

# *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*

**MARTIN ANDERSON**

**The Hoplite Journals**  
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“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





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 damp spores 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, counterfeiterers 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 birthplace. 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 asceticism, 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 24<sup>th</sup> 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 distills 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.