

**Q U A R T E R L Y**  
**P R E S S R E V I E W**  
FOR ADVANCED EFL LEARNERS

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## Oxford Essay Topics

*From general subject questions included in the All Souls College examinations between 2005 and 2010. Often described as the hardest exam in the world, the test is given over two days in September to recent graduates of Oxford, with winners receiving an Examination Fellowship of seven years. Applicants take four examinations of three hours each, and in the two general subject tests must answer three questions from a list. No more than three fellowships are awarded in any year, and in some years none are given.*

What is war good for?

From where does a sense of community come?

Are there too many accountants and auditors?

Is there anything to be said for astrology?

Why should I tolerate?

Is exile always a misfortune?

If there are millions of other planets capable of supporting advanced life-forms, why haven't we seen or heard from them?

Is dark energy more interesting than dark matter?

What do extremes in dress and personal adornment signify?

Do historical novels harm historical study?

Has there ever been a period that was not an information age?

Why does truthfulness matter?

Should England declare independence?

Are universal human rights a form of cultural imperialism?

Have developments in electronic communications destroyed our personal space?

What can we learn from a century of sound recording?

Should we worry about the fate of the British red squirrel?

Is China overrated?

If modern politics is "managerial," should politicians be better managers?

What has happened to epic poetry?

What can we learn from Las Vegas?

Is "women's writing" a distinct category?

What difference should it make to feminism whether gender differences are natural or socially constructed?

Have any philosophical problems been finally solved?

Is it worse to be cruel to a fox than to a flea?

Does business entertaining differ from bribery?

How many civilizations are there in today's world?

Do we work too hard?

Can happiness be measured?

What are the deprivations of affluence?

Why is it unnecessary to translate Russian music into English?

What is the difference between painting and decorating?

Would it have been better had some surviving works of ancient authors been lost?

Would you want your friends and colleagues to take pills to make them more intelligent?

Can it be as important for societies to forget as to remember?

Is it better that ten guilty men go free than one innocent man be convicted?

Why is a leather jacket more acceptable than a fur coat?

Why do Jane Austen's novels continue to be so popular?

Is Amazon.com good for literature?

Do children's games involving blindfolds reveal an essential cruelty in human nature?

Isn't global warming preferable to global cooling?

Can you love someone if you don't respect them?

Is teamwork overrated?

How many people should there be?

Why doesn't Britain have a café culture?

Has morality made progress?

Should people agree to disagree?

Is nothing sacred? ♦

## My Boys

by *Rebecca Evanhoe*

At the edge of the Winn-Dixie parking lot two young boys were trying to pick something up with a stick. Whatever the thing was, they didn't want to touch it. I watched them from the driver's seat of my truck, still running with the windows rolled up and the AC on all the way, waiting for my boyfriend to come back with our cigarettes and a six-pack. I had been too ashamed to go in with him, to stand there acting not poor while he paid in quarters and dimes.

I saw the boys dangle the thing in the air: a snake. It was dead or nearly there. The boys were flinging the snake around. They were flinging it back at the ground. It wasn't all the way dead, I could see that now. The snake wriggled, but in a plastic way, as if it were fake; it moved a little bit on the ground and writhed slowly at the end of its stick. The brownhaired boy, who had the stick at this moment, set the snake back on the ground, and they both watched it try to get away.

The boys stood close together and I could tell by the way they ducked down, heads cocked toward each other, that they were coming up with some plan. The yellow-haired boy took the stick and stood, guarding the snake like a shepherd. The brown-haired boy started to creep between cars, trying their door handles. He kept looking back at the entrance to the store. The day was so hot, it seemed people were taking extra time in the store's air-

conditioning. My boyfriend in there, he might've been doing the same, he was taking too long.

The brown-haired boy found a car door that opened, and I watched the yellowhaired boy take the snake up on the stick again. They put the snake on the driver's seat and closed the car door.

Now that is pretty smart, I thought. I started to hope that my boyfriend would keep taking a long time so I could see the show. The boys hid behind a bush near my truck; they didn't realize I was in it, they'd been so absorbed by the snake, the plan.

People came out of the Winn-Dixie in ones and twos. The boys and I were now watching the store entrance and tracing people's paths through the lot, waiting to see who would find this fun and nasty surprise. A very thin man and a chubby woman, both dressed in sweatpants and pushing a cart, headed to the car next to the one with the snake. An old black woman with the most beautiful hair I'd ever seen – she had these gray braids running horizontally across the back of her head, and they swooped up into a sort of bun, or up-do, it was lovely – I worried it might've been her car, but she got into a gigantic pickup truck far across the lot. A muscular man, carrying a case of Busch and a gallon jug of Hawaiian Punch, came out. And as he walked toward the car, all three of us realized that this was our man.

He opened the rear door, tossed the Hawaiian Punch and the Busch into the back seat, and then opened the door to get behind the wheel. With one hand on the roof, he swung himself in – almost – and then he swung himself right back out. He said, "What the *hell*," and grabbed the snake bare-handed and tossed it to the pavement.

Oh no, I thought, this man is too smart. He knew, immediately, that this was a prank. He'd probably been that sort of boy. The man looked around the parking lot. He spotted the two boys behind the bush and charged toward them.

The two boys stood up slowly; my boys knew better than to run. The man was yelling at them. I rolled down the window of the truck.

“Is there a problem?” I asked. The boys looked startled. They really hadn’t known I’d been in the truck.

“You are the mother? These are your boys?” he asked me.

“Yes,” I said. “These are my boys.” The boys looked at me, sort of terrified. I wondered why: I was rescuing them. I was taking the heat.

“Do you know what they did? They took a pissed-off snake and put it in my car. Did you see that?”

“I knew they were doing it. They’re just boys.”

“What the hell are you doing, sitting here in the Winn-Dixie parking lot with your damn boys putting snakes into people’s cars? You think that’s funny? You gotta couple of nogood shitheads on your hands, lady.”

“Don’t say that about my boys,” I said.

The man turned to my boys, who looked queasy, were kicking gravel around.

“What kinda mother you got?” the man asked them. I thought my boys would stand up for me.

“She’s not our mom,” said Brown.

“Yeah, we didn’t know she was in that truck,” said Yellow.

“Boys! What a thing to say.” I looked at the man. “I’m sorry about the snake. I thought they were just having fun. Boys! Get in the truck.”

“No!” shouted Yellow. He edged closer to the man. “She’s *not* our mom.”

“What *is* this?” the man said. He looked at Yellow. “Where do you live? Are you in trouble?”

“Yeah, we don’t know this lady. She’s been spyin’ on us,” said Brown.

“What’s gotten into you two?” I said.

My boys and this man were forming some sort of kinship against me. “These ain’t your boys?” the man asked. My boys were moving closer and closer to him, sort of standing behind him now.

“They’re just saying things,” I said. “I mean it this time, boys, get in the truck.”

Brown looked at the man with tears in his eyes. “I mean it, sir, I’m sorry we put a snake in your car, but she’s not our mom, I swear.”

Yellow reached out to hold the man’s hand. “I’m sorry, too, mister.”

The man said, “Boys, it’s all right.” He walked over to my window. He leaned in close. “Listen, lady, I don’t know what you’re trying to do here, but you better get your ass out of this parking lot, and fast. You leave these boys alone.”

Then he walked around the back of the truck and came back to me. “Jay-Kay-El Five-Two-Three.”

“Excuse me?”

“I got your plates, lady. Jay-Kay-El Five-Two-Three. Now get out of here.”

“Like hell I will. If you think I’m going to leave my boys, you’d better think again.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my boyfriend coming through the automatic doors. The man pounded on the hood of my truck. “You’re not a mother!” He pounded and pounded. I drove off, away from the store, leaving my boyfriend to wander the lot until he figured out I’d gone. In my rearview mirror I could see the man and what could’ve been my boys standing there. Brown and Yellow were holding his hands tight. The man said something to them, and they all walked toward his car. They

looked like a little family, what my family someday might look like, if I were leaving them. ♦



## Man Without a Country

by *Joseph O'Neil*

From time to time I fantasize about commissioning nonfiction books. Two writers – no others – figure in these fantasies: Janet Malcolm and V. S. Naipaul. Currently I dream of sending Naipaul to Ireland. From the tearoom at the Shelbourne Hotel in Dublin (in Room 112 of which, he wryly reminds us, the Irish constitution was allegedly drafted), he extracts from a series of interlocutors detailed, thoughtful life stories illuminative of the condition of Ireland, currently in its post-post-colonial Shit Creek period. Propelled by his abnormal curiosity and diligence into various outings (I see Belfast, Roger Casement's grave, the ruins of Clonmacnoise), overcoming the difficulties created by his advanced age, Naipaul hyper-notices random mundane stuff (a new road, an unsatisfactory sandwich) and productively examines local newspapers, all of which results in a picture of the Irish national malaise that, in its subtle grasp of lingering primitivities, its alertness to suffering and self-deception, and its firm overruling of local sensitivities, religious ones especially, knocks into a cocked hat Tocqueville's *Journey to Ireland* (1835) and Böll's *Irish Journal* (1957). If you're going to fantasize, fantasize.

Perhaps the most basic wishful element of this scenario is that Naipaul still has it in him to travel. Last year saw the publication of *The Masque of Africa: Glimpses of African Belief* and the statement by Naipaul to the effect that he is too physically frail to write another book involving travel (the book comes out in pa-

perback next month). It would seem that, unfortunately, a complete panorama of his wanderings is now available. What exactly has he been up to? I confess that one purpose of my Irish fantasy is to get a clearer sense of this. I know something about Ireland; I know very little about Pakistan, India, Iran, Malaysia, Indonesia, Mauritius, Argentina, or most of the other places from which, for half a century, he has brought us his distinctive version of news. I don't for a moment suspect Naipaul of the surreptitious if ultimately valuable falsifications committed by Bruce Chatwin and Ryszard Kapuscinski. But readers of travel literature have always been in a relatively weak position. They have few means of verifying what is offered by the traveler, who as a consequence is a kind of trustee of his truth.

Of course, some have never found Naipaul trustworthy. I'm particularly fond of this explosion from his old adversary Edward Said:

Naipaul's account of the Islamic, Latin American, African, Indian and Caribbean worlds totally ignores a massive infusion of critical scholarship about those regions in favor of the tritest, cheapest and the easiest of colonial mythologies about wogs and darkies, myths that even Lord Cromer and Forster's Turtons and Burtons would have been embarrassed to trade in outside their private clubs.

There are two criticisms here. First, the reportage is methodologically flawed. A response might be: it is what it is. Naipaul is not an ethnologist or a professional historian and does not hold himself out as one. He obviously writes in the tradition of the attentive visitor, and his work is an assertion of the continuing importance of that tradition: seeing for yourself, talking to people, embracing the randomness of experience, putting faith in your perceptiveness and your hobbyistic research, drawing your own conclusions. This is an imperfect *modus operandi* but a transpar-

ent one. The reader is not duped and can decide for herself what weight, if any, she will give to what she reads.

The other criticism is that his work evinces racist neo-colonialism. Naipaul certainly does not shrink from asserting that the imperial project had some constructive consequences. Thus he credits the British with introducing to India ideas of human association that had the effect of disturbing India's ancient, paralyzing ways of seeing itself, thereby stimulating the growth of a new national self-consciousness. Is this neo-colonialism? Either way, Naipaul's references to the horrors and failings of colonization are extensive, and it's hard to see how the criticism, which these days feels anachronistic, can be made to stick; at least, not without recourse to the either/or fallacy very powerful 20 years ago and before, when it was difficult to draw attention to the infirmities of post-colonial societies, or indeed of pre-colonial societies, without being categorized, by serious people, as an apologist for the imperial era.

However, Said's hyperbolic accusation of racism turns out to be substantive: the publication, in 2008, of Patrick French's hair-raising authorized biography, *The World Is What It Is*, revealed that nigger is a venomously active word in Naipaul's vocabulary. Other deplorable personal traits were revealed as well. Paul Theroux – author of the inimical memoir *Sir Vidia's Shadow* (1998) and, according to Naipaul, writer of “tourist books for the lower classes” – thought that French's book would

probably destroy Naipaul's reputation for ever, this chronicle of his pretensions, his whoremongering, his treatment of a sad, sick wife and disposable mistress, his evasions, his meanness, his cruelty amounting to sadism, his race baiting.

I think Theroux was being optimistic. It's true that the mess of the life can sully the work and its reception. However, most of us are able to hold an opinion of a book that is at odds with our

opinion of its author (if we care to form one), and most of us are aware that writing carefully and at length is almost necessarily an act of self-transcendence. A deep formal rationale for going to the enormous trouble of committing words to paper over time is to find respite from the intellectually and morally chaotic buffoon who goes through the world minute by minute, and to bring into being that better, more coherent human entity known as the author. There is a remarkable difference, for instance, between the grandiose, reckless, and occasionally offensive Sir Vidia of the interviews, and the vigilant, empathetic, and impressive V. S. Naipaul of the writing. Once we have acknowledged Sir Vidia's racism – it would be hard not to – there remains the question of V. S. Naipaul and of the kind of trust we may place in him.

The trajectory of V. S. Naipaul's life is as familiar as that of any living writer. The biographical note that prefaces his books invariably begins,

V. S. Naipaul was born in Trinidad in 1932. He went to England on a scholarship in 1950. After four years at Oxford he began to write, and since then he has followed no other profession.

The rest of the story is equally well known: his self-establishment as a writer in, but not of, England; the early masterpiece, *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961); the retreat to the Wiltshire countryside in 1970; the second great novel, *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987); the years of eminence (knighthood, Nobel); and, after the biography, the years in or around the doghouse. All the while, from about 1960 onward, he has traveled and traveled and written and written – 15 books of fiction, 19 of nonfiction. But however far he journeys, he returns again and again, with never-ending distress and wonder, to himself and to the circumstances of his youth in colonial Trinidad.

What follows, then, is a Naipauline story – Naipauline because it is about displacement and disorientation, but also because it is

about me, the writer: My mother is Turkish, but she belongs to a tiny minority of Syrian Christians that established itself in Mersin, a Mediterranean port, in the second half of the 19th century and in the early 20th century. (Naipaul knows about scattered Syrians, some of whom washed up in Port of Spain and prospered.) My mother's great-grandfather moved to Mersin to set up a business shipping juniper logs to the builders of the Suez Canal. He, his brother, and other Syrians formed a community that was both insular and mutable. My grandmother spoke Arabic as a first language, her children French, and her children's children, depending on where they have lived, Turkish or English or French. When I eventually began to think about this group of people to which I half-belonged, I understood that we were almost inexplicable to ourselves. We were unanalytically who we were, ourselves almost by virtue of who we were not – not Armenians or Greeks, not Chaldeans, not Assyrians, not Maronites, not totally Turks, not really Arabs, not French. (Because of France's old colonial influence on the region's Christians, some had a feeling that they were almost French, even though France was a faraway, mostly imaginary country where their existence was completely unknown.) There was almost no dwelling on the old days and little historical perspective or information on our identity. Our languages and Christian religions and food and distinctiveness pointed in directions – Greater Syria, the Ottoman Empire, the ancient Eastern churches, the Arab world – that did not compel attention. We were rooted, without unusual trauma, in the here and now.

So I connect with this remark offered by Salim, the narrator of V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* (1979) and an East African of Indian descent:



We felt in our bones that we were a very old people; but we seemed to have no means of gauging the passing of time ... the past was simply the past.

Naipaul knows this mentality well. His grandfather emigrated to Trinidad from northern India at some point in the 1880s or 1890s to work as an indentured servant. As a boy, Naipaul heard Hindi spoken by his grandmother, whose domestic arrangements were leftovers from the old country; but when her generation passed, his evidence of India consisted of little more than double hearsay: "I know my father and my mother, but beyond that I cannot go. My ancestry is blurred." He experienced the colony as a place of "spiritual emptiness," of cultural signposts, British and Indian and American, that led to nowhere real. The flimsiness of this inheritance still torments him. As recently as 2007, he wrote,

I don't, properly speaking, have a past that is available to me, a past I can enter into and consider; and I grieve for that lack.

There is a danger of over-extrapolating from the grief particular to V. S. Naipaul in order to reach general conclusions about post-colonial societies and their deep psychic wounds. We should remember that, by Naipaul's own account, the overwhelming majority of Trinidadians were and are okay with not having an intelligible family history, were able to live with being "mimic men": that is, with the inauthenticity of the colonial situation. Of course, that particular situation no longer exists. Trinidad and Tobago achieved independence in 1962 and, whatever its problems, now form a country with a deep and vigorous sense of selfhood. The colony Naipaul grew up in is gone. This is a cause of suffering for him, this

scarcely bearable idea of the beginning of things now existing only in my heart, no longer existing physically in the ravaged, repopulated Trinidad of today.

V. S. Naipaul, then, is anomalous in his pain. This is hardly surprising, since he is a writer and therefore in the business of taking too personally the world's shortcomings; but the anomaly must be reckoned with, not least by Naipaul. In the profoundly autobiographical *The Enigma of Arrival*, the protagonist moves to the Wiltshire countryside and into a fixed culture of great antiquity – or so he thinks. He soon recognizes that his "idea of an unchanging life was wrong," and reflects,

I had thought that because of my insecure past – peasant India, colonial Trinidad, my own family circumstances, the colonial smallness that didn't consort with the grandeur of my ambition, my uprooting of myself for a writing career, my coming to England with so little, and the very little I still had to fall back on – I had thought that because of this I had been given an especially tender or raw sense of an unaccommodating world.

This constitutes an acknowledgment that all of us are burdened with the impermanence of things, not just those of us deprived of enduring tradition and a stable identity. The latter group may not even be especially fraught. In my own deracination, for example, I make V. S. Naipaul look like one of those redwoods you can drive a car through. He was born into the same situation as hundreds of thousands of other Trinidadians. He subsequently left the island for good; but he could still write about Trinidad, as he did in *Biswas*, from the viewpoint of one who belongs. I have never belonged anywhere. I am half Irish, half Turkish-Syrian, partly Anglophone, and partly Francophone. My pre-school memories are of South Africa, Mozambique, Iran, Turkey; the rest of my boyhood was spent in Holland, where I had one foot in the multinational expatriate community and another among the Dutch. Aside from my siblings, I share this background with nobody. And yet I do not feel that I am at an existential disadvantage.

I was, however, eventually placed in artistic difficulty: that of finding, in Naipaul's phrase (appropriated from Darwin), "a resting-place for the imagination." I could not write an Irish, Dutch, English, or Turkish novel. Later I saw that I had no option but to try to write stuff of no nationality. Naipaul was way ahead of me and practically everyone else on this front, though starting from a different place. Very early on, he decided that Trinidad alone was not a viable creative territory for him – in his view, "small places with simple economies bred small people with simple destinies" – and he consciously decided, early in his career, "to withdraw completely from nationality and loyalties except to persons." French's biography explores Naipaul's capacity for personal loyalty. But what could it mean to withdraw from nationality?

With the exception of a charming oddity, the thoroughly English *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963), V. S. Naipaul's early, comic novels are distinctly Trinidadian: *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), *Miguel Street* (1959), *Biswas* (1961), and *The Mimic Men* (1967). The darker, global phase begins with the Booker Prize-winning multi-narrative *In a Free State* (1971), set in Washington, D.C., and England and, mostly, an unnamed East African state. *Guerrillas* (1975) unfolds on an unnamed Caribbean Island, *A Bend in the River* (1979) in an unnamed country in central Africa, *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) in England. His third act comprises *A Way in the World* (1994), a quasi-fiction that imagines its way into a history of colonialism; *Half a Life* (2001), whose main action is in London and a Portuguese-speaking African country; and its sequel, *Magic Seeds* (2004), in which our hero finds himself in Germany and India.

Then there are the nonfiction books. These include three travel books about India (1964, 1977, 1990); two about non-Arab Islamic nations (1981, 1998); and two about Africa (1980, 2010). There are also four books about the Caribbean and the Americas

(1962, 1969, 1980, 1989). Whether or not we assent to Naipaul's impressions or theses, the intensity of his effort to see and understand must be acknowledged. Indisputably, he has devoted a large part of his life to talking with people very different from himself, gone to extraordinary lengths to meet them and listen to them and think carefully about them. This is someone who, deep into his 70s, went to Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana, the Ivory Coast, Gabon, and South Africa to report *The Masque of Africa*.

An overview of the whole enterprise makes one wonder: Is there another writer of English literature who has paid so much attention to the foreign? Plenty of books – by Greene, Waugh, Forster, Hemingway, Lowry, the Bowleses – are set abroad, but their core drama concerns Britons or Americans: the far-off countries are merely host nations (the Olympic Games come to mind). Naipaul proceeds differently. He privileges the alien place and its people with his most passionate scrutiny, so that, for example, the Congo-like locale of *A Bend in the River* comes to function as that novel's brooding, highly complex protagonist. That novel is clearly responsive to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. But Conrad writes from the perspective of the riverboat. Naipaul writes from the perspective of the riverbank.

This is an extremely demanding task, and it leads even Naipaul into technical trouble. A revealing flaw mars *Bend*. The novel's first half is the story of the arrival of Salim and his slave in the town by the river, of Salim setting up his little business, and of his encounters with the various people living in the town and the surrounding bush; it has a wonderful novelistic grip. But the second half consists significantly of formally dubious scenes in which characters offer Salim a succession of lengthy self-explaining monologues. In his determination to get to the bottom of things, Naipaul abandons the invented story in favor of a non-fictional method, the oral testimony.

This impatience with literary priorities even affects his nonfiction, so that later books can read like a series of well-organized witness statements. Naipaul is well aware of this and untroubled by it: his idea of prose has always been an instrumentalist one. In *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples* (1998), he disparages his earlier, more literary cultural explorations and suggests that in those books he “got away with autobiography and landscape.” *Beyond Belief* begins with a declaration: “This is a book about people. It is not a book of opinion.” He adds,

It was years before I saw that the most important thing about travel, for the writer, was the people he found himself among.

Note the key phrase: for the writer. Naipaul is not writing for the other. He is writing for V. S. Naipaul. His books, in their obsession with alterity, justice, and belief systems, may easily be understood as an imaginative exercise in descriptive ethics. But identifying him as an author driven by ethics or anthropology or indeed by some reactionary ideology is like mistaking a lawyer for a crusader for justice. Naipaul has strong feelings and definite ideas, but these are collateral to what actually pushes him, again and again, out into the difficult world and then back to the still more difficult page.

I think this push may be traced to two sources. The first is a private anguish that, as one of his fictional protagonists puts it, “the whole world is being washed away and that I am being washed away with it.” This feeling, endemic in his work, is inextricable from a phobia, or nausea, he shares with W. G. Sebald, namely a sense of history as a vertiginous, terrifying, expanding darkness before which human schemes of enlightenment are helpless. His voyages into the depths of civilizations around the world only nourish this fearful vision. The same applies to his voyages into his own depths. He has written,

Increasingly I understand that my Indian memories, the memories of that India which lived on into my childhood in Trinidad, are like trapdoors into a bottomless past.

The second impetus comes from the logic of his elective statelessness. Having neither a domestic territory nor a viable alternative (as Conrad had, with his ships), Naipaul is forced to travel. He is self-displaced, in effect, into a rare and valuable dimension of inquiry that, it turns out, prefigures the post-national realities of the 21st century. Chief among these are the transformations brought about by new technologies of communication and new ideas of doing business. People from different places live in a new situation of proximity with each other. Consequently, a nation-state is less than ever an impermeable container of a person’s culture and identity; is less than ever an adequate delimitation of his ethical or political or economic concerns; is less than ever, it follows, a sufficient artistic canvas.

In this way, Naipaul has made his own luck. The Trinidadian upbringing he considered to be an artistic short straw is turned by him into a long straw. We cannot trust V. S. Naipaul, or indeed anyone, to get the world right. But he has emancipated himself from the facility enjoyed by the writer securely accommodated by a national viewpoint, and we can trust him to be free from the price payable for such facility. ♦

## An Egyptian Lion Fighter

*From an interview with Al-Sayed al-Essawy, a twentyfive-year-old Egyptian who calls himself the “strongest man in the world,” by Ali Abdel Mohsen, published in Al-Masry al-Youm, an English-language newspaper based in Cairo. In an attempt to “boost tourism in Egypt,” al-Essawy planned a steel-cage fight against a lion, and on June 25, in view of several hundred spectators, he spent twenty minutes in the cage before declaring victory over the lion, which did not attempt to attack him and was unharmed.*

Ali Abdel Mohsen: *You claim this event will revive the tourism industry. What makes you think anyone would want to see this fight, let alone travel for it?*

Al-Sayed al-Essawy: If America had a man with the ability to combat the strongest creature on the planet, it would properly promote him and use his strength to its advantage. He would become a worldwide phenomenon. This is what I want to do for my country.

Mohsen: *What about animal lovers? People are threatening to boycott Egypt because of you.*

al-Essawy: That’s because they don’t understand what I’m going to do. They think I’m going to kill the lion.

Mohsen: *You’re not going to?*

al-Essawy: Unless it’s a matter of life or death, in which case I will be forced to kill it.

Mohsen: *When is fighting a lion not a matter of life or death?*

al-Essawy: It’s up to the lion.

Mohsen: *What do you have to say to your critics?*

al-Essawy: If you think this is wrong, maybe you should change your perspective. This isn’t just for fun, what I’m planning on doing. It’s to help my country and to send an important message.

Mohsen: *What message are you trying to send?*

al-Essawy: When I defeat the lion, I will pull an Israeli flag out of my pocket, drape it over the lion, and put my foot on it. The message is that even though Israel and America may be as strong as a lion – the strongest creature on the planet – they too can be defeated.

Mohsen: *Why do you think it’s been so difficult to get official approval from the government?*

al-Essawy: Undoubtedly because of the misguided international reaction, which I truly don’t understand. God made me, and he made the lion, and he put us both on the same planet, which means the lion is fair game. Ethically, there should be no problem.

Mohsen: *If the event is successful, how will you follow it up?*

al-Essawy: I have a whole series of shows planned in my head. I will pull an airplane with my teeth, and I will pull an airplane with my hair. I will also be run over by an airplane. In between each of these acts, there will be lion battles.

Mohsen: *Have you fought any other beasts?*

al-Essawy: Three of the most ferocious dog breeds. I punch and kick them.

Mohsen: *What combat techniques will you be implementing against the lion?*

al-Essawy: I will have to use a new fighting style I've developed, which is called Life or Death.

Mohsen: *As in a life-or-death situation?*

al-Essawy: That's right.

Mohsen: *Even though you're not going to kill the lion.*

al-Essawy: That's right.

Mohsen: *Do you have anything to say to the public that you feel might change their mind about this fight?*

al-Essawy: I think it's time we start celebrating genuine talent. I've taught children how to chew glass and pull cars with their teeth. I can raise a generation of supersoldiers. I've jumped from ten-story buildings and I've hanged myself many times. So, when I say I have the intellect and strength to take a lion down, people should take me seriously. ♦

## London riots

by Peter Whittle

In October 1974, McDonald's opened its first UK branch in Woolwich, south-east London, on the main street, Powis Street, and my sister and I went along. It was quite an event. As local teenagers with recourse only to the Wimpy Bar when we wanted to impress new girl and boyfriends, we were excited by the appearance among us of this thing from another planet – all yellow and red plastic, shiny surfaces, individually-wrapped parcels of food. There was a pretty big crowd of all ages gathered that day, dodging traffic which, before pedestrianisation, still hogged the road, but which also made it feel alive. The strongest memory I have is of our confusion as to how we were meant to eat this stuff; there was no sign of any knives or forks. We looked around anxiously. "Perhaps," said my sister innocently, holding up a long, weedy plastic spoon, "we're meant to use this?"

McDonald's is still there, although both the town and the people pictured on that opening day nearly 40 years ago have since disappeared. Also remaining is the Wimpy Bar, just about. I stood outside it the evening after the riot in August which had left Woolwich more or less locked down, and watched as groups of mostly young black men took pictures on their phones of the smashed-in windows and wrecked interior. One guy posed in front of a looted jewellery shop, idiot smile on his face, while his friends clicked away moronically. And across the road from us, cordoned off by red tape and passive-looking police, stood the

rioters' *piece de resistance*: the charred remains of the popular Wetherspoon's bar The Great Harry, one of the last remaining pubs in central Woolwich and a place where I'd often stopped for a cheap and cheerful glass of wine. The funeral parlour next door, Francis Chappell's, which has been there since time immemorial, had had its windows smashed in.

Those people who'd gathered in 1974 – what would they have thought of all this? Woolwich was always a white working-class town with an immigrant population which, looking back, now seems to have been remarkably well integrated and accepted. Forty years ago it was a place which, like everywhere else, was dealing with a terrible recession, genuine unemployment, three-day weeks and the rest. But rioting would have been alien to the people then, and looting literally a foreign concept, the kind of thing that happened abroad. They would have been insulted, despite the hardship, to have it assumed that they would naturally resort to smashing, grabbing and burning, and indeed, nobody made such assumptions.

In my lifetime Woolwich has certainly experienced economic decline. When McDonald's opened, there were three department stores, the biggest of which, the Co-op, housed in a grand Art Deco construction, loomed over the rest of the high street (it's still there, empty, like a beached liner). There was the strong and historic military presence (the Ministry of Defence moved out some years ago, although the Army is making a gradual comeback). And there were also little oddities, such as a shop specialising in jazz and classical music, and a small but serious bookshop in which as a kid I was bought a copy of Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris* – remnants of an aspirational working-class culture which has since been forgotten, not least by the working class itself.

Now, in an effort to reverse the tide of decades, there are huge amounts of public money being pumped into the area. It has a new Docklands Light Railway station, there's new investment in the famous ferry and Europe's biggest Tesco is due to open next year – a scheme on which so many hopes rest. The central General Gordon Square is being redeveloped, along with the addition of an expensive (and spectacularly ugly) public television screen in time for next year's Olympics. The old Arsenal has been redeveloped into flats.

But all this expenditure looks increasingly like thick icing on a cake which is rotting away on the inside. I couldn't get near McDonald's on my visit this time as most of Powis Street had been cordoned off. About every third shop had been looted, one had been torched, and a taped-off burnt-out police car was being guarded by police like some exhibit in an achingly relevant art show. Groups of people wandered aimlessly about, cheerfully sizing up the damage. There was plenty of joking and laughter, and not a hint of an acknowledgement of the gravity of what had happened. It was difficult to determine what was more depressing – the events themselves, or the reaction to them among these onlookers. There was no sense that something terrible had happened to what BBC broadcasters relentlessly term their "community". Instead, there was a moral and social vacuum.

The police, standing like Whitehall sentries, were anticipating more trouble, first at 2pm, then at 5pm, but which, by the time I spoke to them, had yet to materialise. They were faultlessly polite; one sensed that they had all gone through some kind of Rank charm school training. But underlying all this courtesy was an almost beseeching quality, a sense that somehow if they were nice enough then people would not misbehave towards them, rather like the way a liberal-minded teacher tries to get troublesome pupils on side by being "down" with them. It was irritating be-

cause it stank of weakness, and more importantly, it was not working. They were obviously being regarded as mere curators, impotent, on the back foot, not to be remotely respected, let alone feared.

I asked a couple of policewomen to confirm who had been doing the rioting the night before. "Don't know," was the immediate reply. I said it seemed to me just from the YouTube clips that they'd been mostly young black males. They nodded grimly. "I think everyone's frightened to say that," said one. Everyone, it seems, and especially the police. Rendered paralysed and apologetic by political correctness, they have appeared in Woolwich, as in the rest of the capital, to be mere bystanders to social carnage. And the rioters knew that they, like the public, were frightened.

For the most part the make-up of the London rioters was in line with the kind of social grouping you see every day in the south of the city, but writ appallingly large: gangs of young blacks with a contingent of white stragglers who have adopted the demeanour of the now dominant youth culture around them, right down to the ridiculous so-called "Jafaican" patois. Cringing multiculturalists have over time failed utterly to condemn the imported gang culture which has played a part in these riots, but which has in any case become a part of everyday life in London (one of the capital's most infamous gangs is the largely Somali Woolwich Boys).

While condemning and poking fun at those ghastly (white) chavs, metropolitan liberals have turned a blind eye to the aggressively materialist, misogynistic, homophobic and infantile mood music favoured by these gangs, on the basis that this is "their culture" and should therefore be understood, and by implication accepted. Indeed it goes further than that: there's a sneaking admiration for it to be found in many a young middle-class liberal media white boy. I met the type on a daily basis when working in

television: there was an awe and sublimated envy for the cartoon masculinity and swagger of gang members and rappers who were seen as somehow more "authentic". Well, they should have got their fill of authenticity by now.

Awe, envy – or perhaps just fear? The looting and takeover of the streets we've seen in places like Woolwich was in many respects an extreme manifestation of the low-level but grinding anti-social behaviour which most people tolerate nervously on an everyday basis and try to ignore. If faced with a group of gang members in a car playing music unbearably loudly next to them at the traffic lights, I personally know of nobody – nobody, from *Daily Telegraph* to *Guardian* reader – who would risk asking them to please turn it down. The *Telegraph* readers would complain about it afterwards, the *Guardian* readers, though equally intimidated, would pretend they hadn't noticed it.

But it's not just gang culture. A while ago I wrote about my attempts to confront this kind of anti-social behaviour on the train journeys I regularly took from Woolwich to central London. What came out of it was the complete moral inversion that had taken place. If asked politely to turn music down, take feet off seats, or not swear so loudly on mobile phones in front of children, people appeared genuinely shocked at what they obviously saw as outrageous rudeness, and abuse of one type or another would follow.

It was also depressing to watch the changing family dynamics. Children were increasingly not just undisciplined but completely unsocialised at the most basic levels by parents who cajole and bribe but set no discernible boundaries. This seemed to be especially true of white families; black kids were, on the whole, much better behaved – in their case it's at the teenage stage when things seem to go wrong.

There is no sense of there being a public sphere at all, and certainly no sanctions against selfish or aggressive behaviour. Communal pressure is nonexistent and with it has gone any sense of shame. It has been deliberately dismantled. The cultural war waged by moral relativists and liberal self-haters has been hugely successful: they have trashed the place as effectively as any rioter. Authority, whether it be moral, social, familial or legal, has been chipped away at so relentlessly that it has finally collapsed. It is this, pure and simple, and not the tired excuses about disaffection and poverty, that has led so effortlessly to the burning of pubs and looting of shops. Many were shocked at the sight of eight-year-old rioters, but coming into Woolwich Arsenal late at night, I had got used to seeing small kids aimlessly milling about in front of the station, and the implied social anarchy.

Now fully multicultural after years of mass immigration, Woolwich no longer has an over-arching identity. For some time there has been a general air of social fragmentation, of different groups existing side by side but an absence of any collective sense. Certainly different cultures and religions make themselves felt – there are the halal butchers and Woolwich is home to the Greenwich Islamic Centre and mosque, founded in 1973 and which is currently undergoing major expansion. The Pentecostal, largely West African, New Wine Church has been in operation for more than a decade in the old Odeon cinema.

The rioters, whatever their ethnicity, were doubtless almost all British-born. But mass immigration of the unprecedented type that London has seen over the past two decades, and which has had its effect in Woolwich too, certainly loosens if not destroys the natural ties that keep communities together and make things like riots less likely. Simple, small things confirm this: I carried out a little experiment of my own recently, before the rioting when, while in Powis Street, I asked directions to Wellington Street, one

of the town's main thoroughfares, a couple of minutes' walk from where I stood. In central London, it would be like standing in Parliament Square and asking the way to Whitehall. Of the 11 passers-by I asked, just three knew where it was and could help me.

The surroundings and the people in them have less and less connection in any real organic sense. English is just one of many languages spoken; it's possible to go for periods without hearing it at all. In the Borough of Greenwich, in which Woolwich is situated, 35 per cent of schoolchildren have English as an "additional" language.

When David Cameron spoke recently of the way in which mass immigration into Britain had created "discomfort and disjointedness" in some areas, he could easily have been talking about Woolwich. People might walk down the same streets, but that does not mean that they are necessarily mixing. Nor does it mean they have the slightest sense that this place is theirs. In such circumstances, it is far easier for riots to take place, whoever is doing the rioting.

The mantra of London as a vibrant, diverse, dynamic city has been rammed home in the past decade with the relentless force of an Orwellian Big Brother, and woe betide anybody who questions it. But in many ways the riots gave the lie to the cliché, by exposing the extent of fragmentation in the capital, and indeed the country.

The media coverage tended to portray the different communities, readying themselves to protect life and limb, as evidence of people coming together, and this narrative is now firmly in place. But the picture one was ultimately left with after the smoke cleared and the smashed glass was replaced was of separate blocs of people operating above a low buzz of tension.



Sikhs locked arms to protect their temple and community (one man, when interviewed by the BBC, talked about protecting their "territories" – a chilling use of word, even if unconscious). The Turks of Dalston won praise for seeing off the looters. The broom-wielding cleaners-up were largely white. The groups of mostly working-class white men who came out in force in Enfield and Eltham immediately got up the noses of the liberal media, who cannot see a white crowd together without suspecting incipient fascism. And the whole episode threatened to take on an overtly racial dimension when three young Asian men in Birmingham were run over and killed by a car.

The multiculturalist argument is that diversity makes us stronger, and that we should celebrate its various manifestations equally at all costs. This has resulted in the absurdity of putting downwardly-aspirational gang culture on an equal footing with, say, the educational and self-betterment culture amongst Indians. Alongside this there is the cultural institutionalisation of a victim mentality which renders criticism of any group unacceptable.

There is, however, little real evidence to support the argument that diversity in and of itself is an unfettered social good. Quite the reverse. Robert Putnam, the Harvard sociologist who is hardly a right-wing zealot, concluded from his research that communal trust decreases the more diverse a society becomes – not just between different ethnic groups, but, interestingly, also within each of those groups.

This has all sorts of consequences, leading, among other things, to a lessening of the likelihood of working on community projects, a lowering of confidence in local politics, and indeed, less personal happiness. On the simplest of levels, if you cannot understand your neighbour, you will also feel (rightly) that you cannot take anything as given, or granted. Alienation (whether un-

conscious or not), and not a massively boosted sense of empowerment, is the natural and obvious outcome.

Like everywhere else, Woolwich has been clearing up the mess left by the rioters, life has resumed, and the reasons for what happened will be pored over for months to come. But the public mood seems to have genuinely changed. Despite the steady stream of youth workers and community leaders on the airwaves in the immediate aftermath, the line that it was all the result of poverty, or government cuts, or the institutional racism of the police is simply not holding. There is some encouragement to be had in the fact that such platitudes are no longer accepted at face value, that even the usual suspects on the Left might have had second thoughts.

The truth is dawning on the people of Britain that these riots were the product not of a strong, dynamic society, but an intensely fragile, deeply anxious one. In Woolwich, as in other inner-city districts, the damage has been done. There is no quick or easy way to make good the effects of 40 years of folly. The fear that was palpable on the streets of London this summer is here to stay. ♦

## Second Lives

by *Daniel Alarcón*

**M**y parents, with admirable foresight, had their first child while they were on fellowships in the United States. My mother was in public health, and my father in a library-science program. Having an American baby was, my mother once said, like putting money in the bank. They lived near downtown Baltimore, by the hospital where my mother was studying, in a neighborhood of dilapidated row houses. Baltimore was abject, ugly, my mother said. Cold in winter, a sauna in summer, a violently segregated city, full of fearful whites and angry blacks. America, in those days, had all its dirty laundry available for inspection – the world’s most powerful nation making war with itself in the streets, in universities, in the South, in Vietnam, in the capital just down the road. And yet my parents set about trying to make babies: on spring nights, when they made the room smell of earth, summer nights, when the city felt like a swamp, autumn nights, falling asleep on top of the covers, winter nights, when the room boiled with sex. They were not newlyweds, strictly speaking, but Baltimore reenergized them, made of their pairing something indispensable, something chemical.

For their efforts, they were rewarded with a son, whom they named Francisco. The district they lived in was one of the poorest in the country at the time, and once the birth was registered my

parents were entitled to free baby formula, delivered to their doorstep every Monday morning. They found this astonishing, and later learned that many of the foreign doctors at the hospital were receiving this benefit, too, even a few who didn’t yet have children. It was a gigantic bribe, my father said, the government pleading with its poverty-stricken residents: Please, please don’t riot! Baltimore was adorned with reminders of the last civil disturbance: a burned-out block of storefronts, a boarded-up and untended house whose roof had collapsed after a snowstorm. Every morning, the sidewalks were littered with shattered car windows, tiny bits of glass glinting like diamonds in the limpid sun. No one used money in the neighborhood stores, only coupons; and, in lieu of birds, the skies featured plastic bags held aloft on a breeze. But none of this mattered, because my parents were happy. They were in love and they had a beautiful boy, his photo affixed to a blue First World passport.

Their American moment didn’t last long. They would have had another child – they would have had me – if their visas hadn’t run out. By the time my mother was done nursing Francisco, a coup had taken place back home, and the military junta that came to power was not entirely friendly with the Johnson Administration. My parents were required to renew their papers every eighteen months, and that year, to their great surprise, they were denied. Appeals, they were told, could be filed only from the home country. The university hospital wrote a letter on my mother’s behalf, but this well-meaning document vanished into some bureaucrat’s file cabinet in suburban Virginia, and it soon became clear that there was nothing to be done. Rather than be deported – how undignified! – my parents left of their own accord.

And then their gaze turned, back to their families, their friends, the places they had known, and those they had forgotten they knew. They bought a house in a suburb of the capital, where I was raised, an out-of-the-way place that has since been swallowed entirely by the city's growth. I guess they lost that old Baltimore feeling, because I wasn't born for another seven years, a crying, red-faced bit of flesh, a runt, undersized even then. No blue passport for me, but they consoled themselves by giving me an Anglo name, Nelson, which was the fashion at the time. Eventually, I got my Third World passport, the color of spilled red wine, but it was just for show. I still haven't had a chance to use it.

Francisco, of course, fled at the first opportunity. It was January, 1987, the situation was bleak, and leaving was the most logical thing to do. I was ten years old; the idea was that he'd get me a visa and I'd join him as soon as I finished school. We went as a family to see him off at the airport, took the obligatory photographs in front of the departures board, and waved as he passed through security. He promised to write. He promised to call. He disappeared into the terminal, and then we climbed the stairs to the greasy restaurant above the baggage claim, where we sat by the wall of windows, waiting for a plane that looked like it might be my brother's to take off. My father drank coffee, fogged his glasses with his breath and polished the lenses between the folds of his dress shirt. My mother drew a palm tree on a paper napkin, frowning. I fell asleep with my head on the table, and when I woke up the janitor was mopping the floor beside us, wondering, perhaps, if we ever intended to leave.

My brother went to live with the Villanuevas, old friends of my parents from their Baltimore days, who'd settled in Birming-

ham, Alabama. His first letter was three handwritten pages and began with a description of winter in the Southern United States. That year, the Alabama rains fell almost without pause until the middle of March, a soggy prelude to an even wetter spring. For Francisco, unaccustomed to this weather, the thunderstorms were impressive. Occasionally, there'd be a downed power line, and sometimes the lights would go out as a result. It was in this familiar darkness, Francisco wrote, that he'd first felt homesick.

The second half of the letter dealt more specifically with the routines of family life at the Villanuevas. Where they lived wasn't a neighborhood so much as a collection of houses that happened to face the same street. Kids were permitted to play in the backyard or in the driveway, but never in the front yard. No one could explain why, but it simply wasn't done. People moved about only in cars; walking was frowned upon, socially acceptable for children, perhaps, if they happened to be accompanied by a dog. The Villanuevas did not have pets. Nor was there anywhere to walk to, really. A two-pump gas station sat about a mile away on Highway 31; its attractions included a pay phone and a magazine rack.

The Villanueva children, Marisa and Jack, ages fifteen and ten, respectively, made it clear from the outset that they spoke no Spanish. The language didn't interest them much, and their father, who insisted that my brother call him Julio and not Mr. Villanueva, considered this his greatest failing as a parent. It was his fault, he confessed to Francisco, for marrying an American woman. In general terms, though, things were good. Speaking English with the Villanueva kids, while challenging at first, helped my brother learn the language faster. At school, not a soul spoke Spanish, not even Señora Rickerts, the friendly, well-intentioned

Spanish teacher. Francisco was not enrolled with Marisa, as had originally been planned. She went to an expensive private school, which would not permit Francisco to audit classes, so instead the Villanuevas sent him to Berry, the local public high school, with the hicks. This last word, Francisco explained, was the rough English equivalent of campesino or cholo, only it referred to rural white people. He'd learned it from Marisa, and had been advised by Mr. Villanueva never to use it if he wished to make friends. My father found this part of the letter very amusing. How remarkable, he said, that Villanueva's daughter spoke no Spanish but had somehow imported her father's classism to North America! How ironic, my father noted, that his own son should learn proletarian solidarity in the belly of the empire!

My parents read and reread the letter at the dinner table, alternately laughing and falling into worried silence. In the early months, I recall them wondering aloud if they'd made a mistake by sending him away like this. Whose idea had it been? And where was Birmingham, anyway? Was it a city or a town? What kind of school was this place called Berry?

They wrote back, urging Francisco to send photos. A month passed, and the next letter arrived with a single picture. We saw Francisco with an umbrella and a yellow raincoat, standing next to the mailbox in front of the Villanuevas' house, a dense knot of purple clouds above. The front yard sloped dramatically, and Francisco stood at an odd slant. He'd put on a little weight – you could see it in his cheeks – and his hair had grown out. His face was changing, my mother said. He was growing up.

By his third letter, the winter rains had become spring rains, which were the same, only warmer. Storms spread like inkblots

across the sky. On sunny days after a rain, the woods behind the Villanuevas' subdivision looked as if they'd been dipped in light. Everyone said that it was an unusually wet year. Francisco didn't mind – he was fascinated by the weather. It was everything else that bored him. His great disappointment that spring was that he'd tried out for the Berry High soccer team, and spent three games on the bench, watching the action unfold without him. He'd quit in protest, and, to his surprise, no one had begged him to come back. They hadn't even noticed. Americans, he wrote, have no understanding of the game. The issue was not mentioned again.

By the fourth letter, the weather had turned; breezy, pleasant stretches were punctuated now and then by days of blasting heat. School would be over soon. He no longer complained about Berry or his classmates, whose dialect he could barely understand. Instead, he seemed to have settled in. Each week, Francisco went to the Spanish class and led conversation exercises with his American peers, and several of them had sought him out for further instruction. An exchange student from Mexico City had spent time at Berry the previous year, seducing Alabama girls and confounding deeply held stereotypes – he didn't wear a poncho, for instance, and was apparently sincere in his love of punk music. He'd also left behind a folkloric legacy of curse words: *panocha*, no *manches*, and *pinche guey*. Francisco wrote that he considered it his responsibility to teach these poor gringos to curse with dignity, and this was, as far as he could tell, the only linguistic knowledge they truly thirsted for. He introduced them to important words, words like *mierda*, *culo*, and *pendejo*, while offering the more advanced students a primer on the nearly infinite uses of

huevo (huevoón, hasta las huevas, hueveo, huevear, se hueveó la huevada). My parents were proud: “Our son the educator,” they said. Photos included with this letter were of nearby Lake Logan Martin, where the Villanuevas had a weekend house. Sun glinting off the water, bathing suits hanging on a line, barefoot games of Frisbee in the freshly mowed grass. In summer, Francisco might learn to water-ski.

This was the first letter in which he forgot to ask us how we were.

That year – the only year he consistently wrote to us – the photos were mostly of Francisco by himself. Occasionally, he’d pose with the Villanuevas: Julio, his wife, Heather, and their two dark-haired, olive-skinned children, who really looked as though they should speak some Spanish. Once, Francisco sent a photo of the Berry High gymnasium, which was notable only for its size. The entire high school, he wrote, would soon be razed and replaced by an even bigger complex farther out in the suburbs. Everyone was excited about this, but he wouldn’t be around to see it. He didn’t intend to stay in Alabama; on this point he was very clear.

We did eventually get a photo of the few American friends Francisco acquired in those first months, and perhaps this could have clued us in about his eagerness to move on. At home, Francisco had always been part of the popular crowd, the center of a fitful, manic group of friends who loved trouble and music and girls. At Berry, he was on the margins of it all, one of a bunch of skinny outcasts, happy to have found one another in the crowded, cliquish hallways of this immense public school. In these photos: a Korean named Jai, a red-haired boy called Anders, who wore a

neck brace, and a frail black kid named Leon, carrying a stack of books and looking utterly lost.

It was just as well that Francisco didn’t ask us how we were. My parents might not have been able to explain. Or they might not have wanted to. Nineteen eighty-seven was the year of the state-employee strike, which was particularly troubling for us, since my father worked at the National Library and my mother at the Ministry of Health. It started in May, around the time that Francisco was learning to water-ski. There was also dismaying talk of a new currency to replace the one that was soon to be destroyed by rising inflation. Together these horrors would wipe out our already diminished savings. War pressed down on the country in all its fury. Adults spoke of politics as if referring to a long and debilitating illness that no medicine could cure. Presidential elections were on the horizon; no one knew who would win, but none of the options were good. My father was shedding weight and hair at a frightening pace, the stress carving him to pieces.

Our letters to the U.S. did not include photographs, a small concession to my father’s vanity in those taxing months. Nor did they mention the fact that Francisco was attending the public school because the tuition at Marisa’s school was simply out of the question for us. Or that my parents had already written a letter to Mr. Villanueva postponing the monthly payment for his room and board. Certainly, my parents didn’t tell Francisco how much shame they felt at having to do this. I doubt they even told him that they were afraid they’d lose their jobs, and were speaking with a lawyer about getting citizenship for all of us and coming as a family to join him. These were the issues my parents talked about at home, in front of me (as if I weren’t there) but not with my

brother. Why worry the boy? The calls were too expensive to waste time on unpleasant things, and wasn't he busy enough, learning English and spending his afternoons jumping from the Villanuevas' pier into the cool, refreshing waters of Lake Logan Martin?

For most of my childhood, our neighbors across the street were a friendly couple named Alejandro and Luz. They were a little older than my parents, the rare neighborhood couple with no kids, possessing no concept of the kinds of things children might like. They visited from time to time, usually bringing some sort of gift for my brother and me – a jump rope, a pinwheel, that sort of thing.

Alejandro had big ears and a quirky grin. He wore dark suits and liked to talk politics until late in the evening. He was a good man, my father told me once, and decency was not something to be taken lightly, but when it came to world view – he said this quite sternly – “we simply do not agree with him.” Even now I'm not sure if this meant that Alejandro was a reactionary or a radical. Those were confusing times. Alejandro worked long hours, and months might pass between his visits, whereas Luz often came by to chat with my mother or to play with us. And when both my parents were working late Francisco and I sometimes spent a few hours at her house, deeply involved in card games whose rules the three of us invented as we went along, or listening to the dark, suspenseful stories Luz loved to tell. Ostensibly about her family, these tales of adventure and daring seemed to draw more from Hollywood Westerns, featuring spectacular kidnappings, gambling debts settled with knife fights, or long, dismal marches through unforgiving mountain terrain. Luz's manner of speaking made it

clear that she had no idea what she might say next. It wasn't that she made things up, strictly speaking – only that facts were merely a point of departure for her.

Luz modified whatever game we played, never apologizing, and we rarely minded letting her win, whether at cards or dominoes or hide-and-seek; in fact, it didn't feel like a concession at all. My brother, who usually kept a studied distance from me and all things preadolescent, regressed in her company, becoming, as if by magic, a gentler, more innocent version of himself.

Often Luz would let us watch an hour of cartoons while she rested on the couch with an arm draped over her face. We thought she was asleep, exhausted from so much winning, but every time a news break came on Luz would sit up in a flash, cover our eyes, and make us press our hands over our ears. The news in those days was not for children, she always said, and I took her word for it. But afterward, when I had opened my eyes and was blinking hopefully at the television, waiting for the cartoons to come back on, Francisco would say, “Did you see that, little brother? That's why I'm leaving.”

Soon after Francisco had gone, Alejandro moved out. It happened almost without anyone realizing it, though the dearth of concrete details was soon overwhelmed by the neighborhood's combined speculative power: Alejandro had run off with his secretary, with the maid, with the daughter of one of his business associates. The mistress, whoever she might be, was pregnant, or maybe she already had children of her own, whom Alejandro had agreed to take care of. It seemed likely that she was much younger than Luz, that he wanted, after all these years, to be a father. There were a few who thought that his sudden disappearance had

more to do with politics, but my father rejected that theory out of hand.

A few weeks had passed when Alejandro came by late one night. He wanted to speak to my father, alone. They shut themselves in the kitchen with a bottle of pisco, and when they emerged, a few hours later, it was clear that Alejandro had been crying. His eyes were swollen and his arms hung limply by his sides. My mother and I were in the living room. I was supposedly doing homework, but really I was waiting to see what would happen. Nothing did. Alejandro gave us a sheepish nod, while my father stood next to him, pisco bottle in hand. They hadn't even uncorked it.

The following day, my mother clarified things a bit. Or tried to. "An affair," she said, "is when a man takes up with a woman who is not his wife. Do you understand that, Nelson?"

Sure I did, or at least I thought I did. "And what if a woman takes up with a man who is not her husband?"

My mother nodded. "That, too."

I had other questions as well. "Takes up with"? Something about the way my mother said this phrase alerted me to the fact that it was a metaphor.

And she sighed, closing her eyes for a moment. She seemed to be thinking rather carefully about what she might say, and I waited, tensely, perhaps even holding my breath. My mother patted me on the head. It was complicated, she said finally, but there was one thing I should be aware of, one thing I should think about and learn now, even if I was too young to understand. Did I want to know? "It has to do with a woman's pride," she said, and waited for these puzzling words to take hold. They didn't. It was

all opaque, delightfully mysterious. Alejandro's affair was different from others, she said. Yes, he had left Luz, and, yes, this was bad enough. Plenty bad. But a woman is proud, and at a certain age this pride is tinged with self-doubt. "We grow old," my mother told me, "and we suspect we are no longer beautiful." Alejandro's new mistress was ten years older than Luz. This was what he'd confessed to my father the night before. A younger woman would have been understandable, expected even, but this – it wasn't the sort of insult that Luz would easily recover from.

I knew it was serious by the way my mother's eyes narrowed.

"If your father ever does something like this to me, you'd better call the police, because someone's going to get hurt. Do you understand?"

I told her I did, and her face eased into a smile.

"O.K., then, go on," my mother said. "Go play or something."

In those days after Francisco left, "go play" came to mean something very specific: go sit in your room and draw and create stories. I could spend hours this way, and often did. My scripts were elaborate, mostly nonviolent revenge fantasies, in which I (or the character I played) would end up in the unlikely position of having to spare the life of a kid who had routinely bullied me. The bully's gratitude was colored with shame, naturally, and my (character's) mercy was devastating to the bully's self-image. I returned to this theme time and again, never tiring of it, deriving great pleasure from the construction of these improbable reversals.

With my brother gone, the room we had shared seemed larger, more spacious and luxurious than before. I'd lived my entire life there, deferring without complaint to my brother's wishes on all

matters of decoration, layout, music, and lighting. He'd made it clear that I was a squatter in his room, an assertion I'd never thought to question. Just before he left, he'd warned me with bared teeth, frightening as only older brothers can be, not to touch a thing. In case he came back. If I were to change anything, Francisco said, he'd know.

"How?" I asked. "How will you know?"

He threw an arm around me then, flexing it tight around my neck with the kind of casual brutality he often directed at me. I felt my face turning red; I was helpless. At ten and eighteen, we were essentially two different species. I wouldn't see him again until we were both adults, fully grown men capable of real violence. I suppose if I'd known this, I might have tried to appreciate the moment, but instead I remained defiant, gasping for breath and managing to ask one more time, "Yeah, but how will you know?"

Francisco, or versions of him, appeared in many of my early works.

I took note of what my mother had said about a woman's pride, and when I was alone with my father I decided to ask him about it. I wasn't sure if I'd got the full nuance, but I relayed the conversation with my mother as well as I could, concluding with the last bit about the police.

"She said that?" he asked.

I nodded, and my father, instead of shedding any light on the situation, just laughed. It was a hearty, surprising laugh, with tears pressing from the corners of his eyes.

"What?" I asked. "What did I say?" But he wouldn't answer me, and, finally, when he'd regained his composure, he gave me a big hug.

"Your mother is a dangerous woman," he said, and I knew enough to understand that when he said "dangerous" he meant it as a compliment.

Meanwhile, Luz drew her curtains and rarely left the house. Alejandro never came back.

A few months later, we learned that Luz was planning to travel to the United States, to visit a cousin of hers in Florida. This was in June, when the strike was under way, and my parents were beginning to feel the stress most acutely. We'd seen little of Luz in the weeks since Alejandro's visit, but she was often mentioned, always in the same pitying tone. Inevitably, the conversation veered back to my mother's comment about the police, and my father would tease her about it, until they laughed together. I'd chuckle, too, so as not to be left out.

Luz's trip couldn't have been more perfectly timed. It was scheduled for July, three or four weeks before Francisco's birthday, the first he would be spending abroad. My mother wanted to send Francisco a gift, just a token, so that he'd know we were thinking of him. After some deliberation, she bought him a dark-blue necktie embroidered with the logo of the National Library. My father approved, said it would help him get a good job. It was a joke, really; we knew that Francisco wasn't interested in the sort of job where he might need a necktie. The three of us signed a card; separately, my father wrote a long letter, and the whole thing was wrapped and sealed and ready to go. Naturally, there was no talk of trusting our local postal service for this, or for anything,



really. We would ask Luz to take it for us and drop it in an American mailbox. Perhaps, my mother said, Luz could even hand-deliver it, should her itinerary include a jaunt through Alabama, and, upon her return, report back – tell us how she'd found Francisco, what she thought of his prospects in the U.S.

One Sunday afternoon, my mother and I crossed the street and knocked on Luz's door. She seemed surprised to see us, a little embarrassed, but beckoned us into the house all the same. Immediately, we encountered a problem: there wasn't anywhere to sit. Sometime in the previous months, much of the furniture had been moved out, and the rooms, half empty now, seemed lonely and sad. Of the chairs that remained, no two faced each other. We strolled through to the living room, where a small television set rested awkwardly on a wooden chair. Luz was thinner than I remembered her, subdued; she seemed to have staggered recklessly toward old age, as if trying to make up in a matter of weeks the ten years that separated her from Alejandro's new lover. Her hair had faded to a stringy yellowing gray – she'd stopped dyeing it, my mother explained later – and her skin had taken on a similarly unhealthy pallor. Her eyes, even in the dim light, were glassy and unfocused. Luz asked me to put the television on the floor.

“Where?” I asked.

“Oh, Nelson,” she said. “Anywhere.”

I placed it next to the chair, and Luz indicated that I should sit on it. I looked at my mother for reassurance. She nodded, and so the three of us sat, forming a not quite intimate circle.

Luz and my mother went through the protocols of a civilized visit: inoffensive questions, anodyne chitchat, the usual phrases and gestures intended to fill up space rather than convey meaning.

It occurred to me as I listened that my mother and Luz were not close. They spoke without much fluency about a minor universe of events that affected neither of them: the vagaries of neighborhood life, people they both knew but didn't much care about. My mother seemed determined not to speak of our family, of my father, my brother, or even me. It was excessive decorum, as if the very mention of family might be insulting to our grieving hostess. The strain to keep the words coming was noticeable, and I wondered how long it would be necessary to maintain this charade before coming to the point of the visit, Francisco's gift. Ten minutes? Twenty? An entire hour?

Luz, as she spoke, as she listened, scanned the room as if looking for someone who was not there. The easy assumption would have been that the someone was Alejandro, but I understood instinctively that this wasn't the case. There were many people in the room with us, it seemed, a wide variety of people my mother and I could not see: principally, the players in Luz's life, those who'd known her at various stages of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, at moments of joy, of whimsy, of expectation. Of anxiety and fear. It seemed to me that Luz was wondering, How did I get to this place? How did this happen? Or perhaps, What are all these people doing in my house, and what must they think of me now? And it was all she could do not to ask these questions aloud. She was gritting her teeth, forcing her way through a conversation with my mother, an artificial exchange about nothing at all, hoping soon to return to her more important, unfinished dialogue with this other, floating gallery of observers. This was my theory, of course. Luz's eyes drifted to the near

distance, to the seemingly empty space just behind us and around us. To the window, to the floor, to the ceiling.

At a certain point, my mother took Francisco's festively wrapped package from her purse. She passed it to Luz, who accepted it without saying much. I'd lost track of the words being exchanged, was focussing instead on the minute shifts in Luz's facial expressions: a sharpening of the creases at the edges of her mouth, or her eyes fluttering closed. My mother explained that the gift was for Francisco, that it was his birthday, that we hated to ask the favor but we hoped it wouldn't be a problem. Could she take it with her?

Luz sat, shoulders slouched, neck curling downward. The gift was in her lap, and by the tired look in her eyes you might have thought that it weighed a great deal.

I'm not sure how I knew, but I did: she was going to say no.

"What is it?" Luz said.

My mother smiled innocently; she didn't yet understand what was happening.

"A necktie."

Luz's eyes were wandering again, following a dust mote, or the disappearing image of an old friend. She was ashamed to be seen this way, and she was going to take it out on us.

"Are you well?" Luz asked.

"We are," my mother said. "We miss Francisco, of course, but we're well."

"And the strike?"

At the mention of it, my mother's expression darkened. She and my father were walking the picket line five days a week, exhausting in and of itself, and, of course, there was the constant

threat of violence, from the police, from the more radical elements within their own syndicate. My parents talked about it every night, oblique references at the dinner table, and later, as I fell asleep, I heard the worried hum of voices drifting from their bedroom.

"We're getting by," my mother answered. "God willing, it'll be over soon."

Luz nodded, and reached over to the coffee table. She pulled open a drawer and took out a letter opener. We watched, not knowing exactly what she was after, but she spoke the whole time, carrying on a sort of conversation with herself, a monologue about the declining state of morals in the nation, about a new, aimless generation, and its startling lack of respect for the rules of society as they'd been handed down since the time when we were a colony of the Spanish Empire. A colony? The Empire? I looked toward my mother for help, but she was no less confused than me. There was sadness in Luz's tone, a defeated breathiness, as if the words themselves were part of a whispered prayer or lament she would've preferred not to share with us. At the same time, her hands moved with an efficiency completely at odds with her speech: she held the package now, and, without pausing in her discourse, used the letter opener to cut the red bow my mother had tied. It fell unceremoniously to the dusty floor.

"Oh!" my mother said.

It was as if Luz had cut her.

Then, with the edge of the opener, she peeled back the clear tape my mother had stuck to the wrapping. The paper slipped to the floor, landing at Luz's feet. She pushed it away with the edge of her shoe. Her hands kept moving.

“People these days can’t be trusted. So much has changed from when I was a girl. We knew our neighbors – our town was small. When a boy came around, my father would ask who his parents were, and this was all he and my mother needed to know. If they didn’t approve of his lineage, they’d send the servant out to have a talk with him. To shoo him away, you understand. I watched everything from my window. I was very pretty then.”

“I’m sure you were,” my mother said, her voice breaking, unable to hide the concern she felt for Francisco’s gift. The box was open now, the white tissue paper was out, ripped in places, and the tie dangled from Luz’s knee, its tip just grazing the floor. Luz opened the card we’d all signed, and spread my father’s letter on her lap, squinting at the handwriting as if decoding a secret message.

“Is there something wrong?” my mother asked.

Luz didn’t answer. Instead, she held the necktie up with one hand, and ran her thumb and forefinger carefully along the seam, lightly palpating the length of the fabric. She’d already checked the box and its lining. What was she looking for?

My mother watched in horror. “What are you doing? Is there a problem?”

“Where are your people from?” Luz asked.

“I’m sorry?”

“The north, the south, the center? The mountains, the jungle? How well do we know each other, really, Monica? Do I know what you do? What your family does? What about that union you belong to, the one making trouble downtown? Did you expect me to get on a flight to America with a package I hadn’t bothered to

check? What if there were drugs inside? What if there was cocaine?”

My mother was stunned. Absolutely immobilized.

“Am I supposed to rot in an American prison because your impoverished family is willing to gamble with my life?”

Luz’s eyes were open wide, and she held them that way, staring at us.

My mother stood abruptly, snatching the necktie and my father’s letter from Luz’s hands. I ducked to grab the box, the wrapping paper, and the bow, but my mother took me by the arm. Her face was a bright and unnatural shade of red.

“Leave it.”

Luz reverted now, drawn back into that lonely place she’d been trapped in for months. “Did I say something wrong?” she asked, but the question wasn’t addressed to us.

The empty rooms were a blur as we raced toward the street. On our way out, I managed to kick over a chair, and I knew by my mother’s expression that she didn’t mind at all.

The day passed and my mother was in a foul, toxic mood. The neighborhood, always so eager to gossip, was now gossiping about us. We’d tried to send contraband to America, people were saying. Drugs. Tried to take advantage of an unsuspecting elderly woman with a broken heart.

These were the kinds of humiliations we put up with for Francisco’s sake. There were others. Francisco left Birmingham that October, and only later did we find out why: one afternoon Marisa skipped her S.A.T. prep class, and Mrs. Villanueva came home early to find them groping in the downstairs television room. For me, the most astonishing aspect of the story was un-

doubtedly the idea that the Villanuevas had a downstairs television room. The rest of the anecdote – even the titillating hint of sex – hardly registered next to this remarkable detail. Mrs. Villanueva gave my brother an hour to pack his things. By the time her husband got home, Francisco had already been dropped off at his friend Jai's house, forever banished from the Villanuevas' ordered American lives.

For months after he'd moved on, we continued to wire money to the Villanuevas to pay off our debt. My father sent several long letters to his old friend Julio, apologizing for his son's behavior, but these went unanswered, and, eventually, he gave up trying to make things right. The friendship was never repaired, of course, but, then, how could it be? The two men had met in the nineteen-seventies and had seen each other only twice in the intervening years. The mutual affection they felt was an almost entirely theoretical construct, based on memories of long-ago shared experiences – not unlike what I felt toward my brother by then, I suppose. Part fading recollections, part faith.

Francisco never got around to applying to college, as my parents had hoped he would. He moved briefly to Knoxville, where his friend Leon had enrolled at the University of Tennessee. But soon after that we got a letter from St. Louis (along with a photo of the Arch), and then one from Kansas City (with a picture taken in the parking lot of a rustic barbecue joint). Francisco's constant movement made it difficult for my parents to get their citizenship paperwork going, though at some point, I imagine, they must have told him what their plan was and how desperate our situation was becoming. Maybe he didn't understand. Or maybe it was inconvenient for him to think about. Maybe what he wanted most

of all was to forget where he'd come from, to leave those troubles and stunted dreams behind and become what his passport had always said he was: an American.

People talk a lot these days about virtual reality, second lives, digital avatars. It's a concept I'm fully conversant with, of course. Even with no technical expertise or much interest in computers, I understand it all perfectly; if not the engineering, then the emotional content behind these so-called advances seems absolutely intuitive to me. I'll say it plainly: I spent my adolescence preparing for and eventually giving myself over to an imagined life. While my parents waited in line at the American Embassy, learning all the relevant statutes and regulations to insure my passage, I placed myself beside my brother in each of his pictures. I followed him on his journey across America, trying always to forget where I really was.

He repaired bicycles in suburban Detroit; worked as a greeter at a Wal-Mart in Dubuque, Iowa; moved furniture in Galveston, Texas; mowed lawns at a golf course outside Santa Fe. At home, I read Kerouac and Faulkner, listened to Michael Jackson and the Beastie Boys, studied curious American customs like Halloween, Thanksgiving, and the Super Bowl. I formulated opinions on America's multiple national dilemmas, which seemed thrillingly, beautifully frivolous: gays in the military, a President in trouble for a blow job.

My brother turned twenty-one in Reno, Nevada, gambling away a meagre paycheck he'd earned busing tables at a chain Italian restaurant. It could be said that he was happy. This was 1990. He was going by Frank now, and had shed whatever South-

ern accent he might have picked up in those first few months as a putative member of the Villanueva household.

Six months passed, and we learned that he had abandoned water-skiing for snow skiing; he was working at a ski resort in the Rockies, and sent photos, panoramic shots of the light mirroring brilliantly off the white snowpack. It was intriguing and absolutely foreign territory. He spent a page describing the snow – dry snow, wet snow, artificial snow, powder – and I learned that people can get sunburned in winter from all the reflected light. I never would have guessed this to be true, though in hindsight it seemed fairly obvious, and this alone was enough to depress me. What else was obvious to everyone but me? What other lessons, I wondered, was I being deprived of even now?

In school, my favorite subject was geography. Not just mine, it should be said. I doubt any generation of young people has ever looked at a world map with such a powerful mixture of longing and anxiety; we were like inmates being tempted with potential escape routes. Even our teacher must have felt it: when he took the map from the supply closet and tacked it to the blackboard, there was an audible sigh from the class. We were mesmerized by the possibilities; we assumed every country was more prosperous than ours, safer than ours, and at this scale they all seemed tantalizingly near. The atlas was passed around like pornography, and if you had the chance to sit alone with it for a few moments you counted yourself lucky. When confronted with a map of the United States, in my mind I placed dots across the continent, points to mark where my brother had lived and the various towns he'd passed through on his way to other places.

Of course, I wasn't the only one with family abroad; these were the days when everyone was trying to leave. Our older brothers applied for scholarships in fields they didn't even like, just for the chance to overstay their visas in cold and isolated northern cities. Our sisters were married off to tourists or were shipped to Europe to work as nannies. We were a nation busy inventing French great-grandparents, falsifying Spanish paperwork, bribing notaries for counterfeit birth certificates from Slavic countries that were hardly better off than we were. Genealogies were examined in great detail – was there an ancestor to exploit, anyone with an odd, foreign-sounding last name? A Nazi war criminal in your family's dark past? What luck! Pack your bags, kids – we're going to Germany! This was simply the spirit of the times. The Japanese kids headed back to Tokyo, the Jewish kids to Israel. A senile Portuguese shut-in who hadn't spoken a coherent sentence in fifteen years was dusted off and taken to petition the Embassy; suddenly all his grandchildren were moving to Lisbon.

The state-employee strike didn't last forever. It ended, as everything did in those days, with an uneasy and temporary resolution: across-the-board pay cuts but no immediate layoffs, a surfeit of mistrust and rancor on all sides. My father was there at the climactic march, when a bank in the old center was burned by government infiltrators and dozens of protesters were beaten and jailed. He was gassed and shot at with rubber bullets, and he, like tens of thousands of others, fled the violence like a madman, running at full speed through the chaotic streets of the capital, a wet rag tied across his nose and mouth. It was, he told me later, the moment he realized he wasn't young anymore.

The dreaded election came and went; the crisis deepened. The new President privatized everything, selling the state off piece by piece and dividing the profits among his friends. The truce that had been reached at the end of the strike was broken, and the next year thousands of workers, including my mother, were suddenly laid off. She was unemployed for months. Prices shot up, the currency crashed, the violence spread, and our world became very small and very precarious. We waited in breadlines, carrying impossibly large stacks of banknotes, which had become a requirement for even the tiniest transaction. People spoke less; strangers distrusted one another. The streets, even during morning rush, had a perverse emptiness to them. We listened to the radio in the dark and emerged each morning fearful to discover what tragedy had befallen us in the night.

These emotions are quite beside the point now, like an artifact looted from an ancient grave, an oddly shaped tool whose utility no one can quite decipher. But back then, walking through the gray, shuddering city, I thought about my brother all the time. I was ten, I was eleven, unfree but hopeful; I was thirteen, I was fourteen, and my brother had escaped. Fifteen, sixteen: waiting for something to happen, reading obsessively about a place I would never see for myself, in a language I would never actually need. Twenty, twenty-one: small failures, each humiliation a revelation, further proof that my real life was elsewhere. Twenty-five, twenty-six: a dawning awareness that my condition as a citizen of the Third World was terminal.

And Francisco lived through none of this. As punishment, I set about trying to forget him: the sound of his laughter, his

height relative to mine, the content of the conversations we'd had after the lights went out but before we fell asleep.

I never managed it, of course. ♦



*Side by...*

## The South African Past as Prologue

by Lynn Freed

SINCE THE END OF APARTHEID, it has become commonplace among South Africans, particularly middle-class whites, to mourn not apartheid but the world that passed with it, a world that predated its demise by at least a hundred years. What they miss most keenly is the safety they had enjoyed – at home, on the street, in the car. In place of that world is now a sort of civil anarchy that has caused many to leave the country and those who stay to take shelter behind high walls and electrified fences, alarm systems, panic buttons, and security guards.

Not long ago, they point out, children were free to bicycle around the streets and women to drive wherever they wished, day or night. Cars could be parked without a guard to pay off. Restaurants didn't have to lock you in behind wrought-iron gates. Even the vast numbers of poor were safer – just ask them how *they* cope with this siege of violence.

And yet violence was always implicit in South African life, and often explicit as well. If guns were scarce before the Eighties, knives certainly were not. Knife fights, flick knives, stabbings, stabbings, stabbings – these were the daily fare of newspaper reporting during the Fifties, Sixties, Seventies. And if they were largely confined to ne'er-do-wells and Africans, well, we all knew it was only a matter of time before it was going to climb the hill

*...by side*

## A dél-afrikai múlt mint előzmény

fordította Tárnok Attila

AZ APARTHEID VÉGE ÓTA divatossá vált a dél-afrikai emberek, különösen a fehér középosztály körében, keseregni nem az apartheid elmúlásán, hanem azon világrend megszűnése miatt, amely az apartheid végével eltűnt; egy világrend megszűnése miatt, amelynek kezdete legalább száz évvel megelőzte a vészidőszakot. Legtöbbször a biztonságot hiányolják; korábban az emberek biztonságban érezték magukat otthon, az utcán vagy autóvezetés közben. A régi világ helyét a polgári anarchia vette át, amely sokakat az ország elhagyására kényszerít, és azok, akik maradnak, riasztóberendezések, testőrök, magas kőkerítések és elektromos biztonsági rendszerek segítségével keresnek védelmet.

Nem is olyan régen, a gyerekek szabadon biciklizhettek az utcán és a nők arra autózhattak éjjel-nappal, amerre kedvük támadt. Az autót őrizetlenül hagyhatták a parkolóban. Az éttermekben a vendégeket nem zárták el kovácsoltvas kapuk. Még a tekintélyes számú szegény lakosság is biztonságban érezte magát, de kérdezzük meg őket manapság, megbarátkoztak-e az erőszakos cselekményekkel.

Az erőszak Dél-Afrika életében állandó jelenség. Jóllehet a lőfegyverek csak a nyolcvanas években terjedtek el, a késeket és a különböző szűrőeszközöket azt megelőzően is használták.

to i nd us.

So when our garden boy came home half-dead one day, stabbed just under the heart, I stared down at the wound as into an omen. There it was, a dark, moist, oozing thing, no distinction between dark skin and dark blood, and the gleaming white rib at the center of it. Even at the age of six or seven, I knew exactly what I was seeing: I was seeing the future. Except that, for us, there would be no chance of a doctor stitching up the wound. For us, the knife was going to be drawn deep across the throat.

Much of my childhood anxiety was spent concocting ways to save myself when the Knife-at-the-Throat bloodbath actually came – where to hide, whom I could count on for help (the nanny, although at the top of the list, would, at least in theory, be part of the same knife-wielding rampage). We all knew how it would happen. One night, without warning, our servants would rise as one, snatch up knives from their various kitchens, and rush next door to slit some white throats. Turn around, and there, in the doorway, would be Josiah, the Sullivans' cook, eyes wild with marijuana and their carving knife at the ready. Our own servants, we knew, would not be able to bring themselves to slit our throats. They'd go over to the Sullivans, or to old Mrs. Holmes on the other side. She was always complaining about the noise we made on the cricket lawn and wouldn't give back the balls we hit over the hedge. And so, in a sense, it would serve her right.

Meanwhile, I kept watch. On a Sunday afternoon, if Zulus were pouring down the hill on their way to their faction fighting, I would sit at the study window, keeping a firm eye on them. At that time, faction fights were ritualistic affairs, and many Zulus were dressed in traditional warrior regalia – skins and rattles and headbands. They jumped and whistled and shouted and shook their clubs and sticks in the air, whipping themselves into a frenzy

Késes támadások, rúgós kések, késelés, késelés, késelés: az ötvenes, hatvanas, hetvenes évek újsághírei között mindennapos esemény. És már akkor tudtuk, amikor még az ilyen hírek kizárólag az alsóbb társadalmi osztályok és a feketék köréből származtak, hogy csak idő kérdése, mikor érkezik el hozzánk is a vész, mikor talál ránk a dombtetőn.

Így amikor a kertészünk egy napon félholtan vánszorgott haza, úgy bámultam a szív alatti szúrt sebre mint intő jelre. A sötétben, nedvesen szivárgó foltban nem különült el vér és bőrszín, csak a fehér bordacsont világított a seb közepe táján. Hat-hét éves korom ellenére tudtam, mit látok: a jövőbe láttam. Kivéve, hogy a mi esetünkben nem lesz szükség orvosra, aki bekötözi a sebet. A kés mélyen a szívünkbe hatol majd.

Gyerekkorom nagyrészt izgalomban telt. Különböző trükköket eszeltem ki, amikkel megvédelmezhetem majd magam, amikor a késelés csakugyan elérkezik hozzánk: hol fogok elrejtőzni, kitől számíthatok segítségre. A dajkám ugyan képzeletbeli segítőttem névsorának az élén állt, elméletileg legalábbis, ugyanannyira aktív résztvevője is lehetne a késforgatásnak. Mindannyian tudtuk, miként fognak lezajlani az események. Egy éjszaka a cselédség és a kiszolgáló személyzet összeáll, előveszik a késeket a konyhákból és elindulnak a szomszédba, hogy elvágják a fehérek torkát. Megfordulunk és ott áll majd előttünk az ajtóban Josiah, a Sullivanék szakácsa, marihuánától izgatott szemekkel, kezében egy faragókés. Azt is tudtuk, hogy a saját szolgálók nem lennének képesek ránk támadni. Ők a Sullivan-családhoz mennek majd át vagy az öreg Mrs. Holmeshoz az utca túloldalán. Az idős asszony állandóan panaszkodott ránk, hogy túl sokat hangoskodunk krikettezés közben és nem adta vissza a labdát, ha átütöttük a sövényen. Ilyen értelemben, ő megérdemelné a sorát.

Állandóan őrködtem. Vasárnap délutánoként a dolgozó-



for the contest that was going to take place down on the soccer fields at the beach.

All it would take, I knew, was for one of them to leap our fence and come crashing through the bed of cannas for the bloodbath to start right there, at our house, never mind that that wasn't the way it was supposed to happen. It had happened already in Kenya with the Mau Mau, a phrase that could spark terror in the heart of anyone, let alone a frantic child checking behind the wardrobe before she could bring herself to leap onto the bed and under the covers.

And so when I woke up one night to the sight of a strange man at the foot of my eldest sister's bed, I was sure it had begun, and that no amount of cunning was going to save me now. We were at a holiday hotel in the mountains, my sisters and I in one room, my parents in the other, and the door firmly closed between us.

I lay as still as stone, moving only my eyes. My bed was lower than the others' – a sort of camp bed, brought in by the hotel and wedged into a corner. All I could see from down there was the man's hat, and the way his head bent over my sister's bed. Maybe he'd slashed her throat already, I thought, and was just checking to see if she was dead.

But what if he wasn't a native? What if he was a Coloured and didn't even have a knife? Coloureds, we knew, weren't going to rise up against us, because they were better off than the natives and wanted to keep it that way. Our Coloured housekeeper had a bedroom next to mine, and used the children's bathroom, and ate the same food as we did, but in the kitchen, and off different dishes.

I took another look, but it was impossible to tell. In the dark he could even have been an Indian. An Indian had once lured a girl in my class into an alley, and he'd made her pull down her

szobánk ablakából figyeltem, ahogy a környező hegyekből zulu harcosok özönlének be a városba, a törzsi vetélkedésre tartva. Azokban az időkben a törzsi vetélkedő a mindennapos rituálé része volt, a zuluk közül sokan hagyományos harci díszbe öltöztek: állatbőrökbe, csörgőkkel aggatták teli magukat, és fejpántot kötöttek. Ugrándoztak, sípoltak és visítottak; botjukkal vagy egy husággal belehasítottak a levegőbe és szenvedélyeiket az őrületig korbácsolták. A tengerparti futballpályán tartandó versengésre készültek.

Több se kell, mint hogy egyikük átvesse magát a kerítésen, keresztülvágjon a *kanna*-ágyáson, és kezdetét venné a vérfürdő, itt a házukban, mégha a terveikben nem is így szerepelt. A közelmúltban Kenyában, a Mau Mau forrongások idején ugyanaz történt; már az esemény pusztá emléke is riadalmat keltett mindenkiben, de főleg egy olyan gyerekben, aki minden este bekukkant a szekrénybe, mielőtt ágyba merne bújni.

Így amikor egy éjjel arra ébredtem, hogy egy idegen férfi áll a nővérem ágya végében, meg voltam róla győződve, hogy kezdetét vette a rettegett esemény és semmilyen fajta ravaszkodás nem lesz képes megvédeni immár. A hegyekben nyaraltunk, egy szállodában aludtunk, én és a nővéreim külön hálóban, a szüleim szobájába vezető ajtó kilincsre zárva.

Kővé dermedve feküdtem, csak a szemem mozgott. Az én ágyam alacsonyabb volt, mint a többi, a személyzet pótágyként helyezte el a sarokban. Onnan letről csupán a férfi kalapját láttam, ahogy a nővérem fölé hajol. Talán már el is vágta a tarkát, gondoltam, és azt igyekszik megállapítani, meghalt-e az áldozat.

És mi van, ha nem is bennszülött? Lehet, hogy csak egy félvér és nincs is nála kés. Azt tudtuk, hogy a mulattok nem fognak fellázadni ellenünk, mert az ő sorsuk szerencsésebb, mint a bennszülötteké, és ezt a különbséget igyekeztek fenntartani.

pants, and a nurse, leaning out an upstairs window, had seen them down there and called the police. And after that the girl had seemed different, as if she had a birthmark down her face, or a limp, or a mother who had died.

But no one ever thought Indians would rise up and slit our throats either. They worked as waiters and gardeners and behind stalls at the Indian market. Some of them had shops down on Grey Street, and my mother knew them, and they knew her. Come the revolution, she said, the natives were as likely to slit their throats as ours. Everyone knew natives hated Indians. When the natives had rioted against them and burned down their shops, a native had thrown a brick at my uncle, who was dark and looked a bit like an Indian himself. And when Pillay, our gardener, had to use the toilet in the servants' quarters, they weren't at all pleased, the house girl told me. Indians were dirty, she said, they stank of curry and hair oil, phew, and also they cheated you. Except that she called them "coolies," a word we were never allowed to use.

The man glided to the foot of my middle sister's bed. Now that he was closer, I tried to sniff for curry or hair oil. But there was only the smell of the room – coir matting and furniture polish. And outside the crickets were singing as if everything were normal. The window was wide open as usual, never mind that we were on the ground floor, because however much they threw the phrase around, my parents were far more concerned about fresh air than they were about the Knife at the Throat. At home, the French doors onto the verandas were fastened back day and night, upstairs and downstairs, the windows too. But when I worried about this, they just pointed out that the only invaders we'd ever had were monkeys, which would reach into the kitchen to snatch something from the table and then gibber up with it into the mango tree, the dogs in pursuit.

Otthon a félvér házvezetőnőnk szobája közvetlenül az enyém mellett volt, a gyerekek fürdőszobáját használta és ugyanazt ette, amit mi, csak a konyhában és egyszerűbb tányérból.

Újabb pillantást vetettem a férfi felé, de a sötétben képtelenség volt megállapítani a bőrszínét. Akár indiai is lehet. Egy indiai egyszer egy sikátorba csalta az egyik osztálytársnőmet, és arra kényszerítette, hogy tolja le a bugyiját, de egy ápolónő meglátta őket az emeleti ablakból és kihívta a rendőrséget. Az incidens után az osztálytársnőm megváltozott: úgy viselkedett, mint akinek anyajegy nőtt az arcán, vagy mint aki lesántult, vagy mint akinek meghalt az édesanyja.

De soha senki nem gondolt arra, hogy az indiaiak fellázhatnak ellenünk és elvághatják valakinek a torkát. Pincérként, kertészként dolgoztak vagy mint árusok az indiai piacokon. Néhányuknak üzlete volt a Grey Streeten, anyám ismerte őket, ők is ismerték anyámat. Ha kitör a forradalom, mondta anyám, a bennszülöttek ugyanúgy nekiesnek az indiaiaknak, mint nekünk. Mindenki tudta, hogy a feketék gyűlölik az indiaiakat. Egyszer, amikor lerohanták őket és felgyújtották a boltjaikat, az egyik fekete téglával megdobta a nagybátyámat, mert napbarnított bőre miatt indiainak hitte. Vagy egy másik alkalommal, amikor Pilláj, a kertészünk a személyzet vécéjét volt kénytelen használni, a cselédek háborogtak. Az indiaiak koszosak, mondta az egyik cselédlány, bűzlenek a currytól és a hajolajtól, fúj, és mindenkit átvernek. A lány *kulinak* nevezte őket, nekünk tilos volt ezt a szót használni.

A férfi átsiklott a középső nővérem ágához. Most, hogy közelebb került hozzám, a levegőbe szimatoltam, érzem-e a curry és a hajolaj szagát. De csak a szoba illatát éreztem: a kókuszpálma leveléből font szőnyeg és a bútórápolószer illatát. Kint a kertben tücskök muzsikáltak, mintha minden rendben lenne. Az ablak szélesre tárva, ahogy minden éjjel, pedig a földszinten

It was the dogs, really, that were meant to protect us. As long as they lay around our feet, cocking an ear for someone to chase – anyone, in fact, who didn't belong in the house – we were supposed to feel safe. Just let the garden boy emerge from the servants' quarters and they'd be after him in a pack, barking, snarling, snapping. The same held for Pillay, and for delivery boys, and for the Zulus pouring down the hill on a Sunday afternoon.

And yet what good were they now, here in a hotel in the mountains, with a man staring down at my middle sister? They were hundreds of miles away, at the kennels. And anyway, how many dogs would it take when all the servants rose up at once with their knives and sticks? Even Superman, our house boy, had managed to slice Simba's ear with the stick he carried to protect himself walking between the kitchen and the garage, or back to his room in the servants' quarters. And when an enemy put a curse on him one day and he came to say he was leaving and wanted his wages, it was almost as if the dogs themselves were cursed too, because they just stood back and watched as he walked to the gate, carrying his cardboard suitcase.

The man turned toward my corner. And just as I was thinking that whatever he was I would leap up before he could get to me and scream at the top of my lungs – just then, he turned and walked over to the window. I pushed myself up a bit to see, and yes, there he was, climbing out, first one leg and then the other, and he was still wearing his hat.

As soon as he was gone, I jumped out of bed and burst through the door leading into my parents' room. But they were too fast asleep to take me seriously. Eventually, though, my mother did climb out of her bed and lead me back to my own, agreeing, for once, to close the window. And then, the next morning, as soon as I heard the early-morning tea trolley rattling

aludtunk. A szüleimet jobban izgatta, hogy friss levegőt szívjunk, mint a „kés a torkon”, hiába ismételte mindenki a frázist unostalan. Otthon az ablakokat és az erkélyajtókat éjjel-nappal zárva tartottuk, a földszinten ugyanúgy, mint az emeleten. Ha rákérdeztem, azt válaszolták, a majmok miatt, mert beszemtelenednek a házba, ételt lopnak a konyhából, aztán felmenekülnek vele a mangófára, nyomukban a kutyákkal.

Igazából a kutyákra hárult, hogy megvédelmezzenek bennünket. Amíg a lábunknál hevernek, hegyezik a fülüket és megkergetnek mindent és mindenkit, aki nem tartozik a házhoz, addig biztonságban vagyunk. Ha a kertészfiú előmerészkedik a személyzeti traktusból, a kutyák rögtön csapatostól a sarkában vannak, ugatnak, vicsorognak és kapkodnak felé. Ugyanerre számíthat Pilláj is, vagy a beszállítóink és a hegyekből aláereszkedő zulus vasárnap délutánonként.

De mit számított mindez itt a hegyek közt, a hotelben, ahol egy férfi bámulja a nővéremet? A kutyák több száz mérföldre innen a kennelben vártak ránk. És egyébként is: hány kutyára lenne szükségünk, ha az összes kiszolgáló cseléd ellenünk fordul, késsel, botokkal? Még egyedül Superman, a házi szolgánk is képes volt Simba fülét lecsapni a botjával, amit a konyha és a garázs közti rövid úton használ védekezésül, amikor a személyzeti traktust kénytelen elhagyni. Egyszer, amikor egy ellensége megátkozta, bejött hozzánk, hogy felmondjon és a bérért követelte. A kutyák is meg lettek babonázva, mert mozdulatlanul álltak és csak figyelték, ahogy a férfi, kartonbőrönddel a kezében, a kapuhoz sétál.

Az éjszakai látogató a pótágy felé fordult a sarokban. Abban a pillanatban, amikor úgy határoztam, félreugrok, mielőtt hozzám ér és telí tudómból ordítani kezdek, a férfi megfordult és az ablakhoz lépett. Megemelkedtem kissé fekvő helyzetemben, és nem tévedés, a kalapos férfi ott állt előttem; előbb az egyik, majd

down the passage, I was back at their bedside.

Something about my insistence must have caught their attention at last, because, when he'd finished his tea, my father put on his dressing gown and slippers and came through to our room to question my sisters. They scoffed, of course – they'd seen nothing, heard nothing. But then, opening the window to let in some fresh air, he noticed some soil on the windowsill. And when he leaned out, there, in the flowerbed below, were four large footprints – two on their way in and two on their way out.

No one ever found out who or what the man was, and no one but me believed he could have had anything to do with the Knife at the Throat. And so on we went, doors and windows open, dogs in place, until the real terror began – coming not at all as we'd expected, but haphazardly, here or there, day or night, with guns as well as knives, because by then guns were almost as plentiful and cheap as hamburgers, and the dogs themselves were the first to be shot – until then we carried on with the paradise of our lives: luxurious but not rich, safe and yet threatened, carefree if one did not think too carefully about the future. ♦



a másik lábát is átlendítette az ablakpárkányon.

Amint eltűnt, kiugrottam az ágyból és átrohantam a szüleim szobájába. Túl mély álomból ébredtek ahhoz, hogy komolyan vegyenek. Végül anyám mégis kikászálódott az ágyból, visszakísért a szobámba, és kivételesen megengedte, hogy becsukjuk az ablakot. Másnap reggel, amint meghallottam a reggeli tea-kocsi kerekeinek csattogását a folyosó felől, átmentem a szüleimhez.

Kitartó győzködésem felkelthette az érdeklődésüket, mert miután megitta a teáját, apám hálóköntösben és papucsban átjött a mi szobánkba, hogy kikérdezze a nővéreimet. A többiek nevettek rajtam, természetesen, ők semmit nem láttak, semmit nem hallottak. De amikor apám kinyitotta az ablakot, hogy friss levegőt engedjen be a szobába, földmorzsalékot vett észre az ablakpárkányon. Kihajolt és ott, a virágágyásban alattunk négy nagyméretű lábnyomot látott: kettő befelé, kettő az ellenkező irányba tartott.

Soha nem tudtuk meg, ki volt a férfi és mit akart. És senki nem gondolta rajtam kívül, hogy köze lehet a „kés a torkon” frázisához. Napjaink ugyanúgy folytak tovább: az ajtók, ablakok tárva-nyitva, a kutyák messze tőlünk, otthon, telt-múlt az idő, amíg az igazi terror elkezdődött. A valóságban semmi sem úgy esett, ahogy számítottunk rá. Minden össze-vissza, kiszámíthatatlanul történt, hol itt, hol ott, egyszer fényes nappal, máskor éjszaka, késekkel és lőfegyverekkel, mert mostanra a lőfegyverek úgy elterjedtek, mint a hamburger. Legelőször a kutyákat lőtték le. De addig életmódunk paradicsomi mámorban telt: luxus jólétben, de nem dúsgazdagon, biztonságban és fenyegetettségben egzszermind. És felszabadultan, ha az ember nem gondolt túl sokat a jövőre. ♦