The Hoplite Journals

LX–LXXXIX
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 (one-volume edition)*

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CONTENTS

LX  
LXI  
LXII  
LXIII  
LXIV  
LXV  
LXVI  
LXVII  
LXVIII  
LXIX  
LXX  
LXXI  
LXXII  
LXXIII  
LXXIV  
LXXV  
LXXVI  
LXXVII  
LXXVIII  
LXXIX  
LXXX  
LXXXI  
LXXXII  
LXXXIII  
LXXXIV  
LXXXV  
LXXXVI  
LXXXVII  
LXXXVIII  
LXXXIX  

9  
13  
17  
20  
22  
26  
30  
34  
37  
43  
46  
50  
53  
55  
58  
61  
64  
68  
71  
74  
77  
81  
84  
87  
90  
93  
96  
99  
102  
105
The Hoplite Journals

LX–LXXXIX
A sky of high cloud and spoiling shadow erases in its movement any trace of the observer. He has woken on this fair morning only to witness his “demise”, the mute accomplice in the creation of a flat surface lacking any perspective. It is not what he wants, or does not want. All the cinemas are closed, the TV and radio stations deserted. All the presses, the telephone exchanges and the satellites have fallen quiet. The electricity generators fail to whirr. For a moment all conversations cease. A language without an abyss. A sky without words. The uncognised, at last, beckons. Only the “I” is lonely. Lonely amidst its Niagara of wants. Lonely for what will not acknowledge its existence.

Lying at a slight angle to the world, a position he claimed he had always been forced to take, in a rickety old wooden bed in the rundown port city of Entemia, he watched the boats move in and out of the harbour all day. When the wind blew in the right direction he inhaled the fragrance of *Zingiber officinale* being unloaded and could hear quite clearly, on the quays, the cries of fish vendors and the wrenching hiss of steam winches. Even the shadowy personages of his past, he claimed, came up to his room there sometimes to talk with him. “Perhaps” he said “it is because Entemia is such a convenient place to pop into on the way to somewhere else. Being mainly a refuelling station now they can easily land for an hour or two before going back on board and completing the rest of their journey”. Such statements we put down to his frequent delirium; not overlooking, however, their plausibility—his room, amongst the peeling tenement blocks upon the hill, was hardly a ten-minute walk up the cobbled street ascending from the harbour. But as far as we, his acquaintances, could ascertain he had withdrawn to such a place precisely to avoid people. That day, though, the last on which we saw him, his withered foot exposed beneath the thin bed sheet upon which the fierce sun flooded through a broken shutter, all he could talk of was himself and his misfortune. We could not but help detect, we later confided to each other, a strong hint of self pity in what
he said, almost as if he had come to regard his deformity as a kind of
wound bestowing upon him the fate of a mythical figure. And, in fact,
it is said that one of Odysseus’ crew had indeed washed up there upon
his oar in Entemia, not drowned as the poem would have us believe.
“She … too … visited” he said “the other day. The last of them. And the
most dearly loved. Dispensing, I think, not sympathy but pity. She …
So selfishly betrayed. I concealed, you see, year after year, all knowledge
of my deformity from her. I concealed it, too, from my self, not wanting
to think about it. After she had gone I lay reflecting, and wondered how
anyone could really feel sympathy for someone who had so deceived
them, taken their own nakedness and given back only a simulacrum.
No one likes ugliness, but I compounded an ugliness that is physical
with one that is moral … Trust … Have slept badly since … Whose
name I can’t remember, a Jesuit. Wanted to say to her, except it would,
if the pity were true, have compounded with ingratitude … His lines.
Something to the effect that you grieve for something but it is, rather,
yourself you grieve for … Too strong a word though, in my case, grief.
Revulsion the least I deserve … Impelled, you see, by self-interest and
love … both.” It was not a pretty story, as we all agreed afterwards.

The best tales that her grandmother told were, she believed, always told
beneath the banyan tree beside the pond in the garden of their house
in Anishpura. Whether it had something to do with the setting, for a
visit to her grandparents always marked the release from the everyday
routine of school and the noise and crowds of the city, or whether her
tales would have exerted their magic upon her wherever they were told
she did not know. For such tales she only ever heard in the house of
her grandparents in Anishpura. One tale in particular she remembered
with an abiding sense of enchantment. Visiting one day, many years
ago, the local market with her mother, her grandmother, only a young
girl then, had overheard a conversation between two ladies in which
one of them had said that it was the kind of weather, bright sunlight
accompanied by rain, during which the foxes got married. Intrigued,
she had asked her mother whether this was true and she had said “It
is said to be so” though she herself had never had the opportunity
to observe such an event. That night her grandmother did not sleep, so intently did she prey to the gods for sun and rain. Waking early the following morning and seeing her prayers apparently answered she quickly finished her breakfast and then announced that she was going for a walk. Setting out on the path that ran alongside the river she crossed a number of fields ripe with rapidly swelling watermelons until she could see, stretching for miles, the tall tips of the sugar cane bending in the breeze, the fine rain and light making them glint. She pushed her way into the tilting green sea of stems towering above her convinced that it was there, where the foxes always fled to hide, that she would, if anywhere, be able to observe their ceremony. In that rustling world of thin, dilute and watery, shadows she felt as if at any moment, as she pushed the thick clusters of stems apart in her progress, she would catch a sudden glimpse of a party of foxes officiating at their solemn nuptials. For hour after hour the stems of that quiet and dappled underworld grazed her arms and legs. She had no sense of the direction in which she was going, or of the amount of time that was passing. Every now and then her mind, bodying forth its secret fantasies, arrested the fleeting wisp of a form before her, only to be disappointed when, upon approaching nearer, it turned out to be no more than a gentle rise in the ground. Sometimes, as the wind moved through that colossal expanse of cane, she heard noises that sounded like the tinkling of bells, or the sonorous and melodious barking of what she took to be inarticulate celebrants at some festive gathering. So on and on she pushed, alone and unafraid, until, suddenly stopping short, she realised that it was no longer raining and that, instead of the light of mid morning filtering down upon her it was the fading light of evening. Then a hand, of what looked like a young boy, raised and proffered before her, phantom-like in the quietness with which it seemed to have stolen upon her, appeared. Hesitantly, she took it and, as she did so, she was led gradually to the edge of the sugar cane and, after a while, out into the broad space of the world again. Although she had no idea of where she was the people in the village close by to where the young boy had exited the field, and where, it turned out, he lived, knew whose parents she was the daughter of and quickly saw that she was returned to them. When questioned as to where she had been and why she had stayed away for such a long time, causing them
to become worried, all her grandmother would say was that she had
gone out walking and had wandered off into the sugar cane and after
walking for hours had got tired and lay down to rest. When she awoke,
she said, she did not know where she was and did not know in which
direction to go, so she walked for a while towards where she thought
she had heard the sound of voices.

In his short treatise “On Names” Ramash Prajna, the Abbot of the
monastic university of Japoche, the great centre of Absolutist learning
and teaching, dwells, in passing, upon the published accounts of
foreign sojourners in his country. Journeying through the diverse cities
of its plains and high plateaus, despite such cities bearing the marks of
successive waves of invaders who'd settled in them over the centuries,
all ventured the same observation that the identity of those individual
cities had always on recollection evaded them. Instead, the details
seemed to merge, they claimed, until they were not sure which details
belonged to which city. “This is not because” explains the Abbot “there
is some mysterious or mystical property operating in our lands, but
because there are not many but only one city. Whichever names and
words might be employed to evoke its various properties it is impossible
to know the relation of these singular and yet, notwithstanding, general
verbal designations to all those properties which together constitute
our cities; for these are properties which, in themselves, are incomplete
and whose nature resides in the scintilla and flux, only, of that eternal
city. Therefore, although one might travel to scores of different cities
it is not surprising that each proper name, after a while, might begin
to evoke not one particular city but all the cities one had been in, and
even ones one had not. Such cities, such accretions of particular sights,
sounds, smells, tastes and textures, though empirically real, are, as
collections of existents, ultimately incomplete and to be differentiated
from that uniform and universal Existence of which they are merely
conceptual divisions. The diversity of all cities as, that is, of all names
and words, is merely apparent.
The Builder and Assembler of Fountains

Thinks continually of that perfect coincidence between the point of arrival and departure.

Abstains from the composition of all diatribes, invectives and polemics.

Calculates, from all the levels, the flow and fall of water, and the pressure required to raise it.

Washes his hands over and over.

Hears continually the rhythms of yesterday, today and tomorrow, overlapping.

Familiarises himself with all the dry wells between his birthplace and the site of construction.

Compiles a reservoir of shadows for time to feed upon.

Watches, in the quiet courtyard, as water gathers at the rim, falls and then rises again, and begins to dream.

His life consisted of a past which he felt had no real borders, no boundaries. Childhood had come and then adolescence, and then his marriage and his divorce. Under the sweating papaya leaves of a humid spring he sat in his garden at the foot of the hill and there seemed to be nothing separating him from that life, from those stages of it that were now consigned to a “past”, and from a self, too, that was chopped up and remorselessly defined by its progress through them. Through what, he wondered. Ghostly parameters the mind furbishes us with, a group's
collusion. Nothing more? I, too, he thought, am thus. And she who I seemed to have met in dreams, she, too, was, perhaps, less substantial than she seemed. And as the Peilau sang high in the trees on the hill he knew, at last, after all that time, that she had betrayed nothing, no one—though he had not thought so then. And that her dissatisfaction at being with him, like his at her being with another, was no more than the dissatisfaction with a dream that they had both woken from many years ago, on a day of fog and fine grey autumnal drizzle in which their faces could barely be seen.

In the heat of the long tropical night her taxi made its urgent way down the steep back streets of the city until it arrived at the entrance to the hospital. Large round wicker baskets full of refuse and rotting debris waited on the pavement to be collected; from them emanated the sweet and acrid stench of decomposition. Married, now, she had never really, although he was her father, known him. Already living with his third wife when she was a child, what she remembered most vividly was the uncomfortable experience of being sent to his office one day to beg for some long overdue money for housekeeping. The war years of his chaotic wanderings with her mother because of outbreaks of bubonic plague and besieging by bandits of the walled village where they lived, and their flight through the bombed coastal southern cities, happened before she was born. His life, typical she thought of his generation, one of displacement, finally came full circle when he returned home two years ago, his lineament and embrocation business in the West, as well as his last marriage, having floundered, to settle uneasily with her mother and younger brother and sister in a rundown apartment overlooking the harbour. She looked at him, now, his body foetally curled on a bed behind a screen, mouth wide open, the sheet drawn back. And she moved, very rapidly, over to his side and bent over and, tenderly, touched him on the arm, uttering quietly the word “Ba”. Then turned quickly and made her way out again into the night.
Within the throng of shadows which hovered upon the tables of the dimly lit Czarina Café there seemed to hover, also, the air of a conspiratorial silence. Even as one sat there spooning a dark and richly seasoned borscht out of one’s bowl one could sense it above the conversation and noise of the other diners. A silence on which dissimulation fed. Beyond their continual coming and going the proprietor, a tall thick set northerner with an accent that was foreign to those parts, presided aloofly. Many years ago he had been driven by civil war to these shores where all the major foreign powers, eager for intelligence, vied for a foothold. With his White Escoffian chef he had, from within a monarchical enclave, suddenly extricated himself one night and floated across the river that formed the border, and then, slowly, drifted south. The silence which seemed to inhabit the Czarina Café was, more than the silence which betokens absence of sound, a silence of unanswered questions. And since the questions were never overtly put, except in the mind of the asker, what grew in their place was a flourishing and unassuaged suspicion. Suspicion feeds energetically upon silence. Indeed in more advanced states it begins, without being either threatening or nefarious, to evince a kinship with the Unknown. Perhaps it was this which drew such a motley gathering of artists, writers, musicians and radical thinkers to the Czarina Café. Amongst such liminal figures there came, also, the purveyors of “official” papers, letters of transit and visas, and those of dubious provenance proficient in numerous languages and of mixed bloodline who, frequently, had lived in the capital cities of those far northern provinces and, attached to foreign embassies or legations or government departments, eked out a living by, so they said, translating or interpreting. Like plotting émigrés, they would sit in a corner quietly but passionately conversing in a foreign tongue, frequently looking over their shoulders. The café’s owner and customers inhabited a crepuscular region where rumour, rather than fact, predominated. Drawn to it, like the members of a secret club, customers arrived and left at all hours of the day and night, many making their way down the steps, which ran almost the entire height of the island, to the unsteady pontoon at the bottom where the air off the mangroves hung, heavy and moist. There they waited for the ferry to take them over the narrow stretch of water before they disappeared into the “towns” of ramshackle squatter huts dotting the
hillsides, or into the maze of concrete tenement blocks thrown up many years ago to house the flood of refugees who'd poured over the border.

Raised here, on the hot coast of an ancient and turbulent country, amid the dust of its crowded streets full of temples and teahouses, odours of incense and salted fish, the earliest strata of his memory contained impressions he had no difficulty, later, in relocating. Latent fires, they lay smouldering within him. In the gently rolling green hills of that land his parents took him to, and in which the remainder of his life was spent, the teeming streets of his childhood never receded. Before he died he wrote, largely at his family’s behest, a book evoking them. In the wild winds and storms of our lives the earliest years are usually a harbour. By returning to them we are not escaping, nor trying to set out again to inscribe a new course, for that is so patently a delusion, but savouring those moments before any course was set: when all that came to occupy the horizon were objects we had not any memory of and which we could not, for only an object which has been sufficiently noticed to be remembered can be forgotten, forget. And which could not, as a consequence, disappoint us.
“Don’t I know you from somewhere else?” he had said. Mind being a necessary condition for the appearance of all phenomena that is not only possible but, perhaps, inevitable, he thought. The smell of ammonia drifted up in the heat; from the old stone tenement blocks without any septic tanks he suspected. Later the night-soil collectors would come towing, on bicycles, tanks of it down unlit alleys and streets, their pedals creaking under the weight. No doubt I have known you, too, in the dingy apartments without any blinds that litter the back streets of this life where we have sauntered and shuffled our days. This is not unimaginable. Even in the better and well off parts of town, closing the shutters at four o’clock in the afternoon to the fatuous entreaty of chimes. And so you have known me, too, in exactly these same environs, and in others, stepping out onto icy balconies at dawn all the fountains and the taps frozen, lingering and smoking in doorways and staring idly, as the evening enveloped the housetops, into the dull water of canals. The smell of ammonia, again, drifted up to him. Like a percept, he thought, that enters the circuit of its own dissolution and, having nowhere to go, turns back into these self same streets only to find me, or that other of which I am inextricably composed.

By all accounts Unsworth had not so much “gone native”, with the consequent adoption of all the outer, as well as inner, accoutrements such as dress which the term implies, as “gone primitive”. He had abolished in his thought and behaviour any evidence of the singularity of the moment and event, denying history, his history, and that inevitable unfolding within it of time and destiny to which we, from the West, have become so addicted and whose ideology, without being aware it is ideology, we expound. He had no fear of his life standing still. It was a life which, he felt, rather than wasting itself on an endless pilgrimage towards the future had peered into the depths and seen the structure of those infinite repetitions, Oppositions and combinations that along with many other abstract patterns revealed its true nature.
Having lived and travelled for so many years in that country where rather than the dynamo of the present, it was the past with its potent yet impersonal armory of annals, legends and myths that gave shape to experience, he began to realize that in order for the present to be, it was obliged to imitate the past. In effect, therefore, there was no tomorrow, except as a prolongation of and recurrence of yesterday. So, in the jasmine scented and leafy pathways of Inferiganga, amid its perfumed gardens above the deep blue of its harbour, Unsworth increasingly spent his days reading the signs of a present from which the meaning of the moment seeped almost as soon as it had been addressed. Instead, in place of that ever transient present, that instant upon the train of whose passing we are ineluctably bound and on which we are forever looking back, there came to him, in spite of that obligation he felt to interpret all the analogous signs of oppositions and similarities within the intelligible and sensible surrounding him, a feeling of liberation. Liberation from the corrosive insecurity and anxiety which had characterised his former self. A self that had struggled to affix upon the passing show of appearances some abiding motif. To the mobility of such a passing show he now felt himself transposed through the unconscious workings of that collective knowledge into which his being had sunk its roots; yet transposed, also, to the deeper immobility from which it derived and which was continually replenished by those formal equivalences in the outer world of that framework of ideas he had come to believe in. To many of those who met and talked with Unsworth, however, his having “gone native” had less to do with a change of ideology than a change of clothes. One can, it seems, in a small and closed community such as ours, overlook more easily the heresy in a man’s thought than in his appearance. But not, certainly, in both.

It had been a book written, as its title *A Guide to the Underworld: the Hill City of Uzgistan and its Environs* suggests, with a certain tongue-in-cheek quality. To reach Uzgistan one has to cross, though, one of the numerous tributaries of the Erbutz River which encircle the base of the mountain on which it lies and the thick gloom of their mist
wrapped waters might, indeed, be said to resemble, in this respect, an aspect of the River Styx. Once inside Uzgistan one becomes aware, also, of how much of its social life is conducted within or around its many public baths which are fed by the warm underground sulphur springs which are one of its main attractions for visitors. Its numerous limestone caves, entrances to which are spread all over the city, also reinforce the impression of a place where the population spends a great deal of its time beneath, rather than on or above, the surface. Added to this there is the generally moribund air which clings to Uzgistan, to its transport services, its hotels and cafes, and many of its buildings: its trains departing for obsolete destinations, its buses operating to out of date timetables; its reputable hotels either boarded up or demolished and many of its cafes and bookstores replaced by government offices. It is as if the swift, therefore, with its streamlined body and its dizzyingly quick aerial movements, the symbol of which embellishes the baronial pediments of Uzgistan's dowdy visitor information centres, and from whose numbers so many find a home in the walls of those deep and extensive limestone caves, is the least appropriate of symbols by which to represent such a place. Until, that is, one remembers that its name, Hadji, which is also displayed on the walls of such centres, possesses, also, the connotation "pilgrim". Whether displayed because of such a connotation one does not know; for those who are compelled to reside all their lives in such a place, settled as it is, despite its elevation, beneath the clouds of a perpetual occlusion, are not pilgrims, and for them such a connotation might only enhance a despair at living in such a place. But for the true traveller or pilgrim, such a place might well authenticate their sense of it being another stage on the road to redemption, allowing them to derive from the anarchy of its maze-like streets, its dolorous and posthumous workings, a sense that they were, indeed, navigating a way to their goal. That Uzgistan, with its mouldy pediments and worn down plinths, its meandering and sodden paths, was in fact a guide, a Baedeker of their weighed down, yet soon to be unburdened, souls.
Towards the end of the affair he had always wondered why when he had mentioned places they had visited and stayed in together she would deny being able to remember. He had put it down, initially, to not only the burden of her legal studies which, taking place as they did alongside her regular employment, imposed upon her formidable feats of memorisation but, also, her imminent departure with her husband and son back to her home country many thousands of miles away, and a consequent determination to try, for the sake of her emotional equanimity, to put the affair, diminished in intensity, behind her. Of the stone grottoes and temples, of the lakes and pagodas, the canals and fenestrated bridges where they had wandered and lingered for weeks on end, or the light like liquid gold on the Pond of the Eels under Mt. Misho, she professed to remember nothing. Like a self that she had “lost,” or denied, she had not so much put that part of her past behind her as erased it. On her arrival back in her own country after a journey of months by steamer she had, much to his surprise, written him a letter, part of which dwelt upon the “forgetfulness” which had so troubled him. “... the more I tried, therefore, knowing that we were soon to part and were probably never to see each other again, to hold on to the memories of those places, the more they slipped from me. It was as if that part of the past, summoned and re-summoned by such sedulous effort within me, was consequently deprived of its ability to arise spontaneously, and had atrophied and died. The names associated with those places, though familiar as names, had become empty of any personal experience that once attached to them. Recalling them, then, was rather like trying to recall the faces of those close to one who had died. All that I could summon up was—a blank.” Perhaps, he speculated, if we had never begun our affair she might have, imagination nourishing itself more thoroughly upon hints and intimations than upon completed actions, imagined more durable places.

"From this silence from which the sounds of all the different instruments are cast, it is to this silence that you must attend in your playing, and in
your listening. It is what each chord, as it ends, breaks upon, and which
is woven back into it. It is the inaudible crucible of sound.” The Teacher
let his arms rest upon his knees. The shadows of the badam leaves
moved noiselessly in the breeze, stippling his bare arms. “What does
not manifest itself, is as important as what does,” he continued. “Just
as the multiplicity of phenomena around you appear, so do they dis-
appear moment by moment, only that the action of your consciousness
and your senses sustains them. Where, into what, do they go you might
ask. And I would answer. Into no place, or accommodation of time, that
your individual mind would recognise. All sound returns to its origin:
all objects of sight and taste and touch and inhalation too. Nor should
we think to ask “who” or “what” produces them. This “silence” of which
I speak,” raising his hand to his lips as in a sign, “which eventually your
senses will be trained to apprehend, also does not exist.”

As he descended the steps into the underground station he looked a
last time at her, his soon to be erstwhile wife, as she walked from him.
Her face, half turned towards him, head slightly down, eyes directed
upwards, forming an expression he would never forget, contained
something of reproach, and of infinite sadness and farewell. It was a
look, he thought, that he was, somehow, destined to be the recipient of.
As if his consciousness, beyond his knowing, had once assumed such a
look and exact angle and disposition of body, as if they had lain always
in wait for it. Descending those steep steps from the street what he felt
he took with him was not just a look but the expression of a phantasm.
How powerfully it claimed his attention, then as now, suggesting to
him the sheer irrelevance of the time and place in which it occurred,
holding, as it did, simultaneously within it both past and present and
future. So she had floated, and still did, past him, carrying, he felt, all
the weight and burden not only of their own lives, but all lives—all lives—all lives—
that were gone, going and to come. Into the dark tunnels of the station
with their dripping walls he descended, her pale visage intractable
before him. On the vibrating rail a single gleam lingered. As if amidst
vast halls of anthracite, he was overcome by a dank malodorousness of
seams. And by, dwelling within them, the terrible impermanence of all
forms.