

## I Arrived in Soul Before Body

by Nik Edge

### 1

On the blistering balcony I stood, my fidgeting hands shielding my eyes from the sun slanting in over the makeshift rooftops of straw. A cigarette dangled from my lips, and a near empty glass of whiskey was on the balustrade before me. In the fierce light the liquid was turning a hue of urine yellow. As if in response to it, I looked down into the swelter of people, expedited in their movement by donkey, mule, and horse carts; and cars. The machines swerved in and out, their horns blaring, with the people on foot breaking into sprints at yellow lights. They would be run over if caught in the change to red, and a nearby policeman would casually mark down the license plate,

as he had no machine to chase down the culprit. Likely no serious charges would ever be filed, and the cop would smirk at any passers-by attempting to drag the body out of the road, while the vehicularized hurled obscenities at the unnecessary delay. I reached out for the remaining whiskey, grateful for the numbing sensation it provided; some antidote for the clamorous din of Cairo.

From inside, through the shuttered doors, escaped the smells and sounds of cooking. I sniffed the hot juices and meat aroma, and listened to the crackling and sputtering of the juices and oil, like water and acid intermixed.

"Yes!" came an animated voice from within"(One had to practically shout to be heard). "This is good meat, worthy of the rattlesnake thief." I could see him through the small kitchen window, marinading another. He massaged the oily white body traced with veins, like red needles piercing a ball of fat.

"And who would that be?" I inquired, smacking at a species of bug I could not figure out, a yellow and red buzzer with short wings.

"Rode! He is a countryman of yours recently arrived. He has imported rattlesnake from Texas, in hopes I will be sufficiently happy with the delicacy to add it to my menu."

"So why do you say 'thief?'" I paced around the balcony, too embarrassed to go in and pour myself another whiskey. I had had two glasses already.

"Well, it is one thing to use the fruit of your own land in your own country, but I believe it is something entirely different to bring it to a whole different place where it is not indigenous."

"That is an interesting point, Habib, but does not your cooking of it also speak of thiefdom?" I smiled, bemused.

There came no immediate reply, just the perturbation of the juices. I silently cursed myself. His wife had died only a few months before, and he could become upset by the merest barb of a snake tongue. "Well," I thought, "what is one to do?" A sharp snapping sound made me swivel around, as I was a little inebriated. My eyes were blurry with the dizziness for a moment, then I smiled. It was a maid shaking the wrinkles out of a sheet, her arms and head stretched out of a window, two apartments over, one up. She had her hair fastened in a black scarf. I could see the strain on her face.

"Edgar?"

I had not noticed his approach and spun back around. "Yes?"

"I have brought you a fresh glass of whiskey." He had it on a silver tray, along with a glass of white wine and two plates piled high with rattlesnake, rice, assorted peppers, and squash. He was wearing a white chefs apron, and his dark Indian face was squinched up into a smile. "Well, Edgar," he said, and put the plates down on the small pine table.

"Well, Habib," I assented, and we burst out laughing, bending over with the spasms, and soon finding it more comfortable to sit down. We already knew that this dish was a new addition to his restaurant, and that we were lucky foreigners to be sitting on a rare balcony near the center of Cairo, eating and drinking and laughing, like two medieval kings.

Habib swirled the wine, and proffered his glass. My tongue swirled inside my dry mouth, as I touched my glass to his. "Cheers," I said, settling back into the padded chair.

"How are your lessons going, Edgar?" His forehead seemed to be growing a small acorn but, when I blinked, it disappeared.

I felt a pressure, and glanced up to see two children pulling out the corners of their mouths, pantomiming gorillas. Their eyes sparkled bitterly, and their faces were dirty. One had a missing eye, which he pointed at dramatically, then to me. I was not sure whether he meant that I was blind, or that I had made him blind by my presence.

Habib had his back to them, but noticing my discomfiture, swiveled around. "Go away! Go away, I say, or I will tell your mother, " he warned, and they

quickly disappeared from the window.

"They are somewhat frightening," I said.

"Well, their mother does not watch them." He looked up over his shoulder as an afterthought. "At least they do not go hungry," he amended, and shrugged. "They always guess at my meaning even though they do not know English."

"They are sad and perceptive," I added, feeling lame. A few people were still retreating back into their windows after the performance; slowly, like sleepwalkers.

"All Cairene children are sad and perceptive, Edgar. Do not let them bother you too much. After some time they will become familiar with you, like they are now with me."

"What is it like, this familiarity?" I could not help but add a touch of sarcasm to my voice.

He smiled, and leaned towards me, as if what he was about to relate was a secret. "I'll tell you what it is like, Edgar. It is like you are just another statue of foreign occupation. They do not see you as living anymore, or vital, and they leave you alone. Can you imagine my fears when I first arrived, with my father's solemn wish for me to run my own restaurant here, since foreign channels were opening by the year? He had entertained a powerful politician at his famous diner in New Delhi." Here he stopped and perfunctorily cleared his throat. "This man's name was Shahhat. My father said he looked the same age as me. Anyway, he expressed his ambition for the ministry, and said he could procure a building permit for my father, and that if, as he expected, the cook in Cairo proved as good as the one in New Delhi, who was familiar with many national cuisines, the restaurant would become the most popular in Cairo for the wealthy politicians and businessmen, who he could assure my father would respond favorably to his recommendation. He said, on his behalf, it would gain him needed prominence, also the power to sway people over in his favor."

"And what did your father say to that?"

"He said it was favorable to him, also, because he had a very capable son to run the establishment, who had just quit studying law, and who would profit greatly from a change of scenery."

"So here you are, Habib."

His face slightly darkened. "Yes. The only thing that bothers me is that he never specified how long I am to control it, because I have already sold my share to Saed, and do not plan on staying here in Cairo for the rest of my life."

I nodded my head. The sweat was pouring from our faces, and our thin white cotton shirts clung to us like second skins. The din was beginning to hurt my ears, as the cyclone of mosquitoes mercilessly attacked.

Parted our ways, Habib proceeded to the management of his cafe, and I meandered on home, avoiding car traffic where I could. My thoughts were confused. On one hand I was deeply enmeshed in my book of poetic reminiscences, a regurgitation of European adventures, where I had lived for five years after graduate school. I had gone there to escape a certain stagnation in the States, an evasive mind-numbing residence, and discovered fascinating people and places, some which turned into small frightening travelogue masterpieces in themselves: drug addictions inducing murder, and marauders hiding in the deepest destitution of cities.

But there I was in Egypt. I had been there a little over a year and had plenty of restful moments to analyze those "turbulent times." The documentation of them had come quite easily in poems, at times extending around me protectively like branches of octopus tentacles, although many of them were written immediately after the action.

The sky was punctuated by a brilliant band of purple light. It was not dark yet, and there were still vestiges of the imperial sun, the one that had earlier

scorched Habib and I as we gratefully acknowledged our repast. Later, as we chatted in the living room while the maid washed the dishes, he remarked upon his frequent thoughts on where he was, and where he would soon be. He compared the sensation to re-entering the womb, how at times, despite his mature years and religious training, he felt helpless in the face of the anger of the world, and wished again to "trade isolation for desolation." He had the noble quality of laughing afterward, until the stress of perspiration turned to the release of tears. "I am but only one," he would giggle to himself.

I peered into the vacancy of a bar, but did not enter, as I was not anxious (at the time) to watch a parade of vacant eyes steadily enter, occasionally one snatching a money-vacant wallet or unconsciously revealing a blood-stained knife handle protruding from a greasy back pocket.

I continued on my way, past a man gesticulating wildly with a toothless cobra. "A toothless monster," I thought, "is that what the world has reduced us all to, a nest of tamed reptiles?"

"No, no," I protested to the man with the wooden leg, who was hopping after me with the head of the snake in his mouth. I surmised he would have done anything with the snake for money, and that the result would not paint the world in a sunny aspect.

A horse carriage came into view and I froze. A horse carriage in the streets of Cairo (carts were common but carriages were rare)? I stepped gingerly to the side as it came toward me, stirring up debris. As I backed up under the faded awning of a jewelry shop, the driver, short, and in a black-and-white tuxedo, pulled the reins to halt the two black horses, whose front hooves briefly pranced in place. He climbed down slowly, as if he knew that I was watching, and went to open the carriage door, but before he could a voice roared, "I need no servants!" A light came on in the building across the way, and an indistinguishable shadow appeared at the window.

The owner of the protest, a gigantic figure wearing Bermuda shorts, walked toward the light, which gradually bathed him in phosphorous yellow. He was bald and when he reached the door his skin presented itself a dark cream. He turned and looked directly at me. His physiognomy had a sinister caste, for a moment all the skin was squinched up toward the mouth. Then it relaxed. "Go home and sleep," he called out equably, then closed the door behind him.

But it was inequitable! He no doubt slept fitfully that night, but I was molested in dreams, too intrigued by the mystery to let it rest. In one he appeared as a drunken truck driver who purposefully spilled coffee on my lap, while in the other he was a gigantic crocodile who caught me unawares on the bank of the Nile and was chewing on my leg as I awoke, pounding it with my fists, thus bruising my shins in the process.

And his naivete and/or indifference, to tell me to go home when my mere presence, looking on like a soaked dog, might have indicated I was a poor street leper! Who is this man and where is he from? Perhaps Habib knows, because many people around here say, "Only Allah knows, unless Habib or Saed knows also." On any account, I was bound to talk to the restauranteer on the morrow.

## 2

(What comes at night? Something or someone to invade your solitude. And in the morning you are plunged out of your nest into a mess of an egress).

To my understanding, my street was one way, leading me conveniently down to my English lessons, more removed from the lesions of stenches. I happened to live in one of the filthier parts of town, since I was saving money for a return

to Europe. Habib and other acquaintances often scolded me over a bottle of wine for it, sometimes building up to a chant of "Don't trade your present for the future." But as their reddened faces and the sparkle of the restaurant cleanliness receded, fresh came to mind scenes of stoic struggle, i.e., painting impossible corridors and shoveling up the freshest horseshit.

Such self-deprecating humor suited me perfectly as I swerved ahead with the morning goers. From up above it must have looked like an infinite number of liquid snakes, colored like a quilt, slithering along. Habib would ask me what I thought about on my morning stroll, and I would reply, "Well, invariably, I think of relativity: my meaning in this world and the good or bad relationship of the world to the rest of the universe."

"Yes, the way of the clown or the fool," he would say, "the wise way."

My street was supposed to be one way, it was marked all along with solid black street arrows, but recently a motley crew of beggars, students, drunks, and businessmen, had begun threading a snake right through the middle, causing curses, unnatural shoving, and infrequent knifings. It was particularly competitive late in the afternoon, especially on Fridays, when the students were eager to get to their parties, the beggars to their bottles, and the businessmen to their bars.

Early in my stay I had asked my landlady why white collars could not be found in bars. Her oval eyes lit up her rotund face and she said, "Egyptian drunks are the worst. Those businessmen do not want their reputations damaged."

"You mean?" I had persisted, even though I had a bag of groceries in either hand, and was balancing them in the palms, so my eyes created just enough space between them to look down at her, who was swaying from side to side, trying to get a better look at me.

"I mean, they feel even worse about their failure when they drink, and



sometimes even get violent."

"I see."

But when I understood is when I truly saw it. It was a Tuesday night and I was haggling over some scribblings, trying to form a poem. Frustrated, and easily distracted, I kept poking and rubbing my hands on the chair velour, peeking out the window from time to time to single out a person and needle him/her through the street maze. Sometimes I would time them against each other with a stopwatch, my first purchase in Egypt, and a good one, just a few blocks down from my place, which reminded me of one of my recent, aberrant episodes.

I had a short-lived timed swimming workout at the University. They asked for my identification and I said "I have none because I am no one."

I stood with my goggles on at the edge of the pool, dripping wet and making buzzing noises, until security came and ran me out. More people gaped than laughed as I led them to the edge of the school grounds, where one actually picked up some rocks and threw them at me as I dodged away into desolation.

What I saw that night was a figure directly below me, in a business suit that was crumpled up with sweat and dirt, spinning in circles with a knife drawn out, slashing around him like he was cutting down wheat. His face was swollen and purple, with numerous contusions, and he was yelling.

"I hate you! You made me small! I used to be strong! You took away my dream and now I want to kill! I am going to make you pay!"

Now and then he would single someone out and chase them, slashing at their back. He was after an old man when a voice yelled "Stop!" but he did not, and two shots rang out. He tilted for a moment, then fell, his head bouncing off the ground. Two uniformed policemen staggered up to the body, as if they had been pursuing him for miles, and took off their caps. One was shaking furiously, and his stifled sobs carried up through my open window with the scent of death.

My street was not one way. I jostled my way into the mess; the wrong-way snake was going straight up the middle, so I tried to keep on an outside edge, away from the friction. Some people urbanely excused themselves, even if they persisted in pushing somebody in the back, using that body as what was known as a "clearer." A good clearer was rare, someone with a lot of weight and a willingness to serve. People would shout, "I swear, I'll call my clearer!," "Give way, I'm a clearer!" or "You better watch out, because my clearer is a weightlifter!"

The final pronouncement was made by a little old woman refined in black, who was a few shoulders to the left of me. She was dodging in and out quite nimbly, even doing a little shoving of her own. She was complected quite colorfully for her advanced years, belying the spider webs around her eyes. Her presence was enormously strong. I could have watched her regal form all day, but I had work to do. My side street came up, and I fought my way through. I almost walked into a vendor selling a spiced-up beef concoction. He looked up from his building broth, his fingers sprinkling in some seasoning, as I was pushed against the back shield of his grille. Our eyes met for a moment, he looked back down as I tried to fight my way around the small barrier I was up against. He looked back up and started waving his hands in the air. He pointed to my nose and shouted something in Arabic. The impetus seemed to hoist me over to safety. It was then, in the presence of a street juggler spinning knives, that I noticed my nose was bloody.

I cleaned it up with a tissue I had in my pocket, as luckily it had stopped running. It felt a little sore near the tip, but I could not remember it being hit. I ducked under the low arched iron entryway and looked up. There was the little boy waving his hand with his perfectly erect mother beside him, blowing me a kiss. I blew a kiss back, thinking, "The Egyptians indeed have strange habits, but now is the time for a habitual lesson."

She had candy for me and tea. Her bird-like body scampered here and there, at the mercy of her genius-child-fiend. His preferred ploy to get what he wanted was to pinch her wherever he could reach. His name was Mustafa, and he was a baby-faced six-year-old, as if he had never aged. "Talk" was his favorite English word, he would say it all day, but perniciously refuse my grammatical recommendations. There is no other way to describe other than as simple offerings, because the mother would give me a scolding glance and hold one of her long bony fingers to her mouth when I had plied too hard.

"Talking," I would say.

"Talk," the obstinate boy would remonstrate, blinking his light blue eyes rapidly, as if his brain waves were stuck on rapid replay.

"Talked," I would change the grammatical pace a little, in hopes it might induce a slip of the tongue.

"Talk, talk, talk!" he would yell, and his mother would raise her eyebrows and chortle. I would look around at the cracked bare whitewashed walls and reconsider my quitting housepainting. Endure chemicals or humor at my own expense? But the true expense was her's, the mother's (Fermina's). She paid me handsomely, and not just from the purse. She always fixed me some sort of melted cheese with bacon bits in it that would smooth my way through the rest of the day, where I was only offered something to drink, I rather must say I was fortunate to imbibe, which did not compete with the ardor of Fermina's love potion. I possessed a humor and disposition akin to hers, and was beginning to grow fond of my lessons with Mustafa.

Typically, I thought of her the rest of the day. Through my remaining lessons I wove her presence in and out, the delicate control and gracious teasing. Compared to Mustafa, the other students were uninteresting, excited by conjugations but cold to the character of American jargon. I tried on many occasions to explain the significance of the American mindset in the Eastwood

statement 'Make my day.'

"Make my day," chimed in the adult-child Mubarek. He was in his early thirties but still lived with his mother, who I never saw because she was out working to support him. His name was not Mubarek but I called him that because he had pictures of the leader covering the walls of the apartment.

"No, no, no," I said. He had said it with no menace, smiling like the lap-dog he was.

"Make my day," I said fiercely, staring daggers at him, even allowing some saliva froth to bubble up to my lips.

"Yes, Make my day," he said jovially, as if to say, "You just make my day, you foolish and funny American." I had an insatiable urge at that time to get on my hands and knees and start barking out "Mubarek! Mubarek! Mubarek!" to see if I could finally crack his shield, and had to use all my powers of restraint to refrain. There was still a vestige of professionalism left in me, but it was constantly threatened by my creative impetuosity, that flickered with the lighting of my match outside Habib's cafe later that afternoon, saying "How are you?" to whoever passed, under the influence of the viceregal cigar.

### 3

I crushed out the cigar, saluted its dying embers, and pardoned myself through a group of European tourists to my reserved table. It was perfectly situated in the back corner near the bar and restroom. My eyes traced over the imported cacti resting in the glowing sand desert, the suave stuffed python with a fedora on his head, and the unrepentant hunched over drinkers, hailing the messenger of the liquor god-the unhermetical Hermes: bartender. Truly this bar was a strange sight(all bars are scary if you pause to think of all the

details held in such an unlawful area, like the judgmental mirrors some have), it was clearly separate from the restaurant, because of its patriotic patrons, not just the morbid python visage.

The restaurant itself was typical of its high price, with tapestries, rare wood tables, and gigantic fish tanks, which reminded me of years ago as a child in California, the fear and wonder as I looked out the picture glass at the black sparkling sea, waiting for me to come out so it could swallow me up-the liquid black monster.

The sea(water) permeated me. If my stomach was bloated with beer I thought of water, and when I thought of water I thought of the womb. The womb breeds life and life breeds the womb.

"What can I get for you tonight, Mr. Harding?"

My eyes pulled off the table to a fat gut to a fatter face. This was Abrik, who had served me the first night I ventured in out of a rainstorm, looking for something to fire up my blood. He now felt it requisite of him to serve me each and every time I came in, which was at least every other night, although by my glances I let it be known I wanted to be served by the new young hostess, who Habib told me also worked the bar area.

"Your strongest drink," I said with a fiendish smile.

"Okay, Abrik will make you strongest drink ever," and he made the motion of slapping me on the back. His face lit up like red dye added to putty.

Abrik's strongest drink, I knew, would keep getting stronger. It was a game we had been playing for a couple weeks. The first time he had watched me clinically as I did not let the mixture back up. Satisfied, he periodically increased the liquor and decreased the mix, all the time changing and masking the ingredients. So far I had only vomited once, and that in the privacy of my own bathroom. What was unspoken between Abrik and I was that as soon as I rushed to the bathroom panic-stricken, the game was over, because my rotten

sickness would jeopardize the reputation of Saed and Habib's establishment.

Saed was rarely seen. He was rumored to be involved in the underground, but Habib had dispelled it, telling me he was like a cousin and that he knew the "grain and fiber" of his being, that he was a person "innocent of deception." Myself, I had only seen him once, and that on the occasion of his chauffeur raising his coattails as he entered the limousine, which honked its way off into the crowd like a giant beetle.

On my own terms I had reserved my table. It was never officially awarded to me. Simply it happened to be the table I had sat down at my first night there, and had never ceased to accord it my understanding. This understanding was an acceptance of my position on the periphery, since I was a recent initiate to that particular part of the world, but intrinsically also a constant observer of my surroundings in the classic poet guise. This latter position was my past, present, and future of life. Yet the periphery in a public domain is purely mental, for when one is accosted, the bars of his/her cage are twisted off. Such was my trivial dilemma that first night, when a small man with delicate features and a deep voice approached my table and said, "You look cold and tired, sir...might I order you a soup to hearten you up?"

"No, thank you, I just spent-"

"No worry, sir, it is on the house." Before I could thank him he was off, moving haltingly(each time to politely excuse himself), but quickly, through the growing patrons. I was immediately struck by his humble celerity, the speed with which he accorded me(a strange foreigner) respect. "Respect undue to a barfly," I thought, greedily slurping down my third drink. Slightly anxious I was, because although I had traipsed from country to country in Europe, I never had to leapfrog miles and miles of ocean to land me safely on a separate continent. "The art of suspension," I thought, "which I must continue to develop in my writing, at least that's what the craft of the design dictates." A

tumult of ideas were lounging around in my head. I felt it incumbent upon me to seek refuge from the rain in short order, and formulate a coherent idea while I unpacked.

Meanwhile the small man had come out and set some zesty vegetable soup in front of me. "Enjoy it, sir."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, but may I ask, do you have a place to stay tonight?" He sat at the table opposite to me, his hands clenched together.

"No, I haven't looked yet."

"Well, it is getting late. Here, take this card. It is a landlady who has a building two blocks down...that is going east, away from the airport and five blocks north, which is a left. Tell her you are a friend of mine. My name is Habib-

"Nice to meet you. My name is Edgar."

"I'm sorry to be in a hurry, Edgar. The restaurant just recently opened but we are already busy. Come back late in the afternoon some day and we will have a talk."

"Certainly."

"Very well, good luck and a nice evening to you, Edgar."

"And the same to you, Habib."

The same to you, Habib...the same you, Habib. You have always treated me as if you have known me your entire life. I believe it was during our second meeting, over jasmine tea, that you told me how your first love was fishing, and that some day we should go out in your vessel, because there were still fish to catch in the Nile.

Presently I looked up at the leering python and wondered how difficult it had been to catch(kill) it, and where it had been found. Its presence(fatal at that) always conjured up mythological images to me, of demonic practices and

bloody sacrifice. In my mind dead and living started to connect and coexist, because Abrik's grin began to emulate the reptile's. Of course, the fast rate of my drinking could do nothing to quell it, but the classic irony was that the more I saw of the similarity, the more I drank to it.

Habib came up, setting a plate of raw fish in front of me, and sat down. He rubbed his eyes vigorously, then looked hard at me.

"What is it?" I asked, discomfited.

"Nothing."

"Am I that inebriated?"

"What do you mean, my friend, certainly you are always 'that inebriated.'- He smiled and briefly whistled.

"Well, you rubbed your eyes, as if you could not believe what you were seeing."

"Yes, you are right. My recent operation has made my sight so clear, I do not even have to wear reading spectacles."

"To your sight, then."

"Yes." He raised his hand in gesture while I imbibed. There was a pregnant pause. I kept shoving aside the image of the horse carriage, introducing ropes and snakes. The snakes climbed the ropes and the ropes strangled the snakes. Meanwhile my mouth devoured the dead fish before me. What was the name? It was like a rattler but a little bit different sounding. Now my head was pounding and I felt like I was drowning in a snake pit.

"Are you thinking of Rodel?"

"Yes! And I guess it would be rhetorical to ask how you know?"

"It would." He looked wise; had shed his proprietorship. The restaurant was emptying behind him, but to his mind it had already closed. His powers of insinuation were extraordinary.

"Well, what of this Rodel, Habib? I know you do not bring up names-I mean



people-lightly."

"I told you of his fetish for snakes, rattlesnakes, to be precise, did I not?"

"To be precise?" Yes," I chuckled. The python smiled at me out of the corner of my eye. "Snakes are parading through my mind and now I know why."

"Yes, Edgar. This countryman of yours, from what my contacts tell me, is in the snake trading business, not just in wholesale with restaurants like mine. I'm curious what is being exchanged for his product."

"Snake trading? That is strange, I think. I guess it is real but still it is strange, I think. And who would he be trading snakes with, anyway?"

"That is what I want you to find out."

"Are you serious?" I knew that to be an "eye" for Habib was a very respected, nay, even exalted position in the community, and that it was accorded to only a select few. I heard he had some deal with Police Chief Nessim, whose specifics I could only guess at.

"I am always serious, as you know. I have been thinking about our conversation last night, and I think it would be wise to check him out."

"Well then, Habib, I guess I get to be a true detective, not just an imaginary one."

"I knew you would be interested, being a writer. I will serve a little as your editor. Do not feel rushed, but as soon as you have clues, come back here, and we will compare notes, and cut out that which is superfluous in our case."

"Well put, Habib. I am ready to begin immediately."

"Very well, but are you not going to finish your drink first?"

I looked down and swirled it around with my finger. "No, I'm soaked through with spirits as it is."

"You must already have a hunch then?"

"Yes, a hunch, but a big one."

Snakes, a horse carriage, and a bald black crown. Somehow they had to come together to form a nucleus. Then that nucleus might branch out to build a body. Yet at the moment the structure was mine, and my entity had to be taken care of. I took pains to lessen the speed and slightly drunk shuffling of my steps, and looked to the ground while I walked, as if I was in a dour mood. Sometimes I was fooled myself and bounced off someone, who would remain as silent as me. There were still a good number of people about, even though it was fast approaching midnight. Street vendors and hustlers were scrambling away, since the area was soon to be cleared by police and security, who would arrest anyone not able to prove residence or a legitimate claim in the area. And to the police there was no such thing as a "legitimate gripe," since gripes themselves were considered illegitimate. I had seen people having their heads knocked on in search of proper definitions of words. Some officers would line a group up and play their skulls with sticks like the xylophone, searching for appropriate tones. Security forces were a different matter. They did not harass anyone, but if they were harassed themselves, would not hesitate to shoot anyone. Protectors of all manner of wealthy personages, they had a furtive truce with their gun-wielding counterparts, who wanted to know specifically who those personages were. A tentative understanding existed between the two, because they both had the power of the gun. According to Habib, at very late night(early morning) hours, from an explanation by cousin Saed, the lower crust of both forces, garnering just enough money and interest from their boring shifts, haggled almost cheerfully with each other, rarely, if ever, reaching an impasse. Still, in general, the two forces slighted each other, police calling security pure mobsters and security labelling police plain thugs. Of course, there were no shortages of variations on these themes. Upper crust vilified one another in

the press and in underground columns, branding each other for rashes of unsolved murders. These murders invariably took place on the outskirts of town, the poorest area, where the citizens said the police were scared, not answering calls of help. Recently security sponsored picketers at the public swearing in ceremony for the new Police Chief Nessim, who smiled at the cameras through clenched teeth, stepping over bouquets of congratulatory flowers.

Here and there I unobtrusively skirted through the crowds, neglecting to puff on a cigar. I might have been too much of an unnatural presence, some drunk philosopher searching for the meaning of life on a most dangerous and destitute road to death. Humor and eccentricity were not allowed in these streets, only in the circus. There were no heroics, no death-defying leaps here, only unbroken falls. The preferred method for execution by the underground, according to the police, was "throwing adversaries off rooftops." Instinctively looked up, and saw no one about to be pushed off a ledge, but did spot a man dressed in a blue suit sporting a rifle. Whoever survived their fall would be lucky to not be killed and eaten by street dogs, who arrived much quicker than the police. If they survived both, which was rare, they spent the rest of their lives as cripples, a testament to the brutality of their enemies. Security forces claimed that the police were notified by the mob beforehand, that it was just business, meaning that it was an inside hit, not an outside job, i.e., not a blood lust killing of an innocent citizen. Police countered by saying that security were the main hit men for the mob, because it was difficult to trace back to the source, and because security, sponsored by the millions of dollars of their employers, bought off judges and juries. Security wanted to know what the final piece of the puzzle was, that the wealthy people of Cairo were responsible for the majority of the murders? The police countered "No," that they were foreigners checking into hotels under false names, on brief parlanes with their pawns. Then why not close the hotel under false pretenses when an

important meeting was known by informants ripe to be adjourned? Or at least bugged. Police scoffed, that it was not under their power of jurisdiction to dictate to the hotels, who were world-wide corporations with the most expensive lawyers...now, on the other hand, if security were to donate a small portion of their extravagant earnings to the city, there could be bought a most experienced and able public defender. Maybe security should stop being critical and assist Cairo and its people. Aha! rallied the insurgents, there go the police again, telling us we need to hold their hand through everything. Perhaps the people's choice of the ape Nessim was not such a good choice, afterall.

Nessim was hairy, had a full beard, and insanely bushy eyebrows. He also had long arms and walked bowlegged. He was only thirty-seven, one of the youngest police chiefs in the history of Cairo, and had, from official figures, personally locked up over 1,000 criminals in his scant seven years on the force. He was formerly a member of security, which made his battle with them ever the more intriguing. He had been the personal bodyguard of the most important people to pass through, and had never disappointed. He was skilled in various martial arts and was rumored to have enhanced his reflexes by snatching flies over refuse, with his bare hands in the streets as a youngster. Habib told me the mob and security felt threatened by his mere bodily presence in power, that they were trying to goad him into a slip of his "baboon tongue" that would put him on his heels, before he could find a legitimate reason in his "ape head" for declaring outright warfare.

As I walked, the presence of security was virtually nil. It seemed they had decided to claim the heights and leave the rest to the police, who were tipping off their caps and scratching their brows, none giving me more than a cursory glance. No one spoke much, as if afraid that if voices pierced the air, bullets would follow. Most looked to be in their twenties, with thin moustaches and thinner limbs. Occasionally a laugh could be heard, but it would be curtly

whispered down. Sweat ran down my face in rivulets now, some boarding my nose for a quick drop to my feet. I felt a bit anxious to get to my stake-out, and was perplexed to find my stomach already rumbling. Determined I was to get a better look at the burly black man in the Bermuda shorts, who seemed completely out of place, like a motion picture actor supernaturally transferred from screen to street. He had seemed utterly cool, unfazed, and confident, such as one only sees in people unattached to loved ones, and unafraid to die. His natural controlled violence was similar to the uncontrolled violence near at hand, the same strain with different underpinnings, a colossus of turning knobs steel machinery, one that could kill or let live with equal aplomb.

Arrived at the point, I was greeted by the horse carriage, shining bright under the street lamps against the black background of the building like a blind provender of faith. To me, who slunk my way down to the same awning I had stood under the night before, it was a blatant sign of the past usurping present and future. It reminded me of the days of the knight, the betrayals coming in the night with the lunge of a sword through a neck, the victim crawling out of the carriage into the mud, dying face-first, extravagant wig askew. My mind intimated the deeper soul of the planetary object, tossing and turning in space like a solitary space man cast off from his ship...cast adrift. That carriage had a dark soul. As I stared at it, my sweat running fast, I heard the cries of those it had murdered, unspecific yet distinct. "Nothing in the universe is untouched," I thought. "Everything has matter which is the integrity of the shape. Many shapes are created by man but they pale in comparison to those created by nature. Nature might use its elements overabundantly, but still, at the core, they are hers, while man creates from many outside sources. Ay, the killing beast-the car. The car might be the most evil object man has created...nay, the gun, the trigger of the gun..."

A light came on in the second floor, flickering. "A candle?" I thought. "That

is odd." The presence of the fire piqued my urge to light a cigar, but of course I could not flirt with detection. The balance of the carriage, the light, and me was tenuous. It was a moment that had a purity of anticipation, and I wished I could freeze it so I could safely smoke. My feet were sore from all the walking I had done, and my neck ached from tossing and turning in bed the night before. But this was a constant irritant to me, and no doctor had a good explanation for it.

"It is just the case of you having a transferable malady."

"So what you mean to say is that I have a sore neck instead of a sore back?"

"Exactly."

The light arose, then fell. Arose again, and fell. "It is controlled by an unsure hand," I thought. Then the dark cream face was at the window. I retreated the few feet I could, like a cat to its feeding corner. The head turned up and down and side to side with a jerking motion, as if it belonged to a robot. It was evident there was someone else in the room behind him, but from my vantage point, and from the size of the window, even if the black man had left his post, that person would have had to step up to the picture frame just like he had. For a brief spell the head was directed back into the room, moving spasmodically. I could only guess at the volume of the almost certain yelling. I could see now that he was naked from at least the waist up, and his back completely filled the window. Then the face was at the window again, the candle was extinguished, and all was black. I stood there in the same position ruminating about the mystery person. From all appearances it distinguished itself as a lover(I say "it" because a person does not exist until he/she is present).

So far I was astounded by my fortune, getting a second look at my "suspect." As I peered down the street into emptiness, I was assailed by memories where I was the primary suspect(of a dissimilar nature). I had often heard whispered

comments about how "strange" I was. "Yeah, I am a different breed than ordinary man," I thought. I felt the deep scar on the back of my neck, as if it had been wrapped around with a scythe. A man in Italy, claiming to be with the mob, on some deserted country road I was looking for a ride on, reached into the pocket of a red jacket. He pulled out a knife and a deeply creased and pallid visage. I knew he was young but he looked very old. He smiled at me, his mouth formed a half circle, and rotting teeth peeked out. Reeking of cologne, and the expensive clothes that were slightly big on him, he said, "You are an outsider, I do not like. I am mafia. You do want to quarrel, no? Give me your money."

"No." Before I thought I was going forward. There was a deep nausea in my gut that made him seem smaller, and wave in the patterns of his suit. His face was contorted and liquefied. I twisted at every part of him, I felt a vague warmth at my neck that make me almost hyperventilate. He was twisted up in a ball, then I pushed him flat. My hands grabbed his head and pulled up, standing with the weight of my body on his back. He felt like a rock now, but I pulled and twisted until there came a crackle, then a snap. His limbs shook, then were still. I shuddered now as I recalled what I had thought then, shaking uncontrollably, but practically laughing: "You were like a rice crispy, my friend, you crackled, then you popped." Eventually I shoved the body into a ditch obscured by rose bushes. Still I stood over the body, until my anger ebbed away, and my sanity returned. Finally I walked away. The tears came easily, but not the twisted thought: "I might have killed when I had a choice."

As I still stood under that awning, hugging myself, the absurdity of killing crept up. "Here I stand," I thought, "as if waiting to be killed, and I wonder about modern civilization, why a man should feel remorse when he has murdered because his life has been threatened. Is not man, through the ages, getting weaker? But what am I first, man or human? If it is the latter, then it

is reasonable, this guilt, this pain, because it stems from being humane. But if it is the former, I did more right than wrong, because the strong must not only survive, but assert themselves, for that man prodded at a deep hunger, and my reaction was to eat-instinct. "Use your instinct or become extinct." That could be a good moniker, but not proper for my students. At any rate, whether man first, or human, I was a poet that had killed.

Night approached dawn, as I sat Indian style. Finally it seemed safe enough to light up a cigar. Tired and distracted by the light activated upstairs, I shooed off embers that had dropped in my lap, cursing myself. A vague shadow appeared inside at a downstairs window, then disappeared again. I stood up, the smoke of the cigar swirling before me, as the black man walked out accompanied by the same driver as the night before.

The Bermuda shorts were still on, along with an orange Hawaiian shirt, with a giant collar. He posed looking up into the sky, like an army general scanning a jet plane horizon. There was something timeless about the scene, hearkening back to imperialism, raised flags in forts signaling the destruction of civilizations. It was as if he had claimed the day, and every day after, as his own.

The horses took off trotting, pulling the carriage behind them, and I walked fast, then jogged, in pursuit of it.

Pace-wise, it was not difficult to keep up. The dodging and feinting around people was what exhausted me in the end. I concentrated on the back of the driver's head like it was the pinpoint of the universe, a black circle toeing my unbending line. I felt my legs getting rubbery after a few miles, but pushed on.

The road got narrower, and rolled up and over barren hills, with the forbidding rawness of abandoned building projects overlooking, like shells of giant caterpillars. My heart was beating almost faster than I could count(I had



learned this precaution from one helpful student at the university swimming pool). It swerved in and out of palpitations, which was normal for the blood.

I thought of the danger I had plunged myself into, and laughed to myself. "Here I am, the swift detective," I thought. Thrill of adventure had completely overcome the tenuousness of life. "And what is life but a riddle anyway? This little mystery is the riddle of purity and poetry in action."

The carriage stopped before a large barn, painted bright red, and the driver leapt down, crouched down-stood up, and threw a rock at the door. It clanged, reverberating off the metal. The door opened almost instantaneously, the carriage rolled in, and the door was shut.

Sun rays beat down fiercely. Because of the quick pleasure of my progress, I turned around and started the long trek back. My mouth was cotton dry, but yet I was not intrinsically thirsty. The stream of consciousness was flowing with a virtual certainty: Somewhere in that barn was a man named Rodel.

5

Through the remainder of the day, relating my discovery to Habib was the prime motivator. It was still up to question whether the rattlesnake thief and the bald man were transacting secret business under the noses of local power and authority, but I was convinced enough, especially with my attendant

hallucinatory visions, which always signaled correct hunches. Deeper in my soul was the recurrence of the dead man. He appeared as a rose bush dripping with blood. Despite the rapid blinking of my eyes, he floated before me in the heat haze. I tried fanning the heavy air to disperse him, to no avail. Sweat

and tears commingled under the chemicals of my brain, stinging my detective confidence. I had to admit to myself that the dead man was stronger when I, too, was stronger. It was ironic, because supposedly when one is weak, he/she is more susceptible to attack. Key to this turn was his similarity to me. As the days and months passed, his features began to imitate mine, or vice versa. His body became more anemic, like mine, just as the hectic gleam in his eye; his face feverish with philosophical frenzy and his speech soft but crisply discordant. Sometimes I would catch people grimacing, not from the volume, but the pungent fiber of my words, and depending upon my sobriety or drunkenness, my pride would suffer or flourish at their expense. Essential to my enthusiasm as I walked toward my lessons and Habib's humble celerity was the simple release from a quagmire. In other words, all the preceding thoughts and action were like an extension of my poet-ego. Suffice it to say, I had a habit of placing myself at the axis, and revolving that action around myself, as if had I not existed in it, something of a polar opposite would have happened to the bald black man.

Such is the ego of the poet, and such is the stoic of the poet. I was quite resigned to my cohabitation with my unpredictable detective post, and with the dead man, who progressively furnished tools for a veritable double.

The walk did not prepare me for my lessons. Fermina had an urgent errand to run, and left me lonely and jaded with Mustafa, who was behaving belligerently. He was ripping at the drapes, trying to get a look on the street for when his mother returned, and the only word I failed to inculcate as I extricated his baby hands was "No." Apparently my double had stolen the effective tone for the day, because the boy persisted in his antics. He was wearing some sort of sailor's outfit that gave him the luxury of precociousness. He fought at the wheel with me, retorting "No!" when I pulled him away from the window, punching and pinching at me while I inwardly cursed my new

employment. Babysitting was completely abhorrent to me. The only time I had ever been forced to administer it I was twelve years old, and I hit back a sixty-year-old boy, giving him a bloody nose. His father responded by giving me, in turn, a bloody nose, whose father gave the assailant a broken jaw, and went to jail a few days for it. I remember him walking to the cruiser handcuffed, with a copy of Crime and Punishment sticking out the back of his oily trouser pocket. He was a swarthy mechanic who spent most of his free time reading. "I read to get stronger," he once told me, and I was prone to believe him, even if he worked hard physically as a mechanic, because his arms were bigger than any I had ever seen on another mechanic. I fought against his wishes for me to pick up some trade, like carpentry or housepainting, about as fiercely as Mustafa fought me, but surrendered in the end, just as Mustafa, becoming what I did not desire.

He sat down, sniffing, tears rolling down his cheeks.

"Now, Mustafa, let's shake hands, no hard feelings," I said, but he sat there stubbornly silent, refusing it.

"Mustafa, your mother is going to be upset with me," I surrendered, and sat down in the same pose as him.

Fermina, fortunately, was sympathetic. She laughed and said, "He is very difficult when I am gone, is he not, Mr. Harding?"

"Yes, Fermina, very much so. I spent all the time keeping him from ripping curtains."

"Don't worry, he is pretty harmless, as you know...but you look very tired, and I was running late, so you'd better hurry to your next lesson."

I looked at my neglected watch. "You're right. But I can get there in time if, like you suggest, I hurry." I felt awkward and foolish.

As I walked out she said, "I'm sorry again, Mr. Harding. You know boys will be boys," which made me tingle.

Fermina was all I thought of while I instructed Mubarek on the names of the planets. He was sitting like a Buddha, eating a hamburger he had insisted I make for him. I had to walk a couple miles for my money to find ground meat that would not make him vomit, and had cooked it well done, so that at least if it was a little spoiled, it would not be filled with rancid grease. He ate it fast, not once hesitating to wipe his dirty mouth, and burped prodigiously afterward.

"Thank you for good lesson, " he said, fell back on a pillow and shut his eyes. A part of me, possibly my double himself, wanted to hit the dough boy's dough stomach, because he took such luxurious pleasure in its health.

But it was time to go, and I still needed the handsome pay of my lessons, which came once a month in a ludicrously sized envelope, at least a foot long, as if the comparatively small check needed breathing space. It was one of those official looking white envelopes with a clear plastic window.

Officially, I proceeded immediately to my rendezvous with Habib, and was neither physically attacked, threatened... nor even accosted.

Once inside the bar, I settled in with a beer, anticipating him. A liquid face grinned twistily in my glass, then disappeared.

Abrik looked disappointed, that I was not prime for the challenge. He only nodded his head as I continued to order liquorlessly. My mind was already in too much tumult. Fermina had excited me, but I did not know how I would pursue her. She had an innocence that tortured my insides. It creased my egomania, because it reminded me of a still unpolluted core of myself. Somewhere in the interior still existed an optimism and morality that reacted sanely to the most confrontational scenes, excepting the aberrant order placed in for the dead man. He was my conscience, an evil one. In the following months, when the inner struggle would swallow up such philosophizing as

progressively prick me, and all people I came in contact with would feel his presence.

But now I am looking back in retrospect and not reliving. There is a wasteful portion of retrospect that cannot be denied, for it overrides the experience with the impurity of nostalgia, which manipulates emotion for its own purposes. It destroys the pain and contradiction of life, which has its own integrity. There is a solidarity and also a lesson in it, that which creates means for discovery. This theory retreats to that night again, when I was thinking of a basic principle, that the mind can be dangerous. Simplicity. I was watching the young hostess again. She was short and a little plump, with large breasts. She looked briefly at me with huge brown eyes, and continued with her dalliances, while I puffed venomously. I felt a little inebriated, but generally clear-headed. Abrik was dusting off the python, balancing precariously on a stool, and the hostess was teasing a group of old gray military men, when Habib came up to my table, looking very anxious.

"Habib, what is wrong? You look like you have seen my ghost."

He nervously laughed and sat down. "Very good. Indeed, you are a writer. You're living in your mind."

"That's a fair assessment. I have been trying, but I'm always in the process of becoming."

"And what are you becoming now, my friend?"

"I believe I am becoming an eccentric detective who has two sets of eyes."

"Of course. Every detective has to see with two sets of eyes." His , meanwhile, were scanning spastically, as if they had been disconnected from his head.

"But what have you been seeing, Habib?" In the near background the young hostess was leaning over, and I could see the black cloth of a bra. Suddenly

the bar seemed very small and suffocating, and the flow of the restaurant ebbed in its wake, a blurry cavalcade like the underwater Titanic. "What I am seeing is presently dying," I thought.

"What am I seeing? A beautiful woman drowning in a huge body of nothingness."

He swiveled around in his chair like a giant toy, doing a whole cycle without stopping. "You mean Indira, right? The young hostess." His brow creased but did not fold. His skin was shining with perspiration that did not let a single drop go.

"Yes! That is her. Why have you never told me her name?"

"You never asked. You were as if bottled up, I believe you say. Now you have released it. But leave her alone. Every man that has been intimate with her has contracted a rare disease and died."

I laughed shortly and said, "You're crazy. Are you aware of that?"

"No. Very sane. I have to say you look a little bothered yourself. Have you found out anything about Rodel?" Habib's hand formed a rigid prism.

"Not definitely." I stared at his hands.

"I see." Habib's hands unfolded.

"I have discovered a different character, though, who may be connected...does Rodel happen to spend any time in a red barn?"

"Yes! But how do you know? I have heard of it but never seen it."

"Well, the man I was observing, who transports in a horse carriage, took a ride out there this morning and disappeared into it."

"You did not see him come back out?" Habib watched the young hostess bend over the bar.

"I did not have the time." Panoramicizing the scene, if felt like an excuse, but then I was bound to my lessons. Reality required me to have two destinies, not just the two sets of eyes. "Now my double will exert himself," I thought.

"I want you to have this," he said, looked around uneasily, then turned back.

His hands went to his lap, then he leaned forward, reaching underneath, and mine went to intercept. It was a small heavy curved object in a paper bag. When I had it figured I just sat staring dumbly at him.

"Tell no one of this," he said. "Saed told me he had heard people were out to harass you, took concern, and wanted you to exercise this precaution."

"But-" I was trying to pass it back to him under the table, but he refused.

He stood up. "Like I said, just a precaution. Keep following this man in the horse carriage, and if you can, get his name. Saed is most interested. I am sorry for my abruptness, but I must get back."

Then he was gone.

When I got home(expeditiously), I inspected the contents of the bag. There was a revolver and bullets. "Habib, what is wrong?" I thought. "You looked scared. So I must conclude are we both in danger. It is strange to see a religious man handing over a gun. No, it is strange to see myself accept it, from a friend. Still, I must continue my case, to retain the honor I was respectfully given." I picked up the revolver.

The double had spoken.

## 6

Epicentric echoes.

Surgent sallies.

The morning was chill. My sinuses and legs felt solid. Shingles of muscle pain crested up my neck. I looked over to the revolver and thought about its influence on the proceedings. Directly I limped into the shower, cursing. I manipulated the controls between lukewarm and hot, focusing on a red dot

somewhere between the black tiles. My eyes blurred with the intensity of the steam heat, then bulged with alarm at the blood forming at my feet. My hand opened the white curtain and reached for the red towel. Fingers pinched the terrycloth around the nose, but the steam and the blood kept running. Absently I knelt on knees and mopped at the pink water, finding a pig impression of myself grinning. Shortly, I threw the towel over the door, and turned the controls to complete cold. Shivering, my shaken hands felt at the base of the nostrils. The stem of blood was ebbing, and my arms hugged myself in mourning until the blood clotted in the chill.

In the mirror, my body looked gray and flat, like an empty firehose. There were black crescents under my eyes, as if exhaustion had attacked with a scythe. Only my penis and feet seemed unaffected, as both moved freely.

Blood in my nose had dried to balls, which I methodically punctured with my fingers and exterminated the remains with splashes of water. Instinctively, I challenged my reflection, and looked into mottled eyes-the primitive spectrum.

I remembered my father threatening that pimp on the street, stiffening his arms into appendages like unbreakable ice, and the pretty girl with glitter eyeshadow: "Hey, big boy, what's your price?"

There was deep sorrow in her eyes, but father's anger spurned her completely: "Whore, get yourself off this street."

I dressed in neat whites(cotton turtleneck sweater and canvas pants), then picked up the revolver. Circumspectly I caressed it, but of course my hand could not warm it up. Its innate coldness excited me, much as if it were some woman who could only act out her rehearsed line: "I do not need your touch."

Out on the street it was strangely quiet. There were dead looks on faces, like stranded ashore fish with popping eyes. They looked at me rather suspiciously, as if I was their barbed hook, or sunken net. Despite it, I smiled. I had a mission. "Derision has many forms," I thought.



The agricultural building sparkled ahead. Unfortunately Egypt was poor in that area and all I could think of was "Do not look into the eyes of the sun." There were a couple of custodians engaged in sweeping the walkway, and I could imagine gold teeth busily masticating on gum. Custodians were prospering, allegedly unskilled miscreants who benefited from the planned projects of paternal city officials. The majority of the electorate castigated this "unpractical opulence," since existing structures were sound, and need not be replaced. "We need homes for our people, not palaces for our politicians," Fermina once told me. One custodian was wearing a yellow felt hat that he had to constantly adjust to keep the sun off his face. He smirked, tried to secure it with one hand, dropped his broom to assure it with two, and smiled. I frowned, and waded through the stream of leaves rushing before his sweep.

My nose itched. I coughed, wondering if Nature's excretions had attacked with gold pollen dust. But would it stop the eternal bleeding? Regardless, it was time to investigate the red barn. The blood color in itself supported my suspicions. The whole situation was very mysterious, as unnerving as a group of policemen up ahead, holding cocked rifles. They just stared at me as I approached, at least fifty maintaining a strict line. One, with more of a carefree habit, disengaged himself and closed the distance. He was wearing a burgandy suit and had a cigarette dangling over a drooping mustache. He tilted slightly to the left, from the shortness of the leg, I supposed. A contort of pain nestled in lines around his mouth and eyes. His face was red and puffy, his eyes bloodshot. It was as if all the blood from his crippled limb had gone directly to his head. He smiled officially and said in fluid English, "Good day, Mr. Harding."

"And good day to you, Mr.-"

"Cannot say." He held the cadaver away from his body and lightly tapped off some ashes. The line behind him evinced no signs of movement. The blue

uniforms were blazed by the yellow haze. "Perhaps I awoke a little earlier than usual this morning," I thought. The sun slanted over the near rooftops, in this case deserted storefronts. There were still small clusters of broken glass, shining like gigantic crystals, and mangled iron bars, testimony to a hegemony between buyer and seller.

"What can you say then?"

He coughed and laughed raspily. "What can I say, indeed? First, I cannot tell you my name, it is a mandate from higher authorities, wherein familiar communication between police and citizenry is deemed inappropriate. Not that you look dangerous."

"Why, thank you." What else was there to say?

"As I was saying, you do not look harmful, but then words can be mundane." He dropped the burning filter and crushed it underneath a black loafer. "But then this day itself could be mundane. I have these officers at my disposal, but it is already too hot...but what do I mean by that? Well, we have reports again of a march by the disruptive students. If they are true, my men will be responsible to contain them until riot police arrive...of course the whole premise is mundane. Forty-six men to contain an unruly mob? Impossible. Some days I think of what could have become of me if I had stayed in the education circles. But now we are in the present. What will this day bring?"

"I don't know, I was just on my usual way down this street-"

"Usual, you say?" He twirled the hairs of his moustache like fine filaments.

"Well, I guess where you are going is none of my business. Anyhow, it promises to be a sunny day, if not bright. The recent rain had us all suspicious." He arched his eyebrows provocatively. "Friends, husbands, wives, and mistresses suspicious of each other. Yes, treachery is at hand. Domestic issues are coming to the forefront, alcohol-related deaths spiraling. The operative phrase has been Allah-be damned. I almost expected a knife to overspill into my home and kill me. In my profession and at home I

can only guard against such danger."

He paused. The sun was glinting now and the officers shrugged and coughed and blinked. Some looked at their rifles as if they were seeing them for the first time in a fierce light. It reminded me of the moment in which I killed the double. But what could I do now? I was confused.

"Well, I must get-"

"Of course! Of course! A man like yourself, an American, must guard against foreign hostilities. Our Chief Nessim is very concerned that people of other nationalities do not get caught up in the civil unrest."

"I understand."

"Good. Good. But we are specifically concerned about people unintentionally getting caught in the flames of the fire."

"I promise you I will do my best"(What was I doing promising him anything?). The officers behind him looked intensely red in the face, no doubt wearying of maintaining their appointed space. A small propeller plane whined overhead, a streak of black, and one officer raised his hand like a claw, in a pantomime of natural grace: as if to swat it. In the harsh light now I could almost see the double's face.

"Well, it is time for me to get back to my post. I hope you have a good day along your alternate route."

"And good day to you." I turned away gingerly, the revolver itching at the sweat on the small of my back, like a protruding tumor. I turned and peeked around the side of the building at the corner of the street, but he was no longer appraising me.

But did he suspect me as a spy?

the newspapers, the students, having no pressing concerns besides the intransigent curfew, were banding together with the consumers against the shop owners. These owners, in turn, castigated their attackers, but were more critical of city officials, who were branded "anarchists." They had the problem of security and police to cope with, along with the resurgence of student protest. "Students Run Amok-Hell to Pay," ran an underground newspaper, recently bought by a multi-millionaire English businessman, who, despite reports that he had never written articles professionally, was now the chief reporter. Known to employ underlings of Saed, he did as he pleased, cantering between entertainers and businessmen like a giant steed. "He wants a statue erected of himself immediately, not after he dies, not sometime soon, but today, tomorrow at the latest," Habib remarked one day. The man's name was Edward Graves, and he always wore red dinner jackets. It was said he had one for every day of the year.

My pace quickened. The character of the day felt inexorable, as if it were theatre. That officious officer seemed to have his lines rehearsed, while his stand-ins eagerly anticipated the closing of the curtain. Only the revolver remained apart, too cumbersome and solid for a stage prop, though, as of yet, an unutilized weapon. My only virtual certainty was that the shopkeepers would return the next day.

My legs itched and burned, as if a rash was forming. My eyes watered, but I was not sure if they were tears. My recent despondency had diminished the potency of my poetry, and had spawned, in its place, a choked monologue, that awakened in me the pangs of a misguided artist.

My feet blistered from the recent run on the same pitted, bumpy road, and I had a sudden disposition to fly, but I knew that was something, even for an inspector such as myself, that a human could not quite manage.

In prison, my father busied himself by reading books. I visited him several times, and he always told me when I cried: "Don't worry, son, I'll be out soon. Besides, it's what I call bent control."

"What does it mean?" I noticed his scabbed-over knuckles and the teeth marks near his throat.

"What it means, son, is that I am using their time to gain insight and knowledge by delving into books. What it amounts to is that I'm bending their control. That's why I call it bent control. It's a catch phrase like 'too tough to handle.'"

I looked into his eyes for the first time that visit. "Dad, you're the one that is too tough to handle. You'll fly away some day."

He laughed shortly. "No, I'm no angel, son, but some day I truly believe you will fly."

Leading me to the barn was that soft, pothole infested track, that yesterday had splinted my shins. A sizeable truck could inflict serious damage. The time previous, when I had pursued the carriage, there had been small mud holes bleeding into themselves, such that did not endanger the breadth of a foot. Now I negotiated chasms like craters of the moon.

A small shack that yesterday had appeared red now looked black, and the sky more blue than gray. The confluence filled me with rapture at first, dread at last, for even the crisp air whispered of change.

From a good distance, I saw an indistinct figure standing at the door. He had something dangling across his midsection. I could have easily retreated then, but I felt already drawn into the wheel. So I kept up the pace, resigned to a direct introduction.

He was tuned into a small hand-held radio, and his posture did not change as my shadow sought to merge with his. I stood before him, resisting the urge to raise my arms. His dark eyes barely blinked, but his machine-gun slowly turned toward me like a periscope. The barrel slightly jumped up and down,

probably to the beat of the music. He had the look of a plain-clothes officer. His face was slightly paler than the normal policeman's, since he would normally work the nights, where bribes were more enriching, and the company and disputes much darker. These were the calculating clones of security, who, if they were subservient enough to, they could graduate to. Invariably, though, they chose to work against instead of for security, whose bribes understandably fluctuated to great degrees. I could picture a thug sitting on the steps of a ritzy hotel sipping on a martini, shrugging off a proffered handshake and saying, "Who are you here to fuck this time?"

Finally the "doorman" took control, banged twice on the door with the butt of the machine-gun, and sneered at me. As it slid open, he pointed it at me again, then jerked toward the opening. I smiled, and turned to enter, smelling the pungent fiber of gunsmoke. "Is this my voluntary execution?" I thought.

There was a rich gelling sound, like a honeycomb of oil dripping bit by bit into a pail of water. The walls were black through the veil of smoke mist. There were no men or machinery in sight, no justification for the acrid stench of a gun barrel burning. "Who was killed?" I thought. I reflexively tapped my piece and stood in place turning around in a circle and being met by metal on all sides. Here and there, on the ceiling and walls, were red rust spots, like red amoebas clinging to the sides of a sunken ship. There was also a pinging sound that my ears could not locate. It traveled like an ellipse, winding around me in a perfect arc. Then a figure was striding toward me, coming out of an unseen door, and I felt a trickle of blood tickling the tip of my nose.

I pinched it off with my fingers, and luckily there was no gush to follow. A large scar ran from one corner of the man's mouth to his cheek, making a cartoonish scowl of his face. It was an Indian countenance, brilliantly dark and shiny, due to some oil or some other coating, but slightly green-hued and

wrinkled. He was dressed in black trousers and a black shirt, but his face made him look strange, as if only his head had been reincarnated a snake. Overall, though, it was a young face, perhaps as young as mine. His eyes were deep brown, which counteracted the ugliness of his physiognomy. He was of slight build, but his movements were very purposeful and fluid. Like a sedated cobra he stood before me, blinking very slowly. He spoke in halting English.

"What is your business?"

"I teach English," I said deliberately.

Knuckles caught my nose as a backhand stung my face. The cobra man's face waved and I briefly felt that I would vomit. His eyes remained unemotional as his features resuscitated. His skin color recovered from a splash of white, and his nose unflattened. I knew that if I struck him back I would be killed.

"No, you are a killer, of what kind I do not know, but not here to kill me."

My nose did not bleed. The impact of the blow had been more than sufficient. I just stood and waited for him to speak again.

"Are you with the police?"

"No."

"Are you from a newspaper?"

"No."

"Then what are you?"

The blow hit me in the gut, and I leaned back and curled over, but did not fall. The pain was dull and deep. This time he looked like he was made out of cardboard before it passed.

"I am a detective."

He raised his fist again. "You mean a spy, right, American?" His face was so shiny it looked like it had been varnished. I tasted blood inside my mouth. Had I failed to register one of the blows?

"Yes...I am a spy." The words sounded hollow.

"Well, American, I have my own spies, too. Leave me now to think. Come back tomorrow and we will talk, or I will have no choice but have you killed...And spy?"

"Yes?"

"You are not a pawn, are you?"

"No, it's not official."

"As I thought. Tell Habib that you are mine now and that if he also values his life he will use his discretion."

"Yes."

"Go now." He stood in place, even folded his arms across his chest, which was not distending from deep breaths, as if my pain had cost him no effort at all.

The statue was stone, and easily stood over ten meters high, impassive in its pose of mock-heroism. I pre-empted my numb shuffling to sit down on a wooden bench before it. The face, with a prominent nose and full, sensual lips, signified a Bedouin, follower of the desert, a man who might prosper by caravans. "Ha!" said Habib of them, "whatever they profit by they soon forfeit to drinking and lechery."

"Yes, good men," said Abrik from the bar, who happened to be overhearing, "those fellaheen."

One arm was at a forty-five degree angle to the ground with the palm down, a classic "cease to desist" proclamation, while the other held a sword, which seemed to be in the process of swinging. To me it was a perfect parabola of deceit. Some newspapers, when the statue was first erected by a handful of men, called it "an exclamation point of caution." "What," I wanted to know as I sat there, "does a face contorted in a yell, and a deadly weapon poised to strike, have to do with warning? No, it only speaks of deadly censure, originated in the maw of dogma!" A boy disengaged himself from his mother



and plunged forward and back with an imaginary scabbard. His actions easily eclipsed my mental calisthenics, so I stood up to continue on the way to my lessons, and left him alone to gouge out the guts of a caricature giant.

"This dog is either very smart or very stupid," I thought. I stopped in the middle of the street, between the sooty apartment structures blotting out all shards of light, and lit a match. The dog stopped also, but did not sit or turn around, or meander in circles, like most dogs would do. Instead, it just peeked behind once, then behaviorally licked at and gnawed its paws. I felt that, without a cigarette and a light, it was doing its best imitation of me. Unfortunately, in my transfixion, the flame had burnt down to my fingers. I looked quizzically at them, the tips hardening, and lit another one. I looked around, but there were only the two stony silences to mock me. "You do not have the intelligence to mock," I called out to the dog, which looked like an unrinsed mop. It had loped out of a doorway with an overspilled chamberpot on it, and it had studied me for a moment with milky eyes and slobbered the corners of its mealy mouth. It had the face of a sloth, but it got up on fours and moved in front of me quickly, then settled into a lazy trot. It was the most peculiar scroungy dog I had ever seen. At each corner, I counted off the paces, and there was little, if any, variation in the ground we covered. When I broke into a sprint it showed surprising speed. "The unchanging senses of animals," I thought, "reminds me somewhat of my youth." I laughed aloud at that, coughing up some smoke. And through the grey gauze the dog breaking into the sun now almost dog-resplendent and a line of schoolgirls in black skirts, giggling as they passed, and me, like some unredeemed lunatic, mentally protecting it, as if coaxing a pinpoint of flame out of a smoldering chunk of black marble.

A mule cart passed, loaded with unripe fruit, the driver holding the reins as if they were permanent attachments, the bone of one shin exposed, skin torn

away, and head bowed, as if he were in private supplication to be spared the untainted leg. I compared him and his cart with the horse carriage and the dignified black man. "This poor man carries more of undefined power and grace." The dog had disappeared, so I found my mind drifting into infinite spaces, such that might inspire my book of poetry. The open market square was like a mirage ahead, the people too small to exist under the endless sky, as much as if they were about to drown under the blue tidlewave. I imagined tiny bugs constantly scurrying to bury themselves, and the exactitude of the sun, burning the dark and light-skinned equally. My eyes steadily embraced the panorama until I was within it, a multitude of voices and limbs bartering on behalf of something in their center, round-shaped and just as fiery in temperament as the sun: "But of course, the stomach," I thought, "the greatest sinner, condemning the poor peasants to religious extremes in order to steadily satisfy the perpetual hunger."

What did I encounter next? A beautiful woman and her boy horseplaying on the living room carpet, floor as gray as the bedrock of a stream, and me, sliding through the tiny space between the doorframe and doorjamb, like a walking snake. They had not heard me, and they continued their wrestling and tickling, as the fine dust swirled on my whites, sheathing my walking disease.

Finally Fermina noticed me, and, sounding more cautionary than embarrassed, said, "You should knock in the future." I stood, arms crossed, holding myself guiltily. "I'm sorry. There will be no need for it in the future."

"You don't mean, do you?"

"That is not what I meant."

(Mustafa was doing a clumsy tumbling routine in the background).

"What do you mean, then? Please do not assume I understand the hidden meanings of your language." The glint in her eye was piercing.

"I'm sorry, Fermina. What I meant was that there would never be a need for

me to apologize again because I would never again make an intrusion." I felt a drip of sweat rolling down my face, but I was too paralyzed to wipe it off. "Why did you not say it in the first place?" Her form was hard to separate from the floor to ceiling window drapes, of a purplish hue.

"You're right, I should have, it was an oversight."

"What is oversight, Mr. Harding?" She had always used my first name, and I firmly believed she knew the meaning of the word.

"It means looking ahead, before making everything clear." I swallowed.

"Like taking things for granted, Mr. Harding?"

"Yes." I smiled thinly.

"Well, are you taking things for granted...Mr. Harding?" She started at the sound of a taxi backfiring.

"No." Sweat was finding its way from the small of my back down to my underwear.

"Well, you look tired and disturbed, and smell a little of alcohol. I did not even let my late husband disturb the peace of my child."

"I understand." I shrugged my shoulders to keep my solemnity, because I felt a tide of insidious laughter bubbling within me.

"Do you? Arab men sometimes look on their sons as if they are only assets, to raise to work for as long and as hard as they can. Nothing more. They take their family for granted while, from what I have seen, you Americans take your livelihood for granted."

I looked behind, but Mustafa was suddenly gone, as if whisked away on a magic carpet.

The steps were an excuse to pause. I looked down the flight, counting every step, each dirtier than the next. Sticky refuse of trash, including torn-out sections of newspaper, were recumbent at the bottom. I knew what I was walking down into, but beyond were only shadows of people I barely knew.

The message was on the back of an advertisement for European canned peaches. It said, "Sorry, Mr. Harding. No more lessons." Stunned, I thought about the poignant ire of two women (confidantes of each other), who had just put me out of employment. The front door was paper-thin, of a muddy color. "Perhaps I should put my foot through, and blindly wave at the child," I thought. Later, I felt that if I had been in a movie, I would have been arrested at that time, and arrested for a murder which I did, or did not, commit.

"What have I done to them?" I thought. "Anyhow, my hands are tied." I uncurled them and looked up into the sky. There was nothing to see except cobalt blue.

I felt I should have crawled instead of walked. Like a man lost to Allah, condemned to perdition inside a scorpion's shell, my thoughts were evil-minded. To the beggars, supplicating with leering faces and taunted by the jeers of their peers, my only reply to their staccato of "bakhshesh" ("something") was "mahfeesh" ("nothing"). They backed away from me fearfully then, as if I was the horned devil himself. One had a bowl of confetti, which he showered before me, screaming, "Allahu akbar!" ("God is great"), to roars of approval from his brethren.

Then the desperation was mine, too. These Cairenes were poor, but my employment had separated me from them for some time. I had briefly believed that the tears in their eyes was caused by the irritation of blowing sand and debris, not sickness from flies or pollution or disease...or some private sorrow. "A Cairene never sheds a tear for an unemployed teacher," I thought.

When I arrived at Habib's, my stomach felt sick. Abrik limped over and slammed a whiskey down in front of me as soon as I was settled. I flinched a little, then looked up at him.

He backed up, laughing. "No worry, my friend, that is on the house."

I poured it back, the corner of my eye hit by a glint of steel. After a minute, I stood up, and turned to go to the bathroom. There were two men, and their jackets were opened, so that the handles of their pistols peeked out. They both had muscular builds, and their faces were very similar. One had a large mole near his ear, and looked slightly smaller but perhaps older. They just looked at me disdainfully, as I focused and walked ahead, sensing the head of the python glaring at me. I stopped and turned. Its hat was gone, but its head was shiny, as if Abrik had recently applied a coat of wax to it.

The corners of my eyes looked bruised, and their focus was blurry; they were extremely hollow. "A needle would confirm there still is, indeed, liquid in them," I thought. My cheeks were purple, as if I were undergoing an apoplexy. "Perhaps Abrik has always hated me, and I am soon to die from his bottle of whiskey laced with poison." The twins, even with their guns, did not frighten me. "They have expressions of foolish children prematurely grown up. Big boys who play with big toys." I pointed my revolver at the mirror, the barrel directly between my eyes. I thought it a perfect anti-gun slogan, and nervously giggled. There was a scraping noise, and I backed up closer to the door and looked down. There were two polished military boots. In my mind I saw the backhand hit me again, and blood began to ooze. They looked like two whales, their heads punctured with single circles, bleeding side-by-side. I shook my head vigorously, smoothed back my hair, then pushed open the door.

They were gone. Gingerly, I walked over to their table, but there were no clues on it, not even an illuminating matchbook. I proceeded to the restaurant, but they were not there, either. All I saw were people in white clothes leaning over white tablecloths. Sensing me, they turned to appraise my shabbiness before returning to their vices.

I did not spot Habib, so I walked back to my table, numb in the awareness that some people would know where I was every moment, unless I figured out

some ingenious scheme to mislead them. It felt like a moveable prison. I sat drinking, looking through the maze of wood slats in no particular pattern on the inner side of the window facing the alleyway. There was no discernible pattern in the artist's work, and as I slightly shifted my head from side-to-side, the truck driver's face became disfigured, a sudden Cyclops engaged in unloading squawking crates.

Unoccupied by patrons, Abrik sat behind the bar, smoking a pack of unfiltered cigarettes. He inhaled quickly and deeply, and had a second one lighted in no time. In contrast, he lightly tapped off the ashes, as if he were taking care of a tiny cremated body. He even held it up in the light of an oil lamp that he kept perched next to the bottles of liquor, his unhinged mouth, knitted brows, and penetrating eyes fixed in concentration. He studied it from above, below, then from the left and right, tapping off more residue, then set it back down. In the brief interlude he turned to the neatly arranged bottles, standing perfectly still and slightly bowed, as if in veneration. He shrugged his enormous shoulders and snatched a bottle off, reached for a glass, poured, drank it in one gulp, turned back, and repeated the process over again. After the third pass, he looked up at me sheepishly and grinned, as I was still the only observer, and went back to inspecting the cigarette and its remains. Just then three businessmen walked in with their briefcases and sat down. They did not seem to notice me in the corner, although I was only some ten feet away. All three looked young. They had gold tie pendants, gold watch chains, and gold wristwatches. One, who sat in the middle, had a thin waxed moustache and a deep scar across his cheek. He had a square jaw and looked slightly less Arab than the other two, possibly Persian. He and Abrik were joking about something, holding his hands before himself in mercy before bursting forth in laughter. The other two looked on with shiny eyes, playfully nudging his arms, occasionally adding something between the rashes of merriment. Abrik kept their glasses full of beer, and rushed cigarettes along. The man in the middle accepted, but the other two

declined, shifting in their chairs.

I drank my whiskey slowly, since my mind was already intoxicated. A picture came to me: The Indian man, the black man, and Rodel swam in my glass of whiskey, telling me to go ahead and not mind them. Sweat began to trickle down my face, and my eyes became a little blurry. It felt like a dream, because things were escalating too quickly. "Damn it then, " I thought, "let come what may." I gulped down the rest and waved to Abrik.

He just nodded his head, elephantine next to the others. The one in the middle was making sharp clicking sounds with something in his hands, and the other two leaned in front of him and stared at each other. They did not seem to notice Abrik leave, showing startling agility in a more direct route through the maze of tables. The only other way was a turn very close to the bathroom. He did not pause once, and set the whiskey down in front of me.

"You did not slam it down, Abrik, so it must not be on the house," I said, laughing.

He chuckled shortly, turned to the bar, which was still only occupied by the three, then seated himself next to me, with a clear view of his post. There was a slightly green pallor to his grey face. He could not have been much older than fifty, but from appearances had some type of heart disease.. With piercing black eyes, he looked at me for a moment. They were neither malevolent nor jovial, as if to say, "Only my soul is saved." They fixed for a brief spell on the python, and he slightly grimaced before he tore them away. The end bar stool had him hypnotized, but somehow he looked comfortable in his black tuxedo

"Listen, my friend," he began, folding his massive arms, "it is not your tab that worries me."

I gave a start, as the sober tone surprised me. We had always just kidded

each other in conversation, but evidently my jocular front had not fooled him. "Yes, Abrik?" I asked good-naturedly, taking a quick sip, but not looking at him as I spoke.

"You do not know what you are doing. I can see it in your face, your eyes. Whatever Habib asks of you from now on, refuse."

"But-"

"Yes, I know you are loyal to him as I am, but you must remember that his power and influence attract dangerous men, and that influence is shared."

Reflexively, I pulled a cigarette out of my inside jacket pocket. I lit it and had a quick puff. I sneaked a glance at Abrik as I did, but he did not appear anxious to continue at once. He just reposed like a giant sage.

Finally, I responded, "So you believe, then, that Habib, despite his seeming control, might have himself in some trouble?"

"No, I am certain of it. The man sitting in the middle of my bar is a filthy Turk. His name is Osman. He is a professional extortionist, who forces people to pay protection. He is just another foreign louse who gets rich by being ugly. He takes other people's money. Saed had warned Habib about him, but he just laughs and tells him not to worry, that known criminals do not risk returning to the same place."

I could not help but raise my voice. "What do you mean? Has he tried his luck here before?" I could feel my face changing shape in my inner rage and frustration.

He waved at the man's back. "Yes. he tried to monopolize security some years back. He was almost successful, but in the end his foreign birth was put to question by Saed, his men rebelled, and after a few bloody years, he returned to Turkey."

"But what does he have to do with extortion?"

He breathed deeply. "That is what he practices in his own country. The



rumors were that if he returned, he would exact revenge on Saed by extorting him. Now he has."

"Habib will be caught in the middle. But it's already too confusing."

He leaned forward. "Yes, and that is why you should stay out of it." He stood up for finality but was restrained by my derisive laugh.

"No, I'm already in the middle." I caught hold of his sleeve, but now the bar was becoming inundated. He frowned at my sudden panic. "You tell me later, now I must go."

"I'm telling Habib as soon as I see him," I proffered, and seeing his mounting consternation, let go. At the time the pressure of the bar must have been enough for him. He started at the near end, serving as if he was fortunate to be a servant for the wealthy men and women adorned with satin, silk, and gold. He bowed, shook and kissed hands, and laughed along with them, reserving his icy smile for the Turk Osman.

It was not long before Habib appeared, stealthily avoiding the bar. Most had their backs turned, and those that faced him were treated to a crisp bow. He had on a chef's outfit, thus they probably thought he was just another overly obsequious employee. They resumed their chatters and solicitations at the bar, red lips pouting, hands furtively touching. The Turk and the two others were shielded from me.

Habib's head sporadically moved up and down and side to side in an unconscious mannerism. There was a small splash of wine or vinegar on his sleeve near his right hand. As he sat down he crossed his clean arm over, and forced a smile. His eyes had a strange sparkle in them, and his cheekbones were more pronounced. I stared at his folded arms meaningfully and shrugged.

"Of course," he said, pulling them back to his sides, as if he had let them fall off his shoulders. "No need to keep up appearances with a friend, right?" He smiled wanly, and rubbed at the side of his face, as if itching a rash. Then he

just sat without smiling, unmoving.

I did not smile back. Instead, my eyes focused on him, as if not quite sure what to make of him. Now, after he had stopped parrying, and sat still, I could sense his insides churning, although he maintained the front. "You have a strong will, my friend," I thought.

"Appearances? That is what you said, isn't it, Habib? But no need to talk about acting now, because I, well, I'm too drunk to act or notice acting anyway." I pulled out a cigarette, but before I could get my lighter out he acquired a lit match. For a brief spell, in the connection between the fire, our wounds were cauterized. We did not have to say a word, and were thankful for it. But I recollected myself quickly. The partiers were an interesting backdrop for Habib's strong visage. "But you know, as well as I do, that drunks speak the truth-sometimes-whether coherently or not. You avoided the patrons just now, as if embarrassed to show your face."

"Well, as you know, I am a busy man, and cannot be held up on such a long night as this. I must tell you that the rattlesnake is paying off handsomely." "Yes, but what, and who, will pay in the end?"

"What do you mean by that?" He looked offended.

"What I mean is what I see, hear, or feel. Today I got too close to the barn I told you about, and throwing away caution, walked up to a guard. He did not say a word, but just waved me in." In the background the Turk walked out, with the two idolaters in close pursuit. "It was empty, then an Indian man approached and asked who I was, and as my answers did not please him, struck me twice. I felt like-but never mind-I was told to come back the next day or else, that he knows you, and said something to the effect that if you value your life you will use discretion. Then I was told by Fermina that I no longer had employment, because I was ungrateful, or something of the sort. I said I was sorry but it didn't work, Then I went to Mubarek's and read a note

that said I could not be used there anymore, either, so it's what I saw, then Abrik, Abrik...Oh, to Hell with, I mean, never mind about Abrik."

Habib seemed to be contorting in pain, as if he had just been poisoned. "Don't worry about the women now, Edgar. But what was it that Abrik said?"

"He said a man who just left, a Turk named Osman, is here to revenge against Saed for something in the past. That he is going to try to extort him."

"From this restaurant? My establishment? No. No. I have heard rumors about Saed but this one is most disgraceful. There have been many but nothing has ever happened. So what can I do? The answer is nothing. As I told you the other night, I do not want to be straddled with this restaurant forever...And about my countryman, I do certainly know him. So do the police here. He tried to become a mobster close to ten years back, but he never found enough allies. Somehow he escaped, but if he is back now, to try again, Nessim will put him away, maybe for just his sick sense of humor."

I felt like laughing. It was as if I was spectating, and being part of, a circus simultaneously. "What sick sense of humor?"

In the background a masculine hand pawed at a feminine butt. "The man, who shamed himself and his country, my country," he emphasized, "calls himself Dr. Aziz, with the doctorate denoting an advanced degree in crime. He irreligiously flaunts his sin." Here he paused, and rubbed his eyes. "I will pay Saed a visit tonight, and he will have, well, I am sorry for all of this." He waved his hands in the air, then rubbed his face.

"Habib?"

"Of course," he said, straightening again, as if he had just awoken from a brief dream. "Saed will have a solution. It is clear that Aziz is in a threatening mode, so maybe he will get in touch with Nessim. I will have him get you protection first thing in the morning. If no one arrives by nine, go directly to the Hilton, where I will be instructing chefs. Tell them it is an emergency. Since you are

American they will come get me immediately. And do not worry about employment, we will worry about that only when your present money runs out. But have I forgotten anything?"

I had been in a prolonged stare-down with the python, which I believed I had won. If I had had a machete at the time I would have chopped its face in half. "Yes, but what about the black man? How do you explain him being in the barn the day Aziz was in it?"

He smiled warmly and assuredly. "That is clear. He was probably lured there by Aziz, on a promise of legitimate business. He probably refused him, but that is no great concern of ours."

"But what about Rodel? Initially, he was the man you wanted more information about. And it was he I was carrying the weapon for, was he not?" My indignation was returning, which only made my confusion worse.

"Yes, but it was just a precaution." He said it sternly, but there was still more than a note of exasperation. He tapped his hands on the table, and stared back fixedly. "You must realize that if I had anticipated any grave danger to you, I would not have asked it of you."

It was clear I had hurt his pride. "Okay, Habib, your reasoning is apology enough for me." My sobriety was returning with thought before talk, but an interior voice was shouting for more whiskey. My hands were shaking, and my skin was itching with sweat. "But again, about Rodel?" I persisted, sure that I had given him too much time for an explanation.

"Well, it is the same case as it is with the black man, as we call him, since we do not know his name," he added parenthetically, and with a taint of unease, which I thought quite unwarranted for the statement.

"Then logically they had met each other if they went to the same place? I mean, it is just a hunch, but then two foreigners, I mean, well, somehow they had to have been connected."

He nodded his head. "I see you are a natural detective, and I agree with you on that general point, but on the other, I believe they have both shunned Aziz. But then we should work on what we know, should we not?" He coughed raspily as a haze of smoke floated over us. He waved to disperse it. "This is another thing I will not miss, being a nonsmoker, although my wife did, may she rest peacefully." His face slightly paled. "But, as I was saying, all we can be sure of is Aziz, so we must tend to his matter first, and let the others rest." "Or fall into place?" It was dark out, and the headlights of chauffeured limousines hovered with a blinding whiteness as people stepped. As they receded, others taking their place, an indefinable red light trailed behind. "You know, Habib, it is strange to be packing a loaded gun."

"Put it away then, Edgar. I'm sorry, but I thought you would feel more comfortable with one. My fault. Anyhow, I will get you an armed escort through Saed. In the morning will be best." He looked at me pleadingly, anxious for the interrogation to end.

I nodded my head, but there was one more thing. "So we have talked around Rodel. What more can be said about him?"

He shook his head. "So many concerns, my friend. But let me assure you, he showed no signs of deceit. He looked me squarely in the eye when he spoke, and openly expressed his love for Texas, and women."

I raised an eyebrow. "So your general impression was of a focused man having his priorities in order?"

"Exactly. You are reading my mind again. You have a gift that at times unnerves me."

"So I have been told," I responded semiconsciously, because my mind was drifting again. Habib was handing the revolver under the table again, then the bony hand hit my face. I blinked my eyes once, but Habib was fuzzy. The military boots were bleeding and the python was smiling. Before aware I asked:

"Does he wear snakeskin boots?"

"I do not remember, but what is the difference, Edgar?" His face gradually regained its distinctiveness.

"Never mind. I guess I forgot myself, but I'd better get going. I'm tired, and..." I stood up, feeling light-headed, but far from dizzy.

Habib smiled. "Of course. But wouldn't you like some dinner first?" He stood up anxiously. "You can't go home on an empty stomach, Edgar."

"No, thank you. I have some good left-overs, which will more than tide me over till morning."

"Okay, my friend, eat and sleep well. And remember about getting up early." He held out his hand, with a commiserating smile on his face. "And please do not worry."

"I won't." I released the grip, my eyes avoiding any sign in his. As I walked away he called out "Good night" and I replied over my shoulder, "Take care, Habib," entering the night.

The blackness shielded my psyche. It was as if I had come into a mental ward-fresh off the streets-and a sheet had been placed over my head, to ward off visual stimuli. So even though a human eye adjusts a little to darkness, I saw nothing, because my walk, and my eyes, were trained directly forward. If I had been less regimented, and looked around as I normally do, I would have only seen the flickering of lights in windows reminding me of the pulse in my brain. Not my heart. It beat slow and steady, because I had survived my spiteful worry. Cars that passed me, making my eyes blink uncomfortably, did not distract me. My steps were heavy but sure. "Home, and then sleep," I thought.

Everyone sped by me. They were walking, also, but it was like they were moving on a treadmill of sand, because I only saw their torsos. "Hey, mister," a boy approached me, carrying a bowl of lizards squirming around, with a

makeshift plastic lid on top. "Not much," he said, and reached in to grab one. "Ay," he gasped, and pulled the mouth off his finger. "No," I said, and kept walking, his voice calling after me, "Mister, mister, wait, I have much bigger one," and I wondered if he meant to say "better." It was enough to open the night. I passed a construction site, where men and women were digging out dirt with pails, filling blankets, then walking up the embankment to empty them.. A large group of people like this, because of their miniscule wages, saved the foreman the expense of bringing in a tractor. They toiled as if Sisyphus himself found time to procreate in his purgatory. "He has many sons, daughters, nephews, and nieces," I thought. Urgently I walked to the edge and held up a pack of cigarettes to attract their attention. One broke into a wide smile, wiped dirt off his face, and said, "Thank you." I just nodded my head, then set them on the edge. The man still smiled, but he had his arms and palms motioned up. I threw the lighter first. It bounced off his hand and fell to the ground. He picked it up, rubbed it against his shirt, spit-shining it, while his people converged on him, excitedly gesturing and commenting, then looking again at me. He held only his right hand up this time. I had to throw much harder because of the weight, but it landed in his sure grip. I left the group with the boys and girls waving to me, the men nodding their heads, and the women breaking out in smiles. I was not a Moslem, but I was basically poor, at the sudden time without employment. Still, my participation in communion was to give, not share. I knew in my heart that if I had symbolically been pushed down among poor people I would have helped them dig up the earth, and not simply reinforce their beliefs in foreigners by throwing them a pack of meaningless cigarettes, and a lighter.

Buildings crept closer on either side, the fringes of the sky darker still, as I entered the "high rise" portion. They were five stories high, but comparatively giant there in Cairo. Searching above, I saw a rarity: A picture window on the

outside of a penthouse, and a woman's naked figure posing. I continued to look up as I walked, but the beauty seemed to be as much entranced by something or someone in the building across, as I was with her. I exited the "gauntlet" nearly asleep on my feet. I increased the pace, but slowed down again when I got near my street. I strained my eyes to see better, methodically unlocked the front bolt, so as to create the least disturbance, paused to pull out and aim the revolver in the entryway, and in each progressive flat of the stairway. With my left hand I awkwardly turned the key in the lock, and pulled the knob, while my right hand arched forward. I pushed the door slowly, all the way back to the wall, and quickly lunged to the left and right with the gun, sweating prodigiously. Still facing forward I reached back and closed the door, having to quickly shuffle over to get my left arm in place to do so, and turned the bolt. Sensing my paranoia, fearing, yet animalistically driven by it, I proceeded to the kitchen first, lighting a lamp, which threw a pale light over the grimy cupboards, the pot with the leftover rice which I had neglected to refrigerate, and the small refrigerator in the corner near the door of the bathroom, which looked like an unopened package. Almost without looking I rushed into the bathroom, taking no account of its upright coffin aspect, with only a shower stall and a cracked mirror, whisked back through the kitchen, and was back in the entryway. I took a few steps and, without delineations of other walls, was in my living room/bedroom. I lunged again to the left and right, as a shard of moonlight shot through my wooden-shuttered window. I laughed derisively at my stupid dramatics, set the revolver down, and lit the lamp on my tall night table, which was really a truncated pedestal. My walls were empty, and save for the table, my futon, which I had brought with me directly from Czechoslovakia, and a row of books stacked haphazardly near my head, along with my notebook in which I wrote my poetry, the floor was empty too. This, excepting a few toiletries, scattered clothes, and pans and silverware,



and glasses(clean and dry in the cupboard, along with a bottle of whiskey and some boxes of rice and noodles), was the entirety of my private spectrum.

I took my shoes off, clamped the shutters close, got underneath the dirty sheet and blanket, rested my head on the ancient pillow which was usually uncovered, whereby my oftentimes greasy hair soiled it, and fell into deep sleep.

In the middle of the night I awoke from a nightmare with the moonlight shining on the revolver.

In bed I laid for some time, wracked by a thought: "How am I supposed to distinguish the man sent by Saed?" The revolver became omnipresent. "Maybe I should hold the gun when he comes in, just in case, for even if it is the right man he might respect me more for my caution! Should I, by my looks, actions, and gestures, communicate that I am dangerous and not to be taken for granted? Further, should I hold my gun on him and demand his? He would most assuredly not give in, and I could laugh and joke with machismo, telling him he was certainly a professional bodyguard, and offer something to the effect of, "You really would have shot me first, too, which proves you have the essential life blood, no, icewater in your veins." I looked away from the weapon, to the wall. "Or should I be completely honest, and tell him I need his protection, as I fear for my life? "Yes, that is all and good, but I need some sort of compromise." "Aha," I thought, jumping out of bed and putting on a sports jacket clumped up beside the books. It was tweed, and of checkered off whites and greys, the better to hide the food stains. I picked up the revolver and strode over to the cracked bathroom mirror. I stuck it in the right side pocket. It was undetectable because of its small size, not bulging out, or doing anything of the sort. I reached in, and somehow without looking my grip was perfect. I pulled it out and aimed at my reflection, put it back in, and it rested again exquisitely, so that even with a quick draw I did not fumble.

"But what about my appearance?" Should I look sleazy, clean, or refined? No, just distinguished, but how so? Now, I could shave my whiskers, but leave my hair tussled, like a true maniac, or leave my whiskers but comb my hair back with its natural oils and some tap water for some makeshift grease, you know, the drug kingpin look-alike, which is still distinguishing, or just leave it as it is, and look like myself, a wino with a terrible hangover...or rather, shave and comb it back at once, which will make me look, with my handsome looks that I often regret, like a sleaze, or a mobster, or just a common pretty boy, or, if one sees my eyes clearly, a wino with a hangover making appearances?" Yes, confusion is the best for the beholder! I took off the coat and unbuttoned my shirt halfway down, and threw some cologne under my armpits, as I hated washing them out of the shower, because the soap and water could not be controlled, and would spill onto my clothes. I lathered my face with bath soap, and cleared the whiskers off with my old, rusty, disposable razor, which I was still in long neglect of replacing. Spores of blood stared breaking out, and I snatched the still bloody, damp towel off the rod, put a good handful in the hot water, and pressed it to my face. I kept it there for over a minute, until it started to cool off, then repeated the process. I remembered when my father had taught me how to shave, and I asked him why he got more cuts than me. "Your skin gets too tough when you get older," he said, patting me on the head, "and you go too fast for the blade." "Will I, can I," I thought, combing back my hair, the red spots clotting on my white face, "could I possibly be, too fast for the blade?"

The knock came, dead and hollow, not urgent. I had devoured the cold rice and debated going out into the street to follow the man up, in order to study him. This I thought too risky, though, as he might sense something, and upon seeing me, figure I was a hit man, and shoot first, ask his employer for a definitive description of me later. So I just opened the shutters and stood on

watch, although there was another entrance at the front of the building on the next street over, which he would most likely use if he was not familiar with it. It was early in the morning, sometime after six by my watch, but the sun was already bright. A plainclothes officer dressed in white walked straight down the middle, then, upon hearing a loud engine, scrambled over to the sidewalk, stepping through all the urine, trash, and, also, no doubt, some excrement. He had a cup of something, which he raised as the flatbed truck sped past, as if saluting it. My hands were clammy, but I felt numb to my plight, and just wanted to get it over with.

"Yes, who is it?"

"Saed sent me," came a gruff voice. "Please open up. I was sent to get you out of your room at once." He sounded calm, but sullied a bit by nervousness.

I wanted to say, "How am I supposed to know?" but instead just opened the door with my hand in my pocket.

I started. He was one of the two men I had seen when I had first entered Habib's earlier, the one that looked slightly smaller, but still muscular, with a mole near his ear. He looked at me blankly, as if it was not even a coincidence, and frowned. "Let's go," he said, "and take your hand out of your jacket. It attracts attention and looks foolish."

I obeyed, then reached in my pants pocket for the keys. When I had the door locked, and had turned around, he asked: "Where is a quick exit?"

I pointed to the right down the dark hall, and we quickly descended, our feet creaking down two flights, to a door, through which we gained the second story roof, now only two long rickety flights from the street.

"This is not a good time," he shrugged, then ran down them whistling, almost carefree, as if the too empty and eerie street was a familiar enemy.

When I reached the bottom he already had a small white Fiat at the curb, facing in the wrong direction up the one-way street. He revved the engine as I

hopped in the passenger side, then just as a van approached the corner, put his arm out his window and executed a U turn, the van swerving around us.

"What did you do that for?" I shouted, as we raced through the streets alongside the van, one taking the lead for a few blocks, then being cut off by the other. I rolled up my window because of the choking dust, and saw shadows of people.

"Quiet mornings are bad omens," he said almost cheerfully, although his brow was sweaty and his face looked tense. "I like such entertainment as this to amuse myself," and as if to punctuate it, passed the van on a corner, the tires dangerously skidding toward the sidewalk, then miraculously pulling out of the slide at the last moment, the van increasing speed, too, so that when a large apparition appeared in front, I thought we were dead. Somehow he squeezed in, the back bumper seeming to catch the other vehicle, because we almost veered out of control again. He was visibly upset now. "I should shoot the devil," he said, looking into his rearview mirror. Then he laughed, becoming carefree again. "Allah," he said, pronouncing it richly. "You do not look favorably down on security, praise be to you." He did not let the van pass again, viciously cutting it off, as if trying to make them tip over. When it could no longer be heard, I said, "Good driving. They are gone." He just kept up the speed. "Do you mind if I smoke?" My fingers were fumbling again.

He just shook his head. "You do not need to ask. When I have no instructions do as you like." He seemed to be greatly concerned that I feel comfortable around him. If he did not enjoy his job, albeit a very dangerous one, he did nothing to show it. He was casual with his intensity, but there was really nothing casual about him at all.

We went east, coming closer to the Nile. There were people to be seen walking now, toward the center of the city. They cut quite morose figures, their faces already drawn, persecuted by the noise, the air, and the pungent smells.

The noxiousness and fecundity of them was something I had never experienced before. It was like draining sewage into a dump, only worse.

"Where are we headed?"

"To the Hilton, Mr. Harding. You will be safer there with the tourists."

"This Aziz is that dangerous?"

"Of course. He has developed a complicated group which no one understands. Chief Nessim told me it combines classic organized crime with terrorism."

I mulled that over for a moment. "So family members are not spared."

He laughed. "No one is spared, Mr. Harding. Not family members, not the police, not security. This man does not stop." As he said this, he slammed on the brakes, skidding to a stop. The pedestrians stationed at a red light did not take any special notice.

I lit a cigarette and put my foot up on the dash, leaning back so I could not see through the front windshield. To the pedestrians I must have looked like a smoke-plumed midget, which made me laugh. My driver glanced at me, and I sat up straight again, puffing venomously.

"Tell me who you are."

"Well, I do have a name, but I guard its secrecy. Makes it harder for my enemies to track me." He exhaled a small dose of air.

"So it will not be said under torture, meaning if I were to be tortured, I would honestly not know your name, and so be killed for it. Is that it? Obviously some of your enemies and associates must know it?" We had arrived at an open space, and the sun became ferocious on the open plain. People were busy working on crops, statues of white on a carpet of green.

He laughed again. "Yes, it is true." Now his tone changed. "There will be no one able to find my family if I do, so I guard my life as if it is theirs, not mine."

In security I am able to make my own rules."

"I understand." In the rearview mirror my face looked perfectly smooth and angelic, but inside I felt a swarm of wet moths. There was a churning of acid that made me hungry and repulsed at once. "I wonder if they prepare hamburgers at the Hilton?" I mused. The idea of a milkshake filled me with absurd awe. My mouth was dry with the absence of alcohol.

"I believe you." We had arrived. My door was opened by a valet. A gold tooth peeked out at me as he smiled. "Good morning and welcome to the Hilton, sir." My bodyguard brushed him aside and I followed him, with nothing in my hands except the filter of a cigarette. A glass of whiskey and a chair were immediately required, in order to hunker down with intoxicating liquids.

7

For a moment I thought it was my mother: A woman seated at the bar with a white shawl over her shoulders, her long gray hair tied up into a ponytail at the back. She had dignified airs, held her glass lightly, and declined offers of drinks. This certain stubbornness I attached to my mother. It was in her silence to her admirers, who retreated hurt and spurned. I guessed that later she would, like my mother often did, become garrulous and venomous at once. I looked over to where my bodyguard was seated. He was a little left of center to the front door behind a large pot plant which he was using as camouflage. He had a tall glass of cola in front of him, but was busier looking out to the group of men outside, all dressed business-like. They were impatiently pacing back and forth, and from time to time looked at their watches.

I had been told Saed would be arriving shortly, but not at what precise time. The bartender and I exchanged communications with solemn nods of our

heads, the drinks coming frequently. I had a vodka tonic, which I began to sip, fearing my declining sobriety.

I felt an emptiness inside of me, and looked askance at my surroundings. It was bright, but the air conditioning kept it cool. Couples who passed looked on distractedly, as if I was the anomaly puzzle piece. Far from comfortable, I felt imprisoned in the lovers' sphere, pining for its disintegration.

The woman at the bar was warming up to her handsome young host. She was most likely innocently teasing him, for he blushed as he prepared her martinis. I felt like the movie camera was on again. There was an unreality to my entire situation, a possibility in my seeming impossibility that I had never seen, and felt that denial would only worsen my straits. I finished off the drink and lit a cigarette, watching the two actors at the bar.

Then I heard and saw the limousine. It roared in and skidded. The men scrambled around, some even pulling their guns out. Saed stepped out, in a double-breasted blue suit. He had a sneer on his face, and a dark pair of sunglasses. The driver shut the door, then waved the men towards him. Some ran off in both directions(I supposed to blanket the building). Five remained with the driver. Saed said something perfunctorily, and walked in by himself. My bodyguard got up and pointed to me. They discussed something briefly and calmly, then walked up to me, rather casually, I thought. In the background the limousine and the men were a black shield.

They pulled chairs out opposite to me, and sat down. Saed nodded at me familiarly, as if an introduction was unnecessary. I had my hand poised to shake, but it was not to pass. My bodyguard sat to the side a little, a picture of calm. His changes in attitude astounded me. It looked like he was ready to attend a party. Saed kept his sunglasses on.

"My friend, Mr. Harding," he said a bit sarcastically, "you know that our friend Habib has put you in some trouble." The accusatory tone made me

flinch a little. "I talked to him last night, and unfortunately, was disappointed in him. He told you things that are none of your business, which only puts you in more danger still. An American teacher is not fit for the troubles here in Cairo." His face was gray and pockmarked a little, but his hair did not show a trace of grey. The aspect was elongated, and the wide mouth looked very cunning. The malice under his veil of courtesy was apparent. He paused a moment, as if waiting to pounce on me for speaking indiscreetly. It was clear to me that I was only to speak when questioned or asked to do so. I could not see his eyes, but his unhinged mouth was a trap of fixed attention. I looked over to the bodyguard, who just looked back serenely. "You are in danger, but you are dangerous to everyone, including me." He smirked. "The men Habib told you about are enemies, and that is all you need to know. I have arranged for you a flight to Los Angeles, where Habib tells me your grandparents live. You are to meet him tomorrow at the cafe, at noon. He will give you the ticket and some money, and you will be driven to the airport by the same man who drove you here." He said it categorically, not even glancing in the bodyguard's direction. "In the meantime, go home and do not go out until tomorrow." He waved back toward the limousine. "Yes, go now, and tomorrow return to your country. If you do not, I will not feel responsible for whatever happens to you." He smiled icily, but courteously.

"Thank you," I said, but he just stared straight ahead. The bodyguard smiled once casually, then I was up, walking to the door. I was sure he knew I was armed, and wondered why he had not demanded it in Saed's presence. It made me nervous and agitated, as if he had dismissed its protection completely. I grinned twistily and patted at it as I walked out the door. The men parted slowly before me, "hesitantly," I thought. Staring straight ahead, and avoiding their eyes, a hand stretched out and opened the door for me, like a loose appendage. I ducked in, the driver did not even glance back as it was shut, and turned the ignition. I watched him curiously as we moved off. His spindly arms were straight out, and bony hands fastened on the wheel. His black cap looked a bit too big on his head, and he moved mechanically on the turns. I did not blink my eyes, but he had put an



indelible image in my mind: A monstrous army ant who ate the real chauffeur alive. I let a laugh escape me, but my driver did not flinch. We passed a group of women wailing over an old man lying in a ditch, who looked like he had soiled himself. The driver did not change form. The skeleton did not shudder despite my anguished cries. My hands tapped at the tinted glass, which was cool, searching for an escape. The landscape of humanity blurring past was tired and poor, but burning, in its insatiable touch.

Smoke vapors trailed up to the driver's head. Humming distractedly, I expounded to the shaft of artificial air that pushed my cigarette halos forward, originating somewhere in the white headliner. I saw a kaleidoscope of color in the minarets of hand-size ceramic mosques sold by an emaciated street boy. He stared straight back at me, before a shot pierced the heavy stillness in the vehicular compartment.

The driver slumped to the side, his hands falling from the wheel. Splattered by his brain matter, I was reaching for the revolver when the limousine jumped up onto the curb. Thrown against my door, I rebounded to the seat cushion. I looked quickly to the driver. The engine was still in drive, but one of his feet was on the pedal, as if he had anticipated the attack. I opened the door and jumped out, pivoting around to stand crouching, but still standing, my hands shaking, sensing the approach of men.

Two zigzagged across the road toward me, heavy caliber pistols at their sides. I was trying to get a bead on them as they closed in. Then a hand grabbed my throat and a barrel poked between my shoulder blades. "Drop it," a familiar voice hissed, and I stared ahead, as the men relaxed into a trot. I glanced down to see the hand was indeed black, clutching tightly now. My breath came in spasms and I released my grip. Both hands grabbed my shoulders and spun me around.

"You," I shuddered, and pointed at him. He was holstering his gun, and grinned, exposing pearly white teeth. "No, Mr. Harding, my name is not 'you.' It is Cole." He was my height, but gigantic in build. He had on the same pair of

snakeskin cowboy boots, a pair of Levis, and black-and-white checkered t-shirt. He frowned and said, "Okay, follow the men to the car. And don't make any false moves, because you make my trigger finger jumpy." I had a sudden impulse to run, but my curiosity was alive, and I wished for it to remain. I walked between the two Indians and Cole, who was admonishing me: "Don't be a fool now, Mr. Harding. Why you are not dead yet is a mystery to me, and should be treated as such by you...Mr. Harding, eh? Strange name. You are a lucky man, though, that Aziz sees something in you. He is a mystical judge of character, but that he sees anything in you is beyond me."

I guessed he did not recognize me from the fortnight, when he called out to me on the street, but his nascent hatred for me was more unnerving. He was basking in it, and it felt strange to somehow have Dr. Aziz on my side. Terribly confused, I got in the back seat of a black Citroen, the two spare Indian men on either side of me, with Cole in the driver's seat. He started the engine and turned on the radio, which was full of static. He dialed here and there, cursing. Finally he settled for some Arabian fusion, which popped and crackled. He pulled out, turning slowly at the first corner, where a group of people meekly retreated to the walls with feverish eyes.

Cole guffawed and hammered the accelerator, and yelled over the music: "They probably haven't even heard of a black assassin like me. I'm just about sure about it. You see, Mr. Harding, the world is opening up for them, and for me. Me? Yes! I make my living the hard-easy way, Mr. Harding, killing people like you."

The red barn flashed in and out, along with the double. He made my face twitch, my ears buzz. He was standing in a wheat field with a brown polyester suit. Each time I shot him he stepped a little closer. He smiled and I pulled back into the compartment. The two Indians stared at me with glass faces. I reached out to touch one and sunk into unconsciousness through a crushing head blow.

At first I saw rain, misting down from the gray ceiling, dripping off the steel girders. It congealed on the ground like mercury, my feet coming down on it, but

the integrity of the shape still remaining. I looked at a wall and saw a dizzying phalanx of white dots. Regaining consciousness, my head throbbed, and my mouth tasted of acid. The center of pain was over my right temple, which I began to knead with my knuckles. Bolts of black impaired my vision. Pulling my hand away, I momentarily saw the apparition of a black crow. An absurd man was waving his hands in front of me like some air traffic controller. I waved back and he stopped. He stepped closer and I saw it was Aziz. He was in a red suit with black suspenders, and his scarred face had two day's stubble on it. Once more, the dull coldness in his eyes gave him the impression of a snake; unlike his movements, which were smooth and graceful, like a cat's, and gave him a noble carriage.

We were in the main space again, with nothing, not even smoke vapors, to distinguish it. This time it was later, though, and the sun was turning it into a furnace. My entire body was wet with perspiration, but my clammy hands molested me more. I waited for a spark to come into Aziz's eyes, but it never did. There was only immobility and impersonality in them, which frightened me more than my present straits. A prefabricated stoicism had settled in me, which stabbed at my guts, but caressed my brain.

I was seated on a small, uncomfortable metal chair, rather than looking around just returning my gaze, endeavoring to make it just as empty, just as glazed.

Aziz just stood before me, arms folded across his chest. Finally he spoke, and his working mouth pulled down a little on one side, elongating the scar. The mark on the unmoving, impassive face.

"You are in pain, Mr. Harding. But why, why do you bring it on yourself? Why are you in this situation? Why did you not listen to me? Why? You do not seem to place much value on your life. But it looks like you like to drink. Your eyes are red and your face is pale."

There must have been a sign in my eyes, because he took it as a response. "You agree with me, don't you? In that case I'm giving you second life. Do as I say and you will not die."

I imagined Cole saying, "So now you know-what it is like to be alive, but dead," pointing at the hole in my head. I moved suddenly, as if to stand up, but thought better of it. Aziz just stood smiling and nodding his head.

"You are a strange man, Mr. Harding. I know now that you have a criminal mind, which makes you useful to me. I have a job for you. No, don't worry, you will not have to kill anyone, although I'm sure you are more than capable. I have seen it in your scowl, on your ravaged face."

And I reflexively rubbed it, entranced by his words. There were small cracks in the leathery skin, so my thumb settled into the cleft in my chin.

"It is wise to be silent," he said, and he seemed to be lost in some reverie. His eyes were uprooted from their mobility, as if he had settled upon some private argument. He thoughtfully rubbed his chin. "But now answer a simple question: Are you ready?"

My jaw felt puffy. "Yes, I am."

"So you are then. You, as a proper Englishman, should understand the proprieties involved in my dilemma."

Flinching, I desired to tell him that I was only an American who had been influenced by his British grandparents, especially after his mother had died. But, of course, I just stared straight ahead.

"You look surprised. Well, that is okay, Mr. Harding, because surprise is my greatest gift. I use it expertly against my enemies."

"I see." It was blurted out, and he laughed sharply and mockingly against it.

"So you understand that also? I guess a drunk like you can be wise. Not often though." He held a finger up in the air. "But you must excuse me. I have business to attend to. Leave now, but this is what you are going to do for me, Mr. Harding. You are to meet a man at the bar Alms, which I am sure you are familiar with. You are to convince a man there to leave with you, to come see me. There will be a chauffer waiting outside. You are to speak to no one but the man inside. If you do, you will be killed at some later point in time. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I responded as icily as I could.

"Do not be nervous, because it makes me think that you might be planning to dishonor me again. Your death will be worse then." He said it with a particular finality, such that made me see the black irises of the double. My vision jumped up and down a little, and a clump of rosebushes dropped in vaguely behind him. "Walk home now and do not think much about it. Then at seven tomorrow morning go to Alms. The man you are to talk to is taller than you, has hair the same color, and wears cowboy boots. He drinks like you, also. Introduce yourself to him, and tell him that he can save his life by coming to see me. He comes every morning, so just wait for him. Now leave before I change my mind."

I looked once more into his snake eyes, then departed.

I stood outside, drawing deep breaths, mumbling incoherencies to the sun and dust. The effect of the rays upon the beaten ground was golden, touching

upon some unattained happiness in my breast. I blinked my eyes in riddance, but was struck by another thought: "The world does not rotate, but rather twists, as the mind twists. The axis is really some sword plunged into its innards, which makes it twist in agony, nothing akin to rotating bliss." Beginning to walk I opined, "Tonight I must write at least one line of poetry. Tonight, for my mind is a cyclical sage, and if these last few days are any indication, I will not live to a ripe old age."

The door shut behind me. I scratched my sweaty sides and almost howled. My entire body was shaking, and my eyelids twitched. It was a smarmy late afternoon. Pollution and bugs convulsed overhead. A muezzin's call to worship could be faintly heard, crackling in and out on some microphone, and I could picture the once pearly-white minaret turned to mud, melting in the terrific heat, and the muezzin's head sticking out like the tiny turbaned head of the twisted snake.

My legs carried me forward, aching, and my nose began to bleed. I did not even bother with it. No, to the contrary, I even encouraged it, blowing out onto my shirt and hands, rubbing some absently on my face for a fiery glow. I passed a woman squatting next to a charred black shack. She stared at me stonily, as if she was connected to the baked earth.

Having trouble lighting the cigarette, I threw it away, thirsting for whiskey. Recalling I still had one bottle underneath the kitchen sink, atop the molding and rotting wood, I smiled. Even if the refuge in the hole of my apartment was to be brief, I eagerly anticipated it, because I knew that the flow of words on the eve of possible death would be prodigious.

I never wrote a single word.

Like half-man, half-bear, I sought out the honey syrup. Clumsily I pawed at the bottle, the green label blending in nicely with the mould. Squatting, the

waft of the infection was heavy, and I bent away from the choking dust, snatching the bottle out, thus almost falling backward.

I rubbed at the dusty label, as if tenderly caressing my dead mother's face. Tears broke from my eyes and rivuleted down my face. Magically the label turned from mould to a sparkling pine tree green, and I pictured my mother and I running through a forest, laughing at the lions waiting for us to fall. Standing in the dark, stoop-shouldered, in dirty clothes, slightly bent at the knees in a position of veneration, with the shafts of light coming in through the shutters across the living room to rebound off the walls, with the horns bleating the sounds of the angry dead, I heard mother's distant wails, her penitent screams. We kept running in the forest, but the lions moved in, floating on air. We reversed our direction, but the line continued as far as our eyes could see. They kept closing in, and we suffocated to the screams of monkeys. In the dark, I thought I could feel her soul embracing me, knocking me to the floor. There I unscrewed the bottle and poured some of the syrup onto my tongue.

8

Awakening on the damp floor, with the shuttered light framing the front door, and the heat and sweat of my dolor(ache). The empty bottle was on its side at my feet, and my ribs felt like they had been kicked in. I felt over my face but there were no scrapes or bumps. "I fell," I said aloud. Struggling to my feet, I stumbled to the bathroom, cursing.

I splashed water on my face, the picked up the shaving cream. There was a brown rust ring on the edge of the sink. "Damn fools!" I shouted. "Couldn't make it easier on us, could you, by using plastic? Why? Why? I'm asking you! You use plastic for everything else anyhow!" "Still, my eyes are not too red

considering..."

But now in retrospect I see that if I was seeing it for the thousandth time, it was a thousand times worse. My thin frame bulged out at the stomach, and there were alien folds of fat on my hips. When I leaned either way they expanded like tumors. My skin shone with a yellow tint, and my eyes were dull, like little pieces of black granite...Jowls slightly drooped along my clenched jaw. I smiled, said, "Okay, killer," but did not recognize him, and sickened, turned away. I leaned over the toilet but could not vomit, even with the slight hint of urine. Every smell became magnified, the uncapped aftershave radiating, as if from the bowels of a sewer directly below the floor, spewing lime and slime. In reality, there seemed to be some large plumbing pipes snaking underneath, which rumbled with human waste.

A few drops of blood dripped into the shower, dissolving into the screened drain. I closed the curtain and my eyes, for power of clarity. My nose did not continue to run, but rashes broke out on my arms. I rubbed them and their surfaces raised. My fists pummeled the walls until there were bolts of pain, and I soaped my entire body with foam, thinking of shaving it entirely. When I rinsed and dried off vigorously, the friction created new rashes. I threw the towel off my shoulders and combed my hair, smiling crookedly, pondering the open door. I walked over and just stared at it blankly, kneading fingers between my bruised knuckles. Stark naked I stood, remarking upon my loneliness: "So fatherless and motherless the poet stands, like a disintegrating enigma. Certain signs of his erring past point to his erring present. People hate the poet and the alcoholic, especially the alcoholic poet. He is unlinked, because they do not understand him. He remembers his mother after his father's deathly wreck. He was nineteen, and she could no longer hallucinatorily understand him. Sometimes in her delirium her head would jerk to the side and her retreating eyes would spurn him. In the hospital bed, in the old house with the antiquated varnish and wax smell, in the park sitting underneath the barren tree, in the frozen



ambulances with her gasps, groans and swallows, sky shedding white metallic, the poison entering the vehicle and passing intravenously quiet, from mother to son: "No, handsome man, you're my dead husband."

He wanted to hug her, until she died of suffocation, he wanted to cry, for his tears to fall steadily into her blinking eyes, he wanted to yell at her until her eardrums burst and she cried. He did not want to see her die, but he wanted one part of her to perish. He wanted her to suffer exactly what he was suffering.

Frigidly he watched the doors slam and the ambulance recede around the corner at the end of the street. His arms were itching from the gray overcoat, cheeks twitching, struck by the irony of his mother being transported by an object of the purest white.

I craved a leg of mutton, but I knew not why. Perhaps I had read about one too many characters in literature who were inclined, or rather, were forced by conditions to eat it. In my mind I saw a juicy white round leg, the meat falling off in aromatic folds at the deft touch of my fork. I thought of wearing an immaculate black suit, and talking to another important literary personage. Meanwhile I sat on my musty bed, in my shabby blue clothes, pulling on my holey socks, and concealing them with my worn-out loafers. Feeling an attack of gas, I ambled over to the toilet, but found no relief there.

"Now," I thought, standing up, "am I ready to kill, or be killed?" Pictures of Rodel raced through my mind. "A bearded toothy grin, a clean-shaven but scarred glower, and a drooping sadness." Recollecting myself, I closed the shutters to keep the sun out, and slammed the door. But at the bottom of the steps, where there was a little boy squatting in the dirt, I retraced my steps, fumbling for the key, and meditated before a picture of my parents.

Mosques and pillars juttred up, and danced in a mottle of red and white. The dense crowds shoved each other back and forth with red eyes. People smiled dazily, and the stench of feces permeated the area. The sky was a giant fecund river. "Meet the Egyptian Ganges," I thought, and almost expected to see bodies floating atop the air. Looking down, I waited until the white sun spots disappeared, then focused and walked ahead, half-noticing pockmarked faces and unhinged jaws. "We're all neatly dead," I thought, dismissing them as black and white mummies. Lowering my shoulder a little and scowling, I pushed my way through, and did not rest until I reached Alms' street. There I lit a cigarette, and cursed everyone who passed. "Blind cows awaiting slaughter," I taunted, but as I was not shouting, was drowned out by the sounds of city.

When I entered the bar, my scowl had probably softened into a grimace. "The battle is not over yet," I reminded the double. It was dark, except for a crude painting on the small wall over the ripped black booths, illuminated weakly by a single yellow lightbulb. It depicted Mohammed riding a camel, but the camel looked more like an oversprung emaciated donkey, and Mohammed more a hunched giant than a man. Adjusting to the darkness, I saw no one except the bartender, who recognized me.

"You must like my painting," he said, and his bony arms flopped inside his red shirt.

"Why do you say that?" I responded, walking up and taking a seat on a sticky stool.

"Well, as I remember, you were staring at it the last time you were here." He leaned forward.

"Yes?"

"Yes. You fell down."

"You speculate one too many?"

"What?"

"Nothing. Get me a double whiskey, will you?"

His long spine curved up to his spindly neck. It appeared one blow might neatly break him in half, and there would only be square bones to collect.

The tall glass was set before me, sunny. I pulled the bill out, uncreased it, and slammed it down. I looked up and his eyes avoided mine. I stared at the alcohol specimens in front of me. Intermittently I cast a dark glance toward the rummy door, and took a longer draught.

The bartender receded to the corner, the flame of the cigarette pinpointing him. I patted at my revolver and spit bitterly on the floor. I saw mother and the double dancing like ghosts on the misty floor. Shaking my head, I ordered them to do a waltz, but they disappeared. "You refused to dance like a couple, didn't you?" I said aloud, mocking them. "You came to entertain yourselves, not me."

Rodel swaggered in. He was smiling with stupefaction, clearly drunk. He had a short beard and a neat crew cut, as if he had fought his way off the serviceman clipper's stool halfway through. His face was leathery red, probably molded more by his native Texas than Egypt. He was wearing cowboy boots like Cole, but they were scuffed instead of shiny, like a true cattle driver's. His short-sleeve white dress shirt with a large collar and his beige khakis were spotted, not with

sweat, it appeared. "Clumsy fool must have spilled a portion of gin," I thought. He walked in with his long but wide face(his head and his entire presence was large), leaning forward, as if he were being pulled by puppet strings. Except for his size, he looked like a Civil War soldier, recuperating from a recent battle. There were patches of black under his eyes, like small inner tubes. When he sat down a few stools away from me, his face slackened and he grimaced, as if from a piece of lodged shrapnel. He reached up to his head, and then shook it, as if remembering his missing hat. He looked at me only once, slightly turning his head, before he called out: "Hussein, why don't you bring me a Budweiser," and shook his head once more, as if uncertain about something.

Carefully, Hussein set the bottle down in front of him. "I thought you had deserted me," he said. "I thought you were the last foreigner, since terrorism has driven the tourists away."

"Maybe I am, but then maybe I am not," he said, slightly turning his head in my direction.

"You're right. Unfortunately, I am an American, too." I raised slightly in my seat, but seeing no accommodation in his look, sat back down.

"And how did your sales go?" Hussein resumed, as if there had been no interruption at all.

Rodel shrugged. "Not too favorably. Some rattlesnake skins and some actual meat of the snake. Only a few people were interested in cooking them."

"Rattlesnake meat?" exclaimed Hussein, throwing up his bony arms.

"Yes. I know it does not sound tasteful, but it is actually pretty good. Anyhow, the more exotic the food, the better." He rotated his head and rubbed at the back of his neck. Sweat stood on his forehead, and bristles of hair sprouted out of his ears. Mechanically, he raised the glass to his lips, and shook his head once more.

"You okay?"

"Yes," responded the giant morosely, and stared at the empty bartop. He did not seem to notice the bartender move off. He began to mumble to himself: "Damn Americans, damn us all! Have nothing-shit, each time I travel have less, and getting older, women like me less and less. Damn world getting too tough for adventure, and too hard to be bad-ass cowboy, either. Goddamn terrorized everywhere, this human creed...still it continues to plant the seed, but no more farmers!" Frantically he disengaged from his seat. He leaned forward, and shouted, "Fuck you, American!" Saliva shot out of his mouth. He wiped it, shook his head more decidedly, and walked out, the bartender staring in amazement at his unfinished drink.

At the doorway, I looked to the left, and did not see his form in the pattern of dirty faces plodding the streets barefoot, with the sun striking down. Only a man running the street with arms and legs gone at the joints eclipsed them. He covered ground like a dog, clearing the way with guttural shouts, avoiding feet.

To my right he stood, about ten feet away, hands in pockets, glaring at the sun-baked street. His collar was turned up, but one triangle had loosely flapped down, and the bottoms of his pants were dirty from dragging, (halos of soil). I approached him, his left eye shadowed me, and a ball jumped in his jaw.

"Don't come any closer, asshole," he warned. He did not turn his head. "And if you've got anything to say to me, say it now, because you're making me nervous." His hands came out of his pockets, clenching and unclenching at his sides. From somewhere near the cripple's barks were turning into screeches.

"Aziz sent me," I practically shouted, and he wrenched around.

He stood facing me, like a gunfighter. There was a great threat in his eyes, but he did not move as of yet. His lips began to move, but then he swallowed, took a deep breath, and said, "You tell Aziz to...no, goddamn it, just tell him 'No.' All right?"

"Okay." He began to move off. "But-"

He stopped and turned, laboriously. "Listen, you'd be smart to stay out of it yourself. Now make yourself scarce, American."

I reached for my revolver, then thought better of it. Rodel was walking quickly now. Beginning to trace his steps, he broke into a run. There were two shots and he fell. A man came in from the side and fired into his body once more, then broke back into stride.

Pulling the revolver out, I sprinted after him. Barely registering peripheral objects and bodies, I focused on the killer's back. I gained ground on the yellow shirt and black pants, swerving through the masses, barely noticing the people I hurled out of my way. I did hear rushes of air escape them, along with a faint ring in my ears, which seemed to be endeavoring to outrun its pursuit of me.

There was a cackle in my ear, zigzagging in its intensity. I refocused and yelled. The man hopped in and out of my vision, and I growled. But my legs felt lighter, and now I was practically upon my prey.

He stopped and turned, and the yellow cloth settled on his shoulders. My gun leveled at him as he raised his with a toothy smile. I felt bolts hit my legs and fell forward, yelling. My hands broke my fall, and I turned on my side to see the revolver glistening in the dirt, like a jewel. Then a solemn blast rang.

**ORIGINAL  
POEMS BY  
EDGAR HARDING**



— Here-in

—  
The diesel truck pitched out  
I thought there was paint in the air  
For my eyes itched and  
Stuttered like shutters  
I was standing beside the road  
And I did not know where  
next to go America was  
behind me-wizened fools  
Raised on the fat of capital  
drool  
Is not a good rhyme but

excuse me, It is as if I have  
Escaped the scene of a crime  
Astrological in scope-  
Bend the rules, don't break  
them while you feel the  
power of the stars The long  
ruminating traveling car  
Is rusty from hectic bouts with  
the rain Many get trapped in it  
and lose their brain Their life-one  
person is always tortured in life-  
That is everyone-  
Break through the bars or dig a new  
passage? You look fine but inside your  
head is Rotting cabbage  
The industrial cord is fixed  
like a race, Spit out the  
ruins of the cabbage-  
All the attendant waste shorn  
out in the Sun to bake  
Stars aground

And there are not many people around  
To climb out of their Winnebagos  
and weep so dexterously and  
brief like that Traveling  
politician in Paris who  
Spoke of trouble in Cairo: slow  
ravaging malaria insensitively tricked the  
tear-duct into gear — Hastily  
ungraciously to shut it

There is a devil running around  
He has a "Yield" sticker on his  
forehead and a pair of those  
never-ending Fake spiraling  
glasses  
They take you in and he says,  
"Excuse me, but sometimes I have

To grin in spite of myself."

Archipelago of woes is

this            Unplanned  
drought of woe in the  
sailor, the,  
The tree, you see, I  
feel and I can believe  
the sea  
When it speaks to me

This is my first visit  
To this particular land  
I have an inkling of  
ideas But not a  
master plan  
To lead me into this travel-change  
The world in a  
blink Personal  
his-story  
"How did you escape?"  
Ask my sometimes  
Abusive Muses.  
"Well, it is very difficult  
To describe-maybe it had  
Something to do with taking

—

Peyote with that Indian tribe."  
"And who might those Indians have been?"  
"Three blind mice."  
"So this was hallucinogenic then?"  
"Yes, my mind turned the wise men into  
blind mice." "Very well, but it is time now  
For me to go back into my hibernating block  
of ice." "Lice?" did he say, I think now,  
Thumb sprouted for the  
Hitch-hike(somewhere here in Italy)  
And so for no hint of punctuality  
In those "loaf-bread" faces dry of butter  
I stand here slightly posing as I mutter  
To myself-they say that if you talk to yourself you  
are crazy But to me it is when I feel a little lazy-  
Like the sojourn through London on that  
Decker bus Where I did not bother much to  
get off for a quick Look(drink) of the famous  
sights(pubs)  
My mind had settled into its own concert  
And I did not wish to interrupt the traveling  
orchestra Of murderers, pimps, lovers,

— thieves,  
Rocks, barriers, lovers, salt  
The "ineluctible modality" of thought to talk Like the  
region of the world I have placed myself here-in To  
immerse myself in a foreign mass and not feel so thin

From the airport(any  
airport) Not so different:  
Selfsame desperate  
Beggars-people  
Caught in this gigantic net  
Siphoning off the  
unfortunate Like a dead  
leaf in a pool Being scooped  
out

---When I regret my karma I feel like a fool---

I travel here to use my heart like a  
beacon and my mind like a tool  
But that tool alone cannot get me my

ride To the Eurail station that in my  
mind hides like an arcane solution to the  
world's plight by that Indian tribe  
Exhuming secrets from the Grand Canyon  
like Archaeologists  
Digging for Tutankhamen  
Hearts pumping new blood overflowing  
drowning Dead  
Maybe the heart can only pump so much  
And so fast as the world will have when it is bled  
In  
Other words  
Humanity must perish alone  
Since we have dictated Nature sans stand alone  
As I stand on this veritable  
Threshold  
Doorway  
Passage either into myself or out to  
That budding tree

A moment I forget myself and  
Cross the road-sprouted thumb heave-  
hoed One lone horn blares, I turn, they  
stare, I glare With a palm resting on that  
tree  
Trunk nothing more solid  
Or weightless as the still-swelling bee in  
me Stinging the silence that if  
unchallenged  
Would rest forever solid as matter in thee

"One thought leads to another like one lover leads to  
another," I heard some eroticist exposed himself



To a popery in Paris  
Again I think of thought to talk  
Or thought to walk  
How matter bends in shape to mind  
And how mind provides the tools to climb  
The peaks that traverse the xenophobic insomnia  
sleep: Here I work, here I live, here therefore I am-  
Exigent fallacy(not true)!

I have seen bodies here but minding other planets  
Cratering their skulls in search of unordained truths

But now I see my ride  
And I am crouching over to the Side, it is a woman and her  
lips are wet  
She poses hesitance but I break it with a wide  
smile Propelling myself forward like a jet  
She asks: "Have we met?"

"...And then sit up, and shield your eyes from the blinding lights. Do not raise your heavy arms, or even nod your lead head when someone arrives, just pretend to sleep, and dream your sleep when you are alive(awake). God, how long have I been unconscious as such(this) and what dreams have been my solemn vent? But my subtle intoxicant returns to lividly course. God bless me, and all that have come before me, but just leave the entire Aziz business alone. I am in a hospital, now straining my eyes and head, I can see my legs fattened with bandages. But what is this horrid medicine I have been given? And why now do flashes of a benign Fermina flash through the temper in my head? Strange, but I remember her not too long ago, not seeming to mind me dead. Habib should be here soon, wonder when I will receive more guest time, but why? I do not want to see anyone now, least of all anyone living...just dead. Feel dead, so cold, the naked woman before me does not speak, must be dead, or I am just thinking. See, now she is changing colors kaleidoscopically, finally resolving red. Hah! She is gone, so now I can think again. Things moving a bit fast but now I know(see)it all. That narrow tube filled with my blood, snaking into my arm, and some blood(probably my own)still on the floor by the door. I cry,I do not know from what sadness, but I cannot raise my arms to wipe the tears away. Really now would prefer to be in a coffin...to solve this bloodstained plane. Existence? How did he miss me? Yes, he got my legs, but might have been distracted from crucial aim by whoever shot him. Goddamn him! Took my legs out from under me, but now I can laugh(if maliciously), so I should thank him. But of course he is not with the living. Does not have to worry he cannot feel his toes..."

"I have the urge to shout, but I know not why. Seems that this anger is a real drug, and now my fingers and toes tingle. Just wondering how much longer until the girl comes in with her shining breasts and examines my thin blood. What will be done? But now I am ready, can sense Chief Nessim's hairy presence..."

"Nurse!" I wrenched my head to the right, straight toward the light blue door. I saw a head through a portal of glass, and flailed my arms toward it, because, once more, everything was fading to black.

"What a terrible dream! Everyone, especially mother, all sitting next to me, slicing my arms and neck with steak knives. I think it was Fermina who first stopped and protested that they were killing me. Really could use a stiff drink, but then the idea itself revolts in my stomach, flaying the insides. I wonder how many drinks I had yesterday, but more so how things came so quickly to pass. The ship should today, all right, definitely be set aright. Should try to block this gibberish how, am just a little too unhealthy nervous for words."

I saw a bowed blunt head. "It's you, Habib."

"Surely it's me, Edgar."

"Well, why have you come?"

He put an arched forefinger between his neck and the starched white collar, prying for more space. His face glistened, and he stood in a void, shifting his weight back and forth, from one foot to the other.

"Habib, are you okay?"

He forced a laugh. "Come, now, it's you I'm worried about."

"Worry? Why worry, Habib? If I had been apportioned death I would have been dead already. There is no need to wormy. I am not in the stomach of a dog, or God."

"I'm glad to see your humor is still alive, Edgar." He looked directly into my

eyes and winced. "But I am eternally sorry for putting you in your position."

I blinked and averted my gaze. "You didn't pull the trigger, now, did you? No.

Well then, it was not you, it was I, who put myself in this position, by taking your eternal word."

"I should have been more cautious," he stated flatly. A tear trickled out of a wrinkled eye. His fidgeting hands transported me back to the bond of friendship on that recent yet inchoately distant day, when we ate rattlesnake. How did the rift so quickly develop? Why this bitterness wedging up underneath my guts, ripping them piecemeal into sticky shreds? Why this immoral ebb?

"Well Habib, I should have been more cautious and less stupid, more skeptical and less trusting. Should I just go ahead and run the gamut?"

"What?"

"You misunderstand me. You'll have to excuse my rambling, for I'm still under the influence of narcotics. I was just coming out of some trance when you came in, and decided after some deliberation that you were not some mangy dog."

"Well. I guess it is easier to get ideas in your head, isn't it?" There was probably a note of scorn in that.

"You're right, Habib. I can get carried away, but then a lot of it is truth shadowed by reason. For instance, I feel that Chief Nessim is somewhere near, from this recent jolt of Aziz. Am I right?"

"Yes, he wants to see you immediately in fact, to glean as much information as he can."

"Glean? I like that word. Should use it more in my speech and writing. Anyhow, I figure Aziz is not in custody. The man is at present too slippery for the ape's clutches, excuse my description. But, despite my anger, I can feel some respect for him. Seems simple enough out of place as it is. But before he comes in, I want to ask you a question."

"Okay." His right eye twitched.

"Why did Aziz deal with me in the way which he did?" Faintly, I heard a cacophony of honking. Had the news commandos arrived en masse, or was it

just another typical emulsion of the Cairo wildebeest?"

"I don't, well, obviously, I don't know, Edgar, but I guess he figured you were scared for your life."

"You're saying I wasn't?"

"No, not exactly, I was just looking at it from his position--"

"Enough said, Habib. You see, I didn't care whether I lived or died, and I haven't for a long time, but I have a feeling that deep down he feels the same way I do, so we are on the same footing, sort of equals, so to speak."

"I'm sorry, Edgar. I did not want to believe that he had arrived again to terrorize anyone he wanted to terrorize whatsoever. Like he did before."

"And what exactly did he do last time, Habib? How many people did he kill?"

"Well, I do not know specifically."

"Approximate it then, will you, because I have an inkling that it was more than a few. Psychotics such as him do not normally stop voluntarily. And if I'm sounding like some fourth-rate psychologist, kindly excuse me." I felt a vein in my right leg popping out, like some arcane psychoanalytical tool. My mouth was dry but I refrained from divulging, lest I lose my control of the situation.

"I believe it was seven or eight. One murder could not be directly linked to him, and all the victims were security or police."

"He does not like authority, does he?" I said rhetorically, and coughed in place of laughter. "He, from what I've experienced and now hear, does not employ subtle tactics. Tell me, did you ever meet him?"

"Yes. He came into my restaurant one time and said he would like to buy it some day. Very polite? No."

"So what he meant was that you would have to sell it to him in the future?"

"Metaphorically speaking, yes."

This time I had to fight against the impulse to laugh. "You are outdoing me, Habib, but remember, only because of my weakened condition. So Aziz was chased out?"

"Yes. He must not have expected the response he provoked. I think he is twice-determined now to make-"

"An indelible mark?" I said, suddenly drowsy. At that point a bearded man strode in, and I thought I would be killed. But he just approached with a half-pitying, half-chagrined smile, nodding faintly toward Habib. He extended his hand, and his eyes widened, as I plunged back into unconsciousness.

Stretching his arm toward me with a smile upturning coarse whiskers, and nodding tenuously at my discomfort, while energetically lifting and tapping his heels, was Nessim. Realizing my complete immobility, he placed his paws at his cheeks and padded lightly, as if in self-chastisement. "Quite a sight," I thought, "reminds me of a monkey man, with all his loose genuflections."

"Mr. Harding," he began, pulling a chair up to the foot of the bed. He sat down properly on it, instead of straddling it. "Good, he is not some television actor. Looks at me friendly, instead of making a Habib-like lame apology. It is ironic Saed has not come to pay his respects. Must be worried about his infallible reputation."

"You are alive." He paused and smiled broadly, pulling in and sustaining his breath, his face changing color. He waited but got no reply. Flirting with blue, he exhaled and sputtered, "You-were-no-help." He clapped his hands once and

said, "Imagine, Mr. Harding, you can still feel the breeze on your face."

"The dust on my face," I retorted disdainfully.

"Good...yes, it is not a pleasant thought, but I see one must hold reverence for the bad, not just the good. Still, you are happy because you were almost dead."

"I do entertain much on it as a kind of release. It gets me much closer than everyday thought to my pure core."

"Okay, Mr. Harding, but you are alive. You can help yourself by bringing Aziz to justice. You can put faith in me because I will catch him. And you will have to worry no more of violence." The candor his words, positive, did even fill me with some optimism for the future. My prospects, still the same, yet filtered through a triumphant note in the waning words. I felt as I had in my innocence as a child, issuing forth ideologies with the least bit of insult; least bit of unpardonable punishments so insensate. When mother's profile changed from divine white to dull wavering gray, and father's features bloated and slackened. Sometimes he joined in the malaise and I watched as they grated each other until the devils danced. Meanwhile I dwelled on suspicion. My ideals were flayed before the ungrated fire; my sensations incensed, insanely twisted. My body did not bode well for me, unnaturally(even for adolescence) craving for sex, and obsessed by bodily functions. Often I looked at my feces, mindful of some ancient urge to eat them. Obsession would follow, frozen monologues on the imperfections imposed upon humanity. Many days in high school I did not shower for school, and never made my bed, fractured by the ignobility of repetition. Cruelly, I punished my cat for evil, specificity untrue, while in bed at night, anguished by cries of hormonal frustration, grave assuagement would ensue.

"Violence? I do not shirk from violence. If you permit me, I will kill Aziz

myself. It is no issue to me, physical pain, because it is mental pain that torments me. Have just been waiting for this opportunity, with all due clemency, Chief Nessim."

Once more he smiled broadly. "Forget about revenge. That will be mine."

"I want a hand in destroying his treasures myself," I stated flatly, painfully attempting(once more)to raise my head. "He is the cause of my present condition."

"Don't strain yourself, Mr. Harding. Your anger is justified, but you should not risk your life unwisely. You are too young for it."

"And you?"

"Well, I could be too old for it now." He began to pace in a semicircle around the foot of my bed. "It is a dirty matter that I thought was already finished. He had killed enough of my men. He must be willing to accept great sacrifices, for he is a man of great action and few words."

"Yes. He struck me in the face, like I was some bastard child." I tried to laugh, but it sounded feeble. "He had me tied in with Aziz right away, which hurt my detective sensibilities. Despite my volcanism and I must say luckily, I did not try to strike him back."

"Men can be wise." So saying, Nessim nodded his head and stroked his beard. "But now I must get back to the station. We are coordinating an attack on the warehouse at nightfall. Now get your rest and regain your strength."

"But-"

"I'm sure Habib will obediently keep you posted. Goodbye." Smiling again, he turned his massive back.

Feebly, unnoticed by the nurse, I raised my "rotten leg." Its muscles were strengthening daily, but in my nervous condition, the instinct was uneven,



when slowly removing the bedpan, which I had slid out on my own. That morning my stubbornness had been subdued in the bath by something smooth, "shining breasts and soapy dew," I thought.

This nurse was at my care only in emergency. She was faintly recognizable in my entrance, when her hands had raised from pressing my fresh wounds, and in my delirium importunately waved them at the grimacing guards for instant passage. She rarely spoke to me, and ignored my admonitions. I recalled her stern front to the stabs of my physician with a pointed finger, struggling to make some practical point. She had said something then, shrugging and looking into my heavy-lidded eyes, bumping him with a lowered shoulder on the way out.

She had applied the soothing ointment after the scarifying bandages came off with matted hair. She had plunged the needle, and watched me drift off into soothing sleep. She had the younger nurse attend to me when the thing between my legs grew hard. She applied wet cloths in the suffocating night. She had only failed to appear when I called out for my mother. But then the doctor had been the expensive sewing machine.

Decently, Habib had only stopped in briefly after his initial visit. He told me how Nessim and his men had been ambushed at the warehouse, as if Aziz had been tipped off. He explained how Nessim and a few of his men somehow broke through a point in the circle, and escaped death. Remanned, they returned the next day, but the warehouse had already been abandoned. Now a group of his best detectives were scouring Cairo in search, while Nessim prepared himself for funereal proceedings. He showed me a picture out of a paper, of the bearded man shouting down hecklers, hand raised like a claw.

I listened, disgusted by the propriety of police. All I wanted was to get out of the hospital and hunt Aziz down. To me, it was simple: Desist from "cat and mouse" and become a renegade yourself, in the guise of mouse. Acquire men

with the skill and temerity to hunt down Aziz individually, or train the men presently at your disposal. Only attack in large numbers once the leader is dead.

Of course, I related none of this to Habib. I busied myself with contrivances, how I felt immediately able to regain some sort of employment. He continued with his laborious apologies, and gently reprimanded me for my aspersions about the Turk Osman, proffering that he and Saed had reached an understanding completely uncompromising to the restaurant.

"What sort of understanding, Habib?" Laying down, my words sounded slurred.

"Come now, Edgar. You know I leave and trust the business acumen to Saed."

"Well, I have reservations about it. I don't think you know Saed well enough to trust him blindly."

"You know, you sound proper English at times, even though you're only American with an English name. You even affect an accent. I must admit it is to your benefit, though."

"Does it happen to remind you of the English themselves, who left your country in 1947?"

"Vaguely, Edgar, quite vaguely...I fight ties with the past, because it is largely an uncomfortable sphere."

"I see...but you'll have to leave now, because I have to exercise a bodily function."

When I walked out, there were no television lights. Apparently, not having been attacked by the prolific terrorists disqualified me from the newsworthy. My leg still felt a little stiff, but most of the circulation had returned. I was wearing some safari-like shorts, t-shirt, and hat, which Habib had purchased for me. I had been notified the fortnight that I was to appear in two days at

the police station in order to identify my deceased attacker. Serious doubts entered my head about the practicality of it, since I could see his guilty rotting body rushing headlong with Aziz. What could connecting a dead killer to Aziz do to detain him? He had to be found first. I saw the pistons firing in the police machine, much too predictable in their pace and purpose. They would try to influence an eruption from Aziz and his men, in order to lawfully massacre them in self-defense. "If they valued life they would directly kill him," I thought.

My armed escort revved its loud engine, two heads looking in my direction donning wraparound sunglasses. I saw the polished black military boot, blood oozing out.

"Thanks, but I'll walk," I said.

"No you won't. You'll get in." A gun pointed at my chest. I recognized them as the twins with pistol handles exposed. They looked haggard now, and expressly impatient. The gun did not waver, but seemed to pulsate with heat. I looked into the black barrel and smiled.

"Okay, you win, but for the last time." I made my way into the back seat. My leg throbbed a little, but not enough to alarm me. I made a clamor while lighting a cigarette, adjusting the flame before striking each time, and being dissatisfied at each adjustment, exclaiming, "Damn lighter." The driver looked at me in the mirror with a bent smile as he pulled off, the mole near his ear like a pointed lesion of pain. He was the slightly less imposing and older looking of the two, who had been so friendly the day of my shooting. I smiled back and did a few more adjustments before I lost the patience and resolve to torture. I thought of my diminished concern for decency as I indulged a cigarette, struck by the release in consciously courting death; while spying the rapidly passing pillars of civilization: Buildings and people, people and the memory of looking into a barrel of death.

"Have either of you two heard of Osman?" I asked, pulling out the money Habib had given me. I crumpled it and shoved it in my pocket, then

reconsidered and flattened them back out. My instinct told me to get my revolver and shoot it out with Aziz until the end, so my soul would finally be able to write freely. But, of course, I was disarmed, and did not expect to be rearmed by someone else.

The driver just shook his head while the other turned and stared. There was just the smallest patch of skin between his eyebrows.

"I see you do not want to talk, but there is nothing to hide now. I know that you and Nessim are in trouble, and I can help." I just spoke as the thoughts entered my head, conjuring up relative images. "You two must understand that things can change quickly. Take Leningrad, for instance. One can barely describe its metallic beauty. It is quite devastating, with its lakes around small peninsulas holding small rafts of ice, and the haunting quality of those blue spotlights illuminating public squares. The feeling is strong, like a bullet shot into your leg. But when I was there Lenin's statue was still extant, and the twisted control existed on every cold red face, on every fat palm of the storekeepers selling Smirnoff. Something very comforting yet uneasy in that feeling, making food taste sweeter or more bitter at turns. You can learn a lesson from it, because Lenin's statue has been torn down and everything has changed. You see, Chief Nessim's statue is as threatened as Lenin's was...look on the corner there. The infamous rich newspaperman Graves is spreading the work as gospel. That rich despot has no writing talent to speak of, he is just writing to spout. Well, you did not look. The paperboy had the headline aloft for all to plainly see. It read CAIRO TORN FROM THE APE'S CLUTCHES. He must make some sort of response, even if at this very moment he is busy on the streets. Hopefully, this has not given the rest of this city's criminals

incentive, rattling against the iron cage. But you do not listen, even though you have the safety net. So very well, and to you..."

In the car we sat, immobile, outside my dilapidated building. A few small boys were throwing a clear marble off a piece of plywood held steady by a taller boy. He peeked over the top, taunting them, and lowered before the object bounced off his shield. He looked to be about twelve, and raised himself astonished at the sight of the rich automobile, grimacing and chasing when the black marble viciously bounced off his forehead. He tripped over his own feet and fell face-first in the street, laughing and yelling at his young tormentors, who skittered down the street like affrighted mice. He passed us with a shy look on his flat face, taking his bloody nose indoors.

"Anyhow, have you two ever questioned the probability of you escaping these streets to enjoy our pensions? Bloody preposterous-excuse the English phrase. When I speak of probability, I mean the spurious set of statistics that are supposed to sustain you to retirement. You must be thinking now, because I have made my thoughts your own. You see, when I am in a bad mood I must talk, or else I pick up my crutch. You know what that is, don't you? My bottle, the sweet poison that streaks my bloody veins. You don't know how relieving it is for me to talk again, now that I have survived a blind phase. And so now might I become the aggressor. But why are you talking to each other in whispered Egyptian, which I cannot understand?"

"Get out," the driver said, his right arm bent at its side. His muscles made the thin fabric twitch.

"Are you two to remain here on the street?"

"Yes," he hissed, leaning forward. "and we're only doing so on Saed's behalf. He was influenced by your friend Habib. You will be leaving our country within the week."

"But I do not want to leave."

"You will. The ineptitude of the police keeps you here. You might easily identify the man today, and be on a flight out tonight, but they have put almost their entire station out in the streets, so they barely have enough to book arrests as it is. I do not like you, Mr. Harding, but if you cooperate, I will do my job, and keep you alive."

"You speak eloquently, so I must praise you. But you need not worry, because I have every intention of keeping my peace indoors. I have much to write about now, so you will all see a light on for most hours of the night." I opened the door, encouraging blunt heat.

He leaned back. "Do not try to escape through the emergency escape. It is barricaded. There should be no reason for you to leave, because Habib himself will come with food once a day, starting tomorrow morning at ten."

"Goodbye." I slammed the door. "And goodbye, Mr. Magniloquent." There was the gutted corpse of a cat in the gutter.

After the first flight of steps, my leg was throbbing, and my head felt filled with moths, wings fuzzing my reason. Already I felt barricaded, and wanted to attack the bars with barracuda jaws. Light barely filtered through the single dusty pane, pointing up the next flight. I thought that my brief helplessness was akin to the torture my double experienced before death-the final impartial fissure in his neck. "But what to make of this defense of the dead?" I thought. "Reminds me of acknowledging Native Americans and accepting their reservation. Reservations are supposed to be their havens, but they have reservations about their reservations, so to speak, because the meaning of the word also infers "reserved." Their chiefs have never been historically portrayed as garrulous, but such spiritual people never refuse what they feel." I looked down the first flight, rapt with the frailty of veiled meaning, perceiving the moment and physicality of life in a giant castle, which I had only ascended the first flight(fight) of.

The leg felt better after the second. It had triumphed in its facile impersonality, and I was congratulatory, aspiring to a toast of liquor..." Fermina, my arthritic drunkenness is like a fuzzy lozenge eternally dissolving," I said aloud. Here the glass pane was smudged with small fingerprints, and I could envision a little child surreptitiously brushing it, while held aloft by the parent rushing it down the slippery steps. I placed my fingertips on it and crowed with delight, then swallowed an unspecific pang of nostalgia. The beauty of innocence disinclined my hand to remain long, for I insinuated the guilt in stealing a children's song. If I had touched a soul I had torn it wide apart.

I exhaled a little in pain at the top, even though the third flight was slightly shorter. It felt unusually premature to stop, but there was a release that compromised the yearning: that vague yet premonitory pulse of anger responding to the quitting of noble thought, existing in and issuing forth from a potent source of betrayal: a case of non-alcoholic beer, Habib's present sitting before my cracked door, then dead-stop, the apparition of mother turning the silent door(clock).

10

If the cathedral of memory vents the soul, then the castle of conceit loses control, for I had lost the urge to kill. I could barely stop writing poems in order to pause to eat some seasoned rice, still mumbling defiant phrases in the direction of my writing pad, and bemusedly sipping my beer.

The memory of the past few days crept in, along with the exactitude of the sun, reminding me what time it was. My vent was slow and soporific, and I was grateful it was not dark, where sleep might easily overtake me. My condition was worsening for the better. After I put the dishes in the soapy sink to soak, I

grabbed the pad anew, with animalistic hunger. I wrote a few key words down as a sketch, before beginning a new European narrative.

Patient deliberation was not my hallmark. Quotas for ideas and structure usually went unfulfilled.

"Violence?" I thought, pondering the recent yet inchoately distant past. A certain occasion at the dinner table, when I was busily building butter sandwiches, while father stared at morose mother as she ladled tomato soup. There was a portrait of supposed grandfather behind him on the water-stained wall, smiling at and holding a blood-soaked quail.. There was still a mark where one day, in a fit of emotion, I applied some ketchup. Mother had discovered it and spanked me-restored it before father came home from the shop, an oil can Pop. He would ask me if I was ready yet to learn to use a gun, and I would reply in the negative, and punish myself with studies for his disapproval. Often he would pursue me at the table with glorifications of grandpa's hunting, how he killed bears on "first shots, and dead between the eyes," liberally quoting, his eyes as ferocious as a bear's, I once thought. When I reached puberty I recanted the picture, and drew laughs from young pugs, saying how they were more like dead slugs. Now I understood that there was also the innocence of a deer in those eyes, foreleg caught in a bear trap. I was eighteen, and it was my final summer at home, before I began retooling at Dartmouth. The beauty of the oceanic Malibu backdrop challenged the reality of the dinner table, each one of us saying "Grace" to the tabletop. Only a year later, I would be getting teeth knocked out in fistfights, somewhere in the Midwest father would drop the monkey wrench in the middle of an engine overhaul, collapse, and die, and mother would retire to an asylum.

"Edgar, kindly pass your mother the potatoes," were the only words spoken that night, sliding across the table with the serving dish like slops.



Later, after they had gone to sleep, I stared out to sea, mesmerized by the moonlight that skated over father's cacti potted just inside the sea wall. He proudly related their discovery to guests, how on a trip to Las Vegas he had been detained in the middle of the desert by bladder pressure, and had fallen into a trance at the side of the road near those prickly pillars. He thought it propitious at the time to extricate his small shovel from the toolbox in the back of the truck, and afford a few of the scorched prisoners more California sunshine. He once had to duck when a highway patrol cruiser shot past pursuing a red Chevy hotrod hightailing, a bunch of drunk ignorant greasers succoring a shouting blonde. Then he would digress, opening up a critical analysis on the plot structures of Chandler, opining that there should have been more dames, smart ones at that, and what did the dames sitting there have to say to that? Mom, by this juncture, would be drunk and flat after her brief sociability, mumbling words like "bastard" and "jerk" in his direction, drawing forced amused titters from the ladies, their husbands and boyfriends drowning them out with predictions about the Dodgers and Yankees. Father jumped up with his booming voice, standing for effect, his brown dress shirt, his favorite, as always, steam-cleaned that very day. He said that he had challenged Mickey Mantle to an arm wrestling match, and that the famed slugger declined, saying, ' Sorry, mister, I just like to swing a bat and chase women, but I'll buy you a beer if you can beat me downing one.'

"Now all I heard was that he was a stupid Okie," he declaimed, "but he beat me, and more times than I can count after that, then whipped me at arm wrestling, and left the bar with a sweet dish, leaving me beaten like a dog...Okay, okay, enough jumping and applause, the moral of the story is that intelligence is relative, because there are many variations of it. For example, my son here Edgar, now listen closely, Edgar, has aims to travel the world and write. He took a little too early and eager to his grandfather's stubborn

adherence to proper English language, tradition, and mores. Now he even smokes cigars, trying to impress the girls. But no hard feelings, now, son. Do any of you believe it?' he resumed.

But I was looking at the cacti again, into the metallic gray. There was a slight crack near the right edge, through which water leaked connivingly, meting out its own justice: "If you give me more space I will continue to run." For a moment I availed of myself Neptune. And how I longed to widen the crack and allow my family to drown.

Then the illusory revolver took shape in my swollen hand, mirroring the twisted neck of the double. The image righted itself in the hunting portrait, Aziz displacing grandpa, my rotting head in the space of the dead bird.

\* \* \*

On the notepad, I drew a rough sketch of Rodel. I was not an adept artist, but I concentrated on the depth of misery penetrating his eyes; settling for the geometry of Xs in his vision, the tragedy in his fighting alive. With crayons, I colored his cheeks red, his hands green, struggling to pierce his shell, reminiscing how mother drew in spirit. "I rebel," she told me when I asked for a reason after returning home from school on my supercharged scooter, swerving in and out of T-Birds and Chevys at lights; powering out of the lurch. "Rodel," I said aloud, walking over to the shutters and putting my hand to the fragments of light, "it was as if you were fighting against life, wracking the indomitable diablo(devil). One cannot ruin a devil, because he has swift patient wings. He emanates from gun stocks and stuffed pythons, and skips across blood stains. Easily, I can imagine how you arrived, shining with your new tan clothes, telling yourself how inspiring it would be to drink an entire case of Lone Star beer while sharing your wisdom with one you did not know.

Unfortunately, when one wants to commune, one looks for a clone. Patently absurd, as no one can share a drink, just as no lion can share a den. Unaided, wisdom sounds ridiculous, like squatting spider monkeys imitating squaws. Damn it! Rodel, could you not see the fracture in the sky?"

"He is not alive. Does not have to worry he cannot feel his toes. But how about you, Fermina? If I am a drunkard, who told you so? And why? What was another glaring fault? Perhaps I would have built myself up like a pyramid, to ask you out for dinner on one of my uppermost levels. We could have sacrificed our souls together...But now what am I saying? My present belief is that I should be praying, and writing you a letter of apology. I cannot conceive of a pillar high enough for us. There is futility in our spoken words, pitchforks in our laughter. The repression! That universal disc that rises in my throat to shut off my spoken truth! How have I been bastardized thus? Do you remember, Fermina, the night I walked you and Mustafa home, and the sewers buzzed and hummed? No, I am not insulting, let soul say what will, let no unspoken word be harm. But one was! What was it, Fermina? Your black dress shuts off your body, depositing you in your mother's nest! What harm truly has been done, and who is to judge a healthy man whose mind is only sick? I have never done a physical harm to anyone undeserving, never infiltrated the devil's den except by chance, which chance never came to a physical fruition! My flames were already doused when you extinguished them! And I cannot destroy them incontrovertibly until I understand them!"

I reached for an imaginary glass. "Where is the syrup? Where is the-oh, damn the thought that all men are infirm-clairvoyant liquid?" Rushing to the kitchen sink, I heard the plangent cries of everyone I had known who had died. Fumbling under it, I felt the terrible dread of a drought, thinking my limbs

might get stuck. My joints felt sticky, because all were, especially those of the elbow, stiff. I remembered throwing it out in high school, trying to get more speed on a pivotal pitch. I had to leave in the third inning with two outs and a two run lead, and our team eventually lost the championship game. It was in dusty scorching Fresno. I slammed the door and stood up with fresh tears. I had braved my emotions in the dugout, but afterward I collapsed.

There was no comfortable place to retire to, no immediately available bottle. I debated haggling one of the bodyguards into fetching one from a store, then relented, feeling too impertinent for objective worth, or words. Realistically, I had no illusions about escaping the apartment, since I was a virtual prisoner inside. Only a bottle could do the trick of releasing me from my uncomfortable introspections.

The dripping red-blood rosebush entered my mind again. My double was sitting up in the low branches of a tree, with the bloody bush in his hands. He was throwing dismembered fingers, legs, and arms at me. He was playing with some birds that were partially attached to his forearms. When some became detached, it caused him acute pain, and he pointed an accusatory finger at me.

A knock sounded, like a silenced gunshot. I swiveled around and raised my arm in a defensive gesture. I did not answer.

"Open the door, Mr. Harding," a voice demanded. "Or I will have to kick it down."

I did not move at all this time. Instead, I only replied, "I will not open the door because I want to be left alone. You have caused me enough

consternation as it is."

"You will open up."

"No, you will leave me in peace, like a monk."

"So be difficult, then. You have a special treat from Habib and you do not want it, I guess. He sends his best regards."

"How do you know?" "I might prove to be more difficult than you ever thought," I said under my breath.

To my chagrin, it was rattlesnake, trumpeted by an innocuous note: "Enjoy, Edgar," presented on a silver platter by the impatient bodyguard. He tried to peek around me, but I shadowed his movements and took it from him with a curt nod before closing and bolting the door.

I set it down on the dingy table. It was as if I was seeing Rodel again, but in the post-mortem stage, all his flesh turned to white from the heat of the fire; the color of fat. The spices seemingly carried the folds of fat up to my mouth, which rankled at the corners, remembering the thud of the bullets into the meat of his body. Imagining him in Texas, I saw him mulling over a dead cow in mulberry thicket, propositioning pathos with a folded brow and a muddy boot. He must have had a scuffle earlier in the morning with his girlfriend, because there were raw pink patches on his cheeks, and he grimaced when he perused the plain for more bodies of animals, drawing a deep breath of maple borne from redolent tree sap engorging and drowning army ants snaking like taut ropes through flaking bark. Rodel was perceiving that he was a desiccated cow on an endless plain of whiskey grain.

Earlier, he might have worn his chaps while he pounded in horseshoes, the rubbing of the muddy hooves through the rain and the sun splotching them black. He remembered the first time, as a thirteen-year-old orphan recently

arrived from Little Rock, Arkansas, he had been too frantic, and the curvature of medal had slapped him on the side of the jaw like a giant hammer.

His foster parent had worked at the smokestacks, and returned home with a tired dirty face and tired dirty jokes, immediately grabbing his wife's butt, while Rodel hid out in his room, because, despite his hard work, he had not been able to complete the daily duties on the farm, which culminated in cleaning the horse stalls, the chicken cages, and the pig pens, rarely pausing to soothe the dryness in his throat, which traveled down his esophagus into his guts, a dryness that felt like it would shut off the valve to his heart.

"All just speculation," I thought, dipping the dry meat into the heavy garlic-seasoned oil, "but deep and interesting enough." Picturing Rodel as I chewed, I saw him seated at a picnic table eating dry oatmeal, stonily staring at his foster father revving the engine of the tractor after an overhaul, staring back with a wide smile through a dust cloud. Emerging from the corner of the house was a blood-soaked rooster which had fought itself through the barbwire dividing the adjacent properties.

A whistle blew down in the street. I pulled aside the dusty shutters and looked out, the plate balanced precariously on my callused right palm. Squinting, I was reminded of the first time I ate rattlesnake, when I contemplated the city's clamor. Now, below, there was a jogger in red tennis shoes and longjohns holding the Egyptian flag, ignoring hurled insults of street beggars, who looked healthy and partially clean from my removed perspective. A svelte woman in a red skirt and jacket dropped a few coins down in his lap, then continued on her way, never turning her head in either direction, while his whistle continued to loose air. Surmising that she could feel my eyes penetrating no further than her shoe soles, I turned away somewhat guiltily, having a sudden preference for the revolver.

I stood stiffly, tantalized by the revolver. It was the vehicle to escape the latent neutrality that crept up on me like a morning mist creeping up over the

beach house in Malibu, tickling my passed-out mother in forgotten places, and bringing the wish for death. Her sensual side was strong when she awoke, ignoring my father slamming around the dishes as he washed them. She would sit and smoke with her legs curled up, and a silky glow of eyes resonating in a husky critique: "Stop worrying yourself, honey. I'm still your wife." Many mornings the scene was quite identical, taking my cereal out near the crashing surf while father muttered "bullshit" in response to her alibis.

"To you, cadaver," I said as I lit a cigarette, nervously sweating for a drink. A glass of whiskey would have been perfect, but I was determined to fight it for a day. My hand shook as I reached for it-the revolver(I did not know how it had found its way back after my shooting). "I sent it back to sear your soul," a voice(probably the double's) whispered in my ear. I ran into the bathroom, and my eyes ferreted over my face in searching affirmation. "Yes, I believe I can, no, possibly must, kill once again."

Now I even reloaded the revolver, and finished the. The speckles of blood were like stars, and my sore feet scraped stones. I opened the door, my jawbone stiffening up to my cheekbones.

The younger of the two bodyguards stood slightly stooped, one hand between his legs. It appeared he was massaging his testicles.

"The prodigal son kicked you," I said. "But no need to worry. He does not play pranks with guns."

"How do you know?" he spit out like a curse, jutting his chin. There was an

unwieldy gob of wax in his moustache, that made it look like he had plunged his mouth into pig fat. Also, there was a trickle of red in the corner(a dab of hot sauce). He wiped the back of his hand across it, and winced.

"Blood, I assume."

"Yes, I almost shot him, the boy," he glumly confessed.

"A sore spot for him," I thought. "Must have been tied down at one point and kicked there until he almost choked on his own blood, not that I wasn't made at times to choke on my English blood, especially in junior high."

"I need a bottle of whiskey, and I don't care if you have to go where parents maim children," I snickered, passing him the coins.

His eyebrows widened, then contracted.

"Whiskey," I repeated. "Never mind the rest. Don't mind my nonsense. It is something we have both seen too much, and would rather forget. Just get the whiskey."

He hesitated a moment, then turned without saying a word. As I shut the door I saw him tense, and the boy scrambled past him on the stairs, making ape noises.

Ducking back in, my blurry eyes invested my room with an underwater scope, and my back felt a familiar itch. I had difficulty maintaining my equilibrium, stumbling a dreary dance to the toilet, where I dry-heaved.

The convulsive force reminded me of my hyperventilation on a hunt in Africa. Every species was on the verge of extinction, it is true, but I was busier contriving my own. This was a few months following my Swiss friends' murder by the narcotics police. He had been discovered in a snowdrift, his bald head boiling in the sun. One time in a restaurant he had pointed out the renegade sergeant, who was rumored to be skimming off confiscations, swimming in the ocean off the Florida coast with local dancers.



I had the bottle of whiskey already, and was pawing at the impossibility of my plane ticket, which my friend's brother had ordained at the funeral over the casket. He said he was going to Sweden, to seek solace with a blonde. Meanwhile, he was choking on a sob, tears lathering his cheeks. His black suit was crumpled, with a faint odor of marijuana, and his shoes were scuffed, as if he had attempted climbing the Alps in them. One foot tapped on the ground in military cadence, and a singed photo of the sergeant dropped to the floor. I gave him a hard look and he nodded his head in approbation, passing me the silver flask. No one was there except his wife, nervously pulling at the fringe of her yellow dress, whose faded color nearly matched her husband's waxen pallor. "Poor Dennis!" she wailed, extricating some grey hair.

The plane ticket had a splash of mustard that had sun-baked to brown, and some dark fingerprints, where I had pressed it in panic after searing-smearing my fingers on the end of the barrel after the lion was past me, and I laid where I had lunged with the roar in my ear, my face on the hard earth, half-expecting the rip of giant teeth in my back; staring at a solitary tree on the harsh savannah.

Four shots silenced the roaring beast, that still wheezed for a time with blood flooding its mouth. Despite my breakdown, I was lucid enough to ask if I had at least hit it in the paw, or a foreleg.

"No, " said the guide, tapping his gnarled stick-methodically-on his foot. He was very short and coal-black, with a type of zigzag scar on his cheek. Declining to comment, he admired the kill instead, walking past as I pulled myself up, like a foolish giant. The rest, experienced hunters, sneered at me, until I brought down a wild boar breaking out of the bush, bearing down on me while I concentrated with bloodshot eyes.

"No prior experience is necessary," the pudgy hunter from Ohio told me one night while we shared a bottle. He faintly resembled Dennis. The gas lamp

inside the tent reflected the myriad insects and a zebra or boar flitting past. "Never mind the prognosticators who say that one must learn minute practicalities." He held the bottle up in the air for a moment, then took a huge swig. "One learns more from experience and innate technique that touches the nerves. For instance, you simply bolted down today when you took down the boar. It took good aim and a strong hand, and no such nonsense as patience or minute practicalities."

"It was a thrill, I must admit, but not quite fair, I think."

"No, come now, don't give in to English honor or whatever it is that has you mollified."

I grabbed the bottle. "No, you have it wrong there, chap. What I mean to say is that if that boar had a bow and arrow, or at least a sword, it would have been more of an even contest."

He laughed shortly. "Well, that is quite a picture you create. But remember that nothing is ever fair, as you call it, so just be grateful that animals are not able to fire rifles."

"And what about pistols?"

He stopped laughing. "That is another matter, of course, in the sense that they kill humans all the time. They can be erratic, because they are extensions of the hand. And hands can fidget on their own."

Presently, in Cairo, my hand wiped away a trickle of blood emerging from my right nostril. The mold around the bottom of the toilet was brown-green, which reminded me of decaying bodies; in particular of Dennis' bloated and rotting body in the cemetery in the hills, verdant from the snow melt, grass cut neatly once a week.

Flushing while still on my knees, the potency of my dilemma crept up on me. A few weeks removed from employment and nominal companionship with a woman, I had a healing leg wound and a residual threat in Aziz. I had not read

the morning paper and was fearful to do so, lest it report further terrorism perpetrated by the Indian, or the Turk Osman. "Strange," I thought, "I had forgotten about him, the slickster at Abrik's bar, who was so comfortable with the obsequious businessmen licking his feet." There was some force that seemed to have aligned the planets in a skewed manner. It was determining the fate of men in the black holes of guns, and infected black gums-the poverty-stricken, who had no concern for the suicidal plots of wealth. "On these streets," I thought, standing up at the sink and turning a screw to splash my hair. "On these streets, the money that competes kills itself, and the money that does not exist kills everyone else."

I drank a tall glass of the whiskey even before the sun had set, even before the bodyguard had climbed back down to the street, where his older brother was busily talking to a plainclothes officer, who stared up toward the slits of my shutters in disbelief.

I recognized him as the peculiar one in charge of the riot police, who had stopped and accosted me, and been so friendly; yet so strangely and evasively friendly as to give me pregnant pause. He was wearing some type of open-breasted jacket, of a faded red, and some combat boots. I blinked, but it was him, indeed. His comicality was apparent, but of some dangerous nature that jettisoned me into new libations.

Habib's visit gave me shivers. He was nervous and constantly apologizing, inviting me over for dinner. "Listen, Edgar," he said, opening the shutters to the night, and speaking with his back turned to me, as if the words themselves were projectiles. "I know you do not trust me like you once did, but I've got a modest proposal that I would like to present to you. And, to be blunt, it might save both our lives." Turning around, he redressed himself, making fumbling motions with his hands over the impeccable regalia of cloth. "I know you have not been long here in Cairo, and you might still be enamored of it, but it is getting a bit too dangerous. Don't you think?"

"It is relative and debatable, Habib. What makes me pause is myself." I lowered a flame to a cadaver, looking past him to the facing building, which,

with its back turned to me(no windows) looked like a cracked dam. I imagined worms slithering out with the fleshy loot.

"Yourself? Why pause? Despite your drinking and writing, you have some control over yourself."

"Do I? I have been thinking about my past. I despise my innumerable demons. They put needles in my eyes, and give me too many reasons to cry." He smiled. "See, your poetry returns...does it not?"

"Not really. I have been procrastinating about it, and everything, in fact, not knowing exactly what I should do."

"That is where my proposal comes in. I have just sold my share of the restaurant to Saed, and have sent a letter to my father explaining this, that I am using the capital to return to India to open my own establishment. He will receive a profit each month, since it was his money to begin with. I would like you to come with me, and teach English to some of my many relatives."

"You are preposterous."

"Yes, I am. But it is my only option. I made a great mistake in putting my trust in Saed. Now I would like to leave the whole problem in the capable hands of Nessim."

"And Osman? What of him?"

"I don't know, Edgar. I know that since Nessim visited you in the hospital he has put most of his resources into exotic terrorist threats, since the local threat has recently lessened."

"No more car bombs then?"

"No. But think of India now, Edgar, not Egypt."

I laughed. "I wish I could, but I've still got my mind on the revolver. A part

of me still craves vengeance. I wonder sometimes what exactly it is that drives people to distraction. You know what I mean, don't you? That inner fire that is constantly present, harping on the poor brain. It questions your reality and speeds you on to a different plane. As such, India and Egypt are separate realities."

"Are they, Edgar? I do know that they are unique countries on separate continents. Why don't you sit down and relax?"

"Relax? Why, you know I cannot relax. I would like to, but my psyche will not allow it. It has been damaged for some time, and I have drunk my well dry many times. Apparently, I have some inner need to shun women. A physical distance I keep. Even a respectful distance from mother dancing with the double."

"What are you saying? Perhaps you should try to calm your nerves a little-"

"Nonsense, just pure nonsense you're speaking, Habib."

"I'm sorry, Edgar. I should not have cut you off. But tell me, who is the double?"

I laughed maliciously. "Funny, sometimes you are so very funny, Habib, and so am I, I guess. But what am I talking about? The double? That is my double persona. I killed him already. And that is all you need to know about him. He only pricks my conscience from time to time."

He had backed up a step. "Well, I am glad to hear it, Edgar. You look the most animated since I first met you, and that is good."

"Is it?" My pulse normalized, and the wavering oil spots at his feet dispersed. "Does it mean that the perfect woman will come, say, in the waning of the day?" Habib's form blurred, but I fought back valiantly. "But speaking of poetic phrases, I have enjoyed the musicality inherent in these terrorist acts. That is all. But I enjoy whiskey also. And turns of phrase more than prophetic vision. India? Well, yes and no, Habib. It sounds interesting, but I will have

to think more about it."

"There is no hurry, Edgar. You have an entire month to decide."

"A month? I think that is more than sufficient to say farewell to all my friends."

"Certainly. And I must tell you that Fermina would like to speak to you before you go. She is very concerned about you."

"She is? We were good friends, then she cast me off like some dirty pariah dog, a very humbling experience for a dog like me."

"Well, I would not call it a complete reconciliation, but at least it is some atonement."

"Unquestionably. I caught her horseplaying with her son, and she attacked me. I can find no more faults."

"She questioned your drinking, Edgar. That is all. But I am your friend, and am not concerned about it. What does concern me is the impromptu parade Nessim has organized."

"And what is this parade all about?" I took a last hit of the cadaver, then crushed it with my shoe. Walking over to the shutters, I saw that the plainclothes officer had fled the scene. I wondered why, and if, as it appeared, he had come to take a special interest in my adventure. "What," I thought, "is so entertaining about a foreign poet wounded in battle?"

"The end of the terrorist threat, Edgar. That is what he is optimistically proclaiming to the papers."

"And how tenuous, eh, chap? One can anticipate the fun Graves will have with it, the millionaire rat in search of more Swiss cheese."

"No doubt. He has already accused Nessim of sparking the terrorism by introducing a new form of nationalism--"

"Which the terrorists are obligated to obliterate, I suppose. The human

condition to destroy gains impetus when it matches mood, and the actual bloodletting is merely the lancing of the malignant tumor."

Mulling that over, he gave a perplexing but charming Indian smile, as if he had felt some karmic power. "That is a fascinating portrait, Edgar. I have felt a dreadful panging since Indira died, and have only persevered by our friendship, because, without her, life is but an enigma. But I cannot fully mourn her until I return to my country."

"Enchanted-dusty-blessed-mystical-hypnotic land," I chanted, and felt a surge of relief, a childish joy that flowered, then abruptly demarcated at a thorny rosebush hedge, in which cripples dwelled disconsolately, sending notes by starved messenger pigeons. They ate richly salted rotten meat and drank pulpy wine, waiting for the knights to come and slaughter them slightly kind. The double had imbibed a little too much, and was pirouetting clumsily, training to be a mime. Nailed to an oak tree, and out beyond in the cow pasture, just legible from the wall, were crude signs fashioned from chunks of tree wood, each pointing down a rare road. One said, "Cairo 1991," and the double attacked the mime.

"Exactly," chimed in Habib, flashing his completely charming Indian smile. "We must go, Edgar. There is great beauty to be attained in my country. Such luxuriousness in every sphere of endeavor."

"It is what I have been pining for, Habib, a reattachment to my spiritual vows." Inside a sentinel screeched, and I rubbed my eyes. "But am I free now?" "Of course you are. You are free to go to India, aren't you?"

"Yes, but what about until I go?" Here I walked over to the shutters and peered down at the mole-faced bodyguard. I looked back at Habib. "Never mind, I can see that everyone is determined to not see me die."

In the morning, I was escorted me to the police station, shoving me through an amorous group of prostitutes stationed at the door. One had a small red heart between her eyes, which she pointed at formally, then to me. The rancid stench of waste filtered through her spritz of perfume, and the plumes of dust. Her pimp sweated obesely in black leather, preening the hair of his women like a mother hen, while a condemning woman hurled tomatoes at them, enraged in her solemn gallabiya.

Sitting before the plainclothes officer, who I had espied the day before inquiring about me, and with a searing headache I attributed to the abrupt morning, I recollected my father's contempt for authority, juxtaposing innuendo and evil: "So you are suspicious of me, I take it?" I blurted, lighting my cigarette before he could validate it with his strike.

"Of course not," he replied. "You know, my job is boring more frequently than entertaining," he said, sitting erect in the red plastic seat, which was squinching his already slight form. The rectangular interrogation room reminded me of a displaced elementary classroom. There was a lone exotic plant dying in the corner. "But you are probably wondering why you were summoned. Just a needless detail. Nessim wanted someone to check in with you."

"And a needless detail," I thought, "that you undoubtedly eat flies in your sleep."

"...And I was thinking about the talk we had that day, about the futility of the city. But the world is such and now, I fear, people are such, a terrible thought to have to think. And now I have a bitter wife but a good superior officer, who was kind enough to visit you in the hospital. Be grateful for the freedom you have, Mr. Harding, and do not be bitter about that which you do not."

"No, the bitter draught is a fierce chill ocean gale in a storm, when the whole



ship is disoriented and does not know where to reach for ground, when one does not know where stability lies."

"Do not be bitter, Mr. Harding, because I understand you. You, who does not have a real choice, are like me. My sidearm dictates the rules, don't you see? Every bullet that seeks me out-"

"Has a nose for death?" I indulged.

"...And I have been thinking about the men I have shot, who have no meaning, not that I have had to shoot many. They all died instantly, because my aim is very good. I have had bad dreams about them, but not very often. I worry more about my wife, who I think has a secret urge to kill me. I almost expect her to leave me in bed with a scorpion." He laughed.

"Have you been unfaithful?" I interrupted, inwardly smiling.

"Of course I have, but so has she." He fingered his turquoise ring. "There have been scandalous rumors about her being in bars, wearing flimsy clothing, attracting handsome young men. The morning I saw you I was recovering from a blow. I had come home-"

"You had been drinking, and she violently refused your amorous advances," I interjected, becoming impatient. "But if the purpose of this visit is informal, I would prefer to leave and-"

"I am sorry, Mr. Harding, but I can not let you go as of yet. I am curious about why Aziz tried to recruit you. You are a hard drinking man, by all accounts, who likes to write short stories-"

"I like to call them poems."

"Yes, of course, poems. But I wonder if you have written some in blood."

"I am a wordsmith, not a gunsmith. I have not had to shoot people in the past like you have. I killed a man once, but not with a gun. It was his knife, his weapon, so it was a clear case of self-defense."

"Well, that in itself does not absolve you of guilt. Guilt is determined in a

court of law. Now, did you contact the police afterward?"

"Am I a fool? The man looked to be small town mafiosi. I might have never left the town."

"I see. You have your own code of conduct, your own set of morals that assures you a clear conscience. Somewhat similar to Aziz in that respect. He must be quite a judge of the level of evil in other men like yourself. Your code appealed to him, but you would not let him employ you, so he had to end you."

"Yes, quite efficacious, except I escaped death. And now he must be punished for trying to punish me."

"Are you going to punish him, Mr. Harding?" He flicked a bead of sweat off his forehead.

"I haven't decided."

"No, you will not, because the punisher is the law, and I am it. I must thank you, because I have been waiting for a scenario like this. Before I retire, I need one final crowning operation."

"Perhaps you should retire now, before you have to kill again."

"How funny you are, Mr. Harding. A confirmed murderer like yourself cautioning a licensed killer like myself. That is the curse of my job, having to kill men in self-defense. You, on the contrary, might think it a blessing."

"A blessing, did you say? To me everything is relative, or ambiguous, if you will. Every curse is a blessing and every blessing a curse."

"Explain yourself," he exhaled derisively. "You seem to be confused."

"Confused I am not. And you take me wrong. What I purport to be a universal truth is that nothing is entirely negative or positive. For instance, when someone is murdered, could not it be construed as the will of God? Additionally, could this not be a direct summons from the afterlife? In other words, when there is a dearth of spirits in Heaven, there must be a constant

mechanism of replenishing them. But we can neither prove nor disprove this, as we cannot confirm the existence of God or answer the great question: Why are we here? Thus, everything is fallible, and only our consciences can keep us in check."

"But what is your conscience, Mr. Harding? You are in danger of losing touch with the world."

"And maybe, in totality, that is good, because one tires of exerting energy in quest of a questionable goal. And I tire easily. That is why I travel so much, to escape the handcuffs of society. Then I do not require goals, and can move easily, on whims. And then, even the ocean does not have as much freedom as I have. Not the sun or other planets, because they orbit in fixed spheres, or wildlife, which is constrained in movement by other species. My consciousness changes, so that my conscience does not feel as pressured, and can evolve much like a child's."

"So when the pressure of your conscience becomes unbearable you kill someone?" He leaned forward a bit, his hand supporting his chin.

"No, when my consciousness gets trapped, I become emotionally violent, not necessarily physically."

"Not necessarily physically, huh? That sounds like enough...but I have detained you long enough. You may go."

"Okay," I thought, exiting without farewells. "You expect me to be crestfallen over this, and vent my rage and frustration into guilt." Outside, the air was musky sweet, and I did a half-turn, spotting the pimp's parade, a host of

swerving feet of chattering women.

With cool dispatch, I cut crosses into the heads of bullets, while outside, the building of the booths for the upcoming parade had already begun. Unsuitable for a ballistics operation, I eschewed the kitchen knife, in favor of the Buck blade my father had bought for me when I was nine. It still had a sharp sheen to its silver.

This lethal practice I learned from espionage movies father preferred to patronize over a bottle of scotch, which I seldom succeeded in sharing. He indulged plentifully, and parried with me over the point of me writing prose. He always held his glass before himself royally at these times, and I would counter with barbs about the point of Mickey Mantle drinking the hard stuff on the eve of a ballgame.

Eventually, an argument would be exercised on the grounds that I plaudited Willie Mays until his bottle was exterminated. He would sit afterward, explaining how Willie's mitt miffed everyone. "Okay, son, you are right, he is a great player, but he makes theater out of baseball, and that is why he has a lot of people fooled into thinking he is better than the Mick."

"The mike, you mean? Come on, Dad, he probably tells more in bars than most people talk to themselves in an entire life of sleep."

"Sleep? That is a relevant point. You seem to have slept through his Triple Crown season, so you might as well sleep with your snide remarks, instead of sharing them with me."

Oftentimes I emptied Mom's overflowing pagoda ashtray before condensing my soul to sleep.

Languidly immersed within a bottle is brimstone(fatal promises echoed in the eerie stillness of a Cairo night). Forgoing dinner, I sat down crosslegged, sipping capfulls of whiskey. A shrill bird catapulted by my window, and I

closed the shutters.

Fermina's specter flitted in and out, like a fly, and I felt my psyche flickering toward an eventual nadir. I recalled her cheek brushing my sleeve in heartfelt communion, with Mustafa reciting the English alphabet on a recent yet inchoately distant night. Now, in remembrance, it piqued the ulceration caused by her hand slapping my caress of her covered knee. Suddenly I faced Mubarek, with his ubiquitous pop gun.

Throwing the cap(scuttling across the floor like an affrighted crab), I took my first earnest swig, watching mother and the double dance a jig. A sudden suppleness of movements spawned an elastic movement in my right arm, which hurled the desiccated bottle into the cracked wall.

11

I had not shaved for a week, but did not care. My abbreviated beard suited me fine. Because my fidgeting hands had no sizable patches of skin to rub, there were no large rashes.

My right foot was swollen, filled with the effects of alcohol, and my left Achilles tendon was strained with the after-effects of tense walk.

On the floor were the small bits of the shattered bottle. Only the label retained a small chunk of glass on its back. It faced upward, like a biblical tablet personally inscribed to me.

Before I properly loaded the revolver, I had a moment of hesitation. The actual mechanical act of placing a bullet in a chamber made me pause. I pictured the bullet as big as a missile, requiring ten men to engage it.

Afterward, the firing itself was just happenstance, not to be mistook for the severe preparations that had preceded it.

"The parade must be my party," I thought, dressing in an immaculate white

suit, whose only defect was a penny-sized hole in the shirt near the neck, which made it look like a tracheotomy had been performed on an invisible man. "Copasetic enough," I thought, fastening the tie. "I could whistle through my throat, instead of my teeth."

When the first knock came, I did not answer. Rather, I just brushed my sleeves, then tapped on the ground with my right foot while I finished the loading process. My fingers did not fumble, but this fluidity made me a little scared of myself. "A man in a right frame of mind would be near hyperventilation," I thought. "And scared beyond belief. But I? No."

Subsequently, I thought of Fermina. "Oh, where have you gone, love?" I said under my breath. "Every time I sought to play with you, you ignored me." I figured she was somewhere outdoors, with her son, scampering after candy for him with bird-like agility. I could not rekindle the scant moments with her that left me so amorous afterward. They had been semi-consciously forgotten, along with my mother. The double himself was deeply embedded, and I had lost the means of retrieving him. I could only sense the accumulation of hidden, competing desires. Momentarily, I realized that they had joined my other assortment of demons, who steadily grew when hidden.

My emotions expired in a severe implosion. Every action in my life was now(in totality) meaningless. "Tear down the wall," I thought, as I stared at the rattling door. "only wish to shoot Aziz, and the eight bullets I have should be more than sufficient for that task."

Pausing again, I wondered if a drink was needed in the space of foreplay, and decided against it. At last I said, "This is for you, Rodel," and headed for the door.

In that frame of time I had the revolver out, and was already shouting, "Don't move! I'll kill you!" Forewarned, the bodyguard was reaching for his

gun, but I smashed mine against his temple, and he crumpled to the ground. I took the side exit that he had so recently insisted I point out to him, and was running when I reached the street. I ran close to a mile, and caught up with the parade. I was immediately struck by the agitation created by the students. They had signs that read "Down With Fascist Ape Nessim," and reeked of stale beer.

"Here a man stands alone," I said aloud, "watching men pass standing in the back of military vehicles. I recognize members of security police, glaring at the spectacle of police camouflaged like rage. My eyes speedily search, but no sign of Fermina. And no sightings of the double or mother yet, because they are still inside, sucking off my blood. I must destroy this absurd reality. Now, here, I pull out the revolver, and love is wrecked by its own vengeance."

The rift spread quickly, jeopardizing the inadequately built stalls. Students rallied, pushing paraders to the ground, snatching food and chorusing indolently, with the police failing in arresting their gluttony.

I stood in one of the spectating lines on one side of the insurgency, watching the police get manhandled. Nessim discarded people like rotten vegetables off his rippling cart.

Then security joined the fray, throttling everyone between the lines. I saw Aziz felling people with single strikes, then Osman counterstriking against wide-smiling Cole.

Our line began to undulate, much like a current. Then I was running toward the brawl myself, where the once dead double fumbled with mother, as if unsure of what to do to her.



Mother: This, my purposeful leap from the pitted past...

Listen to me and believe me when I tell you that my gun was drawn, and there was shooting everywhere. Many people were shot, and I still do not know who I killed. I do know that Nessim was killed, but Aziz survived and escaped Cairo once more. As for Osman and Cole, well, they strangled each other to death. Their hands had to be pried from each other's throats, such was the ardor of their embrace.

Habib is back safely in India, and has not contacted me. Neither has Saed. The only person who visits me is the queer acting policeman who once interrogated me. I found out from him that Fermina remarried. I do not know why. The only thing I know about anybody anymore is the misery within myself.

I have a cell to myself, mother, and, thus, my English accent has miraculously died in a solitude. I do not put on airs anymore. Well, maybe just once. The last priest who tried to convince me to confess my sins said, predictably, that if I refused to, I would go to Hell. Despite his blandishments for an elaboration, all I said in reply with grave certainty(while hearing a man get raped), was, "I arrived in soul before body."

He said he could no longer help me with a stay of execution.

THE END

ORIGINAL POEMS  
BY EDGAR HARDING-CONT.

## Silence

Time is what I find  
Beneath the surface of the Nile  
The temple of silence  
And the silence of waste  
Forever instilled in the paupered,  
Those pennilessly inspired  
To launch a sailboat and  
Plunder Isis goddess of love  
With a stomach hunger for blood

Meat and blood,  
Or just a soggy loaf of bread

Only the immortal silence of Horus can condemn them  
They wave to find some clarity in the dark water But  
never do find him  
Impinging upon their stolen souls

## The Waif

So I sit in the thorny weeds  
Of skeletons  
Caught in an ocean swirl of rushing leaves  
That seem like the infected veins  
Choking the deep chasm in my chest  
And even revile my right to rest  
On this wooden bench overlooking a great nest

Boat out there yawing atop a slight swell: Is  
thy make to  
Sink, or float helplessly at the sea's whim?

The churlish dense ocean rock-  
Pearl of the deep  
Intent on the fate of numberless perils  
Dictates your unrest:  
Whether to return to your place  
In the weeds that admit of no ulterior right  
— To change their shape or hue

— Especially the pricking sensation  
When you look out to the ocean  
And see a boat floating, apparently helplessly,  
Like a waif

Weeds:  
Your fingers turn in me  
Like a pinched needle

-Will my own fate be thine?-

To contagion the freely breathing  
With a sordid swell of boat wrecks,  
Mastheads, bulkheads  
Torn away to only leave the leak  
Like an ogre's eye?

## Dead Souls

I feel the dead souls when I sleep  
They stand over me and stare when I snore  
And even hum when I dream Sometimes I feel their hands Brazenly  
brushing my cheek Or tickling my nose or toes

The inner sanctity of the ear  
Popping with each rough touch  
Of the demanding seers  
Drilling new thoughts into a cratered head

## The Martian Landscape

— The martian landscape  
Revolves in your eyes  
The unknown quantity in life Uplifts and buries  
Effulgence and Consort  
Are the two gods that lapse there    When you visit that  
Plane they hide like cats but do not  
Complain  
  
Because of their reclusiveness  
You grow weary of their mapping your scarred soul

### The Last

The circle did not turn as before  
Newspapers did not proclaim the inky new day  
There was no dearth of silent bodies  
Rummaging through burnt-out buildings  
Sitting crosslegged in the bent wheat,  
On crushed snow, in frozen tractors,  
Staring like wolves at fixed moon beams  
Caught on film in the endless aspect of dead sheens  
Proliferating in spent lines sprayed with red on each face;  
All humanity's ancestors etched on that map  
With only a soft patina of erosive grace  
Wasting away with gnawing failure: The  
knowledge of the vital waste Even then  
clotting itself rancid fat In rivers, on  
freeways, in forests, Spirited across  
oceans  
To dead-end in stagnant harbors