

The Hoplite Journals

Also by Martin Anderson:

The Kneeling Room *

The Ash Circle *

Heard Lanes

Dried Flowers

Swamp Fever

The Stillness of Gardens

Black Confetti

The Hoplite Journals I–XXIX *

Belonging *

The Hoplite Journals XXX–LIX *

Snow. Selected Poems 1981–2011 *

Interlocutors of Paradise

The Hoplite Journals LX–LXXXIX *

An asterisk denotes a Shearsman title.

MARTIN ANDERSON

The Hoplite Journals

(Complete in one volume)

Shearsman Books

Published in the United Kingdom in 2013 by
Shearsman Books Ltd
58 Velwell Road
Exeter
EX4 4LD

ISBN 978-1-84861-291-4
First Edition

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Acknowledgements

The Hoplite Journals originally appeared in three volumes from Shearsman Books:
The Hoplite Journals (2006), *The Hoplite Journals XXX–LIX* (2010) and
The Hoplite Journals LX–LXXXIX (2013), which appears
simultaneously with this volume.

Some parts of this work previously appeared in
High Chair, *Oasis*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Shearsman* and *Tremblestone*.

The author wishes to express his indebtedness to Francisco Ignacio Alcina's *Historia
de las islas e indios de Bisayas* (1668) for the details of fabulous beasts on page 51.

The editorial on pages 123–124, in unabridged form and with
different names of persons and places, appeared in 2003
in the now-defunct newspaper *Today*.

Contents

I	11
II	16
III	19
IV	23
V	28
VI	32
VII	35
VIII	39
IX	44
X	48
XI	52
XII	57
XIII	61
XIV	64
XV	68
XVI	72
XVII	76
XVIII	80
XIX	84
XX	88
XXI	92
XXII	96
XXIII	101
XXIV	104
XXV	107
XXVI	110
XXVII	113
XXVIII	117
XXIX	120
XXX	123
XXXI	126
XXXII	129
XXXIII	132
XXXIV	135

XXXV	138
XXXVI	141
XXXVII	145
XXXVIII	148
XXXIX	150
XL	153
XLI	157
XLII	160
XLIII	163
XLIV	167
XLV	169
XLVI	172
XLVII	175
XLVIII	178
XLIX	181
L	183
LI	186
LII	189
LIII	192
LIV	195
LV	197
LVI	199
LVII	201
LVIII	204
LIX	207
LX	209
LXI	213
LXII	216
LXIII	219
LXIV	221
LXV	225
LXVI	228
LXVII	231
LXVIII	233
LXIX	238
LXX	241
LXXI	245

LXXII	248
LXXIII	250
LXXIV	252
LXXV	255
LXXVI	258
LXXVII	261
LXXVIII	263
LXXIX	265
LXXX	267
LXXXI	271
LXXXII	273
LXXXIII	276
LXXXIV	278
LXXXV	281
LXXXVI	283
LXXXVII	285
LXXXVIII	287
LXXXIX	290

“They make delightful the forests where other people could not dwell. Because they have not the burden of desires, they have that joy which others find not.”

The Dhammapada

“Behold the driver has risen and made ready the file of camels,
And begged us to acquit him of blame: why, O travellers, are you asleep?”

Jalal’ud-Din Rumi

I

In our own country everything takes place without us. Diverse rivers mount the plateau of our days only to overcome them, and whole villages and counties, with a dark mud in which we find the evidence of fossils. The glistening arabesques of dried-up seas, glazed shards of cobalt, petrified teeth and post holes. We look in vain for the treatise preserved in its jar of posthumous air, for the exordium we have been waiting a whole lifetime to read. The disquisition by Flebenius on the plant of immortal longing. The tireless aperture of the sky opens, instead, upon these roads upon which we are caught each day, impelled to repeat the same journey, through the suffocating heat of drawing rooms in summer, across the carpeted floors of which something has left a damp spoor as if it was leaving.

.

The tattered Royal Doulton blue of a scalloped awning draping dry red rivulets vertically down itself from the rusted iron frame on which it was stretched. In damp shadows at the end of a tunnel of flapping tarpaulin walls, in something like a vestibule, two armed security guards slouching, waiting to frisk anyone from the street who should wander in, drawn by the allure of the name *Adonis*. To come so far to seek what was so much, evidently, nearer home. Or, simply, that the signs are reinterpreted here, in this different place in this different time. And what lies, then, behind the facade of Penhurst two doors down, what mansion amid bucolic acres, festering in the fat of a wild boar, transposed to these endless sizzling margins of lechon. And what is it, anyway, that we are after?

.

We are only, all of us, an adjunct of, an interdict to the immense and inglorious history of longing. *You must be tired after your long and difficult journey across the seas. Let me take you to your rooms so that you may bathe and rest. Afterwards, you may eat and we will arrange entertainments for you in this, your city, which we have merely been looking after for you, while you were gone.* It comes round, again and again, in a full circle. Without a memory, let the stones guide you into a dark corner; and listen. You should regret nothing, apologize for nothing. It is not your own heartbeat that you hear echoing, but the jostling of all the continents through time, the voices of the oceans and the forests, and, in the

air above them, the small droplet of blood that pre-dates and post-dates you, that is divided up into a million sacrifices, unnecessary, and all at once.

.

The fusillade toward the barricades at the entrance of the campus enveloped them in a slow and densely moving cloud of gas that drifted among the desks and chairs and upturned vehicles. Eyes blinked back the liquid of lacrimations. Nearby, in the botanical gardens, light, as sumptuous and fine as the beaten gold leaf on the pages of an old book, burnished the embankments. The libraries were ransacked. The ministries sandbagged. In the streets only abandoned dogs where we tread, now, lost in our illusions in shadows at noon as if we were among noctambulant ghosts in stairwells, by quays where foetid holds disgorged their cargoes to the padding of bare feet on springy planks. Warehouses of reveries. Fragrant, but impotent, lucubrations circumnavigating the brain. On the thigh of a young girl, like a mouth gaping for air, a wound you could put a whole walnut into, exuded a staunchless, red tear.

.

They have ploughed up a cemetery for a plot of land to build on. Who issued the order? Who did not issue the one to countermand it? Bones dust in the hot entelechy of air. To the gates of the white walls of certain affluent subdivisions no tax demands are ever issued, and no beggars ever intrude in that *cordon sanitaire* that is purchased by them. The votes are all counted the wrong way. The committee on overseeing elections is easily distracted. The telephones ring all day but the circuits are always busy. Talk. Talk. Talk. And in the government offices it is merienda at every hour of the day. And newspapers brandished above desk tops. And the files, in multiple copies, of official forms, waiting to be processed or “expedited”, impede the corridors and every square inch of space, curling and softening in the humid air that only a few dispirited fans make tremble once in a while. And everyone smiles.

.

Having arrived at the precise point of the present, where does that leave us to go? We lack nothing, scorning sequence, scorning duration, even the “person” and its percipient whole. Good deeds come easily to us, and we are not immune to misanthropy too. They have removed the great lidless eye behind the creepers on the wall of the hotel where we used to stay. The advertisement

for an opticians. Box-ads for enticing lotions to improve a man's amorous performance by enlarging what he is already endowed with fill the *For Sale* columns of the local newspapers. The *Good Ship Venus* glides, now, over the rooftops filling the terminals with a dissolute and unshaven crowd. We talk to one another in a language that lacks any form of protocol. In the equality of our desires, enshrined in the sign of the *Duty Free* store, everything is possible. At the exit, by the money-changers, the official foliage bends in the air conditioned draught, extending a greeting that carries not even the faintest trace of remorse.

.

The abysmal flotsam of our days persists. Vocalic husks. The strimmed modalities of airwaves that have nothing to offer but the aromatics of love. The sonorous perorations of our rulers, back home, elude us. Horse croakings—a seminary of herons. Here, in a charmed half-circle of mushrooms someone lays his head, and asks to be anointed. On a roadside, banged out on old typewriters, on paper so thin you can hold it up and see whatever is behind it, a decree with an official stamp with the name of whomsoever you want—dignitary, Minister of State—on it. Behind the Bureau of Immigration a corpse floated in the river for five days, snagged in the chains of an anchor, before it was apprehended and, for “landing without a permit”, detained.

.

It is someone, and somewhere, else. It always was—*another*. So let us say goodbye to all those *despedidas* in dingy basements and in rooms of institutions where the drinks carbonate endlessly in orderly array under the predictability of the conversations. It is all a lie, it always has been. Only the naif tourist believes that he will return to this same place and people at some time in the future, to these exact rudiments of smile and house front, of physical comportment and gesture. And yet what else does he have but memory with which to establish again where he has been and would wish to come back to. Under the deep blue shade of the jacaranda tree, in the courtyard, the air wanders from one appearance to another. And in the hallways and corridors of each official building the duplicity of affirmations and ardours, and of rebuttals, reverberates in the fabric of the walls and floors. Perhaps someone should write a guide not to the places we see and that we leave but to the indefinable and contiguous images that they press up from themselves; those brilliant and elusive refractions of what it is we are (at morning, midday and at

evening) in the sunlit plaza or in our room staring up at the alabaster cornice, as we wait (in autumn, winter, spring or summer) to enrol ourselves in the catalogue of our deceptions, and the mystery of how we lose what was in the first place not our own, and never will be, deepens.

.

The idolatry of meaning. Through the streets of the living, apparitions and portents of happiness and despair pursue us. A hand raised in anguish, pointing to some irreversible act. A face like a neophyte's—imploring and rapt. And the fear of nothing—waiting, around the corner. The sky a bleached and endless indictment of what we cannot have. What is it? That point at which all that has gone before it is redefined. Up until that point, then, nothing is determined and can just as easily turn out to be the opposite of what it appeared to be. So, in this city that we have come to, it is always the *Day of Lamentation and Remembrance* at which the inhabitants are reminded of how we are caught in the cruel and remorseless cycles of time. Shards of the infinite are drenched in the sweet scent of the dying. Sails break upon reefs. Always more than we are, and less than that to which we aspire to belong. The earthly community so richly divided—priests, writers, whores, entertainers, vendors and artisans—on the same sidewalk. And for all of them the price of deliverance from doubt, is what? Fragrant utopias proliferate on each street corner. Democratic and undemocratic. Near and far off. The leper rings his bell and everyone runs into the arms of another.

.

In the bamboo palace that sits alongside the river—no architecture of permanent forms would be appropriate in this land of instability of reference—the dirty square umbers on walls where the artworks were looted, the life support equipment in the basement, a virtual miniature hospital, and the shadows that have eaten everything that was not fastened down, and some of those that were. Origin of edicts and imperial encyclicals. Now the cockroach and the termite digest it. The liveried orchestra. The prestidigitators—gone. And in their place the fake title deed to a property someone had spent their life's savings on acquiring. The bogus film production crew, full of blandishments and cameras, entering a house to relieve it of its possessions. A carnival of whores and politicians singing the national anthem. While in the plantations pubescents cut sugar cane faster than adults from dawn to evening for a few racattos a day. And, in the capital, a “city” of slums visible to visiting foreign

dignitaries on the road from the airport, is encircled by a white wall, air brushed out of existence. *Quelle triste vie!*

.

Our little angst, in a polis of sad peregrinations towards bed and night, our ablutions almost over. Pay the leaves to entertain us, they are almost as bored as we are; open a new leisure centre; invent a new drug that will save us from tomorrow—and from all the days that will come after. The guilt at having left when we were away and the guilt, when we return, at having not stayed, are different. Where do we belong? Not to ourselves that is sure, for we don't know where that particular item can be located. And the other stands at a distance from us, waiting for us to approach. Only, as we walk through the mirrors into ourselves can we find it. And it is then that we realize that distance and time are so many false trajectories out of the mind of the inattentive. And that all objective categories are superfluous. Without landfall, without a horizon, we lack nothing, but the confidence to explore this land, and its cities, drenched with the scent of unripe fruits—including the endeavour of all its darkness and horrors. Priests, flinging the heart into the fire, should not dissuade us. Even its government's declaration of *A State of Rebellion* should be interpreted not as a disincentive, but as an incentive for us to begin the journey.

II

On that faint exiguous line (contract, horizon, point of rest) of the future someone has signed their name more deeply than the rest, as if they had been there before. The pattern of our lives is circular. The same route that takes us forward also takes us back. We wave to ourselves in passing, knowing that no one else waves back. Out of the shadows our own ghosts move amongst us. Until, finally, they sit down with us and listen to us as we talk amongst ourselves, while the afternoon monsoon rain falls raising a bright spume, a fine mist, on the roads and rooftops that surround us.

.

We remember the piles of dromedary dung freezing at night on the outskirts of town under cold stars. At the railway station it was so cold all the thermometer casings cracked. But in the morning the smell of coal dust in the streets, the gleam of fish ponds and canals, the sound of dried grass crackling under brick ovens, woke us. We had dreamed we had left for another land and woke, instead, to find ourselves twisting under mosquito nets again, perspiring in rooms sheathed in a fine mesh that shone. That normally invisible skein of our senses, sifting and mediating the world, seemed, suddenly, to have appeared before us. Behind it, time sobbed in the branches of the acacia trees outside the window.

.

To be in a place, without memory, in absolute time. To know that one has, finally, come *home*. In this city of eternal longing, this body in which we feel we are in exile, the penumbras and pandemonium of appearances unfold before us the true nature of our being. We move backwards and forwards through time in a motion that is continually intersecting itself, until we are lost amid the calated, the unsublated and the circumfused. On the long grey curb that we stepped off many years ago to get here, the same space, opening onto that moment, remains. The breath of a distance that no one has measured, or counted, runs through it. Undescribed, unmapped, it burns inside us, like a virus—a tenderly nursed prospect that has become, we know, the sad fulcrum of our fate.

.

The many voices of the living and the dead that we are assailed by, on going to sleep and on waking. Stitched into that silence that underlies every discourse. A fragment of a phrase, rhythm, tilt of the head, characteristic pause. Listening, and looking, for them we get drawn into the maze of the body's back streets and alleyways. Disoriented—without a street map or compass. The midday sun obliterates the names in the window of a bookstore where we stop. Across the road a wave drags into the harbour another fragment of that silence that seems, minute by minute, to be breathing inside us. And somewhere else, too, on a small shelving parabola of beach, it is setting down—on a light washed horizon. In that liquid, far off, ripple, we hear our bones speak in the amalgamate of an anonymous discourse above the traffic.

.

Behind the dark tree of winter—a glimmer. From the dark roots—a sigh. That distance could be disentangled from what is present. Everything bends with the weight of what it is not. A silvery thin air glides over the water beneath iron bridges. The mind has carried off what it cannot live among and cannot leave. A caravanserai of objects. Calendars and ledgers, encyclopaedias and atlases, ride on the backs of angels. We tap the glass fronts of barometers and constellations rot above airless plains where signs we cannot decipher are carved into the rocks. And then, soon, it will be summer again, and we will discover the white cadaver, left under the sheet from another year. And red fruit bending the branches, dropping, unpicked; because we have not excised these apparitions from our lives.

.

From around the edges of door frames, the serrated perimeters of palm fronds, light; from across anonymous distances, consuming the wainscots and the eaves, issuing through the windows of the library where we sit, reading, looking up at the slow luminous diffusion from the burned out xerox machine invading bodies and wall, listening to its paper feed crunch then halt. Light, omniscient, emanating out of all those porous and immense spaces, out of old forsaken imperial domains, demarcations of land and interconnecting seas, flickering, here, upon spines with such gilded titles as *Administrative Officers of the Empire 1800-1900*; *A Flora and Fauna Of The Province Of Medinora*. Alas, all our limited lexicons and taxonomies, all our frail genera and classes. They thrash, unilluminating, within it. Leaving only the dust of a silence, a white dying gasp, like a sea drying up, that robs us of our voice.

.

We walk each day through the cluttered bazaars that run all the way along the foreshore and back up the narrow precipitous streets that ascend into hills of jungle where light filters slowly down in dappled pools and bright dust-wreathed columns. Textiles and tapestries laid on the ground and hung from bamboo frames throb with an energy derived from the same profligacy of line and colour exhibited by the flora of these hills. Beside the roads, counterfeiters and copyists, scribes and illustrators, in this land of continuous reproduction in which we spent so many years of our lives trying, unsuccessfully, to find what it is we left for. An antidote, perhaps, in the confident and fecund ways its objects assert themselves, to an overwhelming sense of absence. And, in the long, hot, uninterrupted stream of this illusion another illusion emerges—a forlorn wailing of tugs on a grey river moving through the treacherous sediments at Ggov, Horste and Ordflour, seeping into an emptiness difficult to bear ... A loss. An acquisition ... Both part of the same ineluctable dream that does not attenuate the older we get; to represent what is and has always been irritably adumbrating, at the back of our consciousness, a self that can't be spanned—ghost ship gliding silently in and out of a harbour, whose hawsers turn hauling us slowly, again, in: to a dark hold crammed with lapping water, with invisible shores, unidentifiable and rich scents ..

.

The huge swell of the sea running up the almost vertical embankment. Perspiring brokers scurrying, this way and that, scouring the pier heads for business. In the customs sheds the interminable wrangling with officials. Bargains struck, and then unravelled. Our passports cursorily inspected. For who would suspect that as we cross this border we are anything other than we appear to be or describe ourselves as being—vague spirits, traders in the ineffable wares of an interior where, frequently, we lose ourselves amidst an array of false turnings and washed out tracks and end up at night at an inn in a dark room with the lamp extinguished, the only sound the sound of our own voices—and, in some other part of the building, a child crying. We leave before dawn our trunks lashed to our backs muttering our own names in a ritual of emancipation, going over and over the same road littered with torn inventories and bills of lading, and do not return. Inaudible cantors, the dust on our tongues of an endlessly perishing moment, we are to be found at midday crouched at some food vendor's street stall, impervious to the din of people and traffic around us, thinking.

III

It is no use regretting this self that will not lie down. Arm, phantom grey finger of land that aches in a sea of continuous depositings and withdrawals—coast, which it keeps on, even in sleep, circumnavigating. Terminus of unacknowledged destinations. Alienated consumer of the unconsumable. In the cremation pits, exposed after excavating for gravel, it lies bleating like a chastised fool, for all the world to hear and see. The sound of dogs barking and the inventories enunciated from emptying rooms, in the quiet of depopulating villages, kept it awake for years.

.

Perpetually leaking space, like a vent in the wall of the future. Called, in one place, *Lanashka*, and in another *Kurninikustra*. Not identical everywhere simultaneously. And through it, all the cities of this world compress themselves, as if they were real, as if they were so many facial variations upon the expression of the loved one—palpable, yet elusive. And the names that issue so compulsively off the tongue of their weather—its disguises. Names that we repeat, sitting on benches in the dusk settling upon municipal parks, listening to the accents of foreign residents, the diverse phenomena arraigned before us, knowing that it is only the specific that disappoints, the transitory, that cuts into the flesh of our ultimate being.

.

The fullness and weight of a fragrance that lasted. Through arid, stoney grey soil, through centuries. What, heard of, the mind held and furnished against the drought of many lives. First, a homesickness; preyed upon, in concubinage, by the memory of those fruitful slopes of (her name never recorded) her birth-place. Till, under the king's fond tillage, the desert around her foliated, and ran with the "streams of paradise". Then, later, another longing; returning home to hard Greek soils from service as mercenaries in the court of Darius (land of her memory), for those soft slopes too. Whence the image, engraved, passed into the store of our own cultural obsessions. That we may dream, of a landscape within a landscape. The stars unable to tell us where it was. The maps inaccurate, or corrupt. The documents that refer to it rife with the obelus, or missing. So, instead, we hoed in the infertile soils of our own lives, with whatever came to hand, and washed up here, dreaming of somewhere else.

.

This sudden seeming confirmation, in a name and an address, of an identity free flowing, in space, in time; this sudden consummation of a journey. In the great humid, and haunted, sorting office behind the Spice Exchange and the Law Courts they are segregating our mails. Envelopes strewn into an ether of unknown hands, of wasted and derelict spaces, of uncertain itineraries. Through the scribbled ink of each address, standing over against, talking to, us, all that negates and overwhelms us—distance, the immense spaces, the other. All that we wish to take flight from, and yet return to, as if to a self that is coeval with a particular place. All the complex psychology, the intricate circuitry, of our opposed yearnings, signified and authenticated in the vellum of these innocuous deliveries upon which, for months, as the slow boat rolls through indifferent waves, we hang.

.

It is the same distance from morning to evening, wherever we are, whatever obstacles are laid in our way. Now, in the past and in the future. Leaving each house, taking each different road and arriving at a new place, only the location and the persona change. Evening and morning appear—like a geometry of lost angles, fleetingly inscribed on doorsills and in stairwells, a fluctuant grid—and disappear. All that is left, the faded scent of pomade upon the hands of a passionate embrace. The body a ruined, illegible script, where the air of the hot tropical night enters and macerates. Where we wander, circling, worried by how we are measured by what is extraneous to ourselves, by how our mind dilates upon an edge of an infinitely receding object

.

From a local antiquarian we obtain, for a few racattos only, an old map of the city and its environs, replete with the names of original streets and the yellowing parchment of space provisionally divided into subdivisions and plots, boundaries defining waste. Indicated in faded red ink, the Mariners' Mission on the old praya, subsequently moved inland by a sudden rash of reclamation, and the old Officer's Quarters later dismantled, brick by brick, and deposited, intact with ghosts, in crates in a mouldering godown. And so, we too, draw round this emptiness, that we locate at the heart of ourselves, the conspectus of a divided space. In which, talking or wandering or just thinking, we are always trying to locate, in a specific place and time, ourselves—at some precise

point: and yet, because of this, are always losing ourselves. And, from this precise point which we occupy, in that illusory unfolding of our own duration, that movement that annuls us, we repeat the names by which we pronounce ourselves, like a charm, as if they could arrest this endless proliferation of moments which constitutes, sustains and undoes us. We move outward, the pale flowers of the talahib rocking in the wind, of the kakawati, only to return to this infinitesimal point of ourselves that is nothing, and that is nowhere, but which we have anchored with all the particularities of a name and a locus as in this map spread out, here, before us.

We lost one of our number, amidst the weavers of baskets and the sellers of native made curios and mementoes, in some immense haberdashery that had grown up on the side of the road, as we were passing; the sun on his head like on the side of a cuirass, his dented pate gleaming. Habitue of the bars and bordellos of this fragrant city we gave him up almost at once to all the decadence and carnality that we knew, finally, he would surrender himself to after a life of ascesis, trusting to providence that he would succeed in finding on these far shores more than a token of what it was he sought by leaving us, and that look of a stale ambrosia in our eyes, behind. Before he left he deposited an envelope with us—a procedure common to all of us at that time—and instructed us to open it in the event of his demise. It turned out that its contents amounted to a list of items, not only severely incomplete but many of which were seemingly insignificant, and which contained no instructions as to how to dispose of them—of those which had not vanished, that is, or which were not simply the products or creations of his own imagination. They were, in the order in which he had indicated them:

1 copy of 'Epistles To An Exemplary'

1 pocket compass

2 Andalusian Songbooks

1 frangible pine chair (sic)

1 "lock" of hair from a dog(?)

2 silver Mexican dollars

1 mortar and pestle (with his engraved name)

1 handbell (for ringing at angelus)

1 obsidian lozenge ("for placing under the tongue after dark")

2 newspapers dated February 24th 1848

1 Permit To Work

1 Handbook Of Topics For Polite Conversation
1 thimble full of fingernail cuttings (of his mother)
1 cabinet of tinctures for all ills
1 collection of sundry pieces of cork for plugging holes.

.

This coastline, exuding a light of hyperborean intensity, where the entropy of the observer, faced with the stark space of his own disappearance, manifests itself; the space of his own body and its image of itself giving way to a space of a completely different order. Garlands of sampaguita thrown around our necks on our arrival. The dusty tautening of frayed ropes round capstans, odour of hot oil and steam filtering over the iron plates of an engine room, and the acrid assault of the smell from bails of salted fish winched through the air above us, all seem to confirm the dream of the empirical and proximate that we are only ever partly successful in breaking free from. “Partly”; at least, unless, then, we should not even be aware it is a dream, and would be held fast in the dense warp and woof of the percept ... Observing the slow route of our valediction amidst the grammar of size, and order and number, and all the interrupted patterns of our desire, the shadow of the fruit of the tamarind tree distils an essence; neither the word, nor the object, but an unoccupied systole and diastole in which things vanish and emerge, a deliquescent edge, like this horizon, upon which we listen for our own lives, ungarlanded and uncelebrated, as they arrive and leave without us.

IV

Standing under a rotten timber trellis of dense fronds, in the shade of a jacaranda tree, we hear the trilling of an unseen bird. And each of us, standing alone in his own personal domain of reminiscence, tries to imagine where it was that he had previously heard that song, so clearly and longingly did it punctuate the air. Wrung from the ochre streaks of an evening sky, as if from some pre-lapsarian garden, it comes to us with all the assurance of a song that we have heard before. And yet the exact location from which it originates evades us. Issuing, it seems, out of those cool temperate mists from which we have come (but through what unknown lands did those bloodlines we inherited themselves wander?) we reach back for it into a wooded silence, all the time with the feeling, the strange intimation, that it is not the song of a particular bird, nor a composite of many, but, instead, an inward assuagement, beyond time and space and memory, of some profound and inerasable loss; and that by trying to endow it with the features of a name and a place we are pursuing only a personal nostalgia for an outward manifestation of something that has not yet come into our lives, something that ranges far beyond the identity and the song of any particular bird, or species of birds, and which lies, like an unvitiated text, behind a door we have yet to open.

.

A long, fluid blue shadow slowly envelops the hull of the Anan Bhun, a schooner of the Ephesus line, anchored in the channel. We stop and look. Tide pulled, eddied and whorled, rising and falling to the rhythm of the water lapping the steps at our feet, the ship, in its shadow, gradually and inevitably becomes a submerged outline, a datum of memory, point of transit only within the flickeringness of our being. Standing, in the rippled gloom of the channel, lost in reflection, peering, through the vapours that coil and weave off the warm sea's surface, at a ship we can no longer see, we realize suddenly how all the moments and memories of our own lives are, thus, inescapably inhabited by phantoms. Reassembled fragments of percepts, inherently fragile, untranscendental. Like the sound of our names that break down into incomprehensible parts, these infinite atoms of the acoustic and the visual, constructed against the nameless, though they attempt to enwrap and lure us, do not dissuade us from the conviction that they are, finally, constituted of anything more substantial than air itself.

.

In a capital suffused with syphilis and soot, alerted by the sound of continual alarms, lines of leafless winter trees scribble, as the wind moves them, a stubble of animated charcoal, upon pale unlit skies. *The distance between the ideal and that which confronts one, is not so great as the distance between the shadow and the one who casts it.* Somewhere it is evening, and someone sitting outside at a restaurant table looks into the eyes of the one sitting opposite and cannot hear the commotion in the street nearby, or the surf moving across the beach towards them ... There are no different countries. And those distances we set off into have all come back to haunt us, draining their dust into our pores, their marvellous mosaics purloined, piece by glittering piece. A curse on all museums, and collectors. Only the light knows, having secreted itself into the most secret places of the night, what is in us, and what, in our haste to depart, we have left behind. In our catafalques on the outskirts of our suburbs, lodged behind green lawns and the stillness of stone angels, the cut up catalogues of our lives persist. And what did we bring back with us, out of those vast emporia that clogged the crossroads and highways with millions of travellers? And those we left behind standing there beside them in freezing puddles at night, what were they listening for, the thin impartite music of advertising coiling round their hearts—catchphrases and slogans; a debased language, in which we have fashioned the epicene and the self's indulgence. A language that cannot measure time, and that has cancelled all the debts that mortality fastens upon us, whose syrups we slurp with ease, the noise of our farting occluded, along with the fractious debates about that profound imbalance in our lives between giving and taking.

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That perpetual elsewhere unfolding within us. That panoply of diverse vistas, voices. Where are you, unable to sit still, taking off to now? Into a new style. A new place. A new day ... The frayed white grass of the square where he fell, without a blindfold, facing their carbines. A “where” that persists through all the dimensions of love and hate—indifference, only, excluded. At the breast of yourself you find that unappeased appetite for the other. In time you will come to see through it, through the fracture of all such distinctions. Meanwhile, at the side of the road, her eyes like coals in the cooling swathe of her skin, a young girl sells mudfish. In the bay beyond, invisible to her, fine flocculent spray of the *balenas* drifts on the sea wind. We are drawn beyond each edge of where we think we should be by a space that seems to annul all the others. But what we thought we were looking for did not, in fact, move on so much as merely grow much larger and, therefore, farther away from where we thought we

stood listening to a voice that we took to be our own. But nothing owns itself. The objects, in which we have so often put our trust, are not self-sufficient. And that precise point, in space and time, that eventually unbearable stasis we think we inhabit, who advocated it? Some becalmed mariner, no doubt, adrift and seeing no horizon for months, rapidly induced within himself the seeds of his own madness, mumbling for a chart wherein were marked all channels, tides and currents; all sandbanks, submerged rocks, reefs and shallows; all safe harbours and landfalls. We believe that, as a stationary object, all distances radiate away from us. But the truth is that, not having the unity of such an object, they, instead, devolve inside us: so that, in moving, we become never any nearer to that point of rest that we associate with our selves than what distance and space themselves, arriving at and meeting the bourne that defines their own extent—which, of course is boundless—allow.

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As if there was, in the first place, anything at all to “escape” from. One simply arrives at a mode of being less inauthentic than that in which one existed before. To “escape” one would have to know what exactly it was one was leaving. So, month after month, we peregrinate up and down this coast upon the ostensible purpose of buying as many piculs of rattan and gutta-percha as we can lay hands on. Criss-crossing the track by the harbour sand banks where boatmen from a shrimp beam trawler spread out the coarse breadth of a sail and set to work to patch it, the slow stipple and glitter of water on the sweep of a Hoklo sampan as it gently lifts out and is, for one moment, magically suspended—the eye and mind waiting as if for an act of mysterious alchemy to be completed—arrests us. The action, both fluid and dynamic, yet static, seems to mime some elementary principle that one feels at work and embodied in the very structure and design of the houses here, where one feels one enters a mental, as much as a physical, space. Amid the joggled *voussoirs* the light vibrates, through carefully placed grills, against water, reflecting upon tremulous walls; the interplay of light and shadow negating the reality of weight, as if the visible structure floated rather than rested upon supports. Visiting such buildings one questions not only the validity of “where”, physically, one is—it being apparent that it fluctuates as adroitly as the air and light move—but the viability of talking also, therefore, about “where” one is going to. Under the scrutiny of such a reflection the fiery architecture of the mind melts, within a light that seems to seine it. Motes, like molten ground down husks of the souls of the departed from all of time, drift on an invisible wave about us, an immense river in which we breathe all the icons and outlines

of a visible and invisible world and yet still feel that further and further on within it is the source, the lambent furnace, from which, like a sporing reef, all the forms caught between light and darkness are cast and exhaled. Or, as local mythology would have it, excreted in a noiseless ink cloud by a cuttlefish pursuing its own shape upon the surface before it plunges back again into the deep, without it.

The heat drew him. The benign *spiritus* he heard roaming these fields, fringed with a loss he couldn't explain. No one, or thing, ever held him, he said, so closely to what he was and what he was not, without imposing the falseness of an obligation upon him to choose. The fragrant miasma of the ink in its small roadside pot, as the old man wrote his horoscope for him, overcame him with almost a childlike sense of conviction so that he felt he would, if he had to—and did he, perhaps, not?—follow it “to the ends of the earth.” A musky red scent, that penetrated him like a dream and which he claimed to be able to hear, as he inhaled it, coursing through his blood. Where did it—more ravaging than the grief itself that ensued when it was withheld—come from? Like a dispersed sediment out of the stars, the grains from an immense desert scoured by winds so dry they lit the rocks they ran against. A scent in which the half deciphered characters of a world he had been able only partially to read conjoined, evoking anagrams wherein the inscrutability of familiar shapes enticed and fascinated him, and where, in the fading gold of arcades a young boy laid his hand upon his arm, and, in the dying light of an afternoon, led him through alleys and passageways too numerous to recall, slowing and turning, every so often, to smile; a smile full not only of kindness but of guile and betrayal and which, in turn, led to a premonition of that unfathomable dark script of our own final solitude which awaits us all. That a single scent could contain so much! And then he realized that it carried, in fact, the olfactory memory of a dream that had taken root in him when he was young; that had taken root in those same insatiable soils in which his own society had sown its rejection of him. And he had fed it, voluptuously, ever since on the most arcane of diets—books, people and places that were sequestered and inaccessible except to a few. And he wondered, then, if, as he suspected, it was at last taking its revenge, whether we are, indeed, led by ourselves. For at the heart of all our actions and thoughts we inhale the subtle odours of a land without borders, traversing a non-ontological space, a dimly lit imperium where shadows we are not conscious we are a part of collide with us and send us, as if through an “orderly vicissitude” of desires, into our way.

It was, he felt, from such unvisaed and unvisitable regions, from within the depths of their soundless transformations, rather than from the clamorous and loud empirical domain of our senses, that our lives are ruled.

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Over the flooded creek that winds into the dense forest and swamps of the interior we looked out, a faint gleam of light reflecting from the water barely illuminated the opposite shore of plantains where, after a while, we were able to identify the decorated pirogues of a slow fluvial funeral. The sound of lugubrious gongs reached us as if from across an immense distance, and the dark wave, pressed out from under the soundless bows of the procession, ramming and sluicing the shingles under the small wooden jetty, broke into the deep cast of thought the scene had plunged us into with a force of such surprise—the wind then, too, coming up, warm and strong, seemingly from nowhere, and adding to our sense of inexplicable unease—that it appeared to register the signature of some profound riddle, which we were able only to embroider and annotate, hastily abandoning our words and resorting to gestures, with the most banal and trivial of sentiments and asides, before the night closed round us and we lapsed, again, into our respective silences.

V

This vanishing and evanescent city, seat of multifarious depredations and visitations, always returning, amid reports that it was lost for good, to confront us. In the nocturnal boulevards of its immense and heterogeneous sections and suburbs our impotent reveries pursue us. Backlit figures from late afternoons on the long unlit horizons of winter, we stumble through it. All its spaces are public or private but empty. Its name is pronounced as if with the faintest asperity of syllables. Built on a foundation of aereations, it seems to move as we move through it. The scrawled graffiti on its labyrinthine walls might even, at first, mislead one into thinking that one was inside a populist scriptorium—dedicated to the diffusion of the most secular of meanings. Embroiled in the untidy array of its human and non-human traffic one finds oneself pushed and pulled by a play of forces, looking for an axis that does not exist, for an invisible centre of coherence from which are controlled all of its activities. Instead, what one hears, in its food stalls and municipal offices, what one reads, on its news-stands and in the cordite of its radical street bulletins, is only the sad plethora of the false histories of which it is composed.

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Within the generous apportionments of the trunk of a banyan tree a painter and dresser of religious effigies sets up shop attracting, amongst others, some itinerant vendors of votive candles to temporarily lay out their wares. Nearby, in the thin highly pitched accents of an archipelagic dialect, an old woman embeds, within the torque and sailing of her tongue, fabulous genealogies, narrating from memory the congress of those long gone under the cogon topped tumuli fringing the city. The sounds of bargains being struck rise incessantly from the Zinabuando Traders Flea Market, as if the negotiators are afflicted by a *horror vacui*. Over everything the smell of woodsmoke and rice cakes descends, appearing to unite a diversity of events and voices; and, for a moment, we almost forget how, amorous, intransigent and predatory, we glide through each others' lives as if they were not there.

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We recognise only that which we have already seen. Yet, in that precise instant of re-cognition, all sense of prior acquaintance with it is annihilated by the sheer force of its closing upon us again. In the perpetual motions of matter,

through which we walk as if through a garden of concealed harmonies, the real movement of our minds presents itself, obscurely, to us. Caught between a remembering and a forgetting we greet what we really do not know, what we do not any longer clearly see, so inexplicably does it come to us, strained through the carious traffic, the interstices, of time. So that suddenly even the simplest, the most commonplace, of things can become that elusive object that floats on the borders between our appearing and our disappearing lives, filling us with a feeling of loneliness as if we were in exile, making us believe, fools that we are, that if we could, somehow, “possess” it we would possess the thin peripatetic shadow of our own fleeting and inconsequential self, and that we could bring it and hold it, here, before us, where we stand in the dust of the street, or in our homes.

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Inserted between the mildew mottled boards of an old accounts book that had fallen behind the bureau in his room we found this short, detached entry dated just prior to his disappearance: *What remembers itself? In this dry season I stand, my eyes scanning the horizon, narrating a past to myself. On bleached white ground I loiter by walls of old courtyards. They remember nothing; no rustle of furbelow and gusset in the shadows that they cast. These arid spaces I dwell in. Hot interregnums of dust and silence. The still roads—that go nowhere. Ruminations strewn across time and space, choking the air I breathe. My own air, slowing to a still, unrecuperable place inside me. Until it seems to make little sense whether I do or do not distinguish, except for practical purposes, what is inside from what is outside me. So, at the end of the day I look into my eyes in a mirror and it’s the same light that scorches the porch and cloister that’s crouched there, in the packed cells of the umbra. On a burning road of motes I travelled down to get here the relic of some ultimate silence lodged in my ear. Now, exhausted by the presence and thought of it, I cannot sleep.*

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History builds walls, tamping down red willows and reeds with a thin sandy gravel, in the most difficult of terrains. In its yearning for that stability and coherence that our lives do not have, it, in effect, preserves them but also erects a barrier to them. History that is always only one minute old, expires on the ground of its making. In the very fabric of its sounds—that iridescent cacophony of our senses—we detect a profound nostalgia for being, that can never be quenched. A pain for which there is no analgesic. The opulence of

our perception, the fragrant entrepôts of our bodies, are looted by those thin altitudes in which it breathes the final delimitation of all longing. When it corrects, what it corrects is only itself. And the odour of charcoal and grilled squid, of the blooms in the flower markets, and the secret dialogues that are written down afterwards upon the dusty backs of envelopes and ledgers, fade. And, our lives punctuated by an endless succession of lost moments, we become, again, that young girl, sad profligate, drowning in a city of birds beside the decomposing odours of a river where the names of the dead drift in vaporous roilings across the surface, and are quickly—if known at all—forgotten.

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We wonder, sometimes, wandering round the streets and coming upon the sun cracked and mildewing sarcophagi of the Company's old graveyard, whether it is where we, too, shall deposit our aching bones one day, a considerable distance from where all of us set out and were, eventually, bound for. Tilting headstones propped up against a wall where the gecko mysteriously manifests and unmanifests itself, in masonry breaking down under the heat and loosening wind and rain of endless typhoons. Lives carved into letters, in various degrees of indecipherability, that the lichen invades. A young cabin boy who toppled onto a deck from aloft during a stormy voyage to an elsewhere he was never to see, laid out here with a short and touching encomium of verse to commemorate him. Or a well liked midshipman who never made it back on deck, brought fatally low by the *anopholese* mosquito, inhaling, as it was mistakenly thought, too much of the foetid miasma that percolated through the foreshores of this coast. Under the great limpid green leaves of ferns these shadowy lives merge with the inarticulateness of the earth itself. On our way, all of us, to somewhere else. Figures in the vast emporia of the lost. Our possessions mouldering beside us. In the long fungible reaches of our discourse we return to them stumbling, through the white gaze of an insomnia, towards what we cannot keep. Then, as if there was birdsong in the thick detritus of air filling the streets, suddenly, we look up. And there, in the hollow of a marsh embankment, in a small gorse bush inched by delicate fingers apart, so symmetrical, sculpted seamlessly onto the fork of a branch, a diminutive tightly woven oval of mosses, grasses, leaves and feathers. The nest of a green linnet.

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Like the blind spores of the kapok tree swarming here in the wind our words unroll before us down the crowded passageways of our breath, seeding the dusk with a sound of our selves. And no matter how many times we open our mouths they return, as if there was something still to be said, some place still to be visited, that we have not articulated or seen. But since where they return to is never quite the same place so the destination they set out for always shifts slightly and we never quite come at it directly. Wandering through these streets, through these markets of fetishes and shopfronts of crumbling reliquaries, we embrace, in the despoiling dusk, the light from an unknown geography in which we engrave our names, a transcendent ground of syllables in which nothing moves. And the only sound we hear is our own breath, a shadow pinned behind our ear, and the street names that are called out as we pass so that we may reconnoitre our way back safely to a place we have not left.

VI

We are born with the fragments of obliterated spaces within us. A celestial sensorium. A wind of luminous, driven particles. The sun shod storm of our being that will not stop with us—that, indeed, does not, in all its fitful accretions and re-accretions, recognise a person—that did not begin with us. The immense music of its coming and going deprives us of any rest, and within it we are swept up on the joy and down on the sadness of its passing; its seeding, a dusting of breath deposited in our voices. Whenever, in the litany of the vestibule or of the street, we hear it, we know that it has come to demand of us again some token of supplication and of deference. A packed bag. A cleared desk. Or simply a slow peregrination down towards the rickety quays that vibrate in the wind, and a quiet reorientation of our bodies towards that great liquid horizon that portends before us, that gusts through all the precarious and leaking hulls of all the alphabets through which this world is journeying.

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The elation of arrival on their tired faces, having moved from country to country, living often out of no more than a suitcase, learning the new language of each new place they put their feet down in. The aroma of journeying; stale sweat clogged pores, debris of high altitude air saturating their clothes. Habitués of departure. After the luggage rotating and rotating on the imbricated belts of carousels, the clatter of electronic flight boards and the profferings of boarding passes, now, on their intent faces, as they are about to meet those waiting for them at the barrier, family and friends they have not seen for a multitude of years, the quick, sudden and unfamiliar joy of the emotion of arrival, and the quickly identified and inhaled odour of pancit from a food stall that seems to assuage all the ruptures of distances over all the years they have been away. And then, quickly forgotten, the ache and anguish of that vision of a far country that they had so often glimpsed and imagined and that had seemed at times to lie just beyond the immediate perimeter of their seeing and hearing and touching, but which, in each new place, had finally turned out to be just as foreign as the place before. Now, as they are swept out into the heat and humidity of a new night, into the city's flow and baleful worship of signs, and its squalid augury of appearances, the neon of its votive lights burns for unknown destinies, and a silent and fleeting embrasure opens quite unexpectedly deep within their being, an unavoidable premonition, unsettling

intimation, that they have come back to somewhere they do not know, that cannot, ever again, be “home”.

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On a short, recently completed length of praya fronting the eastern entrance to the bay the Coconut Planters Cooperative has erected a bank. Next to it is a half ruined mosque, and surrounding the mosque a clustering of matshed and tin huts where people live amidst tall toddy-palms and banana plants. Walking at midday through the ambient glow of light and heat, through which the shadow of one's body seems to pass like some unidentifiable desire, one is struck by just how much the bank's design derives from a mind not indigenous to these parts. Heavily chiselled stone steps. Huge plinth. Fluted columns. Thick monumental walls. An architectural embolism. Built to “outlast time” and endure the degradations of a hostile climate. Beyond this preoccupation with time and change there is a preoccupation, though, with space, too. Space, which is to the visible as silence is to the audible. So aggressively do the stones announce their own presence that they seem inescapably poised against its very opposite, an unarticulated void or absence. Upon such a feral space, that has not, unlike time, been tamed and bound upon our wrists, the building seems to launch its full weight. In its very foundations, then, while the nothingness of light and air threads round and through the columns, and a footloose universe breathes and scarves the stone it is gently warming, the collective unconsciousness of another race seems to locate and bear down upon another fearful colossus—that of non-being.

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The whistle from the mailboat, a weatherbeaten and begrimed pinnacle, announces its arrival. Letters from home. And our minds go back to another coast and to other apparent objects of our cognition. The longed for and familiar tilt of the script of a loved one's handwriting. As the fragrant yellow gum on the envelope is unsealed the very heart of the chimera is released, like a genie out of a bottle. A tangible apperception fills the room and, at the sight of one's own name, the name of another floats before one like an icon. In the strong afternoon light that wreathes the hand with gold, one hesitates before one reads. Thinking of the distance the letter has travelled and the time it has taken to get here, one feels that although, like envelopes, our bodies move through space, it is not the same space as that which they move

through, but a psychophysical space, and that, unlike Archimedes, we cannot, from within this space, ever displace ourselves, or calculate or find in it an exact measurement of ourselves. For it is an element in which we are diffused, which is an exudate from us, and from which we can never be subtracted or added to except by ceasing. We are, agencies as such, condemned always to move through and within it, as through the thickness of our own flesh, continually trying to trace the marks we leave upon it, the scars of a lifetime spent travelling through its dark calligraphy, its breath.

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At funerals, held usually at dawn, salt is thrown—for the repose of all named things. No one is allowed to utter a word, and the ceremony proceeds with a long undulating intoning, the breath and the sound slowly released until they expire. At which point they are revived again. During no part of the ceremony are words spoken. It is believed that at the centre of the world there is a lake called *Empyrethma*, which means the emptiness of despair, and that the condition from which all earthly existences fomented resides there and that it is there where they all return. Although it is described as a lake it often sounds more like a vast pan, or dried up bed of marsh. Into it, it is said, all the salt from the tears of the living ascends filling the air with a continuous evaporation. A snow like refulgence refracts through the laminae of all the crystal. And a continual, almost inaudible, vibration as of lattices opening, which, it is said, is what those who are about to depart for it can hear, though all those around them are deaf to it. Like, as someone has said, sustaining the image, the sound of a capiz window opening on a morning of clear frost. Or, to paraphrase another, a music of glass abraded against an ether.

VII

Here, in the evening, along roads lined with coconut palms moist with evaporation from the mangroves, we meet ourselves coming back, trying to reconstruct, in a world that is restless and anxious, something we are only half conscious, vaguely aware of. Noiseless shadows, navigating the endless displacement of ourselves, the thought comes to us that through most of our lives it is for nothing more, perhaps, than a thing like a small complete tune that we have been walking and listening, having carried some of the diverse notes from it around with us in our heads all the while. And sometimes when passing a field of pilay that bends in the wind, the fragrance of flesh wafting over the alleyways from a roadside lechon where men in dark corners raise their heads and sniff, we wonder whether it is from the same dream, too, that they are waking: to see, at their feet, only a convoy of ants dragging a looted carapace and wings.

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Tucked away in a small side street down a slope that is in the shade all year of huge banyan trees is the lunatic asylum where inmates, in suits of coarse white cloth, stand under the pines in the courtyard staring into nothing, or at, and through, those who stop to look. Mostly catatonic, one has the impression that their gaze is, though, far from mindless; so far, in fact, that whenever they look at an object their gaze seems to filter an infinite number of possibilities and proposals as to what it might be. Objects to which our own gaze had long since become accustomed. Not for them the anaemia of instant recognition, or of similitude and likeness; but, instead, perched on a deep verandah before red brick walls the desperate energy of a condition reflecting their own and characterised by exclusion. Whenever anything meets their gaze it is as if it is being compared with all the things that it is not; launching, in the inmates, a lonely and weary sieving through entire catalogues of substances. What, for example, is a frangipani, or the object which goes by such a name? It is not an orchid, a peony, a fern, a weed etc ... They appear to be possessed by a seemingly endless need to complete the labour of such a process before their gaze can come back to rest on what the object is, before finally granting to it its own being, and, in return, granting to themselves their own. In the distance they travel how far, we wonder, have they not, poor souls, outstripped us, who have not budged from the given, here, before us; this undespised home of the

unqualified in which, unlike them, we do not hear those relentless inquisitions by a universal, sifting through a fragrant bouquet of names it does not share.

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From the white heat of the pavement, in an effort to cool off, we step into a large emporium where the air, wafted by fans in a draught that oscillates across the moist faces of both assistants and shoppers, is mildly warm only. On shelf after shelf, stand after stand, rail after rail, a prodigality of products, a densely packed miscegenation of wares, some put together in a multiple of countries, others assembled singly, here or elsewhere. The materiality of our lives, or a large portion of it, controlled by a fluid capital that recognises no borders, into which and out of which, like a monsoon rain through porous walls, it flows. We think of all those white walled haciendas, transplanted from the Old World, where what began as a trickle of money returning home, later turned, in the form of foreign corporations, into a flood. With such thoughts, accompanying us as we wander between the aisles, we walk into a section to which the Latin suffix *iana* has been added to the country whose name, surprisingly, designates it. Surprisingly, because the country signified is no other than that very country in which we are standing, whose very air we are breathing. It is as if space has suddenly become inverted. As if the “self” has suddenly become “other”, in a vertigo of self-exoticisation and, momentarily, we seriously wonder where we are; in this brilliant archipelago bathed by warm tropic seas, or in the northern hemisphere of some temperate country. As the familiar geography of all our borders crumbles not only do we begin to “consume” ourselves, but to parody ourselves. But should these selves, constructed from such frangible material as they are, put together by others as much as “ourselves”, concern us, perhaps, so much. Or this “where”, for it has a capability of being any where, a ubiquitous locus?

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Only the brunt of the headland, where scrub shorn slopes grow sheerly down to exposed layers of granite and basalt at the edge of the water, seems solid. The rest of the bay appears to float through a filter of memory and dream where fragments, washed up on that thin peripatetic border between the past and the future, hover. At this deceptively still point of the present you stand, in a land of lacunae and shadows rifted by the silence of the deep. You know that what the tide brings in and what the tide takes out, in its varied scintillae of ablution, the mind cannot account for. Grave plinths on a broken hillside, dust and

desiccated vegetation swirled in an ossuary of stone; somewhere, give back a sense of a leaking terrain where, on a hot afternoon, you lingered beneath trees and at corners, listening. You felt that, within that listening, you were both summoned and annihilated: so much so that you gave yourself up, in the heat, to a ripple, to the merest weave of contiguities—birdsong, wind rustle, wave slap—which would elide and, finally, settle down within you to become, with no pure chronology to punctuate them, part of those ambiguated landscapes that experience invests you with. Tokens, that is, of a continual passage, a motion, in which each thing that had appeared to be so self possessed and enclosed is left rummaging, amid the fluid and inexorable providence of memory and duration, for its name. And on that wordless broken hillside, in that hot air of an afternoon—the residues of how many other afternoons, of how many other headlands, or high places by the sea, aggregated within it—it was as if something was trying to draw you back in to a world without tenses, before the names; to a world that had no use for them at all.

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You observe the rusting locomotive beneath tattered plantains engulfed, like a dark insignia, in steam. As it pulls trailers of logged teak towards the open holds of dhows lined up at the quay, your mind returns to those small stone stations of the branch lines of your childhood where you waited on countless mornings for the train to arrive. Finally, above a low green relief of hills, long before it could be heard, a thin white streamer of vapour announced it was approaching. And then, in a great flurry and hiss of steam through the cutting, it stood, having brought with it the pungency of soot, beside one. Seated at last in the carriage, listening to the slow and coaxing hypnosis which the rhythm, emanating through all the ties and sleepers and metalled ligatures into the very core of your being, produced, you began to wonder, after a while, as you drifted in and out of a reverie of bisected views of the landscape through which you were passing, whether you were not falling, after all, under the deep persuasion of a spell. Birdsong and voices were fading from every siding and platform along the line. And even when the train stopped, no one got on or got off. All there was, was the silence of stone and light on deserted platforms, a silence that was deep; the gleam of light on thick canopied trees, warm smell of grass, and the scent of flowers in station borders. You did not even hear the whistle of a guard as you lurched off again between the endless horizons of fields where there was no sign to tell you where you were, or where you were going. Your mind tripped into a trance. For all children are brought up in a land that is foreign, and are, therefore, natural and curious travellers. It is only

later in their lives that they remember, if they remember at all, that far country in which they were young, and how it was sustained by a profound longing for a limitlessness that had not then yet fallen under the custodianship of a system of belief, or frittered itself away in the easy gratifications of some consumerist utopia, or just simply disappeared.

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A senior clerk, by the name of Hadfield, casually wandered in off the harbour front the other day, pushing his travel scarred trunks into a corner of the office ... And so one more rootless soul found its way back here to these shores of the blossoming almond tree. One day they just suddenly turn up again and, under the lugubrious sweep of the fans, an old face resumes its place, as if it had never been away. No explanations are asked or needed, and none are given. Where they come back from, that grey capital of fogs and stewed cabbage, all the economic migrants of the world, they say, seem to pour into, filling mundane positions the locals quickly leave to go off in search of more elevated employment. It is into areas where these newcomers congregate that the returnee almost inevitably finds his way, soon taking his meals there, wandering amidst the unusual aromas of their streets. He finds himself bereft, in a culture he no longer identifies with, where a strain of vulgarity and coarseness that had in the past found expression almost exclusively in working men's clubs and places of entertainment, now, he notices, pervades the whole of society. Indeed, on the streets of the capital, it is palpably clear to everyone, even those who have not been mugged, that the qualities of courtesy and manners are to be found only within a museum of antique behaviours. Posters warning against violent and abusive behaviour proliferate on buses and in railway stations, and in surgeries of doctors and dentists ... So the returnee finds himself at noon each day in the small equivalent of a souq under the shining edifices of that delinquent city, in a culture within a culture, listening to a language he barely comprehends, longing to distance himself in it from the encroaching barbarism around him, finding in those sounds of an unfamiliar tongue some solace, as if he hears there the seeds of an incipient decency being preserved. At the same time he also hears what he perceives to be a dirge; the long funereal plaint of *patria*.