

Aboutism

Sometime around the beginning of what we call “the third millennium” (the year 2000 in the Western system of dating years), my long-time friend, the San Francisco-born, Vancouver poet George Stanley half-jokingly invented “aboutism.” Among other things, aboutism proposes that a poem — or any other literary work for that matter — should be, after all, about something. Aboutism stands in contrast to the contemporary poetics of linguistic abstractionism or verse containing no more than local anecdotal significance, and whose context is restricted to the expressive self rather than connected to the world. And underlying that dictum about poetry is the suggestion that one’s life, too, should be about something.

In his book *At Andy’s*, George Stanley’s poems are described (in a back cover blurb) as being “about movies, ballparks, hockey, dogs, sex, aging” and various trips Stanley had made “to Calgary and Veracruz, Ireland and Scotland, his return to Terrace, B.C., where he lived for fifteen years . . .”

And so they are. But I immediately noticed something peculiar about the whole idea of aboutism. When you read one of Stanley’s poems, one, say, ostensibly about a few half-stoned men watching hockey on TV, or the comings-and-goings of Terrace, a small town in northwestern British Columbia, Canada, it turns out that the poem is also about capitalism, about television, about the phenomenological events in the poet’s mind, about advertising (“the car drives into your head & is wedged there, & the beer pours through your veins —”), about the nature of language, about one’s decentered location in the cosmos, about the problems of writing, about ruthless mortality and about “the huge surrounding fucked reality.” (I especially like that last, big, fuzzy concept, “the huge surrounding fucked reality.”) The poems are not only about something, they’re also almost always about everything.

Aboutism is George Stanley’s reminder — to himself and others — that art is, finally, about the world. A related but slightly different idea appears in contemporary philosophy in one of Richard Rorty’s essays, when he says, “Certainly we should not think of our [philosophical] claims answering to how anyone or everyone takes things

to be, but neither should we take them to answer to how things really are. The alternative is to take them as about things, but not as answering to anything, either objects or opinions . . . Aboutness, like truth, is indefinable, and none the worse for that.”

In relation to art, aboutism is a game, but within it is a fairly serious parody of contemporary literary movements. In fact, were it not saved by its playful aspects, aboutism would be a slightly reactionary doctrine — though not actively retrograde, like the so-called New Formalism in poetry (or, the “New Formaldehyde,” as Stanley calls it). But aboutism is reactive in the sense that it rejects a lot of the outcomes, if not the intent, of the late 20th century literary movement known as Language Poetry. That movement proposed a kind of writing that would be self-consciously critical of the banal characteristics of much of contemporary poetry, including its tendency to regard itself as making priestly pronouncements, all of which had only served to remove poetry even further from public consciousness and reduce it to a minor art understood solely by a select readership. In the “pomo-speak” style that Language Poetry critical writing favoured, the movement argued for “a self-critical poetry, minus the short-circuiting rhetoric of vatic privilege” that “might dissolve the antinomies of marginality.”

Aboutism doesn’t object to that idea. But what was wrong with a lot of the poems by the Language Poets is that you couldn’t make head or tail of what they were saying; the results were often *irreferential*, in the sense that they didn’t seem to be about anything, or anything most people could understand, despite the effort to break “the automatism of the poetic ‘I.’” Language Poetry wanted to get rid of the authorial voice, to produce a kind of “view from nowhere,” on the grounds that the “I” inevitably distorted the world. Whether the storyteller can be eliminated from the story and its telling is arguable (I think it’s a dubious proposition) but, in any case, Language Poetry seemed just as marginal as any other marginal writing. Does any of this matter? Yes, of course, it does. How we tell the story, what we write about, our understanding of the function of writing are all issues for every writer, to which the idea of aboutism offers one possible response.

Like other ideas, aboutism is not just an abstraction existing in a vacuum, but is part of a discourse whose context is both autobiographical and about the world. In the mornings, at the college just outside of Vancouver where I work, before we go off to teach our 8:30 classes to sleepy-headed students, Ryan Knighton, Reg Johanson, and I imagine aboutism. Ryan and Reg are the next generation of writers and teachers at the college, while George Stanley and I, in our sixties, are just about to be put out to pasture. Reg, though not an

Aboutist, is willing to humour Ryan and me. He or Ryan, conjuring up the yet-to-be-written “Aboutist Manifesto,” cites the movement’s first axiom: “Theory guards us from error. We are for error.” I.e., art wants to risk making mistakes.

Ryan insists that the name of the doctrine be pronounced in the French manner — “*a-boo-tisme*.” Its practitioners can then be known as “*Aboutistas*,” he says. The quirky shift from French to Spanish is a comical way of celebrating the current Mexican Zapatista political movement, or a comment on Starbucks coffee shops referring to its workers as *barristas*. Ten years from now, I think, this semantic fooling around, which enlivened a few of our mornings (and thus gave us courage to talk to the students), will no doubt be inscrutable to readers. I imagine a project to recover — from the secret crannies and undervalued protocols of literary production — a history of lost literary jokes, and the pleasures they invoke.

Just before we leave for class, I suddenly cry out from my flimsy-walled office cubicle, imitating the strangled voices of dinosaurs I heard in “prehistoric” movie melodramas when I was a teenager. The movies had names like *100 Million B.C.*, and though they were far less “realistic” than contemporary digitalized dinosaur movies, they were much more scary. My high-pitched wail — a sort of “Wrrraghurrooa” — echoes down the fibreboard corridor of the Humanities Division to Ryan’s office at the far end. Though my unpremeditated outburst is just a goofy, anti-professorial mockery of us academics studiously preparing our lesson plans before class, there’s something curiously authentic from my childhood under its surface. Maybe those movies gave me my first sense that, as George Stanley puts it in another poem, “Things cry out against each other — / the world, the image / I have of it, whirled back / in time, into nothing —.”

“The sounds of professors in their cages,” I say, but think: *We cry out*. I can hear Reg, in a similar cubbyhole across the hall, chuckling at my send-up of classroom “preparation” (an activity solemnly invoked in union contracts between the college and the teachers). Perhaps I’m hinting that these days professors have been reduced to the evolutionary obsolescence of dinosaurs, but the immediate point of making fun of preparation is that there’s no way to be prepared for anything. Then we head off to our classes, perfectly unprepared *Aboutistas*, energetically ready to talk about the world.

PS: Predictably, as soon as a few people started taking aboutism half-seriously, Stanley announced that aboutism was over. He proposed an academic conference: “Aboutism: What Was It All About?”

Acknowledgements

I'm one of those readers devoted to the paraphernalia of books. I like prefaces, forewords, introductions, contents pages, epilogues, afterwords, appendices, bibliographies, indexes, even the "running heads" of authors' names and chapter titles, and the fine print data on the verso of the title page. Of all the extra-textual materials, I'm particularly fond of acknowledgements and often find myself reading long lists of the names of those people who helped the author, as if I'll run into someone I know (or even myself). Acknowledgements usually appear at the beginning or end of the book, but in an ABC book, of course, they enter the text itself.

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Finally, I like the traditional last line of acknowledgements, in which those who aided the author are absolved of blame for his mistakes, and the writer declares, "Whatever errors of fact or interpretation that remain are the responsibility of the author."

Adam

In Jan van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* (c. 1432) — which I saw in St. Bavo's Church in Ghent, Belgium in spring 2002 — in the upper left-hand panel of the triptych, there's a portrait of a naked Adam, driven from Paradise, taking the first irreversible step out of the Garden of Eden. What I notice are the sole and carefully rendered toes of Adam's right foot, lifted in a step that, through an optical trick of van Eyck's art, steps out of the narrow frame of the picture. I think of the old saw: The hardest step on any journey is the first. To which George Stanley tartly responded: "The hardest step on every journey / is the last, and every step is the last". The aphorism can bear one more addendum: And every step, first or last, is the expulsion.

Adolescence

While I was an adolescent, everything that is crucial to my identity happened. Because those adolescent experiences were so vivid, I could never accept the notions of the determining impact of either the unconscious or the affective power of early childhood traumas with any enthusiasm. So, I'm not a Freudian even though it was the reigning psychological ideology during the 1950s when I was growing up. The general ideas of Freud are plausible in the abstract if not in the specifics, but I remain deeply resistant to the concept that we are primarily shaped by our infantile experiences.

Adolescence as the determining period of the creation of the self seems more common-sensically true. As an adolescent, my relationships with the boys with whom I played sandlot baseball and went to Marshall, and then Austin High School in Chicago — the Murphy brothers, Eddie Lacy, Bob Greenspan, Abe Dorevich, Nick Kinnis, Elliot Goldman, Mel Weisberg — set the parameters of my notions of friendship, loyalty, physical beauty and desire. Adolescence is when I first contemplated the nature of the starry universe; became engrossed in politics (the McCarthy-Army U.S. Senate hearings on communism were on TV and I watched them after school); and acquired a taste for “bohemian” company — in drama class with Sandra S., “Bunny,” Chuck Harris. Adolescence is also when I began to write.

One day, age 13 or so, around the onset of adolescence, I was working — inkily and ineptly — in the school mimeograph room (Sumner Elementary School) with Bob Perna, a local “tough” of Mediterranean lineage. He told me about an uncle of his who was an artist. I looked up blankly from the clicking drum of the mimeo and registered his disappointment that I failed to recognize the name of his relative, Salvador Dalí, or the remarkableness of being so related. After all, I was supposed to be a “brain.” I was awed by Perna's sophistication, his assumption that one should surely know who Dalí was, by the intimation that a larger world existed and could be the concern of people like me. Much later, coincidentally, I became particularly fond of Dalí's paintings — just the other day I was again looking at his *Narcissus* — notwithstanding the contempt in which he's held by the official art world, which regards him as something of a fraud.

Adonis

Here's the sort of thing that not infrequently happens to me: I'm sitting in Berlin one rainy summer afternoon reading, in a desultory way, the electronic edition of the *New York Times*. I happen upon an article about an Arabic-language poet who, the headline says, "dares to differ." I click onto it thinking no more than, OK, some guy who dissents from the madness of Islamic politics. Good.

But in the article, apart from its topical account of an Arab literary dissenter, I learn that 72-year-old Adonis, a Syrian-born writer named Ali Ahmad Said until he took the name of a Greek god as his nom-de-plume at 19, is "widely considered the Arab world's greatest living poet." Among other things, he lives in exile in Paris but is spending the year in Berlin (so we're in the same city, as I'm reading the article); he's a modernist, as important to 20th century Arab-language poetry as T.S. Eliot is to poetry in English; he rejects Islamic ideology, and is also critical of equivalent Western nonsense; etc.

A few lines of a prose poem, "Remembering The First Century," are quoted: "We blunder through prophecy as if through sand. 'Brother, show us a sign that shall prevail.' History crumbles downhill like a babble of ants that choke on their own dust, on the filth of snails, on shell after shell . . ."

All of the article's claims about the greatness of Adonis strike me as completely believable. And I'm thunderstruck. Maybe I shouldn't be, but I am. It's as if the newspaper article is announcing the discovery of a whole new continent. I perhaps had heard Adonis's unusual pen-name, but paid no attention. I think I confused him with some African or Caribbean "dub" poet. How is it possible that I've lived a relatively long life that includes knowing quite a bit about poetry and yet I knew, until that moment, nothing about Adonis? There is no end to ignorance, or at least no end to my ignorance. I'll have to reconfigure my picture of the world, my *mappa mundi*, not only now, this very minute, but probably right up to my very last breath.

Irene Aebi

Memory, quick as a gift: In the copy of Marguerite Duras's *Practicalities* that Irene Aebi gave me (because she knew of my fondness for Duras), I find her inscription in French, "For my friend Stan (who always remains the young man that I knew), affectionately, Irene."

We were both young. It was in Naples, Italy, around 1960. I was in the U.S. Navy, stationed near Naples, and she was a Swiss girl, working as an assistant to a biologist doing research in immunology, studying chicken eggs under a microscope. The three of us met because he was looking for help in writing up his findings. Irene and I became friends. She was tomboyish, with short-cropped blond hair and strong cheekbones — a look that was made fashionable by the actress Jean Seberg when she appeared in Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless*. As a Swiss, Irene was quadrophonic, speaking a melange of English, French, Italian and German. She was the first European I knew.

A couple of years later, Irene visited me in San Francisco. Then there was a gap of many years. When she reappeared — it was in Vancouver in the 1980s — her life was transformed. In her new incarnation, she was a singer and occasional violinist who performed with her partner, the famous jazz soprano saxophonist, Steve Lacy. They lived together in Paris, but Irene often found periodic refuge at the Sylvia Hotel in Vancouver. That's where she gave me the Duras book. We were no longer young, but our conversations, about books, art, ideas, retain the adolescent excitement of a lifetime.

Of African descent

My father owned or worked in a series of more or less failing grocery stores in black neighbourhoods on the South Side of Chicago for some twenty-five years, roughly between 1940 and the mid-1960s. His stores foundered because of the appearance of large, new, chain supermarkets, a feature of post-World War II capitalist development that ultimately doomed the independent corner groceries. It was the era when the South Side, as historian Robert Stepto writes, “burgeoned as thousands of African Americans, almost exclusively from the south, migrated to the city during the Great Migration of the World War II years.”

Among the first black people to whom I was formally introduced — at about age five, one Sunday morning while accompanying my father to the store — was a plainclothes Chicago policeman named Two-Gun Pete. When we shook hands, his large paw engulfed my tiny one, and I noticed how the pink flesh of his palm contrasted against the dark brown skin on the back of his hand. Was I shown and allowed to touch the mother-of-pearl handle of one of his fabled guns, or was I merely told about them? My father impressed upon me Two-Gun Pete’s prowess and fearlessness. He’d just as soon shoot a man as look at him, people said of Pete in tones of awe.

A couple of years ago, on television, I watched scenes of black “unrest” in Cincinnati, Ohio, in the wake of a police shooting of an unarmed African-American teenager, the latest in a string of similar killings over a number of years there. Like the other viewers, I was left with a few violent, familiar visuals: the plate glass window of a shop being smashed; a gaggle of young black men, several of them shirtless, running across a flame-licked urban landscape; a grainy video clip filmed at night, whose soundtrack carries an occasional police gunshot; the talking head of the sombre white mayor of Cincinnati declaring a curfew; a grieving mother. The succession of pictures provide a sort of check-list of scenes meant to prove that this “riot” is comparable to previous riots impressionistically stored in viewers’ memory banks. Intentionally or not, the visuals successfully hinder any understanding of what might be going on.

“Race-relations” or, more properly, the impoverished, horizonless

condition of masses of black people in blighted city cores across the United States, remains the great American internal political disgrace of the second half of the twentieth century. But the bare declaration of the atrocity — and it is an undoubted atrocity, long drawn-out as well as punctuated by incidents such as those in Cincinnati — hardly conveys the horror of hundreds of thousands of slowly lost black lives in America.

When I look back on the time during which I grew up, the ubiquitous racism is now more apparent, even if it was only the muted version absorbed in my family, which, on my mother's side, included several small shopkeepers whose customers were mostly black. Then, African-Americans were known as Negroes, coloureds, or, among lower-middle-class Jews, the Yiddish term *schwartz*, derived from the German word for “black,” was used.

(George Stanley recently observed how thoroughly and rapidly the term “black” succeeded “negro” in the 1960s; a brown-skinned woman of Caribbean descent with whom we were talking argued that the later “African-American” is a questionable usage arising from dubious aspects of contemporary “identity politics.”)

Did my aunts utter the sentence, in reference to the impending arrival of a coloured cleaning woman, “Is the *schwartz* coming over today?” These relatives of mine, European-descended Jewish Caucasians, watched brutal scenes on TV of black civil rights protesters being menaced by police and dogs in Alabama or Mississippi in the mid-1950s. And they were probably appalled by the Southern practice of segregation — separate and unequal toilets, drinking fountains, and schools for Negroes and Whites. Yet their own unthinking references to blacks simply assumed them to be a separate and yes, inferior, people. Significantly, the contemporary white race riots of the early 1950s, against Negroes being apportioned a share of the newly-built public housing projects right there in Chicago, received far less attention than the televised barbarities in Georgia.

Apart from acquiring a liberal attitude in support of the black civil rights movement, as a teenager I was less absorbed by the politics of race than I was by the ontological mystery of the differences. How was it possible for human skin to be different colours? I'd encountered hundreds of black people — customers, workers, and people in the neighbourhoods on the South Side of Chicago where my father's successive failing stores were located. They included the young black men my father employed and trained in the skills of meat-cutting and clerking (valuable trades to acquire, given black unemployment rates), who in turn taught me to play basketball and instructed me in the rudiments of boxing in the alley behind the store during our breaks. I maintained a correspondence with one of them, Frank, a

young man four or five years older than me, after he'd joined the army and was stationed in Alaska. With the ambition of a budding author (age thirteen), I proposed that I could "write up" his adventures in the wild.

Although it became conventional in the left-wing identity politics of the 1980s and 90s to intimate that sexual desire for the coloured "other" was also a form of imperialist racism (based on a judgment about white men sleeping with black women), it's a proposition I'm inclined to dispute as simplistic and partial. The mystery of skin colour wasn't fully impressed upon me until I became infatuated, around age 14 or 15, with someone I'll call Jesse Williams, a black schoolmate in my high school gym class.

I contrived to get the clothes locker next to Jesse's, and whenever I could, I lingered in the locker room. I sat next to where Jesse stood on the wooden bench, looking up in mute adoration. In the crowded change room, with the sound of showers hissing in the background, and the noisy horsing around of teenage boys banging locker doors and snapping towels, onlookers would hardly have noticed me, although I had the sense that Jesse himself was not unaware of my furtive glances at his groin as he stepped into his white jockstrap.

I couldn't have articulated my feelings then. I had barely thought about homosexuality yet; at most, I had a dim notion of the Freudian concept that boys passed through "a phase" of love for other boys. Yet, I felt a distinct difference between my desire for Jesse, and for others to whom I was attracted—pale blond Protestants, or the Irish and Jewish kids of my acquaintance. Having grown up with all of the latter, it seemed as if my attraction to them arose at least partially out of a shared cultural background in which I had gradually learned about the possibilities of beauty. Whereas, with Jesse the force of eros was startling, unprecedented, as if I had invented this particular recognition of desire all on my own (or as if it had invented me). Though it's hardly a cure for racism, desire and a healthy curiosity about others (a.k.a. xenophilia) seem like first steps away from it that are as plausible as any others. Equally, relationships between people of different races that create children of mixed skin colour deliver a small, more literal blow against racism (in the 1950s such relations were banned in the U.S. by so-called "miscegenation" laws).

A similar illumination on the intellectual side occurred when I walked into an algebra class on the first day of the semester and discovered that the teacher, Mr. Harris, was a black man. Clearly there was a dissonance between the slightly demeaning notion of *schwartzes* and the presence of an African-American man who would instruct us in the mysteries of mathematics, rendered alphabetical with mysterious x's and y's (e.g., $2x$ times $3y$ equals $4z$; what is x ?).

The developing cognizances — erotic, intellectual — of actual black people I knew are more informative than the abstract political rhetoric of racism deplored. Recently, I happened upon Wayne Miller's book of photographs, *Chicago's South Side, 1946-1948*, gradually becoming pleasantly lost in the images of scenes I may have seen for myself as a boy.

There was no photograph of Two-Gun Pete in Miller's book, but I was intuitively certain I would find something. After looking at the pictures, I turned to Miller's introductory memoir of shooting those photographs and immediately found the passage I was seeking. Of the many hundreds of pictures he had taken a half-century before, Miller says, he remembers those "of Silvester Washington — a Chicago Juvenile Police Officer nicknamed 'Two-Gun Pete'; like the maverick General George Patton, he sported a pair of pearl-handled revolvers." There's a photo of a contemplative black teenager in a suit and tie who, according to the caption, is "at the Wabash Avenue police station presided over by Silvester 'Two Gun Pete' Washington." The boy appears to be listening to someone just outside the photo's frame, likely Two-Gun Pete himself, who also moves just outside the frame of my memory.

After Lorca

In the winter of 1958-59, Jack Spicer gave a poetry reading at San Francisco's Bread and Wine Mission, a proto-New Age storefront drop-in centre at the top of Grant Avenue in North Beach run by Father Pierre Delattre. I was in the U.S. Navy at the time, 18 years old, stationed at nearby Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay, my first posting after boot camp.

Had I already read about, or seen a picture — in *Life* magazine — of “Hube the Cube”? This improbable poster-person for the beatnik movement was a scruffy, thin man with a black beret whom I sometimes saw walking on Grant Avenue. What got him into *Life* magazine was the word “oblivion” tattooed on his right bicep, his unique way of declaring withdrawal from the “rat race” of conventional life in 1950s America.

When I went into the city, I searched out the “beatniks” and artists, and occasionally stopped by the Bread and Wine Mission for the free spaghetti dinner it offered once a week. That's likely where I heard about Spicer's reading.

I hadn't yet been introduced to Spicer, though I'd read a couple of his poems in the *Evergreen Review* a year or two earlier. But I was paying more attention to the stars of the burgeoning literary movement that would eventually become the “New American Poetry” — Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Gary Snyder.

In person, Spicer was an ungainly pear-shaped man in his early thirties, his thinning hair swept back from his sun-freckled forehead, garbed, the first time I saw him, in a rumpled sports jacket and ill-fitting black pants. While he read, he scrunched up his eyes, balled his chubby fists, and seemed to menacingly chew on the words of his poems.

I was soon to learn that Spicer, about a year or two before this reading, had experienced one of those extraordinary artistic breakthroughs that often determine a poet's career and shape the remainder of his life. That breakthrough is the subject of this passage.

Born in Los Angeles in 1925, and raised there, Spicer had come to the University of California at Berkeley at the end of World War II where he fell in with a group of young poets, the most prominent of

whom — Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser and himself — formed a triumvirate at the forefront of a local poetry movement that became known as the “Berkeley Renaissance.”

A decade later, while briefly and unhappily in New York and Boston, Spicer found himself at an artistic impasse. True, he had written several good poems in the past ten years, predominantly influenced, I think, by the work of W.B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens, but as he said in a poem commemorating the death of jazz musician Charlie Parker, “Song for Bird and Myself” (1956), “I am dissatisfied with my poetry, / I am dissatisfied with my sex life, / I am dissatisfied with the angels I believe in.” In the opening chapter of an unfinished detective novel he subsequently attempted, Spicer offers a fictional self-portrait of himself as a stymied, “academic” poet, returning to San Francisco to seek new inspiration.

Just before his return to San Francisco, Spicer read a new edition of Federico Garcia Lorca’s *Selected Poems* (1955), co-edited by Don Allen, a former Berkeley classmate working in the publishing business in New York. Toward the end of 1956, Spicer began dabbling in some translations of the work of the homosexual Spanish poet who had been murdered by the Fascists in 1936, at age 38. Spicer was attracted not only to Lorca’s homoeroticism, but also by the Spanish poet’s association with surrealism. Lorca had been in love with Salvador Dalí, and was a friend of the filmmaker Luis Buñuel. Spicer was also drawn to Lorca’s Orphic theory of *duende*, and his interest in the 19th century American poet Walt Whitman. All of these were themes that resonated with Spicer’s own poetic concerns. By Christmas 1956, back in San Francisco, Spicer had completed his translation of Lorca’s angry “Ode to Walt Whitman,” at which point he became stuck in this still undefined project.

It wasn’t until summer 1957, after conducting a “Magic Workshop” for young poets and finishing a brief teaching stint at San Francisco State College, that his writer’s block broke. When Don Allen arrived in San Francisco to spend the summer, Spicer had a new “Lorca” poem to show him practically every day when they met at Vesuvio’s or The Place, two local North Beach bars. But the poems weren’t simply translations. As Spicer wrote to Robin Blaser in Boston in June 1957, “Since school’s been out (for me forever) I’ve been ignoring my unemployment and translating Lorca . . . I enclose my eight latest ‘translations.’ Transformations might be a better word. Several are originals and most of the rest change the poem vitally. I can’t seem to make anybody understand this or what I’m doing. They look blank or ask what the Spanish is for a word that isn’t in Spanish or praise (like Duncan did) an original poem as typically Lorca. What I am trying to do is establish a tradition. When I’m

through (although I'm sure no one will ever publish them) I'd like someone as good as I am to translate these translations into French (or Pushtu) adding more. Do you understand? No. Nobody does."

A year or so later, in 1958, in the middle of Spicer's next book, *Admonitions*, and as part of the text, there is another letter to Blaser. "You are right that I don't now need your criticisms of individual poems . . . Halfway through *After Lorca* I discovered that I was writing a book instead of a series of poems," Spicer says.

"That is why all my stuff from the past . . . looks foul to me. The poems belong nowhere. They are one night stands filled (the best of them) with their own emotions, but pointing nowhere, as meaningless as sex in a Turkish bath . . . Look at those other poems. Admire them if you like. They are beautiful but dumb," he laments.

"Poems should echo and reecho against each other. They should create resonances. They cannot live alone any more than we can . . . Things fit together. We knew that — it is the principle of magic. Two inconsequential things can combine together to become a consequence. This is true of poems too. A poem is never to be judged by itself alone. A poem is never by itself alone." Spicer tells Blaser, "This is the most important letter that you have ever received."

Allowing for a bit of vatic hyperbole in the claim that his earlier poems amount to no more than "one night stands," what's interesting is that Spicer's critical vocabulary uses the colloquial language of gay cruising to describe his dilemma, asserting that poetry, if not the poets who write it, is looking for love rather than sex. More important, in the midst of writing *After Lorca*, Spicer discovered the notion of what he and Blaser would subsequently call the "serial" poem, a form whose unit of composition is the "book" (using that word in a way slightly different from its conventional reference), and to be distinguished from the modern "epic," such as Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, or Charles Olson's *Maximus*, as well as other "long" poems, or poems in "parts." In the serial poem, each poem stands on its own, and yet integrally connects to the other poems that make up the "book." Furthermore, Spicer conjoins to the serial poem an Orphic theory that the poem is transmitted, from an unknown outside source, by a process of "dictation." For the remainder of his brief life — he died in 1965 — Spicer would write only dictated "books."

The first result of this breakthrough was *After Lorca* (1957), a thoroughly original work and a book unlike any other in American poetry in its era. Beyond the form of the serial poem, and the mixture of "transformations" and scrupulously accurate translations (the one of Lorca's "Ode to Whitman" is arguably superior to that of any preceding "professional" translation), Spicer gave the book an elegant and witty coherence by interweaving the poems with a series of letters

to the dead Lorca that proclaimed Spicer's poetics and provided a sort of self-reflexive narrative of the writing of the poems. As well, there's an "introduction" to *After Lorca* written mock-posthumously by Lorca himself.

The assumption of the persona of Lorca is Spicer's first great invention in *After Lorca*, creating the trope that not only are the poems written in the manner of Lorca (hence, "after Lorca"), but that both Spicer and (the imaginary) Lorca are writing after the death of the Spanish poet. "Frankly I was quite surprised when Mr. Spicer asked me to write an introduction to this volume," Lorca begins, in a tone of dry, mild affront that Spicer sustains throughout the apparently reluctantly written preface. "My reaction to the manuscript he sent me (and to the series of letters that are now a part of it) was and is fundamentally unsympathetic. It seems to me the waste of a considerable talent on something which is not worth doing." However, Lorca adds, with grim wit, "I have been removed from all contact with poetry for the last twenty years. The younger generation of poets may view with pleasure Mr. Spicer's execution of what seems to me a difficult and unrewarding task."

The imaginary world that Spicer conjures up in this first paragraph is so smoothly and economically presented that its surreal metaphysics are almost imperceptible — a world in which living poets can communicate with dead ones by sending them letters through a celestial post office, and in which dead poets have enough of an afterlife to criticize the living one's efforts.

Lorca forcefully warns readers that the poems are not translations. "In even the most literal of them Mr. Spicer seems to derive pleasure in inserting or substituting one or two words which completely change the mood and often the meaning of the poem as I had written it." Moreover, there are hybrid poems, half-Lorca, half-Spicer, "giving rather the effect of an unwilling centaur (modesty forbids me to speculate which end of the animal is mine)," as well as an equal number of Spicer's own poems "executed in a somewhat fanciful imitation of my early style." Worse, there's "no indication of which of the poems belong to which category," and — in a final twist of the poetic knife — "I have further complicated the problem (with malice aforethought I must admit) by sending Mr. Spicer several poems written after my death which he has also translated and included here." As Lorca puts it, with gallows-humour, "Even the most faithful student of my work will be hard put to decide what is and what is not Garcia Lorca as, indeed, he would be if he were to look into my present resting place."

The letters to Lorca are "another problem," says the imaginary recipient of them. "When Mr. Spicer began sending them to me a few

months ago, I recognized immediately the ‘programmatically letter’ — the letter one poet writes to another not in any effort to communicate with him, but rather as a young man whispers his secrets to a scarecrow, knowing that his young lady is in the distance listening.” In this case, the young lady “may be a Muse, but the scarecrow nevertheless quite naturally resents the confidences.” As for the reader of this odd amalgam, “who is not a party to this singular tryst,” Lorca concedes that he “may be amused by what he overhears.”

What follows are about thirty brief poems, each dedicated to a poet, friend, or lover of Spicer’s acquaintance, two surrealist playlets featuring the silent movie comedian Buster Keaton (about whom Lorca had in fact written a playlet in his posthumously published *Poet in New York*), the famous polemical “Ode to Walt Whitman” in which Lorca — and Spicer — argue their uncompromising views on homosexual love, and the interleaved “programmatically” letters.

In the letters, Spicer propounds a poetics whose principal issues are the relation of language to poetry; the connections or “correspondences” of poems to each other despite their apparent dissimilarities or distance in time, geography and language (a theory created in the 19th century by Rimbaud and Baudelaire); and necessarily, a metaphysics about art, life, love, and death — the latter realized through a metaphorical embodiment of “the dead,” who, as Lorca says, “are notoriously hard to satisfy.”

The poems in *After Lorca* are unassuming lyrics that nonetheless often carry the sting of the underlying poetics, but are far from the spectacular figures and romantic language that first attracted me to poetry (Allen Ginsberg’s “angelheaded hipsters,” say, “dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix” — some of whom I would meet in San Francisco). Spicer’s Lorca poems are stark, melancholy, disciplined, and cerebral. A characteristic one reads:

A Diamond

A Translation for Robert Jones

A diamond

Is there

At the heart of the moon or the branches or my nakedness

And there is nothing in the universe like diamond

Nothing in the whole mind.

The poem is a seagull resting on a pier at the end of the ocean

A dog howls at the moon
A dog howls at the branches
A dog howls at the nakedness
A dog howling with pure mind.

I ask for the poem to be as pure as a seagull's belly.

The universe falls apart and discloses a diamond
Two words called seagull are peacefully floating out where the
waves are
The dog is dead there with the moon, with the branches, with
my nakedness
And there is nothing in the universe like diamond
Nothing in the whole mind.

The complex metaphysics of "A Diamond" posit the merciless interrelationship of person to the world and perhaps something larger. The ordinary world of "branches," "a dog," "seagull," "the ocean," rendered in words — "two words called seagull are peacefully floating out where the waves are" — and the binary universe / "the whole mind," are offered as alternatives, mediated only by "the poem." The howling of Spicer's dog is far removed from the rhapsodic, Whitmanesque "Howl" that Ginsberg had written only a year or two before. In Spicer's vision, the universe "falls apart" to disclose "a diamond" at the heart of things — "the moon or the branches or my nakedness." The declaration is that "there is nothing in the universe like diamond / Nothing in the whole mind," and that the diamond is the poem.

The letters to Lorca make the poetics more explicit, despite a dialectical elusiveness. Spicer begins with a tactical feint, disclaiming the importance of the missives. "These letters are to be as temporary as our poetry is to be permanent," Spicer tells Lorca. "They will establish the bulk, the wastage that my sour-stomached contemporaries demand to help them swallow and digest the pure word. We will use up our rhetoric here so that it will not appear in our poems." Several times Spicer makes unfavourable comparisons of the prose of the letters to poetry. "See how weak prose is," he says. "These paragraphs could be translated, transformed by a chain of fifty poets in fifty languages, and they would still be temporary, untrue, unable to yield the substance of a single image. Prose invents — poetry discloses."

In the course of enunciating his stance, Spicer also provides, almost offhandedly, an autobiographical portrait of his own spare life. "A mad man is talking to himself in the room next to mine. He speaks in prose. Presently I shall go to a bar and there one or two poets will

speak to me and I to them and we will try to destroy each other or attract each other or even listen to each other and nothing will happen because we will be speaking in prose. I will go home, drunken and dissatisfied, and sleep — and my dreams will be prose. Even the subconscious is not patient enough for poetry.” Neither madness, dreams nor everyday discourse can take us beyond prose; only poetry can make something “happen.” Spicer adds, almost by way of respite, “You are dead and the dead are very patient.”

In a further letter, Spicer notes that although “a really perfect poem has an infinitely small vocabulary,” there is a considerable difficulty embedded in language and reality. “We want to transfer the immediate object, the immediate emotion to the poem — and yet the immediate always has hundreds of its own words clinging to it, short-lived and tenacious as barnacles. And it is wrong to scrape them off and substitute others. A poet is a time mechanic not an embalmer. The words around the immediate shrivel and decay like flesh around the body . . . Objects, words must be led across time not preserved against it.”

Finally, on language: “Words are what sticks to the real. We use them to push the real, to drag the real into the poem. They are what we hold on with, nothing else. They are as valuable in themselves as rope with nothing to be tied to.”

The difficult notion of “the real” and the problem of the “immediate object” or emotion are taken up in a subsequent letter, one that would attain some notice as Spicer’s formal statement of poetics when it was published in editor Don Allen’s *New American Poetry, 1945-60*. Although many of Spicer’s contemporaries also made statements about poetics, the still-remarkable feature of *After Lorca*’s poetics, which are fully embedded in the work of art, is that no American poet had said precisely these things before, and no one had spoken in this intimate, confiding tone of voice about how poetry worked.

Spicer declares, “I would like to make poems out of real objects. The lemon to be a lemon that the reader could cut or squeeze or taste — a real lemon like a newspaper in a collage is a real newspaper.” Immediately, and characteristically, Spicer invents a tantalizing dialectic between the impossibility of poems made out of real lemons and the reasonableness of a newspaper fragment pasted into a collaged artwork. “I would like the moon in my poems to be a real moon, one which could be suddenly covered with a cloud that has nothing to do with the poem — a moon utterly independent of images. The imagination pictures the real. I would like to point to the real,” Spicer says.

If there is a dialectic between words and the real in poetry, there is

something similar between mere images and “visibility” within a poem. “How easy it is in erotic musings or in the truer imagination of a dream to invent a beautiful boy. How difficult to take a boy in a blue bathing suit that I have watched as casually as a tree and to make him visible in a poem as a tree is visible, not as an image or a picture but as something alive — caught forever in the structure of words. Live moons, live lemons, live boys in bathing suits. The poem is a collage of the real.”

But, as Spicer knows as well as the rest of us, “things decay . . . Real things become garbage. The piece of lemon you shellac to the canvas begins to develop a mold, the newspaper tells of incredibly ancient events in forgotten slang, the boy becomes a grandfather. Yes, but the garbage of the real still reaches out into the current world making its objects, in turn, visible — lemon calls to lemon, newspaper to newspaper, boy to boy. As things decay they bring their equivalent into being.”

That is, “things do not connect; they correspond.” It is the possibility of correspondence that gives meaning to the otherwise mysterious notion of “tradition” that Spicer mentions in both his letter to Blaser and the letters to Lorca. A poet “translates” real objects, “bring[s] them across language as easily as he can bring them across time.” The corresponding objects are not at all identical — “that lemon may become this lemon, or it may even become this piece of seaweed, or this particular color of gray in this ocean. One does not need to imagine that lemon; one needs to discover it.” Even the letters to Lorca “correspond with something (I don’t know what) that you have written . . . and, in turn, some future poet will write something which corresponds to them. That is how we dead men write to each other.”

At the end, after other letters and poems, Spicer announces that “this is the last letter.” The connection between the two poets has faded away “with the summer. I turn in anger and dissatisfaction to the things of my life and you return, a disembodied but contagious spirit, to the printed page.” The communion with the ghost of Garcia Lorca is over.

How was it ever able to happen? Spicer wonders. “It was a game, I shout to myself . . . There are no angels, ghosts, or even shadows. It was a game made out of summer and freedom and a need for poetry that would be more than the expression of my hatreds and desires.” Yet, it was real. “The poems are there, the memory not of a vision but a kind of casual friendship with an undramatic ghost who occasionally looked through my eyes and whispered to me . . .”

In “Radar,” a postscript dedicated to Marianne Moore, Spicer once more measures the uncertainty of the world in relation to the self, and the irreparable loss which shadows any such encounter:

No one exactly knows
Exactly how clouds look in the sky
Or the shape of the mountains below them
Or the direction in which fish swim.
No one exactly knows.
The eye is jealous of whatever moves
And the heart
Is too far buried in the sand
To tell.

At Spicer's reading that night in the winter of 1958-59, he read from his recent books, *Admonitions* and *A Book of Music*, two serial poems written in 1958. In about six months I would acquire an elementary understanding that permitted me to see why this poetry was more interesting than its spectacular, hip cousins, but at the time, what Spicer read went mostly over my head. Nonetheless, after the reading, I hung around anyway and fell into conversation with the poet. Somewhere in the course of talking — perhaps as a result of the talk, or simply because I was young and attractive, though I wasn't any more aware of my beauty than I was of his alleged ugliness — Spicer produced a crumpled brown paper bag, the kind you could get at any grocery store. He emphasised that although the books inside the bag normally sold for one dollar, on this occasion he was giving me a gift. At which point, he extracted from the paper bag a copy of *After Lorca* and handed it to me. Thus, I began my relationship with my mentor.

AIDS

I only have to re-open the pages of Paul Monette's *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir*, as I did recently, and a lot of it comes back. From the chilling first sentence — "I don't know if I will live to finish this" — the aura of dread that for years permeated every minute of the time of that plague era returns in force, sending a shudder through my body. The memory leaves me off-centre, with a survivor's mixed feelings of guilt and gratitude, and also, a sense of being curiously obsolete for possessing personal recollections of what to others can only be an increasingly distant matter of history. Some 20 years after the inception of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), and after or in the midst of subsequent, if lesser, epidemics (Ebola, West Nile and the SARS viruses), how can I explain what it was like then? Strange to have lived through — strictly by chance — a plague in my own lifetime. Strange that its location in people's minds, including my own, is now displaced, both temporally and geographically. Strange that in one sense AIDS is over, but hasn't at all ended, neither here, in North America and Europe, where it continues to afflict particular ethnic and sub-cultural groups, such as intravenous drug users, nor there. "There" is now Africa, where AIDS rages in catastrophic proportions, with literally millions of people on the verge of death, simply, as far as I can tell, because "we," the rich world, won't give "them," the poor world, the drugs they need and can't afford.

How to give an idea of what it was like then? Through our records of the plague, our dispatches from the front. There is, not surprisingly, a lot of very good writing about AIDS, from novelist Edmund White's fictionalized memoir, *The Farewell Symphony* to activist-scholar Douglas Crimp's militant essays, *Melancholia and Moralism*. The amount of good writing is not surprising in the sense that a sizeable number of talented, literate men, their minds "wonderfully concentrated," as Samuel Johnson put it, by the prospect of death, applied their intelligence to providing a description of the plague. Even works that are justifiably criticized — journalist Randy Shilts's best-selling *And the Band Played On* and Larry Kramer's shrilly-pitched *Reports from the Holocaust* come to mind — offer moments of legitimate illumination. But of all the books written in the midst of

the plague, Paul Monette's *Borrowed Time* is the one that had the greatest impact on me.

I

The circumstances of Monette's grief-stricken tale are simple enough. Set in the mid-1980s, Monette and his friend, Roger Horwitz, lovers for a decade, are practically poster-boys for the joys of middle-aged gay domesticity. There's "a stucco 1930s cottage high in a box canyon above [Hollywood's] Sunset Strip" in which they live, "a view of the city lights through the coral tree out front and between the olive and eucalyptus across the way," while out back "is a garden court shaded by Chinese elms and a blue-bottom pool that catches the sun from eleven to three," and a terrace for dinners with friends down from San Francisco. There's a used, bawky, black Jaguar (upscale successor to a Mercedes), and holidays to Greece or the California foreshore at Big Sur. There are understanding parents with a house in swanky Palm Springs, fashionable restaurants, and an assortment of therapists and agents. They attend benefit dinners put on by the gay community, and Roger, a lawyer, and Paul can afford to sponsor a table. The occasional movie star, prominent producer, or famous writer passes through the scene of their domestic life.

But there's a darker side to this middle-class homosexual idyll. Monette, a once promising poet and novelist, the author of *Taking Care of Mrs. Carroll* (1978) and *The Gold Diggers* (1979), finds himself, five or six years later, at age 40, in something of a literary slide, stalled on a novel and reduced to writing sit-com movie scripts. There's a hint of recent past trouble in an otherwise monogamous relationship. And there is the rumour of the plague.

Monette recalls the "shadowy nonfacts," "the most fragmented of rumours" of the early 1980s. He remembers noting in his diary in December 1981, "ambiguous reports of a 'gay cancer,'" then adds, "but I know I didn't have the slightest picture of the thing. Cancer of the *what?* I would have asked, if anyone had known anything." A couple of months later, in early 1982, driving to Palm Springs to visit Roger's parents, Paul reads aloud from an article in the gay magazine *The Advocate*, an article titled "Is Sex Making Us Sick?" As Monette notes, "There was the slightest edge of irony in the query, an urban cool that seems almost bucolic now in its innocence. But the article didn't mince words," providing the first in-depth reporting he'd seen — it wasn't yet mentioned in the *Los Angeles Times* — of a mysterious — was it fatal? — disease that targetted gay men.

"I remember exactly what was going through my mind while I was

reading,” Monette writes a half-dozen years later. “I was simply relieved . . . because the article appeared to be saying that there was a grim progression toward this undefined catastrophe, a set of preconditions — chronic hepatitis, repeated bouts of syphilis, exotic parasites. No wonder my first baseline response was to feel safe. It was *them* — by which I meant the fast-lane Fire Island crowd, the Sutro Baths, the world of High Eros. Not us.”

It wasn’t “us,” not yet. Nor was it yet known that the disease didn’t present a neat set of preconditions. Not until a year and a half later, in autumn 1983, did Monette get a call from his best friend, Cesar, a teacher in San Francisco, who reported a swollen gland in his groin that he was going to get biopsied before the school semester began again. “AIDS didn’t even cross my mind, though cancer did,” Monette recalls. “Half joking, Cesar wondered aloud if he dared disturb our happy friendship with bad news. ‘If it’s bad,’ I said, ‘we’ll handle it, okay?’” Paul and Roger were busy getting ready for their annual trip to Big Sur. Paul put the thought away. After all, “even though he went to the baths a couple of times a week, Cesar wasn’t into anything *weird* — or that’s how I might have put it at that stage of my own denial. No hepatitis, no history of VD, built tall and fierce — of course he was safe.”

But days after their return from Big Sur, Paul arrived home one evening and “Roger met me gravely at the door. ‘There’s a message from Cesar,’ he said. ‘It’s not good.’ Numbly I played back the answering machine, where so much appalling misery would be left on tape over the years to come, as if a record were crying out to be kept. ‘I have a little bit of bad news.’ Cesar’s voice sounded strained, almost embarrassed.” Monette spends the evening working his way through a tangle of telephone calls, bracing himself for cancer news, before he reaches a mutual acquaintance named Tom. “The lymph nodes, of course — a hypochondriac knows all there is to know about the sites of malignancy. Already I was figuring what the treatments might be . . . I had Cesar practically cured by the time I reached Tom . . . But as usual with me in crisis, I was jabbering and wouldn’t let Tom get a word in. Finally he broke through: ‘He’s got it.’ ‘Got what?’” Monette asks, but he knows at that instant that “it” is something other than a curable cancer.

The best thing about Monette’s narrative is simply its accurate accumulation of mundane details. It is like a careful description of weather — a gathering storm — or a slowly advancing, but relentless, artillery barrage, closing in on your little foxhole. Though life will soon be as alien as “living on the moon,” Monette’s text respects the reality of his experience sufficiently that there is no vain striving to rise above it, to claim that he’s anything more than a precise instance

of something larger. Roger and Paul are ordinary, middle-class gay men, accustomed to the privileges available to them, not even necessarily the sort of gay men I especially like. They're politically liberal but not more than that, fussily self-absorbed (aren't we all?), "out" in homosexual terms, but not *too* out. All of that is part of the unheroic attraction of *Borrowed Time*.

Since Monette's book is a chronicle of a doom foretold, the inevitable happens: Cesar's condition deteriorates, Roger falls ill, is diagnosed with the deadly syndrome, and in turn, Paul tests positive for the virus. Among their circle of friends and acquaintances, more and more of them are struck down by what is clearly a plague. We know all this from the very beginning of Monette's book, as in a Greek tragedy where the chorus opens the drama with a recitation of the plot. Monette, looking back on the wreckage of life, ponders the difficulty of knowing where to start. "The world around me is defined now by its endings and its closures — the date on the grave that follows the hyphen. Roger Horwitz, my beloved friend, died of complications of AIDS on October 22, 1986 . . . That is the only real date anymore, casting its icy shadow over all the secular holidays lovers mark their calendars by," he says in the first pages.

Further, "the fact is, no one knows where to start with AIDS. Now, in the seventh year of the calamity" — the time at which *Borrowed Time* is being written — "my friends in L.A. can hardly recall what it felt like any longer, the time before the sickness. Yet we all watched the toll mount in New York, then in San Francisco, for years before it ever touched us here. It comes like a slowly dawning horror. At first you are equipped with a hundred different amulets to keep it far away. Then someone you know goes into the hospital, and suddenly you are at high noon in full battle gear."

Once Roger is hospitalized at the University of California at Los Angeles, their life together, with sporadic respites over the next year and a half, increasingly revolves around various rooms and wards at UCLA hospital. Henceforth, they live on time borrowed from the future they will not have. But there's more than one sense of time here. For gay men of their generation, there's the "lost time" of having been in the closet, the years before the declaration of public homosexuality in 1969. Making up for that lost time perhaps explains part of the gay sexual frenzy of the 1970s, a reaction to the recognition that what was once absolutely forbidden can be transformed into a state in which everything is permitted. Nor is time here only borrowed from the future. Recounting an earlier journey to Greece, Monette observes that "people who travel have dreamlike moments where they borrow time from the past, but it's not out-of-body at all. The echo of the ancient image, warrior or monk, is in you."

Finally, time borrowed from the past is the substance of writing. “I can see us so vividly side by side in bed—reading, dozing, roaming — always coming around again to that evening anchorage . . . At the time I thought there were no more layers of innocence to peel . . . I cannot say what pagan god it was, but I’d gotten in the habit, last thing at night, of praying: Thank you for this. I’d be tucked up against my little friend, perfectly still, and thanking the darkness for the time we’d had — the ten years, the house, the dog, the work. I did, I counted my blessings . . . I knew what I had and what I stood to lose. I held it cradled in my arms, eyes open even as I slept. The night watch from the cliffs at Thera, clear along the moon all the way to Africa.” Thera was the Greek island city they had visited, destroyed by a volcano in 1500 BCE, perhaps the source of Plato’s myth of Atlantis. A couple of fresco paintings from its civilization survived, and like Monette, I’ve seen them in the museum in Athens. I have a postcard.

The rest of *Borrowed Time*, recounted in tones both measured and frenetic, is a mixture of inconsolable sorrow, political rage at governments and media slow to do what they could have done to reduce the ravages of the plague, moments of hyperventilating panic and claustrophobia, and eventually, exhaustion and “the desolate waking to life alone — this calamity that is all mine, that will not end till I do.”

II

Living in Vancouver, I was on the periphery of AIDS, literally on the epidemiological margins of a fatal viral epidemic. It was transmitted mainly through sexual intercourse between gay men, and its epicentres were in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and other North American cities that contained smaller but sizeable homosexual populations. But even being on the edge of the plague was close enough to feel the horror, to become hysterical in the middle of an afternoon, wake up in a sweat from nightmares (and wonder if it was those symptomatic “night sweats”), visit dying friends on the 8th floor of St. Paul’s Hospital in Vancouver or in a bleak Berlin apartment, attend countless meetings that Monette describes as “boredom in a good cause,” remember the dead at memorial services. Close enough to read *Borrowed Time* the first time, in 1988, with terror. Monette’s account was not so different from the plagues referred to by Boccaccio in *The Decameron*, or described in Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year* and Albert Camus’s *The Plague*.

I remember calculating my degree of risk by means of a primitive equation I’d made up: acts plus number of sexual partners minus precautions taken, over geographical location multiplied by time,

equalled risk of exposure. That is, if you were the recipient in acts of anal intercourse, and had had sex with many people without using condoms, and if you lived in one of the plague's epicentres at the time of the critical mass dissemination of the virus (the early 1970s), the odds were against you. I had lived in San Francisco for five years or so before moving to Vancouver in the mid-1960s, just before the main period of the virus' silent spread, so my comparative safety was simply a bio-geographical accident. The same was true of my bedroom behaviour. It was only at the insistence of a sensible friend in the early 1980s that I began to obey the protocols of a safer sex, so again, it was more a matter of chance than prescience that provided whatever protection I enjoyed.

The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) was attended by two particular cruelties. Its incubation period could be as long as a decade, so the "safer sex" procedures soon undertaken by gay communities (which successfully reduced new infections) would have no bearing on whether or not you had acquired the virus years before. Second, there were no available medications for AIDS other than those to alleviate the accompanying "opportunistic" infections that a deficient immune system invited. From the mid-80s — the time of Roger Horwitz's death — there were experimental drug protocols, and Monette, with his histrionic energy,chutzpah, and middle-class gay privilege, was quick to enroll his friend in available programs, but to no avail. Nothing worked. Retroviral inhibitor drugs, which don't cure AIDS but prolong life significantly, wouldn't be available for years.

In 1989, the year after Monette's *Borrowed Time* appeared and as a half-million mostly American gay men continued to die, I wrote, in a book called *Buddy's*, a fantasy about "How the Plague Ended": "It hadn't ended with a magic bullet, a cure, or even imperfect treatments." It ended, in gay communities, because self-education had dramatically reduced the rate of lethal transmission. "It ended, so it was said, because we had changed. And the change had changed us, in ways that were not yet apparent." And at the end, "we didn't even feel relief. Perhaps we permitted ourselves to take note of our exhaustion." But "what next?" We couldn't yet turn our attention back to everyday catastrophes. There were still committees to sit on, hotlines to staff, the dead to bury, memorials, demonstrations, and the rest. "Yet, we would continue to desire. We had not ceased grieving . . . we would continue to cry our eyes out. We would find ourselves numbly staring at the ocean on a muggy afternoon, then come to, recalling a dinner engagement. Gradually, it would become a memory, like the curling, yellow-edged pages of an old newspaper exposed to the air. But when it ended, we barely noticed." As it turned out, that effort to

imagine an end of the plague, at least for the limited “us” that comprised gay men in North America — an attempt to provide a bit of somber political hope — was not that far off the mark. There were “imperfect treatments,” but today, more than a decade after my fantasy of it ending, gay friends remark to each other on the eerie disappearance of the mention of AIDS in the media, or even among ourselves.

Both the failure of governments and media to respond to AIDS and the inadequate efforts of scientists to develop effective medications sparked the politics of AIDS. There were two half-truths promulgated by gay activists, crucial to engendering support for a stricken community, but which can now be viewed in a more balanced retrospective light. The first was the slogan, AIDS is not a gay disease, but one that can strike anybody. That is of course true in a literal sense but, in reality, the virus was introduced into a primarily gay male population and, as epidemiologists learned, quickly and “efficiently” disseminated and contained within that aggregate, aided in part by that population’s sexual practices at the time. What “leakage” there was of the virus (through blood transfusion, shared use of needles, and heterosexual transmission via bisexual men) was limited, and the grave anticipations of AIDS decimating the “heterosexual community” in North America never happened. Like others, I knew that at the time, but in the face of charges by evil Christian fundamentalists that “AIDS was God’s punishment” of homosexuals, the claim that anyone could come down with AIDS was a useful political fiction.

The other half-truth concerned sites of transmission and “promiscuity,” and became a point of contention within gay communities as well as outside, because it touched on one of the central premises of gay liberation. What public homosexuality proposed at the beginning of the 1970s was that the whole question of sexuality was up for grabs. Conventional — i.e., conservative heterosexual — notions about who one slept with, how many sexual partners one had, the motives for sexual activity, and much more, were all subject to challenge. At the time, homosexuality was news from the front-lines of human relationships. The subtext of its challenge to conventional sexuality — especially to the shibboleth that sex was primarily reproductive or creational, rather than recreational — was a broader attack on institutional arrangements in bourgeois society. At least that was the case among radical adherents in Gay Liberation Front groups (I was one of the founders of the GLF Vancouver branch). As with other revolutionary proposals, there were excesses, in this case, of sexual activity, as became evident in mounting statistics of venereal diseases, hepatitis, and amoebic infections. When AIDS struck, a decade after public homosexuality, the response was often a barely

disguised homophobia. “Promiscuity,” it was claimed, violated a law of nature; homosexuals had brought the plague upon themselves.

In practical terms, gay bathhouses, which facilitated sexual encounters, were targeted as dangerous sites of AIDS transmission. Even some gay men themselves called for the temporary closure of such establishments. But for many gay activists, who had adopted the slogan “Silence=death,” such proposals amounted to a betrayal of the principles of the gay movement. Hence, their insistence that the vital issue wasn’t the number of partners or the circumstances of sexual encounters, but the practice of safer methods of sex. Again, while it is literally true that transmission of the virus could occur in a single act of “unprotected” sex, it was simply an epidemiological fact that the number of partners and the circumstances of the encounters were factors in the rate of transmission. Though insistence on prudence against accusations of promiscuity wasn’t the whole truth, again, its political function was understandable.

If “Silence=death” was a call to act-up against delinquent authorities (Act-Up was the name of a prominent AIDS activist movement), then one form of acting out, namely, shouting at governments, media and even at each other equalled a kind of resistance. With respect to the latter, failure to toe the party line could get you labelled as a traitor. I remember one local incident, now almost comic in retrospect, in which I found myself on the wrong side of the line. Through my old friend John Dixon (he was also my colleague in the philosophy department at the college where we worked), I was a member of the board of the British Columbia Civil Liberties Association (BCCLA), over which Dixon presided, and which was actively engaged in issues involving people with AIDS. One of Dixon’s contributions was a book, *Catastrophic Rights* (1990), arguing for the civil right to access to experimental drugs for those struck by catastrophic illness. I was also a member of the board of the local AIDS organization, one of those voluntary jobs that seemed to have more to do with bureaucracy, budgets and “boredom in a good cause” than the visible saving of lives. One simply signed up and, indeed, doing so did some good.

At one particularly untimely moment in the midst of the plague, the local conservative government of the day proposed a quarantine law. The proposal was in response to tuberculosis cases and had been innocently requested by the Vancouver public health officer, someone Dixon and I knew to be an intelligent and sensible medical official. The initial draft of the law, however, was so loosely written that it was reasonable for an already beleaguered gay community to see the spectre of concentration camps. The BCCLA, like other groups, opposed the initial draft, but rather than using the occasion to mount a political outcry against an insensitive regime, we successfully lob-

bied the government to redraft the bill to remove the threat to people with AIDS, which they did.

Of course, no good deed goes unpunished, as one of my friends wryly says. For supporting the redrafted measure, Dixon and I were called onto the carpet of a gay community meeting one evening and afforded the opportunity to be the target of a couple of hours of angry remonstrance. An intransigent slogan of “No quarantine” was obviously a simpler battlecry than the complexities of moderate legalese. As it turned out — BCCLA, as usual, formed a watchdog committee to monitor the effects of the legislation — no one with AIDS was ever threatened with quarantine. That minor fact didn’t prevent the appearance of vitriolic, scurrilous articles in the gay press (even in gay newspapers that I wrote for), as much as five years after the fact, questioning the state of my soul. Few self-delusions are more convincing than righteous anger.

Meanwhile, the wounded continued to die. In outposts at the margins of the plague, unlike the blitzed epicenters, the deaths may have been epidemiologically proportional to location, but still, those dying were not strangers to us. Fred Gilbertson was a large man in his 30s, a friend of mine from writing groups and the gay newspaper for which we both wrote. His interests included politics, theology and a demi-monde of sexuality with which I was also familiar. He had been a “character” in my book, *Buddy’s*, and unlike some of the other friends I’d written about, he enjoyed his appearance as a semi-fictional figure, taking it, as intended, as a mark of respect for him. For him, the course of AIDS progressed swiftly. A year after his jovial appearance in my book, when I visited him at St. Paul’s Hospital near the end, he was physically shrunken, breathing through an oxygen mask, and without illusions as to his fate. A few months later (I was writing an epilogue for the paperback edition of my book), he was dead.

Other people were acquaintances. Dixon and I spent some time with Kevin Brown, the president of the Vancouver Persons With Aids organization, working on medical and welfare issues for the disabled. Brown was one of the many people whose lives became more focused, as he told me when I interviewed him for a newspaper article, as a result of AIDS. Suddenly, because of the disease, he had become a spokesperson and discovered in himself a reasoned, gentle articulateness. Another person whom I slightly knew was Jon Gates, a social democratic activist. Even as he was dying, he had foreseen that the epicentre of AIDS would shift to Third World countries, and he campaigned to make drugs available to the destitute parts of the world years before the crisis in Africa was dimly perceived by the rest of us. A fellow member of the AIDS Vancouver board was a psychologist named David. On the last day of his life he held a farewell gar-

den party for his friends and acquaintances. I was one of several people he had asked to provide drugs for his suicide, which he committed later that day among a circle of intimates. There were others, of course. I attended memorial ceremonies for Warren Knechtel, a faun-like photographer; for literature professor Rob Dunham; for political activist Maurice Flood. All people I knew. All gone. Now, as the poet Milosz says, “all they can do is make use of me . . . of my hand holding the pen, to return among the living for a brief moment.”

Paul Monette did live to finish *Borrowed Time* and, as it turned out, quite a bit more. His memoir was accompanied by a suite of poems, *Love Alone*, in which he could rage against the dying of the light in another key. Two novels, *Afterlife* and *Halfway Home*, and an autobiography, *Becoming A Man*, followed. Finally, there was a volume of essays, *Last Watch of the Night*, published in 1995, the year of his death, at age 50.

Re-reading *Borrowed Time*, the terror of the first reading gives way to measured grief. Grief, as Monette says, “that will not end till I do.”

Woody Allen

In a dream, I was having a conversation with the filmmaker and actor Woody Allen. We were in a busy university building, the foyer and staircase crowded with students on their way to classes. Allen and I were talking about Hegel. Yes, Allen was saying, Hegel on the subject of tragedy has been very important to me. But have you read Marulla? he asked, and was surprised when I said I hadn't. Oh, you have to, he urged, as he approached the staircase to walk upstairs to the seminar he was conducting. Just before the dream ended, he said, referring ironically to something earlier in the conversation, I have to buy a woman. You mean, I interjected, as he started up the stairs, you have to buy a *novel*! Several people around us who had been listening in as we talked burst out laughing at this, and so did Allen. I basked in the glow of having made a successful joke in the presence of the great comic.

Upon waking, I puzzled over the name of the book or author Allen had recommended, then quickly realized that there's frequently a verbal distortion or elision in dreams because of the vast distances they have to travel on their way from the unconscious. Marulla . . .? Mar . . . Mar . . .? Marcellus . . .? Then I got it. Allen wanted me to read the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius!

Allen is one of the great, if deliberately underappreciated, artists of our time. It became fashionable in recent years, among intellectualized elements of the middle classes, to display a sort of knowing contempt about Allen's films, citing their limitations, repetitiveness, and other imagined flaws. This critical scorn intersected with scandalous revelations about Allen's private life, namely, that he had an affair with his partner's adopted daughter, whom he subsequently married.

I've no objection to people criticising Allen's messy personal affairs, although I think they're probably irrelevant to the estimate of his work, or ought to be. But the criticisms of his art seem to me largely misdirected. One of the objections is a quasi-feminist, ideological complaint that the main character in many of his films (an obviously Woody Allen-like alter ego) is always chasing girls and women who are a zillion years younger than him. Leaving aside the political debate about whether intergenerational relationships are appropri-

ate, one of the things I like about Allen's films is the tenacity of the erotic pursuits of his main Woody Allen-like character, even if they are self-admittedly neurotic. At least, Allen or his alter ego has a reasonably clear idea of the sort of young woman who attracts him and why, which is more than some people can say about their objects of desire.

Nor has he concealed his desires. In many of his films, he has investigated, in interesting ways, the source of his amorous obsessions. Further, the women he portrays in his movies are persons as complex, anxiety-stricken, and as "real" as the unvarnished self-portrait he offers of himself. In one of his funniest scenes, in *Deconstructing Harry* (1997), his therapist wife Joan (Kirstie Alley), who works out of their apartment, discovers that Harry (Woody Allen) has been screwing one of her clients. His character is portrayed as so ethically obtuse as to be almost endearing:

Alley: I knew when I married you that you were mentally ill, but I thought that because I was a professional that I could cure you.

Allen: Hey, the last thing you want to do is get down on yourself as a therapist.

A little later in their screaming match:

Alley: How could you sleep with one of my patients? Don't you realize that's a sacred trust?

Allen: We never go out. Where else am I going to find someone?

Which is to say, Allen gets the point about his supposed moral deficiencies, or minimally, his works of art are, like those of most artists, smarter than he is. More important than judgments about his moral life, Allen has made great films, creating them over a period of more than three decades with the regularity of the arrival of the seasons. The best-known ones, *Annie Hall*, *Manhattan*, or *Hannah and Her Sisters*, are self-mocking yet sympathetic portraits of elements of the New York intelligentsia and their risible contemplations of love and death. He also authored persuasive comic meditations on the nature of art in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* and *Bullets Over Broadway*.

In the latter, a mediocre playwright with a tin ear is forced, in order to secure financial backing for his play, to cast a talentless actress who is the girlfriend of a mobster. She's accompanied to the rehearsals by a hit man who serves as her bodyguard. The rehearsals are a disaster, the acting wooden, the play itself stilted. The hit man makes a small suggestion to the playwright for improving a couple of lines in the play. At first the artist is resistant, but in the face of impending catastrophe, he recognizes that the suggested lines have a

certain verisimilitude, are more like what the characters would really say. Gradually, the hit man — who, it becomes apparent, is the real artist here — makes more suggestions, until eventually he's rewriting and directing the whole thing. And when it becomes clear that the final sticking point of the production is the untalented girlfriend of his gangster boss, the artist-hit man unflinchingly uses the tools of his trade to hilariously solve the artistic impasse. Seldom has a comedy about art so sure-handedly hit the target.

At one point in Allen's career, sometime in the 1980s, he felt the need to make some films in the manner of his own master, Ingmar Bergman, but in *Stardust Memories*, a movie about a Woody Allen-like moviemaker attending a film festival in honour of himself, he had the wit to conjure up some aliens landing in a spaceship. After asking the space visitors what he should do with his life and art, their message to him was to return to the comic aesthetic of the films of his youth. "Tell funnier jokes," the little green men told Allen.

In my dream, when I delivered the punchline about having to buy a novel rather than a woman, I must have been thinking of Allen's story "The Kugelmass Episode" in his book *Side Effects*. Kugelmass is a professor at a New York university, his marriage is a disaster, and he's trying to persuade his psychotherapist that he needs to have an affair. When his therapist resists this plea for permission to embark on an erotic escapade, saying, You need a magician, Kugelmass dumps the therapist. A couple of weeks later, there's an unexpected phone call. The caller is a magician in Brooklyn who announces himself as "Persky," then adds his stagename, "The Great Persky." The magician's device is a box into which Kugelmass is placed, and the gimmick is that if you toss a novel into the magic box, you end up travelling through time and fiction to encounter the female protagonist of the book. Kugelmass chooses *Madame Bovary*, and the story goes on to comically detail Kugelmass's inevitable misadventures with the woman of his dreams. Since my name is Persky, I've always assumed that I am a version of The Great Persky.

Allen's critics regularly announce his decline and demise — he's lost it all, all that's left are one-liners and his pitiable sexual vanity, they confidently declare — but each year there's a "Spring Project" and a "Fall Project." Not everything works. No surprise there. Yet, as in the late masterpiece, *Deconstructing Harry*, Allen still occasionally succeeds in combining all the signature elements and themes of his work. He recreates his *meschugene* relations with his Jewish relatives. There's a send-up of his metaphysical preoccupations through a fully realized portrait of Hell (with fellow comic Billy Crystal doing a turn as the Devil). He offers reflections on making art and representations

of desire. The hopeless tangle of all of it is endlessly, brilliantly interwoven into his recognition of the temporality of being.

Near the end of the film, there's a great scene where Allen arrives at his small alma mater for a ceremony in his honour. Spilling out of the vehicle which he's precariously driven upstate from New York City are his "kidnapped" son from a previous marriage, a gargantuan but sensible black prostitute, the corpse of a man who has died en route, and Allen himself, harried as always. What Allen is saying here is that as absurd as both the voyage and the companions of the voyage may be, this is the truth of the matter. One does argue with one's ex-wife about how to raise the kid. One's desire takes the form of an Amazon, and yet she's interesting and tender as a person, more interesting than the stereotypes of such persons would make her out to be. One does have close friends, and sometimes they inexplicably die on you along the way. In the end, we appear at the obscure ceremony to receive a minor award, surrounded by the unexpected companions of the present moment of the journey as well as by all the ghosts of one's life, still chattering, shrieking, kibbitzing, exactly as they did when they were alive.

Alphabet

When I was four years old, my father, Morrie Persky, bought a blackboard on an easel for me. Across the top of the blackboard, the alphabet was printed in white letters. My father's method of instruction was to draw pictures I requested — a cowboy, say — and then to write the word on the blackboard, pointing out how the letters of the word related to the alphabet at the top of the board.

Once I'd mastered the basics, he drew me complicitously into a routine in which I demonstrated my rudimentary spelling ability to unsuspecting relatives. At a family gathering, he would show me off by innocently asking, "Now, Stan, can you spell 'cat'?"

"C-a-t," I replied.

"How about 'bat'?"

"B-a-t," I dutifully answered, to the silent chorus of adults nodding approval.

"Spell 'rat'," he commanded.

"R-a-t."

Then — just as boredom was about to set in among our familial audience — along came the punchline. "Spell 'idiosyncrasy'," my father said in a deadpan voice.

"I-d-i-o-s-y-n-c-r-a-s-y," I rattled off. My first parlour trick.

Now, much later, I'm tempted beyond the confines of the 26 letters of the English alphabet. I'm attracted to letters found in other languages: the Spanish "ñ" that gives us *niño* and *señor*, or the double "ll" for "llama" and "Mario Vargas Llosa." Also, the small diagonal slash across the letter "ł" in Polish, pronounced as a "w," as in the name of the Polish labour leader, Lech Walesa, so that his last name is pronounced "Va-wen-sa" (the "n" sound comes from a cedilla under the "e"). I'm equally fond of the German double "s" in "Strasse," which has its own sign, ß, and the tongue-twisting "Schloßstraße" (Castle Street), two streets over from where I live part-time in Berlin. Finally, there are the various diacritical marks that can be placed above the letter "s" in Slavic languages to produce a "sh" sound, as in my childhood Polish nickname, "Staś."

Beyond that, other orthographies: Arabic, Cyrillic, Hebrew, Thai, Greek. I've always wondered why there's no equivalent in English to

Greek's sensible "theta" sign for the "th" sound. I guess it's just a matter of linguistic, um, idiosyncrasy. I suppose I should be grateful that my ABC's are not predicated on the thousands of characters in Chinese — then there would truly be no end.

Angkor Wat

I

I'm a more-than-reluctant traveller. I have no desire to go anywhere. I just want to sit at my desk in Vancouver and read and write. Walking up to my local supermarket on 4th Avenue is my idea of a big adventure.

Yet, again and again, I've gone to the ends of the earth, as if possessed by the ancestral gene of the Wandering Jew. I never intend to go, since, as I say, I have no desire to go anywhere. So, how to account for my presence at various times, over many years, in Gdansk, Berlin, Tirana, Vilnius, Naples, Mexico City, Managua, Shanghai, Bangkok, Angkor Wat?

I always seem to back into destinations. It is as if it's not me who wants to go to a particular place, but rather that the place is calling me to it. I know that is a romantic fantasy, but often that's the way it feels. Take Angkor Wat, an abandoned once-thriving Cambodian city-civilization from about 800–1450 CE, which surely meets the definition of the ends of the earth.

I was visiting Bangkok, Thailand, in early 2002 — not because I wanted to, of course, but because a friend of mine, Dan Gawthrop, was living there, and encouraged me to visit him. At the Malaysia Hotel where I was staying, I met a friendly middle-aged American from Kansas City named Larry who, one morning at breakfast, told me he wanted to go to Angkor Wat in Cambodia and was looking for a travelling companion.

It hadn't occurred to me to go there, but I saw when I located it on a map that Angkor Wat wasn't far, just across the Thai-Cambodian border. What's more, I'd vaguely heard it had recently been re-opened to tourists. This was after some three horrific decades in Cambodia: first, American invasion in the early 1970s, followed by civil war and the genocidal rule of the Khmer Rouge, then conquest by neighbouring Vietnam, and finally, a decade of "normalized" but bloody internecine politics. Now the situation was temporarily stable.

I was tempted, having heard of Angkor Wat as one of the fabled temple sites of Southeast Asia, one of the "seven wonders of the world." But for some minor reason — I think the airfare struck me as

unreasonable — I held off. When Larry returned to Bangkok, just before heading home to the States, he gave me an enthusiastic account of his visit, and the idea of going there stayed in my mind.

A month later, in February 2002, I found myself at a Bangkok travel agency. It was just down the street from my hotel, a place I often passed on my way to the neighbourhood internet café in a narrow lane around the corner. The computer shop was a picturesque place filled with wall clocks, a large gloomy aquarium, and ten-year-old Thai kids playing Harry Potter video games. A rooster in a pen across the lane crowed regularly at an ear-splitting pitch. Passing the travel agency on the way back to the hotel, I thought nothing more profound than, Oh, what the hell, I'll just check the fares; it doesn't commit me to anything. So, I figuratively backed in. The overland fare was not only reasonable but ridiculously cheap.

A few days later, at 7 a.m., I was crammed into a mini-van with a half-dozen or so young foreign backpackers and we were on the highway to the border. I'm usually okay once I get to where I'm going but while in transit I assume the petrified posture of a frightened rabbit. The backpackers, dressed in shorts and floppies, were all in pairs, and at least thirty years younger than me, the only solitary traveller in the group. The American couple sitting next to me were "doing" Asia, a half-dozen destinations in two or three weeks, and seemed perfectly at home in the cramped vehicle, their feet propped up on their enormous rucksacks, eating junk food and mildly debating the comparative merits of the pop novelists whom they were respectively reading, John Grisham and Stephen King (they seemed to favour the literary merits of the horror writer King). They were slightly puzzled that I was staying in Bangkok for a couple of months — what could one possibly find to do there over such a long time? — and quickly turned their attention back to their thrilling paperbacks.

After five or six hours on the road, we reached the border. There's a Wild West frontier town, Popit (pronounced "Po-peat"), that you enter after going on foot through the usual complicated customs stations. Two things were immediately visible: gambling casinos and bread. The garish gambling palaces, built in the style of equivalent temples of chance in Las Vegas, are apparently for well-to-do Thai tourists. The bread, sold by kids who approach you as soon as you hit Cambodian customs, is a cultural vestige of French colonialism, since bread isn't a major feature of southeast Asia's rice-based cuisine. I bought a small loaf, which was crusty, delicious, and suddenly exotic after a couple of months of seldom seeing any bread except the toast that the hotel in Bangkok provided for Western breakfasts.

After getting our documents stamped, we were reassembled behind a corrugated metal fence in an empty lot that seemed to be a combi-

nation of garbage dump and informal bus depot, to wait for the vehicle taking us to Siem Reap, the Cambodian town closest to the Angkor Wat site. Through an arrangement between the Thai and Cambodian travel agencies, various tourists in the mini-vans are combined into a larger group and shifted onto a bus. While standing around, amid heaps of trash and various vehicles, waiting for our bus to appear, I reflected that the striking thing about travel is not just the landscapes but how you become familiar with an instant, if transient, group of people — backpackers, drivers, travel agents, vendors, guides and others just hanging about.

I was mainly and anxiously oriented to a young woman in her twenties named Ma, an obviously bright, efficient person who was in charge of the complicated business of ferrying the travellers across the border and recombining them onto the buses for the Cambodian stage of the trip. My anxiety about keeping her in sight diminished once we were at the assembly site and I was reasonably sure I wasn't going to become a lost straggler, abandoned in the middle of nowhere. We had to wait an hour or so. I fell into conversation — in a sort of pidgin made up of various languages — with a teenage boy who was a guide in Popit. He bought a couple of meat kebobs from a passing vendor and immediately offered me one of them. The friendliness of his unexpected gesture jolted me out of my uneasy anticipation of the future back to the present and, within a few minutes in that bedraggled garbage-strewn lot, in the afternoon sun, I began to fantasize a sort of life that I might lead in that border town. I could see a table in a motel room at which I would sit, reading and writing. I think that's the feature of travelling — in which we reconfigure our selves in an imaginary way — that changes us.

The vehicle was an ancient, unreliable-looking, battered school bus. The heat was 30-plus degrees outside and there was no air-conditioning. I sat up front, behind the driver. He kept the folding front door open to get some air circulating. At the last minute, as we were pulling out, a teenage boy hopped on, not the one I'd been talking with earlier.

The road on the Cambo side, in contrast to the smooth four-lane Thai highway, was unpaved, bumpy hard pan. It was the dry season and everything was coated in a layer of fine tan-coloured dust. Once the driver got the bus up to speed, he had to close the door to keep the dust out. It was hot inside, and there was nothing to do but settle in and gaze at the seemingly featureless landscape — seemingly featureless only because I didn't know what I was looking for — as the bus headed in a descending direction down the long ribbon of mostly traffic-free hard pan. The Cambodian teenager introduced himself. His name was Vonnice, he spoke English, and was an Angkor Wat

guide from Siem Reap. He came up to Popit regularly and rode the bus back with the aim of securing some business from the travellers headed to Angkor.

Every once in a while, the bus passed through an inhabited place. As you got near a town, the view changed into agricultural landscape. The rice fields were dry at this time of the year, so you could see the banked-up borders of hard earth that enclosed them, and a system of what looked to be irrigation channels and reservoir pits. The earth-rimmed fields were designed to keep the rice partially submerged in water during the growing season. The towns were a sudden jumble of life, startling after the long stretch of desolate road between habitations. The houses were made of wood and set on stilts because of the flood season, there were groves of banana and other trees, now covered in dust, and there were children everywhere, along with the occasional tethered water buffalo, wandering chickens, and pigs nosing about. It was a quick blur of liveliness — kids playing, people washing clothes, a bit of a marketplace — and then we were back on the empty jostling road.

It wasn't until we passed through the third or fourth farming village that I realized that the whole point of going overland was to see precisely this: how the people lived. The noticeable feature of life was the enormous number of kids. I'd read somewhere that the population of Cambodia was 13 million now, about half again as many as the about 7 or 8 million it had been in the 1970s. And if more than half of them were under 15, that meant that the majority of the population hadn't been born at the time of the genocide in Cambodia. For teens like Vonnie, the gruesome image of "the killing fields" was just a piece of history, as it was for most of the backpackers aboard the bus. Only a middle-aged woman I glimpsed for an instant in one of the villages, or an elderly traveller might have the horror as a direct or indirect memory. So, this is a divided society: grandparents and parents who lived through hell, and their children for whom the horrors are stories.

It was a long ride, eight hours or more, with a late afternoon lunch break in the one sizeable town on the route, and a few rest stops along the way. As it was growing dark, something appeared in the distance that might be a city, but it was at least a couple of hours away. Vonnie had circulated among the backpackers, looking for business, and now dropped into the seat next to mine for the end of the haul. It was dark when we reached Siem Reap. I had tried to memorize the map of the town in my guide book, but I quickly lost track of where I was as we turned this way and that through the streets. Instead of anything like a sense of direction all I have is the sort of blurry visual field that 19th century French impressionist painters invented. I couldn't get any sense of the streets at night —

there were only shadowy buildings and the occasional patch of light provided by a flicker of neon or a string of coloured lightbulbs. The bus rolled into a compound behind a backpacker hostel.

Since I was a middle-class tourist rather than a backpacker, I asked Vonnie if he knew how to find the hotel noted in my guide book, the Golden Angkor. He'd take me there on his motorbike, he told me. First he had to help unload the rucksacks from the bus. I stood at the edge of the bustling crowd of backpackers, people from the hostel, and various kids with motorbikes in the warm, anxiety-tinged night. Then I was on the back of Vonnie's motorbike, clutching my satchel with one hand, and Vonnie with the other, weaving through the dark streets of Siem Reap.

My expectations of catastrophe, as almost always, were happily unfulfilled. We neither crashed nor was I abandoned in the middle of nowhere. The Golden Angkor, once we arrived, turned out to be a perfectly nice middle-class hotel, they had a room free, there was a Thai restaurant next door, and the room had a writing table. Angkor Wat, Vonnie explained, was about a half hour out of town. You could get there by motorbike — that's how he made his living, taking tourists out to the site — or rent a car and driver. I preferred the latter. He said he would arrange for me to be picked up at 10 o'clock the next morning. So, there I was, safe for the night in the middle of nowhere — but not nowhere for Vonnie and the other people of Siem Reap, a city of about 800,000 people. Safe, showered, fed, seated at my writing table, memorizing basic greetings and numbers in Cambodian, which uses a system based on the number five. So, ten is double-five.

II

In the morning there was no problem getting a little metal tankard of coffee from the Thai restaurant next door and bringing it up to my room. After my morning coffee and reading, I took a walk through the streets of Siem Reap. In the hazy, soft sunlight, the villa-like buildings still carried a trace of the town's French colonial provincial history, which had lasted until the mid-20th century. There were several construction sites with new hotels going up. The streets carried a surprising amount of traffic. Even though the map in my mind and the streets seemed to correlate, I wasn't very venturesome, going just far enough to identify various nearby restaurants, a place that sold postcards and stamps, a drugstore. At 10, the car and its elderly driver appeared as promised, along with Vonnie on his bike. I asked Vonnie how much he charged for a day's services, and hired him to walk me around the site, since the driver, who looked older than me and only

spoke Cambodian, didn't seem a likely guide. As a middle-class elderly foreigner who was only likely to see Angkor Wat once in his life, I wasn't tempted to skimp.

The reason for this considerable narrative of utterly mundane travel details and the self-portrait of a timorous narrator-traveller is to make the contrast with the splendour of Angkor Wat as sharp as possible. Despite the fame of its great temple, Angkor isn't just the gigantic, moat-surrounded, five-towered 12th century building that is mainly referred to by that name. Instead, Angkor is the name of a civilization that occupied a considerable interior region of Cambodia, from the once fish-filled Great Lake at the south to the Kulen Plateau in the north, all of it located partway between what would become the modern Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh to the southeast (and the Mekong River delta further south), and the Thai kingdom to the northwest. So, when you go through the toll station at the entrance to the Angkor grounds and pay the fee (in American dollars), you're entering an area of a hundred square kilometres or more, with fifty or so temples, and the remains of the towns and water reservoirs built by successive dynasties over a 600-year period.

We drove along a fairly busy road for about ten minutes — already at that hour there were busloads of tourists, people on bicycles and motorbikes, pick-up trucks — until we were moving parallel to the moat, on the other side of which was Angkor Wat. The driver pulled into a large, dusty, tree-shaded parking lot opposite the temple. Behind the lot was a row of open, barn-like sheds with restaurants and souvenir stands. The tourists getting out of vehicles were quickly surrounded by groups of kids hawking postcards, T-shirts, and other items.

Vonnie took me to the low stone bridge across the moat that leads directly to the main entrance of the temple. The first sense of the magnitude of the place is the scale of the moat surrounding Angkor Wat. It is some 200 metres wide, and retained on both its inner and outer banks by walls of laterite and huge blocks of sandstone, cut to fit one against the next, all of which cover a distance of about 10 kilometres. At the moment, rather than reflect on the precise facts of the size of Angkor, I simply went on the impressions I had of the moat's vast placid waters and the munificence of the bevelled towers ahead, located behind the arcaded outer walls of the temple. I picked up the details later on, reading Charles Higham, the leading Western archeological expert on the region, author of the rather dry but informative *The Civilization of Angkor*.

From the inner edge of the moat there's a flat grassy expanse, beyond which stand the outer walls, about 4 or 5 metres high. The bridge across the moat is linked to the main entrance via a causeway

whose balustrades are in the form of sculpted mythical beasts, dragon-like animals known as *nagas*. Inside the walls, there are a series of galleries, lotus towers, and various side temples that comprise the heart of the complex. The walls of the outermost gallery are covered with bas-reliefs illustrating the life of the king and his court at Angkor in the 12th century. Accompanied by Vonnie, I wandered through the labyrinth of the temple for two or three hours, clambering over stone doorsteps, ascending the towers, meeting statues of gods, wandering through sunlight into dark inner chambers.

So, what am I seeing, I asked myself at some point — or maybe at every point — in the process of moving from scene to scene within the temple. How does the site of this once-upon-a-time civilization mesh with the tangle of individual memory and imagination constructed over a lifetime? First, all travel that's interesting is a kind of time-travel, or else it is merely two-dimensional. Here, it's 2002 and at the same time, roughly 1150 CE. Angkor is a faerie castle of childhood books, the Lost City in the jungle, the actual Magic Kingdom, as contrasted to kitschy, cartoon-based simulacra of various Disney theme parks around the world, safe holiday destinations for vacationing family ensembles.

There's an important, complex oppositional relationship between sprawling actual historical sites — Angkor, the Acropolis at Athens, the Egyptian Pyramids, those in Mexico, etc. — no matter how tarted up for tourists, and the carefully manufactured fakes. Nor are the theme parks only located in nations with relatively brief national histories like the United States, which might otherwise be a reason for their popularity there. They also appear in societies with millennia-long traditions, and have become a phenomena of globalization. Ian Buruma, a Western scholar of Asian culture, points out that one of the cultural conundrums of contemporary China, Japan, Singapore, and other parts of East Asia is the craze for theme parks, an extraordinary proliferation of which are woven into the new commercial urban landscapes. “They are to East Asian capitalism what folk dancing festivals were to communism,” Buruma notes. They're all over Asia, and “are sometimes as quickly abandoned as they were built, or even before they were finished . . . What is curious is not just the insatiable taste for these fantasy places, but the fact that they often blur seamlessly into the ‘real’ urban landscape.”

Buruma is primarily interested in figuring out the political relationship between the theme parks, as well as other replications and simulacra, and the ultimately similar communist and capitalist regimes of the region. “So why are Chinese officials prepared, or even eager, to tear down physical evidence of a real past and replace it with copies?” he wonders. “Why do they appear to be happier with virtual

history? And what lies behind the ubiquitous taste for Western theme parks, for creating an ersatz version of abroad at home?"

Whether considering authoritarian Singapore, the dubious democracy of Japan, or the communist version of capitalism of China, Buruma believes "there is something inherently authoritarian about theme parks, and especially the men who create them. Every theme park is a controlled utopia, a miniature world where everything can be made to look perfect . . . [and] nothing is left to chance."

The theme parks, like globalized mega-malls, are themselves utopian models for the societies in which they're located, and which those societies are meant to increasingly resemble. As Buruma remarks, "Singapore, once likened to a Disneyland with the death penalty, is truly a place where nothing is left to chance." Everything is "subject to elaborate guidelines, more or less forcefully imposed." Among the uncertain political prospects of post-Maoist China, one of them, he suggests, is that the country, "as a continent-sized Singapore, will be the shining model of authoritarian capitalism, saluted by all illiberal regimes, corporate executives, and other PR men . . . the whole world as a gigantic theme park, where constant fun and games will make free thought redundant."

As-yet-undeveloped Cambodia, by contrast, has to make do with merely real history. Angkor Wat is relatively uncontrolled. There are a few paths marked off as not yet cleared of landmines, the occasional rope restraining barrier before the bas-reliefs on the walls of the galleries, and some uniformed official guides available for hire. Vonnie told me it was his ambition to ascend into their ranks one day. But the visitors were free to scramble around the site, skinning their knees on some precarious steep stairway up the side of a tower, free, in other words, to make whatever they can of the historical reality in which they find themselves. The first disjuncture, then, is one of ontology, of being in the presence of something real in a world whose character is increasingly virtual, not just by way of manufactured spectacle, but including all the digitalia of TV screens, computers, and relentless optics.

Second, as against the ahistorical contemporary theme parks, which can only be read as a set of signs of postmodernism, at places like Angkor, you're confronted with the half-solved historical puzzles of a vanished civilization. The story, albeit fragmentary, is put together by scholars like Higham, from the surviving stone or brick temples, archeological remains of the now dried-out great water reservoirs, and most important, scattered texts throughout the region. The "stone inscriptions set into these monuments," says Higham, "provide a vital social overlay to the skeletal archeological remains. These usually incorporate, in Sanskrit, the name or names of

the founders, the presiding god and the date. Further information follows in Khmer. The names of the king or benefactor and the gods are repeated. Although Hindu gods are often named, with a preference for Shiva, local gods are also mentioned. We find reference to the god of the cloud, a tree, the old and the young god, and the god at the double pond . . . “The characteristic inscription lists the amount of land belonging to the temple, its boundaries, productive capacities, the names of people assigned to maintain the temple, and a royal warning against violating the rules of the establishment. The texts are absolutely specific. One, reports Higham, “records the assignment of 17 dancers or singers, 23 or 24 record keepers, 19 leaf sewers, 37 artisans including a potter, 11 weavers, 15 spinners and 59 rice field workers of whom 46 were female.”

The textual records also attest to the power of the kingdom’s rulers. About Indravarman, a late 9th century king, the inscription says that “the right hand of this prince, long and powerful, was terrible in combat when his sword fell on his enemies, scattering them to all points of the compass. Invincible, he was appeased only by his enemies who turned their backs in surrender.” This claim was engraved on the foundation stone of a temple in 879 CE, followed by a pledge made on the king’s accession: “Five days hence, I will begin digging.” Indravarman lived up to his promise, constructing a huge reservoir of unprecedented size, 3800 metres long and 800 wide, which is recorded in another inscription: “He made the [reservoir], mirror of his glory, like the ocean.”

Angkor Wat was built some 300 years later, the enduring temple of Suryavarman II, and without question, agree the scholars, the outstanding achievement of the civilization of Angkor. The foundation stone, mentioned by later visitors, is missing. What we know is that the temple was dedicated to the Hindu god Vishnu and opens onto the west, the god’s quarter of the compass. For all its present splendour, Higham tells us, Angkor Wat today is but a grey reflection of its former state. Traces of gilded stucco remain on the central tower, and an early 17th century Japanese visitor reported gilding over the stone bas-relief panels. In the 12th century, it was literally a golden palace. The 4-metre-high statue of Vishnu remains, still venerated.

In the great illustrated galleries, I came upon the bas-relief panel of Suryavarman himself, sitting in state upon a wooden throne. He wears a pointed crown, heavy ear ornaments, a necklace, armlets, and bracelets. Straps crisscross his pectorals, and there are anklets above his feet, which are drawn up in a half-lotus posture. A forest of parasols, large fans, and fly whisks surrounds him as he receives his ministers, named in the inscriptions, offering scrolls and holding their hands over their hearts, signalling loyalty and deference.

Other sections of the gallery walls show scenes from the Hindu epics, massive battles with hand to hand combat; Yama, the god of death, sitting on a water buffalo, determining the fate of each person; a depiction of “the churning of the ocean of milk in search of the elixir of immortality.”

But the specific purpose and symbolic meaning of Angkor remain elusive. A temple, sure, but also a mausoleum for Suryavarman? The central towers, the scholars think, represent the peaks of Mount Meru, home of the Hindu gods, while the moat possibly symbolizes the surrounding ocean, but even if Angkor and its counterparts are intended as earthly representations of Paradise — the temple as paradise theme park? — the explanations are thin and unsatisfactory. Did the outer wall enclose residential areas and the king’s palace? Where did the rice-growing peasants live? What about burial rites?

If much of the history is patchy, one macro-feature of the civilization is clearer. In addition to its reality, and what we can piece together of its history, the third thing about Angkor civilization is, in a Marxist sense, its mode of production. What Angkor is founded on is rice, water, and labour — surplus rice, control of water, and the ability to organize, protect and exploit labour power. The mode of rice cultivation in the region is what’s known as flood retreat agriculture. As the waters of the flood season subside, the rice grows in the half-submerged earth-banked fields. The point of the farming village fields I saw on the road to Siem Reap now becomes clear. The function of the giant reservoirs scattered throughout the region, however, remains something of a mystery, though one would immediately imagine some sort of irrigation system as the dry season sets in. Higham leads readers through an unresolved scholarly controversy about whether or not the reservoirs were for irrigation or other uses. But in the end, it is a surplus of rice, controlled by the warriors through force, that is the basis of dynastic power. Rice makes possible parasols, fans, fly whisks, kings on thrones, artists to make gilded stone bas-reliefs of the sinuous bejewelled body of Suryavarman.

III

Vonnie and I made our way back across the bridge over the moat, found our driver in the shaded parking lot, and I took both of them to lunch in one of the barn-like sheds that housed the restaurants. Then we got into the car again and drove along a winding, forested road, north to Angkor Thom, a city built by the regime succeeding the one that built Angkor Wat. At the entrance to the city is a stone gate about 25 metres high, a heap of columns forming a rough arch,

topped by sculptures of giant, broad-faced, Buddha-like heads in elaborate headgear. In the centre of Angkor Thom is its main temple, with fifty or more of the same half-smiling, immense sandstone heads as the ones at the entrance gate. The heads are carved into the temple towers. I clambered over the stone slabs of the temple stairways, cracked and broken over time, crawling up onto a terrace a third of the way up the towers.

Angkor Thom is the creation of a king named Jayavarman VII, who was crowned in 1181, after a turbulent period of warfare in which he repulsed a water-borne invasion — up the Mekong and Tonle Sap rivers and across the Great Lake — by a rival kingdom to the east. During Jayavarman's reign, this great new city north of Angkor Wat was constructed, with the traditional moat, city walls about 3 kilometres long on all sides, pierced by the entrance gateways and their colossal heads, one of which we had passed through, and an array of temples and palaces.

On the walls of the principal temple, as at Angkor Wat, there are bas-reliefs providing a glimpse of life during Jayavarman's rule. In addition to the familiar battle scenes, the striking feature of the Angkor Thom bas-reliefs is scenes of domestic life that give us some visual sense of the everyday world of Angkor civilization. In one panel, a woman in labour is being helped by midwives. In another scene, two men are hunched over a game resembling chess. Workers are shaping building stones with chisels in another sculpted picture, and lifting them by means of a lever. Fishermen are casting nets and hauling in their catch, women are selling the fish in a marketplace. Crowds of onlookers watch a cockfight. A man carries a rice basket, another drives an ox-cart. For scholars and visitors alike, the domestic bas-reliefs are like a newsreel documentary of everyday life. They flesh out the details of the inscriptions, which record that 2740 officials and 2202 assistants lived and worked in Jayavarman's royal city, and 12,640 people had residential rights within the walls. To feed and clothe this population, there are scrupulously listed quantities of rice, honey, molasses, oil, fruit, sesame, millet, beans, butter, milk, and all clothing materials; "even the number of mosquito nets is set down," as Higham notes. Assigned to supply the temple were 66,265 men and women, a figure rising to 79,365 if you include foreign Burmese and Cham workers.

A century later, there's a final, unprecedented, remarkable text available for Angkor civilization. The king at the end of the 13th century is also named Jayavarman and the tangled politics of his regime are unclear, other than for the evidence that part of the ideological struggle involved religion. This Jayavarman, the eighth in the line of that name, was, as Higham reports, a worshipper of Shiva and an

iconoclast who destroyed or modified every image of the Buddha that the two preceding regimes had created. If you really wanted to know anything about Angkor you'd have to sort out the ideas associated with Vishnu, Shiva, Buddha, and the rest. But the complex subject of the struggles between various belief systems promoting rival gods and philosophies can be left aside here. What's of interest during Jayavarman's regime is that there's an eyewitness, one who eventually sat at the equivalent of a writing table. He's the man with whom I identify.

He was Chinese and his name is Zhou Daguan. He arrived in August 1296 as a member of a diplomatic mission from the Chinese emperor to Cambodia, and he stayed as a guest in a house in Angkor Thom for eleven months, observing life at the court, in the capital, and in the countryside. After his return to China, Zhou wrote an account of his visit, which survived in the Chinese archives, and was first translated into French in the late 18th century.

Zhou describes the city, with its moat and walls, the gold-covered stone heads at the gates, which were closed each night and opened again in the morning, with only "dogs and criminals who had had their toes cut off . . . barred entry." Angkor Thom's golden temples are recorded, along with the royal palace, the tile-roofed houses of the nobility and the homes of the lower classes, roofed with thatch. In the middle-class home in which Zhou lived for almost a year, the floor is covered by matting, but there is no furniture. Rice is husked in a mortar and cooked in ceramic vessels on a clay stove. Family members and Zhou sit on mats and eat from ceramic or copper plates. A half-coconut shell serves as a ladle, small cups made of woven leaves contain sauces. They drink wine made from honey and rice. At night, everyone sleeps on mats laid out on the floor, but it is so hot that people often get up during the night to bathe. Two or three families arrange for a ditch to be dug for use as a latrine, which is covered with leaves.

Zhou also provides an account of the life of the city, punctuated with religious festivals, fireworks, parades, martial art displays on elephants, and the twice daily royal audiences given by the king. But it is in that house where Zhou lived for a year that the human figures begin to move for us in the present tense, where those countless lives now utterly lost to memory have a momentary vividness.

IV

Just at the instant of exhaustion in the mid-afternoon sun, as the visual data blurred and I dreaded the prospect of a further excursion, Vonnie casually mentioned that we could drive back to Siem Reap for a

mid-day break, and then return to Angkor Wat that evening to watch the sunset, apparently the custom of both tourists and local inhabitants. Back in the cool hotel room in Siem Reap, I showered, napped, sat at the writing table with my notebook, like Zhou Daguan.

In the early evening we drove back to the now recognizable great temple of Angkor Wat. The road was crowded with local people on bicycles and motorbikes who came out for picnic dinners along the grassy banks around the moat. I sat on the steps of one of the temple entrances, facing west, watching the sun slide below the tops of distant groves of trees.

Back in Siem Reap that night, I ate at one of the restaurants I'd noted on my morning walkabout, practiced my few phrases of Cambodian on the waiters, took an after dinner walk. On the edges of town were the shadowy hotel construction sites, not middle-class hotels, but luxury dwellings going up for a different class of tourist who would jet in from Phnom Penh, Bangkok, Tokyo. On the way back from Angkor, I had glimpsed a half-dozen giant gift emporia, temples for consumers. There was a current of uncertain excitement among the people I met, a kind of boom-town atmosphere. Those like Vonnie were quickly learning English. We'd run into some Japanese tourists at the site that afternoon, and I noticed that he'd already picked up enough Japanese for rudimentary conversations. The strangers who came to town were an opportunity, and it was all recent enough that the local Cambodians were still a little unsure about what these wealthy foreigners wanted, tentative about what should be offered, how flirtatious to be.

The next morning we drove out to the site and Vonnie walked me through various temples at a greater distance from Angkor Wat. The most energetic trek was to a temple atop a hill that you reached by scrambling up a long slope of broken rock. Once you reached the summit upon which the temple was perched, you could climb up its vertiginous staircases for a panoramic view of the countryside. The hike up the slope, however, was enough for me. I could see the towers of Angkor poking up in the forested distance. Noticing that I wasn't enthusiastic about the clamber down, Vonnie suggested that we could take the road at the back of the hill, a dirt path that wound gently downward. The main traffic consisted of elephants carrying tourists up and down, to and from the temple. When an elephant approached I pressed against the inner edge of the road to let the great swaying beast pass.

That was enough. I'd seen what it was possible for me to take in, unless I was planning to stay for a much longer time. We made a dutiful stop at one of the gift temples on the way back to Siem Reap, but

I'd already bought an Angkor Wat T-shirt from one of the kids hawk-
ing them in the parking lot, and there wasn't anything else I wanted.
I'd seen it.

V

Angkor Wat was sacked in 1431 by the Thais, whose kingdom was
based at Ayyuthaya, just north of Bangkok. It was then abandoned to
the jungle. The subsequent history of Angkor is one of its "reception"
— of how it was seen and understood — by explorers, colonial visi-
tors, and now tourists like me.

In the late 16th century, some hundred and fifty years after it had
been abandoned, Portuguese traders and missionaries became aware of
a great city hidden deep in the wilds of Cambodia. The Portuguese
had heard stories of a Cambodian king named Satha, who, while on
an elephant hunt, with his retainers beating a path through the jungle
undergrowth, was brought up short by stone giants and a massive
wall. According to the account, Satha ordered a work-party of sev-
eral thousand men to clear away the jungle, thus exposing the lost
cities of Angkor civilization.

One of the first foreigners was a Capuchin friar, Antonio de Mag-
dalena, who explored the ruined city in 1586. Three years later,
shortly before the friar's death in a shipwreck, he gave an account of
his visit to Diogo do Couto, official historian of the Portuguese Indies.
"This city is square, with four principal gates, and a fifth which serves
the royal palace," wrote do Couto, setting down the friar's recollec-
tions. "The city is surrounded by a moat, crossed by five bridges . . .
The stone blocks of the bridges are of astonishing size. The stones of
the wall are also of an extraordinary size and so joined together that
they look as if they are made of just one stone . . . the source of which
is, amazingly, over 20 leagues away . . ."

The 16th century account goes on to record that "half a league
from this city is a temple called Angar. It is of such extraordinary con-
struction that it is not possible to describe it with a pen, particularly
since it is like no other building in the world. It has towers and deco-
ration and all the refinements which the human genius can conceive
of . . . The temple is surrounded by a moat, and access is by a single
bridge, protected by two stone tigers so grand and fearsome as to
strike terror into the visitor."

Two decades later, in 1609, Bartolomé de Argensola wrote, "One
finds in the interior within inaccessible forests, a city of 6,000 homes,
called Angon. The monuments and roads are made of marble, and

are intact. The sculptures are also intact, as if they were modern. There is a strong wall. The moat, stone-lined, can admit boats . . . There are epitaphs, inscriptions, which have not been deciphered. And in all this city—the natives discovered it—there were no people, no animals, nothing living. I confess I hesitate to write this, it appears as fantastic as the Atlantis of Plato.” I too hesitate.

French missionaries entered the region in the 17th century; at the end of the next century Zhou Daguang’s memoir was published in Paris; and in the mid-19th century, with Cambodia now a French protectorate, a steady flow of mostly French explorer-naturalists, photographers, and archeological scholars began the study and restoration of the monuments. The obscure volumes of the memoirs of the often strange, wandering, fever-wracked men — I later read one by Henri Mouhot — can be found occasionally in Bangkok bookstores.

The next morning, I sat on a bench in front of the Golden Angkor, along with some local drivers, anxiously wondering whether the bus bound for Bangkok would actually appear. The desk clerk had assured me more than once that he had been in contact with Ma, the woman who handled the travel arrangements. I saw it as a problem in logistics equivalent to the provisioning of Napoleon’s army in Russia, and likely to have the same doomed outcome. Well, that overstates it, but only a little, at least from the viewpoint of the reluctant traveller. The bus arrived, the backpackers were aboard, and we pulled out of Siem Reap, back onto the highway towards Popit, the border station, and then onto Bangkok. A young French couple was sitting alongside me. “How did you like Angkor?” I asked. The woman said, “Oh, the temples are all right, but we’re more interested in, you know, the people.”

That night the bus pulled into the driveway of the Malaysia Hotel in Bangkok. There was an odd rush of feeling as I recognized and was greeted by the familiar faces of the desk clerks, the bellman by the elevator, the waitresses standing at the entrance to the hotel coffee shop. Did you have a good trip, they asked. “Yes,” I said, “it was astonishing,” then added, as do all returning travellers, “but it’s good to be home.” In time-travel, what you learn is that home is in the middle of nowhere, as are we all.

Animals

The answer to the titular question of Clive Wynne's *Do Animals Think?* (2004) is: Not very much. I mention this not only to dispel unnecessary suspense but because the students in the first-year university philosophy classes that I teach often believe that their dogs, cats, budgies, and goldfish are thinking pretty much the same thoughts they are. Unfortunately, some of them are right, I point out — but I point it out only when I'm in a snide and grumpy mood.

Wynne, a peripatetic academic who grew up on the British Isle of Wight and is, at last report on his book jacket, a psychology professor at the University of Florida, asks, "Are we human beings alone on this planet in our consciously thinking minds, or are we surrounded by knowers whose thoughts are just too alien for us to understand?" As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein famously suggested, If a lion were to speak, we would not understand what it said. Although there is a lot of popular mysticism about animal minds, the answer Wynne comes to in his book is that we humans are alone in the kind of thinking we do, at least until some recognizable artificial intelligence comes along. Yet the urban and jungle myths persist. "If I had a penny for every time I have been told that chimpanzees are genetically as nearly identical to us as makes no difference and, given appropriate training, can communicate in human language," Wynne says, "I would have a great pile of small change." Ditto for tales about dolphins using "an elaborate language among themselves that we are not smart enough to decode," to say nothing of whale songs, weeping elephants, and loyal hounds.

Of course, animals are wonderful, and Wynne devotes a large part of his book to writing charmingly about the behaviour of honeybees, bats, pigeons and dolphins. Each species has unique sensory capabilities, from the sonar of bats and dolphins, to the ability to see ultra-violet light possessed by birds, and the sensitivity to electric and magnetic fields experienced by some fish. "The obscure Australian duck-billed platypus can tell if a battery has any current left in it," Wynne notes in one of dozens of oddball factoids he provides, then deadpans, "though there are easier methods of testing batteries." At the same time that there is tremendous diversity in the animal king-

dom, there are shared “basic psychological processes like learning and some kinds of memory, along with simple forms of concept formation, such as identifying objects as being the same or different from other objects . . . All of these seem to be common to a wide range of species and to operate in similar ways in animals as diverse as chicks and chimpanzees.”

But there’s a difference that makes a difference. “After forty years of trying we can say definitively that no nonhuman primate (or any other species) has ever developed anything equivalent to human language,” Wynne reports. Though humans are distinct, if not utterly unique, Wynne is not at all suggesting that some “divine intervention separates us humans from all the rest of creation. In denying human-style language to any other species, I am not trying to lift humans up from the beasts and closer to God . . . To admit that humans are different does not return them to the centre of the universe.” That is, Wynne is a straightforward Darwinian who argues that evolutionary development is the best explanation of human intelligence and communication capacities.

For most of the animal kingdom and nature, “red in tooth and claw,” it looks like instinct, or hardwiring with some adaptive capacities, handles most of what in humans involves thinking. And conversely, a lot of what humans think about doesn’t occur in the brains of non-human animals. In case there’s any doubt about nature being red in tooth and claw, Wynne provides lots of grisly details about the lives of digger wasps, who paralyze beetles or locusts and deposit them in their birthing burrows, so that when the baby wasps emerge from their eggs, they’ll have something to munch on before digging out into the big world. But if you interrupt the digger wasp’s birthing routine, it’ll go back and perform the whole routine over and over, no matter how many times you interrupt it. The wasp never figures it out; it is hardwired to do it one way.

Students in the philosophy classes I teach are only momentarily persuaded by such examples. Invariably, they return to the question, “But how do you know that Fido and Felix aren’t thinking just like us?” Well, I say, they give no evidence of such thinking in their behaviour or in their communications, presumably because they don’t have the kinds of brains that have evolved to do that sort of thing. “But maybe they’re thinking thoughts, anyway,” they insist, perhaps thinking of oppressed people under dictatorial regimes who have thoughts they don’t utter. “Any maybe they have their own way of communicating them,” the students add, as prepared to entertain the notion of animal psychic powers as they are to consider human psychics. Even my concession that their pets are sort of thinking about their student owners’ arrival home from school, and are happy to see

them, and are sort of thinking about food, walks, taking a pee, or digging up a well-remembered bone, doesn't appear to satisfy the students. They think me rather cruel and close-minded for denying that their dogs and cats are pondering the prospects of the local hockey team winning the league championship, just as they are.

The crux of all this, and "the critical question to bear in mind is, Has any animal succeeded in learning an open-ended language system like our own, or have other species only mastered communication in a more closed manner . . .?" The notion of chimpanzee speech acquisition achieved a breakthrough in 1970 when Allen and Beatrice Gardner taught a chimp named Washoe to use about 125 Ameslan, or deaf language, signs. "Prior to the Gardners' research," Wynne observes, "the prevailing position was that chimps were incapable of learning human language because they lacked the specialized brain structures that underpin its comprehension and production. With the publication of Washoe's feats, the new received wisdom became that chimpanzees only lacked the ability to speak." What happened after that was curious. The story of Washoe passed into educated popular wisdom and became a staple of urban legend.

While the signing chimp achieved popular currency, other researchers were discovering the limits of chimp language acquisition. Herbert Terrace of Columbia University published *Nim* in 1979, an account of his work with a chimpanzee he named Nim Chimpsky, with a little intended malice towards linguist Noam Chomsky. Terrace began with a predisposition favouring environmental factors in language learning as opposed to the innate language acquisition mechanisms proposed by Chomsky. At the end of several years' work with Nim, Terrace concluded, according to Wynne, "that what Nim was doing had little to do with language as we normally understand it. Instead . . . the chimp had achieved a simpler form of learning: that making certain signs led to certain consequences. The chimp had learned to produce certain arm and hand movements to demand things he wanted: 'I do this; I get that.'"

Terrace also noted several other limits to chimp learning. The vocabulary acquired by apes, about 250 words over three or four years, is pretty modest compared to human infant acquisition rates. The chimps never experienced the "spurt" of language learning that occurs in humans at about age two. Although there is a bit of controversy about particular primates and their vocabularies, Wynne reminds readers that "though it is always fashionable to bemoan the limited vocabulary of contemporary youth, the average U.S. high school graduate knows about 40,000 words." I'm not sure I've observed 40,000 word vocabularies in most of my students, but even a half or a quarter of that puts it beyond mere quantitative compari-

son with Nim. Of course, the argument about vocabulary size in relation to chimps is subject to the objection of the irrelevance of criticizing dancing dogs, since the wonder is that they can dance at all.

But while humans are stringing together little sentences at age three, “this never happened to Nim. The average length of his utterances remained stuck at only a little over one word throughout his training period.” Even more important, neither Nim nor any of the subsequent language-acquiring chimps of the 1980s and 90s ever demonstrated anything close to a minimal grasp of grammar. “And grammar,” argues Wynne, “is what makes the difference between being able to express a number of ideas equal to the number of words you know and being able to express any idea whatsoever.” Grammar is what turns lexicons into open-ended systems, and without it, you don’t develop what we call thinking. Yes, there’s some thinking going on in other primate species, but not much. Wynne comes to similar conclusions about non-human primate tool-use, self-identification and “culture.” Yes, there’s a bit of it, “but on the other hand— how slight this culture is.” (By the way, none of these limitations is an argument for treating animals badly.)

“For all the excitement and all the TV documentaries,” Wynne concludes, “the so-called ‘language-trained’ apes have not learned language . . . They sign or press buttons because doing so gets them what they want. They can be drilled to string a couple of signs together but usually can’t be bothered. Although some of them have been in training for decades, there is nothing to suggest that any of them ever comprehend grammar. Grammar is the crucial lubricant that opens language up from being limited by our vocabulary to being completely infinite in its expressive possibilities.” As Wynne says at another point, “Without grammar there is no language.” And maybe, without language, there isn’t much thinking.

And then: Just as I finished writing a review of Wynne’s book and posted it on the website magazine I write for, I suddenly remembered a book in my home library that I hadn’t thought about in years. I went to my bookshelves, and there it was: *Animal Friends*, and inside the cover (a picture of horses and colts on a farm) there was a filled-in form noting that the book had been presented to me by my Uncle Docky on my third birthday, January 19, 1944. It was the first book in my library, and 60 years later, I still had it. The children’s book that brought me closer to the world of animals would also, through its use of language, take me irrevocably further from them.

Apartheid

One day in the 1980s, when apartheid still existed in South Africa, I saw scenes of rioting in the sprawling black African township of Soweto on the evening television news. The visuals featured menacing armoured vehicles that were more tank than truck, rumbling through the racially segregated encampment of more than a million people, spewing tear gas and bullets.

The next day, I was visiting my friend Tom Sandborn. He'd seen the news, too. As we sat at a picnic table in his sunny Vancouver backyard, I said, "Tom, we've got to do something."

This was one of those rare occasions when the famous political question, "What is to be done?", had an obvious answer. The black leadership in South Africa had called for international sanctions against the country's white apartheid government, sanctions that ought to take the form, they advised, of a boycott of products imported from South Africa. The call for sanctions received the support of the United Nations and the boycott was being enforced, albeit haphazardly, by various countries around the world.

One of the few exceptions to the boycott was occurring where Tom and I lived, in British Columbia, on the west coast of faraway Canada. Practically every other province in Canada had implemented a boycott against South African liquor products, but not the conservative provincial government of British Columbia. Even as people in Soweto were being shot before our televisual eyes, the beefy minister for liquor sales in British Columbia was justifying the continuing sale of South African liquor products on the grounds of the sanctity of consumer rights in a free market. Consumers, he argued, have the right to individually choose whether or not to support the apartheid government of South Africa by buying or not buying its products.

Tom didn't bat an eye. He didn't engage me in theoretical arguments about the efficacy of the sanctions strategy or about the inconvenience of engaging in acts of civil disobedience, topics that were the subject of extended hand-wringing in newspaper columns and among political activists. Instead, we went straight to his basement and began rehearsals. Our first task was to learn how to smash a bottle without cutting our hands. There's nothing worse than political

klutzes who can't get the champagne bottle to smash against the about-to-be-launched ship or who end up a bloody mess themselves. Since this was to be a symbolic act for the eyes of television cameras, and since television cameras are easily distracted, we wanted to be sure that their eyes stayed focused on the bottle rather than any fumbling slapstick of ours. Soon, armed with ordinary gardening gloves and a small hammer, we had progressed to the ranks of journeyman bottle smashers.

A couple of days later, accompanied by a gaggle of TV cameras and print reporters whom Tom had alerted, the two of us appeared on the premises of the B.C. government liquor store at the corner of 18th and Cambie in Vancouver. Among Tom's many virtues are his organizational thoroughness and tidiness. He had already cased the store, and we were able to go directly to the South African wines section. Furthermore, Tom had phoned the union, informing them of our intentions, and asking them to tell the workers in the store so that they wouldn't be overly alarmed by our criminal act. Finally, Tom had brought along plastic bags, so that the broken glass and spilled wine wouldn't make a mess for the store's employees.

We each selected a bottle of South African wine, donned our gardening gloves and wielded our hammer while the cameras duly recorded our minor protest against apartheid and the policies of the government of British Columbia. There was a bit of a hitch with the authorities. While Tom borrowed a mop and bucket to tidy up the floor, I had to remind the store manager that it was his job to call the police. Then we had to stand around for a while until they showed up. When they did, there were a half dozen of them, two constables and four senior members. They took us into the back room of the liquor store for questioning. At the end of the questioning, the constable said, "Okay, we'll send you a summons in the mail if we decide to charge you." Tom and I shared a bemused glance. As everybody knows, the last shot in a televised story of this sort has the police car pulling away from the curb after ushering the miscreants into the back seat.

I should include a political philosophy note here about civil disobedience since it's a topic not well understood by many people, even by some civil disobedients. They often detract from the focus of their action by whining about whatever small punishment they may receive or protesting that they're really innocent because of the greater good they're doing. In protesting against apartheid, or whatever other evil, by breaking the public mischief law, you're not claiming that the minor law being violated is wrong, unless you're some kind of anarchist. Instead, you're saying that evil is wrong, and you're prepared to accept whatever punishment is necessary in order

for you to appeal to the public, a public of which you're a normally law-abiding member in good standing. It's theoretically pretty simple. Practically speaking, it's only complicated in countries like China where civil disobedients are still thrown in jail for ten years.

I said, "Constable, I have to inform you that if you don't apprehend us, it's our intention to return to the store and do further damage." The officer said, "I'll have to consult with my superiors." The police huddled. Perhaps they imagined that once we got done with South African wine, we might move on to vodka from the neighbouring province of Alberta. In due course, if a bit grumpily — I think it was lunch hour for them — Tom and I were packed into the police cruiser, and driven down to the police lockup at 222 Main Street. The cameramen had their concluding shot.

Since the media is a player in this drama, something should be said about its informational/disinformational roles in relation to political acts. While Tom and I were awaiting our trial, one local newspaper columnist worked himself up into an incensed state, devoting an entire column to denouncing our "attention-seeking media stunt." This otherwise unremarkable and noxious bit of journalism stays in mind because it's both typical of the subtextual silences of much journalism and it raises questions about the ability to engage in political action in nominal democracies where the media and most other forums are dominated by the ideas of ruling-class corporations.

What I mean by "subtextual silences" is this. First, there's nothing "natural" about any "news." While there's a history, and even a professional ethos, of how journalists decide that something is newsworthy, there's also a strong sense in which all of the news is a "media stunt," i.e., a decision by journalists to feature some aspect of everyday life that may or may not deserve such attention. Two of the best bad examples of this are: 1) the media's overemphasis on sporadic violence, giving sensationalised attention to empathy-provoking murders while in fact violent crime is statistically declining, and 2) treating practically all business decisions as implicitly rational and good.

Second, even given the colloquial usage of "media stunt," it's not clear why our citizenly action was any more of a manipulation of the media than the ceaseless parade of political "photo-ops," indirect corporate advertising and governmental press conferences announcing or defending some policy, such as the liquor minister's defence of apartheid. That is, the columnist in this case is subtextually silent about why he's so irked by us, a silence that makes me suspect that he thinks the media should have the right to determine who is or isn't a legitimate political actor in the public forum. Apparently, not all media stunts are created equal.

Finally, the one other interesting thing about this newspaper col-

umn, as we now know from the ideas of deconstructionist reading, centres around the trope of innocence and guilt. The columnist is making the flimsy claim that Tom and I are “seeking attention” for ourselves, rather than seeking to bring attention to the evil of apartheid. The claim is flimsy because we’re not obvious crazies ranting in formulaic jargon, but adults in our forties who speak in sentences. At the same time, while chastising the protesters for illegitimate attention-seeking, the column is silent, either willfully or naively, about the columnist’s own attention-seeking self-portrait as a tough-minded critic willing to blow the whistle on self-indulgent, ineffective political activists. The column implicitly pretends that the columnist isn’t a guy who has to come up with something three times a week if he wants to continue to receive the attention of having his name at the top of the column, not to mention his paycheque. More important, the column is silent about the evil of apartheid, suggesting, again implicitly, that it’s possible for one to be innocent, to not be complicit, whereas the protesters are saying that everyone is implicated, everyone could do what the protesters have done in order to concretely resist that particular evil.

I’ve gone on about this topic at some length because the widely observed passivity of the citizenry in nominally democratic societies usually goes unexplained by the very institutions that are partially responsible for reinforcing that passivity. How hard it was to imagine distant South Africa, notwithstanding its brutal televised availability, how hard it was to conceive of oneself as having the right, if not the responsibility, to alleviate the suffering of people living far away whom we did not know. Perhaps one definition of politics is caring about strangers, a uniquely human ability. I consoled myself that this neurotic column helped, in some small way, to increase public awareness of the fact of apartheid.

While awaiting trial, the political problem of South African wine and spirits in Canada was solved when the federal government announced a national policy of boycotting South African products in compliance with the United Nations’ anti-apartheid program, thus taking the matter out of the hands of the free-market enthusiasts running the government of British Columbia.

The judge I appeared before some weeks later, a charming eccentric named Wally Craig — I later got to know him at the local YMCA health club where I play squash — gave me an absolute discharge in exchange for forbidding me from making a speech in the courtroom. Like most other directors of courtroom theatres, he preferred to reserve the speechifying for himself.

These days, on television, I observe large groups of youthful demonstrators in the streets of cities from Seattle to Genoa, protest-

ing against capitalism. Apartheid has at long last ceased to exist in South Africa. The strangest after-effect of apartheid for me is its amnesiac absence in the present world, especially when I happen to mention South Africa while talking with students in college classes I teach. I'll casually refer to, say, Nelson Mandela, the black former president of South Africa and, feeling a sudden gap in the psychic space of the classroom, I'll glance up and recognize from the looks on the students' faces, that although these nineteen-year-olds were alive when black people were racially denied any political existence whatsoever during the apartheid regime, that for them what I'm talking about is history while for me it's memory. For me, it's real, for them it's abstract, and a frisson of despair snakes down my back, as I imagine a dystopia in which almost everything has been forgotten.

Arcadia

Arcadia, like the Garden of Eden or El Dorado, is one of the many images of utopia that human beings have imagined over the centuries. The Argentine-born writer Alberto Manguel gave me a copy of his friend Tomás Eloy Martínez's book, *The Peron Novel*, and inscribed on its flyleaf, "et in Arcadia ego," a phrase popularised in the Renaissance (and sometimes credited to Virgil). It means, "And (even) in Arcadia, I am." "I" is the figure of death, and the phrase is a stark reminder that death is everywhere present — yes, even in the earthly paradise of that region of the Greek Pelopponesian peninsula, Arcadia, where amorous shepherds engaged in pastoral dialogues.

In summer 1992, at a gathering of writers held in the Banff Centre for the Arts — a rather Arcadian place itself, located amid the alpine forests of the Rocky Mountains in Alberta, Canada — I met Martínez, whom Alberto, as the host of the occasion, had invited as a guest. I often jokingly refer to Manguel, who is a Canadian citizen but frequently lives elsewhere, as "Civilization's ambassador to Canada," but it's no joke. Alberto's choice of Martínez as a visitor was perfect. Martínez was working on a new novel, *Santa Evita*, a true story about the fate of the corpse of Evita Peron, and the story he told us of writing it was more precise and intimate than any writer's tale I'd ever heard. When I asked Martínez to autograph my copy of his Peron novel, he wrote, along with expressions of friendship, "Scripta manet," "the writing remains" — beyond our mortality. I've long had the sense that writing, puny as it often seems, is our weapon against time, yet at the same time, it always recalls us to our human fate.

In Nicolas Poussin's 17th century painting, *Et in Arcadia ego*, the phrase is discovered on a tombstone by a group of shepherds. Arcadia is inextricably linked to the homoerotic desire proclaimed in the shepherds' love for each other, recorded in the poems of the old bards. The linkage is found in contemporary texts, too. The first part of Evelyn Waugh's homoerotic novel, *Brideshead Revisited*, is titled "Et in Arcadia ego." In Gore Vidal's memoir, *Palimpsest*, he describes his boyhood love affair in the early 1940s with 17-year-old Jimmy Trimble as one in which "there was no guilt, no sense of taboo." Vidal adds, with characteristic arch wit, "But then we were in Arca-

dia, not diabolic Eden.” Eden is read as a site of original sin; Arcadia renders homosexual love almost innocent.

Perhaps a year or so after reading Vidal’s book, in summer 1996, Thomas Marquard (a friend of mine from Berlin) and I rode on an afternoon bus along the twisting, mountainous road that threads through Arcadia. Not many shepherds in sight but, as we drove along the main streets of the villages of Arkady, old men in black clothes sitting at tables in their roadside cafés, watching the infrequent passing traffic. Former shepherds, ex-loves?

Art aphorisms

Normal art: I've lately begun to entertain the perverse idea that making art, or meaning, or trying to understand the world, are, contrary to popular notions, normal activities of human beings, even an evolutionary feature of our survival. It is the failure to do so that should be seen as abnormal, odd, demented, and not the other way around.

Art and politics: While there's no requirement for art to be political, art today ought to see itself as an active cultural politics against "entertainment," which is the capitalist replacement of art and culture (for example, the replacement of books by "reality" TV).

Reasons to write: The writer Brian Fawcett gave a talk on "reasons to write," offering such reasonable motives as money, ideology, keeping a record, healthy curiosity, and serving the Muse. The poet Lisa Robertson wittily added love and revenge to the list. When I mentioned the subject to Robin Blaser, he immediately said, "Because of life." That is, the condition of our existence is sufficient reason to interrogate it.

I'd say the same thing. What I mean by "life" is not a definition or abstraction, but the sense conveyed by an Arthur Rimbaud poem, *c.* 1870, translated by Charles Olson:

... (O saisons, o chateaux!
Délires!

What soul
is without fault?

Nobody studies
happiness

Every time the cock crows
I salute him

I have no longer any excuse
for envy. My life

has been given its orders: the seasons
seize

the soul and the body, and make mock
of any dispersed effort. The hour of death

is the only trespass

Art and Auschwitz: Theodor Adorno sternly declared in the wake of the Holocaust that lyric poetry is impossible after Auschwitz. I think that the best way to interpret that remark is not that good poetry can't be written after Auschwitz, but that good writing now requires an understanding of the Holocaust.

Charles Olson's dictum: "Art is life's *only* twin." That's the banner under which we ride into the fray.

Art, Life, and Imitation: Equally, there's John Berger's assertion, "Art does not imitate nature, it imitates a creation, sometimes to propose an alternative world, sometimes simply to amplify, to confirm, to make social the brief hope offered by nature."

The Anxious Asp

Memory, quick as a stolen kiss at midnight: for a year, age 24-25, 1965-66, in San Francisco, I worked in Arlene Arbuckle's bars in North Beach. There were two of them. On Grant Avenue, near Green St., was her "respectable," mostly-gay bar, the Capri, run by the bartender-lieutenant of her little fiefdom, a prissy, lean, but hard-nosed guy named Lee. The other establishment, a tiny beer-and-wine bar called the Anxious Asp, was around the corner, on Green St., between the Green Valley Restaurant and Gino and Carlo's, Jack Spicer's literary headquarters.

On a crowded Saturday night in Gino's, sitting at Jack's table, during a lull in the evening, or maybe just needing a breath of foggy fresh air, somebody — George Stanley or Lew Ellingham or I — would get up and announce, "I'm going to take a look at the Asp for a minute."

Inside the Asp it was even more crowded, and the jukebox, even louder than in Gino's, was playing the same Beatles songs, "She's A Woman," and "I Wanna Hold Your Hand," over and over. The atmosphere was, compared to the sedately drunken Gino's, more frenzied, erotic, given to abandon. Although there wasn't any room to dance, there was a kind of dancing in the Asp. Gino's was the old world: Italian leftists breaking out into an occasional chorus of "Bandera Rossa"; the alcoholic longshore foreman Tom, our Roman centurion, pounding his fist against an imaginary warrior's breastplate; poetry in the person of the hunched figure of Jack Spicer. The Asp was the new world, the world of the Beatles, rock'n'roll, cool images rather than feeling, as Spicer complained. It was just after the 1964 American presidential election — the first since John F. Kennedy's assassination — and George Stanley had campaigned for Lyndon Johnson against the right-wing Republican candidate, Barry Goldwater. "In your heart, you know he's right," went Goldwater's slogan. "And in your guts, you know he's nuts," his opponents replied. It was the beginning of the U.S. war in Vietnam, and in a sense, the beginning of the Sixties.

I'd been working in the warehouses south of Market Street. Getting a job at the Asp, and eventually at the Capri as well, introduced me to the lesbian subculture of North Beach. Don't remember how I got the

job, maybe through Armando, a bartender friend of George's, who had worked for Arlene at various times. Arlene was a slim, curly-haired, butch woman in her late 30s, who usually had a fem girlfriend in tow. Occasionally one or the other of them would turn up in the morning at the Capri, sporting a black eye, as I was setting up, slicing the limes, peeling the lemons, putting the coffee on, while the morning drinkers sat stiffly at the bar, awaiting their first hit of coffee and brandy. Arlene's best friend was a tall, masculine woman named Sherman who ran an artist's supply shop on Grant. Sometimes, after work, Sherman would join Arlene and her girlfriend and a couple of the other women in their circle for an early evening cocktail. Arlene was a discreet presence, who seemed to leave the running of her businesses to her lieges. Or maybe, since I was an innocent, I didn't really notice much of what went on. I simply reported to Lee, who laid down the rules, which mainly had to do with not stealing and keeping a certain decorum, a tone that Lee liked to maintain, an idea of classiness.

If Gino's was the Greek war camp, and the Capri was doomed Troy, the Asp was mere "roistering in Thessaly," as Socrates put it. The shift ran from six in the evening to two in the morning. By midnight, the Asp was in Bacchanalian dishevelment. A baseball bat was kept under the bar in case of trouble. A nice neighbourhood character, a nearly seven-foot-tall black man named Big Jim, took a liking to me, and turned up periodically to keep an eye on the place. In return I provided free beer. The poets trickled down from Gino's during the course of the evening, usually for a brief visit, but the Asp wasn't their kind of poetry, unless, like Lew or George, they'd gotten very drunk. The Beatles warbled on. Sometimes the Asp was so crowded, the party spilled out onto the sidewalk.

One midnight, I slipped into the john for a quick pee, and found Doc Salter there, looking into the mirror. He was an attractive young man, the same age as me. Something clicked — what? whatever — and we stole a kiss at midnight. "Stick around for closing?" I asked. "Sure," he said, though he wasn't really gay, as I learned when we bedded down later in the Swiss-American Hotel on Broadway. He was just high on the excitement and his own desirability. "Do what you want," said that San Francisco Narcissus.

They're all gone now, I'm pretty sure. I have a vague memory of being told, maybe by George, of Arlene's passing. Lee, Sherman, Big Jim, Doc. Only the shades are dancing.

Athens

At the centre of modern Athens is Omonia Square, a vast inferno of roaring, polluting traffic. At the time, in July 1996, it was undergoing infrastructural redevelopment, so that ragged wooden hoardings and the pounding of pile drivers and jackhammers were added to its usual chaos. The square is surrounded on all four sides by shops, newspaper and cigarette kiosks, eateries, and slowly-moving glutinous crowds of people. But Thomas Marquard, my travelling companion, and I, who were staying at a cheap hotel behind Omonia Square, weren't looking for modern Athens.

Perhaps some other time we would seek out present-day Athenians, look up its artists, or attempt to figure out the politics of this southernmost great metropolis of Europe, a city of some three million people. Instead, we were treating contemporary Athens, apart from casual contacts with waiters, taxi drivers, desk clerks and the like, as merely a translucent palimpsest through which to peer down its many historical strata to the *polis* that existed around the 5th century BCE.

Looking south along one of the narrow, traffic-clogged commercial streets — we were standing in front of a grocery where we'd stopped to buy plastic bottles of water to rehydrate ourselves in the July heat — we could see at the horizon the 90-metre-high gleaming Acropolis, a big stone plateau covered with the columned facades of the ruins of its temples. Thomas, a thorough and indefatigable traveller, saved me from my usual lethargy upon arrival in a new city, and we set off immediately for the winding, circular trek up to the heights.

We paused at the Theatre of Dionysus, a stone amphitheatre carved into the back side of the rock, resting for a moment in the seats once occupied by theatre-going citizens who had seen the tragedies and comedies of Euripides and Aristophanes on opening nights in the 5th century BCE. Thomas, a drama teacher and theatre director at a Berlin high school, explained some of it to me.

We made it to the top, dutifully touring its most famous temple, the Parthenon, whose construction began in 447 BCE, when the city's eventual greatest philosopher, Socrates, was a young man in his early twenties. But Socrates — who, allegedly a stonemason in his youth, may have even worked on the project — though conventionally

observant, was never really interested in the Greek gods nor, I suspect, the temples atop the Acropolis where they were worshipped. From the Areopagos, a nearby hill of slithery russet-coloured marble, it was possible to find a perch and look down over its rim to a patch of rubble far below.

That was our destination, the Agora or marketplace of ancient Athens, once the centre of the known world. Here, amid its streets and shops, baths, schools, gymnasia and public spaces, Socrates had entered into those teasing, probing conversations in which modern discourse has its roots. What's striking about the dialogues preserved (and half-invented) by Plato — I was re-reading his *Symposium* during this trip — are precisely how recognizable they are to us. That is, between the end of ancient Rome around 500 CE and, say, the 15th century Renaissance, almost a thousand years later, there is no talk so understandable to us, either in terms of subject matter — how to self-consciously live a good, or at least examined, life — or method, namely, secular arguments about definition, meaning, categories. So much of the intervening discourse really is phantasmal chatter about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

I was introduced to that talk in my mid-twenties when I studied political philosophy with Bob Rowan at the University of British Columbia. We read the *Apology*, in which Socrates, charged with corruption of the young and worshipping false gods, pleads and loses his case before an Athenian jury that sentences him to death. Then the *Crito*, set in the Athens jail, where Socrates rejects his wealthy friend Crito's offer to arrange his escape. Can you imagine me, at my age, roistering in Thessaly? Socrates asks. No thanks, he says, declining the offer of escape, in the *polis* we have our second birth, after being born of our parents, and it is the City that raises and nurtures us. Should I reject its laws now, simply because of a decision that goes against me? And finally, the *Phaedo*, and the last conversation between Socrates and his friends before he drinks the fatal hemlock, and feels the cold chill of death move up his limbs. Now, once again, on our travels in Greece, I was reading the *Symposium*, where Socrates, Aristophanes and their friends spend the night talking about the nature of love.

What's more, the appearance of such talk in Athens in 400 BCE is a surprise in human history. In contradistinction, the warrior society talk of Troy or Sparta is of a piece with the kingdoms of Mesopotamia and Egypt or the stateless warlord regimes of contemporary Africa or central Asia. The ritual language about the gods atop the Acropolis has its equivalent everywhere. You can find great temples and palaces all over the world. Nor is the marvellous Greek theatre entirely unexpected. Its stories of the legendary heroes, the pity and terror of

implacable fate, arise from the ritual search for right conduct in the relations between humans and the gods. And while the talk of commerce and human desire is trans-temporal, before Athens there was no talk like this, no semi-abstract argumentation that sought meaning. This Greek discourse does not replace poetry, the basic mode of story-telling that begins with *Gilgamesh* (although Plato inveighs against poetry in his *Republic*), but is another way of knowing, another attempt, as the philosopher Wilfred Sellars once put it, “to see how things, in the broadest possible sense of the term, hang together, in the broadest possible sense of the term.”

While I’d feel as estranged from the Jews in dusty Jerusalem at the time of Jesus as I am from the ravings of contemporary born-again Christians, and as distant from medieval courts as we are from the ziggurats of our digitalized bankers, I have the sense of utterly knowing these Athenians, from their philosophic ponderings to their young adults who remain erotically alive for us in the suspended desire of their sculptures or the late-night talk of the *Symposium*. I’m astonished that the talk of the Greeks is conversant with the latest developments in postmodern theory. Socrates would not be baffled by Richard Rorty.

Thomas and I ambled along the sun-baked streets of the Agora. What remain are the stumps of the foundations of buildings. Here are the outlines of the gym where naked youths stretched their bodies; here at the north end of the Agora is the prison where Socrates was executed; here’s the broad ramp leading to the procession road up to the Acropolis. Almost impossible to imagine it, even with Thomas’s reading of the maps, were it not for the adjacent reconstructed Stoa, the colonnaded trading hall that now houses the Agora museum. In a dusty glass case, we found some eggcup-sized drinking thimbles, allegedly the kind used for administering the hemlock that Socrates drank. Outside, in the blistering heat again, a tortoise emerged from the rubble of the foundations, like a figure from Zeno’s paradox.

And that is all that’s left, this patch of ground in contemporary, debased Athens. That, and a few similar ruins scattered about the city. Outside of Athens, once we were on the road, across the Corinthian isthmus into the Pelopponeses, there were other old places — Olympia, Mycenae, Arcady, seaside Navplion on the Bay of Argos.

In each place, in the morning, before we went out to see the ancient world, I read Plato’s *Symposium*. Each of us who reads has such landmark books, re-read again and again in the course of a lifetime. The symposium is an evening drinking party, held at the house of the young and handsome playwright Agathon, whose work has just been performed and won the first prize at the theatre of Dionysus, in whose seats Thomas and I had sat. The subject of the *Symposium* is

the nature of Eros. The dialogue contains three and a half great speeches. The most practical talk is that of Pausanias who, in specific detail, explains the rules and motives for courting boys, and how those of Athens differ from Sparta, other Greek cities, and the Persian kingdom, where men are not as devoted to conversation as in Athens.

The greatest speech, aesthetically, is that of the comic playwright Aristophanes, who declares that love is “the desire and pursuit of the whole,” and tells the story of how the gods divided us into two parts so that we go through life seeking our other half, and warns that if we continue in our errant ways, the gods will split us again, cutting us into quarters the way a hair is used to slice a hard-boiled egg. Socrates’s speech is metaphysical, and attempts to link the desire for a particular beautiful boy with larger and larger forms of love, up a ladder of desire, until we contemplate the nature of the beautiful itself.

The half-great speech is provided by Alcibiades, a drunken young warrior and politician in his late 20s, who tells the story of how, years ago, when he was the most beautiful youth in Athens, he offered himself to Socrates, crawling into the philosopher’s bed and wrapping a blanket around the two of them, but that Socrates rejected this offer of beauty, not satisfied that Alcibiades was interested in the pursuit of truth, which would be one of the appropriate motives for entering into a relationship with someone. The chaste night they spent together is the source of the mistaken notion of “platonic love.” But reading the banter between Alcibiades and Socrates once more, at the seaside port of Navplion, it was clear to me that of course they had had sex together, on other occasions, many times, though in the end, Alcibiades proved a moral disappointment to his would-be teacher.

Of all the places we saw, the most beautiful was Delphi. It’s a temple north of the Pelopponesian peninsula, up in the mountains. The Athenians came there by boat to question the Delphic oracle. We spent half a day wandering through its ruins, looking out from the mountain on whose slope it is set, down the throat of a long valley to the small port, Itea, on an inlet of the Ionian waters, where the Athenians landed. That evening we ate dinner at a terrace restaurant, which had a similar view of the valley. The night sky was a pure black that neither Thomas nor I, we both noted with some amazement, had ever seen before. The black heavens were marked by a constellation of stars just at the horizon — Scorpio, Thomas told me. As we left the restaurant terrace, we gazed down the valley under its black sky a last time. For an instant, it seemed all of a piece: magical Delphi, where the Athenians learned from the Delphic oracle that no one among them was wiser than Socrates, who alone knew how little he knew.