

## A Few Clearings (#3)

### *Of Grace and 'An-Nur':*

In the final hour of dead time between my afternoon and evening classes yesterday, I parked behind the Kingsgate Mall off East Broadway. Facing the grey wall, I partook of a stale bagel with cheese and a can of V8 juice while listening to the radio. The CBC AM afternoon talk show featured one Ira Nadel, biographer of Leonard Cohen, describing his most recent interview with his celebrated subject.

Nadel set the scene by describing his gracious host's "modest" Los Angeles home and the gourmet Beverly Hills pizza they lunched on. Nadel noted that instead of wearing his usual Italian suit, Lenny was dressed in black shirt, shorts and Italian sandals...

Annoyed by the yappy voice that assumed a fascination with such trivia, I snapped off the dial...

I recalled the early Cohen's writing about "a state of grace", in which one so exalted, rides above the world's chaos like "an escaped ski" down the mountain... In his Zen monastery on Mount Baldy in California, had he so mastered the snowdrifts?

The smarmy Nadel interview, only deepened my resolve to not seek out the recent music of our "national treasure." Lenny has just become too *precious*! With a rueful chuckle, I crushed the aluminium can then turned the key in the ignition ...



"This is my poetry."

Three hours later, I leaned over the desk of Dubraivko, a student in my Lower Advanced level evening class. Arriving late and dishevelled from construction work, he was keen to show me his chapbook, recently published by an international support group for Bosnian refugees. He said he wrote it during the besiegement of Sarajevo.

"This one is a poem about 'An-Nur'—an Arabic concept. It's the light that shines at night from the graves of the martyrs."

He was glad to have me look over his volume at my desk. While the class was busy with an exercise on adverb clauses (all except the gypsy beauty Alzira, who inspected her black painted nails), I flipped through it. Most of the text was in Slavic characters but at the back there a poem translated into English:

*'Wasted nights in Vancouver/ beside the dead ocean...'*

For a few moments, the dreariness of a windowless basement room in east Vancouver was dispelled... Where else but in teaching English to immigrants would such a moment of unconcealment arise?



Driving out of the underground parkade an hour later, with the automatic door closing behind, I saw Dubraivko scurrying across the cross walk towards the bus stop...

In that moment, I remembered the idolizing interview of Cohen heard in the afternoon. As the exiled Serejevan disappeared into the "wasted night", there was no doubt that 'An-Nur' was more resplendent than any imagined state of Judeo-Christian grace...

*1996, November*

FWT

### ***Head cold at Wellness Day:***

A heavy head cold was certainly not in harmony with aromatherapy— one of the highlight presentations of the college’s Wellness Day...

Yet it was not only the nasal stuffiness that stopped me from joining the line-up in front of the table of samples. It was the presenter herself who put me off what I would otherwise have been curious about. The 40ish blonde woman who introduced herself as a “holistic body-work therapist” made bold claims for the curative powers of scented oils— a line of which she marketed.

“Aromatherapy works on the principle of holistic medicine,” she said in her introduction. “We are just beginning to understand the triadic relationship between our mind-body and our relationships. Essential oils can open pathways to the vital forces upon which our well-being depends...”

She gave special attention to a clove and camphor oil tincture for which she claimed a host of medicinal benefits.

“Do you know this was sprinkled on handkerchiefs and used to fumigate bubonic plague sick rooms during the middle ages?”

I was tempted to raise my hand and softly mention that the strong fragrances which may have helped mask the stench of death did nothing to stop the plague. I was also tempted to comment that her new age notions about medicine would have fit quite comfortably with the medieval belief that contagion was caused not by germs but by ‘vapours’ and imbalance of bodily humours...

I can only hope that my delight in exotic fragrances will not be sullied by scorn for yet one more enterprising pseudo-science...



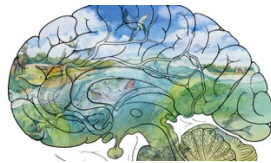
Fortunately, a plugged nose was no barrier to the *Update on the Brain*, provided by the college’s own faculty member, BF. With his flair for providing an enthusiastic lay-person’s report on an academic topic, the affable teacher trainer is a perennially popular speaker at college events. BF’s update on neurological research (and implications for education) was spiced with his usual anecdotal asides and corny jokes... Like several others, I took a few notes:

He began by informing that recent research suggests that the brain does not operate so much like as ‘computer’ (“not like an integrated circuitry with separate logic gates”) but more like an ecosystem. He used the analogy of a “jungle ecosystem” to suggest the manner in which the organic neurons, like flora and fauna in the jungle, worked both cooperatively and competitively. Like the organic harmony within an ecosystem, the integrated mind arising from the buzzing activity of our neurons was neither directed from— nor positioned at— a particular locus of the brain. Further, ‘feelings’ and ‘thoughts’ are not separately compartmentalized in our brains. Bits of perceiving, feeling and thinking integrate in instants of our ever-shifting consciousness... For this paradigm of the mind, BF introduced his audience to the term ‘neural Darwinism’, an idea that invites further exploration...

Even in the fascination with such details, I wondered about the limitation of the brain positioning itself as its own object of research. Of course, like any science— neuroscience is a hypo-deductive inquiry, undertaken in a socio-historical context. That context determines the overarching paradigm. From a water-clock to a steam engine; from a switchboard, to a computer— and now to a jungle ecosystem— as paradigms of understanding shift, so too will the future metaphors for the mind...

Still, I can well appreciate why many contemporary philosophers regard some understanding of neuroscience as critical training for this work... Even with a head cold, I had no doubt that BF's presentation passed a smell test that the session with the holistic body-work therapist did not.

*1996, June*



*FWT*

***Mutual paranoia:***

“I hang out with the Iban people. I go to their bars.”

Back in Maple Ridge on a term break and animated by a few drinks, RJ was eager to chat. Although his phone call came after my usual morning shift bedtime, I was eager to hear about my former colleague’s experience in his teaching contract in Brunei.

“Doesn’t Brunei have Sharia law?” I asked.

“It does. The bars are in Muri, across the border in Sarawak, Malaysia— just a half-hour drive away. It’s like a wild-west wide-open town... One of Iban guys I met invited me for a weekend at the longhouse of his extended family up the Baram River.”

“Wow, that’s interesting!”

“You know the Iban are really getting fucked over. The logging is destroying their forests and big oil corporations are polluting their waters...”

Listening to RJ’s anecdotes, I could not help comparing his weekends with mine. While he stayed at an Iban long house and toured caves in Sarawak, I was shuffling around Ikea or watching the kids jumping in the plastic ball pit at Chucky Cheese’s...

“You’re lucky, R.,” I said.

“Well, I don’t know,” he said.



RJ and I have a few things in common. When we first met as newbies at the college, we’d both recently returned from several years teaching in the developing world. We’d both married in our overseas postings (he in Jordan) and both had 3 children nearly the same ages... But when faced with a drawn-out college-wide strike, he opted to find work elsewhere while I gambled on carrying a picket sign.

5 years later, he was obviously interested to hear any gossip about his former colleagues—all of whom, like me, are ‘regularized’ and paying into a pension fund. In respect to his sensitivity to that fact, I assured him that I was still clinging by fingernails to lousy shifts.

“So, do you think you’ll ever get decent shifts?” he asked.

“Not likely for a ‘junior’ the same age as most of the ‘seniors’ who’ve been at the college forever,” I said. “You were wise to move on.”

He sighed. “Yeah, on the whole it’s a pretty good gig. Lots of public holidays in addition to the long breaks between the terms. A tax-free salary. I figure if I can hack it for 2-3 more years, I can pay off

our mortgage. By next year, D. [his wife] should have her teaching certificate. When she and the kids join me, we can save even faster. But still—”

“T. and I seem to be going backwards, further into debt.” I interrupted, “We’ll probably never get out of this coop.”

“Still, you guys are together. You’re putting down roots. You know, I’ve lived in Islamic countries half my life. Teaching in Brunei is a job my 13-year-old son could do. It’s all politics. Like all the expats who learn to get by there— I know how to *'salam'* and play the game. I do get bored.”

I strained to hear between the lines. Was his marriage breaking up? Was he visiting the brothels across the border in Malaysia?

“Well, I’d rather be bored than stressed out,” I tried to reassure.

“Yes, F. But I miss my family. I come back from the school and often just wander through the malls.”

By then I was squirming. In a similar late night phone chat, back when he was agonizing about whether to take the Brunei contract, I told me he ought to go for it. (“After the strike, big cutbacks are coming,” I’d said). He may well still think that that my real wish was to have him drop out of the competition.

“Well, it won’t be long before D. and the kids join you... Meanwhile, I’ll be stuck here on a split-shift— that’s if I don’t get laid off.”

“You know, you should apply to Brunei, F. You and T. could both be hired. She has a primary teaching certificate, right? It’s a 2-year contract— renewable. The Brunei bureaucrats love Canadians almost as much as Brits. You’d get to travel during the holidays— it would be a great experience for your kids. You could put them in one of the international schools. They’d meet expats from all the world.”

“It sure is tempting.”

“I can get you a form,” he said, “It wouldn’t hurt to apply.”

However gruelling the split-shifts, just how eager was I to re-join the legion of English teaching nomads whose labour is ever cheapened by increasing numbers?

“As soon as I get back next week, I’ll mail you the form.”

It suddenly occurred that RJ would be glad to see me quit the to the college. Luring me away to Brunei in the same manner as he probably thinks I urged him to go— while not deliberately malicious— would still be a vindication...

“I’d appreciate that, R. Before you go back— let’s talk more about it over a few beers.”

With a weak cough, I swallowed back the jolt of paranoia.

*1995, June*

### *Counting crows:*

It was a mild shock to see so many crows roosting in a stand of yellowing poplars across from the bus stop. The branches seemed to sag with their weight. In the blood orange of a fall dawn and on the edge of whizzing traffic on Lougheed Highway, I counted their dark forms... 44, 45, 46... I had reached nearly 50 when the #151 bus pulled up...

I would certainly have forgotten that moment counting crows early this morning, had it not been the shock just 20 minutes later, after I stepped off the bus. Walking down through the seedy Pandora Park towards the workplace, I suddenly felt that I was being watched. I wheeled round, remembering a near confrontation with a skinhead walking back to the bus stop from a nightshift. The relief in being alone immediately evaporated in the glance up at a utility pole to my right. Two crows! I stood frozen for a moment, as with shivering tail feathers, they hopped along the line. A portent of ill?



Hastening down towards Dundas St., I chastened myself for surrendering, however briefly, to superstition. I recalled an amusing analogy from an essay by Bertrand Russell:

The superstitious leap of the mind that falsely ascribes causation Russell compared to the fear of cows, standing by a railroad track as a train roars past... While obviously unable to ascribe 'evil design' or 'portents'—the cows may well still perceive the train as an omnipotent malevolence, directed at themselves.

So, the appearance of the crows before I got on the bus and just after I got off— was nothing more than a coincidence. They were certainly not following me. Perhaps it is at this most dreaded time of year— when the mornings grow colder and the days shorter— that I am most vulnerable to 'foreshadows'...

Yet confronted by 2 successive murders of crows, it is a challenge to be as rational as old Bertie!

*1993, September*

*A fellow traveller:*

At 6:55 AM at the back of the #151 bus barrelling down the Lougheed Highway, I looked across at the woman in sensible shoes, spreading her newspaper across her lap. She was dour-faced, with wire-rim glasses and a grey page boy cut.

For 2 years now, we have not only caught this same bus, but walked the same path down the hill from Forest Grove nearly every weekday morning at 7:15 AM. For 2 years, 4 days a week, we have stood together at the bus stop without exchanging even a nod of acknowledgement.

Several times we have even taken the same bus back in the afternoon, both getting off at the intersection of Production Way. At such times, we automatically take opposite sides of the road for the walk up the hill.

One afternoon last spring when I was walking behind her, she stooped to pick up a worm from the asphalt. She then gently laid it in the grass median before moving on. That act challenged my stereotype of her. Who was I to think that she did look like someone with a rich and exotic inner life?

This morning for the first time on the bus, she took the seat directly in front of me. Looking between the seats, for the first time I got to see what she was reading. Her magazine was '*B.C. Waterfowl*'. When she closed it and left it on her lap, I was even able to catch the name and address on the mailing label: *Ms. D.U., Timberlane Court, Burnaby, BC.*

So, was she a birdwatcher? I had been hoping for something more exotic: maybe a skydiving or a Rosicrucian mag. Yet drearily enough, the stereotype was close...

I averted eyes as Ms. D.U., perhaps sniffing suspicion, glanced back. Without any reading material of my own, I watched the dull-brown blur past... Who was I to suppose that Ms. D.U. did not have a rich inner life?

*1993, February*



***While the kettle boils:***

The wane morning sunlight of late fall slanted through the kitchen curtains dimly illuminating the new microwave oven on the countertop. Purchased yesterday, the new appliance might provide as much as a week of domestic peace. It is just the latest purchase in an orgy of spending over the last year for household appliances, furniture and electronics...

While waiting for the kettle to boil, I was seized by disgust. *What had possessed me to piss away our meager savings on all this junk?*

The first decent paycheck in Canada seemed a godsend. We assumed we would no longer need to draw on our shrunken savings from Zimbabwe. Yet two years later, with steady (however insecure) work, I am more than \$5000 in debt.

I set my foot up on one of the new Ikea kitchen chairs to confirm that it still wobbled from my sloppy screwing and gluing. How appropriate that every morning as I slump down to drink my tea, I be reminded of incompetence and folly!

I then glanced out the curtains down at the black cherry Dodge Spirit (colour chosen by T.) squatting in the parking stall. Three years of monthly payments remain on the car loan whether I hang on to my dreary job or not. Of course, we could have done with a used car just as we could have managed a bit longer with our Value Village furnishings.

Turning around, I looked though the doorway at the new TV and sofa set. Two years ago, unemployed and in the abyss of jobless despair, we still had our modest savings from Zimbabwe. There was much solace in knowing that we could have cleared out at a moment's notice for better prospects, if necessary. Now weighted down with junk, we are stuck...

Roughly opening the cupboard, I pried off the lid of the tin box and extracted two teabags.

What rubs in the salt is the realization that the spending spree, largely intended to mollify T., has largely backfired. The car loan, I tried to convince her, was a necessary step in establishing a credit history—which was necessary for any future application for a mortgage... Yet with the depletion of our savings, T. was ever more upset that the time-horizon for having a place of our own was moving outward with the expanding universe.

Meanwhile, with real estate soaring (even a townhouse within commuting distance almost out of reach) the cost of purchasing domestic peace in little increments of household spending keeps escalating. Indeed, last week's new vacuum cleaner purchased barely two days of calm...

As wife and kids get ever more seduced by advertising will the pressure to buy on credit only increase? What about the 20% interest rate on a VISA bill should I get laid off?

Tethered to a hamster wheel, am I supposed to be thankful for having a toe hold on 'the good life', Canadian style? As if in exclamatory affirmative, the teakettle suddenly shrieked.

*1990, November*



### *A summoning of the greys:*

"I can call them right now. Would you like to meet them?"

GL, a former classmate seen for the first time in 20 years, posed his question as a dare. 'Them' referred to extraterrestrial beings which he claimed he could summon...

When I knew GL in high school in Saint John, N.B., he was excited by poetry, filmmaking and the occult writings of Lobsang Rampa. He tended to speak about his shifting interests with the fervour of an evangelical.

I also recalled an incident in a geography class wherein GL passed me a note commenting on the shortness of the skirt of the girl sitting between us. '*It's hitched up to her snatch*' it read. The note was itself snatched up by the teacher who read it aloud...

The only son of a Jewish dentist, GL, like many fellow dope smokers and low achievers, was a disappointment to his family. After high school, he spurned college and lived in Israel for a few years. In a letter sent from a kibbutz in the Jordan Valley he enthused about (I remember his line): '*cheap brandy, dynamite hash and the most beautiful girls in in the world...*'

About a year later, another high school friend (to whom that letter was jointly addressed), mentioned that GL had married an Iraqi refugee in Israel who dumped him when she got a Canadian passport...

That was the last I remembered of GL until last week. I heard his voice on the radio. He was on the CBC Vancouver afternoon phone-in show in his capacity as "the acting president of the western chapter of the Canadian UFO Research Centre." In the interview, he came across as reasonable—emphasizing that his institute took a scientific approach in investigating UFO claims.

Later, I called the station to get a contact number for GL's organization. We had not been the closest of friends, but I knew he'd be as curious to hear about my journey after high school as I was to hear about his... Not surprisingly, the number of the Western Canadian UFO Research Centre was also GL's home phone.

He seemed glad to hear from me despite just having woken up from sleeping before his night shift. He said that he'd heard that I was living in the Vancouver area and that he'd always meant to look me up. He had himself moved west in the early 1980s. He worked at the Post office—a "a brain-dead job" he admitted—but one that allowed him to pursue his UFO research.

"I'd like to hear more about that," I unwisely said after inviting him out to Burnaby for dinner with my wife and little girls.

GL showed up a little late, apologizing for getting mixed up in directions to Forest Grove. He looked much the same, just pudgier and greying at the temples. He was nervous at first and asked for a glass of water to take some pills ("medication I need before eating"). T. prepared her special poached salmon which he warmly complimented.

Through the meal, he grew more at ease. He asked T. about Africa and we asked him about his experience in Israel. He described climbing Mount Sinai when it was under occupation. While tempted, I did not ask him if he'd talked with any Palestinians let alone ask about his marriage.

Our girls behaved well at the table and GL laughed at 5-year-old MT's cute expressions. After eating, MT and TE went upstairs to play in their room.

"You have a beautiful family, GL said. "You are lucky."

It was only when we moved from the table to the sofa that the conversation turned to the search for extraterrestrial intelligent life (SETI). I asked my old classmate in his capacity as the acting president of the western chapter of the Canadian UFO Research Centre, if he really believed any claims of direct contacts with alien beings.

"Well, there are a few crazy people who have hallucinations," he said, "but you might be surprised how many check out as authentic."

"Seriously?"

"100%. I have personal experience."

Pausing for dramatic effect, he expelled a breath and then launched into a 10-minute monologue, spinning theories he probably knew better not to have brought up in his CBC interview:

He believed that ETs have been revealing themselves to select *homo sapiens* over thousands of years— but they began appearing with greater urgency at the onset of the nuclear age. He claimed that the benevolent ETs who seek to guide humanity away from self-destruction are opposed by malevolent ETs whom he called "the greys". The greys, he said, are bent on destroying human civilization. He believed the evil ETs harvest human DNA for experimentation... They also surreptitiously implant transmitting devices in humans they deem dangerous to their aims. He supported some women's claims that their miscarriages were cases of "abducted fetuses." As for the implants:

"I am pretty sure I have one. They got to me, as they usually do, when I was sleeping. I don't know exactly where in my body it is— implants are microscopic in size so they can't be detected by x-rays. It sometimes gives me sharp headaches."

I glanced at T. "Com'on, G. You can't really be serious about all this."

He shook his head. "F., we've known each other since we were teenagers. I would *never* bullshit you. I'd love to give you evidence." He then looked directly into my face and in a low voice asked: "Would you like to meet them?"

I looked over at T. She was politely smiling, as if humouring someone eager for an audience.

"You've put me on the spot, G." I gave a nervous chuckle. "I don't know what to think."

"Ha— look!" He grinned to T. "Look, he's hesitating. He wouldn't hesitate if he didn't *almost* believe!"

For that unnerving moment I could have been subjected to a stoned rant in a musty parlour of old Saint John, whose greyness few of its natives ever seem to completely escape.

"You don't have to be scared, F." he said.

"I'm not scared," I nervously chuckled. "I'm just flabbergasted. I don't know what to think." I looked at my wife. "What do you think, T.?"

"Send us the good ones – not the evil ones," she said with a lilt of mirth.

"Sure, L. – go ahead," I said. "Show us your proof."

"Just a minute." He fished into his canvas satchel in which I'd assumed he'd brought some brochures about his organization. He pulled out two wands of white plastic.

They are special strobes," he said. "They're a version of the signaling devices used by ground crews at airports."

I slid open the glass door to the outside balcony and the old classmate stepped through, tapping his light wands. I winked at T. as we watched from behind. For a few minutes, GL waved the pair of softly flashing lights into the dark sky. A moment later he stepped back inside and turned off the flashers.

"It's done," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean they are alerted. They will reveal themselves to you. Maybe tonight— maybe in a week. You will know."

"I hope they won't harm us!" said T. a little spooked.

"No, no, no," said GL, putting away the wands, "They'll show you their love."

"What?" I gave another nervous chuckle.

"Sometimes," he said sadly, "sometimes their love is stronger than a human can handle." He tsked. "You just don't know what you're missing F. I know it's hard to open yourself up to things you have never dreamt possible. I just wish you could!"

"Honestly, G.," I said, "I don't take anything for granted. But I can't help being guided by reason."

My old classmate seemed as saddened by my skepticism as I was by his sincerity.

"Well, I better be going," he said breaking the moment of silence. T. got him his jacket. GL nodded. "It was interesting to hear about your country. And by the way, you are a fantastic cook."

"You are most welcome," said my wife, shaking his hand.

"I'll give you a call," I said.

"Sure," he said, likely sensing that I had no intention of contacting him again.



“I think he’s crazy,” said T. afterwards as we watched the TV news. “I think he’d do anything to make you believe in aliens.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“How do you know he might even try to kidnap the girls and say it was aliens?”

The recent news of the disappearance of a little boy in Victoria had scared her. That missing child was the same age as our MT.

“No, G.’s not a dangerous person,” I said. “Not at all. He’s a gentle guy. He’s probably just lonely.”

I thought of the moment when GL directly caught my eyes, as if measuring the person I had become. His eyes looked a little glassy, possibly the effect of some tranquilizer. At the same time, I realized that he was pitying *my* benighted soul... Still, I felt compassion for an old comrade on such a strange pathway.

It’s sad,” I murmured.

I looked out the glass door into the dark of the balcony in the sadness of an old friend becoming as strange to me as any ET of whatever hue he sought to summon...

*1990, October*

### *A glimpse of the wall?*

Never before last evening has ‘*The Wall*’ seemed so relevant. Midway through rereading Sartre’s much-anthologized short story set in the Spanish Civil War, I turned the paperback over on my chest. I shifted the icepack under my swollen armpit and stared out at the silhouetted cedars on the slope of Burnaby Mountain.

Awaiting clear diagnosis after a health scare is nothing compared to the final hours under a death sentence, such as Sartre so powerfully evokes— but there is a tiny connection. In the uncertainty of the last several months in however small a way, I have had a glimpse of ‘the wall’...

It began with the general checkup last January. The discovery of a swollen node led to two needle biopsies— both with inconclusive results. Bouts of recurrent flu through winter and spring fed the growing anxiety.

“It could be one of three possibilities,” said one Dr. Turner, the oncologist who scheduled me for yesterday’s exploratory surgery, “an inflamed node, a lymphoma or a bit of tumor broken off from somewhere else. That’s the worst possibility— but the least likely.”

As the day of the operation came closer, I often lay sleepless, imagining the worst.

“Don’t worry. Don’t be a chicken!” urged my dear wife, the night before the operation.

Never having been under anesthesia, I was terrified by the possibility of never waking up. On that last night, I woke several times to check the red numerals. Dawn did not come with the volleys of a firing squad (as in ‘*The Wall*’) but in the clock-radio alarm signaling that time for worry had run out...



“Religious denomination?” asked the day surgery check-in attendant, entering the data into her computer.

“Is this in case I need last rites?”

She scowled at my lame joke.

“Maybe just leave it blank,” I said.

“Non-denominational?” She posed fingers on the keyboard.

“That’ll do.”

I gulped— maybe I should have said: ‘*not religious but devoutly superstitious*’...

“They said to just pick me up around 1:00 PM,” I told T. as she leaned into my hug. “They said they’ll call if I, um, have to stay longer.”

“See you in a few hours,” she said as chirpily as if she would be picking me up from the mall...

As she walked away down the shiny corridor, I was taunted with the thought that it was my last sight of her...

At 9:40 AM, I was standing by the gurney bed in an op-prep room. Naked under the hospital gown, I felt like one of the zombies in the ‘*Night of the Living Dead*’, shuffling along with exposed rump from the hitched up slit at the back. I pulled up my skinny wrist to read again the plastic bracelet with my name, birthdate, and social insurance number. Was it designed to double, if needed, as an ankle tag for the morgue drawer? I felt the cold terrazzo and touched the oxygen and IV outlets on the back wall. The room was definitely not designed for potentially cheery final impressions of the world left behind...

At 9:45 AM, an elderly nurse came in to take my temperature. In a friendly manner, she introduced herself as Marianne.

"I have to take your temperature, luv," she said.

When pulling it out of my mouth, she shook it and tsked. "You're 36.0—that's a degree below normal."

"I'm a little nervous," I said.

Nodding, she began to hook an IV in my arm. "It'll all be over in no time," she smiled.

I chuckled in what seemed a *double-entendre*, however unintentional.

When nurse Marianne left, I lay back on the gurney, fixed on the analogue clock face. The second hand was on its 7<sup>th</sup> wheel round when just after 10:03 AM, a Filipino orderly came in.

"Let's go for a ride," he said.

We jerked to a stop in a yellow walled room. I was parked to the side of two other patients awaiting surgery. The old man at the far end, looked grimly at the ceiling. In the middle was a younger woman whose hair under her plastic cap could have been blonde. She looked scared. With both of us reduced to helplessness, I turned my head away so as not to make her feel worse. Moments later, she was taken out by two female attendants in green gowns and bandanas. The old man was still waiting when it was my turn.

"Time's up, is it?" I murmured after the bump into an elevator...

The following minutes are foggy:

Inside a plastic sheeted enclosure, with the IV seeping sedative into my blood, I do recall the discomfort of being rolled by blue-gowned attendants onto the operating slab and strapped in tightly.

"This will keep you from jumping out," said a nurse in a Filipina accent.

My arm was strapped out on a wing board. Most uncomfortable was the hissing tube wrapped python tight around my leg. I was cold but tingling with shivers of warmth. Then after an interminable lull, I sensed murmuring voices ceasing. The cap was pulled from my head and I was rolled off the table...



Drifting up from a chilly fog, I saw that the IV needle was still attached to my wrist. The plastic bag to which it was attached hung half empty from the metal stand. I was in the post-op room.

*'That wasn't so bad,'* I thought. *'Why was I such a chicken about it?'*

The analogue clock read 10:22 AM. when Dr. Turner strode through the doorway, the straps at the neck of his operating gown flapping loose.

"We just poked around under your arm and we found nothing," he smiled, "no swollen nodes at all! It was just muscle tissue. Perhaps because you're so thin and because you use your arm so much— it was lumpy."

"So, nothing to worry about?"

"We didn't even need to take a specimen for biopsy. I'm always a little sorry when I have to cut into a person for nothing. But the mystery is solved now."

*The mystery solved!* Like other reprieves from innumerable anxieties, it felt undeserved. At the same time, I thought of the blonde girl. Could she have been so lucky?



In a shiver of gratitude, I touched the ice pack under my arm and looked out into the September twilight. I turned the paperback back over and reread the paragraph in which the condemned prisoner of the fascists, Pablo Ibbietta, describes what he felt— before his absurdly unexpected reprieve:

*'In the state I was in, if someone had told me that I could go home quickly— that they would leave me and my life whole— it would have left me cold. Several hours or so years of waiting is the same when you have lost the illusion of being eternal...'*

As much as believed I was preparing myself for the worst, perhaps I never *really* expected the worst. I never really felt my back pushed into the actual wall. Close as I came, I was never fully deprived of "the illusion of being eternal." Until I experience that, I cannot really know the essence of mortality...

At the same time, in this momentary security, I can only wonder what new anxieties will rush in to fill the vacuum...

*1990, September*

*A solemn moment before the rubbish pit:*

I had to steel myself this morning for the final stage of the pre-departure clean up. Four cardboard boxes of paper were tipped into the rubbish pit behind the backyard garden plot. More than two-thirds of papers accumulated over the last six years were dumped: largely teaching materials and lesson plans. Yet included were manila envelopes containing letters and rough notes for stories that will never be written.

Crouching over the pit, I lit the pyre. As the flames rose up, I tightened stomach against the taunting of regret...

It was tough to watch a blue page lettered in the crayon hand of Shoko F. of Japan engulfed in the Heraclitean flames. Just as the last evidence of her erotic tease over 3 years and 10,000 km. was consumed, off to the side of the pit I noticed a letter from Mariam Kitutu. However wrenching— that tender memento from Mombasa was just another scrap for immolation.

Sentimentality is no less a burden now than for the emigrant of old with only a single trunk accompanying his passage to the new world. But it is not just a matter of limited space. It is more the necessity to start clean...

In that assurance, I recalled staring into the fireplace at Gokomere in July 1983. It was a cozy moment on a chilly Capricorn winter night until disturbed by foreboding for the trip back to Canada I was about to take on the morrow. Watching the wisps of flame creep about the fresh log, the simple fact that *nothing is permanent* struck with epiphanic force. Never before or since did I better understand that every elapsed second is one second closer to my own dissolution back to nothingness...

*1988, Zimbabwe*



### *Of the dread of routine:*

Only midway through the first year at Gokomere mission, the daily routines are beginning to wear:

The work morning begins with stiff greetings of fellow teachers in the staff room (most heads in the morning's Harare *Herald*) before squeaking into my chair midway within the quadrangle of desks... Minding elbows, I do a perfunctory scan of the lesson plan before the Pavlovian buzzer jolts me onto my feet. I grab a handful of chalk on the way out the door then tense my stomach before stepping into the first class (students half asleep, heads in arms)...

Between each class, I ferry back into the staffroom exercise books that accumulate in teetering piles through the day. There are occasional friendly chats across the quadrangle during the free periods. Still, the sitting down tends to make harder the bolting back up for the next round before students who become more restless through the day...

After the lunch break and short siesta, I trudge back up to the classroom though the druggy heat for the 3 afternoon classes. In the final buzzer ending the period of the day, I slog punch drunk back to my flat. Although the cooler air and shade within the drawn curtains is most welcome, there remains the plan book to update and the armload of student scribbles to mark.

So it goes: 28 weekly periods of 45 minutes each, 5 days a week...



There are little pleasantries to look forward to. They begin with the strong cup of tea in pre-dawn and the first notes of *Lillibullero* that herald the BBC World service 6:00 AM news...

Back home at the end of the long day, is the tall glass of water in the coolness of the kitchen... Refreshed, I remove shoes and stretch out on the sofa. I sometimes fall asleep in bird chirps, soft whistles and lowings from the nearby cattle dip...

The evenings are most pleasant: spent in my armchair by the bookshelf reading, listening to music or simply enjoying the quietude that those deprived of such would regard a luxury...

Still, some evenings I start up from my chair in the alarm of a latter-day Prufrock (*'I grow old, I grow old'...*) In such moments, I try to assure myself that not only are the Gokomere routines transitory—but that they may be nostalgically missed. After all, this age of 32 is supposedly the prime of life...

Yet without any justification to complain about my decent allotment here, I sometimes feel a profound boredom. After 32 years, the very body sometimes tires of the repetitive cycles of sleeping and waking; hunger, satiation and elimination. This sense of profound monotony can even strike in the midst of chewing and swallowing. Sometimes the thought of carrying on these daily functions for upwards of 3 more decades seems repulsive...



Yesterday, On the walk up the dusty pathway from my flat to the staffroom, I was struck with an anxiety that the very ground beneath my feet could buckle and cave in like thin ice.

I stopped up, breathing heavily. Yet when the irrational fear passed, I realized that nothing— not even the ground beneath one's footfall— ought to be *ever* taken for granted...

That lesson, it occurred, is a much-needed chastening for the dread of repetitiveness. Indeed, one would hardly wish for monotony to be broken by a blood clot suddenly striking the brain...

*1983, Zimbabwe*

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### **For a late friend, who loved summer**

In this last week of June  
when northern Appalachia  
erupts into a fleeting Amazon  
The effluences which so moved you  
stir us now

Yet every year of your absence  
even in our momentary swoon  
we strain a little more  
to hold open  
this little clearing for you...

*1996 (Coquitlam)*

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