

## MICHAEL FILIMOWICZ / Tatavan

I did not know what those animals were called, nor knew their typical behavior. Black, big as a car, sharp horn tubes long and twisting. Would they mind? My being here. They inched forward chewing the ground, perhaps eyeing my presence with their side-mounted fish eyes. I was treading the footpaths between the crops, unsure of what those crops were, not being good at plant names, either. Short, deep green stalks, in mud pools sometimes. The air was cool with touches of noon heat, and sunbeams were sparsely spaced across the plain like tilted columns beneath the overcast. Steam off the fields meandered between the dark gray and pock-marked rocks that were scattered and growing in size toward the slopes of a great mount, either carved or deposited by glaciers, I couldn't remember what the book said, anomalous like a great cyst in the landscape. In history it had been a useful mount, one of those fortunate heights which can't but be used for some military purpose. On it had been built a massive fort complex, now impressive remains of walls and quirky room shapes. The ruins probably looked better than the intact entity, though this was but my hiker's daydream.

I had walked the ruins all morning and clambered up the mossy ramparts, walked along the highest, most held together remnants, took in the valley with its smoky definition, the hazy bright horizons, the dewy scents. The thick coffee had settled nicely, my gut was humming, the crickets swelled in cascades of needling sound. At times an archer's slit would frame a slice of the valley, or a crevice invite a detour into some roofless interior space. Occasionally I would stop to take a photograph. Looking down at the road, the vehicles that traversed it were separated by good, distinct intervals of time, always a lone vehicle. A tractor, then the crickets, some time passed, a small hatchback sans hood pattering past, then the crickets and more time. An army jeep, time, a scooter, crickets.

*You have to forget before you remember, what goes down will come back up whether or not an effort is made, no borders between an imagined and recollected world, for at the boundary of boundaries is zero, even in the brain's electro-chemical nebulae, adjacent to*

the microwave background of the Big Bang as it permeates each one of us. For now this happens to be a single bit of particular desert amongst vaster, anonymous, nondescript, unincorporated desert superimposed as the backdrop to one little patch of familiar desert, some outpost like this, latitude unknown and longitude suspected. We are stranded and wild ones, mere barbarians and enfranchised to nothing. The authorities high-tailed it out of here long ago, the deputies lost the sanction of their deputy-hood and so wandered off with the nomads like so much human tumbleweed, you should have seen how directionless, how without compass the elected were that day, when it first came on the news that the gods had lost favor with the capital, and the capital ceased to be the epicenter of empire, and the ring of empire without its epicenter ceased to be a ring, and here we were without allegiances and alliances, without law and precedent, without future and all the invisible solidifiers. How so many of us blanched, became ghosts of once-assured selves and took on a pall the color of these sands, no, even whiter than the whitest of sands, not their actual complexions which were blushed and wet with sobbing, but the white pallor of their souls, so white no prism could split those withdrawn intensities, a collapsed ball of white, the sudden vanishing of the enterprise, the embarrassment of that grand posture which justified our orbit at the perimeter of the world, the white fear as our particular outpost was jettisoned into free undefined space, like some metaphorical billiard ball in a hypothetical science lesson, our coinage instantly without currency, our borders in dispute, our language unofficial. While we await the news of a viable jurisdiction announcing itself, and the Capital Abbreviated Name of what power we shall adhere to, I have not talked to my mother in months.

I had climbed up on the road side and gone down on the field side. Hence my predicament. Would those ox-bulls do anything? To me. Did they care? Was I an instinctual enemy of some kind, some territorial threat? They were inert enough. Surely they were used to the farmers and their herdsman. These weren't goats, after all. It was not as if they would just come up from behind and gore me for no reason. This wasn't a rodeo, either—they were not caged and provoked. This was no street in Spain, no arena of beast harassment. They had all the world there to chew on. Arguably, I would not be anything to be bothered about. But still the implacable trepidation, the unease in the proximity of large herd animals with vorpal horns.

I would run, of course, if one of them made a move toward me. I was embarrassed by these thoughts. Somewhere I was sure there was a telepathic shepherdess camouflaged in a thicket giggling at the foreigner in his shiny jacket and big boots who was afraid of nothing at all. This shepherdess, of course, had no such ox-anxiety, would be able to survive in the mountains for weeks because she knew the names of roots and where to find them, knew how to dig for water, obviously. She could whack a wild cat on its nose with the strap of her sandals and be done with it. But the foreigner would exhaust his canteen and then look for a restaurant, probably one in his book. Alas, the foreigner with the aftershave smell would have a camera, somewhere in one of those big pockets. He'd want to take a picture, though not entirely sure why.

A cow patty lay on the path, the basis of a futuristic city of flies. Airborne traffic went about its business as if there was some reason to move about on that pile, as though it weren't absolutely the same shit through and through but had to be constantly investigated, to see if one part might have something different to offer. Really, why all the motion? Look at those black beasts, they know the grass doesn't get any greener, so they have all the time in the world. As though the flies haven't seen shit before.

Maybe in their world of phantasmagoric scents they are frenzied by every little shift in the breeze, one moment it's there, right in front of you, right inside you, the next it's scooped out of existence and the trail of it is racing away, then, whoah, you've just passed it, hey, there it is again. The reality of the thing, in the breeze of the thing.

*When an army is marching down the streets of some town or other, you hear that lovely rhythm of synchronized boot steps, syncopated with the rattling of chain mail and the clank of hilts in their scabbards bumping up against the breastplates and the lilting beat of the saddle buckles. But in the desert, when an army marches, you hear only the clanking, and not the low, resonant, steady tattoo of boots on pavement. There is just the wind and the jangling, and the stupid squish of sand.*

The footpath came to a grassy road. I decided to take it left, vaguely back toward town, though I could see by the way it bent along a creek that I might end

up nowhere near the hotel. But I had all day, all morning, at least. Until I became hungry perhaps and would have to go looking for a hut bakery. In the meantime I walked, gazed up the slopes of the foothills, out across the crops and wild grasses, the tree tops poking out, the unfamiliar bearded birds with the crazy stripes swirling around them. This was a paradise of sorts—no phone wires crisscrossing overhead, no billboards or signage of any kind, no names to anything, no parking lots or pavement or call boxes or fences. No adulteration of the landscape, no excessive gesturing to me going through it. The world is so easy on the eyes without all that infrastructure blocking the view. This was my mission today, to see the naked earth, tilled a bit, reclaiming old built stuff.

*It happened this way and so had to occur in that manner. If there was some other road I missed I have missed it for good and so there was not that road to begin with.*

There were some boulders along the banks of an irrigation ditch. I sat there and thumbed through the blank post cards. Chose one. It featured a boy, maybe twelve, on crutches. One of his legs ended at an uncovered stump, dark pink, just below the knee. He is looking at the camera, a little unsure, a little ashamed at displaying himself like this.

S,

*I have just contributed three cents to the revolt. This boy, I was told, stepped on a land mine. I can't read the caption, but I was told that is what happened. They're selling these post cards in the shops, in plain view of the troops who patrol the streets, though mostly they fill up the tea gardens, playing chits—a game with numbered wooden blocks, a game board, dice. A simple game. Just down the street some insurgents have set up a photo gallery in a pool hall, documenting the killed and maimed. I was asked if I'd be willing to deliver some packages for them. Should I take them up on it? I wonder if the postal service really lets these cards get sent—I'd like to know if you get this post card, it being anti-government propaganda, after all.*

By around noon I was beginning to get bored. The grass road kept going, widening a bit, there were tire marks in the dirt. Now and then a ditch or stream passed beneath it through a corrugated tube. Not a dwelling in sight. I began to have second thoughts about my left turn. I'd been following the consequences of that

decision for an hour or so—it would have been an admission of failure, and a failure to explore further, to turn back. I went on.

*You have to look for the greatest lack of roads, the largest, blankest white spot on the map, preferably cordoned off by mountains, and find some dot with a name or maybe with several conflicting names, attached by a faint umbilical dotted line to some thicker, darker dotted strokes, teasingly winding and attached to a scribbly scratch somewhere, preferably a river, or better yet, a tributary to a larger river, a mere stream, meandering through speckled or bumpy textures, so that the business of the highwayman exists only by virtue of the ferryman, and likewise the ferryman's business only by virtue of the merchant marine, the itinerant smuggler, and occasional folksy extortionist in a mountain pass.*

Just a week ago at the bus station, while looking out over the strait, the pontoon bridge, the blue gold streaks of light, shadow spikes of minarets, Rachel and Rebecca, two unknown quantities, walked past. Inspired, I initiated flirt-with-two-women procedures, though after the flirtation had commenced I realized I had ignited something regrettable. Too late—I mentioned my destination—and surprise—two days later there they were, fresh off the bus, four hundred miles from where we had departed. It was a small village. I could not hide from them for long.

Imagine—spending two months getting as lost as possible in another country only to run into the same Danish nurse on four occasions. Each time trying to ditch her, but unintentionally leaving clues that would lead to the next rendezvous. This is how it worked. I would overhear her discussing the itinerary with her friend, freckly Tasmanian Rebecca, and then I'd announce my next destination which was unfortunately nowhere near where they were going. That was one technique. The other was trickier. I would say that I would be in either one of several places, in perhaps one or two weeks time, I could not be sure. Invariably, Rachel and Rebecca would select the right place at the right time, picking out of the various probabilities the correct junction. There is no doubt that Rachel and I were meant, by whatever fates were reigning, to be lovers on this journey, though that would never happen due to my strange defiance. As if to prove that one can rebel against fate.

*I have seen the slaves sleeping on the veranda, in the checkered shade of the lattice streaked with the writhing shade of the palm leaves, heads propped on a chunk of*

sandstone in which perhaps dwelled some genie of a sandman, so unbothered their sleep seemed though their faces, in the waking world, were drizzled with darting, nibbling flies taking turns in beady rows. When you sleep every night with a rock for your pillow you begin to make minute distinctions, and categorize and compare current rock pillows to previous rock pillows, and you acquire eventually the skill to discern that one rock is softer than another, that one stone is better as a pillow than another stone, or, one hard edge is better for one part of the nape and another smooth contour is better for one side of the head than, say, a flat, flinty edge, which may be good for the temples but not the pate. Indeed, there have been whole slave wars waged over the rightful share of desirable rock pillows, one slave faction clamouring for its right to a certain precious lump from a favoured pit and another crying foul, its heads deprived of the soft rocks owed to it by their various entitlements. These slave wars have often involved the hurtling through space of the very rocks called into contest by the wars, so that, one soon suspected, the entire controversy had been devised by the rocks themselves, in order for them to obtain some means of locomotion, which they would not be able to do without the rock wars, they themselves but being rocks.

I met Jimbo on the bus. Blonde, short, muscular, a crane operator from Perth. I needed a roommate. One night in the Marley Bar (Bob Marley was the only offering on the stereo), he and I were playing backgammon with, who else, Rachel and Rebecca. He was holding Rachel's fingers in his hand, gawking at her cleavage as she explained that she had picked up the silver ring with triangular patterns in Nepal. Jimbo pulled it off her finger and while attempting a careful and reverent inspection promptly dropped it onto the floor. He then urgently rammed his knees into the cement as he went looking for it under the table, knocking into her thigh and stopping to look at her legs, which were shaved and tan. He then went crawling under the table next to ours in search of Rachel's ring, stopping to look at the legs on display there as well. Rachel asked me to walk her back to her room, a few streets over. I don't remember how I avoided going into her room—somehow I made it back to Jimbo, to backgammon, to Bob Marley, to Rebecca flipping through the CDs. Why was I so determined to avoid sleeping with Rachel? Why? Because. Because her cheeks were a little orange, and I didn't like her taste in music. Also, she said "Oh



man” a lot and one eye looked bigger than the other. I just didn’t want to be obligated to spend much time with someone having those qualities. In retrospect she would have been the perfect lover for that trip. My reasons for rejecting Rachel’s overtures were ridiculous, of course, but at the time seemed reasonable. Zorba the Greek would not have run away from her. He would not run from an obese fifty year old widow, either. I was not living up to the Zorba love-making ethic.

*Have you never known the pleasure of serving a master? Experienced that natural inflection of your will before another’s, the easy surrender and going down that every blade of grass knows in a strong wind, or every chunk of driftwood in a current? Or are you a stone in a brook with sharp edges, a tree limb which snaps off in a storm and impales the cattle? Are you something hard and stiff like all that? Slavery is a choice, a lifestyle—try it, you might like it. But remember—slaves may only speak when spoken to by non-slaves. Or, they may speak to themselves. Also, they may not speak to each other unless a non-slave is not around. Furthermore, slave-owners are advised to only mix together slaves from disparate tribes in order to prohibit coherent communication between them, and encourage conflict in addition. That’s the way to do it—diversify your portfolio.*

A sound like a far-off lawn mower, growing louder. A truck pulled out of the tall grass and stopped. The driver, an old man with a white mustache, seemed bemused. Something else on that mug, inscrutable. He waved his hand at me, did it again, either signifying go away or come over here, I couldn’t tell. I opted for approaching and said, “Tatvan.” He said, “Tatvan,” then waved again. I stood there. “Tatvan?” He reached across and opened the passenger door.

We rode along for a while. He mostly said things I couldn’t understand. I didn’t want to nod my head and feign understanding, caught myself shrugging my shoulders instead. That seemed stupid, or at least uncool (always, of course, imagining myself in full view of that imaginary telepathic shepherdess). I then took to opening my palms, splaying my fingers, and furrowed my brow in concentration, as though if I just focused hard enough I’d figure out what he was saying. “England?” he asked. “America,” I said. He yelled loudly, slapping his knee, “America! America, ah. Discotheque.”

*The hushed, whispering, continental migration of giant sand dunes, interceptors of ocean-thrust winds, aid to the dispersal of nomads and guardian of the longevity of legends. To deal with that dry, depthless viscosity, engineers have floated foundations, schemed canals, and devised hovercraft capable of incredible speeds. Of a formal beauty glimpsed only in the dark opacities of glare-free goggles and fish-eye lenses, neutral density filtered. Capable of mercy in the form of occasional puddles. I have read that whole planets are composed of this. Entire worlds formed only of this sub-world, with thousand kilometer per hour winds, fifty-year cyclones, and execution temperatures. Every solid particle hewn through cataclysmic collision against every other particle, subsumed in the thrall of forces neither its own nor wholly alien to it. In such a wilderness there is no life, just dead things, very busy dead things in ceaseless motion. What's the point, of all that dead energy? What good is a landscape without creatures whose body-needs and soul-dramas push that landscape into the background, where it belongs? Who can care about just background?*

I was struck by the condition of the dashboard—the gaping holes and grimy vents—the way he drove bare-footed and whistling. Where the hell was he going? “Tatvan?” I offered. He whistled. A jellied dragonfly on the windshield gazed at me from its pool of eye. It was getting to be hot, well past noon. I had completely lost sense of where we were in relation to town. I would have to trust this old man to get me back.

Some sheep were blocking the road. The old man laid on his horn like it was the middle of rush hour and someone had fallen asleep at a green light. It seemed unnecessary, shattering the calm of the day. Wouldn't just one quick horn blast do? But the sheep were slow to get it. We plowed through them slowly, engaged in an improvised conversation of honking and bleating. Something definitely was being communicated into the air but who could possibly translate it? The noise contest abated as we broke through that mulling phalanx of puzzled flock. Unexpectedly, the old man slapped my knee, like he was exuberant about some joke we had just shared and meanwhile was swatting a fly.

He pulled off the road into a field alongside a bluff. There were other vehicles parked in the tall grass. There was no road out of here—this was a dead end place. I wanted to say, “Damn, I said I have to go to Tatvan! What the hell are we doing



here?" All I could reasonably communicate, of course, was "Tatvan?" I tried to put some exasperation into it, to get across serious disappointment. I rolled my eyes and looked impatiently out the window. There were people in the cars. In one I thought I saw a man begin to strangle his passenger, grabbing him in a choke hold and smothering his nose. But the act was too slow. It took several moments to dawn on me—they were getting it on. Like two dumb, clumsy oxen, like they were mugging each other, they were figuring it out as they went about it. The old man slapped my knee again, this time more like a pat. Another pat, a little squeeze. I sat there, strategized, and held back a laugh. I didn't want to insult him. I smiled politely. The old man was smiling, too, and I looked at his teeth. I could not imagine having teeth like that. Bad dream teeth, Freud's death-wish teeth, Cubist teeth, what few there were, each investigating a different geometrical plane, no common coordinates between them, an assemblage of angles and a palette of yellows, browns, and grays. The wiggling tongue spasms behind them. May I never have a mouth like that, I thought. An old peasant's mouth.

I was still smiling politely. Of course I was gripping the door handle and gesturing, nodding, thanks for the ride, it was very gracious of you, I'll be on my way now, I've got to meet up with some people now. He raised his eyebrows, questioning me. Are you sure? Do you really want to go? Think about the benefits of not going away.

*It is not exactly that they are poor. It is only that some of us went through an industrial revolution, electrification, and finally, cyber-spatialization. Some billions of us, however, did not. They are reiterating an old pattern, like a shape with outlines growing thicker as it is retraced over and over, whereas we have placed all our bets on the future. A few hundred years ago we would be indistinguishable from them. They are not deprived versions of us, but are rather so far at the back of the race that the police have long since removed the barricades.*

I found a trail leading away from that scene, too narrow for any truck to maneuver, but I wasn't concerned that I'd be followed. A few yards into the grass I heard the truck start up, he was giving up on me and would now have to resume whatever errand he had originally been on. Unless this was his errand. Maybe I had

stumbled onto some lovers' path, the left turn, maybe a young man walking along that road at that time of day signified something definite to him, to others like him. Maybe he was just taking a chance.

*Right now some sop is out there in that old battle field, mining the sand with a metal detector, looking for salvage, some souvenir, a momentous curio for the flea markets. The idiot analyses the clicking in his headphones, shovel ready in hand, stoops and starts to dig at the rust. Later you see them on the streets, starved and deranged skeletons with eager and hopeful eyes when you consider their junk with pity. Some shell casing to be bartered for bread, or a melted, wadded bayonet to amaze the illiterate tribals, maybe get a corn rusk or two for them.*

I aimed for the cliff and found some goat paths that were navigable. As a Capricorn, I called upon the great goat spirit to steady my steps and guide me home, home currently being a hotel room in Tatvan. It was a lovely walk, those goat trails, which very quickly ceased to be trails and became more like guesses. Here and there invisible sign posts read, "Try this way—you probably won't fall," and "The fall isn't too bad over here." The "path" wound and crumbled, forked and hugged the escarpment's precipitous outcroppings and ridges as I uneventfully made my way to the top within an hour. I photographed the plateau, its edges breaking apart into a maze of gullies, sheer drops, and gentle rises. I discerned mountains at the horizons—the plains did not go on indefinitely. There was a sense of encirclement, of being in the middle of something. Here and there a goat, a creamy dot speckling the grass. Serious and frozen things, sniffing.

*Does it matter if one chooses not to write one's name on walls already covered with the names of previous visitors? One cannot deface what is already clearly defaced, tomb or no tomb. Then a thought appeared, gently, in the manner of a mild superstition being born. I came to imagine the spirit of the deceased, who lay here somewhere beneath me in the ground, or more likely hovering above it, not only tolerating the graffiti but over the centuries coming to appreciate and even need it. In the vesperous infinities of ghost logic there would be some residue of presence left behind by each scrawler which would serve as a community of presences for the spirit, ameliorating the loneliness of time, death, and being forgotten. By choosing finally to take out my key chain and dig into that*

*soft stone the short version of my given name, I would be enriching the life of a lifeless soul, exchanging a bit of my being for some of its nonbeing. Giving it some company. Or something like that.*

The bluff was a clue. Somewhere nearby had to be the river which formed it over the aeons. I brought out the map and looked for river lines, noticed plenty of blue veins and beige patches in which I might be standing. Sans compass, careful observations and measurement, the map was less a reference and more a reminder as to the possible uses of maps. I picked a direction as though commitments could be arbitrary, and walked past a bull in a tree. On a ridge grew a tree with a forked trunk like a Y, and propped into the junction of the split trunk stood a bull, one forked trunk under each arm pit, standing resolutely still as though at attention, with a head that refused to move perhaps out of embarrassment, stoically accepting the flies. The bull stood as if intending to stand that way, with forelegs on the front side of the Y, hind legs on the other, and no way to un-prop itself from this entanglement. It's horns made for an additional branching, so one might add something like handlebars to the Y's midpoint to get a sense of the geometry of that spectacle. I had taken my last photo hours ago, and trusted the scene to memory. I turned my back on the only bull I ever saw trapped in a tree, who perhaps became the only bull skeleton someone else would see at the base of a tree.

*A lone hiker watches the sun unravel in tails of light, and the moon slide out from behind a purple peak, happy at the distant sound of the saz and the char scent of lamb as an invisible village solidifies in the shadows, his currency, wadded though it is, welcome as any other. That he has enough stashed in his pockets for many more meals of this kind is proof intangible of chances taken and not known to be taken, and risks accomplished as easily as not taking them, that one can cross a country or a street and either be struck by a speeding camel or make it to the other side in one piece with no credit due to one's looking both ways. He hears old melodies and learns new words. In this way, the others receive him.*