

The Hoplite Journals

XXX-LIX

Also by Martin Anderson:

The Kneeling Room

The Ash Circle

Heard Lanes

Dried Flowers

Swamp Fever

The Stillness of Gardens

Black Confetti

The Hoplite Journals I–XXIX

Belonging

MARTIN ANDERSON

The Hoplite Journals

XXX-LIX

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XXX-LIX

XXX

There is thunder over the plain that you are leaving. Or there is lightning, but no thunder. Either way, the rain does not come. The molave and the red gum trees sway in a breeze that might or might not betoken a storm. Clouds of exhaust fumes spill over the nearby highways and drift up to compose a yellowing, contused sky. Dust rises in the heat off beaten-earth tracks. They, too, wait amid the glare of a mid-day sun, as if for something to happen. Not to defy some point of balance is to disturb that equilibrium upon which all life rests. Disturbed, life is, though, never restored exactly to what it was. Clouds race across the far off ring of mountains. Perhaps you will return. Perhaps you will not. The smell of lunch, bitter-gourd and fat, is rising from the kitchen beneath you. Someone in the courtyard, inebriated, is bidding the caretaker goodnight.

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O dear, where in the world can one these days park one's money? Pity the poor police officer who has amassed a small fortune after years of hard work and who is having difficulty investing it in some laundromat abroad. Numbered or alias accounts in the country are very risky these days. And even the Hordellos can only continue to enjoy their wealth at the risk of great humiliation—if that still matters to the woman enamoured with black holes. Haven't you heard how frequent her headaches are these days? So where can poor officers splurge some extra cash? Harassed they tried to burn their money in those expensive nightclubs in Brazon City until last week when remnants of the Turakong Labeleng gang tore through it going from cubicle to cubicle (O sorry, 'private room' is what they are called) holding up customers. Yes, including some officers. Our advice is: stay away from clubs and any place where you could burn money. These are difficult times and the farmers and fishermen and millions of slum dwellers are watching how the elite mock them by flaunting their wealth. Laundering money is the toughest challenge these days. Stop looking for places to park

your money. Maybe you might even consider returning it or finding ways to return it through civic duty. What's a community day care centre worth, or a tiny centre for the elderly? Or a donation to the city library? Try it, you'll find it's better to give than receive. Finally, stop looking for big bucks because they spell trouble. Rich people always have a problem with money; when they die their relatives often scramble to keep the death under wraps for as long as possible, in order to 'fix' the bank accounts, certificates, titles and other assets or to scoop out the jewels from the deposit box. When they're still alive it's also a problem; explaining the provenance of the money is the hardest part. Ask Repella. Her eldest daughter Arleta heartily agreed when journalists attending last Saturday's Coconut Planters Bank's new headquarters opening said, 'People with money are always miserable, far more miserable than ordinary people like us.' Arleta waved her hand: 'O my God yes, you're so right. Looking after one's money is such a headache.' Amen.

[*The South Inferiganga Coast Times* editorial: May 11th 2003]

Out of the hot night a voice streamed into your ear. The invective of a thousand nights. And then broke off, just as abruptly, with a drunken curse. You did not know whether he was with her, or not; except that you weren't. Imperiled by your broken leg you decided, though, to stay in the house where you were, rather, than as advised, put up elsewhere. *Love for sale*. A carload of goons in the parking lot, windows open, feet poking out, smoking. An offer declined. Peremptory disappearance into the dark; where the lies accumulated, the phantom abortions, and the 'emergencies.' *Fresh, only slightly soiled*. O into that pitch black night you went. Why, O why, a newspaper held up before her face, a dearth of conversation, could you not see? An autopsy, so long drawn out. On the withered tree you hung your crutch. *Who's prepared to pay the price?* What dog scratched those initials in the bark to retrieve the bone at another date? A scabrous totem. A defiled bed—exorcising the stain of that need. You fled, with nothing but your naivete about you.

Somewhere beneath the handepara and buri trees, in the orchard that ran down to the wide silt coloured river, her grandmother, the exact location unknown by anyone but herself, had dug a hole one evening in the dark soil and placed in it, a few months after her birth, the remains of a part of her grand-daughter's placenta. Listening to her grand-daughter recount the tale, she who had wandered across many parts of the world and who had been born in a country far from the one in which that orchard grew but for whom that country had become the focus of her identity, listening to her his mind went back to the house where he himself had been born one late January morning, and, despite the fact that he had spent almost his entire adult life wandering outside that country, being temperamentally unattuned to it, to the details of that room in which he had continued to sleep until he was five. Now, approaching the final quarter of his life and having become, he decided, incapable of settling anywhere for any considerable length of time, he found that her story had a particular resonance for him. The road and the house of his birth, he remembered. But who, he wondered, had been present in that room on that particular winter morning to deliver him and had, afterwards, walked, anonymous midwife in a grey skirt and jacket, out of the gate with that umbilicus, only to discard it, for all he knew, to the four corners of the wind. Recollecting the account of the scattered remnants of Osiris he entertained, for one moment, the thought that another Anubis might be found to recombine for him those parts of himself that he supposed must have, at one time, constituted an entity rather than what, now, he felt he was—a fragile aggregation of continually dispersed fragments. What buried root could take hold of him now, he wondered? What soil, except an abstract landscape un nourished by his being, could flower with a fragrance for him that he would recognise as his own? No doubt I shall, he concluded, knowing of no particular place into whose rich earth my umbilicus has been placed, have to wait like Osiris until I enter the land of the dead, for such a unification.

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To someone coming from a land of vast prairies and plains, or even from a land of more modest proportions, the gleaming rails stretching, seemingly endlessly, into the distance summon up not a narrowing but widening of a perspective whose bridges and viaducts span an immensity of space within them. Into this vista the lonely sound of a locomotive whistle fades and, with it, a caboose of dreams, growing smaller and smaller as they stand rooted to the spot from which it departs. So it comes as a shock to the new arrival when they step up to the tracks here to take in the anticipated long vista of the lines and they behold, between those lines, nothing but a thick sprouting of grass and weeds, in the midst of which are, sitting at tables, people. Entire families, the plywood walls of their shacks tilting just inches away from where the infrequent locomotives pass, are, as it were, at picnic. Animals, children and adults, compressed into and milling within that long avenue of obstructed air and light. To them it is home. To the unacquainted observer it is more like the desecration of space. There, amidst the clutter and the debacle of human habitation, distance and motion end. And, with them, because such qualities are at the very heart of such a visitor's culture, hope. Perhaps, however, those in the middle of the tracks have learned to latch their dreams to something other than that lonely caboose which diminishes into the distance across the unpopulated prairies of the mind of such a visitor. Perhaps, having nowhere else to latch them to, they have, instead, attached them to each other.

Those ashes we scattered over the bay in sunlight have not come back. No matter how much the wind veers round, and the light is a ripple of warm water saying the name. The taste of a grainy deposit has entered the mouth. 'Goodbye' we say. And 'Farewell', in this culture of crying in which we are brought up. Tonight, as we walk back, rounding the corner, there, ghostly in the moonlight, will be the white plaster pillars of a place we designate 'home'. Out on the verandah, within the dark, someone, without a face or an outline, will silently be smoking as if they had been there all the time, unnoticed, and expected us, all along, to return.

XXXI

Ageing, he had wandered off, much to the dismay of his eldest daughter with whom he had for numerous years lived, and made his way into the upland villages of the province where he had been found one morning by some villagers, lying by the side of the road in a ditch where he had fallen after stumbling during the night. Unable, because of the amnesia with which he was afflicted, to tell them his name and where he came from, they searched his pockets and were able to find, written down on a piece of paper designed for just such an emergency, an address and the name of a person to contact. He had, it seems, in spite of the obfuscating clouds of that condition, moved like a shade, unaided, but inevitably, across that wide lethaeon gulf between the present and the past in which he lived. Moved slowly, tentatively and circuitously. But moved, and towards a *where* that appeared to have, by some means unknown to anyone, escaped that erasure that had affected almost everything else in his life. He must have walked back, through those narrow dust filled roads that climbed the heights of a changing vegetation, into a shadow land where his senses had laid down a "road" for him dissolving the juncture between subject and object and which, mile by mile, grew more familiar to him until the solid stone houses and the cobbled streets of his birth, laid out in a regular pattern, appeared. They affirmed for him, perhaps, less a place than, as in a composition of sounds, a particular arrangement: all the landscape between where he had set out from and where he eventually stopped, unfolding before him in a subliminally registered terrain. Vibrations of line, shape, colour and smell reactivating leitmotifs and traces his conscious mind had no explicit 'memory' of.

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Setting off we depart, however temporarily, from a domain of the familiar, leaving behind a house and family, a friend or lover, or a rented room only where a valued painting hangs on the wall and where our belongings wait to greet us as we walk back through the door. We leave

such things and enter what feels at once like a form of exile. Some feel this more sharply than others, almost from the moment of their earliest memories; some never feel it at all, or so slightly it hardly matters. On the road in the dark of night, or in the bright light of mid-day, it is unassuageable, for it speaks our name with an intensity which leaves us in no doubt that that is not our name at all, and that, as much as we protest, we know from henceforth we will be travelling without it. Just as there will be no room or family or loved one to go back to, so we will go on looking and waiting for that day when, in the grey drizzle of an anonymous street, a stranger will come up to us and will, uttering a name we have not heard before but which we will know intuitively is our own, disown us. Looking into that face we will, with a sudden and overwhelming astonishment, realise that it is the same face that looks back at us each morning in the bathroom mirror, and that that grief in which all our departures originate, and which underscores them, begins, as we had begun to suspect, not with our self, but with another we will never 'know.'

Everything, in a movement of indefinite expansion, is involved in a return to its origin. *Me and my companions have a disease of the heart . . .* And they listened to it, day and night, through the almost vertical ascents of freezing mountain ranges and the plunges into malarial lowlands, and did not hear it, raiding all the temples they could enter, fleeing over the causeways . . . *that only gold can cure.* Driving later through those cracked, flooded underpasses at night, unable to find a boy at an affordable price, your face in the rear view mirror louvered with the fleeting shadows of the city, its huge billboards proclaiming JESUS LOVES YOU, beside military camps, where they slowly torture internees, you sigh, deeply: *At the end of the day, one doesn't really need anyone . . .* In this contaminated country where all the fruits refuse to ripen, and where the distances, between what one desires and what one receives, accumulate with a sly, deceiving momentum, the state of vagrancy, all points of origin abandoned, has been elevated to a principle. Under your tongue the pool of pure clear water, not

for assuaging thirst but to accentuate the drought within it, lies, still; unsensed, unknown, unsipped.

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And she had come all that distance to be with him, leaving behind the waterwheels and the dried up cisterns of her hometown. The dark mildews on the walls of the public buildings opened their veins for her. They would, for her, she knew, always be commiserating. On the frosty steps of a new country her dark shadow passed over the rent in her being—and closed it. She heard the unfamiliar waters lap against the stone bridges. And when he looked at her, she thought, as their bodies touched, that was all he could hear, the sound of that water. A water in which all those hypnotised by absences immerse themselves. Under the stone bridges it flowed and into the heart of the evening, wearing away all it rolled against. Perhaps even she would become, soon, a memory to him, and nothing more. Perhaps even he was a memory of someone she was forgetting, even now at this very moment as she spoke, a memory which would release her from those endless repetitions of mistaken identities which she had, for so long, indulged in.