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## Fracas in Caracas

Cecelia Lawless

Venezuela has erupted into the North American consciousness in the past few months. Stories and images of violence in the streets of Caracas, stalled oil tankers, Venezuelan flags and thousands of angry faces have appeared on the radar screen of the American media with incredible force since the attempted coup against the president Hugo Chavez in April 2002. Venezuela is in crisis. Because of its geo-political situation and its enormous oil reserves this crisis is now deemed newsworthy by Americans caught in the tensions of a possibly impending war with Iraq and all of its destructive, oil-immersed connotations.

Located in the northern tip of Latin America, Venezuela is one of the gateway countries to this continent. With a population of over 25 million, one of six Venezuelans is foreign born, and there exists an 80/20 split between brown and white peoples. In 1995 when I first arrived with a Fulbright on my way to Mérida—a university town set high in the Andean mountains—I was intrigued to learn that when confronted with a choice of prizes for a TV game show, most participants chose to go Miami for the weekend rather than stay in a local beach town for ten days. During the oil boom years of the 1970s everyone wanted to emulate the United States—Johnny Walker replaced local rum as the drink of choice, consumer goods were bought in double quantities from Miami, and the American Dream appeared accessible for all. The attraction to the United States has always been strong and Venezuelans have been proud of their ties to the northern magnet.

Hugo Chavez views the United States through a very different filter. The first *mestizo* president of working-class origins to be elected in Venezuela, Chavez is disdained by many of the white middle-class and elite population. A *mestizo* is a person of mixed blood—Indian, white and/or black. Some of the enmity felt for Chavez definitely has strong racial overtones. Opposition spokesmen complain that he is a leftist who is leading the country to economic chaos, but underlying the fierce hatred is the terror of the country's white elite when faced with a mobilized mass of the population who are black, Indian, and *mestizo*. Only a racism that dates back five centuries—from the Europeans' treatment of African slaves and the indigenous inhabitants—can adequately explain the degree of hatred that Chavez has aroused.

In 1992 there were two attempted coups against then-president Carlos Andrés Pérez. The first coup was led by Chavez who was jailed for two years, but managed to negotiate one minute on television to pacify his followers. This one minute made an impact on the disenfranchised population of Venezuela who saw on the screen before them a man who looked and spoke like themselves, and who told them to wait patiently, that the day

for revolution in Venezuela would come—soon. In 1998 Chavez was legally elected president with an amazing 80% of the popular vote. In the year 2000 Chavez was re-elected for a six-year term with a mandate to pursue his own brand of populist political reforms.

In 2002 the currency devalued 50% in the first six months, inflation skyrocketed from 12% in 2001 to 35% or more, and unemployment jumped from 13% to 17%. Contrary to what many people in Venezuela seem to believe, these economic trends have affected the middle class much more than they affected the poor. Chavez was then ousted from office in April 2002 and reinstated within 48 hours. During their brief triumph his opponents' anti-democratic agenda became clear. They suspended congress, took control of the supreme court and were holding Chavez prisoner. As he said, "A dictator (Pedro Carmona, one of the leaders of the strike) was installed here for one-and-a-half days, a supposed president. He was a dictator. I was elected one time, two times, and the 14th of April was another election—the people brought me back. I am not a dictator"—typically fiery and bombastic language from a man who does not avoid controversy. Although Chavez calls the four general strikes of 2002 coup attempts disguised as strikes organized by "terrorists," most progressives see them as a strategy by business leaders, certain unions, media barons and the church to dislodge Chavez, despite his sup-

port from the working class.

Thus far Chavez has shown himself to be a politician of many words and little implemented action. In my more recent trips to Mérida I have heard him speak for more than three hours during the noonday meal emulating his hero Fidel Castro of Cuba who is justly (in)famous for his seven-hour speeches. Chavez often sports a red beret in public and he is a former paratroop commander. Often he inspires fear because of his "grandiloquent communist rhetoric, vulgarity, authoritarianism, violence, and ineptitude" (as quoted by a Venezuelan colleague of mine). The opposition has called for a referendum on Chavez as president in February, accusing him of mismanaging the economy and planning to "Cubanize" the country.

Chavez counters that he is not a dictator but rather that he relies on the will of the people through his own referendums. He declares that during his presidency, for the first time in twenty years of Venezuelan history, there has not been a single political prisoner, no censorship of the media, and the dreaded federal police, the DISIP, have had their powers seriously curtailed.

One of the reasons Chavez inspires such fervent support is because of his enticing promises as outlined in the new Venezuelan Constitution that he drew up after his first referendum in 1999. He has concentrated on land reforms—always a vital and historic issue for most Latin American countries—and in November 2001 drew up 49 land and

oil reforms not approved by the National Assembly, some of which give the government the power to expropriate large estates and agricultural land deemed unproductive.

As part of his flamboyant foreign policy Chavez became the first foreign head of state to visit Iraq since the 1991 Gulf War. There was strong US opposition to this trip, and when I was in Caracas in 2001 the taxi driver, maneuvering through the dark streets, ranted against Chavez's trip because he felt that it would antagonize the United States in the wake of the events of September 11th. He thought that it was a dangerous and unwise move, and that Chavez's economic policies were leading businessmen and their families to ruin. As a middle-class family man who had computer access, good clothes, and a well-furnished house, this taxi driver aspired to the American dream and spoke vehemently against the *rancheros*, or shanty-town dwellers, whose house lights punctured the mountainsides during our drive. My taxi driver was convinced that Chavez favored only these poor people and that he himself would be lost in the ensuing years. Many of the middle and upper classes feel this threat.

Whatever Chavez's failings, the radical realignment of Venezuelan politics that he represents, that of the poor and the military, remains legitimate in the eyes of many Venezuelans. Historically, since the discovery of huge oil reserves in the Maracaibo



Clockwise from left: Gutiérrez, Chavez, Lula and Castro.

Jack Sherman

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# Beyond the Frame

## Hong-An Tran

In 1923, Soviet director Dziga Vertov wrote, "We cannot improve the making of our eyes, but we can endlessly perfect the camera." With this statement, Vertov was expressing his excitement over what he believed the movie camera could do: that in documenting daily life it could be a new kind of eye, seeing that which would otherwise go unnoticed or overlooked in the hustle and bustle of the workaday world. Eighty years later, Vertov's statement still rings true, though with a new twist: cameras are everywhere, affording us glimpses of other daily lives from places we cannot see firsthand—and yet in this age of the major news network and breaking headlines, there is much that, while documented, still remains unseen. Bombarded with a barrage of what is constituted as News—as that which is new and immediately visible—we often do not get to see the ongoing experiences that constitute life.

Starting at the end of January and running through February, Cornell Cinema will be screening two film series that do give us access, both into what non-CNN cameras are seeing and into the visions of filmmakers who have attempted to depict their understandings of a world gone awry. Both the Human Rights Watch Traveling Film Festival and Reflections on War and its Aftermath series afford us numerous opportunities to acquire new perspectives on the workings and consequences of power and politics, here and abroad.

The Human Rights Watch website ([www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)) notes that the works featured in the festival "help to put a human face on threats to individual freedom and dignity, and celebrate the power of the human spirit and intellect to prevail." The works focus on human rights abuses, but as the films powerfully illustrate, such abuses are not always so obvious (or are craftily hidden).

Oppression often comes in the form of the struggle to live from day to day in the face of an ongoing unstable political condition; how one person or an entire populace is treated is

often a consequence of power plays by invisible hands. *Gaza Strip* (2002) examines the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the occupied territory; the filmmakers explore the conflict through the eyes of a thirteen-year-old Palestinian newspaper street vendor, Mohammed Hejazi, who is the main support of his family, and who, along with his friends, fires slingshots filled with broken bricks at Israeli tanks. *August: A Moment Before the Eruption* (2002) depicts the conflict through the eyes of Israeli filmmaker Avi Mograbi, who fuses documentary and psychological drama to produce a diary of the streets of Tel

his reported role in the Indonesian takeover of East Timor, and his part in the kidnapping and murder of Chilean general Rene Schneider in 1970, at the time believed to be the only "obstacle" to a military takeover of the democratically-elected president, Salvador Allende.

*Stealing the Fire* (2002) explores the dealings of German technician Karl-Hans Schaab, who sold key atomic technology—the centrifuge—to Saddam Hussein; the complexities of the story lie in the ties this technology has to corporations linked to the manufacture of Zyklon B (the gas used in

*Thin Red Line* (1998), Terrence Malick's vision of the WWII battle of Guadalcanal; with its lush cinematography and sense of stillness punctuated by gunfire, Malick's film seems to ask viewers to stop and look around, as the soldiers do, at the incongruity between the landscape and the onslaught of brutality.

Sergei Bodrov's *Prisoner of the Sun* (1997), an adaptation of a short story by Tolstoy, examines the current Russian-Chechen conflict through the eyes of a Chechen village elder who captures two Russian soldiers and holds them captive, in exchange for his POW son. As with *The Thin Red Line*, landscape plays a crucial role in forging a sense of humanity (or lack thereof) in the face of war.

*No Man's Land* (2001) is perhaps the most satirical of the films featured in the series; directed by Denis Tanovic, a former cameraman in the Bosnian Army, the film illustrates the absurdity of war—and of international involvement—by using the camera as a witness to both sharp-tongued dialogue among soldiers (two Bosnian, one Serb) caught in a trench between the lines, and to the ineffectiveness of UN peacekeeping troops stationed in Bosnia.

A certain sense of the inevitability of conflict frames the films in this series, to be sure. Yet it is interesting to note that the camera does not focus on bloodshed or killing as such, but rather manages to capture, in each of the films, instances of questioning and doubt on the part of the soldiers. The emphasis in these films is not on the battle scenes, but rather on the more subtle moments, when we witness soldiers coming to a kind of self-awareness about their place in the destructive context of war. It is the attempt to mark one's presence in the face of seeming futility that becomes the gesture of consciousness in these films.

The myriad emotions and perspectives in these films provide a more nuanced sense of the sources and unfolding of conflict. Yet, in a sense, the camera only tells half the story; we may rely on filmmakers to uncover that which is hidden from our eyes, but confronted by the situations revealed in these films, heightened consciousness in itself seems inadequate. Seeing may be believing, but it is still only the beginning.

For more information on film screenings go to <http://www.cinema.cornell.edu>

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Aviv in August of 2001. The struggles of NGO emergency workers and doctors in Kabul frames *Afghanistan Year 1380* (2002); shot in and around Kabul the month following 9/11, the film takes a look at attempts to re-open a hospital previously closed by the Taliban, and documents the daily life of the Afghan people during this troubled, and yet hopeful, period.

Alongside the insight that gives those films their anchor are more exposé-driven documentaries—the ones which do indeed "put a human face on threats to individual freedom." *The Trials of Henry Kissinger*, based on the Christopher Hitchens book of nearly the same name, is a visual exposé of what Hitchens, the filmmakers, and many others believe were Kissinger's deceptive and manipulative practices over the past 35 years, beginning with his role in the secret bombings of Cambodia during the Vietnam War, to

WWII concentration camps) back in the 1940s. That Schaab received a 5-year probation for his part in this scheme, while Kissinger has never been indicted for what many believe are crimes against humanity, gives these documentaries an added sense of injustice. Through these films we can better frame questions of accountability and responsibility, yet this is perhaps the limitation of the camera: through it we can be more conscious, more aware—but from that foundation of seeing, perhaps we must also construct new forms of action.

Co-sponsored with the Anti-War Coalition and the Cornell Forum for Peace and Justice, the Reflections on War and its Aftermath series includes films that do not so much take an explicit or polemical position against war as they do meditate on the absurdity and futility (and yet seeming inevitability) of violent conflict. This is perhaps most apparent in *The*

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# Philip Berrigan *Presente!*

Fred A. Wilcox

Soon after terrorists slammed commercial airliners into the World Trade Center towers on September 11, 2001, guards at the Ohio prison where Philip Berrigan was serving time for hammering on an A-10 Warthog placed him in solitary confinement. Phil was 77 years old. He had spent 11 years in dirty, overcrowded, dangerous places he called "hell holes." During all those years, no one had ever threatened to hurt Father Berrigan. His jailers knew that their prisoner—white haired, stooped from pain in his hips and, I suspect, suffering from the cancer that was infesting his kidneys and liver—posed no danger to his fellow prisoners. When prison guards locked Phil away from friends and family—they said this was for his own safety—they were merely following orders.

Phil Berrigan understood these men. As a combat soldier in World War Two he had also followed orders. "I became a skilled killer, trained in the use of all small arms, clever with the bayonet, good with a submachine gun and Browning automatic rifle. That is exactly what I was: a highly skilled killer." (Wilcox, *Fighting the Lamb's War: Skirmishes with the American Empire*.)

When the United States dropped "Little Boy" on Hiroshima and, three days later, "Fat Man" on Nagasaki, Philip celebrated with friends and family. "We cheered and danced. We were sick of war and we thanked God that it was finally over."

Philip came home from the war feeling that he had done his best, but while attending the seminary to become a priest he began to question why human beings wage war.

"Years after my return from the killing fields," wrote Phil, "I looked into the mirror of my own violence. What I saw there forced me to rethink and redefine the meaning of sanity. I realized that while I considered Adolf Eichmann a war criminal and despised him for participating in the Holocaust, we [the United States government] had a few things in common. Like him, I had only been following orders. Like him, I was 'sane' enough to do my duty, and to do it well. Like him, I believed that wars are fought for noble reasons. We were both true believers, one a mass murderer, the other a killer on a smaller scale (*Fighting the Lamb's War*).

Philip was ordained a Josephite priest, became a pacifist, and spent more than a half century disobeying laws that protect weapons he called "flying concentration camps." He refused to follow orders to pay taxes so that the American Empire can keep building weapons that, if they are ever used, will turn Mother Earth into a lifeless cinder. He was arrested scores of times for committing acts of "divine obedience" at the Pentagon, the White House, and military installations. He was hauled before judges who, after refusing to allow him and fellow defendants to talk about atomic weapons, nuclear warfare, the Nuremberg Principles, the Bible, or international law, sentenced Philip and friends to years in the penitentiary.

On Friday, December 6, 2002, at approximately 9:30 a.m., Philip Berrigan passed from this world. Lying beneath a beautiful quilt in the room he shared with his wife and fellow war resister, Elizabeth McAlister, Phil Berrigan spoke about the urgent need for the American Empire to turn its swords into plowshares:

I die in a community including my family, my beloved wife Elizabeth, three great Dominican nuns—Ardeh Platte, Carol Gilbert, and Jackie Hudson jailed in Western Colorado—Susan Crane, friend local, national and even international. They have always been a life line

to me. I die with the conviction held since 1968 and Catonsville, that nuclear weapons are the scourge of the earth; to mine for them, manufacture them, deploy them, use them, is a curse against God, the human family, and the earth itself. We have already exploded such weapons in Japan in 1945 and the equivalent of them in Iraq in 1991, in Yugoslavia in 1999, and in Afghanistan in 2001.

For more than a decade, Philip had been talking about the disastrous consequences of the United States military's use of depleted uranium during the Gulf massacre (not war) in 1991. Depleted uranium, a by-product of the manufacture of nuclear weapons and fuel for nuclear power reactors, was used in shells that penetrated Iraqi tanks, burning soldiers inside to death and poisoning the Iraqi people's air, water, and food supplies with



Daniel Berrigan walks behind Philip's coffin through the streets of Baltimore.

radioactive material. In the aftermath of this massacre, Iraqi mothers are giving birth to seriously deformed babies, and Iraqi children are dying from skin cancer, leukemia, and other diseases related to radiation poisoning.

The last time I saw Philip Berrigan—friends had gathered in Syracuse, New York, to welcome him home from prison—he spoke about the legacy of atmospheric testing of atomic weapons. Referring to the work of Dr. Rosalie Bertell, Phil said that countless people have died, or are dying, from the effects of radiation poisoning. He called the killing of these people a crime against humanity. Spreading depleted uranium across Iraq, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, said Phil, is toxic genocide.

Philip Berrigan had always been far ahead of the Catholic Church in challenging fellow priests and his superiors to work for peace and social justice. Speaking to a civic association in Newburgh, New York, in 1967, he demanded to know why the United States was sending poor African-American kids from the Mississippi Delta to kill poor Vietnamese kids in the Mekong Delta. He went on to say that the war in Vietnam was a racist attack on poor people of color. No black man, said Phil, should ever risk his life in Vietnam, when his own government refuses to guarantee his civil rights in this country.

Phil's comments outraged the archdiocese. As punishment his superiors sent this young priest, who had marched with Martin Luther King Jr. at Selma, Alabama, off to Saint Peter Claver, a poor black parish in Baltimore.

Now, nearly a half-century later, Philip Berrigan has returned to St. Peter Claver church. Dressed in a blue sweater that his wife Elizabeth made for him, a tattered copy of the *New Testament* placed lovingly beside him, Philip Berrigan's body lies in the simple

wooden coffin built by his son Jerry. His brother, Daniel, who acted with Phil at Catonsville, Maryland where, on May 17, 1968, they poured blood over draft card files and then burned the files with homemade napalm, stands beside the coffin. Hollow-eyed and gaunt from grief, Dan greets each mourner, exchanging a few words, shaking hands, hugging those who have come to pay their respects to Philip and his family.

The line moves slowly, and when I reach the place where Dan is standing I pause, still struggling to accept that my friend Phil, the kindest, most courageous, and most brilliant human being I have ever known, has left this world. I thank Phil for his extraordinary generosity of spirit, for the gifts he has given the world, for his inspiration, for his anger at injustice, for his relentless efforts to expose the American Empire for what it is—a manic and methodical killing machine that has destroyed, and continues to destroy, the lives

of millions of poor people in El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Columbia, East Timor, Afghanistan, Iraq, in other parts of the world, and here in the U.S.A.

Philip's coffin is carried on the back of a pickup truck through the ruined streets of Baltimore city. Elizabeth McAlister and close family members walk directly behind the truck, followed by several hundred friends and supporters. Mourners stumble over ice that the city has not bothered to clear from this poor neighborhood's streets, and as we pass by burned-out buildings, one still smoldering from a recent fire, entire blocks of houses crumbling, boarded, abandoned to rats and homeless squatters, I recall Phil's vivid depiction of Europe after years of war:

Northern France was in ruins. Germany fared even worse. Visions from hell, pure madness, towns, cities, villages smashed to pieces. Bloated horses, rotting corpses, dead hope in the eyes of the survivors. Dresden and Düsseldorf and Münster were smoldering crypts, stacked high with charcoal logs that didn't look at all like human beings. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, and the whole world was being driven blind and toothless (*Fighting the Lamb's War*).

We pass liquor stores and signs advertising bail bondsmen, buildings in which human beings cannot possibly live. And yet they do. We do not pass clothing stores or grocery outlets, community centers or medical clinics, health food shops or cooperative food markets, job training centers or food pantries.

And who declared war on this predominantly African-American city? Who, indeed, declared war on North Philadelphia, the

South Bronx, East New York, East Saint Louis, South Chicago, parts of Los Angeles, Detroit, and New Orleans? It takes decades of government neglect for a city to collapse upon itself like this. Decades of neglect by Republicans and Democrats alike. Only a nation that feels contempt for its poor, and that is still violently racist, would allow tens of millions of its citizens to live in battered cities like Baltimore.

A black man slouches in his pickup truck, his face chiseled from poverty, his eyes burning with rage. He watches the kilted bagpipers who pass by playing "Amazing Grace," followed by the procession of mostly white folks carrying banners reading BOOKS NOT BOMBS. He watches this strange parade of people chanting: "Martin Luther King, *presente*. Oscar Romero, *presente*. Maura Clarke, *presente*. Mahatma Gandhi, *presente*." And as the procession streams by the man's truck, his face softens and he nods, as though keeping time to the mournful, yet enthusiastic, anti-war music.

"We all have to take responsibility for the bomb," said Philip Berrigan. "The bomb is destroying us spiritually, morally, psychologically, emotionally and humanly. This responsibility will create the new human, the new creation, and the just social order, that the scriptures speak about.... We are expected to do good, to do justice in our lives and we're expected to resist evil. So I would say that we have to continue resisting war as long as we live."

Inside Saint Peter Claver Church, mourners wait for pallbearers to wheel Philip's body to the front of the sanctuary. Daniel Berrigan tells mourners that his brother Philip was impatient from 1967, when the United States was destroying Vietnam, until the day of his death. He learned this impatience, says Dan, "at the hands of judges and jailers."

Elizabeth McAlister reads from the *New Testament*, telling the story of how Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Philip's daughters, Frida and Katie, talk about the many wonderful things they learned from their father—not from what he said they or others should do to bring about peace and social justice, but what Philip actually did, the risks he took, the sacrifices he made, the courage he demonstrated, the love he expressed through action for them, and for the world.

Running down the many prisons in which her father had served time, Kate Berrigan tells mourners that her father "showed us all what it meant to be free. Dad never seemed to be touched by those awful places. He was still free."

Brendan Walsh, a long-time friend of Philip's, tells mourners about the time he and Phil were arrested for an action at the Pentagon. "I got off without having to do jail time," says Walsh. "But Phil had to spend time behind bars. He didn't like that much. And then there was the day back in 1968 when we were preparing to go to Catonsville, where Phil, Dan, Tom Lewis, and others were going to pour blood over draftcard records and burn them with homemade napalm. I was going to drive—we got the car from Peter Claver Church—but just as we were about to leave, Phil grabbed the keys from me. He was going to make sure those 'killing licenses' for human beings would be burned. That was Phil. That was the kind of person he was."

Walsh and his wife, Willa Bickham, run Viva House in Baltimore, serving the poor. A registered nurse, Willa, helped care for Philip during the weeks before he died.

"Think about it," says Walsh. "Phil spent 11 years behind bars. And he never complained, and he never whined. He had cancer. His hips were bad. He must have been in

*continued on page 5*



# Best Laid Plans

Michael Doliner

Whatever the motives in the imminent war with Iraq, there is little question that, soon after its end, the United States intends to take advantage of its position there to exploit Iraqi oil. The reconstruction of Iraq's oil industry infrastructure, which has decayed under the UN-imposed sanctions and may experience further damage in the war, will require billions of dollars in investment from the oil companies, which will not be forthcoming without guarantees of political stability. To hold Iraq together, either an Iraqi government created out of the present Iraqi opposition or an American military government will be needed.

The present Iraqi opposition to the government of Saddam Hussein is highly fragmented. In the north, two organizations, The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, fight for the loyalty of the Kurds. Many of the Shi'i in the south have no political allegiances, but two political organizations operate: the al-Da'wa (the Call) and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. Some of the Shi'i, especially those in al-Da'wa, are interested in alliance with Iran. Others are not. The Sunnis in the middle of the country (who have supplied the present ruling organization with its members) would not want a government controlled by the Shi'i, who are the majority group in Iraq. According to Said Aburish, a well-known Iraqi journalist and a biographer of Saddam Hussein, there are over 70 other opposition parties.

Since the United States has committed itself to a unified Iraq, it can ally itself with none of these. Instead it favors an umbrella organization, the Iraqi National Congress (INC), led by former banker Ahmad Chalabi. Although the Kurdistan Democratic Party originally allied itself with Chalabi, it betrayed the INC in 1996 and allowed Saddam Hussein to destroy elements of the INC operating in northern Iraq. The INC does not now have an effective fighting force, and

their unity is questionable. Aburish describes the old exiles who make up the INC as spending their time quarreling over how to divide the \$96 million the United States has given them.

The INC can control a postwar Iraq, if at all, only with the extensive support of both American arms and money. The war will decimate the present Iraqi military, eliminating its commanders, most of whom are in Saddam Hussein's circle of homeboys from Tikrit. To keep the factions that want to pull Iraq apart from doing so, the INC will need a strong military made up of members of its various factions, but only the INC's ability to supply money and arms will provide even a hope of gaining their loyalty. For this the INC will rely on Western aid, which will be extremely limited. Exploitation of Iraqi oil will be the primary Western motive, but a rebuilt Iraq would be an oil-hungry Iraq. The better Iraq's situation, the more of its own oil it would need to use. Thus, the American goal will be an impoverished but docile Iraq, and it will not provide enough aid for real economic recovery, but only enough to pay and supply the military force. In such a situation the military commanders will use their positions to enrich themselves. They will be mercenaries.

As long as the INC can dole out arms and money, this army of mercenaries will remain loyal out of self-interest. But these commanders will also set up fiefdoms wherever they can to extract further wealth. Turf wars are bound to break out, and oil companies, trying to build pipelines, refineries, and the like, will need to pay what will amount to protection money to these warlords. This inevitable dynamic is easy to see in Afghanistan, where Hamid Karzai, the hoped-for new leader of the country, has had to appoint warlords as commanders in his army, funnel American and other Western aid to them, and turn over large sections of the country to their care. Karzai has so little influence that he cannot even find a loyal Afghan bodyguard, but must rely on Americans. In a recent *Washington Post*, article an Afghan government spokesman described the situation: "After 23

years of war and hard living, a lot of people view government positions as a chance to get wealthy and take advantage," said Ishrak Hussaini, spokesman for the Interior Ministry. Use of government positions to acquire wealth and advantage is a problem anywhere that central authority has broken down and life is very hard. There is no doubt that Iraq, after a war, will be such a place.

Recently, US government officials have indicated that a military government under General Tommy Franks would most likely take over the administration of postwar Iraq rather than a government under the INC. As a model for this occupation, they cited the military government of Japan following World War II.

Reconstruction in Japan was no picnic. Black markets flourished, people starved, and the country languished at least until 1949. The United States military government of Japan continued for seven years and employed 250,000 people. To Americans it might seem that Japan just bounced back. However, it was only the economic stimulus of American "special procurements" for the Korean War, five years into the occupation, that allowed Japan to dig out of the war's devastation.

But there was more to this recovery than just money. Japan is, for all intents and purposes, a monoculture. There were no competing tribes, no Kurds, Sunnis, and Shi'ites, threatening to pull Japan apart. Nor was there a single act of terrorism against the American forces in Japan during this time. In postwar Japan, the emperor was allowed to stay, even though stripped of his power. This provided a respected central figure retained from the past around which national unity could coalesce. In the case of Iraq, obviously, no such leader will remain, instead several competing figures are likely to emerge and vie for power. In Japan the government—especially the bureaucracy—was largely left intact. This provided a ready means for distributing food to a starving population and for organizing the reconstruction of industry and infrastructure. Iraq's current leaders, largely Saddam Hussein's loyal retainers from Tikrit, will

almost certainly be killed in the war or its aftermath, in revenge for his brutal policies. Certainly they will lose power. No functioning government will be left in the wake of this bloodbath. Further, Japan was already a highly industrialized country before the occupation and could realistically set out upon an ambitious course of high-tech development as early as 1946, even in the face of very different American plans to keep Japan a fourth-rate country.

Iraq would be a state impoverished by more than 20 years of war and UN-imposed sanctions without a head of state or a functioning bureaucracy. Unlike in post-war Japan or Germany, the US will not offer a Marshall plan, for its interest in Iraq will be to extract material wealth, not to protect against a Communist uprising. Lacking both large industrial base and a functional bureaucracy and with no American motive for reconstruction, Iraq will not revive as Japan did.

An American military government sitting upon an unreconstructed Iraq will not be able to provide the political stability necessary for the huge investment the oil industry will need. In Japan the United States set up a supragovernment: it did not and could not handle day-to-day affairs. But the old government, essentially intact, was there to do so. In Iraq, hydra-headed organizations will arise. These organizations will become shadow governments; the United States, unable to eliminate this amoebic political nonstructure, will learn to accommodate it, just as it has learned to accommodate the warlords who have partitioned an ostensibly united Afghanistan. However, this will mean a fragmented Iraq with shadow states by the Kurds in the north and the Shi'ites one in the south. Last October, in a discussion at MIT, John W. Dower, an authority on postwar Japan, was asked his opinion of an American invasion of Iraq. He replied that the Bush administration is "now heading for war followed by chaos."

—Michael Doliner lives in Ithaca. He studied politics and philosophy with Hannah Arendt during the Vietnam War.

# American Crude

Steven Chapman

## **Dreaming War: Blood for Oil and the Cheney-Bush Junta**

By Gore Vidal

Thunder's Mouth Press/Nation Books  
208 pp., \$11.95, paper

*This is the people  
That hopes to impose on the whole  
planetary world  
An American peace.*

—Robinson Jeffers

As America stands on the brink of what many are already calling the Second Gulf War, it may be useful to recall Robinson Jeffers' stoic and unpopular position as defender of the Republic during World War Two. Jeffers, along with a majority of Americans, wanted America to keep out of Europe's wars, and blamed FDR for deliberately provoking the Japanese into attacking us. Partly for proclaiming such unpopular isolationist views, Jeffers has been virtually ignored by the literary establishment, even though future historians may indeed recognize him as the greatest American poet of the early twentieth century.

A half century later, America's last surviving eminent man of letters, Gore Vidal, levels pretty much the same charge against

the Bush-Cheney regime. In *Dreaming War: Blood for Oil and the Cheney-Bush Junta*, Vidal argues that the whole "war on terrorism" was basically concocted before 9/11 as a way for the corporate-energy interests to dominate not only the supplies of Iraq, but to secure Afghanistan as a gateway into Central Asia, the famous "Stans" of unspeakable mineral wealth, and the oilman's El Dorado.

Vidal, novelist, playwright, dramatist, historian, and indefatigable *caccarone*, is a Republican of the very oldest guard, of a mold similar to Jeffers. After noting the blows to our democracy during the course of the last election in which the Supreme Court robbed the American people of their duly elected leader and installed the current "junta," Vidal launches into a bit of history, reminding his readers of how "we the people" have been manipulated into every major conflict of this century for the profit of an entrepreneurial war-mongering class:

It should never be forgotten that the American people did not want to fight in either of the twentieth century's world wars, but President Wilson maneuvered us into World War I while President Roosevelt maneuvered the Japanese into striking the first blow at Pearl Harbor, causing us to enter World War II as the result of a massive external attack.

The historical perspective is useful, because it shows that what the Texas boys are up to in the Middle East and Central Asia is part of a larger historical pattern, even as our current military adventurism opens up a new phase in our transmutation from Republic into Empire.

Vidal argues, with much evidence (and not all of it circumstantial) that the current "War against Terror" actually started with the Reagan and Bush Sr. administrations' deliberate strategy of demonizing the enemy. Media-fabricated personifications of evil such as Libya's Mumar al Qaddafi and Iraq's Saddam Hussein were designed to provide a pretext for the United States to move in militarily to secure the vast energy reserves of Eurasia, thereby assuring our strategic dominance of the global energy-based economy for the next forty years or so.

To give some useful background on the larger geo-political context, Vidal cites former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski's 1997 Council on Foreign Relations study *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*. The title of the report alludes of course to the great "chess game" between the British and Russian Empires in the nineteenth century over control of Central Asia, and which resulted in the current borders of Afghanistan. Brzezinski notes in the study how:

Eurasia accounts for 60% of the world's GNP and three-fourths of the world's known energy resource .... It follows that America's primary interest is to help ensure that no single [other] power comes to control this geopolitical space and that the global community has unhindered financial and economic access to it.

Brzezinski recognizes the political difficulty of gaining the American people's support for the projection of American military power in the region to provide "unhindered access" for multi-national energy companies. Thinking ahead in 1997, he already has the answer:

As America becomes an increasingly multi-cultural society, it may find it more difficult to fashion a consensus on foreign policy issues, except in the circumstance of a truly massive and widely perceived direct external threat. (italics mine)

Vidal's wry commentary on all this: "Thus was the gun produced that belched black smoke over Manhattan and the Pentagon."

With regard to Afghanistan in particular,

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# An Anthropological Epilogue

Ann May

Like most novice ethnographers, I set out hopefully in pursuit of data. In my case, I envisioned returning home with a tidy batch of information about the process of rural-urban migration in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania—all duly gathered and systematically categorized for analysis. Having been in that East African country several times previously, I felt prepared for such an undertaking and wholly up to the task. I had come to study only those participants in a situational phenomenon of migration, and certainly was not aiming to fit them neatly into any monolithic explanatory model, as in much anthropology of the past. And, based in a huge city like Dar es Salaam, home to about three million people, I could not realistically expect to “know” all of them, as would be the case in a small remote village setting.

But I was not prepared for a certain methodological despair that I experienced afterward. At the end of it all, what I had seemed like an incomplete mixed bag crammed with numbers, stories, experiences, assorted facts and points of view—bits of ragged laundry strung along a clothesline, with strange, unsettling gaps here and there. My worries about the adequacy and types of data I had assembled nagged at me and grew as I prepared to write, creating a vague sense of failure with regard to the field research. But there were other physical, intellectual and emotional qualms and uncertainties to sort out as well.

The first was a deep misgiving about my ability to analyze and then disseminate in any sort of meaningful way the information I had obtained. I felt humbled by the massive numbers of things that I still did not know. What had I really learned, anyway? More importantly, I agonized, how much of what I set out to learn had I failed to discover? It seemed that I had spent inordinate amounts of time in the mundane details of daily living and running a household in the large and chaotic tropical city of Dar es Salaam where I spent most of my fieldwork year 1999-2000. I often felt consumed by the constant effort required just to get from here to there, and to deal with erratic supplies of water, electricity, and the inadequacies of third-world communication. Alarming stores of precious time and energy were expended braving bad roads and frenzied traffic, and battling oppressive equatorial heat and humidity, monsoon downpours of gothic proportions, blowing dust, failing plumbing, and persistent insects large and small. Added to all that, the acute pain of a prolapsed disc two months before my intended return date led me to wonder finally whether I could realistically accomplish what I had set out to do. There was so much I still didn't know. I hardly even knew my neighbors.

A vexing sense of unease persisted about the inappropriate characterization of cities in the developing world, such as contemporary Dar es Salaam, as being situated at some mid-point on a linear advance to “modernization,” as though all societies eventually would (or should) conform to Euro-centric conceptions of “civilization.”

Another concern was the obligation I felt I owed those with whom I had interacted during my research. Like many who have gone before me to work in similar places, I had received constant appeals for help, ranging from small handouts to verbal and written requests that my inchoate understandings of their plights be communicated as soon as possible to organizations or entities (donors) who could “do something.” My image was as a mature and relatively well-off westerner, who had, after all, managed to summon sufficient resources to get myself halfway

around the world for a year. I was often overwhelmed by the weight of the collective need. I explained and rationalized and worried, counted and recounted my money, giving what I thought I could manage at times, withholding it at others with a guilty pang, searching always for realistic and humane ways of dealing with these entreaties. Months after I left Tanzania the hopeful requests in letters (and even e-mails) still arrive. I have found no satisfactory answer to this dilemma.

## History, Modernity, and Everyday Life

This issue of privation that has led to pleas for assistance is indisputably linked to the legacy of Africa's long experience with slavery and colonization and a forty-year history of exploitation and mismanagement by post-independence elites and various foreign interests. In his book, *Shadow of the Sun* (Knopf, 2001), long-time Africa observer Ryszard Kapuściński writes that the “the leap to the kingdom of liberty” at independence was fraught with a perplexity of expectations, intricacies, and entanglements:

This stems directly from the fact that European colonialists, dividing Africa among themselves... crammed... ten thousand kingdoms, federations, and stateless but independent tribal associations... within the borders of barely forty colonies. Meanwhile, many of these... groups shared a long history of conflict and wars. And here, without being asked their opinion on the matter, they suddenly found themselves within one... colony....

Returning from Tanzania with a host of unresolved questions about my own research and about notions of modernity and international development, I had the good fortune to read *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Univ. of California Press, 1999) by noted anthropologist James Ferguson. His clear-eyed assessment of the particular nature of urban fieldwork in Zambia, Tanzania's neighbor to the south, helped me to realize that my discomfort after finishing my fieldwork did not necessarily signify failure on my part, but actually went with the territory. Ferguson writes:

This was anonymous urban living in the midst of a busy and confusing city; it offered no “whole,” knowable social world of which a field worker might acquire a sense of mastery or confident familiarity. Such a setting, too, was an unfavorable one for the acquisition of local language skills... [it is] difficult to make headway... in an environment where English was so readily spoken.

Although social change is often portrayed as unidirectional, aimed toward “modernity,” Ferguson discovered a reversal of the “modernization” that had buoyed Zambia in the earlier half of the 20th century, an economic setback with disastrous consequences for that country. He writes:

My fieldwork left me with a terrible sense of sadness, and a recognition of the profound inability of scholarship to address the sorts of demands that people brought to me every day in my research, as they asked me to help them with their pressing and sometimes overwhelming personal problems and material needs.

Ferguson's response was to realize finally that the depressing way of life he had observed, the “decline, confusion, fear, and suffering, were central subjects of the book,

and not mere background to it.”

While Tanzania at the turn of the twenty-first century could not be equated with Zambia in the late 1980s, as a country experiencing “demodernization,” the benefits of its economic progress were nevertheless benefiting only a privileged few. For me, it was not just the impoverished conditions most people lived in that engendered a sense of anguish. It was more that the enormous rift between the lives of those fortunate few and all the rest seemed so utterly unbridgeable. There is something unspeakable about the visible daily juxtaposition of extremes of wealth and poverty. The tiny but unambiguously elite segment of Dar es Salaam's population (mostly government officials and expatriates) enjoyed relative comfort and grandeur, while ordinary citizens with whom I talked—like the vast majority of the urban population—endured daily life in edgy uncertainty and often deep privation.

Perhaps the almost palpable apathy and lack of excitement in Tanzania that year about the approaching general elections set for October 2000 was a manifestation of this dismally lopsided economic picture. In the mid-1990s, leading up to the country's first multiparty elections in 1995, things had been quite different. There was widespread optimism and friendly debates were heard in all quarters. But despite the ostensible inauguration of “multiparty” politics in the 1995 elections, the ruling party, *Chama Cha Mapinduzi* (The Revolutionary Party), remains dominant; the idea of “choice” is still illusory. Today in Tanzania, there is a pervasive sense of mistrust and even open disgust with political figures, of disenchantment with the ideologies once espoused by post-independence leaders such as Tanzania's first President, Julius K. Nyerere.

## “No money in our pockets”

Eventually, I came to realize that my inability to grasp what was happening in Dar es Salaam was shared by those I had come to study. The oft-heard claim in the streets was that the country was prospering but the people were not. “There is money in the country, but no money in our pockets” had become a mantra among taxi drivers, street vendors, housemaids, and others. There was a sense of disbelief about this, as if their eyes were lying to them: New high-rise buildings stretched into the hot blue sky, international hotels, trendy restaurants, internet cafés and cell-phone companies proliferated weekly in the city center. More and more imported European-made buses took to the streets to replace the old open-backed, hard-benched *dala-dalas*. They joined ever-increasing numbers of expensive air-conditioned cars—many with state or foreign diplomatic license plates—clogging the roadways. White South African investors have flooded into Tanzania since the end of the apartheid era, bankrolling many of the new enterprises. “The only ones getting rich are the South Africans,” was another frequently heard lament: “South Africa is buying Tanzania.”

But the tailor operating his treadle machine on his front porch, the shoe shiner, the bar girl, the clerk at the local vegetable stall, still struggled even to find change for their customers. Taxi drivers not only dusted and polished their cars as before in anticipation of customers, but now also spent considerable time with the hoods raised, twisting knobs and fiddling with hoses, patching ancient parts in hopes of getting another month's service from a worn-out vehicle. It became customary that year for me to offer at least partial payment of the agreed-upon fare in advance, enabling the driver to fill a perilously empty gas tank before proceeding.

One day when the taxi I was riding in stopped dead in the road, I was appalled to

watch the driver jump out with a length of rubber hose in his hand, raise the hood, and siphon up gasoline by sucking on the end of the hose. Jumping back in, he restarted the ignition, reeking of a substance that I was sure would kill him if he accidentally swallowed even a drop. His anxiety was evident even as he tried to stay cheerful and make light of the trouble. Being the only white person in my neighborhood, I knew there was intense but friendly competition for my business among the local drivers, and I had ridden with him before. Perhaps fearing that I would look for a more dependable ride, he worked hard to reassure me that we were safely on our way. “*Hamna shida, mama*” (no problem), he repeated twice, smiling hard.

As Ferguson points out, this kind of situation blurs the line between “native” and ethnographer. It may, along with “methodological anxieties that come with urban fieldwork, [account for] the sense of unease... the lack of a comfortable bounded community... in the midst of rapid social transformations.” The taxi driver and other “ordinary” citizens seemed disconnected—alienated and marginalized from the life of the burgeoning city.

This type of fieldwork flies in the face of the basic anthropological tenet that “immersion” in the life of those being studied would enable a gradual but fairly thorough knowledge and understanding of “their world.” Although my aim was not to write an ethnography of the whole city, I was nevertheless daily confronted with life there, and forced to deal with the contingencies as I found them. In an urban environment there is no single community, “no presumption of getting to the bottom of things.” Like Ferguson, I knew some people “quite well, some only in passing, others in special-purpose relationships that gave me detailed knowledge of some areas of their lives and almost none of others.” The shopkeepers and taxi drivers, bus conductors, and waitresses, and the people who went in the evenings to the same bar as I did to drink beer, eat roast goat meat, and to watch the Africa Cup soccer matches on a tiny flickering television were “nodding” acquaintances, neighborly people with whom I exchanged only superficial greetings and pleasantries. Others I knew more intimately, such as my watchman and

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## Berrigan

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pain. And he never, ever, complained.”

We cluster in front of Peter Clavar, shivering from the cold, waiting for the truck that will carry Phil to the gravesite to depart. Journalists snap photographs, cameras whirl, people unfurl banners and stand, in tribute, to Philip Berrigan. “Philip Berrigan,” someone shouts. “*Presente*,” someone responds.

Today, we bury Phil's body. Tomorrow, we must work even harder to convince our world, and ourselves, to beat swords into plowshares. That is the only tribute Philip Berrigan would ever want from those who love him.

Fred A. Wilcox, associate professor of writing at Ithaca College, is the author of *Fighting the Lamb's War: Skirmishes with the American Empire*. (the autobiography of Philip Berrigan), *Common Courage*, 1996; *Chasing Shadows: Memoirs of a Sixties Survivor*, The Permanent Press, 1996, and *Uncommon Martyrs: How the Berrigans and Friends Are Turning Swords into Plowshares*, Addison-Wesley, 1991, among other publications.



# Where to now, Mr. Chavez?

Gareth Chetwynd

Witnessing the sad implosion of a friend's marriage over the Christmas period, an unlikely analogy with the dramatic events in Venezuela forced itself upon me. As a dispute over parenting escalated out of control, the welfare of the child in question was forgotten in the midst of a bitter and futile quest for unconditional victory.

In Venezuela, the pact of governance underpinning the relationship between national institutions and "civic society" has entered a destructive spiral of such antagonism that both sides seem determined to celebrate victory on the rubble of the nation's economy.

President Hugo Chavez, a pseudo-revolutionary whose rhetoric belies a preference for democratic maneuvering, has provoked such ire in his opponents that a broad coalition of business leaders, organized labor and media interests seem determined to risk their very livelihoods to remove him.

For his part, Chavez seems willing to oversee the destruction of Venezuela's oil industry if that is what it takes to smash the opposition to his regime contained therein.

What is it about this charismatic (some would say clownish) former paratrooper that provokes such rage among the Venezuelan middle classes and their new-found allies, the oil workers? And where does a man who is willing to alienate three-quarters of his nation's population and destroy its key industry want to go?

Much has been written about the intrinsically racist or class-based rejection of Chavez by the more privileged sections of Venezuelan society. When the backlands *mestizo* stormed to power in 1999, his tirades against a corrupt elite certainly struck a chord with impoverished slum dwellers. Yet my visits to Venezuela suggested that the middle classes were more mistrustful than overtly hostile at this stage, and the national mood was one of optimism. However, the Chavez masterplan included the systematic purging of national and civic institutions of interests he saw as hostile to his own, and it was arguably his attempt to achieve this that stirred up unprecedented levels of hostility in such a wide range of interest groups.

In the sphere of national politics, Chavez moved quickly to strengthen his position at a time when his popularity ratings were still up in the clouds. He used the plebiscite format to sweep away resistance to his plans to dissolve the Venezuelan Congress, re-write the constitution and create a new national assembly dominated by his own supporters. Opponents cried foul in the face of this *fait accompli*, but it was Chavez' attempts to exert control over the national oil industry and the trade union movement that subsequently provided the watershed beyond which battle lines were drawn. *Petroleos de Venezuela* (PDVSA) is one of the titans of the global oil industry, producing around 2.5 million barrels of crude per day from prolific regions such as Lake Maracaibo and the state of Monagas. In the 1990s PDVSA earned industry accolades for its market-friendly policies under the stewardship of its urbane CEO Luis Giusti.

PDVSA management, and the US-educated Giusti in particular, were a favorite Chavez target as he lambasted elitist fat-cats for creating a "state-within-a-state." He also promised to end the quota-busting policies that had earned Venezuela a reputation as a black sheep in the OPEC family. Once in power Chavez subjected PDVSA to tighter government control and cut back on production as promised. PDVSA careerists grumbled about the long-term effect on production capacity and the bureaucratic stifling of decision-making, but most tried to get on with the job in hand.

Like other state oil companies in Latin

America, PDVSA serves as a focus for technical excellence and strategic importance, inspiring a strong sense of loyalty among the 40,000 workers. As a string of PDVSA presidents came and went, the perception that Chavez was playing politics with the meritocratic tradition of "their" company gradually stirred up fierce opposition among the normally passive ranks of PDVSA.

Parallel to this, Chavez launched an attack on one of the redoubts of organized opposition to his regime in the shape of the trade union federations, some of which maintained links with Venezuela's traditional political parties. The oil workers unions resisted moves to force new leadership elections, and

aligned against Chavez, and massive protests increased the clamor for his resignation. Claiming that Chavez had lost the legitimacy to govern in the face of such unpopularity, the opposition groups warned that they would launch a general strike unless Chavez agreed to back a February referendum and call elections if his government failed to win approval.

Waving his Bolivarian constitution, Chavez told the "golpistas" where to go. With battle lines now drawn, both sides launched themselves into the zero numbers endgame that is now unraveling the Venezuelan economy. The 30,000 PDVSA workers who obeyed the strike call have provided the backbone of the general strike whose ultimate aim was

strikers to defeat.

With hindsight, the decision to call such an overtly political strike now seems a rash one. I had the opportunity to speak to Luiz Giusti weeks shortly after the opposition groups had given their ultimatum and this arch enemy of Chavez admitted to feelings of apprehension about the challenge laid down by the strike organizers. Giusti knew that PDVSA would form the battering ram in the dispute, and risk its own destruction in the process.

Analysts warn that it would already take at least six months to get the wells, pipelines and refineries functioning to their full capacity again. But this assumes that some level of administrative normality can be achieved. The



Street clashes in Caracas.

Caracol

a string of pay disputes masked this wider struggle. The unions can claim to have inflicted the first serious defeat on President Chavez when the government was forced to back down over pay demands in 2001, and pro-Chavez PDVSA president Hector Ciavaldini lost his job as a result.

Chavez eventually managed to force a change in the leadership of the Fedepetrol oil-workers union, but unionists have questioned the legality of the elections. The continuing strength of grassroots opposition to Chavez has led to moves to form a breakaway oil-workers union, while union rank and file rushed to back the December strike call a few weeks after their leaders had accepted a 35% deal that was thought to form part of a wider peace pact. Attempts to launch a pro-Chavez labor union in the shape of the Sintraip organization also met with limited success, while the white collar PDVSA staff association known as Unapetrol has attracted thousands of members, despite the refusal of the authorities to recognize the entity as a legal trade union. The oil industry's potential to mount a serious focus of opposition was dramatically confirmed in the events that led to the coup of April 2002 that briefly ousted Chavez from power.

An attempt to fill the PDVSA board with Chavez supporters triggered the protests, strikes and demonstrations that escalated into street violence and the coup attempt.

The unedifying attempt to seize power, and the equally unappealing US move to back the coup, seemed to confirm Chavez' warnings about PDVSA acting as a state-within-a-state. Yet there was something of the self-fulfilling prophecy in the anti-Chavez sentiment that surged up from within the ranks of the company. Back in power, Chavez agreed to reinstate the PDVSA board, and appointed former secretary-general Ali Rodriguez to head the company. These apparently conciliatory moves did not assuage the rage of the groups

nothing less than the removal of Chavez. The strike also forged an unusual alliance between PDVSA managers and workers that has crystallized into the management-led organization known as *Gente de Petroleo*. The unionists have not always been comfortable with this alliance, but they see it as a direct result of Chavez' attempts to control their movement.

As a result Venezuela's crude output of 3.1 million barrels-per-day slowed to less than 500,000 bpd, and has crept up only modestly since then. Chavez' response was to condemn the strikers for treachery and employ the armed forces and replacement workers in an attempt to keep the oil flowing.

Chavez fired some of the strikers and announced that PDVSA would be hived into two regionally based operational units, effectively shutting down the 7,000-strong administrative headquarters in Caracas where opposition to his regime is strongest. The strikers have been equally resolute, vowing to do all that it takes to force Chavez out of power. The consequences for the Venezuelan economy are potentially devastating. The main supply of government revenue has been cut off, and financial channels closed to company and country. Estimates point to economic contraction of between 15% and 25% over the next 12 months as a result of the strike. Debt default seems more likely every day that PDVSA revenues are absent.

Production by private companies has also dropped dramatically due to their reliance on PDVSA infrastructure and the chaotic situation in the ports. There are growing signs of an environmental disaster in Lake Maracaibo due, apparently, to the errors of inexperienced replacement crews. In the supermarkets, shortages are so far limited to specific items such as flour and beer, but a lack of inputs is starting to cause shortages along the chain of production. With the support of the armed forces and a grim determination to win, Chavez seems to be in a position to grind the

acrimonious nature of the dispute suggests that it may take longer than that to attain the levels of management cohesiveness that will make short work of the job of inspecting, repairing and operating the country's oil facilities. The constitution that Chavez masterminded permits a mid-term referendum that would fall in August. But some analysts doubt whether Chavez will expose himself to such a test so soon after the bruising battles of late. Chavez strives to maintain his populist link with the working classes, and the government-backed popular markets ensure that the typically pro-Chavez slums are kept well supplied with affordable basic goods. But the support that he commands among the lower classes has undoubtedly dwindled due to unrealistic expectations and some Chavez fatigue.

Analysts gauge Chavez' approval rating at 70% in a country where 80% of the population are classified as poor. This suggests that a sizeable portion of the poor are rejecting their former hero. Chavez has already moved to delay the August referendum by winning a court ruling that states that a governmental mandate can only begin in January. This idea would effectively shift the start of his current term to January 2001 rather than August 2000. Caracas-based political analyst Luis Vicente Leon believes that this is just the start of a backsliding process by which Chavez will seek to avoid a popular vote. "He is pursuing a revolutionary aim of purging his enemies and taking control of institutions. He will try to use the instruments of legality to do this, seeking delays and postponements. But if pushed into a corner, I believe Chavez would take the revolutionary route rather than the institutional one," he predicts.

Gareth Chetwynd is the South America correspondent with *Upstream*, a weekly newspaper covering the oil and gas industry.



# Fracas in Caracas

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basin in the 1910s, there has been some degree of prosperity for the country. But, little of this new-found wealth found its way to the common people. With poverty rife and educational and health facilities in a deplorable state, a series of popular uprisings took place, culminating in the country's first democratic elections in 1949.

Despite almost fifty ensuing years of political stability, Venezuela's political climate continued to be marred by corruption scandals and threats of a military coup. The country's economy, which was hit hard by the 1988 drop in world oil prices, remained shaky. Almost 67% of the population lived below the poverty line. Then-president Caldera's unconstitutional crackdown on economic speculation and civic freedoms in 1994 incensed civil libertarians, but it took until early 1996 for popular opinion to swing against him. The government's tough measures were designed to bring Venezuela's rampant inflation and alarming currency slump under control, but the bloated public service resisted attempts at frugality until the arrival of Chavez and his radically pro-working-class reforms, which include measures to levy royalties on oil and redistribute land to the landless.

A reporter for the *Guardian*, Greg Pallast, calls the strike in Venezuela, which began on December 2, 2002, an "economic coup d'etat" by the privileged elite who are trying to strangle the economy. A professor friend of mine at the Universidad de los Andes in Mérida—goes so far as to say that the country has been sequestered, kidnapped. There is now a movement by the anti-chavistas not to pay taxes, to keep the money from *el pueblo*—the people—and most recently the bankers have threatened to join the strike as well. Five powerful families run dominant TV channels (there is only one state-owned channel) that broadcast anti-Chavez propaganda overlaid with racist commentary 24 hours a day with no commercials.

The real strike, however, lies with the computerized oil industry, not with the labor force. SCIL is the software computer company that runs the state-owned oil industry. Many of the directors are retired US military people. They are destroying the software of the refineries, even the automated tankards, although there still remains a 90% ability to physically move the oil even without this technology. Oil makes up 80% of all Venezuelan exports and accounts for half the government's revenues. Energy Minister Rafael Ramirez has said that the strike has already cost the Venezuelan economy two billion dollars.

Most universities, which are heavily subsidized by the government, have been paralyzed since the December strike began, unable to pay salaries or expenses. When I taught there seven years ago tuition was the

equivalent of US\$4 a year. My professor friend in Mérida relates:

I, who considered myself fortunate to live far from the noise of the world in a farm thirty minutes from the city, find myself like so many others, sequestered. I don't even have a drop of gasoline and it has been more than fifteen days since I left the house. I bathe with cold water and I cook with wood because I don't have any gas. I have no idea what's going on in the world. My mother passed Christmas alone and will be alone for her birthday tomorrow....The list of our miseries is endless although thank God

Meanwhile, back at ground zero, Mérida came pretty much to a standstill on Wednesday (the 8th): no gasoline in the city, and no public transport of any kind... the queues for gas are amazing, something like 600 cars, and the people at the front of the queue have been there for eight nights. Needless to say, I haven't bothered. Because not only is there no guarantee that you will get petrol, but almost certainly you will be limited to roughly half a tank. Other parts of the country don't seem to be quite so badly affected. On the other hand, the city is wonderfully peaceful



Demonstrator in Caracas.

the chickens, who still have food, lay their eggs every day and we still haven't gotten sick.... I don't think that it would surprise anyone the fact that I have no sympathy for those who have sequestered us.

Another friend writes to me:

and free of pollution. And in spite of everything we are having the paradura [end of Christmas party] on Sunday, though it will probably be strictly for the neighbors.

On January 2, 2003 Chavez met with the newly-elected leftist Brazilian president Luiz

Inacio Lula da Silva and called for—with an obvious reference to Bush's rhetoric—an "axis of good" among Brazil, Cuba and Venezuela. Chavez has also suggested the formation of a Latin American OPEC, LOPEC, which would include Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico, Trinidad, and Venezuela. Venezuela itself is the fifth-largest exporter of oil in the world and this new Latin American alliance could be a powerful one if brought to fruition. In the beginning of January of this year Lula sent 520,000 barrels of Brazilian oil to Venezuela, as well as the loan of oil industry technicians, in a gesture of support and solidarity with Chavez.

The US has been subversively meddling with democracy in Latin America for years. One has only to look back to the example of Salvador Allende in Chile to remember how the US helped to orchestrate that coup and backed the dictatorship of Pinochet. It is worth noting in the context of the current Venezuelan situation that the man in the Pentagon responsible for Latin America is Rogelio Pardo-Maurer, who was closely involved with the Contras during their US-backed war against the left-wing Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Two of the Venezuelan military who supported the April coup, General Efrán Vasquez and General Eddie Ramirez Poveda, are graduates of the US Army School of the Americas in Georgia, a notorious training ground for right-wing military around the world. The tycoon who led the media onslaught that preceded the April coup, Cuban-American Gustavo Cisneros, is a close friend of Bush senior.

In Latin America there is a growing resistance to United States policies. At the upcoming World Social Forum Meeting, to be held again in Porto Alegre, Brazil, 60,000 to 100,000 delegates will discuss the meaning of civil society and offer alternatives to the current Western economic models.

The recent election of Lula da Silva amounted to a huge referendum against the expansion of NAFTA and its neo-liberal policy. After twenty years of struggle, the people of Brazil took to the streets crying and exuberant at the election of Lula. The supposedly voiceless, powerless workers created the conditions for his political victory. Taken together with the latest election of a populist president in Ecuador, Lucio Gutierrez, there appears to be a growing hope in Latin America that the poor and previously disenfranchised have begun to claim their rights through democratic elections. But the resulting high levels of expectation place a burden of responsibility on the new leaders.

Cecelia Lawless is a senior lecturer in Romance Studies at Cornell University. Her most recent book is *Making Home in Havana*, with photographer Vincenzo Pietropaolo.

## An Anthropological Epilogue

continued from page 5

research assistants and several others who were old friends. I knew some of my neighbors by sight, others I only experienced as sounds, smells, and smoke, when their singing or laughter or cooking pots or roosters or errant children or radio music reached certain levels.

While my KiSwahili was good and I used it every day, the urban milieu was such that I ended up either interviewing primarily in English, or relying on translation by research colleagues, or a combination of both. This sense of not having truly mastered knowledge of a community and its vernacular language led to "feelings of inadequacy and uncertainty," not only for James Ferguson

and for me but, as he points out, also for some of the early British anthropologists of the Rhodes Livingston Institute who researched in the Zambian Copperbelt of the 1930s to 1950s—A.L. Epstein, Peter Harries-Jones, and Hortense Powdermaker. These ethnographers and others, such as J. Clyde Mitchell, delayed publishing on their research for a number of years after completing their fieldwork, as did Ferguson. He conjectures that this tendency is perhaps related to similar feelings of inadequacy. But, knowing that those who came before me had shared this experience of inadequacy helped to restore my confidence.

When I go back to Tanzania, I know that in spite of their problems, people will welcome me again as before, still friendly, gra-

cious, hospitable hosts. The essential Tanzanian character can be summed up in a brief Swahili proverb: "*Kaa ufikiri, dunia wawili wawili.*" It translates roughly, "Remain thoughtful, the world is just two people;" any two, at any given moment in time.

At the end of the day, perhaps that is all we can count on.

Ann May received her doctorate degree in Anthropology in May 2002 from the University of Colorado at Boulder, and is a research assistant for the Institute of Behavioral Science. She is seeking a position with a non-governmental organization that would take her back to Africa.

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# Read All About It

Carrie Laben

**A History of Mayor Alan J. Cohen's Administration of Ithaca, NY 1996-2002 Or Why Your Taxes Are Going Up and Up**  
By Joseph Wetmore  
Self Published  
52 pages, \$2.00, paper

So this well-known gadfly type writes this book at a time when his community seems to be taking a turn to the conservative side of the spectrum. In the book he attacks apparently popular powers-that-be. He addresses issues that the mainstream media have successfully convinced the public that they are not interested in hearing about. According to conventional wisdom, the book should sink from sight in days. But instead, it becomes a long-lasting bestseller.

If you guessed that I'm talking about Michael Moore's blockbuster *Stupid White Men*, you're right. If you guessed that I'm talking about Joseph Wetmore's notorious little pink pamphlet *A History of Mayor Alan J. Cohen's Administration of Ithaca, NY 1996-2002*, you are also right.

Though no warehouses full of the Cohen book had to be rescued from the shredder by enterprising librarians (after 9/11

Moore's publisher refused to release his book until some librarians heard about it and protested), its preparation did involve several months of painstaking research, as well as the assistance of a squadron of fact-checkers and proofreaders. And Wetmore (who was, in decades past, published in Moore's periodical *The Michigan Voice*) acknowledges that the book is as unlikely to affect Cohen's political future as *Stupid White Men* is to get Bush thrown out of office. "[Cohen]'s made it clear that he has no intention of running again" for the mayor's office, Wetmore points out. "Rather it's offered as a civics lesson."

And it is quite an in-depth civics lesson. In fifty pages it tracks the twists and turns of Cohen's career through the "Democrats for Cohen" affair (a complete list of Democrats who bolted their party's nominee, Dan Hoffman, to support Cohen is provided), the Widewaters and Lake Source Cooling controversies, and the Eckstrom scandal. It also includes lesser-known or relatively forgotten issues like the HUD grant difficulties created by the Boatyard Grill project and the Paleontological Research Institute location foul-ups. The penultimate chapter covers the recent revelations that the mayor neglected to fill out conflict of interest forms during key years in his administration. But perhaps the most

interesting feature of the book is the way that the author connects the dots provided by relatively minor instances of mayoral misbehavior to suggest a more disturbing big picture: the pattern of fiscal irresponsibility in a series of unpaid bills, the quest for control behind his failure to fill various committee positions. Since many have suggested that Wetmore is in the habit of nit-picking unduly at Cohen's behavior, it's important to see this demonstration of the devil that he sees in the details.

Still, unlike the civics lessons you may remember from high school, Wetmore's book is entertaining and quite popular. Since it first appeared in November it has gone through roughly one printing a week. In December, it even managed to top The Bookery's non-fiction bestseller list.

It's easier to see why Moore's book is a hit—his trademark blue-collar, straight-talking, All-American Guy attitude and quick, occasionally cruel sense of humor are widely appreciated traits that right-wing commentators have made their own domain for some time (and to be fair, he's certainly not the first lefty to use this schtick either; Molly Ivins leaps to mind). But no one—certainly not the publishers who were prepared to turn the whole print run into confetti—expected Moore's book of digs and indignation at racism, the Bush family, the

wealthy, the criminal justice system, the proliferation of handguns, and the like to take flight at a time when the American public was supposed to be interested in Bin Laden's head on a pike to the exclusion of all other concerns. Nevertheless, the book is now in its ninth month on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Moore's book is also a civics lesson of sorts—and if it's taught by one of the class clowns, at least we can hope that the material is reaching people who otherwise might have slept through the lecture.

What even those of us who already considered ourselves well-versed on the antics of mayor and president alike can learn from both of these books is that it is much too soon to give in to the sort of despair that's engendered from a perverse elitism. Plenty of people—in Ithaca and in the nation at large—are prepared to hear arguments that the powers-that-be have attempted to label radical, or dismiss as the whining of a small minority. Those who feel that they have a message, therefore, need to communicate it, with painstaking research—and a bit of eloquence and humor never hurts.

—  
**Carrie Laben**, a Cornell University student, works at the Autumn Leaves bookstore in Ithaca.

## American Crude

continued from page 4

Vidal points out that the purpose of the assault was not to keep women out of burqas or to make the place safe for democracy, but to serve the vested energy interests, and in particular,

for Union Oil of California, whose proposed pipeline, from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan to Pakistan and the Indian Ocean port of Karachi, had been abandoned under the Taliban's chaotic regime. Currently, the pipeline is a go-project thanks to the junta's installation of a Unocal employee as American envoy to the newly born democracy whose president is also a former Unocal employee.

The record bears much of this out. The Taliban needed to be replaced to make the way safe for oil and gas pipelines from the vast oil and gas fields of the Caspian Sea. Gore argues, convincingly, that we were ready to move into Afghanistan before 9/11, that the Al Qaeda folk knew something was up, and that the attack on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center was a pre-emptive strike to throw us off guard. Vidal also raises the possibility that American intelligence agencies colluded with Pakistani agencies to nurture a radical Islamic terrorist movement—whose figurehead later turns out to be Osama—precisely in order to provide a bogeyman and pretext for military intervention. Vidal makes the point that we didn't move on Osama for such a long time

because our geopolitical interests were maintained by demonizing the Muslim extremists, and because each more audacious assault (the attack on the USS Cole and on the African embassies) brought us one step closer to the final goal of a securing a *casus belli* that could be sold to the American people.

Vidal admits that there are still many unanswered questions, but suggests that, under oath, some of those involved would reveal how much was deliberately withheld from the American people—so much so that he dares to dream of the upcoming impeachment hearings of George W. Bush.

With the caper in Afghanistan more or less accomplished, Vidal shows how the focus of media attention has now shifted from Osama to Saddam, "in pursuit of the vast oil wealth of Iraq itself, which must—for the sake of the free world—be reassigned to U.S. and European consortiums." It is the "next giant step, which is to conquer Eurasia, a potentially fatal adventure not only for our frazzled institutions but for us the presently living." Does this mean we may be witnessing a real turning point, the phase of critical overextension and ensuing decline of our imperial ambitions? Rome was neither built, nor did it fall in a day, though the experience of the British and the Russians before us should give us pause.

The last chapter of this provocative book consists of an interview with a journalist named Marc Cooper in which Vidal presents himself not so much as a lone dissident in exile but as a staunch defender of the Republic. After reciting a litany of our gov-

ernment's past evil deeds and present imperial ambitions, Vidal leaves some ground for hope: "Eventually they will figure it out." "They being who? The American people?" his interlocutor responds. "Yeah, the American people," Vidal replies. And with reference to George W. Bush in particular, he dares to add: "Mark my words. He will leave office the most unpopular president in history. The junta has done too much wreckage." Such assurances from the oracle of Ravello give grounds for cautious opti-

mism that the tides are finally beginning to turn, and that the American people may indeed awaken and figure out what their government is up to. As we await the day, what else is there to be done but unfurl the flag and proclaim with Jeffers: "Shine, perishing Republic."

—  
**Steven Chapman** lives in San Francisco, and is currently working on a book on Goethe.

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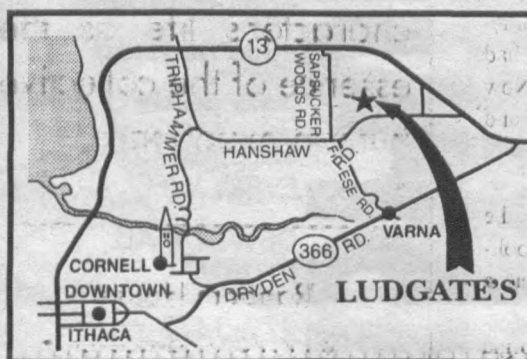
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## Fiction

Joel Ray

Coming down from the running jump shot across the lane Wyatt was flying sidewise and his right foot crumpled under him and he went down. It was the ankle he had torn when he was eleven, jumping off the high wall along their street, showing off for his mother; he realized now the ligament hadn't knit right. Someone went to get ice, and he sat on the sidelines until the game was over. The next day the doc told him it was a splintered bone and that he'd be in a cast for several months.

Maybe he had overreached, though the feeling when he was aloft, watching the ball arc toward the basket, oh that was fine.... But the break was bad news. He could get along without basketball for awhile, carry on with his affairs, his work—but now the guitar class he had just started with Michaels was finished. In the deep snows that would last till April he couldn't drive or walk to class on crutches and carry the guitar. The day after he came home in the cast he sat and awkwardly crossed his legs and tried to play the last exercise they had learned. His fingers stumbled repeatedly and he put the guitar away in frustration.

He had signed up for the class because a friend had told him that years ago Michaels had studied with Johnson Hill. On his first trip from the South back to New York, when he was sixteen, Wyatt had sat in the gallery at Birdland with his pianist friend David, mesmerized by Johnson Hill's stillness—nothing moving but his wrists and fingers, not even a foot tapping—as, song after song, the brilliant quicksilver lines came leaping from his guitar. "I'll Remember April," "It's All Right with Me," "Caravan," "You Stepped Out of a Dream." Solos of swift complexity and building power, dense harmonies, sudden reversals, exhilarating releases, and during it all the man was like a statue. David, whose playing was full of big gestures—he jumped around on the stool, laughing and mugging, a natural ham and ladies man—had whispered to Wyatt, "How can he do that and not move?" So beautiful was the torrent of music that Wyatt had held his arms tight around himself to keep from dissolving in the hot bath of it. When he had left New York with his mother he had been very young; he barely had memories of living in the city; but in hearing Hill he thought he had recognized something he'd lost.

Since then, before and after his permanent move to the North, he had listened to the music widely and avidly. He had become friends with several musicians, and had begun writing reviews for a jazz magazine and hosting private jam sessions. In the class he had just started to sense from Michaels what, in his own body, the stillness might mean, how all the striving, bursting energy could be concentrated in the poised extremities with their fine dense nerve endings like electrical contacts and the rest of the clumsy animal body be immobile, as though one were a transmitter for some other source. During the first few sessions, as he sat on his stool in a row with the other students—not yet twenty, most of them, and Wyatt now with a slightly graying beard—and Michaels moved them all along swiftly from one exercise to the next, he knew that over the months of the class he would begin to gain access to the language and technique that one day, maybe it would be years from now, might allow him to hear the spirits that Hill, with his bowed head, had been listening to. He would learn discipline, a practice method, which would lead to playing with his friends.

That was what the study and practice was for, not to play alone as he had been doing, grinding away on the static little classical pieces in the book, but for that moment when

you slid into the same groove of time and heard the chords and keys with another person and you were one, breathing together, finding your way together toward resolution.

When he was a young boy he had thought of the guitar as a poor man's instrument. Doyle, the young man who lived across the street, had played a guitar. Wyatt remembered Doyle's strumming and the sad songs he sang, songs from the hill country. Though Wyatt's family had come from the country, too, he was raised in the bustling town, and he was impatient at the poverty in the songs and at their gloomy repetitious verses. Thinking back on the revelation in Birdland he could imagine how exhilarated people must have felt when they first encountered the gypsy magician Reinhardt, so fluid and adventurous despite the damaged fingers on his fretting hand. And Johnson Hill in his stonelike stillness had been virtually absent in himself. Wyatt had sung in public once, with David behind him playing splashy chords, running up and down the piano, and though it had gone OK he recalled mostly his nervous dread of forgetting the words. To Hill there had been no audience, and not a sign of Hill himself, either, his person and history hidden. He was like a monk. A boiling statue. You could go north, Wyatt had thought, and get out of your skin; it had to be that Hill had escaped from Georgia and cleaned out all the country in himself.

Now in the hobbling cast with his toes sticking out obscenely once again and the invisible chiggerlike itch that made him want to claw the thing off, Wyatt could see that high wall on his street, feel the clasp of the past. Running his hand over the cast he suddenly recalled sitting one day in Doyle's kitchen. Doyle lived alone. He spoke with a stammer and had a cruelly twisted right foot. He was slim and wiry like a boy, yet dark in the way of a man, with a thick closely shaven beard, and he always wore farmer's overalls and hightop black boots laced all the way up and a clean white shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a pen in the pocket that he used to draw with. His slim, wiry arms were covered with silky black hair. Out of the corner of his eye Wyatt would see someone moving jerkily on the street, and he knew it was Doyle limping to the grocery on the corner, his body flailing with the effort, so that he looked palsied, a little crazy and out of control. But he was always clean. Wyatt could recall the slightly scorched smell of his cleanness, and when he played and sang, his voice became steady and clear, the stammer gone. That day in the kitchen, after he had put the guitar back in its case, Doyle sat back down at the table and took off his boot and began rubbing the twisted foot with his slim hands covered with the silky black hair, saying to Wyatt that it went numb sometimes. For a second Wyatt felt a queasy flash of panic that Doyle was going to take off the white sock and show him the twisted foot. Finally Doyle had worked the boot painfully back on and laced it up.

Shortly afterward he had climbed up on the wall to show his mother how strong and agile he was. She had been apprehensive, he remembered. Her own way in the world was to be quiet and removed. On their return to the South after his father's death she had come again under the stern domination of her mother, and as he grew up she taught Wyatt to be quiet too and not think he was better than others and not brag. To know his place. And not to hit back. She had never hit back and the resentment at her mother had built up, and in those years he took some of the brunt of that diminishment in her, and watched silently as she began to drink. Don't make a spectacle of yourself, she would say.

When he jumped from the wall and fell, she had not scolded or blamed him. Then one day as he was showing her the names of his school friends written on the cast, she had told him one of the rare stories about herself

when she was young. She had been driving a car when she was a girl, she said, eighteen, and had no license, and had been in a terrible accident, smashed by a trolley; and she lay in the hospital paralyzed from the waist down with a shattered pelvis for many weeks. "I remember Mama coming into that hospital room and telling me that pride goeth before the fall," she said, "and that the doctors had told her I would never have children. But every day the doctors came in and tickled my feet, until one day I moved my toes. Then I went away and married your daddy."

But after the brief years of happiness in New York, with the return south she had been assailed by grief and loss—her mother's daily humiliations, the desperate escape into a brief and violent second marriage, the alcoholic decline of her once-admired older brother. From time to time the memories would surface and her face would brighten as she told Wyatt about dancing at the Waldorf and marching in her new hat in the Easter Parade; and she might sing a few bars of the Berlin song, about the bonnet with all the frills upon it. Yet he remembered her instinctive deflection of his own feverish excitement when he had returned from that first trip back to New York, sleepless and dirty from the road and with only a penny in his pocket, and he had shown her the outsize celebrity photo of himself sitting at the table in Birdland, taken by the cigarette girl, the photo which had survived the long rainy day and night hitchhiking back home. In the brightness of the flash there was a wide grin on his face as though he belonged there, and as he began to tell her about Johnson Hill she had laughed and squeezed his hand and said, "Oh, that haircut. Your ears look like two big old cabbage leaves."

Now he called Michaels to tell him he couldn't complete the class. He asked him about Johnson Hill—was he still playing? Michaels hesitated, then said no, he had become a carpenter and lived back in the South somewhere. Wyatt asked what had happened, and Michaels told him that Hill had had a nervous breakdown and could no longer play in public, even in a recording studio. In his mind's eye he again saw the blur of Hill's hands, his lowered head, and his listening stillness as he flashed through "I'll Remember April." The famous black Birdland emcee had introduced him with a grand flourish: "And now, ladies and gentlemen, the one and only John-son Hiii-uull!" After it was over he and David had floated out into the dark New York City morning.

After he thanked Michaels and hung up, he spent the afternoon searching through the boxes in the big closet for the old photo. But it had gotten tossed out somewhere along the way, in all the moves. Ah, he thought, to hell with my cabbage ears anyhow. Yet he felt a pang, hard and equivocal, at having lost the image of that ecstatic moment when he had heard Johnson Hill calling from the other world, the visible proof of the moment when he had taken the first step to leave home, and his mother, wary of his elation, had spoken those seemingly offhand, joking words to stanch his leaving.

Hill had played "It's All Right with Me," and Wyatt thought, yes, that title seemed a clue to what he had seen that night. He could imagine Hill saying quietly, "But you see, the music has nothing to do with me—it's just a gift. You can take it or leave it." Then somewhere down the long years the vessel had cracked and the spirits had departed. Now Hill's hands wielded saws and hammers and wrenches. What old injuries had come back on him? Perhaps Wyatt hadn't known what he was seeing that night. Perhaps despite the brilliance of the music Wyatt had been looking at a man under duress, wounded even, a rural southerner in the alien, crowded north, a shy white man from the hills of Georgia painfully aware that he was playing in the

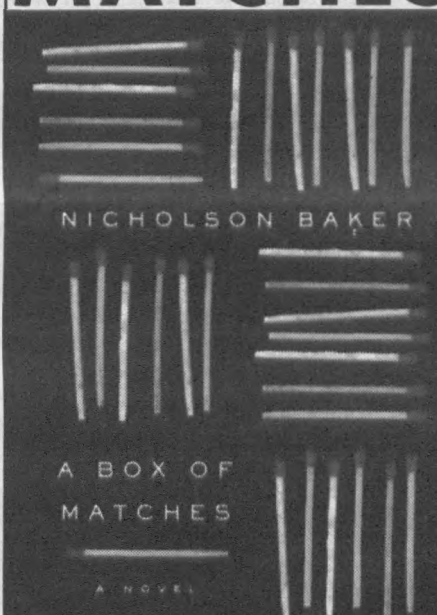
shrine of the black genius Charlie Parker, and he had misinterpreted the stillness and bowed head as some holy thing, some pristine impersonality.

He heard the faint call of Doyle's clear unstammering voice as he sang those old country blues, his twisted foot forgotten for the moment, and it seemed now some kind of strange prelude to Johnson Hill's shimmering absence.

In his dreams Wyatt floated across the lane, turning in midair again toward the basket, trying to hit the moving target. He dreamed of the majestic hook shots of Lovelette and Chamberlain and Russell, their bodies impossibly large stretched at full extension, one leg pulled up and one straight, the front arm crooked protectively before the body and the other fully extended upwards with the ball held so high up there, at such a poise, just before the fingers rolled it off, flipped it off with such ease, almost one finger at a time, and a faint touch of disdain as they looked back over the shoulder, over the eyes of the helplessly reaching defender, up at the basket.

Joel Ray is a former editor of the Bookpress. He lives in Ithaca.

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## Fiction

### Patrick Robbins

Winston studied his hat rack. He had a number of hats to choose from, and he had to pick the right one. It could be the Cubs baseball cap, or the University of Arkansas cap, or maybe even the cowboy hat. The Cubs hat had the best fit, while the U of A hat had a longer bill for those especially sunny days. The cowboy hat had been a present from Mavis last Christmas—she knew he would look ridiculous in it, which was why she bought it. She was delighted whenever he emerged from the bedroom wearing it, and while he'd grump about it, he used to enjoy watching her delight. This evening, though, he went with the Gilligan hat. He set it on his head and went off to the liquor cabinet.

Most of the windows at Winston's harbor residence faced the east. This meant the house got a lot of natural light in the morning, and that Winston had to start turning on the lamps before the local news. When it was cloudy he'd keep one living room lamp on throughout the day. Mavis used to complain that this was wasteful if they weren't going to be using the light, but Winston would assert his position as head of the household, and the light stayed on.

It was different now. Winston rarely saw a need to keep any of the lights burning. He would fix his dinner in the gloaming and get ready for bed in the dark, feeling for his pajamas. Artificial light was too harsh for him now, too false, provided no warmth. He wished he could show Mavis, tell her how right she'd been. She'd probably tell him he was being ridiculous, that you shouldn't pretend you don't need something when it's clear that you do. She used to go back and forth on issues like this, and it used to drive him crazy.

The sun was setting now, and Winston poured himself a Cutty on the rocks to take outside. His hand shook a little as he poured, and the mouth of the bottle tapped the rim of the glass. Winston felt like a conductor at the podium, calling the orchestra to order. He recapped the Cutty and took his glass to the porch, stopping along the way to pick up his son's postcard, which rested on the felt-top desk.

It was a warm and quiet evening. There was one cloud on the horizon, vaguely pink from the sun and perfectly flat along the bottom, watching over the lake. Winston squatted over his lawn chair and dropped into it, rattling the ice in his glass like a percussion instrument. He took a slow sip, listening to the ice crackle and hiss, then set the glass down, covering a knothole. For a while, he watched the cloud turn pinker through the shroud of netting that protected him from all those carnivorous insects. Then he took up the postcard. It was postmarked June 23, two weeks previous, but Winston couldn't bring himself to file it away just yet.

Dear Dad—it's Helen's mom's turn to see the kids, so we won't be up for the July 4th weekend after all. I think it's great that you're at the Harbor this summer—it's good to be with your memories, and I'm glad you're not shutting them out. Besides, if Mom knew you weren't using the place she'd have a bird. Think good thoughts, Dad.  
—Love, Tony.

The front of the card showed a picture from some time in the 1940s; a farmer leaned on his tractor and chewed a piece of hay. He looked irritated at having to stand around posing for pictures when there was work to be done. Winston smiled at the farmer, wondered what it took to get him to quit the fields. Illness? Old age? Or did his family push him out there?

Winston had spent his Fourth of July morn-

ing watching the parade. A few of Mavis's lady friends walked over to say hello and express their sorrow for his loss. Mavis was a wonderful woman, they assured him. Winston already knew this. He waited for somebody to ask him how he was holding up. Nobody did.

In the afternoon he tried to call his daughter. First he got a recording telling him the number had been changed. He had to go find pen and paper, then call the old number back so he could copy down the new one. When he called the new number, nobody was home, so he left a message asking Becky to call him back when she got the chance. He stayed near the phone for the rest of the day, bringing it out with him on the porch when night fell. The fireworks were "beyond exquisite," as Mavis used to say; the netting cut down the glare, but Winston was still appropriately dazzled, sad, and a little bit proud of America. The phone didn't ring during the fireworks, didn't ring until the next morning. Becky was dashing off to work, so she couldn't talk long, but she wanted him to know she'd call him early next week, when things weren't so hectic, and then they could talk as long as they wanted. Before she hung up, she told Winston she loved him.

Now the cloud was a mottled purple, and Winston felt a brief chill float inside his chest. He finished his Cutty and let the light, clean fuel warm him before he pushed himself to his feet. As he went inside and put his glass in the sink, he debated whether he should throw on a sweater or change into his flannel pajamas. He decided to hold off on any decisions until he got to the bedroom, where he could consider them both and really weigh his options. The hallway to the bedroom was always the darkest part of the house; he touched his way to the end, then grasped for the doorknob and turned it.

There was a whistling sort of noise in the room. This gave Winston a moment's pause; he knew of nothing in the room that might make that noise. It sounded like a radio between stations, but there was no radio in the room. Yet there was something familiar about the noise, something unwelcome. Winston stood in the doorway, his eyes roaming for clues, as the noise fell and rose again. Then it rose higher, and with it came the quick little creak of the house settling.

Winston's mind snapped. As his eyes darted to the clean hole in the window, the memory came roaring back. He and Mavis had just finished the long drive up, and he had shut off the motor and leaned back to admire the house, and in the middle of a happy sigh he spotted the broken window next to the door. He was out of the car in a flash, running up to the house, leaving behind Mavis's voice asking what the trouble was. As he feared, he didn't need his keys; the door had been unlocked from the inside. He took two steps in and froze at the sight of the beer cans and the cigarette butts and the ashes scattered in front of the fireplace and the scraps and stains. He stood there, dumb, and the wind whistled through the hole in the window and flew around the room, mocking Winston with its empty laughter.

But Mavis hadn't been upset in the slightest. When she came in and saw what had been done, she simply went about cleaning things up. Her attitude was that some young people wanted to have a party, and that this was the house they decided to have it in. Boys will be boys, after all, and since no real damage had been done besides the window, why fuss about it? Winston pointed out the charred remains of *Reader's Digest Condensed Books* in the fireplace, but Mavis pointed out that he never read them, had no intention of reading them, and probably wished he'd thought of the idea. The wind blew through the hole, singing to Mavis as she cleaned, and Winston went back to the car to unload it and make room for the wood he'd buy from the hardware store, wood to make shutters that closed

and locked from the inside.

The shutters he'd installed in the bedroom were all open, of course, now that he was here. He looked at them, pressed against the wall, and looked at the hole again. It was just below the window lock, right where that curved crack had been for so many years. It wasn't there in the morning, when Winston was getting dressed, and it wasn't there when he came in to get his hat. He imagined it got there while he was out on the porch; his hearing wasn't what it used to be, and he wouldn't have been surprised if he didn't hear it at all. He could picture a gloved hand punching through the glass, reaching up to the lock...

That was when Winston realized he might not be alone. Whoever broke the window could still be in the house. Could be waiting.

It gave him a bad, sinking thrill to think this. It sent him to the closet door. He threw it open. Nothing but a couple of his dress shirts, for the fancy lawn parties he and Mavis sometimes went to, and a few of her dresses. She loved the magenta one.

Whenever she tried it on, she would never ask Winston how she looked. She would strut around the room, making exaggerated pivots, secure in the knowledge that she looked divine.

He took a sleeve between two fingers and brought it to his nose to smell. But there were no smells left, nothing but dust. It only made him have to sneeze; he jammed his lips together to suppress as much noise as he could. He gave one quiet snort, then another. That done, he eased out of the bedroom, looking for huddled shadows, or maybe a flashlight beam playing on the walls.

The house had only one floor to it, which cut down on both hiding places and search time. Winston went through the living room, kitchen, and dining room, seeing nothing. He tossed a glance at the porch, just in case, then doubled back on his tracks to the kids' rooms. He hadn't been in either of them since their last visits; Mavis had been the one who aired them out and cleaned them up, so now the rooms were stale but tidy. Tony's bedside table had a lamp, a courtroom thriller, and a picture of him and Helen during their engagement, in a stand-alone plastic frame. Becky's table held an unplugged phone, a travel alarm clock, and a clear, slim vase of plastic flowers. Mavis used to secretly fill the vase with water, then tell Becky she was glad to see her taking such good care of her flowers. Becky would roll her eyes a little, Winston would laugh, and Mavis would give her husband a sly smile. He never lost appreciation for her off-kilter sense of humor. It was with her to the end—the last thing she asked for was a glass of iced tea, saying it could be her last cold drink, depending on which way she was going. Winston promised her she had nothing to worry about in that regard, and was in the middle of listing the reasons when she died. He never got the

chance to bring her that glass of iced tea.

Now the room was empty, any water in the vase had evaporated, and there was no sign of intruders. Winston backed out, pulled the door closed in front of him. He turned to his door, which was ajar—but he'd left it that way, hadn't he? Maybe someone had ducked back in there while he searched the other rooms. What he would have given for two good ears. He stood there, wanting to feel silly for all his worries but unable to convince himself they weren't well-founded. He wondered how Mavis would handle it. She'd probably join him in the search and when they came up empty she'd kiss his forehead and tell him he was so brave.

Winston edged back into the room; it looked the same, right down to the open closet door. Then he had an inspiration. He eased himself into a squatting position to look under the bed. There was nobody there. He could see the shards of glass under the window, and...

And a lump. A lump of some kind. It was hard to know what it was in this light, from five feet away. He pushed himself to a standing position and moved around the foot of the bed to get a closer look. Some of the glass crunched under his right foot as he stopped. The lump, he saw, was a bird. It was a bird that made the hole in the window, and now Winston got to feel the embarrassed relief he'd craved for the past few minutes. There was nobody else in the house. He was alone. Him and the bird.

He leaned over, pressed his right knee with his right hand and picked the bird up with his left. It was small, fitting easily into his palm. It was black and orange, and its eyes were closed. Winston took its beak between his

*continued on page 11*



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# Even a Demon Chants the Buddha's Name

Peter Fortunato

## A Garden of Demons

By Edward Hower  
Ontario Review Press  
222 pp., \$22.95, cloth

Belief and faith are not the same. While faith might be called the proof of things unseen, and might appear to one who does not share that faith as nothing more than a strong belief, still the word faith evokes considerably more depth. Belief tends toward complacency through the lack of self-examination, while faith asks to be practiced and is strengthened with testing. Faith is reflective, as it seeks the truth of experience.

Blind allegiance to dogma is never truly an element of devout faith. Such allegiances are especially dangerous when linked to tribalism, for tribal identity dresses itself in blood, and when its blood is spilled, it cries for vengeance. Terrorism and war, with their escalating cycles of hatred and fear, with their resort to such idols as divine sanction or "infinite justice," these primitive dynamics still threaten the survival of humanity. In fearful times of chaos especially, tribalism and fundamentalism often violently reassert themselves. Psychologically speaking, there is something of the Underworld about them: such belief systems refuse the light of reason and the generous sunshine of love.

It might be that people can't live without some illusions and assumptions that unconsciously shape our perceptions; faced with the wide world, the private, tiny self thereby gains a sense of direction and meaning even when it operates without complete consciousness. And yet, beliefs of all types, including religious ones, create a separation from reality. A map is not the same as the territory, and unfortunately, we humans have the capacity for ignoring every sort of evidence when it contradicts our cherished beliefs.

While I don't think it is Edward Hower's intention in his slim, suspenseful novel to examine all of these distinctions, *A Garden of Demons* resonates well beyond its particulars: in Sri Lanka in 1998, a small family is attempting to make of a former plantation a nature sanctuary. The mother, Sue, tries to live according to Buddhist principles, meditating and studying the Dharma, raising her young daughter, Lila, in a tradition that honors all life. Derek Gunasekera, the father, also has high ideals, and works tirelessly to preserve this land that was passed down to him through his Sri Lankan father. Who can deny that the

goal of creating an ecological preserve is a good thing, perhaps especially where war is tearing a country apart? But Derek is obsessed with his plan, disturbingly so, and from the outset of the story, his belief that the sanctuary can exclude all violence feels ominous.

The action begins with the arrival of Sue's brother, Richard, from America. When he was last at the sanctuary several years earlier, it was a source of healing for him, and back in the States he has since gotten his life onto a new track. This time around he is an outside observer who cannot ignore the political turmoil threatening to engulf the entire island. While the book is not a foray into the horror that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* explores, still, Hower's tale has its own dark jungle. The novel is also by turns descriptive and concise, lyrical at the same time as it is plot driven.

Richard is a hero to his niece Lila and a confidant to his sister, but he and Derek have their differences, which date back to earlier times. He is also frustrated by Derek's and Sue's belief that their paradise with its wire fences can remain neutral amid the violence that plagues Sri Lanka. When Richard tries to understand the source of these troubles, he concludes that at the root of the danger there are "religious things." Sue concurs: "And animist, and political, too. It's all mixed up together here, especially nowadays.... Politics here are a nightmare."

Ethnic sectarianism, demons and magic — Sue and Derek and Lila have grown to accept these, but seem not to have noticed, as Richard does, how things are rapidly changing for the worse. It is a utopian dream the family is seeking to live, but as one member of a gang of native boys stealing fruit from the sanctuary informs Lila, "You don't know anything."

Violent rebels and witches are not the only threats that give to *A Garden of Demons* its sting. Hower's central characters also have themselves to contend with, and this tightly constructed novel is as much about human psychology and our desires for peace and beauty as it is a political thriller. In this respect, the book recalls the way Graham Greene's fiction thrives in post-colonial locales.

Derek's vision is made suspect in a number of ways; for example, when Lila observes that her house cat has been caged by her father to punish it for hunting within the sanctuary, she sees instantly how unhappy a solution this is: the cat has been imprisoned for following its own nature. The incident reflects the perturbation within her father's psyche, but one of *Garden's* principle delights is that the story is told from the point of view of Derek's artistic daughter.

Born to this place, raised according to her

parents' principles, Lila is sensitive to the physical beauty and animism of the culture. She is also friends with many different types of people. And it is Lila's experience that gives to the book its most moving qualities, as she too must face the possible loss of paradise and adapt to unexpected changes. Lila's story must be like those of the children in many beautiful but war-torn places whose histories resemble that of Sri Lanka's.

Twenty-five hundred years ago in India, the Buddha stated unequivocally in his First Noble Truth that life in *samsara*—dualistic experience—is suffering. What he meant is that ordinary life, whatever its particularities and pleasures, is inherently incapable of satisfying us. Even when they seem within our grasp, our goals resemble nothing more than insubstantial dreams whose impermanence proves painful to bear. Furthermore, as Buddhism's Second Noble Truth explains, it is the very desire to obtain happiness and avoid its loss that actually leads to more suffering.

Even the best of societies can offer nothing more than provisional solutions for the problems of their citizenries, and only the most honest of peoples can hope to realize a relatively enlightened model of society. For a Buddhist, that future seems plausible only through faith in our innate ability to find a sense of balance on the Middle Way that the Buddha taught. Since our True Nature is already beyond all dualities, enlightenment itself is nothing to be attained; real freedom is in walking the Path between a renunciation of life and blind attachment to it. The Third and Fourth Noble Truths explain this path.

Returning to *A Garden of Demons*, the tensions that become obvious to brother Richard are familiar from many a utopian tale: while seeking to banish the horrors without, other dangers from within threaten to undo a "dream world." Especially, Derek's inability to contend with his personal demons, and the dangerous political compromises to which he is willing to resort to save his sanctuary spell trouble for his family. I cannot help but read the book as something of a parable, and I have found myself often reflecting on similar conditions very close to home these days.

That Lila will become an artist and remember the upheavals the novel recounts is implicit throughout; that an artist through the power of memory transforms and preserves experience is one of the redeeming messages here. The role of parents and adults as protectors, the compromises inevitably imposed on us all by the complicated world beyond a child's ken, all these are conveyed succinctly and dramatized by Hower without moralizing.

I have known Edward Hower for many

years and share his interests in anthropology and folklore and the Indian subcontinent. Hower has traveled extensively in this part of the world, and his first-hand knowledge shines in his descriptions. Still, there are a couple of elements of the story that seem to me incomplete.

Derek might be disturbed, but he never truly impresses me as demon-possessed. When he hosts a rite of exorcism at the sanctuary, it's a good plot device, but the emotional and spiritual impact of the experience remain vague, despite much fine description. And after the story's dramatic climax, I might have wished that the novel did not simply resort to an image of the Buddha's serene gaze as an emblem of acceptance.

Early on, Lila reflects that the world would indeed be a good place and that people would find peace if only they did practice the Dharma, avoiding injury to others, and offering aid to those in need. Jesus said something similar, of course; the Hebrew Bible and Muslim Koran teach the Golden Rule as well. This is ecological thinking of the highest order, and a universal among the world's wisdom traditions. Then why don't human beings behave better toward one another or the planet, even when it's shown to be in our own best interests?

The Buddhist answer is a simple one, habit. Our habit of egocentric thinking is so deeply ingrained that it is largely unconscious. Often, we experience the negative consequences of our attachments without awareness of how our attitudes help to create the very conditions we would avert. Yet, for one who has stabilized the mind in the clarity and calmness of meditation, painful experiences themselves can become valuable opportunities to practice the Dharma precisely. "Even a demon chants the Buddha's name," goes an old saying. Even horror holds a mirror, if we are willing to see ourselves and what we really are in the face of negative forces.

Bad things do sometimes happen to good people, as in *A Garden of Demons*. Buddhism does not preach mere passivity in the face of danger or injustice, but counsels active acceptance beyond anger and fear. Through such patience, transformation is possible; through such faith, in other words, the Way is clarified. The novel comes to something like this in its final chapter, and with an unexpected refocusing of events makes wonderful, artistic sense.

Peter Fortunato has a holistic counseling practice in Ithaca. He has recently completed his first novel and is seeking a publisher.

## The Return of Mavis

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thumb and two fingers, the way he gripped a pen, and moved it around. The bird's head lolled in every direction. A broken neck, clearly. Still holding the beak, he signed his name in the air. W-i-dot-n-s-t-cross-o-n.

Winston didn't know much about birds. He could recognize a blue jay up close, and he knew a chickadee call because they basically said their names out loud, but that was it. Mavis would have recognized the breed straightaway, he was sure. She'd brought binoculars and a good field guide up to the house one year to teach herself, and she'd gotten pretty good. Winston built birdhouses and put together feeders, and she'd hold up her binoculars and study them; watch them eat and fly. Before the end, she could tell if it was male or female by its plumage or the rings around its neck or some such. Anyway, that book was probably still in the house somewhere.

Winston put the bird down on Mavis's old

pillow, on its back. The claws were straight up and the head straight back, making it look unnatural, if relaxed. The white pillowcase started to remind him of the lining of a coffin, and then his mind was whisking him to a funeral parlor. Before it could get there he moved quickly to rearrange the bird. Now it was on its stomach, its head curled down as though it was napping and content. Winston sighed and went out to look for the bird book.

There weren't too many books on the shelves that weren't condensed by Reader's Digest, so he picked it out right away and leafed through the introductory pages as he returned to his room. By now the light was quite faded, and he thought that he really should turn on a lamp or something. But no, there was enough for him to look at pictures by. He sat on the bed, half on and half off, and began to flip through the guide. He reached a snapshot of the kids in their teens, used to bookmark the hummingbird section. They really were beautiful kids. He smiled at them and kept looking.

The picture he stopped at was a Baltimore oriole, standing in a nest. Winston looked back and forth between the page and the pillow. The black, the orange, the beak—yes, it was all there. He had a dead Baltimore oriole on Mavis's pillow, its eyes closed, its hopes gone.

Winston closed the book. He stood up and began to disrobe. It was dark enough now that he could go to bed. Day is done, gone the sun. He would sweep up the glass in the morning; he never went on Mavis's side of the bed anyway, so he wouldn't cut up his feet. He rubbed his hands across his chest; they slid a little in the sweat. The mosquitoes would smell him now, he knew, and they'd be coming for him through that hole. No, wait—the shutters. He climbed onto the bed, closed one shutter and then the other, cutting off the empty whistling noise and plunging the room into total blackness.

He felt for his pajamas, and as he put them on he thought of the bird on her pillow. He would leave it there for tonight. Not forever—

it would decay soon, and the rotting smell would be too much to take. Just for tonight, he would let it stay. He would even name it. Why not Mavis? He had never shared his bed with anyone who didn't have that name and he wasn't about to start now. Besides, his Mavis, the real Mavis, would have been honored. She must have been laughing somewhere, watching all this. Laughing to see her husband sharing a bed with a Baltimore oriole. Teasing him for being a sentimental old fluff and kissing him on the cheekbone.

Winston climbed under the covers and lay still for a while. As he felt himself beginning to recede from the day, he reached over and felt for the oriole's beak. When he found it, he stroked its head. "Mavis," he whispered, and soon he was asleep.

Patrick Robbins was born in Maine in 1971 and moved to the Ithaca area last year. He works at the Bookery and his hobbies are macramé and typing.



# Alarums and Excursions

Brian Hall

## Tourmaline

by Joanna Scott

Little, Brown and Co.  
\$23.95; 279 pp., cloth

The island of Elba may or may not abound in the crystal tourmaline, but the large sea-girt rock and the little sea-colored one each offer ready metaphoric possibilities, and their antiphonal Siren song has tempted Joanna Scott into linking them in *Tourmaline*, her seventh book of fiction.

Murray Murdoch spent a peaceful month on Elba as an American soldier during World War II, playing football on the beach and swimming in the sea, and when he left, an islander presented him with a chunk of blue tourmaline. In 1956, with several failed jobs behind him, Murray borrows money from his exasperated relatives and takes his wife and four boys back to the island where, he tells the children, "the sun always shines...," wild-flowers bloom year round, Elbans will give away the jackets off their backs, and pirates know it is a good place to bury stolen treasure." What is intended as a summer idyll, during which the dreamy Murray obscurely plans "to consider his options," turns into a fifteen-month ordeal involving a missing local girl and the islanders' suspicion that Murray murdered her. The story of what happened, or didn't happen, or what he imagines might have happened, is told to us some forty years afterward by the youngest son, Ollie, who was five years old at the time.

The import of Elba is obvious: as home to the exiled Napoleon in 1814-15, it can stand for those other tiny realms ruled by grandly visionary but humanly small emperors, which we call families and fathers, as well as all the unrecognized gardens of our lives from which we long to escape, so that we may hurry off to our private Waterloos. *Tourmaline*, however, needs some explaining: Scott informs us that it is dichroic, which means it exhibits different coloration when viewed from different angles. The significance of this, in a novel told from more than one point of view, is too obvious to mention, and Scott, to her credit, doesn't mention it. However, it remains a somewhat brittle thread on which to string a title and a theme. Perhaps the word "tourmaline" contributed to the temptation for Scott, who listens carefully to her language: though pretty, it encloses, pearl-like, that ominous grit of "mal." A folk etymologist might interpret it to mean "bad-trip-stone."

Scott is a skilled and intelligent writer, but too much craftsmanlike contrivance of this sort and not enough rapturous creation has gone into *Tourmaline*. The unease at the

heart of the novel is less the question of what happened to that local girl than it is Scott's uncertainty about the kind of story she wants to tell. It's a mystery, yes; but is it a golden or a pyritic one? In other words, are the stakes real?

Early in the novel, the Murdochs are on a ship crossing the Atlantic; there is an engineer at their dinner table who talks a bit too much about death and disaster. He confides to Murray's wife, Claire, that he fantasizes about suicide. Then one bright afternoon on deck he suddenly scoops up Nat, the Murdoch's second youngest child, and carries him to the ship's railing.

"That's when I felt my mother tense," writes Ollie, who was in his mother's arms at the time. Claire sets Ollie down and runs to the engineer,

who pivoted slowly. His expression was somber. His arms were outstretched in front of him.

There he stood, palms turned inward, my brother no longer between his hands. That's what my mother saw: a man in the pose of a priest who has just made an offering to the sea. Where my brother had been was the invisible outline of his form.

But it's an illusion; Nat is standing on the far side of the man. Since life, especially a parent's life, does offer up such awful moments of groundless panic, there would be nothing wrong with this particular sleight-of-text (although the lines I've quoted are somewhat overstuffed with their delaying cotton), if it did not amount to an announcement of the method of the novel, which proceeds almost entirely by means of false alarms.

There is the luggage that is stolen when the Murdochs arrive in Italy; the problem is resolved in a line: "we'd shop and replace what we'd lost." There is the scream that wakens the family at dawn in their hotel room in Genoa; it turns out the old lady's parrot next door has died. "Nothing more," Ollie writes.

Then there is the illness that grips the boys on the island. Scott loads the text with menace. Nat, seemingly immune, makes hubristic fun of his sick brothers. Then comes his turn, and he is struck hardest. The expected break in the fever on the fifth day does not come. Medicine spilled on his pillow looks like blood. The doctor says he is too sick to move to the hospital. Claire, frightened, remembers the incident with Nat and the engineer; "when the comparison came to mind, she could only stare at the doctor, stunned." But the memory, really, should be a comfort—on the following day the fever, like the engineer, steps aside, and Nat recovers. But Scott (or Ollie?) doesn't want simply

to let the danger go. We are told that Nat is deaf. Well, not really deaf. "What happened to Nat was stranger than deafness." His hearing comes and goes. But it's apparently still good enough that his parents don't notice a problem. Then his father does notice, and Scott writes touchingly of his grief and acceptance of his son's handicap. But finally, strangest of all, toward the end of the novel, Nat's hearing returns to normal.

Ollie's mother, Claire—who apparently is reading the same text we are, and occasionally addresses comments and corrections to her son—seems to share with him the wish for something dramatic to have happened those long years ago. She ends her chapters with statements such as, "It's comforting to believe that our lives follow the patterns of nature. But it's a small comfort when we're faced with the violent outcome of human action." Elsewhere, she tells Ollie that when she arrived on Elba, she imagined herself to be Miriam in Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*: "I... imagined bearing her burden of secret knowledge, every sight tinged with the memory of a secret crime." But these comments lead nowhere. There is no secret crime, other than Murray's commonplace failure to make something of his life.

Murray gravitates to Elba—he more or less free-falls onto it—because he remembers sunshine, and football on the beach, and blue tourmaline. He makes friends with a resident British historian, who serves as his window on the island's history. He drinks; he hangs out. He seems to be looking for undiscovered outcrops of valuable gems, but given Elba's ten-thousand year history of inhabitation, the idea that he might find something without sinking a shaft is absurd. He wants to buy a few acres of paradise; he wants to erase his adulthood; he wants to become an emperor of his own life. Quoth the parrot: "Nothing more."

In fact, Scott may fully intend that we think of Poe's "The Raven": a poem in which the drumbeat of doom, sounding incessantly, manages to quench the protagonist's spirit (as Murray will leave Elba a quenched man), without anything actually happening. Scott admirably takes risks in her fiction, and the Novel of False Alarms makes for an interesting formal idea, with an underlying hint of parody. But "The Raven" (which I confess I've never liked) is about a soul projecting its malaise on the world, then reabsorbing it in a feedback loop that spirals into a shriek of madness. The malaise of *Tourmaline* remains muted; it, too, doesn't really go anywhere; and I can only say that, whether or not the novel's odd shape and tone were intentional, I found them unsatisfying.

The plot's central "something," or almost something, is the disappearance of Adriana Nardi, a young woman whom Murray meets through the island's historian, Francis Cape. Adriana comes to Murray one night, when he is alone in his villa, for an unknown reason. He makes a clumsy pass; she angrily withdraws. The next morning, she is nowhere to be found. The islanders suspect Murray. They begin to have dreams, in which "Signor Americano" is glimpsed in threatening attitudes. There are indications that the slightly creepy Francis Cape may be involved both in the girl's disappearance, and in the rumors directed against Murray.

I won't say how Scott chooses to resolve this, except that she remains true to her puzzling plan. It helps to notice that "Murray Murdoch" might call "murder" to mind, but the word it actually encases is "murmur." Much that's worried over in this novel ends up dissipating into a pelagic blue susurration of uncertainty. The greatest uncertainty of all is which of even the bare facts we are told happen to be "true." Ollie has grown up to be a novelist; perhaps a failed one. And although he has told his mother that he's "lost the ability to make up stories," neither

she nor we believe him. "Where are you getting your information?" his mother asks him at one point. "How do you know so much?"

Having returned to Elba as a middle-aged man, perhaps with the same obscure desire to "consider his options" that sent his father there, Ollie wanders and woolgathers. He notes down random impressions, perhaps for use later in the novel he has so far failed to write for us. It's a descriptive technique to which Scott herself is partial, and she ends the book with it:

Surf churning against the headlands of Polverara. Rain turning the cart ways of the old open-cast mines to mud. Vine stumps sprouting. Cormorants diving in the harbor of Marciana Marina. Smoke puffing from stovepipes. Cars slowing to round the bends of mountain roads. Rain disappearing into the tangle of genista and broom. The rich fragrance of wet moss. Boulders frozen midway in their tumble to the sea.

Not unlike tourmaline, this is beautiful, but inert. Ollie is islanded; he has "the liberty and resources to travel," but doesn't seem to know where to go. His creator is equally blessed with the wide latitude her talent offers her, and equally immobilized by her choices.

Brian Hall will be reading from his new novel about Lewis and Clark, *I Should Be Extremely Happy in Your Company*, as part of the Bookery series on February 16th, and all the cool people will be there.

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