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Volume 59, No. 1, Spring/Summer 2009



Heaven and Earth Le paradis et la terre Cielo y tierra

The magazine of International PEN
Le magazine de PEN International
La revista de PEN Internacional



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Editor's Note

Welcome to 'Heaven and Earth'.

The theme of this issue takes its inspiration from International PEN's second annual *Free the Word!* festival of world literature in London, with which it coincides. We have asked our contributors to respond to this theme in a personal way, and the results hint at an almost infinite range of cultural perspectives.

Take our special guest writers, both of whom appear at the festival. Each has taken 'Earth' as synonymous with that other possible antonym for 'Heaven': fearless truth-teller Lydia Cacho of Mexico reports on her encounters during a recent trip to Cambodia with people who have lived through the kind of hell that human beings seem all too adept at inflicting on their fellows; Petina Gappah of Zimbabwe imagines the lives of a young family who have made their way from hellish circumstances to a better place – only to discover that 'better' is relative.

It's not all infernal, of course. Jack Waveney's narrator flies above Peru's Nasca Lines and vividly senses the Great Mystery; there is a numinous quality, too, in Rebecca O'Connor's tiny poem rooted in the material world.

Most of the writers in this issue grapple with the realities confronting us in between Heaven and Earth: Azar Nafisi (also appearing at *Free the Word!*) remembers a girl's striking moment of independent thought under an authoritarian theocracy; Kachi Ozumba's hapless Nigerian pastor comes down to Earth from his lofty sense of self at the hands of canny, corrupt policemen; Jason Mooreland takes a thoughtful look at a troubling trend in education and wonders which way it will lead us.

For some, the 'earthier' elements of our existence take centre-stage: Florian Zeller (another festival guest) gives us a cynical, desperate traveller who views sexual encounters strictly in terms of 'exchange rates', and Encarna Cabello's young North African couple discover the erotic potential of a common garment.

The Earth as a planet harbouring ferocious power features as well, in a poem by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih (appearing at *Free the Word!* as well) that considers the aftermath of the tsunami of 2004, and in a story by Élise Gruau set on Stromboli, that Aeolian island in thrall to its volcano.

Heaven and Earth: sooner or later we must each of us come to terms with either one, or both. We hope the writing in this issue can provide some sustenance for that journey.

Mitchell Albert, Editor

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Coming next issue: 'Context: Asia Pacific'. See pages 18, 22 and 24

Roy Ashwell

The Old One's Things

From the shed his spade,
From the porch his cap.
I lift the ash-shafted steel
Over the earth
And feel his hard hand over mine.
The cap on rainy evenings
Clasps my head,
Warming the skull beneath.

Rebecca O'Connor

Snow

Recordings of birdsong fill the studio below
where you are painting the bull in snow.

The cuckoo sounds frightened.

The bull stands sentry as the white of day
turns to the violet of night.

Eric Berkowitz

Excerpt from a work in progress

Sex, Law and History (working title)

***Sex, Law and History* considers the ancient struggle between human sexuality and the laws that govern societies, ranging from ancient times to the present day.**

Virginity's Price: The Vestal Virgins and the Fate of Rome

The primary goal of Roman sex law was to channel female sexual behaviour, not forbid it outright. Women were expected to marry and produce legitimate children. Total abstinence was never part of the plan, with the exception of six priestesses whose untouched bodies symbolised Rome's unbroken walls,¹ and whose holy virginity ensured the safety of the city. It took just a single detour by one of them to turn stability into chaos. When that happened, there were meticulous rituals in place to purge the curse and restore hope: failed Vestals were buried alive in an underground chamber, and it was left to Vesta, the goddess they served, to decide whether they lived or died.²

For minor offences, a Vestal risked being scourged in private by Rome's highest priest, the Pontifex Maximus.³ But a Vestal's violation of her vow of chastity was a public curse. All participated in the expiation. Immediately after her conviction, the guilty priestess was flogged and then bound in thick cloth to muffle her lamentations. Churning like a larva, she was put on a litter bed and carried through the Forum. Thousands watched in tearful silence as she passed. 'No other spectacle is more appalling,' wrote Plutarch of such sights, 'nor does any other day bring more gloom to the city than this.'⁴ The crowd's sombre mood came not from the woman's imminent death – gory public executions were common enough – but from terror at what might result from the Vestal's loss of virginity.

The procession ended near the Colline Gate, just inside one of the city's walls, where the burial chamber awaited. The room was supplied with furniture, a lamp and bits of food, milk and oil. The Vestal was unfastened from her coverings except for a veil over her face. As her soiled body stood in the wind, an object of grief and scorn, the Pontifex Maximus stretched his hands toward heaven, muttered some prayers and then sent her down into the hole. As soon as she was underground, attendants sealed the room with stones and spread earth around it so that no traces of it, or her, remained.

Technically, this was not an execution. No one shouldered the responsibility of killing a Vestal, even a guilty one. The few provisions supplied to the accused priestess absolved the priests for her death and gave Vesta the opportunity to hand down the ultimate ruling. If the Vestal was, in fact, found by the goddess to have broken her chastity vow, Vesta rebalanced the celestial scales by letting her starve and suffocate. If she was innocent, Vesta could lift her up and restore her. Of the

ten or so Vestal virgins who endured this process over seven centuries, none was resurrected. Their guilt was confirmed beyond doubt and Rome was saved, at least until the next Vestal misbehaved.

Only girls between six and ten years old who were deemed perfect in all respects were eligible for service in Vesta's temple. No marks, lisps or other defects were allowed. Both parents had to be alive and married, with no divorce, scandal or slave blood clouding their lineage. Selected girls underwent an elaborate initiation process that put them in service to Vesta and Rome and no one else. All Roman women belonged to one man or another, but not the Vestals. They alone were free from male control, because they were the sisters, daughters and wives of the city itself. They were taken from their homes to Vesta's temple in the Forum, where they lived for at least thirty years.⁵ Vesta was the goddess of the hearth, and of the Earth itself.⁶ The perpetual flame that burned in the *Atrium Vestae* was the fulcrum of Roman life. Just as early Rome's daughters tended the flames of their families' homes, the Vestals kept Rome's fire alive. They also maintained a storehouse of holy substances and took care of dozens of other ritual duties.⁷ For that, the priestesses received extraordinary privileges. They were allotted prime seats at the theatre and at gladiatorial games, and rode in ornate carriages with bodyguards to move people out of their way. Even consuls had to step aside. If, during their travels around town, they encountered a criminal about to be executed, the man's life was spared. (However, anyone with the nerve to pass under a Vestal's carriage would be killed.) When Vestals died, they were among the very few inhabitants of Rome whose burial was permitted within the city's sacred precincts.⁸

Most Vestals kept their bodies and reputations intact. There were precautions in place to prevent temptation (their temple was closed to all men at night, even doctors), but it was inevitable that some would fail. When a Vestal had sex, the crime was *incestum* – an offence that incorporated incest (all Roman men were their family) and sexual defilement. Because that loss of virginity was a direct assault on the state, calamities were often blamed on Vestal *incestum*. In what seemed like an instant, they transformed from high priestesses to monstrous scapegoats.

The very fact of Rome's troubles was taken as proof of Vestal unchastity. In 483 BC, the city was at war with the Volsci and the Veii. Rome's superior resources should have permitted it to make short work of these enemies, but Rome was wasting its advantages on internal struggles. To make matters worse, there were daily heavenly prodigies showing the gods' anger and portending disaster. The city was in a panic. Its priests could not figure out what was causing the problems, even after consulting animal entrails and bird flight patterns. They then concluded that a Vestal was misbehaving. 'These terrors finally resulted in the Vestal virgin Oppia being condemned for *incestum* and executed,' wrote Livy.⁹

In 215 BC, in the alarm over Rome's loss of 50,000 men to Hannibal at the Battle of Cannae, the Vestals Opimia and Floronia were found guilty of *incestum*. One of them was buried alive; the other was allowed to commit suicide. A century later, after the destruction of the army of Marcus Porcius Cato in Thrace, three Vestals were put on trial for conduct more fitting to prostitutes than professional virgins. 'Three had known men at the same time,' wrote Cassius Dio. 'Of these, Marcia had acted by herself, granting favours to one single knight ... Aemilia and Licina, on the

other hand, had a multitude of lovers and carried on their wanton behaviour with each other's help.'¹⁰

If that was not bad enough, the fire in Vesta's temple began to sputter out on its own – a sure sign of Vestal misconduct – and a bolt of lightning killed a noble girl on her horse, leaving her dress hiked up above her waist.¹¹ At first, only the Vestal Marcia was found guilty, but the public's thirst for a clear remedy for all this trouble was too strong for a single verdict to stand. A second trial was convened, and the other two Vestals convicted. All three were buried alive.

Vestals were sometimes prosecuted in the absence of a calamity. Emperor Domitian's moral reforms were punctuated by trials against Vestals for *incestum*.¹² The chief Vestal, Cornelia, was buried alive in 83 AD, but did not go down quietly: 'Is it possible?' she demanded of Domitian as he watched her being led to the hole. 'Does Caesar think that I have been unchaste, when he has conquered and triumphed while I have been performing the rites?'¹³ In other words, how dare Domitian accuse her when he has enjoyed good fortune? But he did anyway.

Some Vestals were able to acquit themselves at trial with impressive feats of magic. The priestess Tuccia was charged, in 230 BC, with giving away her virginity based on one man's accusation. Calling Vesta to her aid, she led a crowd to the Tiber River, where she pulled up a quantity of water with a sieve. To everyone's amazement, the water did not drain out of the holes. She took it back to the Forum, where she dumped the river water onto the feet of her judges. Her life was spared, and her accuser was never heard from again.¹⁴ Another time, after the sacred fire went out on the Vestal Aemilia's watch, the priests enquired as to whether she had been entertaining men. In the presence of everyone, she cried out:

O Vesta, guardian of the Romans' city, if, during the space of nearly thirty years, I have performed the sacred offices in a holy and proper manner, keeping a pure mind and a chaste body, manifest yourself in my defence and assist me and do not suffer your priestess to die the most miserable of all deaths; but if I have been guilty of any impious deed, let my punishment expiate the guilt of the city.

She then threw a piece of her clothing on the cold altar where the fire had burned. Instantly, a flame burst through the linen. With that, the city was safe again, and Aemilia cleared.¹⁵

The Vestal college lasted for about a millennium, until the fire was put out forever and the order disbanded in the fourth century AD by the Christian emperor Theodosius. Judging by Rome's long run, the priestesses mostly protected the people well by keeping the sacred fire lit and men out of their beds. In a sex-soaked culture in which aristocratic women tried to register as prostitutes, the Vestals' untouched genitals were a guarantee of Rome's long life.

(Unpublished, 2009)

1 Holt Parker, 'Why Were the Vestals Virgins?', *American Journal of Philology*, vol. 124, no. 4 (2004), p. 568.

2 Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddess, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (Dorset, 1975), p. 211; see also Plutarch, *Roman Questions*

- (Loeb Classical Lib. 1936, Frank Cole Babbitt, tr.), ch. 96.
- 3 Plutarch, *Life of Numa Pompilius* (Loeb Classical Lib. 1914, Bernadotte Perrin, tr.), ch. 10.
 - 4 *Ibid.*, see also Dionysus of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* (Loeb Classical Lib. 1937, Earnest Cary, tr.), Book II, ch. 67.
 - 5 Plutarch, *Life of Numa Pompilius*, ch. 10. It seems that many Vestals stayed longer than the required three decades, however, as they had bad luck with their marriages after laying down their sacred offices.
 - 6 Robin Lorsch Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins: A Study of Rome's Vestal Priestesses in the Late Republic and Early Empire* (Routledge 2006), pp. 6–60; see also Dionysus of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, Book II, ch. 66: 'And they regard the fire as consecrated to Vesta because that goddess, being the Earth and occupying the central place in the universe, kindles the celestial fires from herself.'
 - 7 Wildfang, pp. 16–17. The Vestals were involved in other practices that seem incompatible with virginity, e.g. agricultural and fertility rituals such as the Fordicidia rites, in which a Vestal burned a fetus torn from an unfortunate pregnant cow; see also Pomeroy, p. 211, and Mary Beard, 'The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins', *Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 70, p. 13 (1980). The Vestals' chastity throughout their fertile years gave them 'stored up, potential procreative power' (Beard, p. 15).
 - 8 Parker, p. 568; O. F. Robinson, *Ancient Rome: City Planning and Administration* (Routledge 1994), p. 124.
 - 9 Livy, *History of Rome* (Dutton 1912, Rev. Canon Roberts, tr.), ch. 2.42.
 - 10 Cassius Dio, *Roman History* (Loeb Classical Lib. 1925, Earnest Cary, tr.) ch. 26.87.
 - 11 Wildfang, pp. 93–4.
 - 12 Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, ch. 67.3; *The Letters of the Younger Pliny* (Penguin 1963, Betty Radice, tr.), pp. 118–19; Brian W. Jones, *The Emperor Domitian* (Routledge 1992), pp. 101–2.
 - 13 Pliny, *Letters*, 43.
 - 14 Dionysus of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, Book II, ch. 69.
 - 15 *Ibid.*, ch. 68.

Kachi A. Ozumba

THE POLICE IS YOUR FRIEND

Nduka was determined not to leave the Ikeja police station without his police report. He waited at the counter, his gaze fixed on a poster on the opposite wall. Although he had seen the poster many times before, it never failed to arrest his attention. It depicted a policeman smiling broadly and benignly; radiating beneath it was the caption: THE POLICE IS YOUR FRIEND.

A policeman emerged from the door behind the counter. His black uniform bore the two red stripes of a corporal. Leaning on the grimy wooden counter, he asked: ‘Good morning, sir, can I help you?’

‘Yes, I’m Pastor Nduka Obi, and I’ll like to see Sergeant Bello.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry, the sergeant is not around at the moment. Is there anyway I can be of help?’

For a mere corporal, the policeman’s English was flawless, Nduka thought: his tone was polite, his manners polished. Although this was his third time at the station that week, Nduka could not help being reminded that the corporal before him was not a semi-illiterate, as was so often the case in years past. A government policy a few years back had pegged the minimum qualification for recruitment into the police force at a National Diploma. This was to help stem corruption and make the force friendlier.

‘Yes. He’s the one handling my case. I lost my passport two weeks ago, and I need a police report to obtain a new one, which I will need for my trip to the UK in a month’s time. The report has already been written since my first visit. All that has been holding it is the Divisional Police Officer’s stamp. I need it to apply for my visa, and I’m already running late.’

‘You say the report has been written since your first visit; how come you have not collected it since then?’

‘On the first visit, I was told the DPO was not around; on the second, I was told he needed time to study the document; on the third, I was told the document had been signed and only the stamping by the DPO remained, and they were looking for both the DPO and the stamp. Please, corporal, I hope I won’t leave here today without it.’

The corporal smiled, but it was a tight-lipped smile, and the pastor felt there was something incongruous about it. He could not tell whether it was born of sympathy or mockery.

‘I really apologise for the delay so far. But you know how life is: nothing is predictable. Anything can crop up at any time to cause a delay. But if you’re determined, then your determination will move mountains – and you’ll get your report today.’ The corporal smiled again, glad to show the pastor that he knew

something of the Bible.

'Of course I'm determined to get it today,' the pastor answered, irritation seeping into his voice. 'I've been determined to get it since the first day.'

'Okay, I'll see the DPO about it right away. Won't you like to send your regards?'

'I don't even know him,' Nduka said. 'Well, tell him a law-abiding citizen sends his regards.'

The corporal hesitated, staring for some time at Nduka, then turned and disappeared through the door. Moments later he reappeared, shaking his head. 'The DPO has yet to reach your file. He has so many files to attend to, those of people who came before you. We operate on a first-come, first-served basis, so please exercise some patience.'

A red curtain fell over the pastor's eyes, making them bloodshot. His voice rose an octave: 'What ... what nonsense is this? Do I have to pass through the eye of a needle just to collect a common police report? You people are –' He caught himself back from swearing. *Be angry but do not sin*, he cautioned himself, quoting the Bible.

The corporal must have taken pity on him. 'But, sir, why are you making things so difficult for yourself? Have you not got the message? All that stands between you and your report is just an express-service mobilisation fee of a mere two hundred *naira*!'

Nduka's eyes narrowed into slits. 'What exactly are you saying?' he asked. 'Are you suggesting that I give a bribe in order to collect my police report?' He pointed to a poster on the wall to his right. 'I'm sure you can read this!'

The poster bore the bold caption:

DO NOT GIVE BRIBE
IT IS ILLEGAL

'Of course I can,' replied the policeman. He gestured at another poster behind the pastor. 'I hope you have also read that one.' It had an even bolder caption:

HELP THE POLICE TO
HELP YOU

'I'm not asking for a bribe,' the policeman said, 'but that you help *us* to help *you*.'

'I want to see your DPO right away,' Nduka said. His anger had given way to a zealous determination to fight corruption.

'Sir, I'll advise you to stick with me. Just pay the two hundred-*naira* mobilisation fee and you'll get your report. The higher you go, the higher the amount that will be demanded of you.'

'Will you take me to your DPO right now, or do you want me to find my way there?'

'Well, if that's your wish ...'

The corporal led Nduka into a dim hallway with several doors. He tapped on the last door, on which a sign was affixed that read: DIVISIONAL POLICE OFFICER (DPO); then he ushered Nduka in.

It was a small cluttered office. The DPO sat behind an enormous desk strewn

with files and papers. A miniature national flag sat between two plaques on the table. On one of the plaques was engraved the name 'Owonikoko J. A., B.Sc. M.Sc.'. On the other was perhaps the man's personal motto: *Heaven helps those who know how to help themselves.*

The DPO lifted his face, frowning with irritation.

'Good day DPO Owonikoko,' Nduka began. 'I have a problem.'

'You have your problems, I have my problems, everyone has his problems,' the DPO replied. He returned his gaze to the files before him.

This not-so-subtle message was not lost on Nduka: How can you persuade me to abandon my problems and help you with yours? Blood raced through the pastor's veins, and his lips trembled. He nearly screamed his reply: 'Well, my problem now is that if I do not walk out of this station today with my police report, the evils of this station shall be all over tomorrow's papers!'

The DPO looked up sharply. He ran an appraising eye over this new-generation pastor before him, taking in his Piaget wristwatch and Gucci shoes, the expensive cut of his suit. A huge smile replaced his frown. Once again, Nduka felt odd about the smile. It was indulgent – as though the man could see through his bluff. But there was still something else hidden in its wide expanse, something the pastor could not place his finger on.

The DPO waved Nduka to a seat and said: 'Please calm down, and sit down.' The corporal eased himself out of the office as Nduka sat, shutting the door quietly behind him. 'You are?'

'Pastor Nduka Obi of the Mighty Faith Ministries.'

'Oh, that's the one located along the Lagos–Ibadan expressway, isn't it?'

The pastor nodded.

'Hmm! So you people are the ones building that gigantic church, eh? Great. How can I help you?'

Nduka took a deep breath. 'For over two weeks now,' he said, 'I've been trying to collect a simple police report with which I may apply for the replacement of my missing passport. You see, I have to be in the United Kingdom next month. I need the report urgently so that I can obtain a new passport and apply for a visa. Now your corporal is telling me I have to give a bribe before I can collect it.'

The DPO sprang from his seat and went over to the door, quickly. 'Corporal!' he bellowed. 'Corporal!'

The corporal appeared promptly.

'Did you ask this righteous gentleman for a bribe?'

'Bribe?' the corporal said, shocked. 'No, sir. I only asked him for the usual express-service mobilisation fee of two hundred *naira*, sir.'

'Two hundred *naira*?' the DPO barked. 'Since when did the mobilisation fee become two hundred *naira*? It's *five* hundred! Something must be wrong with you. Are you sure you were not planning to pocket the money?'

'No, sir. I would have placed it into the coffers of the station and had it duly receipted.'

'Okay, you can go now. I'll see you about it later.'

Nduka's heart sank as he watched the whole exchange.

'You see,' began the DPO as he came round to his seat, now smiling benignly. 'We have to collect such fees when someone wants us to jump the usual process

and give him what amounts to an express service. It's our policy, and you will find the same everywhere, even in the presidency. Such fees help us in running the station. You know as well as I do that in this country one cannot rely entirely on the government.'

'My report has already been delayed for over a week, and you're still talking of express service!' The pastor's voice was losing something of its crusader's fervour.

'You would appreciate the express nature of the service if you knew the enormous number of reports and complaints we receive daily. Some have waited months, indeed years, to collect a common police report. We try our best, but we can only do so much ...' The DPO broke off, spreading his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

'And you're asking for what you call a "mobilisation fee", which you know as well as I do is only a euphemism for a bribe.'

'Bribe? No!' The DPO shook his head, apparently hurt. 'How can you say that? Even the good Lord demands some mobilisation fee for the work He does for us. Please correct me if I'm wrong, but my pastor says it is written in the Scriptures that the Lord demands one-tenth of our earnings – what the Scriptures call tithes, and what you collect, un-taxed, as offertory in your churches.'

The pastor opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

'It's really no different here,' said the DPO.

Nduka suddenly felt tired. He glanced at his watch. He felt like running out of the station. The atmosphere was beginning to choke him.

'You have to understand that we cannot be partial in the way we apply our policy here,' the DPO began again. 'So, just release the funds and I'll personally see to it that you get your report immediately.'

Slowly, Nduka reached into his trouser pocket and retrieved a five-hundred *naira* note.

Lord, please forgive me if I'm committing a sin, he prayed silently.

But you're only giving to Caesar what is Caesar's, another voice whispered.

Nduka was about to banish it as the voice of Satan, but hesitated. He filed it away in his mind. He would examine the idea later; there might be some truth in it.

He handed the money to the officer across the table.

Natalia Smirnova

Gas

look, we intend to croak. but we will just
live on. and on and on and on
and on, wrinkle-free, in a tiny flat
where there is no heating, only gas
where coffee grows old and grows cold
within two minutes. not like in ukraine,
of course – we've got some gas – but heating,
there's neither heating nor even water
that could flood the place, flood it, no,
if only we could have our flood, or blood
but there's no flood, no wrinkles, no poison
with which to croak and no home to live at
or leave. but there's gas, at least.
god bless ukraine. oh please let there be gas.

Translated from the Russian by the author

Jack Waveney

Excerpt from the story

Manuelita

Flying

If you go to Nasca, you have to see the Lines. The best way is to fly over them in a small plane, although you can also read about them, watch the Lines video and go to the Lines lecture. I did all of these things, and at the end of it I was none the wiser. Which is exactly how it should be.

The Nasca Lines are huge drawings in the Peruvian desert covering an area of over 500 square kilometres, and were made by the simple process of removing stones from the surface, thus exposing the lighter soil underneath, which contains gypsum; the stones were then laid on either side of the lines, presumably to emphasise and protect them. There are dozens of them, some representing animals or birds, while others are purely geometric. There is a dog, a condor with a 130-metre wingspan, a 90-metre-long monkey with an elaborately curved tail and many more. One of the most striking drawings represents a human figure with a round head and a rectangular body, and has been named 'The Astronaut'. Others are merely straight lines running for several kilometres across the desert, which some people have said resemble flight paths. There are triangles and rectangles, and some that cannot be identified at all. Most researchers agree that they were made by the people of the pre-Inca Nasca culture over a roughly thousand-year period, between 300 BC and 700 AD. But then begins the mystery, because these huge drawings can only be appreciated, can only be truly *seen*, from the air. Why they were made, and how they were made so precisely, no one knows. As you would expect, there are many theories. But no one actually *knows*.

Nasca is a small town of 30,000 people, surrounded on all sides by the desert. The main business of the town centres around the Lines. Without tourism, it would probably die. There are a number of hotels, and several agencies selling flights over the Lines and tours to a thousand-year-old cemetery that has mummies lying in excavated tombs in the sand. The touts who try to entice you to the hotels and sell you the flights and tours can be extremely persistent and irritating, the worst example of the breed that I came across in my time in Peru. But what survives all that is the mystery. It is the mystery that draws people. It draws them out into the desert, and up into the air. But in the desert you cannot see very much; close up, the Lines merely appear as strange shapes drawn on the ground and nothing more. All you get is a sense of vastness, and of what it is like to be burnt by the sun. Up in the air, it is different: true vastness. Seen from above, the Lines reveal themselves. Up to a point, for the mystery remains of why and how they came to be put there. Because the people who made the Nasca Lines were not able to see them – or, at least, see them as we can today, flying over them. They could not fly, physically.

But perhaps they could fly in other ways.

The most striking designs are in the desert about 20 kilometres north of Nasca. I went up in a small plane, just three of us plus the pilot. The flight lasted about thirty-five minutes. We climbed high over the desert and then swooped down until we were a few hundred feet above the Lines. The plane banked sharply this way and that in order to give us a better view, and every so often it was rocked sideways by the wind. I looked at the Lines, obviously. It was what I had gone up there for, after all. But there was something else. The Lines were what I looked at, but what I *noticed* was my vulnerability. Given the physical conditions, it was difficult not to. But it was not only that. Below was the mystery, discovered as recently as 1929. Discovered, but apparently impossible to solve. Which has not stopped people from trying to solve it. Some people are never satisfied until they have made everything concrete. Or of concrete. They are attracted to the mystery and at the same time they want to kill it. They want to *know*. Perhaps it makes them feel less vulnerable. But up in the air, looking down on the desert, you suddenly realise it: that the only chance our civilisation has of surviving depends on us becoming *more* vulnerable, not less.

Of course, I have exaggerated. It is what comes of suffering as a child from a long line of sadistic science teachers. There is no harm in investigation. But there is something more important than finding out the mere facts, than discovering exactly why the Lines were constructed. One has to go further. One has to listen to something as well. And the listening has to begin here, in this flimsy piece of metal that is being buffeted by the wind. This is about as vulnerable as it gets, I said to myself. Well, good. That is what you need, and more of it. And now that you are feeling like this, listen.

What you have to listen to are you own thoughts, the ones that come from the part of you that you are seldom in contact with. I have only listened to them a few times in my life: when I have been faced with death, or parting. At times like that it has always felt as though the everyday me had shrivelled, as though my filed and folded self had folded even more, inwards. But now I realise that what happened to me in those situations was exactly the opposite: my everyday self was dispersed, it folded *outwards*. Which is what happened to me when I was flying over the Nasca Lines. I unfolded, and I kept on unfolding.

I did that because it was what the Lines themselves seemed to be doing – opening out to the emptiness of the sky above them. There is nowhere like the desert for giving one such a sense of limitless space, both on the ground, stretching away to the horizon, and above it as well. Seen against such vastness, these huge drawings appeared puny. As did our plane, its shadow just a speck on the sand. As I looked down on them, it struck me that what the Lines represented was an awareness of something beyond the here and now of the lives of the people who made them. They were reaching out to something above them, in the vastness of space. And as such, it did not matter that they could not be seen from the ground. They were not meant for earthbound viewers, they were something other. In this way, the Lines were a recognition of their makers' own vulnerability.

And of ours, also. The overwhelming impression one receives from the desert is of emptiness – not just of the earth and the sky, but also within oneself. It is an emptiness that cannot be filled by all the paraphernalia of the modern world:

by the plane, by the voices coming over the pilot's headphones, by the watch ticking on my wrist. Or by one's shaving mirror, campaign bed or travelling trunk. All these things are nothing. If there is anything permanent in this world then it is not oneself or the things that one surrounds oneself with, but only this: the emptiness of infinite space. The emptiness that the people who made the Lines have disappeared into. That Manuelita has disappeared into. That my great-grandparents, dead for over forty years, have disappeared into. We have to recognise this emptiness in our own lives, in order to get a true grasp of it. Except that there is nothing to get a grasp of. Out of all the things on earth, it is the one we fear the most; because it is not on earth, and against it we are nothing.

It is why I did not want to go to Machu Picchu. Machu Picchu is a demonstration of power; of power that was eventually swept away, as all power must be. Flying above the Nasca Lines, one realises that they do not represent power, but a relinquishing of it. There is nothing about them to be swept away, nothing worth sweeping – which is why they have survived so long. Nothing except an awareness, and awareness cannot be swept. They show a people's reaching out to something beyond themselves – to a mystery, not a certainty. To emptiness. It is from emptiness that one has to start. Which is difficult. It is difficult to start from nothing, from thin air. Better to start from one's own inner emptiness, of which there is plenty to be going on with.

The key figure among all the Lines is perhaps The Astronaut. He lies flat on the floor of the desert; his head has no nose, ears or mouth, but only two round eyes that stare up at the sky. His rectangular body has two tiny arms, one of which points up and the other down – one in contact with space and the mystery, the other with the earth and the world of men. Just like that child on the pavement in Lima, he is watching, watching. I now think that this is the task of all of us: to be in touch with the mystery, and at the same time with the things of the earth. With what is beyond us, and with what is inside us, simultaneously. Reaching both up and down, to encounter the same emptiness. And to be always watching, watching.

You are the mystery, is what the Lines are telling us. It is an intrinsic part of you, never separate. Not separate from the known parts of yourself, or from the stars.

Dominique Abel

L'Enfer

La solitude et le monde ...

La consommation et la solitude ...

Régulièrement l'envie me prend de me noyer dans la foule des grands magasins.

C'est un cycle, un besoin, ça revient. Et c'est état des profondeurs: je suis sous la mer au milieu d'autres « humains », là où tout le monde nage sans jamais voir personne, il y a des produits qui flottent vers lesquels chacun se dirige, absent, happé.

J'ai la certitude de perdre mon temps et mon argent mais je le fais malgré tout. Sans ce foulard ou ces chaussures je ne pourrai plus vivre : elles vont tout changer, me faire trouver un nouvel entrain, un nouveau pouvoir de séduction ... Je deviendrai irrésistible. Voilà l'illusion à laquelle je m'attache ...

La frivolité, juste pour aider à vivre: s'y laisser aller malgré la conscience de l'inanité de tout ça, faire semblant de ne pouvoir y résister, prendre en pitié sa propre faiblesse.

Comme si j'aimais cette solitude qui m'habite tout le corps, plus pointue, plus présente que jamais dans les grands magasins ou les centres commerciaux.

Désir d'enivrement ou envie de mourir. Un peu comme dans les boîtes de nuit mais en plus fort: conscience d'un éparpillement, cesser d'exister singulièrement et devenir informe dans le monde de la profusion et des biens ... S'y perdre tout en devenant, plus douloureusement et avec davantage d'acuité, *seule*.

Entre ces crises de boulimie, j'oublie ... Et puis après, ça me reprend. Ce matin, il me faut absolument ce pantalon pour me présenter au casting ... Même désir, même mirage. Quand ce rythme s'exaspère, je parcours le Forum des Halles en tout sens, repassant plusieurs fois aux mêmes endroits, fuyant le regard des vendeuses qui me reconnaissent. Je me sens très mal à l'aise, comme un homme qui repasserait plusieurs fois devant les mêmes prostituées sans avoir l'air de savoir ce qu'il veut. Je cherche mon objet mais ne sais pas ce qu'il est. J'entre dans toutes les boutiques, j'essaye, je n'achète pas. Quelque chose m'empêche d'acheter ... Non pas parce que ce serait une folie mais parce que, sur le point d'assouvir mon désir, il m'apparaît trop dérisoire.

Face à moi les vendeuses sont d'abord « aimablement » pressantes, puis facilement agressives avant de devenir légèrement ironiques et enfin brutalement indifférentes. Même scénario d'une boutique à l'autre. Même musique aussi, ce rythme binaire qui martèle sans répit.

Je finis par acheter n'importe quoi. A peine l'ai-je payé que mon plaisir s'évanouit, à peine le porté-je que je ne m'y sens plus à l'aise. Je rencontre un miroir -ou les yeux des passants- et l'habit enchanté n'est déjà plus rien.

Un autre sentiment funeste m'envahit alors: celui du gaspillage ... Qu'as-tu fais du peu d'argent que tu avais tout à l'heure?

Enfin, au bout d'une heure et demi de ce shopping en dérive, long comme une vie, je sors du Forum par le premier escalier mécanique. J'aperçois le gris du ciel où je me baigne après l'artificialité blafarde des néons.

Contre le ciel, l'église Saint-Eustache. Envie d'y entrer m'y reposer. Et dès le premier pas à l'intérieur, je suis saisie par le contraste, la paix, l'espace, la lumière; je venais donc de l'enfer?

Je marche doucement, regarde, respire à pleins poumons, goutte le silence qui résonne en moi. Je vais là où il fait le plus sombre, vers le fond. Je m'assoie sur un banc, fixe la voûte un moment, puis ferme les yeux.

Ce moment n'appartient pas au temps réel non plus: le temps où l'on vaque à ses devoirs sans être touché par le doute. Il renvoie aux mêmes profondeurs que le désert de la solitude pendant la traversée du Forum. Mais je vis alors l'expérience contraire: au lieu de me disperser ce moment me rassemble, au lieu de m'étourdir et de me désespérer il me fait retrouver mon grand silence intérieur, mon unité.

Quand j'ouvre les yeux à nouveau, je ne sais combien de temps est passé, je m'aperçois qu'il est trop tard pour mon casting, je m'en fiche.

J'ai très faim et reprends l'escalier mécanique vers le bas, la descente aux enfers m'emmène devant le Quick Burger, les queues sont longues: « *c'est l'époque qui veut Quick* » ... mais ça va lentement.

Plusieurs clients cherchent une table libre, le plateau à la main. Ils regardent tous vers le haut, vers le premier étage: y a-t-il une place pour moi? On dirait presque une image mystique. Je souris à cette idée, emporte mon hamburger spongieux pour le manger en marchant, j'ai envie de jeter l'emballage par terre et, sans ma tenace « bonne éducation », je l'aurais fait sans même m'en rendre compte.

Prochain numéro – Automne / Hiver 2009

PEN International: « Contexte : Asie Pacifique »

La série de *PEN International* « régions à la loupe » reprend et se tourne vers l'Asie et le Pacifique afin de célébrer les auteurs contemporains issus du fin fond de l'Asie australe jusqu'au sous-continent indien et l'Afghanistan, ainsi que de l'Asie de l'Est et du Sud-Est. Pour connaître les invités spéciaux et voir les nouvelles traductions, merci de suivre les mises à jour sur le site www.internationalpen.org.uk.

Nous invitons les soumissions d'auteurs originaires de (ou résidant dans) ces régions, ou aussi qui ont voyagé dans ces parties du monde.

Pour proposer vos contributions, merci de contacter la rédaction:
mitchell.albert@internationalpen.org.uk avant le 25 JUILLET 2009.

Jeff McMahon

Skateboarding with Mouloud

On a frozen morning this November past, I was tacking through alleys on the South Side of Chicago, angling toward a friend's apartment for breakfast, when I locked eyes with a man who was digging through a garbage bin, a shopping cart waiting beside him.

Nelson Algren wrote that you never truly love Chicago until you love its alleys, 'where the bright and morning faces of old familiar friends wear the anxious midnight eyes of strangers a long way from home'. Among those anxious eyes are the hungry eyes of Chicago's gleaners, who salvage a narrow living from our neighbors' discarded excesses.

This man had little to show for his morning's work: a few aluminum cans, random angles of iron and coils of wire. But in the shopping cart he had something that once was mine, and I recognized it at once. It was a skateboard I had piloted on one perfect afternoon three and a half years prior, and upon which I had made a most rewarding acquaintance. It was on that skateboard that I got to know Jean Grenier and his cat, Mouloud.

It was the last day of classes in June 2005. I emerged from the Classics Building onto a sun-drenched quadrangle and found myself in the spell of two beauties: it was a beautiful afternoon – a perfect example of the mildness Chicago can find between its extremes – and it was the end of a beautiful year, my first teaching writing to MA students at the University of Chicago. That task had been challenging, but with the challenge behind me and 120 masters newly loosed upon the world, it was nothing now but satisfying. Now I wanted for nothing, except that it was spring, and as Mark Twain writes of spring: you don't quite know what it is you do want, but it just fairly makes your heart ache, you want it so.

It's a fine condition in which to meet a new love, living or literary.

A breeze crossed the quadrangle, and the oak leaves whispered of freedom. I decided to walk the fifty blocks home and resolved to be in no hurry about it. And what better first detour than a quick descent into the Seminary Co-op Bookstore, where I found Green Integer's little edition of *Islands*, a collection of Jean Grenier's lyrical essays, in a neat stack beside the checkout counter. As I returned to the perfect afternoon, I began to read.

It would prove fateful that I began the collection at its second essay. My melancholic, misanthropic self was equally drawn to the first two titles – 'Attraction of the Void' and 'Mouloud the Cat' – but the first sentence of 'Attraction' ('In each life, particularly at its dawn, there exists a moment which determines everything') could not rival the springy appeal, on this perfect afternoon, of the first line of 'Mouloud':

The world of animals is made of silences and leaps.

From that sentence I could not break from the essay, not for portentous stoplights, not for menacing automobiles. We are always searching for the next book that will hook us with its first line and carry us, outside of time, to its final period. But who would expect that hook in the first line of an essay, an essay translated from the French, an essay about a cat? I found I was not just reading about a cat, I was reading about the *aboutness* of cats:

In the afternoon, stretched out on a bed, he purrs, paws thrust forward. This morning he came early, and due to a riotous day yesterday will remain here the entire day. He is more affectionate than usual: he is tired. I love him: he abolishes the distance which, at every waking, is reborn between the world and myself.

In Grenier's minimalism, Mouloud consists of a purr and paws. That's all Mouloud needs to help Grenier stretch his own paws for a lyrical truth, the certainty of which derives from its lovely recapitulation of experience. Anyone who has appreciated a cat will recognize the feline power to reacquaint, by example, the divided human with the pleasure of living:

Mouloud is happy. Taking part in the combat to which the world eternally submits itself, he does not penetrate the illusion which makes him act. He plays and he does not dream of watching himself play. I am the one who watches him, enchanted in seeing him occupy his role with a precision of movements leaving no place void. At each and every instant he is entirely one with his action ... When I return to myself this plenitude saddens me. I feel human, which is to say, a mutilated being.

Now I had to hurry home so I could read unmenaced by growling cars, but I had to hurry home without ceasing to read. I slipped from the streets to the alleys. Chicago's alleys are quieter, less perilous with traffic, but mined with other distractions – unexpected wildlife, unintended glimpses of humanity, unburied treasures: such as, on this afternoon, half protruding from a garbage bin, a battered and sun-bleached skateboard.

It was a classic wood board with a kick tail, sandpaper grip, clay wheels, the kind the older, cooler skaters rode in the 1970s, when I was an adolescent and skateboarding was resurgent. In my sun-struck, spring-fevered, prose-drunk condition, I had found my ride home. The clay wheels complained on the stony pavement, the bearings wailed for grease, but she rolled, and now I surfed through the alleys, still reading 'Mouloud the Cat'.

I would not learn until later that Albert Camus also discovered Grenier's essays in the street. But owing to a lack of skateboards in 1933 Algiers, he was forced to run home. In a preface to the 1959 edition of *Islands*, Camus wrote: 'I would like to return to that evening when, having opened the volume in the street and read its first lines, I instantly shut it, and grasping it against myself ran to my room in order to devour it without witness.'

The essays demand to be read without witness because of the intimacy of the wonder they inspire. Like many stories about animals, 'Mouloud' ends in sadness, but the sadness is not just for a cat or for a man. It is sadness for our mutual plight. As exactly as the essay describes cats, it implies our difference from cats:

Their life is at the antipodes of those of other animals. They are awake while these others sleep. At night, gardens are transformed into jungles, and roofs are peopled with black, white, and grey phantoms, similar to the penitents of medieval brotherhoods. Beings of luxury for whom all work is servile, they give themselves up to festive entertainments to which only the richest among us can ever hope to aspire.

As I rolled on and read on, I discovered passages it would be unbearable to forget, passages like the ones above, and not wanting to pause to dig for a pencil, I bookmarked these pages with ash leaves. Now, whenever I open the book, I rediscover those leaves, pressed artifacts of that perfect afternoon.

When I reached my apartment, I parked the skateboard beside the back door. Inside, I devoured, without witness, Mouloud's ending. It had already been clear, as I have said, that 'Mouloud the Cat' is not just about cats but about the aboutness of cats. And that it is, by reflection, about humans. But at its ending, its aboutness multiplies. It becomes about much more: about being alive, about being separated from life, about life going on, about expedience.

Grenier was a teacher at the Lycée Bugeaud in Algiers, then a professor at the University of Algiers. His star pupil at both institutions was Camus. Although Grenier taught philosophy, Camus remembers him as a writing teacher, and Grenier's imprint is all over his pupil's writing. Camus also excels at stretching his paws for lyrical truths, as in this example from his *Notebooks*: 'We must have one love in our lives, one great love, to give us an alibi for all the moments of motiveless despair.'

Camus's lyrical moments may not represent his best philosophy, but they may represent his best writing, and the philosophy they offer is human, concrete and livable. He derived his courage to write them in part from his teacher. Camus describes Grenier as 'a man born on other shores, yet also in love with light and the body's splendor, who came to tell us in inimitable language that these appearances are beautiful, but that they must perish and that it is necessary, therefore, to love them without hope.'

Drained of hope, but filled with light, I could react to the experience of Grenier's essay only by conspiring to replicate the experience in others. I turned to the pages marked with ash leaves and typed up the passages there. I sent them by email to everyone I knew who possessed the requisite sensitivity, to lovers of writing and to lovers of cats. On my next commute to Hyde Park I bought that neat stack of *Islands*. I gave copies to friends, to promising philosophers, to undiscovered poets. As autumn approached, I maneuvered to include the essay in the reading list of a non-fiction workshop I had been contracted to teach. My motive was unselfish – that others might enjoy the world of this essay as I had – but also selfish, because no one wants to enter such a world only to be alone within it.

Drained of hope, but filled with light, I felt newly justified in my melancholy

and my misanthropy – my melancholy for our mutual plight, my misanthropy for our human failure to rise above it. In the end, Mouloud and the race of cats cannot expect too much from us, and they don't. They know us better than we know ourselves. Their complaint – whether we fail to give them food or freedom or love – is that we don't make the most of living.

The skateboard remained beside my back door that summer and autumn. In winter, I would shake the snow from it and move it to the basement. I would forget it there, even when I moved out of the building. I would not ride it again, nor would I consider it, until three and a half years hence on the frozen November morning when I spotted it in the gleaner's shopping cart.

Mouloud is an Arabic word, Grenier's translator tells us, a past participle for 'to be born'. The gleaner – he might be named Mouloud. And me, for that matter, I might too.

As our eyes met, I said: 'Hey, buddy.' He said: 'How ya doin'?' I glanced at the skateboard. I considered asking him if I might buy it from him, or borrow it for just one more ride. But I let the skateboard pass. I let it pass because, like that perfect afternoon, it belonged already to the past, to memory, and finally to forgetting. As does Mouloud. As does each of us, every one.

This essay first appeared in the Winter 2009 issue of Contrary magazine.

Coming in Autumn/Winter 2009: *PEN International: 'Context: Asia Pacific'*

PEN International's regional spotlight series resumes with a focus on Asia Pacific in a celebration of contemporary writing from the furthest reaches of Australasia to the Indian Subcontinent and into Afghanistan, plus all of East and Southeast Asia. Guest writers and new translations to be announced. Visit www.internationalpen.org.uk for updates.

Submissions are welcome from writers from these regions or residing there, as well as non-inhabitants who have written on or travelled through these parts of the world.

To contribute work, please contact the editor at mitchell.albert@internationalpen.org.uk.

SUBMISSION DEADLINE: 25 JULY 2009

Marcos Neroy

¿Qué es una amapola?

Quando la conocí supe al instante,
ella me lo confesó,
que su flor preferida era la amapola,
no la amapola que se doblega en un cuenco de barro,
de pistilos azufrados,
la cautiva del acuerdo tácito con los hombres,
'si me ofreces en exequias tus hojas
yo perpetuaré tu estirpe y
aunque la polis olvide tu nombre
tú, amapola, no has de morir',
no, esa no.

Ella prefería la amapola
que crece junto al arcén de la comarcal 110,
de camino a Guadalajara o Wisconsin.
Una túrgida mata que se enrolla en la guadaña
que amputa, de cuando en cuando,
los brazos o el cuello a motoristas incautos.

La prefería así, ella me lo confesó,
y yo tuve por bien lo que dijo
que era una amapola,
creí en su idea con la naturalidad
de un hombre que mira alucinado
hacia el pasado,
que sabe en consecuencia
lo que le espera más adelante:

la pugna por expresar
lo que es y no es una amapola,
de defender ante otros su idea
y probar que sólo florecen junto al arcén de dos carreteras
y en ningún otro lugar,
que la profusión de palés holandeses,
su calculado tráfico de esclavas

no es garante de nada,
ni sobre la idea de la amapola
ni sobre nuestro amor por ella,

El hombre, alucinado, tendrá que demostrar
que cuando ve en los escaparates
de una librería de viejo
una litografía que muestra
un diagrama de las exequias
practicadas por chinos que se enamoraron de la idea del opio
no siente la idea de la amapola.

Que cuando camina por un descampado
y pisa una amapola
no siente pena por la planta,
pues no era lo que pretendía ser,
sino ilusión y fuga de una idea preconcebida
que se parecía, en cierta manera,
tanto a él:
ambos fueron engendrados en la comarcal 110
y nunca supieron quién les legó en origen
su suerte de alucinados,
de amapombres que se preguntan
qué es una amapola.

Otoño / Invierno 2009:

PEN Internacional: "Contexto: Asia Pacifico"

La serie de enfoques regionales de *PEN Internacional* regresa con la mira puesta en Asia Pacífico, celebrando la escritura contemporánea desde los extremos de Australasia hasta el Subcontinente Indio y Afganistán, en su camino a Asia Oriental y Sureste Asiático. Invitados especiales y nuevas traducciones a determinar: visite www.internationalpen.org.uk para las últimas novedades.

Se anima a los escritores provenientes de estas regiones o residentes en ellas, así como de no-residentes que hayan escrito sobre, o viajado a través de estas áreas del mundo, a que nos envíen sus textos.

Para el envío de textos, por favor contacte al editor:
mitchell.albert@internationalpen.org.uk.

PLAZO DE ENTREGA: 25 DE JULIO 2009

Richard Wirick

Excerpt from the novel

The Devil's Water

In what the author calls the 'Great American Crystal Meth Novel', a young girl reluctantly caught up in a California town's pervasive drug subculture begins to question her future ...

Chapter 39

Back in the magazine office, night again, I look for a while at myself curled up in the window space. The submissions pile is under my bent knees, and the editing pens sit in a tall plastic purple cup that says 'Kenyon' on it, white letters above a white shield.

One story really got me today. I think this writer really has the groceries, really has the stuff. This is a story with legs, on a whole other level than what we've been seeing. The narrator is a woman who lives somewhere in Arizona and keeps writing her parents that she is working with the developmentally disabled, the slow readers, the adult retarded, things like that, so they will stay off her back. They are an old Eastern family and Mom and Dad are wondering when she'll come back to Wellesley, back to summers as a counsellor at Buck's Rock. All the acronyms she uses for the phoney programmes are plausible, like 'R.E.A.D.' and 'A.S.S.I.S.T.'. But none of them are true, and she realises that her letters home are becoming inconsistent with the acronyms and the descriptions she's given.

What the narrator is really doing is giving group swim lessons to very old people in a landlocked city in the north, miles, maybe hundreds of miles, from any body of water. Almost nothing really happens in the story, and she tells you that right up front. But then she starts describing how she visits these senior citizens at one of their houses every day and teaches them techniques she actually had to teach when she was on her high school swim team back in Connecticut.

One of the old ladies, named Kelda, said they were all obviously very lucky to have a swim coach living in town, and that it was sad there wasn't a pool or lake or even a very rich person's bathroom with a large bathtub where they could practice. The narrator doesn't say much. She just nods at the old people's comments and expressions of gratitude, and follows through with modest, usually hilarious instructions keyed to each of their requests.

She teaches them how to breathe while doing the basic crawl stroke by putting big pans of water beside low cots. They dip their faces in and lift them out and turn them to one side to gulp in air, then put them back in the water and blow the air out. It could be bedpans she is having them use, or plastic hand laundry basins – she really doesn't say. Two of the ladies are in their nineties and have never even tried to swim. They have lived in Arizona all their lives and have never even seen

the Colorado River or any lakes, not even the lake where the London Bridge was rebuilt. They are thrilled to be learning everything, realising it may be the last big life experience they have.

She teaches them all the strokes she knows. The crawl is just as described, with the students dipping their faces and pumping their arms on either side of the cots, which must be thin enough to be stretchers left behind by some ambulance or medical transport vehicle. Their kicks can be vigorous, and she assures us they are, because the cots are also too short for all of them. If their shins bump the edges of the cots she puts a towel or pillow there, though they protest that this is too much, it's not necessary, they don't want her to go to such lengths of indulgence. Their gratitude is like their gratitude at being alive at their age. The amazing thing is that none of them are crotchety. None of them have any bitterness, and none of them give up on any part of the lessons. None of them ever misses one, or comes late.

She doesn't get paid for the lessons. You get the feeling there is nothing else going on in the town at all, and that it really isn't a town so much as some kind of gas station with a motel or motel-restaurant combination next door.

When it comes to the sidestroke, there isn't really any face-dipping in the pans, and I *do* remember the sidestroke being that way, where you don't really have to put your face in the water at all. The butterfly is the most hilariously described. A guy named Jack Jack (yes, first and last name) flies across the floor, throwing his winglike arms up feverishly, his belly smacking down and his chin pushing the pan of water along the carpet from one end of the room to the other, never missing a dip-and-breathe. Sometimes she's afraid of him dying, and has him slow down. The bottom of his neck, right over the thyroid, gets flushed and folded with soggy pieces of carpet lint and his own slobber. The harder he breathes, the happier he seems.

She says things like: 'If I can say this without being immodest, I was *instead* of the water.' It's lines like that that make me lose it, that make me want to look, if I have to, through a thousand stories for something that perfect. The pitch and tone are perfectly zany like that, coloured with wonder but also mild irritation; she has that off-kilter, impatient, David Letterman vibe. She describes barking out her instructions like a true competitive coach and blowing her whistle and having them spin around in unison when they hit their imaginary wall and start swimming in the other direction. Then she has them start *diving*, one following the other, with each poised on a desktop and timidly pushing off and belly-flopping onto a mattress (not a cot). Another thing she says: 'It was still diving, it was still letting go of mammalian pride and giving in to gravity's hug.' When one of the ladies suggests they make noises as they land, the narrator says that it is a little too creative for her taste but that she wants to be the kind of teacher who learns from her students.

Later, when she sees them in the parking lots of the completely non-existent stores and village establishments, she asks them if they have been practising their dives and strokes, and they say things like: 'I working on it, Coach!'

The story peters out a little when it weaves back into messages she wants to leave her mean boyfriend, the guy who, along with her parents, drove her to these ends of the earth, to this moonscape of a state, 'four hundred square miles of kitty litter'. The lines! Isn't that perfect? They come with the spice of somebody doing

stand-up, and when I find her contributor's bio I won't be surprised if she's also a performance artist or something like that.

All our submissions are blind. I settled on this method after hearing that one of the editors of *The Best American Short Stories* used it so he wouldn't be better disposed towards his friends, names he recognised, people who were big at the moment. So we ask that people don't put their name on until the last page, and then fold the page in fours, still keeping it stapled so the reader has to take a minute to unfold it and can't be picking it apart all the time they are reading.

I am blown away by this story. I'm still laughing and actually trembling a little at its quality, almost intimidated to have something this good make its way here. I open the four-squared last page.

The name is there, for some reason in the lower left corner, and with an email address underneath. It's Natasha. Natasha Varvoucha, the burned girl.

(Unpublished, 2009)

John Weston

For Shi Tao, in a Chinese Prison

Your *Book of the Dead* poems, online
 their skin still gives off heat,
 as I turn that gun from your ear, count
 down each year by one line,
 like a shaman spell syllable
 by syllable a sympathetic
 magic stronger than painted aurochs,
 terracotta regiments, Olympic
 circles, to lift your flame from live
 burial ('Come forth!') before this sentence ends.

*The poet and journalist Shi Tao was arrested in 2004
 for sending emails about a Chinese government directive
 banning commemoration of the Tiananmen Square massacre.
 He is now serving ten years in prison.*

Inua Ellams

For Tina

The day I discovered how she survived the civil war,
how she saw her friends pass like minutes into oblivion,
how she screamed through drop zones and Morse codes
into jungle, dodging bullets, hiding and crying into rain,

the day I discovered my grandfather heard her wailing,
felt something enough to move him after her, in darkness,
through rain, how her eyes, found in the flickering bounce
of hurricane lamps, showed a place so pure, he sailed her

away to the embrace of Paris, the kiss of Rome, the world
with its wide welcoming dome. The day I discovered this,
why she'd call him hero, she died. Peacefully, ninety years old.
He followed her an hour after, again into darkness.

All these years, he never let go. That day, I realised we live
in different worlds; friends pass too fast for minutes, wars
come after *X Factor*, turtledove romances exist in the past.

But I will send one sentence to you. One text message
screaming through wifi zones, digital codes, dodging
ones and zeros, like bullets and anti-heroes, promising

if evr ur lst n ths urbn jngle,
i'll find n bring u in frm rain.

FOUND IN TRANSLATION DÉCOUVERT EN TRADUCTION DESCUBIERTO EN TRADUCCIÓN

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Encarna Cabello

Chapitre du roman

Alizmour

Traduit de l'espagnol par Dris Bouissef Rekab

Alizmour, une petite ville de la côte méditerranéenne de l'Afrique du nord, est un endroit plaisant où vive un jeune couple de relation affectueuse aussi simple qu'intense. Arriveraient toutefois des éléments externes qui casseraient le pas harmonieux des jours ...

La fouquia de l'amour

La *fouquia* est une sorte de tunique maghrébine large, très large, dont les hommes se couvrent depuis la base du cou jusqu'aux chevilles, tout en laissant les bras à découvert. Vêtement du beau temps, des journées chaudes qui commencent au printemps et se terminent au-delà de l'été. Il est donc très habituel de voir, dans une petite ville méditerranéenne de la côte sud de cette mer, des corps masculins en train d'aérer leur démarche sous le tissu doux, fin et presque transparent, dont les raies verticales mettent en valeur la masse musculaire du mâle. Il est véritablement aisé de deviner les formes qui bougent sous le tissu, parce que beaucoup d'hommes, surtout ceux qui sont dans la fleur de l'âge, et à cause de la chaleur étouffante, y résistent très peu et préfèrent ne porter sous la *fouquia* que l'indispensable slip.

Pendant les trois ans de leur mariage, Abdelkader n'avait jamais utilisé cet habit devant sa femme, même si quelquefois ils avaient plaisanté sur la possibilité d'en acheter un. Mais voilà que son frère aîné, revenu prématurément d'Espagne à cause d'une expulsion foudroyante, avait laissé à la maison, parce qu'il n'avait nul autre endroit où le déposer, un grand sac de voyage ; et alors que cela faisait plus de deux

mois que ce lourd sac se trouvait dans un coin obscur sans que personne n'ait daigné y toucher, une après-midi Abdelkader se dit qu'il était temps d'y jeter un coup d'œil, souhaitant y trouver quelque vêtement qui lui plaise. Parmi les T-shirts et les chaussettes bons à utiliser, il trouva une *fouquia* flambant neuf qu'il posa sur le dossier d'une chaise. Lorsque sa femme passa par là, ses yeux vifs et énigmatiques lancèrent des étincelles en découvrant d'en haut les raies verticales blanches et grises du frais vêtement à la forme reconnaissable.

–Mais, qu'attends-tu pour la mettre ?

Cette robe avait toujours provoqué un certain charme dans l'esprit de Touria, une excitation intime si, à travers le tissu de fil son regard fixait le contour visible de muscles libres, de jambes sauvages, le balancement de fesses maîtresses de leur mouvement viril. Se dire que sous le tact noble du tissu, juste sous lui, elle toucherait la peau brune, satinée et chaude de l'homme ... Si elle avait pu le faire toutes les fois qu'elle en avait eu envie ...

Abdelkader souriait, indécis face à l'idée de sa femme. Il ne perdrait rien à essayer la *fouquia* ; il déboutonna donc pantalon et chemise et entra dans l'ample toile ; sa silhouette se fit plus grande, il avait gagné en hauteur et en autorité. Il mit les mains dans les poches latérales, il semblait qu'il venait de découvrir que ce n'était pas en fait des poches, mais simplement deux fentes pour la commodité et le repos des mains du mâle : tel qu'il était, en tendant vers les deux hanches la toile avec ses doigts, il éclata de rire spontanément, attirant l'attention de sa femme sur la protubérance qui surgissait au centre, comme des falaises scabreuses serrées les unes aux autres et formant un ensemble solitaire au milieu d'une plage déserte atlantique.

La satisfaction devant cette agréable surprise surgit dans les traits du visage de la femelle, les transmuant face à la promesse de plaisir.

–Viens, passe ta main par là.

Elle lui obéit. Lui, il sortit sa main droite, lui prit la sienne et l'introduisit par la rainure ; le bout de ses doigts aveugles sentit rapidement la peau d'un corps qui lui sembla nouveau, appartenant à un homme inconnu, tellement elle arriva vite aux falaises, en palpa la molle texture prompte à émettre des gouttes timides de rosée, contourna la masse vipérine en la pressant doucement et en réprimant l'envie insolente de la presser ouvertement. Une main d'Abdelkader alla alors à son pantalon-pyjama à elle, pénétra par la ceinture et plongea dans la partie la plus étroite du slip jusqu'à ce que ses doigts aient entouré le clitoris, dont le balancement l'excitait tellement, lui. Dans ce va-et-vient voluptueux des doigts de l'une et l'autre mains dans la mollesse la plus intime de l'autre, elle, se sentant complètement envahie par l'inconnu, ne tarda pas à gémir sans honte aucune : voix obligée et cri d'extase. Touria avait arrêté son action, mais les bouts des doigts masculins, avarés, continuaient à passer sans cesse là où la sensibilité de la femme devenait insoutenable, tellement qu'elle le supplia de stopper.

Ce fut là, debout, qu'il la prit, avec sa *fouquia* soulevée, car elle ne voulait pas qu'il l'enlève, alors que les premières ombres de la nuit tombaient sur le couloir. Il n'y avait que des cris stridents de filles et de garçons jouant les jeux du crépuscule qui se faufilaient par la large fenêtre ouverte depuis le bas, depuis la reposante et étrange clarté du dehors, qui laissait voir les montagnes arides d'en face.

Abdelkader avait un grand corps de berbère à la constitution musclée. Sa calvitie naissante et ses trente-trois ans semblaient ceux d'un homme plus âgé, comme cela arrive aux africains du nord qui commencent à travailler dans les champs avant de changer leurs dents de lait, alors que la morve leur descend encore du nez sur leur

petite blouse blanche. Inutile de dire qu'ils n'ont jamais mis les pieds dans une école, certains, au grand maximum, ont fréquenté pendant quelques années la petite école coranique de la mosquée rurale pour apprendre à lire de façon rudimentaire le Coran ; apprentissage qui s'efface de leur tête peu après, faute de pratique. C'était le cas d'Abdelkader. Étant donc analphabète dans toutes les langues du monde, la maturité précoce de son corps et de son regard obéissait à la lutte constante pour amener à la maison quelques dirhams et demander le moins de prêts possibles aux amis et aux parents, qui en avaient déjà assez avec leurs propres difficultés.

Alors que Touria – qui lui avait échoué en mariage –, élevée dans la petite ville méditerranéenne, avait pu fréquenter l'école et avait un certain pouvoir sur lui, ne serait-ce que par le fait de savoir calculer et de pouvoir lire les documents compliqués tels les licenciements, certificats, convocations, amendes qui de temps en temps faisaient leur entrée dans la maison devant le regard méfiant d'Abdelkader qui, en posant de loin ses yeux rudes sur le papier suspect, révélait la sauvage tristesse de celui qui se sait inexplicablement ignorant, outre sa pauvreté.

L'homme fruste, avec toute la rusticité de son corps et de son âme, subjuguait Touria – six ans plus jeune que lui –, aimant secrètement et rageusement son corps énergétique quoique lourd : des formes charnues qui lui inspiraient beaucoup d'audaces.

Un autre jour, juste après avoir mangé un plat de lentilles seules, Abdelkader s'assit pour fumer, se reposant sur le long divan qui occupait tout un mur, alors que la luminosité diurne lui éclairait la *fouquia*. Touria, tout en bougeant dans la salle pour enlever des affaires, remarqua la lumière estivale sur les rayures grises et blanches de la large jupe, telle un aimant qui, avec perversité, lui faisait signe d'aller le chercher. Elle fit quelques pas et planta ses fesses sur le sol tapissé, près des vifs pieds bruns du mari. Sa délicate main gauche monta avidement à travers les plis du tissu qui gardait le beau mollusque enroulé sur lui-même. Elle poussa, appuya timidement à cet endroit et ne tarda pas à en entourer entièrement tous les contours velus. Elle sentait l'envie de l'excitation qui l'embrasait comme un feu interne. Sur les joues, le nez et le menton surélevés de l'homme, transfigurés, elle lisait le désir, elle l'écoutait dans la sueur des pores maintenant plus ouverts.

Bercée par le doux vertige de l'après repas (au moment où beaucoup s'adonnent à la sieste dans la plus profonde obscurité), remarquant la couleur patate qui pointait à la fente latérale, elle y aventura la main, ses doigts touchèrent la gratifiante chair de la ceinture, se promenèrent du côté du bas-ventre, retardant le moment d'attraper le mollusque qu'elle imaginait maintenant dressé, quand l'homme, dans un mouvement violent, lui prit la tête et l'introduisit sous la jupe de la *fouquia*. Elle y fut éblouie sous la fraîcheur ombrée provoquée par la pénombre de la toile : ce territoire de cavités et de chair, grotte profonde de pulpe affamée et solitaire, lui appartenait. La pointe de ses doigts attrapa la base de la tige musculieuse et la parcourut entièrement, jusqu'à arriver à la cime humide et au sommet onctueux : ce membre, pensa-t-elle, avait une vie propre, il n'avait pas de propriétaire, comme s'il était remis au hasard pour son loisir ou bien comme si le passe-temps de cet être orphelin doué de vie ne dépendait que de ses fantaisies et de ses stimulations, esclave de sa perversion. Le reste du corps mâle était inerte : le sérieux de ses muscles tendus et soumis à l'ombre faible de la *fouquia*, les plis noirs horizontaux du bas-ventre au repos : petit univers à l'affût de sa besogne, tout juste découvert grâce au tissu oublié par un frère aîné globe-trotter.

Découvert en Traduction

Richard Berengarten

Volta¹

Traduit de l'anglais par Robert Davreu

... maintenant que la nuit va tomber ...²

Soleil Roi, au joues teintées de rose, souverain d'or du jour,
tu me touches, et ma peau devient une cornée,
nerf optique mon épine dorsale, et mon corps de trembler
à moitié ébloui par la flaque d'or que tu verses
sur cette mer et cette ville, et je suis aveuglé.
Ici s'élevaient jadis des rangées – et je sais qu'encore elles s'élèvent –
de maisons et de rues, qui sont d'une autre ville,
non de celle qu'ici tu as du tout au tout transmuée.

Le long du front de mer nous flânons. Des pêcheurs
les bateaux sont prêts à appareiller pour la nuit,
moteurs toussant, lampes à pétrole à la proue,
et pour la promenade toute la ville est de sortie,
amants bras enlacés, jeunes hommes plastronnant,
mères et pères, enfants léchant des glaces,
vieillards assis à regarder depuis les tables des terrasses,
et les collines assombries d'approcher, comme des animaux amadoués.

Douce radiance du soir, répandue sur collines et baie,
voilà que ton bras effleure le mien, comme par accident,
tel celui de cette jeune femme qui marche à côté de moi,
hanches lourdes, petits pas, démarche chaloupée,
cheveux de jais rejetés en arrière, gorge délicate, épaules
bronzées du plein été, yeux olivâtres enjoués.
Je te bois, lumière frémissante, comme du vin, comme de la musique,
comme ses ancêtres t'ont bue pendant des milliers d'années.

Cité poreuse, *Éleftheria*³ elle se nomme,
et si tes cicatrices sont des paillettes grises dans ses yeux,
à cette heure, pourtant, où la lumière et de la lumière les inflexions
jouent subtiles sur son visage comme parole ou chanson,
sien est l'antique droit de parcourir ce quai
en instrument et gardienne de ta lumière

qu'elle recueille dans les puits profonds de ses pupilles,
et sienne, la liberté chérie d'y marcher à pas de danseuse.
Soir chéri, lumière de milliers d'années d'âge,
chanteur à la gorge claire, ravissant comme cette femme,
comment puis-je ne pas adorer la grâce dans laquelle tu fonds
cette cité et son peuple, moule
qui sculpte tout ce qu'il touche, le monde tout entier ?
Je suis devenu ton esclave, sinon ton citoyen.
Et dans ma soif de te boire tout entier, j'emplirais
chaque pore de ta splendeur, sa liberté.

- 1 Le mot *volta* signifie promenade du soir, coutume que l'italien nomme *passeggiata* et dont la pratique est commune à plusieurs cultures méditerranéennes.
- 2 L'épigraphe est tirée d'un poème de Georges Sféris.
- 3 « *Éleftheria* » est ici le prénom d'une jeune fille. Il signifie « Liberté ». Le cri « *Elefthéria i Thanato !* » est celui que lançaient les Grecs qui partaient au combat pour l'indépendance nationale au dix-neuvième siècle. C'était aussi l'ultime cri de défi des résistants grecs devant les pelotons d'exécution nazis.

James Neil

Thoughts on Annemarie Jacir's *Salt of This Sea (Milh hadha al-bahr)*

The sea lies before you ... and thine enemy behind
– Soraya, in *Salt of This Sea*

The haunting sound of a solitary *oud* is heard as black and white archival images show homes being demolished and the exodus of Palestinians from their villages. A shot of Yaffa (Jaffa) from the back of a boat conveys the departure. Cut to the implied return, this time in colour, evoked by a shot of the beautiful turquoise Mediterranean Sea accompanied by a modern rendition of *Ya Bahriyya*, the Palestinian ode to freedom. This bold opening situates writer-director Annemarie Jacir's *Salt of This Sea (Milh hadha al-bahr)* firmly within notions of history and memory, ideas that continue to resonate in the contemporary reality of the Middle East.

We are then thrust into one of the frontier spaces – airport passport control – and witness the full extent of an interrogation that is immediately unsettling. Soraya (Suheir Hammad), a Palestinian woman from the US, is forced to answer aggressive questions about her family history. The tension mounts as she undergoes the indignity of a full-body search and further intrusive questions. Eventually she is allowed to enter.

As a genre piece, *Salt of This Sea* is a road movie; only, in this instance, it belongs to the cinema of exile, and takes us through historical Palestine – today's modern Israel and the Occupied Territories. The film explores a personal relationship that develops against impossible odds and traces the protagonist's quest to regain her family's memory.

Initial impressions offer a dry landscape, with glimpses of new settlements and the omnipresent dividing wall between Israel and the West Bank. In a restaurant in Ramallah frequented by the Palestinian elite, Soraya is asked what has brought her back to Palestine. She answers: 'They won't give us a right to return, so I took it.' Her hosts are thus reminded of the Palestinian Right of Return. They explain that Yaffa, her family's hometown, was lost long ago, and that there are agreements to build two states. Soraya takes issue with the limited gains that were negotiated. She is told it's better for her to be abroad, to which she replies: 'Better for whom? Have you lived abroad?' The comment suggests that immigration has failed in the betterment of Palestinians. That Soraya wishes to return is testament to the American dream remaining just that: a dream. Watching the scene today resonates as the economic reality for millions in the West begins to look perilous.

Emad, played by the excellent Saleh Bakri, is their waiter, and is subtly mocked by one of Soraya's hosts – whose social standing allows him to get away with

such behaviour. It illustrates how the elite remain out of touch with ordinary Palestinians, and merely look down on them with irritation.

Soraya is left in a state of distress after learning that her grandfather's savings, which had been left in a British bank when he was exiled, cannot be retrieved on account of the change in the political situation after Israel was created. Her attempts to retrieve these frozen assets appear fanciful, even fantastical; it is an effective narrative device, as it marks the struggle for recognition of how ordinary Palestinians lived before they were exiled in 1948 – a theme that returns constantly throughout the film.

Wide, high vistas introduce us to the beautiful landscape in which the sea and Yaffa can be seen. They appear near, yet so unreachable. Soraya has come to Palestine in search of a new life and carries with her an oral history, recounting with clarity the details of her grandparent's lives in Yaffa. Emad plans to leave and is awaiting a visa to take up a scholarship in Canada. Their different perspectives situate them at opposite poles. Emad hasn't been allowed to leave Ramallah for many years, and we can deduce the unfortunate experiences of a young man who has endured the realities of life under military occupation. His internal bitterness is conveyed through Bakri's consummate use of subtle shifts in facial expression. The scene is handled deftly as cinematographer Benoît Chamaillard deploys an unobtrusive camera and natural tones.

Salt of This Sea bypasses the conventional narrative build-up to a love story; instead, its protagonists are fellow travellers who develop affection for one another and share a difficult past. Soraya is a Brooklyn-born, working-class woman and an outsider in her society. Emad lived in refugee camps before moving to Ramallah. Both lead actors are cast effectively to type, and their physical features carry an impression of deep life experience.

A sense of resignation pervades after Soraya fails to obtain a passport that would allow her to stay (only Palestinians who have descendents left in the West Bank or Gaza can apply), and Emad's fourth visa application is rejected. Deciding to join Soraya and his friend Marwan (Riyad Ideis) in their defiant plot to rob the British Palestine Bank, Emad helps to retrieve Soraya's grandfather's money. With false car number plates they pose as converts to Judaism and travel through the rest of that divided land. The shots of Israeli cities evoke a country defined by its long wall, barbed wire and checkpoints to control movement, but also a developed land with modern infrastructure and tall office blocks. Evidence of the past remains, however: in one instance, a plaque from 1924 commemorates the opening of a public building in Jerusalem by the then-British governor and Palestinian mayor.

The feeling of lost innocence imbues one scene in which Emad contemplates the vast sea. The subsequent image of the three young people in the water is a moment in which they are able to forget themselves – though we are subtly reminded that the beach is the regular Tel Aviv domain of Jewish Israelis, who become uncomfortably aware of the presence of Arabic speakers.

In Yaffa, the trio's voracious appetite for oranges becomes a symbolic consummation of the quenching of their thirst for their homeland. Soraya plucks up the courage to knock on the door of the house in which her grandparents had lived. A young Jewish artist, Irit (Shelley Goral), invites them in. She is friendly and

liberal, and expresses regret over the circumstances under which the Palestinians had to leave their homes. She blames the 'leaders' of both peoples for the lack of peace today. Soraya asks about her grandparents' furniture, and Irit assumes her family got rid of it at some point.

A moving sequence ensues, with long tracking shots past antique shops. The items for sale include old furniture, a fez and an *oud*. Emad retrieves an old tile along the waterfront. An old Arab song plays, and the scene is redolent of a bygone era, full of melancholia and of lives undone.

Soraya confronts Irit, declaring that the house belongs to her and that she is willing to buy it. Irit explains that the Jewish National Fund, responsible for expropriating Palestinian land and property in 1948, won't allow it. It becomes all too much for Soraya as she wrestles with her family's immense loss. Irit says: 'You want to speak about history, the past. Let's forget it.' She has rationalised history and memory, arguing that Soraya's family left voluntarily. Handheld cinematography helps to generate tension, as an angry Soraya demands that her family's forced departure be recognised for what it was. The theme of the demand for recognition returns, centre stage, and the scene carries an emotional charge.

Paradoxically, the emotional trauma raised in the film was actually mirrored in numerous incidents during its very making. Israeli authorities refused some twenty-five filming permits; Bakri, a Palestinian with Israeli citizenship, was refused permission to enter Ramallah and had to sneak into the city to act in his scenes, risking arrest. These obstacles compounded the difficult process of raising funds to make the film in a territory where there is no formal film industry to speak of. Jacir takes pride in the fact that there were no Israeli co-producers. *Salt of This Sea* is a Palestinian production made in historical Palestine, and Jacar has said that it was perhaps this reason more than any other that prompted the authorities to refuse permits. It's quite an achievement, then, that the film's aesthetic vision remains so strong.

It is notable how the film's point of view shifts during key moments so as to develop the histories of both Emad and Soraya. Upon entering the village of al-Dawayima, where Emad's parents lived before Israel existed, the camera stays with the young man. He finds shells of old buildings alongside scattered ruins. A sombre and extended silence pervades, which powerfully evokes the flight of Palestinians depicted in the film's opening archival sequence. The extent of the decay, and of the burned-out houses, suggests that *something* happened here. It is left to our imagination. Only during the final credits are we told that it was the site of a massacre of Palestinians in 1948.

Soraya and Emad spend two nights in the ruins. They speak in the language of dreams, despite their different ambitions. Emad ponders that if they had a child together, he would have a US passport and would be able to travel anywhere. Soraya, on the other hand, imagines having a child and building on the ruins of al-Dawayima, raising her in 'pride and dignity' – qualities denied them in their own lives. On the second morning, an Israeli teacher (Juliano Mer) tells Soraya that he is showing his students around so that they can 'learn about their roots in these ancient ruins', how Zionist settlers 'turned this biblical land into life again'. Having followed the quest for recognition of a once-vibrant land where Palestinians lived, we're reminded that that such recognition remains a struggle, and that still today,

the teaching of history remains deeply distorted in the modern state of Israel.

The dream of love and life in Palestine remains elusive for our main characters, as with no legal papers and an expired visa both Soraya and Emad can only too easily find themselves the targets of the authorities. The journey comes full circle. As Soraya departs, an Israeli border guard asks where she is from. She replies: 'I'm from here, Palestine.' He then asks: 'How long have you been here?' She says: 'I've been here all my life. I was born here.' The guard is confused, as he sees only her US passport and cannot imagine an identity beyond the confines of a document. Indeed, he cannot imagine a living Palestine. *Salt of This Sea* is a part of a cinema that can.

Peter Gonda

Excerpt from a novel in progress

Drinking and Driving in Chechnya

Chapter Two

Leonid ran blindly all through the night, through the dark city streets. Occasionally a shell would explode ahead of him or to either side, altering his course. He tried to move as far away as possible from the violence but it was always there, behind every corner. He was not unlike a lab rat coursing through a labyrinth designed by creatures bigger-brained than himself, electric shocks being imminent at every bad turn.

He ran and ran, hoping to come upon some sensible Russian soldiers who could help him out of his predicament, maybe even help him get back to Moscow. The problem was that he'd become so turned around in the bombardment (and he had never been too clever on direction) that he had inadvertently put himself behind the Chechen zone.

This he had realized early in the morning only after throwing himself upon the pity of a fighter he had taken for Russian. This was not as foolish as it seemed: Russian and Chechen soldiers wore the same wintry fatigues. They had, after all, once served under the same banner. The one thing that might separate them in appearance was the *jihadi* bandana that many Chechens now tied around their heads and helmets. Of course, too, there was the small matter of languages. It was this difference that first tipped off Leonid to his mistake. When he noted the bandana, he lost all hope.

The Chechen, however, could not be bothered – he had different Russians on his mind. He had thrown Leonid off, in the direction of inner Chechnya, along with the rest of the downtrodden of his land. Never even noticed that Leonid was ethnic Russian and hence a possible spy.

Leonid continued in the direction in which he had been pushed, towards a forest in the distance; to the best of his ability, he tried to hold those bearings for the many days and weeks to come. He told himself he'd walk a straight line until he came out of Chechnya. But no one ever walks a straight line in a forest.

Leonid was now far out of Grozny the terrible, out in the countryside. Although the shelling was now fainter, the heavy fighting further behind him, he did not feel any more secure. He was a city boy, and felt right only with pavement beneath his feet. Of country life, the ways of woodsmen, pig farmers and potato growers, he knew nothing. In fact, he had often mocked them, as city folk tend to do. He and his state-schooled chums, having read Tolstoy, would secretly refer to the great writer as 'a rich fucking nutter' for working in the fields beside the peasants. Now here was Leonid, wandering through an endless wood.

That memory of walking through a forest with his grandfather came back to him. As he walked on, he dwelled on it, earnestly trying to remember what his grandfather had tried to impress upon him that day. What he had been trying to impart. Although he could still not touch upon the thing, it comforted him somewhat.

Morning. He had marched through the night yet again, adrenaline surging; he felt no fatigue. But he was slowing down a bit now, giving himself time to think. Where would he sleep tonight? He realized he was quite chilled. How to make a fire? He felt his stomach rumbling. What could he eat out here? This was the same variety of questions he found himself asking upon becoming cognizant of the fact that he was stranded in Grozny: questions of vital importance that too many people need never ask. Back in Grozny, he had felt as though his life had been reduced to zero, and that he had to learn to live differently. But this was not Grozny. These woods had effectively re-zeroed him.

It's a truly strange thing the way a person, a brain, a mind, will begin to observe and problem-solve when faced with desperation. Ask anyone who has survived some ghastliness what had saved them; when you hear their replies, you will undoubtedly and in amazement ask: 'How in bloody hell did you ever think of that!?' The answer is always the same: because they had to.

So it was with Leonid. Never having considered things arboreal for even a single moment in his life, he now remarked on the shape and angling of some of the taller conifers' branches towering above him. He took an interest in the smaller conifers, the lower branches of which actually swept the ground. It occurred to him that there must be a tent-like space between the trunk of the tree and these branches. He then squatted, bent some branches upwards and went on in. He was pleased to find that there was indeed space in which a man could lie down, and that on top of that, the ground inside was dry and still covered in grass rather than the snow that carpeted the rest of the land. He found, as well, that the densely latticed pine needles and branches significantly cut the wind. Quite proud of himself at having solved the shelter question for the coming night and, too, recognizing in it a convenient hiding place should any bad business arise, Leonid lay to rest.

His nap turned into a sort of hibernation; he did not stir for nearly a full day, and was awoken finally by his mild shivering. He left his shelter to think, rubbing his arms and pacing about for warmth. Although the frost blowing off the mountains could not reach him here, there was still the matter of the temperature. He needed a fire – but how to build one where he was? City boy that he was, he still had the sense that God gave a brick. Any fire built under a dry pine would surely turn into an inferno. Should he move out into an open space, then, or stay put? He pondered for the better part of an hour. And then came the answer.

He began by determining the wind direction, and began snapping off branches on the leeward side of his tree, which offered him no protection from the gusts. He broke them all off, all the way up to his own height. He then dug a small pit under the balded side of the tree, and in it threw all the dry pine branches he could find as well as bigger bits of wood that lay about.

Once finished, he surveyed his work and decided it was not quite complete. He searched out thick pieces of bark. These he strung together with the more

elastic twigs he found, and fashioned a sort of reverse funnel, open wide at one end and narrowing tightly at the other. He packed the inside of this construct with snow to dampen it, making it less combustible. Then he tied it to the branches and the trunk above the pit to a height of seven feet, the narrow end emerging through the tops of the upper branches. What he had made, in fact, was a chimney. It would ensure against rising heat generating any bonfires above.

Although his cigarettes had been taken off him on that first night in Grozny, the thieves had neglected to take Leonid's matches. He used one to start his first-ever fire. Briefly, as he watched the flame dance, he wondered how he had concocted all this, and if perhaps that this was the very thing his grandfather had taught him. Upon further reflection, he decided his grandfather had been too much like him – a city boy.

Grandpa would never have thought of this. No, this is my idea.

He basked in his corner. It was growing dark. What with all the work and thought he'd put into his new home, Leonid drifted off in minutes; and in sleep, he appeared almost – dare we say it – happy.

How is it that man's ingenuity, the reason that chops away at pure animal tendencies, the curiosity that promotes creative, inventive and beneficial thinking, is *always* put into action only of necessity? *Always*, only when a man is put into critical circumstances does the brain kick in – it is only when he must save himself that something pops out of his mind that advances humanity towards the greater good. But when in comfortable repose there is none of this brain activity in the very same man: no thought for others who might be in harm's way, *never* the crucial synthesizing idea that everything in the world is connected to everything else, the understanding that if one suffers, we all lose a share of our own spirit. *Never* this, unless we are the ones doing the suffering. *Never* the chimney, the shelter or the fire unless we have serious need of them. Unless Leonid had need of them. *Always* the blind eye to those in need to whom we feel no obligation.

Perhaps we should soften that a bit. Terms such as *always* and *never* are a bit excessive in their absolute qualities. Let us, then, forgo hyperbole and exchange them for a more just word, though not much happier a truth: the word is *usually*.

Leonid decided to stay for awhile, at least until his arm had completely healed. But there remained one problem unsolved. *Always one more thing*. It was food; he'd managed to ignore hunger for three days now, and was ravenous. He wondered how many more times he would have to face such questions. Shelter, clothing, food – the same shitty cycle he'd gone through back in Grozny. It was becoming a full-time job, and he felt it would soon break him. *When will all these fucking considerations stop!*

The answer, of course, was never. We all live this way, we just don't see it that way. Until something happens to turn our world on its head. There might well be other things, some may say even more important things, like friendship, compassion, hot sex, even love. But best to save all that spiritual hokey for when and if you survive the ordeal and come out on the other side. Get yourself nice and cozy in front of a television, and then you can worry about where your next blowjob is coming from and if one should throw a dinner party the

coming weekend.

So it was that on the night of his third day of deprivation, Leonid noticed that although snow covered the ground elsewhere, he had still green grass below him by his tree. He knew that all the other trees of this genus must also have similar offerings. After wondering about cows and goats and sheep and all the other animals that ate the stuff, he asked himself if it could really be so bad. Then, like an animal, he ate it. And when he was done mowing his own lawn, having none left but still not sated, he moved on to the next tree and chewed around that one's trunk.

(Unpublished, 2009)

Santiago Montobbio

El Portavoz de la familia

Como escribo para decirte que sé que has muerto, no pongo dirección ninguna, mas, como supongo que no me leerás, me ahorro las disculpas. Es extraño, mira: yo pensaba que no te morirías. Y ya sé que a veces decías que se te habían muerto las ventanas o (no recuerdo bien) que se te hicieron pequeñas y frías en los dedos y que por ello las tiraste a uno de tus cubos de basura; sí, recuerdo que a veces decías cosas así, y que parecían frases hechas con cristales que guardasen prisiones de silencio adentro, y ahora que lo recuerdo pienso que tendríamos que haberlo sospechado. Adivinar que si decías que la sombra era un otoño y tú sus heridas, era así la sombra, y que si te hervían niños muertos en los ojos, te hervían ahí, y que te hacían daño. Sí, supongo que tendríamos que haberlo adivinado. Aunque, claro, yo también he dicho cosas así, ya lo sabes. Aunque es verdad: hemos sido muy distintos. No, no es que nos hayamos llevado mal, sino que, y pese a ser hermanos, me temo que nunca nos hemos conocido. Yo he sabido de ti por otros. Supe del centro luminoso, bares y la noche, travesías hechas de alcohol, hechas de cuerpos. Yo con cruces entonces, con martirios. No me atrevo, no quiero pensar que tú has tenido más martirios, porque los has callado, pero alguna vez, no creas, sí que pienso que la vida podría haber ido de otro modo y haber sido así posible abrazar mi noche con tu noche, tras haberla sonsacado, y hacer agua de ojos y de manos.

Lo había pensado algunas veces: dormíamos en el mismo cuarto, y estábamos en otro mundo. No sé. Ya sabes por qué te escribo, las cosas falsas y hermosas que se dicen en el trance. Ahora, en ese engaño en el que tampoco tengo lágrimas, te veo también últimamente como un fantasma que ya nada decía y era cárceles que guardaban otras cárceles de derrotas y de fuegos. Creo que ya ni escribías, esa pasión extraña que te iluminaba la vida. Pero en soledad y silencio siempre, siempre sin hacer ruido también. Mas creo, sí, que sólo tejías líneas negras, tercamente y sin descanso. Si alguna vez venía a verte, ponías una frase. Recuerdo una: la única caza es la de ti mismo, pero hace tiempo que la has perdido. Luego sonreías, y en la sonrisa creo que estabas diciendo que no te hiciera mucho caso, que eso, como otra cosa, también era mentira. Alguna vez que venía papá ponías cosas de demonios, tetas y culos. Papá lo ha sentido. Eso que nunca olvidó que abandonarás con la juventud en medio o con la juventud a cuestas, y que lo dejaras todo. Tenías capacidad. Eso te ha perdido. Más que nadie, dice una de las niñas. Y se la agotasteis en tonterías. Claro que es la que te quiere mucho. Es la única que ha sabido qué hacer: llora desde hace dos días. No nos dimos cuenta, mira. Estábamos ocupados en ese momento y en el otro. Te escribo porque me lo han dicho, y ahora pienso que la sombra puede empezar ahora, cuando me dé realmente cuenta de que lo hago para decirte que sé que has muerto, y que no pongo en el sobre dirección ninguna.

Jason Mooreland

Distance Education: The Promise Gap

The digital future has been here for some time: cell phones, BlackBerrys, iPods, laptops, netbooks, the ‘information superhighway’ ... We can flip open a wireless personal communication device smaller than a pack of cigarettes and casually speak with someone on the other side of the planet. People once imagined the future as a technological heaven in which such marvels would be unequivocal blessings. They aren’t. They haven’t exactly delivered us unto a technological hell either, of course, but there’s often a gap between what their vendors promise and what they actually deliver.

Post-secondary online education – commonly referred to in the US as distance education (DE) – is a perfect example of this promise gap.

I’m an associate professor at a major American state university with more than twenty-five years of experience at university level. I have been teaching DE courses for a little over five years now, which makes me almost an old-timer in the rapidly developing field, and I am profoundly ambivalent about it. DE has real potential and fulfills a real need, but the results strike me as dubious.

DE is a major – perhaps *the* major – trend in post-secondary education in the US. Over 3.9 million students enrolled in online university courses during the fall semester of 2007. In that year (the latest for which I could find reliable statistics), online students represented 21.9 percent of all US university enrollment (3,938,111 out of a total of 17,975,830).¹ In other words, more than a fifth of all US university students are now taking online classes. As this number has more than doubled in five years, there is little doubt that the number has further increased since this count.

DE university students sit at their computers – in living rooms, bedrooms, back porches, cafés – and log onto their university website. Using a password, they then access their virtual classroom. Students can log on anytime that suits them, as often or as seldom as they feel they need to, and stay logged on for as long or as short a time as they wish. This flexibility is one of DE’s main selling points. DE allows students to study at home, on their own schedules.

DE can involve various forms of interaction (videoconferencing, recorded audio lectures, PowerPoint presentations, live chat rooms, live online discussions). One of the more exotic developments involves schools setting up virtual campuses on property purchased in the online digital three-dimensional world Second Life (www.secondlife.com), where virtual personae (avatars) used by participants can interact in a virtual classroom. The reality, though, is usually more prosaic, and the interactions that take place in online classrooms are typically restricted to what is known as asynchronous online discussions. That is, communication is serial –

equivalent to a series of emails sent back and forth – rather than synchronous, as it is in a face-to-face classroom where professor and students engage in ongoing, real-time, give-and-take discussions.

In practical terms, it works something like this: a student logs into class, say, on Monday morning. She goes through the announcements, lectures, and/or reading assignments posted by the professor for that week. She then reads the week's discussion topics and posts responses. On Wednesday evening, she logs into class again. By now the discussion topics have progressed, other students have posted responses and the professor has posted new questions guiding the discussion. Our student posts responses to the new developments, addressing her remarks either to the professor's prompts or to other students' postings, or both. There may also be group work, quizzes, exams, etc. And so it goes, each week, until the term ends.

There is considerable public debate about the results, and the value, of online instruction. For some, DE is nothing less than a revolution in education, a bold step into a better future that provides a more democratic style of education. For others, it is fraught with problems. Partly, the debate seems to be a genuine response to the newness of the technology that enables DE and to the distinctive nature of the online student population – many of whom attend university part-time; are older; have jobs and families and busy lives, with needs different from those of traditional, younger university students straight out of high school. The debate also seems partly to be just another example of the periodic clashes that occur between differing (and alternately fashionable and unfashionable) schools of academic thought.

The most striking aspect of this debate, though, isn't what is being discussed but rather what is generally *not* being discussed. The debate is, in a way, just smoke and mirrors. There are important, fundamental aspects of DE that hardly anybody mentions.

What's missing is any serious examination of the fundamental characteristics of DE technology and their results. 'The medium is the message', in Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase: technological media affect society not only through their content, but also through their fundamental characteristics. This is precisely the case with DE, and the results are severely problematic.

For starters, DE is an administrator's micromanagement control fantasy come true: the technology allows for complete control in ways that have previously been impossible. Every single bit of communication in an online class is recorded, and all classes archived and stored, in digital perpetuity. An administrator can keep track of every single word that every student or faculty member posts in every online classroom in any DE class that was ever taught at that institution. Moreover, an administrator can ghost into a 'live' online classroom, monitoring what the faculty member is doing without his or her presence being detected – a new wrinkle on the Big Brother scenario. The astonishing thing is that nobody is discussing it. It's a total non-issue.

Most administrators, of course, have far better things to do than spy on faculty, but the very fact that they are enabled to do so creates a new sort of atmosphere and new sorts of relationships between administrators and faculty.

I was assigned my first online course with very little warning. The head of my university's DE department told me that the university had set up a Faculty

Mentoring Program, and that she could assign an experienced faculty member to help me get through my first online course. I had completed a prerequisite five-week, online DE training course, but I gratefully accepted the chance to have an experienced faculty member help me out.

My mentor had access to my classroom; he was a sort of 'Little Brother' watching me. He monitored everything I did. In theory, he was there to answer any questions I had and to supply useful advice. As things turned out, he spent more time lecturing me than advising. I began to get the odd feeling that he was working to some sort of script that I knew nothing about.

Several weeks into the term, I received a Faculty Mentoring Program information booklet in the mail. Buried in it were these lines: 'At the end of the term, the Faculty Mentor will present to the faculty mentee an assessment of his/her progress during the term. A copy of this assessment will be placed in the faculty mentee's permanent file.' In other words, the job of the Faculty Mentor wasn't to help new teachers; it was to write a performance assessment for administrators. None of this had been so much as hinted.

As it was my first online course, I was concerned that my 'assessment' would be less than stellar. I needn't have worried. My mentor's official assessment was full of observations like 'the faculty member is a naturally gifted teacher' and 'he facilitated the classroom learning experience very professionally'. Such boilerplate phrases had no meaningful connection with what had actually occurred in my online classroom. Reading my final 'assessment' email (a copy of which would be placed in my permanent file), I began to realise that the sense that he was working to a script was essentially accurate. Every word was intended for the administration. If an administrator ghosted into my classroom, either during that term or after the class had been archived, every word my mentor had written would be what the administrator would want to read to feel reassured that the DE program was a complete success. Likewise, my final assessment.

Ordinary, useful interaction between faculty had been replaced by formalized institutionalese intended for the audience that took priority (because they held the power): the administrators. The focus on students and on the process of teaching had been replaced by a primary defensive focus on the administration.

Another problematic effect of DE technology involves standardization. Many US universities are in the process of adopting the 'business model' of education, and for-profit online educational institutions are, of course, straightforward for-profit businesses. When education is seen as a 'business', efficiency is paramount and quantification becomes crucial. Educational 'assessment outcomes' and 'learning objectives' become standardized and formularized, as do the courses themselves, so that the 'product' can be effectively (profitably) controlled and distributed. The technology underlying DE lends itself to this sort of standardization particularly well. As we have seen, it not only allows administrators to record every aspect of a course, but to maintain complete control over it and to closely monitor any deviation by the faculty member from preset standards.

If this standardization process continues (and there's every indication that it will), the end result will no doubt be more efficient 'business' practice; but it will end up creating generic courses, each section of which will be 'taught' in exactly the same way as every other section, regardless of who is doing the teaching. Faculty

members will become 'facilitators' of a formularized course to which they have contributed nothing, to which they have no personal commitment and that they need minimal expertise to 'teach'.

In a traditional classroom, part of the experience has always included individual input by professors. It may have had some drawbacks, but it guaranteed that teachers had significant academic freedom in the way they taught their courses; significant input not only into their own courses but also into the general curriculum; and that students had a 'personalized' educational experience in that they had to learn to adapt to different teaching styles and personalities, which added an extra human dimension to the learning process.

As DE courses become more standardized, faculty will have less and less academic freedom or opportunity for meaningful input. Online students end up with a generic set of courses all conditioned by quantifiable 'assessment outcomes' that, under the 'business model', constitute the standards by which 'educational excellence' is to be judged. The technology can lead to a degree of standardization that reduces classroom scope and dehumanizes the education process, making it harder for both professors and students to feel a sense of personal commitment.

Another problematic effect of DE technology involves the teaching/learning process. DE makes it difficult for teachers to monitor how effectively students have learned course material, and forces students to work in isolation.

In a traditional university classroom, professors have the advantage of face-to-face interaction. They can determine from facial expressions, body language, etc if students are understanding the information or not.

Getting new information across to students consists, in part, of clear explanation, which may, in some ways, be easier in the give-and-take of a traditional classroom where students can ask questions and receive immediate responses; but professors can also adapt to DE technology and work out alternative ways of clearly explaining course material to online students.

Getting new material across isn't just a matter of clear explanation, though. It also requires that the professor monitor the students' responses to make sure that they are not misrepresenting the information to themselves. We all instinctively try to fit new information into what we already know, and sometimes distort it in order to make it fit. Inevitably, there are a number of students in any class who have difficulty 'getting' certain aspects of the course material because that material simply doesn't fit in with what they already know/believe about the world. One of the perennial challenges for any university professor is to monitor responses to ensure that students grasp and process new material effectively – and to then proceed in an appropriate way to make sure students 'get' it.

Not only does the asynchronous online DE environment make it harder for students to 'get' material – in my experience, the number of students who don't 'get' the material is significantly higher in DE classes than in traditional classes – it also makes this monitoring process far more difficult than in a traditional classroom. The solution isn't simply to innovate online technology. The problem is a *consequence* of the technology: sitting by yourself at a computer simply is not equivalent to the sort of complex live human interaction that helps catalyze changes in people's understanding of the world.

One of the much-touted benefits of DE is its flexibility: students can log onto

class in their own time and space. The result, however, is that DE students spend most of their online time alone, physically isolated from their peers. University students learn from the course material they study, of course, but also from what is often called 'the collegiate experience'. Anyone who attended a traditional university would probably agree that they learned as much through socializing with other students, talking informally with professors, attending university events, etc as from the formal classroom experience. Not only is this osmotic process crucial to learning, it also gives students a chance to forge relationships that will, in some cases, last a lifetime. Such networking connections are especially important in the post-graduation work world.

It can be argued that social networking sites such as Facebook have made traditional face-to-face networking irrelevant. To some extent that may be true, at least with ordinary socializing. But in terms of practical value in the post-university job market, a personal face-to-face relationship still holds more weight than a virtual one. (Who would an HR manager rather hire – someone who can be vouched for through personal contact or a virtual contact?)

There are also real-world drivers, such as the economics of DE, that get little or no mention in the public debate. After the initial outlay for the required hardware and software (which can be considerable), the economic benefits of DE are clear. Absent physical classrooms, overhead is reduced. More significantly, perhaps, as online students can be located anywhere on the planet, the potential catchment basin for students is hugely increased – which means potential increases in numbers of students enrolled, classes offered and, of course, income.

As DE courses are becoming more and more standardized, requiring less and less academic expertise to teach, universities are beginning to use primarily part-time adjunct junior faculty to teach them. In the US, not only do adjunct faculty get paid significantly less than full-time faculty, they also receive no health insurance, pensions, etc – all of which adds up to a considerable savings for the institutions employing them.

A friend of mine who ran the graduate program of a New England university once mentioned to me that his university offered an online course in African American History and had two applicants to teach it. One was a tenured professor with a PhD in history; the other was a brand new MA graduate whose thesis had been on traditional African American cookery. The course was assigned to the new graduate. More and more, the economics of DE (along with technology-facilitated standardization) will dictate this sort of decision.

In the US, DE has become serious business. A number of large, for-profit educational institutions have emerged that offer only online courses, employ only part-time adjunct faculty and have no central campus. These institutions sell themselves in exactly the same way banks do: with extravagant offers of 'service' and 'customer satisfaction', with no mention of their underlying profit motive. The rise of such institutions has been facilitated by the elimination of what was termed the '50 percent rule'.

Congress passed the 50 percent rule in 1992 to restrict the growth of 'diploma mills' (DE institutions – essentially correspondence schools in those days – that provided worthless degrees). The rule stipulated that post-secondary educational institutions enrolling more than 50 percent of their students in DE courses would

be barred from receiving student-aid financing from the federal government. This all changed in 2006, when Congress rescinded the rule. This issue is discussed in a *New York Times* article⁷ worth quoting here at some length:

It took just a few paragraphs in a budget bill for Congress to open a new frontier in education: Colleges will no longer be required to deliver at least half their courses on a campus instead of online to qualify for federal student aid. That change is expected to be of enormous value to the commercial education industry. Although both for-profit colleges and traditional ones have expanded their Internet and online offerings in recent years, only a few dozen universities are fully Internet-based, and most of them are for-profit ones ...

The Bush administration supported lifting the restriction on online education as a way to reach nontraditional students. Nonprofit universities and colleges opposed such a broad change, with some academics saying there was no proof that online education was effective. But for-profit colleges sought the rollback avidly.

'The power of the for-profits has grown tremendously,' said Representative Michael N. Castle, Republican of Delaware, a member of the House Education and Workforce Committee who has expressed concerns about continuing reports of fraud. 'They have a full-blown lobbying effort and give lots of money to campaigns. In 10 years, the power of this interest group has spiked as much as any you'll find.'

Some academics say the nation is rushing to expand online higher education because it is profitable, without serious studies of effectiveness ...

'This is a growth industry and you get rich not by being skeptical, but by being enthusiastic,' said Henry M. Levin, director of Columbia University's Center for the Study of Privatization in Education.

The gravitational pull of so much potential profit not only tends to produce the familiar sorts of lobbying and insider deals that mark so many businesses, but also tends to skew the public debate. The annual assessment of DE published by Sloan-C (www.sloan-c.org), which styles itself 'A Consortium of Institutions and Organizations Committed to Quality Online Education'. Its most recent annual report is titled 'Staying the Course: Online Education in the United States, 2008'. The connotations of that title – the commitment to the success of DE that it implies, the echo of ex-President Bush's famous use of that phrase – have the distinct odor of a public relations campaign.

There is also the 'No Significant Difference Phenomenon' website (www.nosignificantdifference.org), which sets out to document 'research reports, summaries and papers that [show] no significant differences (NSD) in student outcomes between alternate modes of education delivery'.

A quick Internet search produces many articles in praise of DE, with titles like 'The Necessity of Online University Programs', 'Myths of Online Education' and 'Distance Education: How to Overcome the Common Fears'. There are a few critical articles scattered about, mostly related to faculty workloads etc, but on the whole, it's remarkably difficult to find a bad word said about DE. It all begins to feel a bit uncomfortably ... *collusional*.

DE has a further, more profound potential effect – upon the education system itself. In the US, the sober reality is that to give their children a genuinely decent high school education, parents must either send them to a private school or live in an area affluent enough to have a sufficient tax base to subsidize local public schools. With few exceptions, the way to get a decent secondary education in the US is to have money.

What happens to the children of families without money? Those who graduate from public high schools (and nearly a third of US public high school students don't) often end up with a second-rate education. The ones with ambition try to go on to university – often after a number of years in a job – but many don't ordinarily stand much chance of being accepted to a decent university.

The answer for many of these students is DE: gaining acceptance as a part-time student to a DE course is much easier than getting admitted as a full-time student to a traditional university.

Traditional full-time university students now frequently supplement their face-to-face courses with DE classes, and there are hybrid courses that include both classroom and online components; but it is under-qualified, non-traditional students who make up the prime growth sector of the DE 'market'. For-profit online institutions compete for a 'market share' of this group. The problem is that profit often trumps other considerations – a couple of years ago, one major for-profit online university was fined a hefty sum for accepting large numbers of students without proper academic prerequisites (like high school graduation).

These days, a university education is absolutely required for a decent job. The entry-level degree in the US is what is known as an Associate's degree. (In the US, a Bachelor's degree requires the equivalent of four years' full-time study; an Associate's degree requires half that.) The pressure is on: millions of academically under-qualified Americans are hungering for a university degree, many for the entry-level Associate's, and they are prepared to pay for it.

DE is what they are buying, and the results can be speculated, uneasily. High school students from affluent backgrounds will continue to attend traditional universities, adequately prepared to do respectable university work. They will receive a fully rounded education from tenured faculty with long years of experience, and enjoy the benefits of the full collegiate experience, establishing useful personal networks that will serve them well in their careers.

Online students, on the other hand, will increasingly tend to come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds that mostly ensure they have substandard high school education, and they will thus be inadequately prepared for university study. They will attend for-profit institutions, take formularized generic courses, receive a spotty, part-time education, mostly from adjunct faculty with limited experience. They will have no collegiate experience and will be limited in the number of useful networking contacts they can make. In other words, DE will likely end up creating a second-tier, second-rate post-secondary education system for the economically disadvantaged.

This may all sound overly dramatic, and my observations about the future of the education system are, of course, speculative. But the pieces of the puzzle are there, and they fit together all too easily to form this picture. There is nothing intrinsically or inevitably second-rate about DE, but because of the technological

and economic realities driving the situation, the outcome above seems likely. There are doubtless many teachers, administrators and entrepreneurs struggling to make DE the very best vehicle for post-secondary education it can be, but I believe these people are struggling against the general current, which will ultimately see disadvantaged part-time students earning university degrees without ever having been inside a university classroom.

- 1 I. Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman, 'Staying the Course: Online Education in the United States, 2008' (Needham, MA: Sloan Consortium, 2008); see www.sloan-c.org/publications/survey/pdf/staying_the_course.pdf.
- 2 Sam Dillon, *New York Times*, 'Online Colleges Receive a Boost From Congress', March 1, 2006; see www.nytimes.com/2006/03/01/national/01educ.html.

Samira Negrouche

Inspiration sur tierce

Pour Angélique Ionatos

Un

Déroulé de vagues folles
 corps déplumés détournés
 Corrida insoutenable de la voix
 sanguine
 vas et vas et viens
 dans le rythme oscillant
 du cou aquatique
 onde du pouls sismique.

Vogue silhouette fantôme
 sur les pas du souvenir
 qui se dérobe et s'évanouit

Appel d'un fil ondulé
 plus tu t'approches
 plus il t'échappe dans le courant
 d'un songe obsédant et répétitif
 tu avances tes pas
 volatiles et silencieux
 sur la voie arythmique
 impuissants et essoufflés
 du fil qui passe
 et n'attends pas

Dans le creux d'un angle mort
 l'instant d'une double-croche
 mal assurée
 ventres jumelés à marée basse
 souffles retenus
 en attente

Déroulé
 d'étoiles marines

noces de déesses d'O
 Olympe d'un velouté sonore
 ouvert à ces doigts
 racines
 qui empoignent le ciel

Te couvre
 et t'étire
 sur une note ailée.

Deux

Ne te perdre
 dans le désert des flots

Femmes affolées
 d'un rivage sourd
 la mer est un refrain
 Capricieux
 ces enfants
 qui attendent les secondes
 comme des heures

Messager de Poséidon
 qui planes sur les sables
 mouvants de ta jungle infinie
 délie cet horizon de mirages
 tes monts endiablés
 et ton miel envoûtant
 ouvre ce paradis de mystères
 et porte l'appel éperdu
 et désireux
 tends ta vague coléreuse
 sur le fil des attentes
 la rive est orpheline

La voix loin de sa muse
 reste muette
 Tu es une barque qui s'éloigne
 aujourd'hui ou demain
 tu ouvres tes ailes et m'essuies
 dans un sourire innocent
 qui se retire sans bruit
 et je n'attends que le retour
 d'un écho sans formes
 qui dessine les ratures
 de l'histoire qui pèse
 et ne se mesure pas

Vogue marin
 de mes nuits centenaires
 ton amante a les seins ouverts
 et te rends à d'autres noyades

Ne te prendre
 désir retenu d'une image
 qui se brise
 sur terre ferme

Trois

Etreinte de la main
 tremblante et tectonique
 défilé d'ondes darwiches
 horizon apprivoisé
 de ces rêves inavoués

Petite femme
 derrière les klaxons affolés
 d'une journée de championnat
 blanche dans la colline algéroise
 désertée et peureuse
 vide et folie des hommes
 dans le théâtre assiégé.

Magie d'une syllabe
 à haut voltage
 langue connue et reconnue
 de la jugulaire qui bombe
 se dessine
 et envahit l'espace épidermique

Etreinte centenaire
 que dire bimillénaire
 d'une orange déracinée

Hommes qui criez victoire
 qui soufflez dans la hanche
 d'un ballon rouge et noir
 ceci est un cercle dépouillé
 de ses îlots fraternels

Chante envoûtante
 une sœur qui perle sa terre
 amnésique

Murmure qui m'habite
 sur la corde poussiéreuse
 me voilà offerte à des
 migrants
 inconnus et labiles

La percussion est divine
 soumission
 qui ne sait le départ du retour.

Contributors

Dominique Abel est danseuse, actrice de théâtre, mannequin de mode, et aussi actrice, auteur et réalisatrice de long-métrages de fiction. Elle publie en 1997 son premier livre, *Cameleone* (France: Ed. Robert Laffont; Espagne: Ed. Planeta), chroniques intérieures et acerbes de la vie de mannequin. Elle a maintenant terminé la rédaction de son second livre, chroniques, anecdotes, pensées, réunis sous le titre (provisoire) de *Prose bitume*. Elle est en train de terminer la rédaction de son premier roman *Yo sólo quiero caminar*. Son site de web est www.dominiqueabel.com.

Roy Ashwell writes in Africa, London and Wales. His poems have appeared in many magazines and collections and are about his fellow creatures and about beginnings and endings, including his own. He has published three collections of his own, some copies of which are still available. He can be reached at royann857@btinternet.com.

Richard Berengarten (connu aussi sous le nom de Richard Burns) a habité dans plusieurs pays d'Europe ainsi qu'aux États-Unis. Il a reçu de nombreux prix au Royaume-Uni pour ses poèmes, qui sont issus de traditions anglaises, européennes, slaves, juives, méditerranéennes, chinoises, japonaises et américaines, et ont été traduits en trente langues. Les cinq premiers volumes de la série *Selected Writings* (Salt, Cambridge) sont sortis en 2008. Il travaille maintenant sur deux ouvrages, *Imagens: Towards a Universal Poetics et Manual*, une série de courts poèmes sur les mains. Le poème *Volta* est issu de la série 'Black Light' dans *For The Living* (Salt, 2008.) Il est dédié à George Seferis. Ce poème sera publié en plusieurs langues dans *l'International Literary Quarterly* No. 9 (www.interlitq.org). Il habite à Cambridge en Angleterre où il enseigne à l'université. Son site de web est www.richardburns.eu.

Eric Berkowitz is a lawyer, journalist and historian living in Paris. He has written for several publications including *The Los Angeles Times*, and for The Associated Press.

Encarna Cabello est née en 1956 à Badajoz, Espagne. Elle est l'auteur de nouvelles et de romans qui, pour la plupart, ont comme sujet l'émigration et pour toile de fond le Nord de l'Afrique. Son roman *Alizmur* vient d'être traduit en français par l'écrivain marocain Dris Bouissef Rekab, et sera publié prochainement au Maroc par Saad Warzizi Éditions. Parmi d'autres, elle a édité et traduit en espagnol l'anthologie de nouvelles *Des Écrivaines Arabes et Derrière la porte de la cour (La vie quotidienne des femmes Rifaines)* de Ursula Hart.

Robert Davreu est né en 1944 à Castres dans le Tarn. Il a étudié la philosophie avant de enseigner pendant près de vingt ans dans des classes terminales de lycée, puis de passer, en 1990, à l'enseignement de la littérature comparée à l'Université Paris 8. Poète, il a publié à ce jour huit recueils chez Gallimard, Seghers, A.M. Métailié, Belin, et José Corti. Auteur de nombreux articles et essais, il est également traducteur, de l'anglais principalement mais aussi du grec. On lui doit notamment à ce titre des traductions d'Hannah Arendt, A. J. Ayer, Harold Bloom, E. E. Cummings, Thomas Hardy, Henry James, John Keats, Philip Larkin, Percy Bysshe Shelley et Graham Swift, ainsi que de *l'Érotokritos* de V. Kornaros. Il est membre du comité de rédaction de la revue *Po&sie*.

Inua Ellams is a Nigerian-born word and graphic artist, performer and curator currently living in London. He published his first collection of poetry, *Thirteen Fairy Negro Tales* (Markmouth, 2005), at the age of nineteen, and took part in International PEN's first *Free the Word!* festival in April 2008. His first full-length show, a humorous narrative about the 'shhhtupidness' of his youthful misadventures in transit from Nigeria to Dublin, *The 14th Tale*, was performed at the Arcola Theatre in London in March 2008. A selection of his works can be viewed at www.phaze05.com.

Peter Gonda is a Montreal-based photographer and screenwriter who travels widely. His despatches from abroad were serialised as a column, 'Meetings with Ridiculous Men', in a Montreal weekly newspaper. He is currently involved in documentary film production and is finishing his first novel, *Drinking and Driving in Chechnya*.

Élise Gruau est née en 1978 et vit et travaille entre Paris et l'Italie. Elle est traductrice de l'italien au français. Elle a traduit le roman de Amara Lakhous, *Choc des civilisations* pour un ascenseur Piazza Vittorio (Éd. Actes Sud, 2007 ; Éd. Barzakh, 2008), pour lequel elle s'est vu décerner le Prix des Libraires 2008 lors du Salon International du Livre d'Alger. Elle est éditrice de beaux-livres et de littérature française et étrangère, et créatrice des Éditions Nihil Obstat, Paris.

Kamal immigrated to Canada in 1998 from Iran. He began taking photographs depicting life under the Khomeini regime. Under his mentor Chehrenegar, a renowned Iranian photographer, he learned both the technical and human elements of photography. In 2008, he was selected for participation in a Magnum Photos master class run by Canadian photographer Larry Towell. Kamal's photographs have been published in numerous books, magazines and newspapers in Canada and elsewhere, and have been exhibited in Iran, Canada, France, Poland and Turkey. His photographs are in public and private collections internationally. He has lived in Montreal since 2003, and is currently working on a long-term project about multiculturalism in Québec. He is the co-founder of the photo agency Photofade (www.photofade.com).

Jeff McMahon is a journalist based in Chicago. He writes commentaries, reports on the environment, teaches at the University of Chicago and edits *Contrary* magazine.

Santiago Montobbio nació en 1966, en Barcelona. Es Licenciado en Derecho y en Filología Hispánica por la Universidad de Barcelona y profesor de ESADE y de la UNED. Publicó por primera vez como poeta en la *Revista de Occidente*. Su libro *Hospital de Inocentes* (1989) mereció el reconocimiento de ilustres autores: Onetti, Sabato, Delibes, Cela, Martín Gaité, Valente. Ha publicado también *Ética confirmada* (1990), *Tierras* (1996), *Los versos del fantasma* (2003) y *El anarquista de las bengalas* (2005), finalista del Premio Quijote 2006, que concedía la Asociación Colegial de Escritores de España al mejor libro publicado en el año mediante votación de sus socios. Ha publicado igualmente un libro de arte junto al pintor Lluís Ribas, *Los colores del blanco* (2009). Se ha publicado una antología de su poesía en Francia (*Le théologien dissident*, Éd. Atelier La Feugraie, Paris, 2008).

Jason Mooreland has taught literature, composition and communications for a major state university in the US for more than twenty-five years. He has been teaching distance education (DE) for over five years, and has become increasingly ambivalent about the entire DE enterprise.

Samira Negrouche est poète et écrivain d'expression française. Elle vit à Alger. Médecin de formation, elle est également très engagée au sein d'associations culturelles et littéraires. Elle est l'auteure de plusieurs recueils de poésie dont : *À l'ombre de Grenade* (2003) ; *Iridienne* (2005) et *Cabinet Secret*, livre d'artiste avec Enan Burgos (2007). Elle est traductrice de poésie arabe et a réalisé divers essais de travaux interdisciplinaires avec le théâtre, la vidéo, la photo et les arts plastiques. Son prochain livre, *Le dernier diabol*, sera publié courant 2009 par les Editions Chèvrefeuille Étoilé.

James Neil is a film curator and programmer whose work has included curating the 'Women's Cinema from Tangiers to Tehran' festival in London and Cambridge, the Africa programme of 'All Power to the Imagination: 1968 and Its Legacies' and programmes featuring Egyptian and Iranian films. He is currently co-editing the forthcoming publication *Dreaming Middle Eastern Cinema*.

Marcos Neroy (seudónimo literario de Vicente M. López Abad) nacido en 1983. Escribe poesía y cuentos cortos desde hace más de ocho años. Publicó la mayor parte de sus poemas como colaborador de la revista digital online *Magazine Siglo XXI* (2006–07) y más recientemente en *Revista Turia* (nº 84). La editorial canaria *Baile del Sol* prevé publicar en junio de 2011 su libro de poesía *Último Círculo*. Estudió periodismo en la Universidad UCH-CEU (España) y prosiguió sus estudios en el máster de Literatura Comparada de la Universidad de Edimburgo. En septiembre de 2009 comenzará un Doctorado en Literatura Hispánica (con una especialización en literatura del Cono Sur y poesía española contemporánea) en EEUU como becario de la Comisión Fulbright de España.

Rebecca O'Connor was awarded the Geoffrey Dearmer Prize for 'Best New Poet' by *Poetry Review* in 2004. Her collection *Poems* was published by the Wordsworth Trust, where she was writer-in-residence in 2005–06. She lives in rural Ireland with her husband and son.

Kachi A. Ozumba is a writer based in Newcastle, England, where he is pursuing a research degree in literature and creative writing while working on his first novel. He was a winner of the Art Council of England's Decibel Penguin Short Story Prize in 2006, and his work has appeared in several anthologies and journals. His stories, including 'THE POLICE IS YOUR FRIEND', have also been broadcast on BBC Radio 4. He holds an MA (Distinction) in Creative Writing from the University of Leeds.

Dris Bouisset Rekab est né en 1947 à Tetouan, Maroc. Il est l'auteur de l'autobiographie *À l'ombre de Lalla Chafia*, publiée en France par l'Harmattan (traduite en espagnol par Encarna Cabello), où il raconte ses longues années en prison au Maroc comme détenu politique à l'époque de Hassan II. Il a aussi publié *La tyrannie ordinaire (Lettres de prison)*, et dernièrement le roman *Le fils du souk*, aux Éditions Velours, à Paris.

Natalia Smirnova studied law as well as English language and literature in Moscow and St Petersburg. In 2006, after a stint as a foreign rights manager for a Russian publishing house, she co-founded the St Petersburg-based literary agency Goumen & Smirnova, which represents Russian authors both in Russia and worldwide. She translated the novel *Hairstyles of the Damned* (2004) by the American writer Joe Meno into Russian, and once broke her arm snowboarding.

Jack Waveney is a British writer who lives and travels in South America. His story 'Head Down in the Street' was translated into Spanish for the 'Found in Translation' section of *PEN International's* Autumn/Winter 2008 issue, 'Context: Latin America and the Caribbean'. 'Flying' is an extract from 'Manuelita', a much longer story based on his trip through Colombia, Ecuador and Peru in 2001–02.

John Weston served as a British diplomat for thirty-six years in China, the US and continental Europe. He was knighted in 1992 and retired in 1998 as the UK's ambassador to the United Nations. His first poetry collection, *Chasing the Hoopoe*, was published in 2004, and his poems have appeared widely in magazines and journals. (These include his translations of three short poems by Shi Tao, in *Poetry Review*.) From 2004–08 he chaired the board of The Poetry School, in London.

Richard Wirick is the author of the collection *One Hundred Siberian Postcards* (Telegram, 2007) and a short story collection, *Kicking In*. A staff book critic at the blog *Bookslut*, he writes for a wide variety of periodicals in the US and UK.

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