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**Innocence**

**HERE**  
notes from the present

**HERE** NOTES FROM THE PRESENT - 23 - JANUARY 2011 - INNOCENCE

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**The news items** in the right column were taken from “The New York Times”.

**Cover:** “This is one of many pictures I took at the opening of the World Press Photo exhibition in Milan. I tried to capture the distance and the relationship between the viewers (all in a position of safety, simply because they live here) and the content of the photos. As always, the latter were very powerful and came from places and situations beyond our grasp, in the sense that the violence they depict seems unfathomable to us. In other words, I don’t think we can really imagine the context, what happens before and what happens after the shot. There is an unbridgeable distance that makes our encounter with the events a mere game of who’s better at sullying their eyes for a few minutes. Our innocence is unscathed, perhaps even strengthened for having braved the sight, and our overall detachment is absolute”. (Sebastiano Buonamico)

“Here-notes from the present” is written so that it can be read “as a novel”: from the beginning to the end in sequence. This is **an invitation and an exhortation** to the reader: many diary pages make little sense if not read immediately after the previous ones and before those that follow.

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# Diaries from July to September 2010



*San Salvador, July 2, 2010*

“We can’t be indifferent.” That’s what they said **Maria Ofelia Zuniga** on the news this morning, commenting on a story about the ceremony to honor the people who died on June 20<sup>th</sup> in Mejicanos. It reminded me that a while ago I wrote about this very thing, indifference, and about how being wrapped up in it was one of my greatest fears.

I know that going on and on about certain things doesn’t help at all, but at the same time, I believe that there are things that you have to talk about, even just with the people closest to you, so that you won’t be living outside the world, because it’s necessary, because they are part of daily life, and of course, because I agree: we can’t be indifferent.

The incident of the bus in Mejicanos left me in a state of shock that I hadn’t experienced in a long time; I got a huge lump in my throat, and the emotions that surged up overwhelmed my capacity for astonishment and reaction. That’s why, all this time, I have been trying to escape the reality of what took place.

I heard the news that same day, just a few hours after it happened: on the radio they were talking

about a bus set on fire with the passengers on board. I couldn't grasp it... there was no room in my brain to process such a thing. Almost in conjunction with the radio, my sister called and said, "In Mejicanos they burned a bus with people on it". No, I said, they burned a bus, but they must have let the people off first. "No," she said, "the people burned up inside it..." We hung up. [...]

In my room, the usual routine of getting ready for bed: I didn't turn the radio back on, better a CD. I switched off the light, turned on the bedside lamp and started reading, but I couldn't concentrate; it can't be true, I thought, there must be some mistake... Maybe some people got burned while getting off... In the end, sleep finally came.

The next morning, Monday, the usual routine again: at 5:45 am the alarm clock rings, I get up, turn on the TV to see the news and before I can do anything else, there they are... Images of a burnt Coaster bus, they say fourteen people burned to death inside. They haven't even been able to recover the bodies yet. They say there were children. They didn't let the people off. I sat down on the bed, listening to the news, and the tears began to well up.

What is this?

The more I heard, the less I believed. I'd only experienced such denial a few times in my life, so few that I can count them, because there were only two.

One: on that terrible Sunday, July 13 when I went

to visit my father in the hospital, and he wasn't in his room. No one told me anything; maybe he's having tests done? A patient comes up to me on a wheelchair and gestures... Just to my side is a gurney with a covered body, a dead person... The patient says, "It's your dad". No, it can't be true, it's a lie; I feel like a five-year-old girl again, clinging to an idea as if it were a safe haven from pain, saying over and over to myself, "Daddies never die". I uncover the body and look at it... what a relief: it isn't him! I didn't recognize him, because my father was alive and this man was not. I picked up the clipboard and read: "Julio César Zúniga Cortez. Cause of death: heart failure. Time of death: 11:50 am". Daddies don't die, my dad can't be dead; I tried to bring back that thought, but it was no longer possible to regain my safe haven; the truth crept over me, my daddy was dead.

The second time that an event made me fall into this state of deep denial was the end of a love affair; I'm not going to talk about it, I'll just say that I definitely know what it means to cling to lies and keep hiding your head in the sand instead of facing the fact that your love has ceased to feel love, failing to find any rational explanation for the painful truth of "I don't love you anymore". Everything passes and everything remains... in the end.

And so, that June 21, I turned off the TV before the news report was over. I didn't want to see, I didn't want to know. If I don't see it, it doesn't happen, it didn't happen, it isn't true... On my way to work, I bought the paper to read about the story (got to stay informed). I lent it to someone

who asked me for it, then put it away and haven't read it yet. [...]

Maybe that's why Rafa Domínguez's comment shook me up a bit this morning, because after all, it really did happen, just like "my dad really is dead" and "my ex really has left me for another woman". It doesn't matter whether I can bear to assimilate it or not, whether I want to accept it or not, whether I want to know it or not:

"On the night of Sunday, June 20, a bus was set on fire in Mejicanos with its passengers still on board. There were children on it, a baby. People were burnt to death, torched alive." Fear mingled with horror, madness, and all I can think is that if there really is a hell, then it must look a lot like this. [...]

From what I can gather, arrests have been made and the "suspected perpetrators" include several minors. When a reporter asks one of them why they did such a thing, the answer gave me goosebumps: "We got carried away. The idea was to set the bus on fire, but to let the people off first. Then all of a sudden we got carried away". We got carried away? That is, the idea came to them in the heat of the moment? So a deed like this can come into someone's mind naturally in the heat of the moment, as something, what, exciting? I don't know, I don't know if it's possible to understand an answer like this, but I repeat, it gives me goosebumps! [...]

Frankly, I have no idea what can be done because, to be honest, I don't know. I think that the general level of violence is something that has gotten out of everyone's hands. [...] Still, I think there are ways to change this situation. These

paths may be hard to travel, with concrete dangers lying in wait and real tolls that you pay with your life to get to the other side, but they exist. I have no idea how to set out on them or even how to know whether one is “on the right path” or even whether, in this country, we are close to finding it. What I know is that if my hope dies, if I leave off hoping, if I stop believing—at least in something—then I would rather be dead.

Unquestionably, there are things that only denial will allow us (at least for a moment) to bear. It is sad to come back to reality and realize that what you believed to be true is a lie and that therefore, the terrible truth is real; some things we get over, others can be accepted only with time, and others invite us to forge ahead somehow... [...]

*Israel, July 4, 2010*

As I write this at 1:45 am, my son and about ten young men and women are sitting outside on our porch, eating, talking, laughing and singing to the guitar.

They made a *poyke* tonight. A *poyke* is a cast iron pot that you put in a fire with meat and potatoes and veggies and whatever spices you want. We have a fire pit in our backyard, perfect for a *poyke*.

They are 20-something-year-old young adults. No beer. No alcohol. No smoking. No sexual stuff going on. Just a bunch of “kids” hanging out on their weekends off from the army or national service, enjoying each other’s stories. Perfectly normal and innocent living.

# Innocence?

By Massimo Parizzi



Is there anyone who really feels innocent? I don't.

This “really”, or “truly”, shows a certain wariness. And wariness is incompatible with innocence. A person who feels innocent cannot be questioned, only corroborated or challenged. There is no middle ground. Any question about his or her feeling of innocence is a radical challenge. It destroys that feeling.

What can one say, for instance, about the diary entry by Sarah Smile that you just read (July 4)?

A dozen young men and women of about twenty, on the porch of her house in Israel one evening, talking, laughing, singing. “Innocent living”, she calls it. Out of the diary entries I will mention here, it was the first that made me pause and consider this word, this thing—innocence—to the point that I decided to make it the title of this issue of “Here”, inviting readers to pause and consider it as well.

It made me pause, not just because Sarah spells out the word itself (the others don't; they evoke it), but because she accompanies it with two strange remarks. The first is strange because it clashes: for these young men and women, she tells us, it's a “weekend off from the army”. The army, and innocence? The second is: “No beer. No alcohol. No smoking. No sexual stuff”. What

kind of innocence is this?

(Here, one senses an ideology of innocence that can be seen as particularly Jewish and specifically, with a political function, Israeli. Many authors have written about it, and it goes like this: the Jews are victims, *therefore* innocent. In Sarah's diary entry, it seems to me that this element is present. But others are as well.)

Innocence has only one meaning that is not ambiguous, the legal one (although courts wisely prefer to judge whether people are "guilty" or, using various formulas, "not guilty", as opposed to their innocence): once can be innocent of a crime one is accused of. But when we're talking about the innocent victims of nature's violence or human violence (like the passengers on the bus torched in San Salvador that Maria Ofelia Zuniga writes about in her entry for July 2)? Or when we're talking about the loss of innocence? We lose our innocence when we come into contact with evil. Not always, not necessarily, by doing it or having it done to us. Contact is enough. Contact with evil permanently contaminates our consciousness. It sinks in and stays there. It is recognized, that is, it achieves recognition. ("This isn't to pretend that racism doesn't exist, of course it exists," Leggy writes on September 21. "I just refuse to acknowledge it.") The recognition can be full and definitive; in that case, evil fully invades our consciousness. It usurps it, somehow. Through cynicism. Which, at times, can seem like a greater awareness, a form of wisdom. Even a struggle against evil. It isn't. It's a form of surrender.

Also in this review:  
see Marc Ellis, *On the Jewish Civil War and the New Prophetic*, issue 12, October 2005, and Liza Rosenberg, issue 16, February 2007, entry dated December 18, 2006 (but in this issue as well, her letter to Netanyahu, September 2).

But it is also possible to recognize evil in a way that is always partial, always temporary. As if every time could be the time of innocence instead. As if, every time for the first time, innocence were possible instead. “What is this?” Maria Ofelia asks us, and herself, when she hears about the bus set on fire with its passengers on board. And yet she is well acquainted with evil, with violence. From the age of seven to nineteen, she saw civil war raging around her. And then a level of crime that has given her country the highest murder rate in Latin America. She isn’t naïve.

Not granting evil full, definitive recognition, being amazed each time, can seem like—and is often called—naïveté. But it’s the opposite. It’s a trick used by the consciousness to preserve itself, to fend off invasion, and so, at the same time, preserve its innocence. But not “really”. To some degree, it’s a feint.

The fact is, to preserve the possibility of pursuing, not innocence, but a less culpable version of reality, “to change this situation”, as Maria Ofelia writes, it is necessary that somewhere—in our minds, in our imagination, in art, as Joan Miró wrote on the eve of World War II (see Emilia de Rienzo, July 7)—there be an unreal place that harbors and cultivates that longing in its purest form. As the longing for innocence. A place where it is at home. Where it can blossom.

As if to say: full adherence to reality prevents us from changing reality. If you face reality head-on, you will be overwhelmed. To change it, you must approach it via some kind of unre-

ality. Playing off the cushion. A feint that generates truth.

In the ranking of these unreal, utopian places of innocence, three have always been the most popular: nature, the animal world, childhood. They are also the ones whose standing as “feints”, “cushions”, places removed from reality, is most obvious. It doesn’t matter that in the real world, nature is often harsh and violent towards humans; that animals constantly massacre each other, that children are born crying, not laughing.

This has not kept us from envisioning a “garden of Eden”, nor does it keep us from sensing, in Clare Kines’s story about his days spent in Arctic Bay watching birds, ponds, lakes, mountains, an equal, unmistakable allure. And it didn’t keep Sarah from describing the “innocence” of that evening with the attributes that are attributed, even if wrongly so, to the “blissful innocence” of childhood: “No beer. No alcohol. No smoking”, in other words, no culpable acts, and “no sexual stuff”.

It doesn’t matter, in any of these cases, whether it’s wrong. Because what does matter, and what nature, the animal world, and childhood have in common, is that in people’s eyes, they are not *their* world. Clare writes: “I live in one of the few places in the world where such a vast swath of wild exists, almost off my front door. A place where I could travel hundreds of kilometres in almost any direction without seeing any of men’s permanence. [...] A true wilderness. [...] William Beebe described wilderness as ‘that age

old fraternity of nature, where man's presence is unnoticed and his absence unregretted.' I'm happy to traverse this place".

*Havana, July 4, 2010*

I looked at the picture of political prisoner Ariel Sigler, taken after his release. Closing my eyes, I felt a range of emotions wash over me. Once again, the force of his example stirred me to react. I wiped away the tears and pulled myself together.

I tried to imagine the future, then said to myself out loud, "What destructive power, what indolence! Who will pay for all this suffering? How can we find a way to keep from harboring bitterness and hatred? What will the people say who currently claim that the dissidents on this island are all on someone's payroll? What price can be put on seven years in prison, or the risk of going there?"

It's time to think in the present. What present? We are going through a unique time, yet uncertainty and incredulity fills the air. What will tomorrow bring? No one knows. How and when will this state of things end (if someday it does)? A question to which there is no answer. Which is grimmer, Greek tragedy or the Cuban kind?

As the saying goes, "what has a beginning must have an end", or, "this too shall pass". Proverbs are rules of daily life, but how sad it is when this daily life fills you with pessimism.

This is my present: walking through the streets day after day, taking public transportation, and feeling the alienation that reigns everywhere.

**Laritza Diversent**

There is only one reality and one concern for the exhausted faces you pass on the avenues: what to put on the table. They sleep, but do not dream. They know there will be a tomorrow, but they are resigned to not thinking about the future. [...]

*Turin, Italy, July 5, 2010*

“Proceeding eighty miles into the northwest wind, you reach the city of Euphemia, where the merchants of seven nations gather at every solstice and equinox. The boat that lands there with a cargo of ginger and cotton will set sail again, its hold filled with pistachio nuts and poppy seeds, and the caravan that has just unloaded sacks of nutmegs and raisins is already cramming its saddlebags with bolts of golden muslin for the return journey. But what drives men to travel up rivers and cross deserts to come here is not only the exchange of wares, which you could find, everywhere the same, in all the bazaars inside and outside the Great Khan’s empire, scattered at your feet on the same yellow mats, in the shade of the same awnings protecting them from the flies, offered with the same lying reduction in prices. You do not come to Euphemia only to buy and sell, but also because at night, by the fires all around the market, seated on sacks or barrels or stretched out on piles of carpets, at each word that one man says—such as “wolf,” “sister,” “hidden treasure,” “battle,” “scabies,” “lovers,”—the others tell, each one, his tale of wolves, sisters, treasures, scabies, lovers, battles. And you know that in the long journey ahead of you, when to keep awake against the camel’s

**Emilia de Rienzo**

*Presidential elections in Poland: the pro-European liberal Bronislaw Komorowski beats the conservative extremist Jaroslaw Kaczynski, twin brother of the former president, who died in an plane crash in Russia last April.*

swaying or the junk's rocking, you start summoning up your memories one by one, your wolf will have become another wolf, your sister a different sister, your battle other battles, on your return from Euphemia, the city where memory is traded at every solstice and every equinox." (Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver, Harcourt, Orlando, 1974, pp. 36-37.)

Like visitors to the city of Euphemia in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, we ought to follow the impulse to mingle our stories, open up our memories to the memories of others, and then inwardly relive our own story, enriched by another person's, and so on, day after day, moment after moment.

Then maybe we would feel like inhabitants of the same planet, where everything one person does not know is known to someone else. A planet that would become so precious to us that we would want to protect and cherish it, stories that would become so familiar that they would become our own: the most beautiful ones, the richest, but also the saddest and most destitute.

In that bazaar, we would learn to take care of each other, we would learn that changing means living. We would learn that we can exchange "things", but even more, that we can exchange feelings and emotions.

*Rome, July 5, 2010*

I look forward to summer to go swimming outside. I enjoy the water, the sunshine, the silence. That was the idea in my head when I went to the pool this morning. The water was there, the sun-

**Serena Damiani**

shine as well, but not the silence! I'm seriously worried. I can't figure it out. Am I the one who has an ever-lower tolerance for noisy people, or do the noisy people keep talking louder and louder?

My mother used to put cotton in her ears. She heard too much, she said. It was best to muffle the world. A few days ago, I turned the same age my mother was when I was born.

*Experts worry that as China's 1.3 billion people clamor for more cars and creature comforts, international efforts to limit global warming could be doomed.*

*Arctic Bay, Canada, July 6, 2010*

Friday evening, we went out for our usual drive, and as is often the case ended up at the outflow of Marcil Lake. It has turned into one of my favourite places to watch birds here. A quick count off the top of my head reveals some seventeen species I've seen there. But more than the number, I've seen some great behaviours and had challenges in ID'ing what I've seen.

While we were there, there were a couple of loons in the pond nearest the road, and while they were surprisingly confiding and stayed put I didn't think much about them. Well, I thought about how great this was, how beautiful they were on a calm, calm pond, orange from the sun (and to tell the truth the sun filtered through an amazing amount of dust in the air). I snapped off some photos, and as we were about to leave finally took a closer look at what I assumed were Red-throated Loons. I discovered that they were something completely different. Well, not completely, they were loons, but they were an unexpected species.

I noticed that this pair of loons had a different

**Clare Kines**

*The booming Chinese clean energy sector, now more than a million jobs strong, is quickly coming to dominate the production of technologies essential to slowing global warming and other forms of air pollution. Much of China's clean energy success lies in aggressive government policies that help this crucial export industry. But this kind of help violates World Trade Organization rules banning virtually all subsidies to exporters, and could be successfully challenged at the agency's tribunals in Geneva.*

pattern on their back, and the stripes on their neck were on the side, not the back. These were Pacific Loons, and when the light was right, their throat patch was purple, not red. They were, as I said, unexpected.

It wouldn't be unheard of for them to be here, but they are supposed to breed further south, down at the south end of Baffin Island and on the mainland. I am aware of an old record in Pond Inlet, but there are undoubtedly others. This late in the season, I would expect that they were breeding, which might be their most northern record of breeding.

We returned the next day and the pair was still there, although one was out foraging when we arrived. The one that had remained at the pond had an interesting display that it did from time to time. It would splash, then shoot forward several feet, make a small call and dive under water. I tried, without success to photograph the purple throat, and then we left them in peace. [...]

*Turin, Italy, July 7, 2010*

There are many ways to react to an imminent danger, to the advent of what Hannah Arendt called "dark times".

On the eve of World War II, Joan Miró was in Varengeville, a village on the coast of Normandy. He felt a deep longing to escape from the world around him, which filled him with repulsion: "At the time," he said later, "I was very depressed. I believed in an inevitable victory for Nazism [...] and I had the idea of expressing this

**Emilia de Rienzo**

mood and this anguish by drawing signs and forms of which I had to be delivered on the sand so that the waves could carry them away instantly, or by making shapes and arabesques projected into the air as cigarette smoke which would go up and caress the stars” He felt the difficulty of expressing himself and reacting: “What counts in a work of art is not what so many intellectuals want to find in it. The important thing is how it implicates lived facts and human truth in its upward movement. [...] If the interplay of lines and colours does not expose the inner drama of the creator, then it is nothing more than bourgeois entertainment. The forms expressed by an individual who is part of society must reveal the movement of a soul trying to escape the reality of the present, which is particularly ignoble today, in order to approach new realities, to offer other men the possibility of rising above the present. In order to discover a livable world—how much rottenness must be swept away!”

*Arctic Bay, Canada, July 9, 2010*

We have had sublime weather so far this summer. **Clare Kines** It harkens back to the summers when I first arrived up here, before the world forgot that this is supposed to be a desert. Blue skies, punctuated by the occasional cloud, and lately, hardly a breath of wind.

The downside to all this fantastic weather is Arctic Bay has turned to dust. Well not quite, but the air surrounding it has. Dust is everywhere. Our roads up here are mostly made of a mudstone

shale, with some gravel in there somewhere. Every vehicle launches a cloud of dust into the air, and with the dry, windless conditions the dust just hangs there. Well, it just hangs there except for the 100 pounds or so of it that settles onto my truck, or gets caked in my nasal passages.

There is a lot of traffic right now, this is a busy time. ATVs and trucks move back and forth between Victor Bay at a frantic pace. Add to that the construction of a new sewage lagoon, and road, that means heavy trucks move back and forth steadily between near First Bridge and town, and well, a lot of dust gets launched into the air. Where it stays. [...]

*Kabul, July 10, 2010*

Last night was yoga—a strange yet welcome concept in this place of dust and Kalashnikovs. I'd popped over to K-Meister's place, not far from mine, and we were taking a taxi. As we arrived it was like stepping through the back of the wardrobe into Narnia, suddenly the bustle of the road disappeared and there was coolness, dark like a cave, and a wonderful smell of lemon and incense. I was calmed immediately—my last experience here had been “the pedicure from hell”, but this time I didn't need to worry as no one was going to attack my feet with sharp objects. In the changing rooms—on the floor a wonderful soft rug with the profile of a mountain dog woven into it—I changed into yoga gear and shoved my stuff into a locker. In the practise room, in the semi light, I could see at least one face that I recognised from yesterday, one very large chap

*“The rich are different: they are more ruthless.” Sam Khater, an economist on why the rich have stopped paying their mortgages at a rate that exceeds the rest of the population.*  
*(“The New York Times”, July 9, “Quotation of the Day”)*

**Karen Woo**

*The Obama administration has started sending federal agents to audit records of thousands of companies, forcing businesses to fire every illegal immigrant.*

with a Chewbacca beard.

Chewbacca boy had been there at the poolside with a group of his friends. P-Monster and I had taken a day to relax at the five-star hotel in Kabul and a pleasant breeze by the pool side had thrown a couple of the large umbrellas into the water, narrowly missing a stout yet determined Chinese man who was studiously doing laps as the sun disappeared behind the perimeter wall. P.M. had complained that being there at the pool, he was surrounded by the worst examples of all that was wrong with the worst kinds of people here in Kabul. I just thought he was a bit hot and bothered and slightly exaggerating—not everyone here is horrible. P.M. had been miffed at the foolish conversations that he'd been subjected to in the men's locker room, some large and over privileged, contract worker complaining about having to work late and not being able to get to the gym, and how unfair it all was. P.M. had gritted his teeth but I could tell he probably wanted to give "over-privileged tosspot" an opportunity to see unfair—possibly say the loss of a limb, unfair imprisonment in an evil place, massacre of his family—you know, something simple like that, even the more common getting up at four in the morning, washing your face and arse in cold water from a jug, cycling eight miles to work for some patronising, fat, foreign wanker would be an unfairness that I'd have liked this guy to try, just to get things into perspective. Anyway, I didn't see the guy, so who knows...

Back to Chewbacca boy: the wearing of the beard by the foreigner is always a curious item; for a start, they look very strange, and secondly,

if it's an attempt to blend in, then you'd have to be a blind idiot not to notice that the six-foot-four, fat white person wasn't from a local village. I often consider getting myself a beard-and-moustache set made and then wearing it around town just for the hell of it; to be honest I'd probably look more like an Afghan man than some of these Scandinavian-creature men. Anyway, Chewbacca boy and his slightly smaller goatee-wearing friend were there with their mats, relaxing and waiting for the class to start.

I let my mind move off its usual preoccupations: planning, packing, getting things done. I let myself concentrate on the class, on the stretching, the physical sensation, my legs shaking, leaf-like, under the effort. For a second I was transported back to Notting Hill—the demographic was no different: middle-class white people struggling to push their bodies through a physical regime after eight to ten hours at a desk. The room was brutally sticky, no air con, and I joked that we were doing Bikram yoga today. The room was full, our yoga mats tessellated like sardines, the atmosphere convivial and inclusive, the tone set by K-Meister, we were all struggling together.

Later as we ended the class, closing the session with focused relaxation after working really hard, I was aware of a rumbling noise vibrating the walls. I was torn between dropping out of my Notting Hill bubble to take a look from the window and remaining in the quiet bliss that I'd attained. I mentally reenacted running to the locker room for my trainers, as I didn't fancy trying to run down the road in flip-flops, my meditation was

dispelled by my fight-or-flight planning, but still I remained in the corpse pose on the practise room floor; I told myself it was the generator. I didn't know whether I'd actually be able to see out of the window and didn't want to worry anyone. It's a canny illusion but nonetheless a welcome one; long oatmeal and rice-paper-coloured drapes dangle down in panels across the windows but these merely disguise the sandbags that cover the windows—(paranoid) safety measures cleverly disguised by soft furnishings—I was happy to be temporarily deceived.

The rumbling was being caused by two MRAPS (mine resistant ambushed protected), these tank-like, armoured vehicles with gun turrets on the top were parked directly outside the health club. US army people sat in the vehicles looking sheepish, a young woman in uniform jumped out and came over to apologise that their presence was blocking our mobile phone transmissions. I was quiet and didn't say anything but there was a tangible air of indignation from a couple of the folks from the UN, "Bloody military people, causing unnecessary risk, endangering us all, blah blah blah". I'd heard it all and it was boring. I just felt sorry for the soldiers in their vehicles, lost, they could do nothing but sit and wait for instructions (they'd been there for the last half hour so obviously HQ map reading was a little bit rusty). They would not normally traverse these back streets and now that they were here they did not know how to get back out. I felt sorry for them in their highly conspicuous vehicles and uniforms annoying people wherever they went.

I wanted to jump into our taxi and say “Follow me, we’ll lead you to somewhere that you recognise (probably one of the super-expensive supermarkets that Westerners frequent), and you can find your way from there”, but this was a fantasy; they probably wouldn’t have followed and it certainly would have been an unpopular suggestion with the UN guys with whom I was sharing a taxi, “Oh, great job Karen, let’s get the sitting target to follow us around the town!”. I was sad for the divisions between us but in honesty probably glad when our taxi pulled out and away from the MRAPS. My Spidey-sense had been tingling for a while and my realist fought with my idealist and won: there was no reason for them to be there, if there was a reason for them to be there then we should be as far away as possible. Our three-dollar car was filled with us and our yoga mats, and the ridiculous contrast between us and the military convoy did not escape me—I wondered how much damage I could inflict with a yoga mat, and some Jedi mind tricks; it was like Men who Stare at Goats made flesh—I could see the headline. “Amateur yogics defeat insurgents with Tantric chanting”.

*Riyadh, July 12, 2010*

I have to tell you what I was up to last night. My very dear friend Tine has finished her time here in Saudi and is leaving soon. Unfortunately, being cooped up in expat compounds, she has never had a chance to see muttawas in action.

**Eman Al Nafjan**

These lions of Saudi morality are a staple mark of life here, so I couldn't let her leave without the experience. That's why we went on a muttawwa safari.

We headed to their natural habitat, shopping malls. And we weren't disappointed. At Riyadh Gallery, a mall that opened about a couple of years ago, they had the World Cup match on this humongous TV screen that you can watch a mile away. I'm not exaggerating; people on all three floors were watching the same screen. There were about three hundred people there. Halfway through the match the muttawwas came in and ordered the TV off. There were two muttawwas and one police officer escorting them. They strolled around this crowd searching for men without women. Because it is illegal for single men to go to a shopping mall. They have to be accompanying a wife, mother or sister. Every once in a while they would stop young Saudi men and ask them where their women were. One guy they didn't believe had to drag a little girl over to the muttawwas so she could verify that he was related to the group of women he pointed at.

Before the muttawwas came in it was noisy and men and women stood next to each other looking up at the screen. At every highlighted moment in the match there was either a collective roar or groan. The atmosphere was electric. Then the muttawwas came and everyone knew that these three men had come in long before seeing them stroll by. Even Tine remarked on how these muttawwas must be feeling this power they had over

*July 11, Kampala, Uganda. At least three bombs exploded in a synchronized attack on large gatherings of World Cup soccer fans watching the televised final on outdoor screens. More than 76 people were killed. Al-Shabab, a militant Islamist group from Somalia, will claim responsibility for the spate of bombings. According to the United Nations, Somalia produces the third most refugees in the world, behind Afghanistan and Iraq, and Uganda is a natural haven for them. It has one of the most liberal refugee policies in Africa, granting approval to virtually all asylum applicants from the region.*

the people.

No one objected to having the match turned off. Women went scurrying off to find seats in segregated areas. Teenagers headed the opposite direction that the muttawas were coming from for fear that they would be stopped because of their hairstyles and low worn jeans. Everyone was silently glancing around, looking for the muttawas and guessing who their victims might be. We decided to follow them, albeit from afar, to see who would they take. They focused their energy on young Saudi men. They even went into the bathrooms looking for hiding offenders. Before we lost them, we had witnessed them apprehend two men. They made the two offenders come along as they continued with their morality raid.

Both Tine and I were angered by how passive people were. It's as if they really believed that they were guilty of something. Hundreds of people shaking in fear of a couple of bearded men. No wonder that things remain the way they are. People believe they deserve to be treated this way. It took the muttawas about twenty minutes to finish their raid and just like when they came in, you knew that they left. The match was turned back on and everyone relaxed and became noisy again.

Before they left, I took Tine outside to show her how arrogant muttawas are even in the way they park. And sure enough, their jeep was parked on the pavement right next to the automatic doors. You would think they were an ambulance.

# Living means being in infraction

by Roberto Juarroz



Living means being in infraction.  
Of one rule or another.  
There is no alternative:  
infringe no rules, you're dead.

From *Poesía Vertical*,  
Emecé, Buenos Aires,  
2005.

Reality is an infraction.  
Unreality as well.  
And between them flows a river of mirrors  
not to be found on any map.

In this river all the rules dissolve,  
each infraction becomes another mirror.

*Kabul, July 12, 2010*

G. tells me that an Afghan friend was telling him about another Afghan friend whose young son had been “accidentally” kidnapped. The kidnappers, it seems, realised their mistake almost immediately, and when they did, rang the father of the kidnapped boy to tell him what had happened, “Really sorry and all that, erm it was an accident, and we’d like to return your son, but we can’t just let him go as it will, erm, look a bit funny. Tell you what, we’ll only charge you our basic costs for the kidnapping and we’ll get him straight back to you...”. Apparently, basic costs for a kidnapping out here came in at around

**Karen Woo**

10,000 USD, and this was just to cover the expenses of mobilising all the people involved in the snatch. The boy's father agreed to pay—he wanted his son back—and a relatively straight forward drop was arranged in a desert area far from any town. A convoy of about twenty Land Cruisers forged into view and, just like in the film with Leonardo di Caprio as a foreign agent, the cars started circling faster and faster, raising a circular wall of dust disguising the pick up of the funds and the drop off of the accidental-kidnap boy. [...]

I'm in the Afghan Spinneys supermarket and I'm there being totally girly; lured in by the cosmetics counter, I leave P.M. chatting with one of the police commanders who's in there shopping too. I wonder if I should go over and say hello and be interested and social but decide that it's better that I stay out of the "men talk" and anyway am having too much fun looking at nail varnish colours. There's not that many to choose from, but enough to occupy that portion of my brain which delights in such fripperies, and I am absorbed blissfully in this activity for at least ten minutes. Such tiny pleasures, I'm thrilled to pieces when I find that the store stocks proper nail scissors, an emery board, and a pumice stone, and I go totally wild when they offer me not just one but three choices of face pack. Later P.M. tells me that the police commander had offered to pay for my purchases, but then again P.M. didn't think that the police commander actually paid for anything when he visited the shop.

I'm in the shower at home and I'm contemplat-

ing the negative impact of taking nail polish on a medical expedition into a remote, mountainous area of Afghanistan. Ridiculous, I know, but several tense minutes were spent thinking through the consequences of bonding with the women of the village over Crimson Lake or Buttercup Baby, only to find that nail polish is considered to be the devil's spawn or at the very least, the mark of a harlot, and that my actions are punishable by death. I contemplate not wearing any myself but decide that toes à la nude is a mistake and that I should just risk it with a neutral shade. [...]

*Atlanta, Georgia, July 15, 2010*

Yep, I got two more piercings on just my right ear. I only wanted one, but somehow got talked into getting two. I think it's cute. I actually wanted a piercing in my tragus, but the lady said we had to do that in a tattoo shop and we were at the mall. This was kinda impulsive, 'cos the last thing on my mind when we got to the mall was to get my ear pierced, although I had been thinking of extra piercings for a while now. I had ditched the ear piercing entirely and was going to get my belly button pierced, but I think this is cool too. It's not exactly aligned perfectly in the back of my ear like I would have liked, but I moved really bad the first piercing 'cos the pain was a shock to my system. I have a very low tolerance for pain. I love it though. The studs are pink, by the way. Pretty cool.

**Joy Braimah**

*Malaysia. The competition is called "Imam Muda," or "Young Leader": a venture into religious-themed reality tv. The winner will be offered a job as an imam, or religious leader; a scholarship to study in Saudi Arabia and an all-expenses-paid pilgrimage to Mecca. The show, which debuted in May with 10 contestants, has built an impressive following among young Malaysians.*

*San Salvador, July 16, 2010*

It's the eternal slogan we grow up with, that we hear from soap operas, movies, our families, couples: "together, unhappy, but together" or "after many trials and tribulations, the reward is hearing the word *forever*", as we were taught by the romance novels of Corín Tellado (the only literary indulgence of certain people who are also in the habit of buying magazines that tell you what's "in" and what's "out" in terms of clothing, sex, food, possessions, etc.).

Whether it's as true as the fact that I woke up at six on this July morning and went straight to the gym, I don't know; I don't think I'm an expert in almost anything, let alone love-related matters, but today, I (unintentionally) overheard a conversation between two women as we moved through the exercise stations and rest areas, and [...] couldn't help but listen, then ask myself "huh?". Their dialogue went more or less like this [...]:

"Hey, didn't So-and-So come?" (I'll call her so-and-so because as we know, it's a small world...) "No! Didn't you hear she got married?" "Oh, sure, I heard, but I thought she'd still come." "No, when you get married you have to quit doing lots of stuff, what with keeping up with the house, your husband, your job, then come kids, problems, obligations... there's no time left over for other things... if I still come here after ten years of marriage it's because the doctor told me I had to." "Yeah, true, that's why I have to give it careful thought, I don't think I'm ready to give up having my own life yet..."

Well, if I said I kept listening it would be a lie;

**Maria Ofelia Zuniga**

*The United Nations founds UN Women, an agency for the empowerment of women and girls. It is headed by Michelle Bachelet, former President of Chile.*

at this point in the conversation my mind was already wandering. Maybe it was the machine I was using at the time, but I started to feel dizzy, and ever since, the words “I’m not ready—yet—to give up having my own life” keep running through my head. [...] Since I have no experience in the matter, I guess my opinion doesn’t count for much, but [...] I think that in many cases (ok, the majority) that really is how it goes: “mother, wife, friend, lover, cook, picker-upper, washerwoman, someone who irons well for free, shoeshine girl, nurse, organizer and administrator of the household budget, comrade-in-arms, housekeeper, chauffeur, the one who goes to the supermarket, to the market, who deals with the cleaning lady, the gardener, the neighbors, the security guards, organizer of parties, good listener, snack-maker, organizer of outings, and who moreover (in many cases) happens to hold down a job from at least 8 to 5”.

At what point does a woman remember that she still is a person and that she enjoys (enjoyed) being just a person? [...] Do I have to forget about myself so that others can live? [...] “I used to be somebody who enjoyed doing things for herself, like working out, going out for reasons other than household errands, going shopping, stopping off for a drink, getting a water ice and eating it leisurely as I walked down the street, having a beer in a bar with friends while talking about the ups and downs of life; I used to enjoy walking, running, travelling, playing soccer, riding a motorcycle, strolling through the park, cooking for the pleasure of a good meal and not as an obligation, cheering at the stadium, laugh-

ing over silly things with my friends, going out alone sometimes, watching TV shows, going to see a movie that isn't for kids (nothing wrong with movies for kids, but...), listening to music, daydreaming, walking hand in hand with my partner without having to rush anywhere, making love with long pauses and without haste, or making love wildly, but 'making' it; sometimes I was happy, sometimes I was tired and fed up and I knew it, but I never felt like a bad person for feeling that way, but then I got married, and now..." Is that really how it has to be?

No, I don't think so, and thankfully I have good examples to confirm that. I may not really know how easy or difficult it is, but I think that it's both necessary and fair that despite demands and expectations, we reserve the right to stay true to ourselves, and that amidst the infinite activities that life itself involves, even more so as part of a couple or family, there be room to stay in touch with that special place where a woman is just a person, period, without roles and responsibilities defining and dictating "how we should be", don't you think?

"You have to learn to be the woman of the house," I remember being told as a kid. The woman of the house? Personally, I'd rather just be a woman; that in itself is enough for this lifetime (maybe even for a few more...) and if one day I decide to undertake the adventure of living with someone as a couple, then I hope, then I pray to the Goddess I believe in, crossing my fingers and throwing a coin into the wishing well: first, that it not be a renunciation, but a continuation; and then, while we're at it, that we make

this decision with the firm feeling that together, we can make the good things in our lives even better, that we want to share our burdens, that not everything will be great, but at the same time, not everything will be awful...

Walking side by side, I think that with a bit of effort, in the end, over time, we learn who our travelling companion is and isn't, and on this path, it's a stroke of luck if in spite of it all, we can find a way to keep admiring, accepting, loving, tolerating, respecting and encouraging each other, so that as close and intimate as we may be, we can continue to be two people helping each other stay true to ourselves, without ever wanting to die for each other, but rather, to take responsibility for our respective lives and enjoy them together...

And that's my last word on the matter.

*Arctic Bay, Canada, July 18, 2010*

Suddenly, too suddenly, summer seems to be drawing to a close. The ice on the bay went out a couple of weeks ago (early), and is going fast out in Admiralty Inlet. I remember my first full summer here, marvelling to someone that the ice had finally left, and their reply "Yes, winter is just around the corner".

Snow Bunting fledglings have appeared, and the shorebirds have all appeared to have hatched and the chicks are on the move. The Common Ringed Plover nest we found this past week hatched out yesterday. Unfortunately, right beside some games that were being held, and the chicks were discovered by kids. I hope they sur-

**Clare Kines**

*Haiti. Six months after an earthquake, only 28,000 of 1.5 million displaced Haitians have new homes, and Port-au-Prince remains a tableau of life in the ruins.*

vived the constant attention.

The sun, almost a month past equinox, is noticeably lower in the sky each night, its shadows grow longer each midnight. A little over two weeks from now it will begin setting, and we'll be in the quick slide to winter's sunset. I don't know how it passed by so quickly.

It seems like only last week that the southern migrants arrived, and here they are on the cusp of leaving. Fall is not here yet, but it will appear suddenly one of these days. And not everyone is disappointed about that: Leah and her sister have been anxiously talking about blueberry season since the snow started to disappear. [...]

Yes, summer is quickly slipping into fall, but in this place of sublime beauty, the waning light only enhances it. And beautiful, peaceful evenings such as this serve to make winter seem farther away than it really is.

*Kabul, July 20, 2010*

So, I'm busily preparing for the trek to Nuristan and also manoeuvring around the chaos that is Kabul. Somehow we had neglected to realise that by bringing the trip forward by a few days we were then slap-bang in the middle of the Kabul conference: the massive international meeting of world powers being held here in Kabul to discuss the future of Afghanistan. The whole place is in lockdown and here, where we are in Wasir Akbar Khan, there are tanks, armoured gun vehicles and soldiers on every corner, there are NDS, ANP and ANA all in their different uniforms and nobody is going anywhere—except to Spinneys,

**Karen Woo**

that pinnacle of supermarkets, which is staying open despite everything. Rock on, those groceries!

Last night I had to be rescued from my place by P.M. and Tariq who drove across town on a mission to spring me from my place and bring me back here. I was sad to leave my rose garden, the five kittens, two tortoises and multiple rabbits who were out and scampering about on the volleyball court. S. and M. and Leg Roll were discussing which of the rabbits would be subject to the cull that they were planning; several of the rabbits were pregnant and a veritable bunny population explosion was threatening. [...]

I'd foolishly underestimated what would happen here with nobody travelling and the shops being closed for two days. Being all so very last-minute, I've got a ball gown being made in Qualafatullah and some ethnic tops I wanted for the trip. One day I'll learn not to leave things to the last minute. I hear what you're saying about priorities and seriously, I probably shouldn't be worrying about a ball gown right now, but still, what's a girl to do? [...]

P.M. told me last night that he had heard several loud bangs in the distance—apparently I was engrossed in the computer and heard neither the bangs nor him telling me about them. Repeated rocket fire on the airport... and us waiting to fly out of there. I'd had several email updates on the progress of the vehicles and thus far all was going well, they'd not had any problems and we were still on target for our rendezvous up North. We found out a couple of days ago that there is still a lot of snow on the pass and the horses

won't be able to go all the way over. We had planned for the horses to carry the bulk of our kit (and there's a lot of it) so now, when their little hooves can go no further, we'll be lugging it over the pass ourselves. The image of a straggly band of people labouring through the snow at 16,000 feet comes to mind but seems so very remote and painless as I sit at my desk in Kabul—I know it's going to hurt but I just can't imagine it right now.

In deference to the Kabul Conference, the airport and roads surrounding are completely closed, so many important people arriving, amongst them Hillary Clinton, who, when I saw her on the TV, looked ever so much like a man in drag. P.M. had horrified me with stories that she was partial to a little reverse action, especially with young men, and I just couldn't get those images out of my head when watching her despite the fact that what she was saying was reasonable and not totally outlandish. Most of the time I listen to politicians on the TV with an autistic head on, you know, the kind of head where you can instantly tell when someone is lying through their teeth or is simply delivering a foil of bullshit, liberally peppered with terms designed to disguise that there is absolutely nothing inside the hot air that they are spouting. If you squint your eyes a little and just listen to the words, the child or the dog inside you, the bit that is innocent and can still tell the difference, will raise its ears and say, "That person is offering me what looks like food but when I go to eat it they will grab me by the paws and squeeze me till it hurts, best I don't listen to them". So I am torn but find myself

switching on the TV to listen to various puffy people talking shit.

Luckily for me, instead of boring politicians, the headline story is of a lovesick baby platypus: it's the BBC reporting from Sydney, Australia, where a lonely platypus has swum into a sewage plant, "This duckbilled juvenile had taken refuge in a large pipe attached to a tank and it was feared that this amorous semi-aquatic, egg-laying mammal might have suffered hypothermia..." [...]

## From “The Earthly Paradise”

by Elsa Morante



When the scriptures tell us about Adam's banishment from Eden, they don't dwell on a detail that the Author of Genesis must not deem worthy enough of note: that is, the supreme demonstration of mercy, despite His severity, that the Heavenly Father showed to man by leaving him the company of other animals who unlike him, had not eaten the forbidden fruit.

As we all know, by tasting that fruit, man acquired the knowledge of good and evil: in other words, the capacity for judgment. But the other animals remained immune to such abilities, and this is the most appealing trait that distinguishes other animals from men; it is here, above all, that the charm of their company lies. In it, we find a hint of the pleasures, and the unparalleled luxury,

In *Pro o contro la bomba atomica e altri scritti*, Adelphi, Milan, 1987, p. 19.

that graced the festive life of our lost Eden. And it is frightening to think how bitter our exile would be had this consolation not remained.

A similar consolation is also granted to adult members of the human race during the very early childhood of their offspring. But unfortunately, with every day that passes, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil casts an ever-longer shadow over them. And it is this shadow that darkens even the sweetest conversations with our fellow men.

*San Salvador, July 21, 2010*

He is not a thief, nor an aspiring evangelical pastor, nor the umpteenth cookie salesman. Yes, he's selling something, or at least trying to, but he does it with swing. He has a gift. He just got on the 52 bus at the stop next to the Government Center, on Juan Pablo II Avenue. He is well-dressed and clean with jeans, a T-shirt and a cap, just like any youth just over twenty. He would pass unnoticed if it were not for this sort of bright orange blanket hanging from his shoulder which serves to carry two dozen rolled-up newspapers. He would pass unnoticed, but that's the last thing he wants now. Within two minutes, he wants to sell "El Mundo," one of the second-rate Salvadorean daily newspapers; the kind that is hard to sell. He has gotten on the last bus which has just left. He hands out five or six copies to passengers at random.

"Good afternoon, kind passengers. I have 'El Mundo' newspapers for you here. Look, look how much is in today's paper. Here you can read

**Roberto Valencia**

about the conflict over gas, which some say should be subsidized and others not. But what is clear is that it won't be \$11 as you were told. A tank of gas will cost you nearly \$15 now! It's explained here. Plus, the breaking news: They've captured the Venezuelan Peña Esclusa! Alejandro Peña Esclusa has been captured! Look!" he proudly shows, holding the daily paper wide open. "Apparently, here in El Salvador, this was an entire network. It was not only Chávez Abarca. You see, he was not alone. It was a group based here in El Salvador. Here it's clarified even further, look. And this other story, look, the story of a poor Salvadoran man from Soyapango who explains the reason why he was led to make this mistake, right? To give his children tortillas made with poisoned seed corn. And the worst, he says, is that any father would have done the same thing. Look at the extreme condition in which we live in our country. So, if you want to have the newspaper, you can have it. It's 25 cents and here you have more news. It will surely be of interest to you. And just for one quarter. Thank you."

One minute and 51 seconds have passed. No one buys anything from him. Nevertheless, he knows what he is selling, and leaves me with the impression that some people do more for the survival of the printed word than the newspaper companies or journalists themselves.

*Atlanta, Georgia, July 22, 2010*

I just watched Jim and Pam's wedding on *The Office* and I was filled with a longing... to marry Joy Braimah

the one I love and who loves me just as much. Weird, ‘cos I told someone today how uninterested I was in getting married and I was serious. I guess this is what having that desire feels like. I hope it is fleeting ‘cos I can’t entertain such dreams right now. I see why they say TV is bad for you, it puts thoughts in your head.

*Rome, July 24, 2010*

I am currently on a family vacation in Italy but I had to post what the Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent my husband. Apparently they have a new service where they send the male guardian a text every time a “dependent” leaves the country. They don’t state which country the dependent left for but simply state that they did leave. My husband tells me he got the same text when I left for Germany. I am an adult woman that has been earning her own income for over a decade now, but according to the Saudi government, I am a dependent till the day I die because of my gender. [...]

**Eman Al Nafjan**

*Havana, July 29, 2010*

The other day I was invited to dinner at my friend’s house and by the end of the gathering I was depressed by the clash between two generations, parents and children: one that keeps their mouths shut out of respect for their elders, and the other that offends with their absolutist ideology.

**Claudia Cadelo**

As *La Mesa Redonda* animated my friend’s

birthday, since her uncle wasn't sensitive enough to turn off the TV, the mother made terrorist comments about the fate of the United States, and the spouses of both tried like children to change the subject—I don't know whether out of solidarity with the younger people or simply out of common sense: it was a party. My friend had two choices: to offer her opinions and turn the celebration into a funeral of shouting and intolerance; to keep her mouth shut and focus on her fries. She chose the second. Her family did not seem to notice the birthday girl's abnormal silence during the whole evening. Among the ideas exchanged: "Socialism is the only way." "All those mercenaries should rot in jail." "I don't know how Obama can sleep at night." "The European Union and the Empire are going to pay one day." "Fidel has always been right." Meanwhile, forms and documents that were going to be presented to the Spanish Consulate in the morning to apply for citizenship in that European country were passed from hand to hand, and the women commented on the Mexican soap opera which they watch on the illegal cable they have in the house. The whole time I was overcome by a feeling of profound pity for these militants of the Cuban Communist Party: with a morality so shameless, an ambiguous ideology, and a limitless intransigence. Their blindness prevents them from perceiving the enormous gulf that separates them from the generation they gave life to: they are alone, so alone that not even their children dare to enlighten them.

*July 26. WikiLeaks releases a series of Pentagon reports on the war in Afghanistan. They reveal information about killings of civilians that were never made public, executions without trial, the growing strength of al-Qaeda, and meetings arranged by Pakistani intelligence between political figures and Taliban leaders.*

*Mosul, Iraq, July 29, 2010*

I came back from Baghdad a couple of weeks ago, after spending two weeks at my grandparents' house; my grandma had a severe disk prolapse, and she couldn't leave her bed for a month and half, and must still stay in bed for another two months. So I spent the whole time doing housework, cleaning and cooking. I improved my cooking skills! We also went shopping three times, and once we went to a nice park where my brother and sister played; it was a nice time. I've always loved Baghdad, I had the best memories ever there, and it's painful to see Baghdad in this dramatic change: weird faces, different language, weird costumes, and odd traditions!

The Shiites had a ceremony of weeping for al-Kadhim, who died 1400 years ago or so, while we were in Baghdad! They walk to his shrine for hours, and days! They are free to do what they believe in *unless* this starts to affect our lives and make us feel angry about their traditions. They have a special ceremony like this (almost every month), each one lasting for a week or so; the situation becomes awful, closed streets, dirt everywhere (cans, food, water bottles everywhere in the streets, since the food is free!), adding to that a loud DJ, and black flags which affect the view of Baghdad; life stops, the shop owners have to close their shops, and people (like ourselves who do not participate) become prisoners in our houses as it is impossible to go out.

While we were in Baghdad we went shopping, concrete walls are everywhere, and behind them, the lovely Baghdadi shops, anyway. At 10:30 pm

**“Sunshine”**

*July 28, New York. An influential Jewish organization, the Anti-Defamation League, announced its opposition to a proposed Islamic center and mosque two blocks north of ground zero in Lower Manhattan, intensifying a fierce national debate about the limits of religious freedom and the meaning of the September 11 terrorist attacks. On the eve of the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, Obama will say: “This country stands for the proposition that all men and women are created equal, that they have certain inalienable rights. And what that means is that if you could build a church on a site, you could build a synagogue on a site, if you could build a Hindu temple on a site, then you should be able to build a mosque on the site.”*

we went into a shop which had really cool clothes; my mom, my sis, and I bought several pieces of clothing from that shop and stayed in it for about forty minutes or so. Anyway, when we left the shop, the view was shocking behind the concrete walls: no customers, no cars, although everything had been normal about an hour ago. The soldiers began to close the streets with barbed wire after we arrived, preparing for their “religious traditions”, which were in a few days. A Shiite soldier saw us walking, and calling my grandpa who couldn’t find a way to take us back home, he said “we’ll not allow your cars to enter this street anymore! It will be for *mawakeb* only (for the people who’ll share in the ceremony)”. I really wanted to punch him.

*Karkur, Israel, August 2, 2010*

Earlier today, I spent some time reorganizing my bookshelves, which on the face of it, probably doesn’t sound terribly significant. Shifting books to and fro is hardly cause for excitement, nor is putting books away in a closet in order to make room for other books. Unless, of course, the books that you’re carefully piling away in storage are your pregnancy books, and you’re putting them away because you’ve more or less reached the conclusion that you’re not going to be needing them anytime soon.

**Liza Rosenberg**

For a long time after The Kid was born, I refused to even consider the possibility of having another. After all, it had been a difficult pregnancy and a complicated birth, one that could have cost me my life. We’d tried to have a child for nine

years, and now that we'd finally succeeded, I couldn't imagine putting myself through all of that again. I was emotionally drained from my pregnancy experience and terrified by my birthing experience, and the prospect of pushing our luck and trying for a sibling was simply too exhausting to contemplate. [...] At some point, though, I realized that perhaps it would be nice to have another child, but that I wasn't prepared to take extraordinary measures to do so. If it happened—great. [...]

My collection of pregnancy books—ranging from the usual *What to Expect...* to books about high-risk pregnancy—remained on the bookshelf, and as the years passed with only a few glimmers of hope that were dashed rather quickly, I started to accept the fact that it just wasn't going to happen. I hadn't given up yet, but that being said, I was still feeling ambivalent. There were times when I wanted another child more than anything, yet there were also times when I absolutely didn't. [...] But through it all, the books stayed where they were.

Until today, for apparently today was the day I gave up. It wasn't premeditated; in fact, rearranging the bookshelves was very much an unplanned activity, coming about only after the contents of one of my shelves suddenly crashed to the floor, leaving me with no choice but to clean up the mess. Items were sorted into piles—books, magazines, papers and so on, and each pile was given a new home.

As I sorted, I stared at those pregnancy books. And I realized, with a twinge of sadness, that perhaps the time had come to put them away.

*August 1, Pakistan. Due to exceptionally heavy monsoon rains, the Indus River basin swells from one to twenty-four kilometers in width. The water sweeps away an unknown number of villages and urban neighborhoods. Over twenty million people are affected by the disaster, and the death toll is said to be in the tens of thousands. Flooding also devastates areas of Afghanistan, China, and North Korea.*

They had sat on that shelf in the bottom, right-hand corner for years, collecting dust and taking up space as I clung to the possibility of being able to open them once again. Allowing them to remain on the shelf was symbolic, for in that position, the books were easily accessible, which meant I could grab one at a moment's notice should the need arise to do so. Today, I reluctantly accepted the fact that the need was probably not going to arise, that in all likelihood, we will not be providing our son with a sibling. One by one, I pulled those books off the shelf, carried them down the hallway, and with mixed emotions, placed them high up in a closet with all the other books I have no plans to open anytime soon, if ever.

It always feels strange to give up on something; I suspect that we finally succeeded in having our son because it was easier to keep trying than to stop, for as long as we kept going, it meant we still had hope. Today I packed those books away, and while I suppose there's always a chance I may need them again, the hope—like the books—is now gone.

*Shanghai, August 2, 2010*

Yesterday I was at a kid's birthday party with my two-and-a-half-year-old daughter in Shanghai and I met a woman from Eastern Europe. A seemingly smart woman who has lived in Shanghai for five years, is married to a guy from a different country than her own, is mom to a one-year-old daughter, and will give birth to her second in September. Pretty savvy, right?

**Kristin Bair O'Keeffe**

*A heat wave strikes the Moscow region and other areas of Russia, causing the outbreak of wildfires that are not brought under control until heavy rains*

So we were chatting. The normal expat chatter: “How long have you lived here? Whose job brought you here?” Yadda, yadda, yadda. A few kids raced past. The woman said, “Which one is yours?” I pointed to Tully as she screeched to a halt in front of me. “That one.” The woman jolted upright. “*That* one?” she said, pointing at Tully as if there was no way in hell *that* one could be my daughter. “Yep, this one,” I said, once again indicating Tully who was by then wrapped around my legs.

Because I’m very familiar with the “big-crap-is-about-to-come-out-of-this-person’s-mouth-about-adoption” tone of voice, I knew I should have scooped Tully up in my arms and headed home... or at least hightailed it to a different room. But before I could move or speak, the woman tossed back her head and laughed. Then she said, “Who is *her* father?” “Excuse me?” I said. But then somehow instead of punching this obviously-not-so-smart woman in the face (which is what I really wanted to do), I ended up explaining that my husband was from Ireland and that we had adopted Tully from Vietnam. All the while Tully was standing there, looking up at me, hugging my legs, and listening.

Then the woman said, “Oh my god, how did you feel when they plopped a one-year-old in your arms?” I wanted to say, “In love. Peaceful. The happiest I’ve ever been in my life. Glowy. Thankful. Totally overwhelmed. Frightened. Just like every other mom in the world—birth or adoptive,” but instead I sat there fighting back the tears because all I could think was “Tully is listening to this nincompoop.”

arrive in early September. The smoke reaches into the stratosphere, and the concentration of carbon monoxide and fine particles causes the death rate in the capital to double. In addition to forests, dry peat bogs and a huge open-air dump catch fire; the heat destroys 20 percent of the wheat harvest, and a grain export ban is announced.

Of course, the woman couldn't leave well enough alone. She studied us for a few minutes, then said, "You know, she kind of resembles you. Thin. Long face. She could almost be your daughter." "Uh, dumb-ass," I should have said, "she is." But instead... I sat frozen in my seat, confounded by this woman's brazen insensitivity. My face flaming with anger and mortification. [...]

## Child

by Sylvia Plath



Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.  
I want to fill it with color and ducks,  
The zoo of the new

Whose names you meditate—  
April snowdrop, Indian pipe,  
little

Stalk without wrinkle,  
Pool in which images  
Should be grand and classical

Not this troubrous  
Wringing of hands, this dark  
Ceiling without a star.

from *Poems*, Random House, New York, 1998, p. 226

*Re del Venda, Italy, August 2, 2010*

I blow gently on my son's closed eyes, after telling him a fairy tale. It's part of the maternal spell: guided by my voice, he will see darkness, and then, under his eyelids, colorful creatures crossing the desert to the oasis where the treasure gleams. I look at the landscape of his face as he breathes with an aching tenderness. In concentration camps, how do children drift into sleep? And the ones out on the street? The babes in hellish orphanages or among prisoners serving life sentences? What rhythm does the night air take in the nostrils of children surrounded by war? Right now, hunger cramps are tugging at the belly of Nassur, curled up in a nomad's tent near the ruins of Palmyra, while a few kilometers from Emergency's paediatric clinic in Nyala, South Darfur, a little cheek pillowied against the earth is turning into earth.

**Anna Maria Farabbi**

In the darkness, I sing a lullaby to myself and it seems like the vowels and consonants evaporate in the air, becoming tainted. I think about the blood in the snow that I saw just this morning. It was terrible: it sank in like steaming letters. Another lamb slaughtered for Easter. Once again, innocence will be devoured bite by bite. So be it. But the commandment for us elders is to practice innocence by reciting the names of the sacred lambs.

this is a poem blown from my breath  
from my mouth the same as any primitive mouth  
focused on the kindling to light a fire

I gaze at the breath of poetry like shamanic women  
who read bird nests and bird bodies in flight  
and like them, silent, stripped of words, study the mother  
of elements  
among the entrails of the dead  
I sing with the awe of little girls  
who make music with seashells and the shells  
of land snails and eggs

I line up barefoot in the square with my whole body  
at my brother Impastato's side

his blood a gash in the snow  
summoning my words  
honesty integrity resistance  
justice and the right to beauty for all

the grains of TNT between the tracks have become seeds  
in the wind

*dedicated to Peppino Impastato  
killed by the Mafia in 1978, at the age of thirty  
to the values for which he died  
and in which he lives*

*Rome, August 2, 2010*

Today I swam a lot at the pool. And now I feel **Serena Damiani** tired. Pleasantly tired. At lunch I felt like a tortoise. With the heat and fatigue I moved slowly, a leaf of lettuce crunching between my teeth and palate. Lettuce is one of those greens that make you happy. Light in color, full of water, noisy, it goes with everything. As a kid I had a hamster, Pelone ("Furball") who loved to eat lettuce. I adored him. I was sure that we would have a circus act together. Serena and her Furball! The first hamster acrobat! I've always had this dream of

the circus. On the balcony as a little girl, I trained more ants than I can count. Dancer ants, acrobat ants, juggler ants!

I spent many hours on the balcony, as a kid. Me on the balcony. My mother sitting by the window. It seemed that for both of us, life, real life, was outside the house, not inside.

*Arctic Bay, Canada, August 3, 2010*

Last night I stood on the shore of Marcil Lake, looking off in the distance. The kids were busy trying to catch char fry in the small streamlets, Leah and her sister were off picking blueberries. As I stood in front of the mirrored surface of the lake, and children's shouts faded away from my awareness, I came to realize one of the reasons I love it up here.

The mountains down Adam's Sound were lit up with the late night sunlight. The few clouds in the sky were painted mauves and pinks. My eyes travelled down far canyons and ravines, over mountain tops, down the fjord. In the direction I faced there was not likely another person within hundreds of kilometres. The sheer vastness of the wilderness here exhilarated me. I dreamed of walking over all of the ground I could see, an impossible task.

I live in one of the few places in the world where such a vast swath of wild exists, almost off my front door. A place where I could travel hundreds of kilometres in almost any direction without seeing any of men's permanence. It is a place that is impossibly vast. A true wilderness. A place almost indescribably beautiful, almost in-

**Clare Kines**

*Indonesia's linguistic legacy is under threat as growing numbers of wealthy and upper-middle-class families turn to private schools that focus on English and devote little time to the Indonesian language, known as Bahasa Indonesia.*

describably intoxicating and commanding. Despite its grandeur and size I didn't feel small or insignificant, rather I felt fortunate. I'm not sure if that is the correct word, but I felt somehow more significant because of my place here. My place in this wild, not crowded in amongst throngs of others.

William Beebe described wilderness as "that age old fraternity of nature, where man's presence is unnoticed and his absence un-regretted." I'm happy to traverse this place, mostly un-noticed, certainly un-noticed by the land. I feel incredibly lucky to have that opportunity.

But I was not un-noticed by all around me, the children's shouts brought me back to my corner of this place. One had caught a fry. It was time to go check it out.

*Bologna, Italy, August 9, 2010*

"Buonasera!" "Hallo".

This is the full account of my "live" conversations during a period of over forty-two hours this weekend, the last one before the Ferragosto August bank holiday. [...]

Saturday, going on for dusk. Taking advantage of my day off, I decided to get out and go on one of my usual long training runs at a decidedly unusual time for me, with the advantage that I didn't have to face the sun and fierce heat of the early afternoon—this year, the idea of getting up at seven in the morning for a run seems like an even harder sacrifice. I began my run just after eight and thus enjoyed a marvellously vivid sun setting over the surrounding countryside, the

**Francesco Selis ("Franz")**

*August 5. Thirty-three miners are trapped some 700 meters below ground in a Chilean copper and gold mine. The rescue equipment used to save them is sent in record time by miners from Pennsylvania.*

first green that gradually, resolutely wards off the threatening presence, over there, of the ring-road and the Bologna-Ancona motorway. My usual lanes are more deserted than ever; the sky in the west is spectacular, with its streaks of crimson, russet and magenta, but I'm surprised by a sight which appears even more unusual to me: the colour of the nearby tilled land, on the other side, which seems to be turning a shade of pink. Swarms of irritating midges don't stop me from taking off my t-shirt; it isn't hot, but at this time of day the damp air still makes you sweat a little. And so like some lowly farm worker, in shorts and bare-chested, I brave the small groups of upper-crust gente-bene, all so very refined and elegant, whom I have to cut past when I get to the golf club, all intent on going to celebrate the collective dinner ritual, prattling away in their typically aristocratic tones. [...]

After finally passing over the provincial B road, which is the farthest point of my usual round, I become aware of the presence of another human being in front of me, unmistakeably running too. As I get closer I can see that it is a woman, and that even at the moderate speed I'm going, I will soon overtake her. I think she may be Dutch. There must in fact be a small colony of Dutch men and women staying at some holiday farmhouse; I've already met up with a number of them, busy walking or pedalling about. Because the situation is so particular, my first concern is to reassure her that my intentions are friendly. And so when she senses my presence and instinctively looks round, I immediately call out: "Buonasera!" "Hallo", she replies, without let-

*"The West says we are terrorists and intolerant, but in time of need, we're the ones serving the people."*  
*Maulana Yousaf Shah,*  
*a provincial leader of*  
*the Islamist group*  
*Jamiat-ulama-e-Islam,*  
*which is providing*  
*flood aid in Pakistan*  
*(*"The New York**  
**Times*", August 7,*  
**"Quotation of the**  
**Day"*)*

ting down her guard. I overtake her, trying to avoid giving even the least intrusive of looks, then decidedly lengthen my stride.

The trees surrounding the lakelets by the restaurant are making my track almost dark now: someone who has always lived in the city is unused to the darkness, and is struck by its mysterious, slightly disquieting allure. I want to get back home, now, as the memory of when I walked along this same road at night, almost a year ago, and of how long it seemed to me then, slips back into my mind and begins to take over. It was the first evening after the accident that had meant the end of the career and the end of the road for my glorious “Cometa” (my first taxi), when I walked as far as the restaurant with the lakelets and back to go to dinner.

When you’re running, however, you soon come out of the dark stretch, and before too long you can savour the age-old pleasure of a welcoming house, now that night has finally fallen.

*Gaza, August 10, 2010*

While out doing field research for *The Gaza Kitchen* yesterday, Maggie and I stumbled upon what we think is Gaza’s only “certified organic” farm. Now, before you roll your eyes, keep in mind this is not a departure but a return to very traditional farming practices of pre-1948 days, when life and livelihoods were violently and abruptly disrupted.

With the Nakba, industrialization, modernization, and occupation changed all this. Land for pasture was stolen; semi-nomadic lifestyles re-

duced; then came new kinds of insects and bugs, followed by the uncontrolled use of pesticides, and with unpredictable access to borders for exporting their goods, many farmers began to adopt an all-or-nothing risk differential, trying to increase output on whatever land they had and sell as much as they could as quickly as they could, to hell with the pesticides' long-term impact on the people and the land.

Abu Yasir was not one of them. Co-founder of the “Safe Agricultural Producers” with Majdi Dabour, who studied organic agricultural engineering in Santa Cruz, California, he insists that his pilot Gaza farm is the wave of the future, and more productive and sustainable in the long term. “Here, insects and birds are welcome. We send them personal invitations,” joked Abu Yasir. The project was initially funded by Norwegian People’s Aid, and for a while, sixty other farmers were supported and trained in the techniques of natural pest management, which grew especially popular after fertilizers and pesticides became difficult to obtain due to the Israeli siege. “But when the funding stopped, so did they,” said Abu Yasir.

Many still adopt certain organic practices, however, and two of the farmers who were “converts” remained to work on the pilot project. The farm produces its own compost, has a rain catchment for winter, among other techniques (like lining the farm with basil plants and encouraging bees, both of which naturally repel undesirable insects).

Abu Yasir said they have customers, “but no market, export or otherwise”. They consist mainly of

private consumers who either call with an order in a CSA-style arrangement, or come directly to the farm to “pick their own”. One woman we met, Sameera Hamdan, is a widow with eight children, and a breast cancer survivor who has had one mastectomy. Her children also recently fell ill with pesticide poisoning. “For this reason we come and buy Abu Yasir’s vegetables,” she beamed, hands heavy with six kilos of tomatoes. The prices are roughly the same as conventional produce, explained Abu Yasir, “because it’s cheaper for us to produce it, just more labor-intensive”.

*Rome, August 13, 2010*

It’s coming closer. Dates, holidays, recurring events make me slightly uneasy. Ferragosto, August 15, with its watermelon, line dances, fireworks. It feels like a scene from a movie. A movie you know you’ve seen before, though you can’t remember the plot or the actors’ names. And if you can’t remember the plot or the actors’ names, you know it wasn’t a great movie.

Rome has fallen silent. For the last few years, on Ferragosto, Marco and I have gone downtown. We like to mingle with the tourists. Watch them take photos of things and of each other. For the last few years I’ve enjoyed Ferragosto. It tastes like coffee granita. And I love coffee granita.

**Serena Damiani**

*Riyadh, August 15, 2010*

Every Ramadan for the past sixteen years, a **Eman Al Nafjan** show called *Tash Ma Tash* [“No Big Deal”],

which means something along the literal lines of “splash what may”, is closely watched by almost every Saudi household. The show is a satire of Saudi society and is funny to say the least. It’s also been prohibited by several sheikhs as un-Islamic, especially due to the actors’ portrayal of those very same sheikhs.

Yesterday’s episode was even more controversial than usual, an episode that had the majority of Saudi men, both conservative and liberal, shocked to their bone marrow. In it, a Saudi woman marries four men because she’s “financially and emotionally capable, and therefore can’t see a reason why not”. Those very same words we hear over and over again from polygamist Saudi men. However when it’s a woman talking, even the most rational Saudi man turns rabid.

The expressions of disgust and revulsion were all over the place. One commenter wrote that he lost all respect for them ever since one of the lead actors wore a woman’s dress last year. As if that was the most degrading thing a man could do. We are so inferior as a gender that wearing our clothes, even as part of a comedy show, will demean you as a person. [...]

*Afghanistan. Some families dress their girls as boys. To those who know, these children are often referred to as neither “daughter” nor “son”, but as “bacha posh,” which literally means “dressed up as a boy” in Dari. In most cases, a return to womanhood takes place when the child enters puberty. In a land where sons are more highly valued, families without boys are the objects of pity and contempt. Even a made-up son increases the family’s standing, at least for a few years. A bacha posh can also more easily receive an education, work outside the home, even escort her sisters in public, allowing freedoms that are unheard of for girls.*

*Mosul, Iraq, August 22, 2010*

I feel tired, emotionally and physically, because of studying. Students need rest, that’s why we have the “summer holiday”, but apparently students in engineering colleges can’t rest! Sometimes I wake up feeling well, other times upset and bored from studying. I miss doing my hob-

**“Sunshine”**

bies, I miss reading, doing handmade work, cooking, playing music on the keyboard, or just giving my brain a rest. Sometimes I spend like an hour or so doing the things I can, but this makes me feel even more upset that during this vacation I couldn't do any of them more often.  
[...]

Before Ramadan started, we went to the north, to Dhook, on a picnic. We had a really lovely time. First we had breakfast in Sararash (a summer resort), where the weather was cool in the morning. Then we went to Ashawa. We've been there many times, it has a great waterfall, and I could feel the spray of water when I stood at a distance from it. This year when I got there and looked at the "waterfall", it was as if someone was pouring a bucket of dirty water!

But we had a nice time, because a group from Baghdad came. They danced, swam, and played music...

Then we went back to Dhook. There, we had lunch in a restaurant called "Shandokha", and went to Dhook Dam, Mazy Mall, and Dream City, and also prepared a surprise for my father: we bought a cake and went out to the park singing "Happy Birthday".

I had a nice day, out of the daily routine; I wish all cities in Iraq were like the northern part, safe, clean, and with better services for electricity, water, and traffic! We deserve a better life, we have the will to change the situation, to rebuild our country; the only thing we need is a good government that doesn't work against its citizens, one that cooperate with us and invest the

*"We should be ashamed of the way we led the country."*  
*Adel Abdul Mahdi,*  
*vice president of Iraq.*  
*(The New York Times", August 18,*  
*"Quotation of the Day")*

*As America winds down its war effort in Iraq, a growing list of former American diplomats and military officials are now chasing business opportunities in the oil-rich Kurdish region or acting as advisers to its government.*

*The security contractor Blackwater created dozens of shell companies or subsidiaries in part to obtain U.S. contracts after it was criticized for its conduct in Iraq.*

resources of Iraq instead of stealing them. Let's hope for a better tomorrow.

*Arctic Bay, Canada, August 23, 2010*

I'm constantly in awe of the world I live in. Even more so in these days of changing light, and constantly changing tableaux unfold before me.

Last night, in the hills outside of town, I stood at the edge of the road looking back toward Adam's Sound and Arctic Bay. Leah, Hilary, and Leah's sister quietly picked blueberries down below me, and the boys played with their toy loaders in a small square of sand. A small nearby stream provided the ambient music.

Before me was the most expansive sunset I have ever seen. There was not a single part of the sky, in any direction, that wasn't tinged in orange. The low clouds were painted in every direction. Every direction. Off over Victor Bay in the direction of the setting sun, the oranges and yellows were intense, but there was colour everywhere.

I stood there and watched as the colours towards the sun slowly deepened and darkened, and the colours faded from the rest of the sky, shifting from orange to mauve and then disappearing. I had left my camera at home, but it didn't matter. While the main part of the sunset might have made a fantastic photo, there was no way a single photo could have conveyed the entire scene. And camera in hand, I just might not have drunk in the entire experience.

Sometimes it's best not to experience the world through the viewfinder.

**Clare Kines**

*August 20. French President Sarkozy launches a campaign to eliminate Roma camps: adults who "let themselves be expelled" will receive three hundred euros each, children one hundred.*

# The Lost Blush

by Alfredo Tamisari



Reading an extract from Marco Belpoliti's new book, *Senza vergogna* ("Shamelessly"), which appeared in the newspaper "la Repubblica" on 22 April 2010, I was reminded of the very timely addition to the "dictionary of lost words" (<http://dizionarioparoleperdute.splinder.com/tag/rossore>) of two fine descriptions relating to the word *rossore*, or "blush". They are:

"Once when I was talking to a friend of mine, a man of about fifty, he said: 'It's something I can do *senza rossore* [without blushing]'; I thought that was a good lesson for my son, who was there at the time." (Beno Fignon)

"Once upon a time people were always blushing! Even my mother used to leave the house dreading that she might blush if she met someone. It happened to me often at school. It's something that has completely disappeared. Who blushes any more? Not even seniors like us, much less today's videophone communicators! There's only one category of blusher left: women, when they reach menopause; but that's something else. It used to happen to me mainly in afternoon classes in October: the pupils would say 'Miss Licia, why are you going red?' Incidentally, having moved to Rome for family reasons, I loved

the fact that the kids called me by my first name. And it's lovely now, on the rare occasions when I meet one of them: they're adults and they make me feel shy." (Licia Micovillovich)

I want to add a few memories of my own:

On the rare occasions when a conversation in our family touched on the topic of sex—completely by accident—the subject would be changed immediately and the words camouflaged. A flash, just a few seconds, but that was enough to bring a *blush* of embarrassment and modesty to my mother's cheeks.

Once when I was a boy, I was on my way home on a very crowded tram. In the crush I saw a hand being slipped into a woman's handbag. I looked at the face of the thief, quite an old man, who elbowed his way towards the exit and quickly got off at the next stop. I couldn't do anything; my legs were shaking. Shortly afterwards I also got off the tram and hurried home. "Mamma," I said, "if you saw someone on the tram stealing from a lady's bag, what would you do?" She answered me with another question: "Why? Has that happened to you?" "Oh no, I was just wondering..." I broke off, and a hot flush spread over my face: I felt the shame of having stood by and watched—it was as if I too had stolen something.

According to Belpoliti, shame is a feeling we have lost. Perhaps it's true: ours is a *shameless* society. We often hear shouts of "Shame! You should be ashamed!" coming from the crowd in a television studio or in the piazza, but it's an

overflow of resentment with no result; nobody is affected by the taunt, and indeed no one is sorry: shame is no longer coupled with the sense of guilt.

Take for example the inaction I mentioned in my second recollection: these days very few people answer the call to take a stand (out of fear of conflict, or opportunism, or for other reasons); they unashamedly surrender their dignity as social and thinking beings. They just watch, they're fence-sitters, "standing in the middle" they call it: Dante's *ignavi*, "who were not rebels, nor were they believers" as he said, putting them in Hell.

The modesty bar has been lowered considerably, and not only the sexual modesty bar. We're ashamed to be ashamed because we must not appear as weak and helpless, but rather as individuals able to control their lives. If the show falls flat, if we lose the approval of others, if we risk even becoming a nobody, a particular kind of shame takes hold: an amoral shame, unconnected to any kind of ethical standard.

Television talk shows reach the height of obscenity: moral shame vanishes altogether, replaced by cynicism; people put their obvious weaknesses and flaws on display in order to be admired and become stars.

To return to blushing, I would like to draw attention to the blush brought on by surprise or wonder.

We'd been climbing for more than two hours. The journey to the Capanna Marinelli (in Valmalenco) involved an initial difficult and monoto-

nous stage along the mule track that climbed up around the edge of mountain ridge. We were hemmed in and oppressed by the rocks. Just before we reached the top of the mountain, we felt the air icy on our backs and donned our sweaters. Then, at the end of the climb, the view that took our breath away. My brother-in-law quickly recovered from his astonishment and reacted with a long-drawn-out shout, and then started playing around with the echo. I just stood stock-still, as if dazed. The valley had opened up in all its vastness and was embracing me, enveloping me, casting towards me the tongue of a small alpine glacier that resembled the muzzle of a docile bear: all this suddenly and without warning, like a miraculous apparition. My face felt hot all over and I like to think that on this occasion its purplish-red hue did not come only from the effort, but contained the blush of emotion as well.

Sometimes I wonder what our gaze has become, and how it has changed with the huge success of television, which means that now everything is exposed to view and it seems there's nothing more to see. At the time of the incident just described I was very young, and my eyes were almost innocent. I'm not sure that I could feel such intense emotions today, and not only because I am older.

Too many images, too much information, too much noise, too much light. The stars have grown feeble; Unesco has declared the night sky part of the heritage of humanity. The lunar eclipse is broadcast on prime-time television. We are deprived. I think sadly of the words of David Maria Turoldo: "Only wonder can save us".

*Israel, August 25, 2010*

D.B. called today and said he had permission for us to come to the base to visit if we wanted to. Wanted to?! I grabbed the last of the chocolate chip cookies from the freezer, and the camera I brought back from the US for his 21st birthday, and drove down there with Ari. Thirty minutes. Not far.

He was waiting for us outside the base. In the picnic area built for visitors. No one is allowed into the base without clearance. He was sweaty. Seems their air conditioner isn't working. They all take their mattresses and sleep in the workout room. But he doesn't complain.

So we sit, in semi-darkness, and talk. He actually told us a little about his week. Mostly because he's not doing specialty stuff now. Back to the basics. Hand-to-hand combat, and handgun and rifle shooting. He told us how he learned to protect himself when someone attacks with a pipe or a knife.

"Haven't I taught you not to hit or kick, D.B.?" He laughs at me. "Yes, Mommy," he smiles. Four more weeks until his graduation ceremony. Then he becomes a full-time soldier. In active duty. And I stop sleeping at night.

And as he speaks I think to myself: This is my son. My little boy. This handsome, very buff, dimpled-smiling young man; he's my son. He calls me "mommy." He hugs me and doesn't let go. He's my boy. And he is so calm. So mature. So manly. So real. I am in awe. I am proud. And I am in awe. Where did he come from? Who is he? He is my son. My "boy". My man of a son.

**Sarah Smile**

*The bullet-pocked bodies of 72 people, believed to be migrants heading to the United States who resisted demands for money, have been found in a large room on a ranch in an area of northeast Mexico. Drug trafficking groups have increasingly moved into the lucrative business of human smuggling, extorting fees from migrants for safe passage across the border and sometimes forcing them to carry bundles of drugs.*

Still can't wrap my head around it!

*Karkur, Israel, September 2, 2010*

Against a backdrop of terror attacks being perpetrated by Hamas, Israeli and Palestinian leaders are currently meeting in Washington DC for the first direct talks in almost two years. Yesterday, I was asked by a producer at the BBC World Service radio show *The World Today* to address Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. She asked me to speak from the heart, sharing my thoughts on the current situation and letting them know what I thought needed to be done.

The text below is the “letter” I wrote to President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu, which I recorded and sent to my producer at the BBC last night. It aired shortly thereafter.

Dear President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu,

In the grand scheme of things, I am not important. I’m an Israeli, a writer, a wife... Right now, though, I speak to you as a mother—a mother whose greatest desire is simply to raise her son in an atmosphere that doesn’t breed hatred and fear.

Mr. Netanyahu, I am so, so tired of the actions of your government, which seemingly serve only to further isolate this country from the rest of the world. Trying to fix the situation with eloquent words doesn’t work. The problems don’t lie in the explanations, but rather in the actions themselves. Nobody believes that we are the victims anymore; they mock us for continuing to act as

**Liza Rosenberg**

*As the United States seeks to end a four-decade Jewish settlement enterprise in West Bank, the American Treasury helps sustain the settlements through tax breaks on donations to support them.*

though we are. We cannot continue to say that we want peace when the actions we show the world are so clearly to the contrary. The occupation is eroding our collective moral compass.

Mr. Abbas, I don't envy your position as leader of a fractured people without a country. That being said, when you and your colleagues continue to blame Israel for all of your problems, when it seems that you prefer not to take responsibility for the predicaments of the Palestinian people, it does nothing to build any trust on the Israeli side.

I do not pretend to understand all of the fine nuances of the security situation, nor do I entertain any illusions regarding the achievement of a solution. All I know is that the current situation is untenable. We need you to be strong leaders. We need you to make courageous, difficult, even painful decisions; decisions that will likely provoke outrage in certain sectors. Photo opportunities and joint press conferences are useless if nothing comes out of them.

When it comes down to it, I don't have high hopes for this current round of direct negotiations. Experience has made me cynical, and neither of you seems terribly enthusiastic to be there. I dare you to surprise me and prove me wrong, if not for me, then at least for my son and his generation on both sides of the fence.

*Havana, September 4, 2010*

Yesterday I went to enrol my son in high school **Yoani Sánchez** and instead of a welcome sign, found a blackboard with the following:

*Regarding the uniform:* Females may not wear more than one pair of earrings. Shirts and blouses will be worn tucked in. They must not be altered with darts, nor cut to fit to the body, nor allowed to be higher than the waistband of the skirt or pants. Do not remove the pockets. The skirts should be 4 centimeters [1.5 inches] above the kneecap. Skirts worn on the hips are not allowed, nor may they be discolored or have ironing marks. Pants must extend to the height of the shoes. Pants worn on the hips are not allowed. Females may not wear makeup. Bracelets, necklaces, chains and rings are not allowed. Religious objects may not be visible. Shoes must be close-toed and socks white and long. MP3s, MP4s, and cellphones may not be brought to school. Males may not wear earrings, clips or piercings. Belts should be simple and without eccentric, large or stylish buckles and must be black or tan.

*Regarding hair:* Haircuts, hairdos and shaves must be suitable, without any eccentricities or styles that fall outside the dress code. Males may not have: long hair, dyed hair, spiked hair, or designs shaved into their hair. Females may not have any dangling jewelry in their hair. Items used to style the hair must be blue, white or black. They shall be of an appropriate size. Males must not have hair longer than 4 centimeters.

Now I'm wondering if Teo is enrolled in high school, or in a military unit.

*Bologna, Italy, September 5, 2010*

A wedge of the city towards the northwest. The *Ferrarese* [Ferrara road] which, before declaring its true intentions and identity just beyond the ring-road, first takes the name of Via Masicella inside the city walls, and then, (believe it or not!) Via Stalingrado. That “nostalgia for the country”, which sometimes begins to hit you even before the ring of asphalt, sets in very soon in this area, i.e. by the time you reach the Bologna trade fair grounds, and then becomes acute in the next two stretches, the one with the head office of Co.Ta.Bo (the leading cooperative taxi service in Bologna, which I am a member of) and then around the “Sprint-Gas” multi-service station. [...]

The first of September was a delightful day with a bright blue sky, sunshine and pleasantly cool air. I left home before 5 pm, and headed for those same outlying areas with the intention of washing my Cavallona (my taxi) and filling her up with CNG. [...]

I turn off my engine in the queue behind a couple of other cars waiting their turn at the carwash, one of the kind where the car stays put and a bridge structure moves back and forth over it, with sprays of water, big roller brushes and gusts of air; it takes five to ten minutes, depending on the programme you choose. In front of me is the row of bays, covered by a canopy, for the self-service washers equipped with hosepipes (the ones with high-pressure spray guns).

In the first one on the left is parked a big transit van, a rather dull pearl-white in colour. The back

**Francesco Selis (“Franz”)**

*China passes Japan in GDP, becoming the world's second-largest economic power. It is expected to surpass the US by 2030. Meanwhile, it is already the world's biggest consumer of energy.*

is open and a sturdy-looking man is being helped to unload something by his daughter standing inside, then he goes back to repairing a tail light which is hanging off by its wires. Looking around me from there, I can see the rest of the family, or who knows, maybe only part of the rest. There's a big lady whose build, the way she moves, her flip-flops and full skirts have the unmistakable hallmark of Romany descent, and then the daughter herself, already a grown woman even though she can't be much over fifteen, who gets out of the van and is now walking around barefoot.

I watch the man fiddling around and then giving a final turn to the glass light cover with a large spanner. I can almost feel it tightening in spurts as he turns it clockwise. Then my attention is again attracted by the wife, who goes to wash her hands and face in an outdoor sink on the other side of the row of bays. A good lathering and then a rinse, self-service, with her hands. Then it's her daughter's turn to head towards the sink. She's a very pretty girl, with long black, wavy hair, and those bare feet. [...] An (almost...) full wash and brush-up for her, again self-service: hands, face and shampoo, the whole show done so tranquilly and naturally, a way of doing things that as a child, as a boy and teenager I don't think I ever had. To tell the truth, I don't have it even now, although I'm close on fifty-five.

I really shouldn't be ogling a girl who could be my daughter, not to say my granddaughter. But whether I want her to or not, she's not likely to notice me now that she's drying and brushing her hair, her attention focused on the right-hand

rear-view mirror of the van.

It's almost my turn. I drive my Cavallona to the mobile bridge, into pole-position. Then I get out again and observe the scene unfolding: now the man has a hosepipe in his hands and is washing the bodywork of his van, just a wash-over, just one blast, no soaping with liquid detergent. But he shows a circus-like deftness in the way he avoids hitting his big lady, who is busy doing who knows what around that whitish van, which little by little is beginning to look shinier.

It's my turn, I drive my trusty car ever so slowly up to the bridge until the red warning lights come on. I get out, insert the key and push the button. The workings of the machine start up again.

*San Salvador, September 5, 2010*

It's 11:08. It's the eve of the holidays and the Citibank branch at 79 Sur de San Salvador Avenue looks more like Rubén Darío Street on the 24th of December than a bank. Due to the crowds, I mean. There are even three or four children who start trying to play hide-and-seek among the columns until a mother demands order. These children have toys, but each one kills time as he or she can. Some listen to music on their cell phones. Others strike up empty conversations. Most do absolutely nothing. They just look around with serious faces and avoid making eye contact with others.

**Roberto Valencia**

Having had a feeling it would be like this, I have come with a book of short stories titled *Último viernes* ("The Last Friday"). I am also taking notes, of course, in order to be able to write about

this one day. When it comes to standing in line, when they want to, Salvadorans are (or should I say “we are”?) remarkably patient. And one of those few places where we respect lines with stoicism is at bank branches. It doesn’t matter even if there are reasons to protest, such as the unquestionably discriminatory bank windows.

There is one for the elderly, the disabled and pregnant, which have *raison d’être*, but right now I can count three other special windows: one, the business window, is for business transactions, obviously. The other two are for VIP clients, a.k.a. the wealthy. In El Salvador it is naturally assumed that those who save the most money do not see themselves mixing with the masses. Who would ever dream of having a poor man who is going to cash his bimonthly check for \$120 share a line and mingle odors with a dolled-up lady who wants to send \$1,000 to her son who is studying in the United States? So there you have it.

At this very moment, I count seven VIP clients who have two employees at their disposal while we forty nobodies have to share four windows. But I don’t want to complain so much today, really. In fact, alternating reading with observation and taking notes is making time pass more quickly.

It’s 11:22. I look at the floor, an exquisite white tiled floor. It is clean, as if they cleaned it yesterday. In fact, the entire branch exudes cleanliness. In fact, all the banks I’ve been to in this country are the same in this respect. They are more, infinitely more, tidy than the public hospitals. Besides, this one has bright advertise-

ments featuring Anglo-Saxon models hung on its walls. They have beautiful smiles. A father giving his baby a bottle, a young female student in London, an executive flying first-class. They all have beautiful smiles. They have nothing in common with the serious faces in this line here who have native features, little or no make-up and are basically ugly women and men.

It's 11:31. A chubby boy, about ten years old, comes jumping up in front of his father. His smile seems honest, not like the ones on the posters, but it fades away as soon as he gets to the line, which is now longer behind me than in front. I've almost finished the story entitled *La locura* ("Madness"), but I close the book for a moment. I look and wonder if someone here might be looking at me and thinking: "What is that lunatic doing, that lunatic who is reading, who keeps looking around and then jotting notes on withdrawal slips?". I look up again but I don't meet anyone's gaze. I continue reading.

It's 11:38. I finish the story. There are only twelve people in front of me. I start to check out the logos on the sports shirts in line. One says "Project Africa." Another is the Lakers. Yet another says "Run with Vision," a dark one reads "Embutidos de El Salvador S.A. of C.V." (an El Salvador sausage company owned by Kreef). And a forty-something man with a large mustache is wearing another that says "Friday's Restaurant & Bar Mantenimiento".

It's 11:45. I only have three people ahead of me and I'm being overcome by a strange feeling of

happiness. I look at the other side of the windows. There are more women than men today, but only one is young and pretty; the one at number five. I hope I end up getting her, I think, although I'm convinced, certain that she is the least friendly. These minutes are the longest. I no longer have anyone in front of me. I wait a little longer. One window becomes available. It's number five! "Hello." I hand over my savings book, my ID and a completed withdrawal form. I ask, "What time are you open until today?" in order to spur a chat that won't continue, as if bankers were prohibited from talking to clients. "Until 12 o'clock," she sighs. "How do you want it?" "In twenties." She counts and recounts and then hands me my money. "Thank you and have a nice vacation," I tell her. She doesn't even look me in the eyes. I turn around and, before leaving, glance over to look at the clock in the branch for the last time. It is 11:51.

## The extraordinary

by Robinson Quintero



Nothing extraordinary happens here  
Roses grow  
the dead rest  
children pitch pebbles toward the sky  
some men bring presents home

Most often nothing happens out of the ordinary

Friends go out to parties  
people get married  
some laugh, some cry  
the absent write

It seems as if everything runs smoothly  
around these parts  
The trees shed their leaves  
the rain is lost in thought  
the sun rises without fail, even in the fog

And the fools raging with boredom  
stubbornly keep saying:  
Nothing extraordinary happens here  
Nothing out of the ordinary has happened here for quite some time

*Gaza, September 9, 2010*

Eid in Gaza is a very strange thing. Then again, **Laila El-Haddad** what is not strange here except strangeness itself? On the one hand, the streets become one large shopping district, as sidewalks become an extension of the shops that overlook them, with street vendors popping up overnight and displaying their wares on outdoor racks and kiosks, offering everything from cheap tunnel goods, toys, handbags, knockoff perfumes and knockoff clothes, to beads and bracelets and knickknacks, all for “super-low Eid prices!”, as the man in the freaky bear costume kept reminding us. You can barely navigate through the crowds, and so many opt to stay indoors: “It’s a jungle out there—stay away!” But this is Gaza, and people seldom get a chance to take a “breather”. It’s been a long, brutally hot Ramadan. So they say they don’t dare step out,

but they do anyway. It's exciting, to hell with the crowds!

After a long day spent in Beit Lahiya, I decided to take the kids to the Shalehat beach resort (sounds much fancier than it is... but one of the only open, grassy areas they can run around in). At the last minute, we changed our plans and decided to go get some ice cream at "Mr. Kathem's" instead (Gaza's oldest ice cream parlor). One street stall catches my attention—a man selling hand-woven rugs, a very old and dying artisan tradition in Gaza, so I stop and peruse the selection. Then—*boom*, the earth shakes, people begin screaming. There is chaos, for a moment, on top of the chaos already present from Eid eve, which is itself another layer of chaos to the already chaotic and indiscernible situation that is Gaza.

One person asks another asks another and we realize Israel has bombed four locations in Gaza, one of them being a complex next to the Shalehat resort we were supposed to be in minutes earlier. Injuries? Dead? "None... no wait two, no four... serious." "This is Israel's way of saying: Happy Eid, Gaza!" remarked one man casually, as he licked an ice cream cone he just bought from Kathem's and took in the holiday scenes. The police are on the alert, there are ambulances streaming by. Tension ebbs and flows.

Then, it's "as you were". People continue shopping. It is Eid, after all. And this is Gaza.

*Rome, September 9, 2010*

They've almost all come back. I just finished washing the dishes and I'm having my coffee.

**Serena Damiani**

Marco makes the coffee for me. He makes it a lot better than I do. This morning we took a long walk in the park by the house and we talked. This is one of those times of year that make me anxious. There is no objective reason for me to be anxious. It's an anxiety... that comes out of habit, tradition. It started when I was a little girl. With my mother's sighs. "Now it's that time again! Lay out your clothes for tomorrow on the chair. Get to bed or tomorrow you'll be tired. Tomorrow it all starts up again." At this time of year the images of my mother get blurry. No more sun, sea, sand. Instead, school, studying, discipline, sighs, melancholy. When it's summer I think of my mother often. Then September comes and it's as if we were saying goodbye all over again. I take a different path. I never understood the resignation, the sighs, the wistfulness. In September I take a different path.

*Havana, September 9, 2010*

I swore never again to speak of that gentleman with the well-trimmed beard and the olive-green uniform who filled every day of my childhood with his constant presence. I underpinned my decision not to refer to Fidel Castro with more than one argument: he represents the past; we need to look forward, to that Cuba where he no longer exists; and in the midst of the challenges of the present, to allude to him seems an unpardonable distraction. But today he once more gatecrashed my life with one of his characteristic outbursts. I feel obliged to focus on him again after his declaration to the journalist Jeffrey Goldberg that,

**Yoani Sánchez**

“the Cuban model doesn’t even work for us anymore.”

If my memory doesn’t fail me, they expelled many Communist Party members for lesser or similar phrases, and purged innumerable Cubans who served long sentences. The Maximum Leader systematically pointed his finger at those who tried to explain that the country wasn’t working. And not only were the nonconformists punished, but we were all forced to don the mask of subterfuge to survive on an island he tried to remake in his own image. Pretense, whispers, deceit, all to hide the same opinion that the “resuscitated” commander now flippantly tosses out to foreign journalist.

Perhaps it is a fit of honesty, as assaults the elderly when it comes time to assess their lives. It could even be another desperate try for attention, like his prediction of an imminent nuclear debacle or his late *mea culpa* for the repression of homosexuals which he came out with a few weeks ago. To see him acknowledge the failure of “his” political model makes me feel like I’m watching a scene where an actor gesticulates and raises his voice so that the public won’t look away. But as long as Fidel Castro doesn’t take the microphone and announce to us that his obsolete creature will be dismantled, nothing has happened. If he doesn’t repeat the phrase here in Cuba, and, in addition, agree not to interfere in the necessary changes, we’re back to square one.

*London, September 10, 2010*

After the Islamic revolution, the zealot revolutionaries ransacked Shapour Bakhtiar’s home and destroyed all his books from his extensive li-

**Potkin Azarmehr**

brary by burning them. Years later, one of those zealots who had ransacked Bakhtiar's home fled the Islamic Republic and sought asylum in Paris. Repenting of what he had previously taken part in, he contacted Dr. Bakhtiar to express remorse and seek his forgiveness. Dr. Bakhtiar replied, "If you want forgiveness from me, all you have to do is read some of the books you destroyed".

I remember watching books being torn and set alight during the "cultural revolution" in Iran. It was a defining moment in my life. The horror of watching ignorant, illiterate zealots destroy books was a horrifying experience.

Those who kiss a book and those who burn books only show their ignorance. A book is for reading; you may like it or you may not like it, but reading a book is the only way to treat a book.

*Havana, September 17, 2010*

Neither Fidel nor Raúl fired him from his job. Life fired him from life on its own account.

Chucho died today. [...] A vigil was kept for him this Thursday into Friday night in the Infanta funeral parlor, "La Nacional". My mother was there all night. I took off. I couldn't stand the dim lighting or the institutional mediocrity with which we are burdened even after death.

Chucho was a fighter. He lived to be over seventy. He did not have children, nor a mate; perhaps only my mother. They met in the Lilí Doll Factory, just when my mother was falling in love with my father, the limpid office worker in the Personnel Department who was nearly 20 years

*Short 1950s-style quiffs and a touch of gel are being touted in Iran as part of an effort "to halt the spread of unconventional styles and promote Islamic culture."*

**Orlando L. Pardo Lazo**

her senior.

I was born in 1971. My mother became a housewife. Chucho waited, like one of those García Márquez characters of which he never read. A century and a millennium passed. When everyone was old, Chucho began to frequent our house in Lawton. He would arrive before dawn. He would help out as he could. He was a dedicated old toiler who had more energy and loyalty than 99% of young people, including me, of course. My father was then like my mother's father. He and Chucho played chess in a hall in the nineties. My father still had the power to defeat him. He had the historical advantage of someone who has had free hands to devote himself to occupations of an intellectual nature.

Chucho, yours was manual labor: the struggle. From lottery bookie in the fifties to secretary of your local unit in a Communist Party of Cuba that was already tired of Cuban communism. It is three o'clock in the morning in Cuba. I am writing naked in my room while he lies in "La Nacional" on Infanta, Hall A (third floor), not too far from his little house in a maze on Manglar Street. Night unites us, old Chucho and the belated adolescent, Landy, in desolation. Once, when my father had already passed away, he wanted to dictate his memoirs to me, but I diplomatically avoided it. I have no regrets. His life did not deserve the fallacy of any narration. His life transcended the concrete. It was a great stone. Like the word "chucho" ("mutt"), for example: even among his friends, practically no

*September 12. An Italian fishing boat is attacked with machine gun fire in the Mediterranean by a Libyan patrol boat with Italian military personnel on board, who went below decks during the shooting. The Italian Minister of the Interior comments: "They must have mistaken it for a boat of illegal immigrants" (seeming to imply that firing on the latter would be legitimate).*

*September 14, Cuba. The government plans to lay off more than half a million people, expecting they will move into private businesses.*

one knew his name, let alone his surname (if he even really had either).

Chucho, dammit. Chucho, you who could have been my father in the proletarian maelstrom of volunteer work in the sixties. Chucho, you who no longer believed in, yet trusted in, the Revolution. You with your poor handwriting that I would turn into fair copy using the Underwood typewriter which had formerly been my father's private property. Chucho would give me meeting minutes and notices to type up. Tac tac. Tic tac. The era of our social class is over. With you dies the spirit of the underdog. You were poor but honest. You found solutions without upsetting others. You with your hearty laughter like an urban character out of Lino Novás Calvo. You would shout on the phone like an unruly peasant. That was it. You were a guerrilla staggering about in that abandoned little palace its original owners called La Habana.

The official organ of the Communist Party of Cuba will not, of course, find out about this "significant loss of a fellow sympathizer," but with Chucho fell the head of an era in which now no Cuban will live. In many mental aspects, for me it's as if Fidel had died. (They physically resembled one another like two peas in a pod.)

Chucho, I will not continue to speak of you in the second person singular, that vacuous vice of mourners.

Dawn is approaching and soon Post-Revolutionary Havana will begin to appear. My mother has been left even more alone. Your love for her is a

little closer to fulfillment in some place that may never be.

Chucho, I'm sorry. Goodbye.

*Atlanta, Georgia, September 21, 2010*

I am paralyzed by the amount of school work I have to do. Just for today's lecture alone, I have 95 PowerPoint slides to go through for human development, and eighteen densely packed pages of biochem notes that I have to go through tonight or else I will be behind. The previous lectures from last week and yesterday that I have gone through, I still need to go over, so I don't forget. I have tons of information swimming around in my head that has not yet been consolidated. Anatomy, cranial nerves, oh my God! Plus all the other stuff. In fact, the cranial nerves are not so bad, compared to all those other innervation pathways. I'm exhausted but too scared to take a nap, 'cos I know I will not wake up until tomorrow. Caffeine... how I miss thee!

**Joy Braimah**

*September 17. The U.S. Census Bureau report said that 44 million people, or one in seven residents, lived in poverty in the United States in 2009, the highest rate since 1994.*

*The United States, September 21, 2010*

Everyone who knows me knows I never talk “Leggy” about race ‘cos frankly, I don’t care. Coming from Nigeria and living there all my life, frankly, the last thing on my mind on any given day is race or the colour of my skin. I don’t have that many African-American friends because according to them I’m not black, I’m Nigerian... ummm... well, excuse me while I check the colour of my skin. [...]

My friend said I need to declare more often that

I'm a proud, strong black girl. Ummmm... no. I'm a strong girl, period. This isn't to pretend that racism doesn't exist, of course it exists. I just refuse to acknowledge it. [...] I just don't get race, I don't even know how to discuss or talk about it. I spent sixteen years of my life in a country where I didn't have to think about the colour of my skin, as a junior in America I've just chosen to ignore it. So, what brought on this rant? My white guy friend told me this evening that, and I quote, "you are the whitest black girl I have ever met", and he said it in such a tone as if he actually thought he was complimenting me. I was like huh? My race doesn't define me. [...] I can't stand stereotypical statements. I don't make them and I hate it when people make them around me. [...]

I have two really close African-American friends and one of their friends once told me that I'm not being true to my blackness 'cos I said that I'm not a big fan of rap and that I think lots of rappers don't say anything meaningful in their songs. [...] I don't have to like certain things, talk a certain way, or have only black friends to prove the fact that I'm black and proud. I would think that my black skin speaks enough for me. Being black in America just freaking bugs me! I'm tired of people telling me who is being racist to me and who isn't, I'm tired of people telling me how wearing my hair naturally is going to help me appreciate my blackness more, I'm tired of people telling me how "white" I am being when I speak.

I was born black. My behaviour has nothing to do with the colour of my skin, my likes and dis-

likes have nothing to do with my skin. Sometimes I just feel like a shadow, like everyone sees my skin and not the person behind the colour. “I am not my skin, I am not my hair, I am that soul that lives within.” (India Arie) I think she puts it excellently.

*Arctic Bay, Canada, September 25, 2010*

The autumnal equinox was this past week, and **Clare Kines** that means that I’ll now have less sunlight than, well, than pretty much everyone else. We are slipping into the dark season, and before we know it our sun will set for three months.

I don’t mind the dark season, never have. It has charms of its own, and it passes quickly. The change snuck up quickly, though, this year. It seems only yesterday I was revelling in 24-hour light, counting birds and snapping photos.

Soon, the night will be inky dark, and the stars closer than anywhere else on earth, and you can watch them to the music of snow crunching and squeaking under your feet. Soon, it will be our glorious northern night.

*Havana, September 28, 2010*

The line for the bus at Coppelia is a special place, one of those corners so eloquent that if it disappeared one day, Havana wouldn’t be the same. Yesterday at ten at night, I was waiting for my P4 bus when a woman standing next to me with her daughter commented how “alive” the city was for the anniversary party for the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR).

"Is that a joke, ma'am?" I asked, and she gave me a serial killer look.

The driver swore that not one more person could fit on the P4, so I got on through the back door. A drunk behind me was pushing to cut the line, but he was staggering around and trying to hold onto his bottle of alcohol at all costs and he lost his balance and fell. The driver started while the man was still trying to get on and he was almost killed in the attempt.

The "lively party" woman at my side started screaming, and me, I said, "He's so plastered he won't even make it to the corner!" She added, "Of course he was black, blacks are all the same," and started a lecture all about "those blacks" which if Martin Luther King had heard, he would have died all over again.

I looked around, embarrassed. Everybody nearby was white. No one opened their mouths, and I realized that they would all remain mute rather than defend the blacks. I got hysterical; I regretted it later, but at the time I wanted to strangle her, especially since her ranting was quietly being listened to by her young daughter; what a great example!

"Madam," I said to her, "if I scream 'Down with Fidel!' you would be the first to jump on it. May I ask, then, why I have to put up with you talking like you're the president of the Ku Klux Klan? And if I scream, 'Down with Esteban Lazo [a black member of the Cuban Council of State]!' are you going to jump on that too, or is it not the same?" The phrase came out rather awkwardly. She said nothing. People were staring at me and soon I felt like I'd stepped out of a tomb at the

Colón cemetery, with worms crawling out of my half-gone skull.

I knew I couldn't stop myself. That should not be the approach to dialog, but sometimes dialog is simply beyond my capacity for tolerance. I got off at the stop at 23rd and A and walked the half mile home, talking to myself.

# Contributors and translators



**Potkin Azarmehr** was born in Iran and lives in the United Kingdom. He's a business intelligence project manager. His diary page comes from the blog *For a democratic secular Iran* (<http://azarmehr.blogspot.com/>). We thank him for allowing us to publish it.

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**Kristin Bair O'Keeffe** lives in Shanghai, China, with her Irish husband and their Vietnamese daughter. Her diary page comes from the blog *Kristin Bair O'Keeffe* (<http://www.kristinbairokeeffeblog.com/>).

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**Johanna Bishop** was born in Chicago in 1974, and lived in Pennsylvania and New York before moving to Tuscany in 1998. She translates from Italian and Spanish into English. In this issue she has translated the texts by Maria Ofelia Zuniga, Laritza Diversent, Emilia de Rienzo, Serena Damiani, Anna Maria Farabbi, the poem by Roberto Juarroz, and the page by Elsa Morante.

**Joy Braimah:** “I was born in Benin-City, Nigeria. I moved to the United States (Atlanta, Georgia) in 2002. I have a bachelor’s degree in Psychology and I’m currently a first year medical student. I like writing because I find it therapeutic.” Her diary pages come from the blog *The smile of a*

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*Nigerian Scorpio* ([www.nigerianscorpio.com](http://www.nigerianscorpio.com)).  
We thank her for allowing us to publish them.

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**Claudia Cadelo**, born in 1983, lives in Havana. Her diary entries are drawn from the blog *Octavo Cerco* (<http://octavocercoen.blogspot.com/>). We thank her for allowing us to publish them.

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**Serena Damiani**, a writer and actress in the theater, was born in 1962 in Rome, where she still lives. Her diary pages have been translated by Johanna Bishop.

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**Emilia de Rienzo**, born in Turin, Italy, in 1947, has been a teacher for thirty years. Her diary entries, translated by Johanna Bishop, are drawn from the blog *Pensare in un'altra luce* (<http://pensareinun'altraluce.blogspot.com/>). We thank her for allowing us to publish them.

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**Laritz Diversent**, a lawyer, got her degree from the University of Havana in 2007; the same year, she began writing as an independent journalist. Her diary entry, translated by Johanna Bishop, comes from the blog *Jurisconsulto de Cuba* (<http://jurisconsultocuba.wordpress.com/>).

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**Anna Maria Farabbi** was born in 1959 in Perugia, where she still lives. She is a poet and translator, and has published several poetry collections. She also contributes to various literary criticism reviews. Her text has been translated by Johanna Bishop.

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**Carole Greenall**, a graduate in European Studies (Bath) in 1978, since 1981 has been an Eng-

lish language teacher at Palermo University and lecturer in Translation from Italian to English at the Palermo School for Interpreters and Translators. She has translated the texts by Francesco Selis (“Franz”).

**Laila El-Haddad**, born in 1978, is a journalist and divides her time between the United States and Gaza. She has a son, Yousuf, and a daughter, Noor. Her diary pages come from the blog *Gaza Mom* (<http://www.gazamom.com/>). We thank her for allowing us to publish them.

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**Roberto Juarroz** (1925-1995), an Argentine poet, published fourteen volumes of poetry under the general title *Poesía vertical*, the first appearing in 1958 and the last posthumously in 1997. His poem has been translated by Johanna Bishop.

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**Clare Kines**, born and raised in Roblin (Manitoba, Canada), retired from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police after twenty-four years of service. Widowed in 1996, he moved in 1999 to Arctic Bay, where he met his wife Leah. They adopted two children, Travis and Hilary. They run the Kig-gavik Bed and Breakfast. His diary pages come from the blog *The House & other Arctic musings* ([kiggavik.typepad.com/the\\_house\\_other\\_arctic\\_mu](http://kiggavik.typepad.com/the_house_other_arctic_mu)). We thank him for allowing us to publish them.

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58, 82

“**Leggy**”, born and raised in Nigeria, currently lives in the United States, where she studies engineering. Her diary page comes from the blog *Confessions of a Confused Teenager* (<http://leggy-freda.blogspot.com/>).

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**Laureen Marston-Hindi** is a freelance translator. She lives in New Jersey with her husband and three children. In this issue, she has translated the diary pages by Roberto Valencia and Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo, and the poem by Robinson Quintero.

**Barbara McGilvray** lives in Australia. For many years she has been translating from Italian into English and visiting Italy whenever possible. Here she has translated the text by Alfredo Tamisari.

**Eman Al Nafjan**, mother of three, is a post-graduate student at a university in Riyadh. Her diary pages come from Saudiwoman's Weblog (<http://saudiwoman.wordpress.com/>).

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**Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo**, a writer and photographer, was born in 1971 in Havana, where he lives. His diary page, translated by Laureen Marston-Hindi, comes from the blog *Lunes de post-revolución* (<http://orlandoluispardolazo.blogspot.com/>).

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**Massimo Parizzi** was born in 1950 in Milan, Italy, where he lives. A translator, he is the founder and editor of this magazine. His text has been translated by Johanna Bishop.

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**Robinson Quintero Ossa** was born in Caramanta, Colombia, in 1959. He has published three volumes of poetry: *De viaje*, Fundación Simón y Lola Guberek, Santafé de Bogotá, 1994; *Hay que cantar*, Editorial Magisterio, Bogotá, 1998; *La poesía es un viaje*, Universidad

Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá, 2004. His poem has been translated by Laureen Marston-Hindi.

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**Liza Rosenberg**, born in 1968 in Schenectady, NY, moved in 1991 to Karkur, Israel, where she lives with her husband and their son. Her diary pages come from the blog *Liza Rosenberg* (<http://lizarosenberg.com/>). We thank her for allowing us to publish them. The letter to Abbas and Netanyahu (September 2) was originally written for BBC World Service radio, and it aired on *The World Today* programme.

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**Yoani Sánchez** was born in 1975 in Havana, where she lives. Her diary pages come from the blog *Generation Y* ([www.desdecuba.com/generaciony](http://www.desdecuba.com/generaciony)). We thank her for allowing us to publish them.

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**Francesco Selis (“Franz”)**, born in Bologna in 1955, now lives in San Lazzaro di Savena (near Bologna). He’s a taxi driver. His diary pages, translated by Carole Greenall, come from *Franz-blog.2* ([www.franz-blog.it](http://www.franz-blog.it)). We thank him for allowing us to publish them.

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**Sarah Smile**, expressive arts therapist, moved to Israel in July of 2003, with her husband and four kids. Her diary pages come from the blog *Sarah Smile* (<http://sarahbsmile.blogspot.com/>).

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“**Sunshine**” was born in 1992 and lives in Mosul, Iraq. Her diary pages come from the blog *Days of my life* (<http://livesstrong.blogspot.com>).

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**Alfredo Tamisari** was born in 1942 in Milan, where he lives. From 1970 to 1980 he was a primary-school teacher. His piece has been trans-

**Roberto Valencia** is a journalist who lives in San Salvador. His diary entries, translated by Laureen Marston-Hindi, come from the blog *Crónicas Guanacas* ([cronicasguanacas.blogspot.com](http://cronicasguanacas.blogspot.com)).

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**Karen Woo**, a doctor from London, co-founder of “Bridge Afghanistan” ([bridgeafghanistan.blogspot.com](http://bridgeafghanistan.blogspot.com)), was killed in August 2010 along with nine other aid workers from International Assistance Mission ([www.iam-afghanistan.org](http://www.iam-afghanistan.org)) as she came back to Kabul from the mission to Nuristan mentioned in her diary. Responsibility for the murders was claimed by Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid. Karen was 36 years old. Her entries are drawn from the blog *Dr Karen Explores Healthcare in Afghanistan* ([explorerkitteninafghanistan.blogspot.com](http://explorerkitteninafghanistan.blogspot.com)).

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**Maria Ofelia Zuniga Platero** was born in 1973 in San Salvador, where she lives. Her diary pages, translated by Johanna Bishop, comes from the blog *Esta boca es mía... Enchufadas y enchufados, estemos donde estemos...* (<http://estabocaesmia-mo.blogspot.com/>). We thank her for allowing us to publish them.

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## Last issues

**Number 20 (November 2008), “memories” - contents:** *Memories*, by Massimo Parizzi; *Tangiers, my birthplace*, by Jihane Bouziane; *The house where I was born*, by Maria Granati; *Progress and memory*, by Jacques Revel; *The fullness of memory*, by Giorgio Morale; *The art of oblivion*, by Andrea Inglesi; *As autumn falls*, by Giovanni Quessep; *Palestinian ruins*, by Jonathan Boyarin; *Remembering our Nakba*, by Rana Qumsiyeh; *War is a state of mind*, by Uri Avnery; *Let's keep an eye on our humanity*, by Massimo Parizzi; *From Palermo to Milan*, by Attilio Mangano; *My first disappointment*, by Renata Borghi; *Light and shadows*, by Marina Massenz; *History begins in reverse*, by Marco Saya; *November 4, 1966*, by Laura Zanetti; *I was twenty*, by Nives Fedrigotti; *The personal sense of history*, by Oksana Kis; *My yesterdays*, by Maria Ofelia Zuniga; *Addirittura*, by Johanna Bishop; *But with my camera...*, by Veronica Khokhlova; *Old memories*, by Hao Wu; *The memory of contemporaneity*, by Roberto Bordiga.

**Number 21 (March 2009), “human fellowship” - back cover:** “At the end of the battle, / and the combatant dead, a man came toward him / and said: ‘Don’t die; I love you so much!’ / But the corpse, alas! kept on dying. // Two approached him and repeated: / ‘Don’t leave us! Be brave! Return to life!’ / But the corpse, alas! kept on dying. // Twenty, a hundred, a thousand, five hundred thousand, came up to him, / crying out, ‘So much love and no power against death!’ / But the corpse, alas! kept on dying. // Millions of persons surrounded him, / with a common plea: ‘Do not leave us, brother!’ / But the corpse, alas! kept on dying. // Then, all the inhabitants of the earth / surrounded him; the corpse looked at them sadly, moved; / he sat up slowly, / embraced the first man; started to walk...” (César Vallejo) - **contents:** diary pages from Gaza, China, Israel, Cuba, Italy, Ukraine and Russia, The United States, Great Britain; poems by Giacomo Leopardi, Marco Saya, T.S. Eliot, Jaime Gil de Biedma, César Vallejo, Ennio Abate; excerpts from “The New York Times”, “CNN International”, “La Repubblica”; *Notes* by Massimo Parizzi; a passage from a letter by Etty Hillesum.

**Number 22 (June 2009), “from Gaza on” - back cover:** “...anti-politics is this wholesale slaughter of the defenceless...” (Lidia Campagnano, Rome, December 29, 2008) - **Contents:** diary pages from the United States, Italy, El Salvador, Iraq, Israel, Kosovo, Ecuador, Palestine, Cuba, Gaza, Jerusalem, China; *The Pain of the Wronged World*, by Elio Vittorini; 325, by Sebastiano Buonamico; *On the Shema and the Prophet Martyr*, by Marc H. Ellis; *Spring 1938*, by Bertolt Brecht; from *War*, by Franco Buffoni; *La chéursa*, by Raffaello Baldini; *With the Shepherds*, by Laura Zanetti; *Polyphony of Nostalgia. Stories from Ecuadorian Migrants*, by Carla Badillo Coronado.

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**"In order to discover a livable world, how much rottenness  
must be swept away!"  
(Joan Miró, 1939).**



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