which is to say 456 pounds, presented himself at the Department of Medicine, Royal Infirmary, in Dundee, with the desire to lose weight. The fellows of the department, thinking the dire case might call for dire measures, suggested that not eating for a short period might help him control his appetite. They did not intend a prolonged fast. As recently as mid-century, some reference works still proclaimed the certain fatality of modest fasts. “Generally death occurs after eight days of deprivation of food,” *Funk and Wagnalls New Standard Encyclopedia* reported – in the same edition in which it reported fasts of forty and sixty days by great hunger artists of old. The Scotsman, known in the annals of science only as A,B., agreed to the fast, and the fellows hospitalized him as a precaution. For several days he took only water and vitamin pills. His vital signs were normal. He asked if he might continue his fast at home, and the doctors released him on

condition that he return for periodic tests of his urine and blood. The checkups were not intended to make sure he wasn't sneaking food, but they had that incidental effect. One week disappeared into the next, taking with it, on par, five of A.B.'s pounds. His checkups showed that he had less sugar in his blood than a normal man, but his movements and thinking were not impaired.

Summer turned to fall, and fall to winter, but A.B. continued vigorous. During the fourth and fifth months, the fellows thought it prudent to supplement his daily vitamin with potassium, but that was all. They could find no reason to halt the fast, and A.B. was so determined to reach his target of 180 pounds that he probably would not have heard of it anyway. He celebrated a year without food with a glass of water. Seventeen days later, 276 pounds the lesser, he reached his mark. He ate, but not from hunger.

A.B. did not recidivate. Over the next five years, he added just sixteen pounds to his 180. His case was reported in the *Postgraduate Medical Journal* in 1973, and *The Guinness Book of Records* cited him for "Longest Fast," although *Guinness* later removed the honor for fear of inspiring unsupervised imitators. "Heaviest Weight Dangled from a Swallowed Sword" remains.

By Thursday much of the odd in-my-head feeling had gone, but a moderate pain now assaulted my lower back. Some fasters believe this lumbago, a fasting commonplace, is caused by toxins dislodged by fats that are burned during a fast. Most toxins (so the hypothesis goes) are flushed out of the body via urine and sweat, but some take up an uncomfortable residence in the lower back. There is little evidence to support the lumbago hypothesis, but there is some evidence more generally that fasting detoxifies. For more than a week in 1984, sixteen Taiwanese victims of PCB poisoning were quasi-fasted (they ate nothing for one day and drank a modest amount of juice thereafter). Subsequently their PCB-

induced migraines, hacking coughs, skin pustules, hair loss, numbness, and joint pain either faded or disappeared entirely.

At noon I went for a walk with my wife, who told me I was frigid. I thought this unkind, particularly as I had let her rub my lower back most of the morning, but she clarified that my hand, which she was holding, was cold – an observation never before made of a human hand, living or dead, out of doors in a Tennessee August. By nightfall my feet would become cold, too, and I would have to wear socks to bed. Next day I took to wearing fleece outside and sometimes even in. My coldness, I surmised, was due to my lack of heat-generating digestion.

In the afternoon I went for a two-mile jog, as I had the previous three days, at a pace set by my nine-year-old dog. I felt fine. Later I tried touch football at a pace set by my seven-year-old son. I nearly collapsed. Similar experiments over coming days taught me that although I could exercise moderately for twenty, forty, even sixty minutes, just a few bursts of vigorous effort sent me gasping to the couch. I later read that such bursts are powered by glycogen, which I had used up days ago.

That night I weighed myself. I had not done so since starting the fast, because I wanted the satisfaction of seeing a substantial drop when finally I did. Even so, I wasn't prepared when I took to the scale and the needle stopped just shy of 151. A decline of nine pounds – more than two a day? It wasn't possible. Most fasters lose a pound and a half a day in their first week. Two is rare, let alone more than two. I dismounted, fiddled with the scale's calibration, remounted. The needle stopped at 151. I did not protest further.

At that rate, I was pleased to calculate, I would reach 135 in just one more week, though I knew I wouldn't maintain quite that rate. Fasters start like hares, thanks to the rapid emptying of the digestive tract and the initial loss of water, but after that they lope

along. Still, if I had accelerated the first dash, it stood to reason that my lope would be accelerated too. I was certain that my daily exercise, which most fasters forgo, had made the difference, and since I would keep exercising, I was equally certain I would see 135 in ten or twelve days rather than the three weeks I had originally envisioned. Clearly I was a fasting prodigy.

In the 1960s a professor of medicine at the University of Pennsylvania named Garfield O. Duncan became troubled by the epidemic of American obesity, which then afflicted a shocking one man in twenty and one woman in nine. (Today it afflicts one in three men and women alike.) Like other researchers, Duncan fasted obese patients and studied how many regained their lost weight. Unlike other researchers, he noticed that the blood pressure of every patient who was hypertensive fell to within normal limits during these fasts. He reported, for illustration, the case of a man of fifty-three years and 325 pounds whose unmedicated blood pressure was 210/130 and whose medicated pressure was 184/106 – still menacingly high. The man fasted for fourteen days without drugs, and his blood pressure fell to 136/90. Six months later, it was 130/75. Duncan did not record how many of his patients sustained such improvements after their fasts, but the possibility of a simple cure for some forms of hypertension seemed well worth pursuing.

Not until 2001, however, was there a definitive follow-up to his work. Its author, Alan Goldhamer, had fasted thousands of patients at his TrueNorth Health Center in Santa Rosa, California, and had seen high blood pressures trill downward like Coast Range streams. He studied 174 hypertensives who fasted for ten days; 154 of them became normotensive by fast's end. The others also enjoyed substantial drops in pressure, and all who had been taking medication were able to stop. In patients with stage 3 (the most severe) hypertension, the average drop in systolic pressure

was 60 mmHg. In all patients, the average drop in systolic/diastolic was 37/13. According to Goldhamer, this was and remains the largest reported drop in blood pressure achieved by any drug or therapy. Like Duncan, Goldhamer did not formally study how long his subjects maintained their newly lowered blood pressures, but he surveyed forty-two subjects six months after their fasts, and their average blood pressure had risen hardly a jot.

His findings are all but unknown. A drug company can advertise its latest blood-pressure pill with a budget approximating that of the Kingdom of Belgium, but the promotional funds are somewhat less for a program in which people go to a low-cost clinic to receive a treatment consisting of, well, nothing. Then too, fasting labors under the hoary misapprehension that it is not only injurious but requires impossible willpower. Not eat for a week? Most people would rather die.

To test his vow of celibacy, Gandhi slept in the nude with a nubile grandniece. He never advanced on her, but an involuntary emission could prompt weeks of self-recrimination. I lack a grandniece, but I recalled the Mahatma's test on the day I prepared a meal for my family. When starting my fast, I traded my traditional role of family chef for that of dishwasher. But as time passed, I missed cooking, so on Sunday, my seventh day, I made a trial of penne with olive oil and parmesan for my son. I was surprised that the meal aroused me not at all. On subsequent days I made pad thai, potato and leek soup, chickpea curry, and artichoke and feta pizza, all without yearning.

I was without yearning in other spheres too. My libido, which had been de minimis since Tuesday, had by the weekend become defunctus. I had foreseen this sorry state, another fasting commonplace, but it was still a wound. My avenues of recreation were being hedged in one by one. For paltry redress, the throb in my temples had disappeared, my clarity of mind had returned, and my

sense of well-being was once more as intact as a writer's – a sexless writer's – could be.

That evening the scale registered 146 pounds, a decline of five pounds in three days, a rate only slightly less than that of my first four days. My waist had shrunk from what I guessed was a pre-fast thirty-four inches – I hadn't checked in months for fear of what the horror might do to my heart – to less than thirty-two. On Monday I would search half a dozen stores for a new belt and find none. Evidently the circumference of East Tennessee Man ruled out an economy of scale for the thirty-inch belt. I finally found the right baldric in the boys' section. Over the next week I revisited the section for shirts and pants and paid cheerfully, for it is an economic fact that no one begrudges a new wardrobe so long as it is made of less fabric than the previous one.

Monday dawned flat, even depressive, an unexpected change from my keenness of the previous days. I felt sloth, and I harbored unkind thoughts of Upton Sinclair, a faster of some ardor, who wrote of one of his fasts, "No phase of the experience surprised me more than the activity of my mind: I read and wrote more than I had dared to do for years before" – a horrifying thought, since Sinclair wrote ninety-odd books in as many years.

At bedtime I weighed myself and was distressed to see 146, the same as the night before. I stepped off the scale, checked the calibration, exhaled vigorously to unburden myself of a few ounces, and stepped back on. The figure was unchanged.

This was a cheat. I had swum that morning, had taken a long sweaty dog walk in the afternoon, had moved furniture in the evening in preparation for renovations – and had done all despite appalling lethargy and grievous apathy. I had known there would be days when my weight would not move, but today, when I had struggled so heroically against the oppression of fasting?

I went to bed very much wanting a glass of Malbec.

I awoke Tuesday to the same mood and energy and at bedtime found my weight the same too. On debarking the accursed scale, my thoughts turned to Nanaimo bars, which consist of a layer of buttery graham-cracker crumbs topped by a layer of custard-flavored icing topped by a layer of melted chocolate. After several defiantly luscious seconds, I clicked an X, trudged to bed, and pulled the comforter over my head.

In 1988 a cadre of young Fischer rats fasted every other day for a week, then were injected "intraperitoneally with 15 million Mat 13762 ascites tumor cells," which is to say their abdomens were shot full of breast cancer. Another group who ate normally for a week were injected likewise. Nine days after the injections, four fifths of the normally fed rats were dead, but only one third of the fasters were. Come the next day, seven eighths of the feeders were dead, but just half of the fasters were. Two weeks after the injections, only one of the twenty-four feeders remained, but four of the twenty-four fasters were still alive. The researchers concluded that fasting every other day could dramatically slow the growth of breast cancer, at least in adolescent rats.

Other research confirmed that fasting could slow and even prevent cancer in certain lower mammals, although a handful of contradictory studies found that some fasted rodents fared worse against cancer than did their non-fasting peers. The reasons for the contradictory results have not been explained, but they were possibly the result of genetic differences between species and subspecies, and of differences in the duration and timing of the fasts.

In 1997 a promising series of follow-up studies began. In one, at the University of California, Los Angeles, baker's yeast that was fasted was found to be protected from "oxidative insult." By "oxidative insult," researcher Valter Longo and his colleagues meant attacks by free radicals and other agents that damage DNA

and thereby cause cancer and other ills. Somewhat paradoxically, oxidative insult also kills cancer – chemotherapy essentially insults cancer cells to death, oxidatively and otherwise. The trouble with chemotherapy, of course, is that it insults healthy cells to death too, and sometimes the patient with them. Hence the oncologist’s recurring dilemma of how to destroy the most cancer and the least patient.

The yeast study was promising in this regard because the fasting seemed to protect only healthy cells. To Longo, this raised an intriguing question: If a cancer patient fasted, would her healthy cells be protected from chemotherapy, while her cancerous cells were not? If so, could she be given a dose of chemotherapy that would kill more cancer without killing her?

Longo and his colleagues explored the theory through several studies. In one, from 2008, they fasted a group of mice for forty-eight hours, fed a control group normally, then gave both groups a monstrous dose of chemotherapy – proportionally three times the maximum amount given to humans. Ten days later, 43 percent of the fed group were dead, against only 6 percent of the fasted group. All the surviving feeders showed signs of toxicity – limited movement, hunched backs, ruffled hair – but the fasters looked healthy. Next, the researchers fasted a set of mice for sixty hours and fed another set normally before administering an even higher dose of chemotherapy. Within five days, all the control mice were dead while all the fasters were not only alive but free of visible toxicity. The researchers repeated the experiment, only this time injecting neuroblastomas, one of the most aggressive types of cancer, before the chemotherapy. In a week, half of the fed mice were dead of toxicity but more than 95 percent of the fasters were still alive. Longo theorized that the fasters thrived because when healthy cells are starved, they shift into survival mode – battering down, curbing their activities, repairing old wounds, and rejecting

inputs they might otherwise accept, like chemotherapeutic drugs. Cancer cells know no such restraint. Their selfish mission is to grow at all cost, and even when their host is fasting they take inputs almost indiscriminately.

Longo’s group started a pilot trial in humans of fasting before chemotherapy, but ten cancer patients who did not want to wait for the results experimented on themselves. Each patient fasted for two or more days before chemotherapy, and some also fasted afterward. None experienced the weakness, fatigue, and gastrointestinal misery they had suffered after previous chemotherapies. Whether fasting helped kill more of their cancer is, however, anyone’s guess. Longo’s pilot study yielded promising enough results for a larger trial to begin.

The American Cancer Society, vanguard of battlers against cancer, has received these and similarly propitious studies in a manner befitting what Herbert Shelton might have called *Scientific* tradition. “Available scientific evidence,” the ACS has declared on its website, “does not support claims that fasting is effective for preventing or treating cancer. Even a short-term fast can have negative health effects, while fasting for a longer time could cause serious health problems... In fact, some animal studies have found that actual fasting in which no food is eaten for several days could actually promote the growth of some tumors.” The ACS buttressed its claim by citing just four studies while entirely ignoring the far larger body of contrary research.

As to why the ACS would oppose so potentially effective and so cheap an anticancer therapy, the Cancer Prevention Coalition, founded as a counterpoise to the cancer establishment, suggests on its website, “The American Cancer Society is fixated on damage control – diagnosis and treatment ... with indifference or even hostility to cancer prevention. This myopic mindset is compounded by interlocking conflicts of interest with the cancer drug,

mammography, and other industries.” Donations from such industries have helped make the ACS one of the world’s richest charities, with assets topping \$1 billion and executives earning up to \$2 million annually. If cancer patients remain in the dark about fasting’s potential, what worry is it to the ACS? No pharmaceutical companies died of cancer last year.

On Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday – the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth days of my abnegation – my mood climbed somewhat from its low of earlier in the week. Life was not lustrous, but no longer was it gray. It helped that I had finally dropped a pound on Wednesday and had kept declining, to 143 by Friday.

I was truly thinning now. My cheeks had taken on a runner’s concavity, my abdomen was approaching plumb, and my legs could have been taken for a triathlete’s. An unforeseen consequence of my rediscovered thinness, however, was that the rest of humanity looked fat to me. It is of course easy, fasting or no, to see fat in America, where, as in Bahrain, Chile, England, Germany, Hungary, Jordan, Mexico, Panama, Peru, Poland, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Uruguay, more than half of all adults are overweight. It is easier still to do so in Tennessee, where obesity afflicts one in three adults and garden-variety fat another one in three. But it was not only fat people who looked bloated to me now. The slightest bulge of tummy, the least hint of jowl repulsed me as a sign of reckless feeding. So quickly do we forget our former selves.

The objects of my repulsion reciprocated in kind – at least, they did on learning the reason for my atrophy. In the early going, I had not advertised my fast. Like the newly expectant mother, I was aware of the possibility of miscarriage and was not eager to receive the painful stream of condolences should the worst come to pass. But as my labor began to show, questions grew apace, and I had to confess.

“You’re an extremist!” cried one of my brunchtime familiars – spitting forth flecks of whipped cream and nearly choking on her waffle – when apprised of my fast. I replied, purely to educate her, that her extreme devotion to three meals a day, every day, might earn her a tumor. In the same altruistic spirit, I said that since she had just passed fifty and was getting on in years, she might care to know that regular fasting showed potential as a means of retarding aging. She was sullen until her side of bacon arrived.

Among the more important studies on fasting’s life-extending possibilities was a 1982 experiment by the National Institute on Aging in which rats were fasted every other day from weaning to death and lived 83 percent – *83 percent* – longer than the control group. In the seventy-eight years of the typical American life, 83 percent comes to sixty-five years. The rats had lived, in effect, 143 years.

In a later study, fasted mice lived 34 percent longer; in another, fasted rats gained 40 percent. Again, the discrepant outcomes were perhaps the result of genetic variation among species and subspecies, and of differences in when the animals started fasting. To test these possibilities, the NIA in 1989 divided each of three strains of mice into three subgroups, then fasted or fed them on different schedules. One subgroup in each strain was fasted every other day starting at six weeks old, which is adolescence for mice. Another subgroup was fasted starting at six months (young maturity). Another was fasted starting at ten months (middle age). Control subgroups were fed normally. The subgroups that fasted from adolescence lived 12 percent, 20 percent, and 27 percent longer than the controls. Those that fasted from young maturity lived a respective 2 percent, 19 percent, and 11 percent longer. But those that started in middle age lived, in the case of the first strain, 14 percent *shorter* than, or, in the case of the other two, the same length as the controls.

Not that all hope was lost for middle-aged rodents. They could take heart in a rosier study in which rats that started fasting in either middle age or elderhood lived, respectively, 36 percent and 14 percent longer than normally fed rats.

No one has figured out why animals of different species, subspecies, and ages respond so variously to fasting. Neither has anyone learned what might be done to extend rodent life spans still further. Would it help, say, to fast three days on, three days off, in perpetuity? To fast ten random days a month? To tweak a gene that is expressed by fasting? There has been almost no research on such questions. Nor has there been much effort to discover whether the benefits of fasting in *Rattus norvegicus* and *Mus musculus* might be enjoyed by *Homo sapiens*. This last oversight, however, is understandable. Experimental outcomes are seldom strictly translatable across species, and the benefit to *Homo* may be a mere ten or twenty years instead of the sixty-five that *Rattus* got.

I continued to dwindle. By Wednesday, the seventeenth day of my fast, the report from the bathroom was 138, three pounds from home. So near, I considered for the first time whether I might care to fast longer – a month, say, or the Christly forty days, or even a few days more to out-Tanner Tanner.

I wasn't long deciding no. Endurance, even with my ugly swings of mood and energy, was not the problem. The problem was that I missed eating. I wanted the sensation of food in my mouth again – the textures, the flavors, the hots and colds, the surprises, even the disappointments. I also wanted the fellowship of eating. Sitting to meals with family and friends had been sociable enough at first, but in the end it had proved an inadequate substitute for companionship, a word whose roots corn (with) and pan (bread) reveal its true meaning: breaking bread with others. Not breaking bread with my intimates, I was an outsider in their rite.

Then too I wanted the rest of my life back. I wanted to run more than a mile or two. I wanted to play touch football with my son. I wanted to play touch anything with my wife. Other people wanted things of me as well. In the previous few days, some persons, maybe one or two in my own family, had described me as irritable, even rude. On Wednesday, my son, himself a bit tetchy that evening, insulted first his mother and then his dinner, whereupon I told him, in a tone I usually reserve for the dog when he eats a whole pizza, to get out of my sight. My fast wasn't worth that price.

In 1993 the one-year-old son of the Hollywood director Jim Abrahams and his wife, Nancy, began having seizures. Few at first, the seizures soon numbered several a day, then a dozen, then more than a dozen. A barrage of medications had almost no effect, and little Charlie stopped developing – cognitively and behaviorally. Five pediatric neurologists later, the Abrahamses opted for brain surgery, but it, too, failed to slow the seizures. So also the ministrations of two homeopaths and, all else having come to nothing, a faith healer. Charlie seemed destined for mental and physical retardation.

The Abrahamses, however, continued to sift through research on alternative treatments, and eventually they chanced upon a reference to a successful anti-epilepsy regimen that had been common decades ago but was now nearly extinct. Under the regimen, patients fasted for a few days, then ate a high-fat diet for a year or two, then returned to normal fare. It was, in essence, the 1920s therapy inspired by the work of H. Rawle Geyelin, which had since become known as the ketogenic diet – as in ketones, the favored fuel of the fasting body. One of the few places in the United States where the diet was still used was Johns Hopkins Children's Center. The Abrahamses were appalled that none of their doctors had mentioned it.

Charlie was twenty months old and weighed just nineteen pounds when he went to Hopkins for treatment. By then, notwithstanding the combined powers of Dilantin, Felbatol, Tegretol, and Tranxene, he was having dozens of seizures on most days. Sometimes he had as many as a hundred. On the second day of the ketogenic diet, the seizures stopped. His arrested development became unarrested, and he grew to adulthood as normally as his brother and sister.

A subsequent study would find that the ketogenic diet had been described in nearly every major textbook on epilepsy published between 1941 and 1980. Most of the texts even devoted an entire chapter to administering the diet, but evidently the taboo on fasting counted for more in doctors' minds than a successful treatment. The Abrahamses endeavored to change that. They founded the Charlie Foundation, which sponsors conferences and produces videos to enlighten doctors, dietitians, and parents. Jim Abrahams produced and directed a TV movie (... *First Do No Harm*) in which Meryl Streep, as the mother of an epileptic child, searches vainly for a cure until she happens upon the ketogenic diet. Thanks largely to the Abrahamses' efforts, the diet is now used in almost every major pediatric hospital in the United States. The number of epileptic children it might have helped over the past century but for *Scientific* blindness makes for grim contemplation.

On Friday evening I became imbued with a mystical conviction that I had reached 135 pounds, even though I had not weighed myself since Wednesday's 138 pounds, and I had not lost three pounds over two days in more than a week. My faith in mysticism being what it is, I put off my rendezvous with the scale until nearly midnight, the better to wring every ounce- reducing minute from the day. When finally I stood before the machine, I offered a silent prayer to Venus, whose planet rules Libra, bearer

of scales, and within whose power it not incidentally lies to bestow a pleasing form. In case the goddess was in a more Grecian than Roman mood, I appealed to Aphrodite as well. I closed my eyes, stepped up, and made sure my feet were properly placed, nothing hanging over the edge. I did not want to look down and find an agreeable number only to discover on repositioning that it was a fraud. I opened my eyes and looked. The needle rested at 135.

This was highly promising, but not, I cautioned myself, conclusive. I examined the position of my toes more carefully. All constituent parts were on the scale. I stepped off, recalibrated, stepped back on, wiggled around so that the needle wiggled with me, and stood as still as my welling excitement would permit. The number remained – 135.

Just nineteen days ago I had been a middleweight. I had, in the interim, slimmed to super welterweight, to welterweight, to super lightweight, and now, at blessed last, to lightweight. I could have KO'd Roberto Duran just then.

I was not the least surprised on Saturday morning when the scale reported 136, the first gain of my fast. During the night I had thought wantonly of food, so it was to be expected that the thoughts would have added a pound. I appraised myself one last time in the full-length mirror. It revealed a stomach that would commonly be called flat, though in fact two ridges of muscle showed through my abdomen. They left me four cans shy of a six-pack, but they endeared themselves to me all the same. My legs were all thews and sinews. If it was true that my arms were stickish and my chest boyish, I could take consolation in the fact that I was married and didn't have to be attractive to anyone.

It would have been nice to know whether my fast had done for my insides what it had done for my out- sides. Had the walls of my arteries become smooth as spaghetti? Had my cells repaired

mutant DNA that might otherwise have grown into a tumor? I didn't have the money to test those questions laboratorily, but not knowing had its advantages. In my ignorance, I was like a fundraiser for the American Cancer Society and could believe whatever I wanted about fasting. I decided the fast had put off Alzheimer's by five years.

I breakfasted at lunch, a few hours short of twenty days. Notwithstanding my desire for mealtime companionship, I dined alone. My fast had been an essentially solitary endeavor, and it seemed fitting that my departure from it should be, too. After heated internal debate, I had chosen for my first course applesauce that my wife had made from our backyard apple tree. I took a spoonful. What occurred within me with this first taste was what occurred in the Starburst commercials of old, the ones in which liquid explosions of kaleidoscopic joy burst forth from the actors' mouths. It was an inundation. I took another spoonful, then another, each yielding the same joyful psychedelia. I waited ten minutes to see whether my stomach would approve, and when it offered no objection, I gave it a handful of Rainier cherries. These, too, were a wonder – every one its own dessert. Thereafter, at intervals of an hour or two, I took a modest helping of fruit or vegetable, and none was less than stupendous in its savor. I capped my resurrective day with a soup of squash and ginger, though it might have been of ambrosia and nectar. By night's end I weighed a tad over 137.

At a family reunion the next day, I moved up the food chain to deviled eggs. Also potato cream casserole. Also fried okra. There were other coronary assailants, but they were lost to memory after a few slices of pumpkin pie. I am confident about subsuming the number six in "a few," since any rational response to pumpkin pie would be to eat ten or twelve slices. My stomach, however, did not rationally respond. It told me I had overdone it

well before the scale said so that evening. Specifically, the scale said 140.

A good night's sleep, however, quieted my stomach, and I resumed eating with what an impartial observer might have called abandon. By Tuesday I weighed 142 pounds. At that rate, I calculated, I would weigh 940 on the one-year anniversary of my fast. I returned to clicking X's, at least on the more gluttonous of my desires, and my weight leveled.

Two years have passed since my great fast, and although my girth has fluctuated a bit, I have kept it in check with short fasts and such exercise as a bum knee permits. Like the Scotsman A.B., I have not recidivated. At press time I weighed 140 pounds.

My thoughts have turned often since my fast to the rats that fasted every other day and lived, in effect, 143 years. I have thought too of the less fortunate mice that started fasting in middle age and gained not an hour for their trouble – or, worse, lost a few ticks. But I have also thought of their more fortunate cousins that started in middle age, or even dotage, and gained what amounted to years. I have wondered: Is a man in midlife more a lucky rodent or an unlucky one?

There was only one way to find out. ♦

Side by...

The Mimic Men (IX)

by *V. S. Naipaul*

I THOUGHT WHEN I BEGAN THIS BOOK that it would be the labour of three or four weeks. Memories of my fluency, on *The Socialist*, in cabinet, were still fresh; the five-thousand-word paper on the reorganization of the police, not a negligible document, had been the concentrated work of an evening. After eighteen months of the anaesthetizing order of life in this hotel, despair and emptiness had burnt themselves out. And it was with a delicious sense of anxiety and of being employed again that I got the hotel to give me a writing-table, set it beside the window, and composed myself to work.

It, was just after breakfast. The pleasant middle-aged Irish chambermaid had got my room ready early and was going to bring me coffee at eleven. My mouth felt clean; my arms were strained and tingling with excitement. At the appointed time the coffee came. My excitement had turned to a type of irritable fatigue; I had written nothing. The wallpaper, in grey, black and red, had a pattern of antique motorcars; the curtain, which hung beside the table, was of a heavy red rep, brownish where it had been handled, discoloured along the folds exposed to the sun; the window, in a modern metal frame, was low, offering a view of the hotel's putting green, bounded at the far end by a wall of brick, pale-red, washed-out; beyond this, more red brick, warehouses, garages, houses, just a segment of the city. I was overwhelmed as much by the formlessness of my experiences, and their irrele-

...by side

Pantomim (IX)

fordította *Tárnok Attila*

AMIKOR EZT A KÖNYVET ELKEZDTEM, három-négyheti munkával számoltam. Korábbi írásaim, a baloldali folyóirat, a politikusi pálya emléke még friss volt. A rendőrség reformjáról írott 5000 szavas, nem jelentéktelen írásom egyetlen este megfeszített munkája volt. Most itt a panzióban, másfél év elteltével, az érzéstelenítővel beinjekciózott rend elfojtja az üresség és az elkeseredettség érzetét. A küldetéstudat kellemes izgalmában kértem a tulajdonostól egy íróasztalt, az ablak elé állíttattam és összeszedetten munkához láttam.

Ez rögtön reggeli után történt. A kedves, középkorú, ír szobalány korán rendberakta a szobámat, tizenegyre kértem tőle kávét. A leheletem tisztának éreztem, izmaim megfeszültek a bizsergető izgalomtól. A kávét a kért időben hozták, de ekkorra már izgalmam türelmetlen fáradtságba csapott át: még semmit sem írtam reggel óta. A szürke, fekete, vörös tapéta veterán autókat mintázott, az asztal mellett lelógó nehézvörös ripszfüggöny fodrai kifakultak ott, ahol a nap érte és koszos barnába hajlottak, ahol kézzel érintették. A modern, alumínium-keretes, alacsonyan behelyezett ablak a panzió golfpálya simaságú pázsitjára engedett rálátást, a pázsit túlsó végén egy halványvörös, eső áztatta kőfal, azon túl tégláépületek, garázsok, raktárak, házak: a város egy szelete. Élményeim nem voltak összhangban külső környezetemmel, melyben róluk beszámolni készültem; az élmények formátlansága, a környezet maga, helyem a városban, ebben a szobá-

vance to the setting in which I proposed to recount them, as by the setting itself, my physical situation, in this city, this room, with this view, that lustreless light. And it was not until late afternoon, excitement gone, the light faded, the curtains about to be drawn, my stomach, head and eyes united in a dead sensation of sickness, that the memory at last came which, forcing itself to the surface all day, had kept the first page of the Century notebook blank except for the date: the memory of my first snow and the memory, incredulously examined, of the city of the magical light.

Fourteen months have passed since, in a room made over-dry by the electric fire, I re-created that climb up the dark stairs to Mr Shylock's attic to look through a snowfall at the whitening roofs of Kensington. By this re-creation the event became historical and manageable; it was given its place; it will no longer disturb me. And this became my aim: from the central fact of this setting, my presence in this city which I have known as student, politician and now as refugee- immigrant, to impose order on my own history, to abolish that disturbance which is what a narrative in sequence might have led me to.

In Isabella in the early days I spoke as much as anyone about culture and the need for a national literature. But, to tell the truth, I had no great regard for writers as men, much as I might have enjoyed their work. I looked on them as incomplete people, to whom writing was a substitute for what it then pleased me to call life. And when I settled down to this book, the labour of three or four weeks, as I thought, I was looking beyond to other things. The financial uplift at the end would be small, I knew. But I thought there was a good chance that publication might lead to some form of irregular, agreeable employment: reviews and articles on colonial or 'third world' matters, calls from Bush House to prepare talks and even on occasion to indulge in the harmless banter of a radio discussion, and perhaps, after a year or two of

ban, a fénytelen táj az ablakon túl – ez mind maga alá temetett és elkésérített. Csak késő délutánra – amikor már az izgalom elmúlt, kint szürkülni kezdett és már be kellett húzni a függönyt, a gyomrom, a fejem és a szemeim valami tompa fájdalomtól elnehezültek – csak ekkor ötlött fel bennem az első hó emléke, a város kétkedve szemlélt fényviszonyai. A Century spirálfüzetben addig csak a dátum árválkodott az első lapon.

Tizennégy hónap telt el azóta, amikor szobám villanyfűtéstől száraz melegében felidéztem a sötét lépcsőházat és az élményt, ahogy egykor Mr. Shylock padlásszobájából a havazáson át Kensington fehérbe vesző háztetőit néztem. És azáltal, hogy leírtam, az esemény történeté vált, kezelhetővé, helyére került, többé nem zavar már. Célommá vált, hogy a helyszín központi tényéből, jelenlétemből a városban, melyet a korábbi időkől diákként, majd politikusként, most pedig emigránsként ismerek, végleges rendet teremtsék, egyszersmind saját múltamban is, eltöröljem a zavart, amelybe egy folytatásos történet torkolhatott volna.

Isabella szigetén a korai években éppúgy fontosnak éreztem a helyi kultúra és egy nemzeti irodalom szerepét, mint mások. Ám az igazat megvallva nem sokra tartottam az egyes írókat, mégha a műveiket kedveltem is. Minden szerzőt félkész embernek tekintettem, akik számára az írás csak pótlék abban a folyamatban, amit akkoriban szívesen hívtam életnek. Amikor ebbe a könyvbe kezdtem (három-négy hét munkája, gondoltam), úgy véltem, túlhaladtam az ő szemléletükön. Munkám nem ígér pénzügyi sikereket, ebben biztos voltam, mégis, úgy hittem, könyvem megjelenése után esély van rá, hogy alkalmanként és rendszertelenül, de nívós megbízásokat kapok majd a gyarmati vagy a harmadik világbeli kultúra és társadalom tárgykörében írandó cikkekre, tanulmányokra, felkérést a BBC-től egy-egy előadásra, vagy időnként ártalmatlan vitaműsorokban vállalkozó szerepet, és hozzászó-

this light underground labour, some little niche in television: the colonial expert, keeping his own counsel, calmly leaving his suburban hotel and returning later, in the taxi for which others have paid, to find himself the object of an awe which he will not of course acknowledge. This last, I must confess, was a recurring daydream. Nothing was known about me at the hotel. I had unwisely represented myself as a businessman; and my inactivity, extending over eighteen months, had begun to excite Suspicion.

It never occurred to me that the writing of this book might have become an end in itself, that the recording of a life might become an extension of that life. It never occurred to me that I would have grown to relish the constriction and order of hotel life, which previously had driven me to despair; and that the contrast between my unchanging room and the slow progression of what was being created there would have given me such satisfaction. Order, sequence, regularity: it is there every time the electric meter clicks, accepting one more of my shillings. In fourteen months the meter has swallowed hundreds of my shillings, now with a hollow sound, now with a full sound. I have seen the putting green in all weathers, preferring it best in winter, when our middle-aged ladies, mutton dressed as lamb, as our barman says, cease to sunbathe, and our homeless men no longer appear on it at week-ends in sporty clothes and make hearty conversation

I know every line on the wallpaper above my table. I have seen no deterioration, but there is talk of redecorating. And the table itself: when I first sat at it I thought it rough and too narrow, The dark surface was stained and scratched, the indentations filled with grit and dirt; the drawer didn't pull out, the legs had been cut down. It wasn't part of the standard hotel furniture It had been provided specially; it was a junkshop article, belonging to no one, without a function. Now it feels rehabilitated and clean; it is familiar and comfortable; even the scratches have ac-

lásaim nyomán, talán egy-két év külsős munka után, magaménak tudhatok majd egy szerény sarkot egy tévétársaságnál mint gyarmati szakértő. A szakértő gondosan leplezi terveit, csöndben érkezik külvárosi panziójából, ahová később taxin tér vissza – a számlát persze fizetik –, megbecsülés övezi, de ő mindezt természetesen a helyén értékeli. Ez utóbbi mozzanat, bevallom, gyakran visszatért álmodozásaimban. A panzióban semmit sem tudtak rólam. Ostoba módon üzletemberként jelentkeztem be és ilyenként feltűnővé vált elfoglaltságom hiánya, másfél év után kezdett gyanakvást kelteni. Az soha nem merült föl bennem, hogy a könyv írása önmagában is cél lehet, hogy egy élet eseményeinek rögzítése magát az életet hosszabíthatja meg. Nem gondoltam volna, hogy egyszer majd megbecsüléssel kezelem a panzió korlátait és rendjét, mely korábban elkeserített, és hogy az ellettét, amely szobám változatlansága és az ott folyó alkotás lassú előmenetele között feszült, egyszer majd ilyen elégedettséghez vezet. A villanyóra berregése, amikor pénzt dobok be fűtésre, ezt a logikus rendet, rendezettséget testesíti meg. Tizennégy hónap alatt többszáz shillingem nyelte el, néha az üresség, néha a telítettség hangján. A pázsitot minden évszakban láttam már. Legjobban télen kedveltem, amikor a középkorú asszonyok – ahogy a pincérünk szokta jellemezni őket: ürücombok báránynak fűszerezve – nem sütkéreznek már és a sportos öltözetű, harsány modorú hajléktalanok sem tünedeznek fel hétvégeként.

Az asztalom fölött a tapéta minden vonalát ismerem. Nem látom jelét, hogy elhasználnódna, de hallom, le akarják cserélni. És maga az asztal: először durvának és túl keskenynek találtam, a lábaiból is le lett fűrészelve. A karcolt asztallap sötét pecsétekkel tarkított, a vájatokban felgyűlt a kosz, a por, a fiókja nem nyitható. A panzió többi bútorától elüt, külön kérésre kaptam, egy használt bútorboltból származhatott, nem hiányzott senkinek, rendeltetése nem volt. Most mégis letisztultnak és helyreállított-

quired a shine. This is the gift of minute observation which has come to me with the writing of this book, one order, of which I form part, answering the other, which I create. And with this gift has come another, which I least expected: a continuous, quiet enjoyment of the passing of time.

I have fitted into the hotel; the fact has been remarked upon. Suspicion has disappeared; it had nothing to feed on since I learned to fill my day. I have breakfast. I work in my room. I walk to the public house for lunch. The beer mats never change. *Who comes here? A Grenadier.* Sometimes in mid-afternoon I go to a restaurant where frying oil hangs in the still air like a mist; beyond the streaming glass the lorries, buses and motorcars pass ceaselessly in their own blue haze. I have tea and read an evening paper. On Sundays we all have tea in the lounge; it is the custom then for the ladies to serve the men. The older folk play cards; the rest of us read the newspapers. I read the characterless hand of a lady, lower-middle-class but nice, who was in India until 1947; now, after Kenya and Northern Rhodesia, her husband dead, her family scattered, she has given up the Empire. Like me. I frequently go down to the bar before dinner to have a drink and watch television. It is a private bar; postcards and souvenirs from residents who have gone abroad are reverentially displayed. I have my own table in the dining-room. It is behind a square pillar, clad with varnished pine. I like being behind the pillar. It is as wide as my table and gives me privacy of a sort. It also enables me, without giving offence, to observe the hands of the man I think of as Garbage.

Garbage also sits behind a pillar. His hands are all I can see of him. They are long, middle-aged, educated hands: and their primary concern appears to be to convert a plate of meat and vegetables into a plate of acceptable garbage. While chaos comes swiftly and simultaneously to other plates; while meat is hacked

nak érzem, kényelmes és ismerős, még a karcolásokat is megszoktam. Ahogy most látom, a könyv írása folyamán gyakorolt alapos megfigyelés eredménye: egy rendezettség, melynek magam is része vagyok, párhuzamban az alkotás rendjével, melyet írásban megteremték. Ezzel a megbékéléssel egy másikat is kaptam, ez utóbbira a legkevésbé sem számítottam: az idő múlásának folytonos, csöndes ajándékát.

A panzió életébe sikerült beilleszkednem, ezt másoktól hallok. Mióta napjaimat kitöltöm, eltűnt a gyanakvás, nincs mi táplálja. Reggeli után a szobámban dolgozom, délben gyalog megyek egy közeli bárba ebédelni. A sörlátétek mindig ugyanazok, rajtuk a reklámszlogen: *Aki visszajár, az sörissza.* Néha délután étterembe megyek. A sülő olaj szaga fátyolként terjeng a mozdulatlan levegőben, a párás ablakon túl teherautók, buszok, kocsik vesznek bele a forgalom kék ködébe. Teázom és az esti újságot olvasom. Vasárnaponként együtt teázunk a panzióban, a hölgyek általában kiszolgálják az urakat. Az idősebbek kártyáznak, mi többiek újságot olvasunk. Egy riportsorozatban egy alsóközéposztály-beli kedves asszony jellegtelen beszámolója. 1947-ig Indiában élt, aztán Kenyában és Észak-Rodéziában. Most, hogy férje meghalt, családja szétszóródott, a brit gyarmati uralom rögeszméi nem foglalkoztatják többé. Ahogy engem sem. Gyakran lemegyek a bárba vacsora előtt egy italra, vagy tévézni. A bár nem nyilvános, korábbi lakóktól külföldről érkezett képeslapok és ajándéktárgyak díszítik. Az étkezőben állandó asztalom van egy lakkozott, négyszögletes fenyőpillér mögött. A pillér csaknem olyan széles mint az asztal, így ahol ülök, egyfajta rejtkehely. Anélkül, hogy feltűnő lenne, hosszan figyelhetem egy másik vendég kezeit. Magamban az illetőt Hulladéknak hívom.

Hulladék is egy pillér mögött ül, csak a kezeit látom. Ujjai hosszúak, középkorú, tanult embert sejtetnek. A kezek fő elfoglaltsága, hogy a tányéron a hús és zöldségfélék maradékait elfo-

and pushed around and vegetables mangled and scattered on a spreading, muddy field of gravy; while knives and forks, restlessly preparing fresh, mixed mouthfuls, probe the chaos they have created, and cut and spear and plaster; those two hands are unhurriedly, scientifically, maintaining order, defining garbage, separating what is to be eventually eaten from what is to be thrown away. What is to be thrown away is lifted high and carefully deposited on that section of the plate, a growing section, which is reserved for garbage. It is only when the division is complete – most of the other plates abandoned by this time and ready for surrender – that the eating begins. This is the work of a minute; the plate is ready for surrender with the others. The waitress passes. Stiffly, dismissingly, the Outstretched hands offer up their labour: a neat plate of garbage. I feel I have witnessed the first part of some early Christian ritual. For this is not all. After the plate of garbage comes the slaughter of the cheese. The big left hand arches high over the block of cheddar; thumb and middle finger find their hold and press lightly; the right hand brings down the curved, two-pronged knife. But at the last moment the hands pretend that the cheese is alive and getting away. The cheddar shifts about on the oily slaughter-board; there is a struggle; thumb and finger release their hold, but only to press down more firmly; instantly, then, the knife falls, in a strong clean stroke that continues until the cheese is truncated and still. And I almost expect to see blood.

So the time passes. There are occasional incidents. Someone objects to the way a deaf diner scrapes and taps his plate with his knife; he, unlike Garbage, likes to offer up a clean plate. The barman gets drunk; a waitress leaves after a quarrel. Sometimes I have to endure a difficult week or two when the double room next to mine is taken by male employees of a nearby factory which, I believe, ceaselessly converts American maize into glu-

gatható hulladék-kupacokká rendezzék. Míg a többiek tányérján gyors és szimultán káosz áll elő, a húst összetranzírozzák, a zöldséget belekeverik a ragacsos szósz maradvékába, a kések, vil-lák megállás nélkül ételek falatnyi ötvözeit állítják össze, tur-kálnak a káoszban, amit a tányéron összeziláltak, vágnak, döf-nek, maszatolnak, addig Hulladék kezei minden sietség nélkül, szinte tudományos precizitással választják szét a fogyaszthatót a végül eldobandótól. Amit fogyasztásra nem tart érdemesnek, azt magasra emelve, tányérja egy részén növekvő kupacban gondo-san elkülöníti. Mikor a különválogatás kész, csak akkor kezd en-ni. A többiek tányérjai ekkorra már magukra hagyottan várják sorsukat. Az étkezés művelete Hulladék számára egy perc csu-pán, ezután tányérja a többiekével azonos sorsra jut. A kezek mereven nyújtják át munkájuk gyümölcsét, egy tiszta tányér hul-ladékot a távozó pincérnek. Olyan érzésem támad, mintha egy kora-keresztény rítus első jelenetének tanúja lennék. Hisz itt még nincs vége. A tányérnyi hulladék után a sajt áldozata következik. A bal kéz a cheddarsajt tömbje fölé borul, a hüvelyk és a közép-ső ujj fogást talál, aztán a jobb kézben lefelé lendül a görbe, két-élű kés, de az utolsó pillanatban a kezek eljátszák, mintha a sajt élne és el akarna szökni. A cheddar megcsúszik a zsíros vágó-deszkán, küzdelem folyik, az ujjak kiengednek, de csak hogy erő-sebb fogást találjanak. Ekkor lesújt a kés, egyetlen, tiszta, határo-zott vágással, a sajt kétfelé választódik és mozdulatlaná dermed. Szinte számítok rá, hogy vér fog folyni.

Így telik az idő. Néha valaki sérelmezi, hogy egy nagyothalló vacsoravendég hangosan kapar és kopog a késével a tányérján. Egy másik, Hulladéktól eltérően, tisztára nyalja a tányérját. Néha a csapos felönt a garatra vagy egy vitát követően felmond a pin-cérnő. Néha a szomszédomban, a kétágyas szobában egy közeli gyár férfi munkásai kapnak szállást, ilyenkor nehéz heteket kell elviselnem. A gyár, azt hiszem, éjjel-nappal termel, amerikai ku-

cose; then I have to listen to a constant stream of churlish chatter, pre-public house, post-public house, always vapid, always punctuated by that even, mirthless, four-beat laugh which I detest.

But such people come and go and are quickly forgotten; they form no part of the life of the hotel. When I first came here I used to think of this life as the life of the maimed. But we who belong here are neither maimed nor very old. Three-quarters of the men here are of my age; they have responsible jobs to which they go off in their motorcars every morning. We are people who for one reason or another have withdrawn, from our respective countries, from the city where we find ourselves, from our families. We have withdrawn from unnecessary responsibility and attachment. We have simplified our lives. I cannot believe that our establishment is unique. It comforts me to think that in this city alone there must be hundreds and thousands like ourselves.

We have our incidents. But we also have our events. The most important is of course Christmas. That truly separates the faithful, who stay on, from those who, steadfast throughout the year, at last reveal other, saddening loyalties. Among the faithful the event is spoken of weeks before. A subscription list circulates: we exchange presents with our lord and lady on the day, just as they exchange presents with the staff. There is much half-bantering, half-serious talk of precedence; for on the day the tables are joined together to form an E, and we eat together, lord and lady and faithful, and he who is the newest among us finds himself farthest from the centre.

I have moved up year by year, but I know I will never sit at our lady's right hand. That position is reserved for a man who has been here twenty-three years, a shy, gentle, delicately-featured man, still quite young-looking, so unassertive in hall and bar and putting green that his eminence on the day comes as a surprise to

koricát alakít át glukózzá. Ezekben a hetekben folyamatos, bugris, kocsmázás előtti vagy kocsmázás utáni, de mindig lapos és sületlen fecsegésnek vagyok fültanúja, időnként azzal a négyütemű, örömtelen kacagással fűszerezve, melyet megvetek.

De az ilyen lakók gyakran váltják egymást, hamar elfelejtem őket, nem válnak a panzió szerves részévé. Amikor először laktam itt, úgy éreztem, az életünk valamiképpen torzó. De közülünk, akik ide tartozunk, egy sem megcsonkított vagy öreg. A férfiak többsége velem egyidős; felelős állást töltenek be, minden reggel munkába indulnak, kocsival. Valamely okból mindannyian távol élünk a családuktól, a hazánktól, de még ettől a várostól is. Elszakadtunk a kapcsolatok kötöttségeitől, a szükségtelen felelősségvállalástól. Életünk leegyszerűsödött, de nem hiszem, hogy életvezetésünk egyedi lenne. Megnyugtató, hogy csupán ebben a városban százak és ezrek élnek hasonlóképpen.

Néha akadnak incidensek, de megvannak a magunk kiemelt eseményei is. A legfontosabb természetesen Karácsony. Ekkor választódik el az igazán hű, aki még Karácsonykor is itt marad, attól, aki, bár egész éven át itt él, az ünnepek alkalmával elárulja, hogy egyéb elszomorító kapocs is köti őt valahová. A hűségesek között az esemény már hetekkel korábban beszédtéma. Összeírjuk azok listáját, akik maradnak. Karácsony napján megajándékozunk a tulajdonost és a feleségét, ők pedig a személyzetet. Félig komoly, félig élcelődő hierarchiát állítunk föl magunk között. Egyetlen napra az asztalokat E-alakban összetolják, hogy közösen együnk, mi hűségesek, a tulajdonossal és a nejevel, ám az, aki a legrövidebb ideje lakik a panzióban, a középponttól a legtávolabb kap csak helyet.

Évről évre feljebb kapaszkodok a ranglétrán, de tudom, soha nem fogok a feleség jobbján ülni. Azt a helyet az a férfi bírja, aki már huszonhárom éve él itt, egy szolid, visszahúzódó, finom arcélű férfi. Amúgy egészen fiatalos. Az étkezőben, a társalgóban

many. It is a sincere occasion. Nothing is skimped, and no extra charge is made even for the wines and liqueurs which are liberally served. But we are grateful for more than the dinner. We are celebrating our safety, and our emotion is profound. It is intolerably moving when the kind and aged waitress who represents the staff on these occasions comes out from among her uniformed colleagues at the kitchen entrance and, in silence, makes her way to the centre with a large cellophane-wrapped bouquet which, after a brief, faint, stumbling speech that contains not one false word, she presents to our lady. I must confess that last year when, for the first time, the toast was made by our lady to ‘our overseas guest’ and all heads turned towards me, tears came to my eyes. And I was among those who, unashamedly weeping, stood up at the end and applauded our lord and lady all the way out of the hall. And really, I thought, in the French patois of the cool cocoa valleys of Isabella, *je viens d’lué*. I had come ‘from far’, from the brink.

So this present residence in London, which I suppose can be called exile, has turned out to be the most fruitful. Yet it began more absurdly than any. I decided, when I arrived, no.- to stay in London. It had glittered too recently; and I wished to avoid running into anyone I knew. I thought I would stay in a hotel in the country. I had never done this before, in England or anywhere else; but after recent events the conviction was strong that I was again in a well-organized country. I made no inquiries. I simply chose a town I had visited as a student in a British Council party. My imagination, feeding on the words ‘country’ and ‘hotel’, created pictures of gardens and tranquillity, coolness and solitude, twittering hedgerows and morning walks, spacious rooms and antique reverences. They were what I required.

But it was holiday time, as I quickly discovered: the season of ice-cream tubs and soft-drink bottles, pissing children and sand-

és az udvar gyepén olyan visszafogott és szerény, hogy a karácsonyi ebédnél elfoglalt kivételes pozíciója sokakat meglep. A légkör őszinte. Semmivel sem fukarkodnak, és még az italokat sem számolják fel, pedig bőségesen kapunk. Ám mi nem pusztán az ebédért vagyunk hálásak. A biztonságunkat ünnepeljük, mély érzelmekkel. Elviselhetetlenül megindító, amikor a kedves, idős pincéernő a személyzet képviselőjében libériás munkatársai sorából előlép a konyhaajtónál és csendben a központi helyek felé lépked, kezében egy celofánba csomagolt virágcsokor, melyet rövid, botladozó, de egyetlen őszintétlen szót sem tartalmazó beszéd után átnyújt Mrs. Shylocknak. Megvallom, hogy az elmúlt évben, amikor a ház asszonya pohárköszöntőjében, akkor először, megemlékezett „tengerentúli vendégünkről” és mindenki felém fordult, könnyek szöktek a szemembe. És én is azok közé tartozom, akik, szegyenkezés nélkül, könnyek közt, felállva tapsoltak, ahogy az ebéd végeztével a tulajdonos és a felesége elhagyta a termet. És valóban úgy éreztem – ahogy az Isabella-szigeti hűvös kakaó-völgyekben elterjedt francia tájjelegű kifejezés tartja: *je viens d’lué* – „messziről” jöttem, egyenesen a peremvidékről.

Jelenlegi, londoni tartózkodásom, melyet feltehetőleg hívhatunk számüzetésnek is, meglepéssel tölt el, habár abszurdabbnak indult, mint bármelyik másik. Amikor először megérkeztem, úgy gondoltam, nem maradok Londonban. Túlságosan friss volt még politikai tündöklésem, félő volt, hogy ismerősökbe botlok, ezt el kívántam kerülni. Arra gondoltam, vidéken keresek panziót. Soha azelőtt nem laktam ilyen helyen, sem Angliában, sem máshol, de a közelmúlt eseményei meggyőztek arról, hogy újra egy jól szervezett, működő országban vagyok. Nem kezdtem el körülnézni, egyszerűen kiválasztottam egy kisvárost, ahol annak idején egyetemistaként egy British Council-társasággal már jártam. A vidéki panziókról alkotott elképzelésem kertek és

wich wrappings. Hotels were full and squalid or half-full and very squalid; they all buzzed and shrieked with the urgent sound of frying. Ceilings were decayed, cramping partitions paper-thin, forty-watt light bulbs naked; and always in tattered sitting-rooms there were tattered copies of motorcar magazines, travel magazines, airline annuals. Country roads were highways and gardens car-parks. Tall hedgerows, which prevented escape from packed holiday motorcars, turned narrow lanes into green tunnels of death and destruction; broken glass was crushed to powder at intersections. And there were the inns of death itself, areas of complete calm, where the very old had gathered to die. Here food was liquid and medicinally tintured, each aged eater sat with his transistor radio linked, like a hearing-aid, to his own ear, and the tiny plastic extractor fans were propelled, in gentle silent spasms, by warm air alone.

Daily, by erratic bus services, making difficult connections, I travelled from small town to small town, seeking shelter with my sixty-six pounds of luggage, always aware in the late afternoon of my imminent homelessness. I consumed the hours of daylight with long waits and brief periods of travel. Money, of which I was at last aware, was leaking out of my pocket. Laundry was about to be a problem. At the end of a week I was exhausted. Even then I did not give up my quest; I was too dispirited to make that difficult decision. I did so on the eleventh day, when laundry had become a problem. I decided to go back to London. But again I did not take into account the holiday, which had apparently reached its climax on the day of my decision. I did not take into account the irregularities and excisions which on such a day turn railway timetables into guides to nightmare.

I made an early start. Afternoon found me at an unknown empty country station, hours from London. The tall trains went by and did not stop for me. They were long trains, and packed;

nyugalom, hűvösség és egyedüllét, csicsergő sövények és reggeli séták, tágas szobák és antik bútorok képeit hívta életre. Erre volt igényem.

Ám hamar rájöttem, vakáció ideje van: fagylaltos vödrök, üdítő palackok, pisilő gyerekek és előre csomagolt szendvicsek időszaka. Tömve voltak a panziók és mocskosak, vagy kevésbé zsúfoltak de még mocskosabbak. Mindenütt sürgés-forgás, sülő olaj sercegő sikítása. Szakadozó mennyezeti tapéták, papírvékony préselt válaszfalak, negyven wattos csupasz égők. És minden rongyos társalgóban rongyolódó autósújságok, utazási magazinok, légitársaságok reklámjai. A vidéki mellékútból országút, a kertekből parkolók lettek. A magas sövények, melyek az autóforgalommal a gyalogost összezárták, a keskeny utcákat zöld halál folyosókká változtatták, a kereszteződésekben törmelékké zúzott üvegcserépek. Aztán ott voltak az elfekvő panziók, ahol a nagyon idős lakók tökéletes nyugalomban várták halálukat. Pépes, gyógyszeres színezetű ételeket szolgáltak fel, evés közben mindegyik idős vendég, mint egy nagyothalló készüléket, a füléhez szorította a tranzistoros rádióját, és az apró műanyag ventillátorokat hangtalan, erőtlen görcsben csak a meleg levegő forgatta.

Akadozva és pontatlanul közlekedő buszokkal nap nap után újabb és újabb kisvárost kerestem fel; késő délutánonként, harminc kilós pogyászommal terhelten megfelelő szállás után kutattam, és folyamatosan magamon éreztem az immanens otthontalanság hangulatát. A nappali világosság óráit hosszú várakozások és rövid útszakaszok emésztették fel. Végül tudatosult bennem, hogy a pénzem így lassanként elszivárog és a szennyes ruhák mosatása is problémát jelentett. Egy hét elteltével kimerültem, de nem adtam fel a reményt, túl lehangolt voltam ahhoz, hogy a nehéz döntést meghozzam. Csak a tizenegyedik napon, amikor nem volt már tiszta ruhám, határoztam el, hogy visszamegyek

people stood in the corridors. Tomato sauce and gravy and coffee stained the tablecloths in the restaurant car. I knew. Hours before one such train had brought me to this station. I was Waiting for another to take me away. Early impatience had given way to despair, despair to indifference, indifference to a curious neutrality of perception. The concrete platforms were white in the sun, the diagonal, lengthening shadows sharp and black. Heatwaves quivered up from the rails and their level bed of dry, oiled gravel. In the bushy field beyond, pale green blurred with yellow, white and brown, junked rusting metal was hot to look at.

I was fighting the afternoon alarm of homelessness, an inseparable part of the gypsy life that had inexplicably befallen me. But this was the limit of desolation. The moment linked to nothing. I felt I had no past. Nothing had happened that morning or yesterday or the last eleven days. To attempt to explain my presence in this station to myself; or to look forward to the increasingly improbable search that awaited me in a London to which I was drawing no nearer, to attempt to do either was to be truly lost, to see myself at the end of the world. The green doors of the buffet were closed. Three circular sticky tables, a very narrow sticky counter, a sticky floor; the glass cases empty, even the plastic orange at rest in the orange-squash vat of cloudy plastic.

The tall magenta trains passed, summer clothes above, black, busy metal below, and blinded me with their racing, rippling shadows, that fell on me, on the platform. 'Standing by himself on Swindon station.' They were the words of Mr Mural, breeder of boy scouts. Poor emperor, I had thought, subject to such witness. I had seen him, though, standing on Swindon station as he had stood in the photograph in Browne's house: in his cloak, his head thrown back, dignified, aloof. Such was the exile of Mr Mural's witness; and dignity and aloofness implied an audience. It wasn't like this: a man sitting at the limit of desolation with sixty-

Londonba. Ám megint figyelmen kívül hagytam, hogy nyár van és a nyári örület talán épp ezen a napon éri el csúcspontját. Nem vettem számításba, hogy a nap rendhagyó és mindent felülíró rögtönzöttsége a vasúti menetrendet lidércesen felboríthatja.

Korán indultam, de a délután még mindig egy elhagyatott vidéki állomáson ért, több órányi távolságra Londontól. A magas építésű vonatok megállás nélkül húztak át az állomáson. Hosszú, zsúfolt szerelvények voltak ezek, a folyosókon is rengeteg utassal. Az étkezőkocsiban a terítőkön paradicsomszós, mártás és kávéfoltok. Tudtam, hisz órákkal ezelőtt ilyen vonattal érkeztem erre az állomásra, ahol most csatlakozásra vártam. Az első türelmetlenség elkeseredettségbe, az elkeseredettség közönybe, a közöny egy furcsa, szemlélődő semlegességbe csapott át. A peron betonlapjai fehérlettek a napon, az éles, fekete árnyékok mérőlegesen nyújtózkodtak. Hőhullámok rebbentek fel a sínekről és az elsimított, olajfoltosan is száraz kavicságyból. Az állomáson túli bozótos mezőn halványzöld színek olvadtak sárgába, fehérbe, barnába, és nem messze tőlem rozsdásodó fémroncsok sugározták a forróságot.

A délutánnak azzal az otthontalanságával küszködtem, amely – megmagyarázhatatlanul – cigányéletem elválaszthatatlan részévé vált. A teljes elhagyatottság küszöbén álltam. A pillanat nem kapcsolódott semmihez, úgy éreztem, a múltam nem létezik. Semmi sem történt aznap délelőtt vagy tegnap vagy az elmúlt tizenegy napon. Megmagyarázni magam számára jelenlétemet ezen az állomáson, vagy várakozással tekinteni még valóságosabb londoni helykeresésemre, ami felé egy lépéssel sem kerülök közelebb, megkísérelnem bármelyiket, egyenlő lett volna az elveszettség beismerésével, egyenlő lett volna a világ végi hangulattal. Az állomás éttermének zöld ajtajai zárva. A három ragacsos, kör alakú asztal, a nagyon keskeny, ragacsos pult, a ragacsos padló, az üres vitrinek, de még a műanyagyszerű narancs a

six pounds of luggage in two Antler suitcases, concentrating on the moment, which he mustn't relate to anything else. And who will later give me even Mr Mural's proof of this moment? It was a moment of total helplessness. It occurred on an afternoon of sunshine, while the holiday trains passed.

That was a long time ago. Such a moment cannot return. It is the moment which really closes that section of my life which I have been chronicling these past fourteen months. An absurd moment, but from it and by it I measure my recovery. *Je viens d'lué.*

It does not worry me now, as it worried me when I began this book, that at the age of forty I should find myself at the end of my active life. I do not now think this is even true. I no longer yearn for ideal landscapes and no longer wish to know the god of the city. This does not strike me as loss. I feel, instead, I have lived through attachment and freed myself from one cycle of events. It gives me joy to find that in so doing I have also fulfilled the fourfold division of life prescribed by our Aryan ancestors. I have been student, householder and man of affairs, recluse.

My life has never been more physically limited than it has been during these last three years. Yet I feel that in this time I have cleared the decks, as it were, and prepared myself for fresh action. It will be the action of a free man. What this action will be I cannot say. I used to think of journalism; sometimes I used to think of a job with the UN. But these were attractive only to a harassed man. I might go into business again. Or I might spend the next ten years working on a history of the British Empire. I cannot say. Yet some fear of action remains. I do not wish to be re-engaged in that cycle from which I have freed myself. I fear to be continually washed up on this city.

Nine or ten months ago, when I was writing about my marriage and had written myself back into my aching love for Sandra, I used to ask myself what I would do if suddenly on day, from

maszatos műanyag narancsnyomó kádban is pihenésre ítéltetett.

A bíorszín vonatok – felül nyári öltözetben, alul fekete, zakatoló fémruhában – rohanó, morajló árnyéka, mely rám esett, ahogy a peronon álltam, vakított. „Egymagában áll a swindoni állomáson”, véltem hallani hajdani cserkészvezetőm, Mr. Mural hangját. Szegény uralkodó, gondoltam, egy ilyen tanúságtétel alanya. Láttam ám, úgy állt a swindoni állomáson, ahogy a fényképen Browne házában: felöltőben, feje hátravetve, méltósággal, távolságtartóan. Így alakult Mr. Mural tanújának száműzetése. A méltóságteljesség és a távolságtartás már eleve megkíván egy közönséget. Semmiképp sem így történt: egy ember ül a teljes elhagyatottság határán, harminc kiló pogyásza két antilop bőröndben, a pillanatra összpontosít, melyet semmihez sem szabad társítania. És ki fog nekem aztán csak annyit is elismerni, amennyit Mr. Mural igazol ebben a pillanatban? Az abszolút gyámoltalanság pillanata volt ez. Egy napfényes délutánon történt, a vakációzó vonatok pedig mind továbbmentek.

Rég volt mindez. Az ilyen pillanatok nem térhetnek vissza. Igazából ez a pillanat zárja le életemnek azt a szakaszát, melyről az elmúlt tizennégy hónapban beszámoltam. Egy abszurd pillanat, de ettől és általa mérem felépülésem. *Je viens d' lué.*

Nem aggaszt már, ahogy aggasztott korábban, amikor ezt a könyvet elkezdtem, hogy negyven éves koromra aktív életpályám végén találom magam. Nem is hiszem el, hogy így van. Már nem vágyakozom ideális tájak után, nem kívánom már megismerni a város istenét, s ez nem is tűnik veszteségnek. Inkább úgy érzem, kötelékeimtől megszabadulva az események egy bizonyos ciklusából kiléptem. Örömmel tölt el, hogy mindeközben bejártam az árja őseink által kijelölt négy utat. Voltam tanítvány, családfe, közszereplő és remete.

Életkörülményeim soha nem voltak korlátozottabbak, mint az elmúlt három évben. Mégis, úgy érzem, ebben az időszakban tel-

behind my pillar, I saw her enter the dining- room alone. I know of course what I would have done then: the question was no more than a wish. But now I find I have gone back to something closer to my original view. I once again see my marriage as an episode in parenthesis; I see all its emotions as, profoundly, fraudulent. So writing, for all its initial distortion, clarifies, and even becomes a process of life.

I do not believe I exaggerate either about Sandra or my mood. Last Saturday there was much excitement in the hotel. We, through our lord and lady, were being honoured by the attendance of a young but distinguished financier at the local branch dinner of some international brotherhood. The dinner took place in one of the upper rooms reserved for wedding luncheons. We, staff and faithful in the dining-room, studied the guests as they were received and went up the stairs. Our guest of honour arrived, with his wife. Lady Stella. I pulled my face behind the pillar and studied Garbage bringing his two-pronged knife down on the struggling cheese. *Dixi.* ♦



jesen megtisztultam és felkészültem az előttem álló új feladatokra. Hogy pontosan mire, nem tudom megmondani, csak hogy szabad emberként vágok neki. Régebben foglalkoztatott az újságírás vagy időről időre egy ENSZ-állás gondolata. De ezek csak a zaklatott embert lelkesítik. Talán újra vállalkozásba kezdek. Vagy a brit birodalom történetén dolgozok majd évekig. Nem tudom megmondani. Azonban még mindig visszatart valami az aktív élettől. Nem kívánom újra egy olyan ciklusba hajtani magam, amilyenből épphogy megszabadultam. Félek, hogy örökké ugyanoda jutok, ugyanebbe a városba sodródok.

Kilenc-tíz hónappal ezelőtt, amikor a házasságomról írtam és visszaírtam magam abba a fájdalmas szerelembe, amely Szandrához kötött, gyakran megkérdeztem magamtól, mit tennék, ha egy nap, hirtelen az étkező pillére mögül előlépne ő, egyedül. Persze tudom, mit tettem volna akkor: a kérdés nem volt több, mint kívánság. De most úgy találom, közelebb kerültem valamihez hajdani világlátásomból. Újra úgy tekintek a házasságomra, mint egy zárójeles epizódra, minden érzelmét mélyen csalártnak látom. Így az írás, minden kezdeti elhajlás ellenére, megtisztít, sőt életvezetésemmé vált.

Nem hiszem, hogy túloznék Szandrát vagy jelenlegi hangulatomat illetően. A múlt szombaton nagy hűhó volt a panzióban. A tulajdonos közvetítésével egy nemzetközi testület helyi szervezetének fiatal, de megbecsült pénzügyi szakértője tisztelt meg bennünket vacsoravendégként. A fenti díszteremben tálaltak, ami általában esküvői fogadásokra volt fenntartva. Mi, a személyzet és a hű lakók, az étkezőből figyeltük, ahogy a vendégek megérkeznek és felmennek a lépcsőn. A díszvendég a feleségével jött, Lady Stellával. A pillér mögé húzódtam és Hulladékot szemléltem, amint a kétélű késsel lesújt a küszködő sajtra. *Dixi.* ♦