

# ARCHIPELAGO

An International Journal of Literature, the Arts, and Opinion  
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Vol. 2, No. 1 Spring 1998

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tr. from the Hebrew by the Author

*Conversation:* About Publishing,  
with CORNELIA and MICHAEL BESSIE  
Part 2

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from MUSIC TO FORGET AN ISLAND BY/  
MÚSICA PARA OLVIDAR UNA ISLA

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# ARCHIPELAGO

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## In Memorium Anna Maria Ortese 1914-1998

Anna Maria Ortese was born in Naples. Her first book, a collection of stories published in 1937, was acclaimed by the writer Massimo Bontempielli as the work of a major new "magical realist." She wrote more than a dozen volumes of stories, novels, and essays, and was the recipient of Italian literary prizes, among them Strega, the Premio Viareggio, and the Fiuggi. Although for fifty years her writing reached relatively small audiences, her most recent works appeared on the Italian bestseller lists. In 1986, her novel, THE IGUANA, appeared in an English translation by Henry Martin, published by McPherson & Company, who also publish two volumes of Ortese's stories under the title A MUSIC BEHIND A WALL. In England, her fantastical novel THE LAMENT OF THE LINNET, tr. Patrick Creigh, was published by The Harvill Press. Her story "The Great Street" appeared in the inaugural issue of *Archipelago*.

## Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor,

I greatly enjoyed the first of your two-part conversation with Cornelia and Michael Bessie. Set against the backdrop of today's book business, careers like theirs look extraordinary, heroic: trumpets blaring, banners flapping in the wind.

I have an especial affection, of course, for Michael Bessie's work, because he published my father's first novel. The novel had been under contract to Random House. Bob Linscott was the editor. He had not approved of an early version, and the despair my father felt at that rejection was quite genuine. In his journal, he wrote, "Still no word from Linscott. This seems to imply no enthusiasm, and if the work I've sent him is bad I have made some grave mistakes. My eyes are wrong, my heart is wrong, and I have been mistaken in listening for all these years to the rain."

"These old bones are up for sale," he wrote to Bessie, who asked him "where should I send the check?"

Good books are not always a commercial success. Interviewing Marion Boyars for *Archipelago* (Autumn 1997), Katherine McNamara asked "Do you think there was a time when the readership was more secure than it is now?" "No; no," said Boyars. "I'll give you an example: George Gissing, *THE PRIVATE PAPERS OF HENRY RYCROFT*; wonderful book. When it was published, in 1902, it sold sixteen copies."

*THE WAPSHOT CHRONICLE* was a success. It won National Book Award. I would say that it was a best seller, but to say that is to make myself part of the problem. It was a good book, it is a good book. And that's the bottom line.

BENJAMIN H. CHEEVER  
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*Benjamin Cheever is a novelist and a Contributing Editor of Archipelago. His "Confessions of a Lover, Spurned" appeared in our inaugural issue. The conversation with Marion Boyars appeared in Vol. 1, No. 2, and the first part of the conversation with the Bessies, in our last issue.*

## IN THE GARDEN

### Viriditas Digitalis

May I say a few words about getting older?

Thank you.

The subject is particularly on my mind -- and, I wager, on the minds of many other gardeners in the post-whippersnapper phase of life -- as spring advances on us. The obligations of the moment are growing all too apparent, as the first ominous dumptruck-load of mulch wings its way to the Capistrano of one's very own property, and suddenly indoor comforts are 1) nothing but a distant memory or 2) still an actuality, but a guilty one.

In my youth, a couple of years ago, I actually used to look forward to these vernal displays of renewal etc., bolting forth wild-eyed from hibernation to take up arms against the natural world and, by opposing, nearly end it. Weighty bales of peat moss were as microchips to me in those halcyon days. Though typically I react to unscheduled visits by peering suspiciously through a slit in the Venetian blinds and then not answering the door, I rejoiced at unannounced appearances by friends, whose presence gave me the opportunity to strike attitudes in front of the lavender bed.

Gradually, however, certain facts began to emerge. One of these was that for each full day I spent hauling brush, digging holes into the nearest water main or underground cable, or grubbing weeds out of the flower beds on my hands and knees, I would have to spend one full day sniveling in bed in a state of semi-paralysis. Too, mishaps abounded. To cite only one of the more unhappy examples, even a childhood spent watching cartoons did not prevent me from actually sawing off a tree limb I was sitting on. In short, I confronted the pusillanimous need for yard help.

So I lined some up. During a recent visit, my friend Rosamund had grown as rhapsodic as her personal demeanor of elegant reserve would allow concerning the merits of her free-lance yard man, Lewis. I insisted she hand over his telephone number without delay, which she did, and I phoned him up and arranged for him to stop by my place on the following day.

At lunch time I hurried home from the office and found him already waiting for me. As a specimen he was something of a disappointment: hardly Bunyanesque (well -- maybe John, but not Paul), his appearance was that of a pipe-cleaner fitted out with a baseball cap and an expression of the highest possible self-regard. I looked him up and down and felt I might make short work of him in hand-to-hand combat should the need arise -- a prescient thought, as it turned out.

I suggested we make a quick survey of the terrain so that I could point out what I wanted him to do. In these tasks -- specifically, edging the flower and shrub beds and spreading mulch thereon -- he displayed a complete lack of interest, preferring instead to quote himself reverently on a wide variety of horticultural topics, and stopping at one point to recite an appalling bit of doggerel which fortunately I have forgotten.

Wresting him from these stream-of-consciousness ruminations, I steered him with some difficulty to the mulch pile.

"I'd like you to start at this edge and pull the pile away from the rhododendrons. It's smothering them," I told him. I felt a little guilty issuing this directive. After all, here I stood, to all appearances somewhat able-bodied or at least able to walk on my own steam, indolently parceling out the dirty work to someone else so that I could, perhaps, loll about in a deck chair on the terrace, filing my nails.

I needn't have worried, though, because Lewis slid his eyes away from the mulch pile as quickly as ever he could. Apparently it was foul and unseemly in some way beyond my comprehension.

"You want to pull this ivy out of these trees," he advised, craning upward. "That English ivy, it's one of my pet peeves. It'll kill a tree. Like I always say--"

But here I cut him short, feeling that I had already had a representative sampling of what he always said, and needing to get back to my office. "Be sure to edge out the beds sharply," I reminded him, fully aware that I myself had never done such a thing in all my days.

"Don't worry," he sniffed with a faintly injured air. "I'll get it looking good. I always do."

I didn't care for his thank-god-you-called-me-in-time implication. I liked it even less when he leaned confidentially against my truck on one razor-sharp elbow as I was trying to pull away. "I've got a lot of good ideas," he informed me, by way of farewell. "I'm kind of an idea guy."

"I don't want you to have any ideas," I replied, gunning the engine. "I just want you to mulch the beds."

For the rest of the afternoon I fretted mildly, but by degrees the idea that I might actually come home from work and find things looking spruce and ship-shape took hold, and by six o'clock I'd begun to feel pleased at having divested myself of a certain amount of inconvenient, if necessary, labor. I had a quick dinner with a friend and hurried home afterward, straining to see in the gathering darkness.

The first thing I noticed as I started up the front walk was a looming shape that I gradually identified as a brush pile. Surprisingly long sticks were poking out of it here and there. Concerned, I turned to survey the beds, approximately one-tenth of which had received a haphazard coating of mulch. Something seemed seriously amiss, and with dawning horror I realized what it was.

For five years I had been painstakingly training the noisette rose "Mme. Alfred Carrière" to climb up a dogwood tree in the front yard. Only

that morning I had noted with satisfaction that it had finally reached the crown of the tree and would doubtless be tumbling down in a great white waterfall by May. Unfortunately, its network of canes had caught the vigilant, ivy-seeking eye of Lewis, the idea guy. Perhaps bored with applying teaspoonsful of mulch here and there on the beds, he had gone to work on "Mme. A. C." with a vengeance. Left of the erstwhile showpiece were two naked canes approximately two feet in length.

It wasn't until the next morning that I was able to comprehend the entirety of Lewis's ministrations. He had demolished two "Henryii" clematis that I had been weaving into a shrubby clump of the hybrid musk rose "Felicia." Apparently after the orgiastic rooting-out process Lewis had been too spent to remove the broomstraw-thin clematis stems from "Felicia"'s clutches: they drooped about here and there, stirring dispiritedly in the occasional breeze. A passing tumbleweed would not have been out of place in the tableau. Repeated urgent calls to Lewis's household went unanswered: perhaps he had already decamped, leaving no clue as to the pathology behind the massacre.

I have been trying to look at all this philosophically. Naturally I blame society, and Lewis of course, but after that -- a distant third -- I blame myself. What could I, an unfit parent, expect, having hastily dropped off dear little Dick and Jane at the Medea Day Care Center and sped away? Though I am disinclined to view life as a series of edifying parables, several possible interpretations of the events suggest themselves:

1) If you want a thing done a certain way, don't think playing the age or infirmity card is going to get others to do it like that; ergo, do it yourself even if it kills you.

2) Skirting the Scylla of neglect, it is possible to run afoul of the Charybdis of destruction.

And finally,

3) If anyone ever, within the context of your personal earthly paradise, tells you that he's an "idea guy," go directly into your house, come out with the nearest shotgun or revolver, and tell him to get the hell off of your property before you blow him to Kingdom Come.

FIVE POEMS

MOSHE BENARROCH

*tr. from the Hebrew by the Author*

*your thousand lovers*

sometimes when I lie near you  
I think of your thousand lovers  
those you loved  
those who bought you  
those who deluded you  
who exploited you  
who took advantage of your dreams  
those you used  
those who desired you  
those who used you  
I think of your thousand lovers  
think of them and I want you  
more, think of them and become  
angry with myself  
angry with them  
angry with my abysmal loneliness  
with my fear of women  
with my fear of you  
when I think of your thousand lovers  
about your crazy life before me  
I can't understand what happened to us  
two lunatics, how two lunatics  
become after x years boring  
deadly boring, when I think of your  
thousand lovers I love you more,  
I hate you I want you, you repel me  
when I think of your thousand lovers  
When I think you are the only lover in my life I am proud,  
I am angry I want you, I want to kill you  
when I think about my gorgeous, universal loneliness,  
about my fear of women, of the thousand women  
who wanted me, from whom I run away  
whom I drove away When I think of your thousand lovers  
and see you staring at me with your naivety I want to embrace you,  
I want to strangle you I feel I am going crazy



where are you? where are you?  
 I want you, I don't know you  
 I don't recognize you, who are you?  
 when I think of your thousand lovers  
 of those who loved you  
 those enchanted by your eagerness  
 those who bought you with money, with presents  
 those who hated you those who wanted to dominate you  
 who am I, when I think of those  
 who visited you before me, before I knew you  
 who are you when I think of your thousand lovers  
 who am I when I want to lie with other women  
 to be with a thousand women  
 who will love me or not, whom I will love or not  
 Who am I within your thousand lovers  
 within and without your thousand lovers?

*speech of the man after the birth of his first son*

look, he said,  
 while eating a croissant quickly  
 and drinking cappuccino  
 she is so busy with the child  
 she doesn't even think of herself  
 her whole world is the boy  
 so how to think  
 that she'll pay any attention to me  
 attention I need so badly.  
 don't misunderstand me  
 I love her  
 but also need some attention.

*speech of the man after the birth of his second daughter*

look, he said,  
 after he finished his cafe au lait  
 I was always the one to give up  
 but one day I suddenly felt  
 I couldn't compromise anymore  
 I can't communicate with her anymore

and I don't hide our discussions anymore and the tensions,  
 I don't mind if everybody knows  
 I try to survive day by day  
 somehow continue another day  
 but relationship, there's no relationship anymore.  
 oh... I need some warmth  
 someone to give me some warmth,  
 he said while smiling to the girl  
 with the enormous earrings  
 sitting with her two friends  
 in the table near us,  
 how I need some warmth...

*the speech of rabbi Akiva*

how hard this separation  
 from this woman I love  
 or loved  
 how hard this departure  
 if there was no love in it  
 if there were only fights and anger  
 we could say  
 this separation is better than joining  
 but how difficult this separation  
 to set out for a new road  
 from this woman who bore my children  
 who gave me a home  
 who taught me to love  
 who saved me from the dark  
 who helped me study  
 how long and hard this separation.

*the body*

As the tensions grew  
 and silence invaded our lives  
 sex improved  
 intercourses grew longer  
 fuller  
 and more

communicative

as we learned  
each other's body  
silence grew longer  
conversations became  
autistic  
each one in his corner  
quiet and shouting  
roaring and still  
only  
the body  
could express love  
hope and frustration  
all the possibilities  
and the impossibility of being fulfilled.

---

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MUSIC TO FORGET AN ISLAND BY  
*from* MÚSICA PARA OLVIDAR UNA ISLA

Victoria Slavuski  
*translated by* Edith Grossman

The *Selene* dropped anchor under a porcelain blue sky. Beatriz was in the crowd on the shore, waving to Julio as he lurched down the rope ladder holding a bottle in one hand. When he caught sight of her he made an abrupt gesture of greeting, almost fell into the water, and had to be carried to the pier by two sailors. He staggered forward, bumping into some fishermen, and throwing his arms wide he shouted: "Oh, my beloved island, I never should have left you," Selkirk's words that even the tourists learn and, in the knotty confusion between the man and his literary double, almost everyone attributes to Robinson Crusoe. When he embraced Beatriz he lost his balance, and she had to keep him from slipping to the ground. Eladio and Colorado held him between them and helped him to the house. "I can't believe it," he protested, "they're treating me like a drunk." Ada asked what was wrong with him. "His father. . ." Beatriz answered, "you know, a telegram came saying he wasn't well, and then the turmoil, the emptiness. . ."

Ada and Beatriz walked together as they watched the men unload the ship. They talked about Julio's extraordinary eyes, about his lock of prematurely white hair, about how it would be hard to choose between his athlete's shoulders and Eladio's dark, agile grace. The hatches had been opened and they could see into the hold of the *Selene*, its wooden arches illuminated by lanterns, the back-lit figures of fishermen moving cargo about. Beatriz compared the hull and arches to the stomach and rib cage of a dragon, adding that originally there had been no battles between heroes and dragons, as dragons were initially sea monsters that swallowed the hero and, like living ships, transported him in their bellies. She hurriedly turned the talk about Julio to the inner workings of the group's love life: she wanted to create, as quickly as possible, an intimacy that would encourage Ada to confide in her. At first, she said, Julio always talked about his wife's imminent arrival on Juan Fernández, but that never happened. Perhaps the supposed geological research that kept him here was a smoke screen to hide the collapse of his marriage. Beatriz went on: after receiving a letter that ended his relationship with the woman who had been his lover for years, Colorado became involved in a tortuous, short-lived romance with a South African tourist, and in another one, longer and less complicated, with a colleague of Julio's who spent a few months on the island. Pablo was a loner, and except for a turbulent, lethal affair when he was twenty with the woman

who was his professor of literature, his love life was as unfathomable as the angels'. She fell silent, waiting for Ada to speak. "And Beatriz?" Ada asked, surprising her so much that she smiled vaguely, raised her eyebrows, and attempted to change the subject. But Ada insisted and Beatriz said that, like her, she was trying to forget. Her eyes brimming with curiosity, Ada asked what it was she wanted to forget. Beatriz smiled: she would like to forget that she, unlike Ada, had nothing to forget. In her case, she added with a grimace, other people were the ones who had to forget.

"Those two look lost in space," Colorado called as he passed them on his way to the dock with Julio, who was now almost fully recovered.

He had raised his voice to tease them, and they continued joking as they walked together to the *Selene*. The two men must have been talking about Ada, because Julio asked about the documentary. "It's still in the planning stage," she said, lowering her eyes, and Colorado, who did not stop looking at her, offered to help with any material she might need about the island. Julio remarked that on the Mainland there was a good deal of tension, rumors of divisions within the military, the expectation of armed conflicts. He had brought a message from Agualdo's son, who had been sent to a northern garrison, which would delay his return to the island for three months. Colorado said he was fed up with social immaturity on the Mainland, and he asked Julio to talk about something else: one of the advantages of being on Juan Fernández was not having to listen to any more political discussions. Julio said he couldn't make him be quiet, that escapism was the most ambiguous element in Colorado's relationship to the island. If he thought Juan Fernández was not part of the world, Julio insisted, he was profoundly mistaken. Beatriz decided to change the subject by asking Julio if he had heard anything aboard the *Selene* about a certain *don* Willie, but Julio said he hadn't. When Beatriz repeated what Chicho had said, Colorado became very interested: he was writing an article about the Miskito Indian who had been abandoned on the island in the seventeenth century. They were joined by Pablo. Ada walked between him and Colorado, apparently oblivious to the fact that they were rivals for her attention. Julio put his arm around Beatriz' shoulder and pointed to the *Selene*: "The *Caleuche*," he said with a smile. He found it inconceivable that the superstition still survived at this late date. Beatriz moved away and said that myths were reborn all the time, that in 1931 the president of the Chamber of Commerce in Hankou, China, declared that he had seen a dragon emerging from the Khan River, and in 1960, in Andalusia, a newspaper reported sightings of a horned dragon in an orchard in Escobinas.

Everyone was waiting for the men to finish unloading so that Agualdo's would open for business. A good number of volunteers helped with the cases of red Macul that Agualdo and his sons-in-law brought up from the dock in wheelbarrows. "The drought is over," said Eladio, brandishing the first opened bottle. Ada had sunk back into her lethargy and barely noticed the activity around her. Beatriz, in the role of guardian and guide, tried to infect Ada with her own inexhaustible enthusiasm for the

island. She explained that the days preceding the arrival of the *Selene* were characterized by a total abstinence from alcohol. By then the island had been squeezed dry, not even a drop of Eladio's dreadful homemade whiskey remained for emergencies, since the most desperate had already consumed all the alcohol in the infirmary. The appearance of the *Selene*, Beatriz continued, provoked a catharsis: "A return to a state of original innocence, or corruption. Class distinctions are erased. . . ." But Ada, her gaze opaque, insisted on returning to her room. Beatriz practically had to drag her to Agualdo's, repeating over and over again that she could not miss the most important social event in the village, that it was absolutely essential for any documentary about the island.

Nano, who was carrying cases of wine, brushed them as he passed. He turned his head, eyes gleaming: he had done it intentionally. And Beatriz could not take her eyes off his bare torso with its broad shoulders and slender waist, bending and stretching under the weight of the cases. "A fabulous. . ." Beatriz murmured, ". . . body," Ada finished the phrase. "Too bad he's a savage," Beatriz said. "Last month he rode a horse right into Rosa Reed's dining room."

As they spoke, Nano would stop working, put his hands on his hips, and look at them. Then he stretched out in front of Agualdo's door to smoke a cigarette and stare up at the sky. Beatriz felt faint as she followed the line of his long neck, his strong, well-modeled, mestizo chin, his shining hair, the powerful body radiating energy, something flashing in his eyes when their glances met. Ada insisted on leaving, but an idea occurred to Beatriz:

"Don't leave me alone, Ada, please," she said, pointing at Nano. Ada agreed to sit on the schoolhouse steps, diagonally across from Agualdo's. Chicho brought them the second bottle.

According to Pablo, there was a Caucasian proverb that said it was advisable to have at least two reasons for doing anything, and Beatriz had them. One was her preoccupation with Ada. The other was Nano. But most of all, she had spoken of him to nurture the tone of mutual confidences: between two women, establishing the topic "talking-about-men" is decisive and can have incalculable consequences. She thought at the time that Ada might resort to real suicide as a substitute for her symbolic crime, and she believed that if Ada began to tell her story she might exorcise it, at least in part.

"Your Eric. . . was he a savage too?" she asked, not taking her eyes off Nano, hearing how out of place her words sounded beneath the school's deserted eaves as she used the familiar *tú* with Ada for the first time.

"No," Ada said, and she moved first one leg and then the other away, distancing herself from the conversation.

Beatriz filled the two glasses. Ada emptied hers immediately.

"Did you meet him in New York?" Beatriz pressed on, returning to the formal *Ústed* because of how Ada had pulled back, looking at a place where there was nothing to see, discovering at the same time that she could not use

tú with Ada and that a red spider hung from the eaves at about the height of her nose.

“Yes,” she said after a long silence.

Beatriz brushed away the spider and poured more wine. She raised her glass and said:

“To Juan Fernández.”

Ada raised hers and said:

“To New York.”

And that was all she said, apparently intent upon observing the bottom of her empty glass as if the most awful battle on earth were being fought there.

“Ada. . .Ada. . .can you hear me?” said Beatriz, tapping the stem of her glass.

She poured more wine.

“The wind in New York,” Ada said suddenly to herself, “tunnels down the streets at incredible speed. Terrifying. You can’t walk.”

Beatriz intuited that this was the wind pushing Ada toward the beginning of her story. She took her fourth glass of wine and tried to become attuned, allow her sensibility to grow supple and slip into Ada’s world. She closed her eyes in an effort to enter the scene and said:

“A windy day and all alone. That wind makes you feel abandoned.”

“Yes,” said Ada. “I feel so alone I want to stop living, become a figure in a painting.”

“Something unmoving,” Beatriz said, her eyes still closed, imitating Ada’s tone, trying to be Ada, to avert silence.

“One of those days when taking part in the movement of life, the rushing around, the activity, seems horrifying, outrageous,” Ada continued.

“A time when you want to be part of an unmoving image of happiness,” said Beatriz.

“A painting with a center, like an Annunciation, the Infant Jesus, or anything else, and all around faces shining with expressions of love and joyful surprise. I want to be surrounded by the cruelty of love. That’s what I’m thinking when the wind blows us against the walls.”

“Why are you out walking in that wind?”

“Because it’s Estrella’s birthday, she’s one of my five friends.”

Estrella, Leonora, Luisa, Lois, Paulina. She might see them infrequently, or often, but she spoke to all of them regularly on the phone.

“I’m with Renzo. The wind whips us, pushes us against the buildings, sometimes we can’t walk. My hands are freezing.”

A handful of people in Estrella’s huge, half-finished loft. They talk about the usual things: New York is always its own protagonist in their conversations. They talk about the third man to scale the facade of the World Trade Center. About high rents. About street muggings. About unbelievable scenes witnessed in the subway. About stock prices falling, and interest rates rising. About cocaine replacing opiates. About the Mafia of art gallery owners. Hours go by. They can hear the wind rattling metal blinds against walls.

Always the same people. Never anyone new. Renzo has his coat on, but Estrella asks Ada to sing a song before she goes, corrals her with a guitar. The one about the fisherman. Please, a birthday present. Ada has a tiny repertoire of three partially-learned songs taught to her by the Brazilian who took her to the island for the first time.

With her coat over her arm she began the one she learned on Juan Fernández, and as she sang she could hear the doorbell.

When she finished the song and looked up from the guitar strings, he was there in front of her in his long raincoat, his legs set slightly apart like an undercover police detective. Her glance moved from his shoes to his wrinkled trousers to the hat angled to one side. The apparition seemed to be inspecting her. The stranger who had materialized as if by magic was observing her, standing there in his oversized raincoat, his expression both amiable and sardonic. Gray eyes, light, tousled hair, he looks at her with the smile of someone who has watched her undress through a crack in the door. As Estrella embraced her he applauded, his chin up and his arms stretched toward her, a mannered, theatrical gesture, his head tilted back in a smile that made his eyes disappear. Who was the mysterious visitor who had come out of the night to stand in front of her? “A friend of Kiki’s, a performer and director; the latest thing off-off-Broadway,” whispered Estrella. She introduced them. Ada was a film-editor, and he shook her hand with the same smile of complicity with himself, as if he found everything, absolutely everything, strangely amusing. They sat in a corner, facing each other, he smiled again in the same way, his eyes turned into slits, and said in English, with a heavy accent she could not identify:

“I can see you in my show. With the guitar.”

What show? The one he was directing, it would open soon at the East Theater. Something very free, hardly any structure, with the possibility of infinite variation, “Like life itself,” he said. Now he was speaking with long pauses, with a sultry, husky voice, very serious. All his friends were going to take part. As if it were a party. All of them would do whatever they wanted. But with moments of immobility, as if time had stopped, as if they were living sculptures. Kiki was going to bring her giant iguana. A Frenchwoman he knew was going to prepare crepes on stage. Someone was going to draw on a black curtain with a laser. And Ada could take part, singing in a corner, singing the song she had just been singing, with a guitar.

“With a guitar. In a corner. Singing exactly what you sang just now.”  
Pause. “Brazilian?”

“No, forty per cent Colombian, forty per cent Argentine, twenty per cent Hungarian.”

Ada liked everything. His raincoat that was too long. His creased trousers. His eyes, even when she couldn’t see them (because of his feline Chinese smile). His uncombed hair. His look of a mistreated Peter Pan washed ashore by the night, blown there by the icy wind, a shipwreck survivor with the air of a blind man when he smiled.



Renzo insisted on leaving and Ada begged for more time. The stranger understood and smiled at Renzo again with his Chinese eyes, as if Renzo were really a mirror in which he was smiling at himself. He asked Ada if she liked solving puzzles. She nodded, trying with all her might to look intriguing. He drew something on a piece of paper.

Did Beatriz want Ada to draw it for her? She picked up a stick and touched it nine times to the dry ground in front of the steps where they were sitting:

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Ada -- he smiled with his Chinese eyes -- had to connect all the dots with a single straight line that could be broken only three times. Renzo came over, and he stopped talking but continued to look at her through the slits of his eyes gleaming, perhaps, with the light of marijuana, though Ada found his glance as intoxicating as liquor. Renzo, ignored, tugged at her sleeve, but she could not move. He seemed to be looking at her again ironically. Aloof from his own hint of a smile, ironic toward everything, including himself. Renzo walked to the door. Finally Ada stood up and said:

“And if I can’t solve it?”

“It isn’t important. Good-bye. Good luck.”

The stranger continued to smile, as if it amused him enormously that Ada, who had just come into his life, would instantly and forever vanish from it, her song unsung, the puzzle unsolved.

“Good-bye,” he said again, his smile broadening, his eyebrows raised so high it seemed as if they were about to fly off his face, as if he did not see Renzo’s increasingly somber face staring at him from the door.

“I’d like to know the answer,” Ada said in a faint voice.

The stranger shrugged, looked at Renzo, and said:

“Good-bye.”

“Could you write it down for me on the back of the paper?” Ada asked, her voice even fainter, not knowing what she was saying, speaking only to prolong their time together, put off the moment of parting. “I won’t look at it until I solve it,” she added, gazing straight into his eyes. “I promise,” her smile promising other things.

He looked at her one last time with his Chinese eyes, took the paper and wrote something. Ada left, Renzo pulling her by the wrist because her hand held the piece of paper. In the elevator she sneaked a glance at it. He had written a cryptic message, “Before you ask the answer is no,” and beside it a telephone number without a name: the first three digits meant he lived somewhere on the Lower West Side.

“I was lost, do you understand? Lost. Thunderstruck.”

“Could you sing the song for me?” asked Beatriz.

"It's gone, you know? Forgotten. I've forgotten the words."

"Hum it," said Beatriz.

Ada edged away from her.

"Why?" she asked, her tone fearful.

"Because I can't picture the two of you," Beatriz replied, "and I can't imagine you've sung it since then. The song may help."

Ada stood, and stumbled; she was very pale.

"You want to steal the beginning of my story from me," she said, her eyes made bigger by the wine.

Ada stepped back, then turned and began to walk away, taking great strides and holding her shoulders high. Chicho, who must have been watching nearby, immediately appeared.

"She left," Beatriz said with a shrug.

Chicho gave her a reproachful look and ran after Ada. Beatriz followed him, they caught up to Ada, and eventually began nudging her toward Agualdo's.

"You can't miss it, it's the most important day on the island," Beatriz repeated.

Beatriz tried to keep her balance in the eye of a small hurricane of contradictory feelings: exhausted by the effort to enter Ada's world, encouraged because at last she had begun to tell her story, disturbed because she had tried to run away. Why, in so short a time, had helping Ada become so important? It unsettled her but she found it more crucial than her own equilibrium. Keeping her balance: a constant, for Beatriz. Watching over her emotions, cutting them back the way Japanese gardeners prune dwarf trees, sacrificing intensity for the sake of composure.

Nano was still smoking in front of the door, and his eyes flashed when he moved back slightly to let them pass, though Beatriz could still feel his breath in her ear, the length of his warm body pressing against hers. The rest of the group greeted them from the bar with shouts and raised glasses.

The night was far advanced in Agualdo's, and the smoke made it difficult to breathe. A few fishermen were already lying on the floor in the corners and Rosa, sitting at the bar on one of the two high stools, guarded on one side by Señor Alexander (to whom she was forever joined in holy matrimony) and on the other by the Chief of Police (to whom she was momentarily joined by the thumb he had placed between the seat and her thigh) presided over the scene, dressed in red like a devouring goddess wreathed in smoke, her face rosy from the reflection of her dress, puffing on a long meerschaum cigarette-holder, her eyes obscured by smoke tinged pink by the cellophane around the light bulbs.

"But she's a whale, I mean it, a whale," said Eladio as soon as they came in, an expression of disapproval moving across his dark face.

According to Eladio, her most faithful enemy, chronicler, and commentator, Rosa had put on her bullfighter's "suit of lights," worn only on

special occasions, in honor of the treasure-hunters' arrival. This was a bright red dress covered in sequins, with a double row of flounces and an abysmally plunging neckline. Knotted around her thick neck, and separating it from her square, bloated face and bulging eyes, she wore a tiny gauze handkerchief that, according to Ada, inspired an infinite number of adjectives and, in brief, "made you want to cry."

At Rosa's feet lay Chief, the dog that always managed to show up at the most private parties, and whose head was being patted by the Chief of Police, not because of any sudden affection for the canine species in general or for this dog, his namesake, in particular, but because with each caress he squeezed Rosa's robust calf between thumb and forefinger while she crooned "Bésame, bésame mucho, as if tonight were the very last time."

Pablo had set himself up as Rosa Reed's defender because, Eladio claimed, they were both fat, although their corpulence was as dissimilar as their souls. With his visored cap turned around, which is how he wore it in his rare moments of enthusiasm, Pablo expounded a theory of seduction in a low, musical voice: even the most awful woman could be exciting because the male animal did not respond to the beauty of a body or its movements, did not see a woman's visible form but only her invisible desire to excite him. And he ended by saying: "In other words, these matters are much more spiritual than they seem." Eladio's response to this elaborate discourse was: "But she looks like a whale, damn it, only a prick like you could think a whale's exciting."

Eladio despised Rosa, an old story that began when he bought a piece of land she was after in an area where people once thought the treasure was buried. Relations between them worsened when the Reeds acquired half the stock in Quetzal, the company that flew small planes between the Mainland and the island. Rosa took her revenge for the land purchase by firing Eladio, who was a pilot for the company, alternating this work with managing the Cooperative. Eladio loved flying and he never forgave Rosa for "that low, mean blow." Julio, with a sweet expression, ran his hand through his lock of white hair and said that what Rosa really looked like was a madam and then began talking to Aguinaldo about his son's transfer to the northern garrison because of the political crisis on the Mainland. Ada, with a distracted air, barely listened as Beatriz continued to emphasize the importance of this night in understanding how the island worked: "When the schooner docks, the night and the next morning share no common ground, they belong to different worlds, like two soap bubbles that would burst if they touched."

Rosa ruled over the fall of the diurnal empire. Alcohol made her perspire more and restrain herself less, and she eclipsed her husband, who became increasingly ashen and transparent until he settled in at the end of the bar so as not to see her flirting with the Chief of Police as well as Señor Maximiliano, the grandson of Baron de Kundt, with whom, people said, flirtation had led to procreation. As it grew later she would also flirt with the fishermen, individually and as a group, and they would start to address her as *tú* and touch her body. That was when Juan Renguel would pick up his

guitar and Agualdo's son-in-law his accordion. The fishermen would ask her to dance, and then the last dikes broke. Señor Reed conveniently dozed off where he stood, and it was easy to slip a hand down the front of her dress or pinch her buttocks. Rosa danced -- Eladio described it as clumping -- tirelessly, and with everyone. She had more endurance than the fishermen, who weakened and were flung from her arms as if from a powerful whirlpool, sometimes thrown against the wall, where they panted while another took their place: no matter how much one despised her, it could not be denied that Rosa was the absolute queen of the night at Agualdo's. The men who muttered obscenities as they explored the chasm of her décolletage to the sound of Señor Reed's rhythmic snoring, and returned to their houses with streaks of her orchid-colored rouge on their shirts, were the same ones who, passing her in the village the next day, would remove their hats to greet her and speak in the most formal manner, not daring to look her in the eye. She, the sole representative on the island of an ascendant bourgeoisie.

By now Juan Renguel was singing, and two fishermen asked Ada and Beatriz to dance. Beatriz accepted. Ada refused, making some excuse, but then one of the fishermen unintentionally stepped on her foot. She could not stop him and another man, who was just as drunk, from kneeling down in the middle of the crowd, taking off her sandals, and beginning an endless massage of the wrong foot, while Chicho looked on in alarm.

When Juan Renguel stopped playing for a time, Beatriz picked up the guitar and put it on Ada's lap.

"I'd really like you to sing the song you sang when you met him," she said.

"Why?" asked Ada.

"It's from Juan Fernández isn't it? You learned it here, didn't you? And tonight you could give it back to the island, couldn't you? Get it away from him. It would be a part of killing him off."

Ada listened but did not look at her. Beatriz wanted the mythic first encounter, so deeply embalmed in Ada's memory, to become mixed with Ada's drunkenness here and now, be tainted with the sweat and heavy feet of the fishermen.

"But a string's missing," Ada said, looking at the guitar as if it were an unclassifiable animal.

"A string's always missing," said Beatriz, slipping down to the floor because she could barely stand. "Something's always missing. For instance," and she struggled to her feet, swaying, "now the floor's missing but I'm walking all the same."

Beatriz put the guitar over her shoulder and staggered out of Agualdo's, followed by Ada. They sat down side by side, leaning against the wall that shook with the fishermen's jumping. Her voice breaking, Ada sang the melancholy tune in Portuguese about the fishermen who died *nas ondas verdes do mar*.

After a silence, Ada made a face and said:

"I haven't sung it since that time at Estrella's. How did you know?"

Beatriz shrugged.

“And you, did you find the solution to the puzzle?” she asked.

“I solved it the following week, on a plane to Puerto Rico.”

On a terrace with a view of the turquoise sea through the palm trees, a tropical breeze flutters the paper with the solved puzzle while she talks to the director of the film and watches a large fly trying to drown in her sugary guanábano drink. She thinks about him. Guanábano, and him. Contract in Puerto Rico, and him. Palm trees, and him. Him, and the suicidal fly climbing tentatively up the straw only to fall back into the glass. She imagines herself with her guitar, singing in his show. In the Loiza Aldea Hotel she borrows a guitar and sings over the deafening noise of the air conditioner, or dies of the heat in order to hear herself sing with his ears. She walks along the beach and thinks about encounters. About destiny. About chance. She thinks that chance means the threads in the fabric of destiny, or that destiny is one thread in the fabric of chance. As she runs through a long barrier of seafoam on the turquoise shore of the Caribbean, looking at some boys as they wash their horses in the sea, she thinks about him, thinks that the miraculous is not the endless number of creatures, objects, possibilities, worlds within worlds, that exist on earth, but the possibility of chance bringing them together. Chance advances the wheel of events, is as likely to bring together flies and guanábano drinks as Love’s darting glances. Chance, reflects Ada that bright morning, is not the weapon or instrument of fate but fate’s will, fate itself like a giant cornucopia, an enormous trayful of possibilities always ready to bring together creatures and objects. After this thought thinks her, she wants to go back to New York.

“And in New York?”

Fear. The paper with the solved puzzle, the telephone number, and “Before you ask the answer is no,” spent a week in a vase. Her cleaning woman might have thrown it out. But no, one evening she turned the vase upside-down and out fell the nine dots along with a cigarette butt, a quarter, and the dried corpse of a cockroach. She dialed the number: 925-0236.

She tells him she has the solution to the puzzle. He laughs into the phone. A chasm of a pause, more laughter, why didn’t she stop by? Tomorrow? Domani è troppo tardi, laughter. That afternoon.

That afternoon Ada leaves her work at a run. Her heart is a drum. As she phones, as instructed, from the corner of Canal Street, her joy is almost perfect among the Chinese merchants and vendors of second-hand goods displaying their transistor radios, used eyeglasses, radio parts, decapitated lamps, watches from Taiwan, key rings with whistles. Among the discards of America and the new trash from Hong Kong, a mad beggar infected with the fever of consumerism has arranged for sale on a grimy towel the cracked head of a doll, three rusty screws, and a dented, empty Coca Cola can. Ada looks up, sees his tousled hair at the highest window. He comes down to open the door. In an enormous freight elevator the size of a boxing-ring, they stand in opposite corners and exchange looks, and it’s as if they were already naked with their hands on the other’s body. Ada’s mouth becomes dry on the way

up. The hall is under construction. The dark brown cat greets them, putting its head through the grate of the sliding metal door, its tail erect, then describing figure-eights between Ada's legs, reaffirming feline infinity. When he stoops to pick up the cat, he brushes lingeringly against her calf. A blast of air slams the door shut, and for the first time Ada hears the tinkle of Balinese bells that will mark, like a ritual sign, the times she enters and leaves Eric's world. Papier-mâché puppets, Dutch lace curtains dyed black. Oriental sculptures. A small collection of wooden weathervanes from New England: a woman washing clothes, a man riding a bicycle, two pigs that made her blush when he, with his Chinese eyes, moved a lever and one stood on its hind legs, revealing a phallus of orange wood that was introduced repeatedly into an opening beneath the corkscrew tail of the other. A huge room with seven ogive windows, in a corner a mock stage and a row of purple velvet seats with broken bottoms. While she was looking at the stage, a frantic green chaos swooped down, hitting her face, until it was transformed into a parrot that landed on her shoulder and dug its claws through her sweater. "How shocking!" shrieked the parrot, and Ada had to stand perfectly still until he got it onto an ivory rod and carried it to its cage. He watches as Ada regains her composure, mute in his heavy kimono, his curled-toe calf slippers, and he opens his hand, waiting for something. She passes him an ashtray. He laughs. He touches her handbag. The puzzle, the very reason for her visit -- he remembers its original purpose, which she has forgotten completely. He sits on a black velvet sofa as damaged as the chairs. He invites her to sit beside him and puts his arm behind her, resting it on the back of the sofa, but for a moment it goes around her as he unfolds the paper. The cat jumps on his lap, he strokes it, and once again Ada is also in his arms, and feeling them for the second time she swallows saliva, fearing he can hear her, but her mouth still produces more while he barely moves, his arms brushing against her though he seems absorbed in the cat and the paper.

"Fantastic," he said. "Perfect. Congratulations."

How long did it take her to do it?

"Not long," she said. "An hour."

"Fantastic," he said.

She asks him for another puzzle (she wants to impress him with her sagacity). The rows of matchsticks. She knows it, and says: "The one who starts wins" (she wants to impress him with her veracity). Things that are hard to do? She can wiggle her ears. He can touch his little finger to his palm without moving his other fingers. She crosses her eyes. So does he. She takes her nose in one hand and an ear in the other, and then her nose and the other ear, crossing her hands. He tries, takes hold of his nose and one ear, then pinches his cheek and pokes a finger in his eye. She laughs. Annoyed, he says there's nothing more ridiculous than fear of being ridiculous.

He shows her photographs of his "living sculpture." "How shocking," says the parrot. An ecstatic Ada peruses, admires. He watches her, intently, in silence, with his smile and slitted eyes.

Ada finds him charming. She finds everything about him charming. His house. His parrot. His cat. His aloof irony. His voice. His height. His fingers. The way he raises his chin slightly when he says “fantastic.”

It has grown dark, and he has an opening on Broadway. They say good-bye. He turns on the light. In silence they watch the cat stretch as if it were an act of enormous importance. They don't speak. They speak at the same time. They say nothing. Again they speak in unison. They laugh. Will they see each other again? Of course. They agree that he'll have supper at her place some day during the week, he didn't know which day because he hated to plan ahead.

And after that first supper at her house, which Ada doesn't want to talk about and when it's clear they make love, the conventional New York art-world beginning begins, intense though they see each other seldom, and always at night, he being the one who determines the duration of their meetings and the length of their separations, which are frequent because he travels a great deal to promote his immobile theater, or works alone in his studio, in front of a maquette for days and nights on end, not going out. Each night without him she studies her naked body as if the mirror were his eyes, tries on underclothes for him, presses herself against the cold mirror. Although she is waiting to make her stage debut to sing her song in a corner *con la guitarra*, he never again refers to the show in which he suggested she appear. Ada mentions it once and he merely looks at her and smiles with his Chinese eyes. One day, when she's in the studio editing a documentary on Africa, and images of disemboweled wild animals move across the viewfinder, Ada realizes that without realizing it she has fallen in love. What does she call falling in love? The fact that his image begins to spread across her life like a halo of light moving at dizzying speed, superimposing streaks of brilliance over everything, even when she's looking at zebras torn apart by lions, lions destroyed by hunters: to her everything seems just millimeters away from bliss, everything seems to find unity and vindication in unending harmony. How has she fallen in love? Madly. When? Too late. Why? Because it is impossible to turn back. When? Too soon. Why? Because it is impossible to turn back. Why turn back? Because his attitude was and is ambiguous, full of sidelong glances and my life is mysterious and it's better to say nothing than to ask.

When he makes a date with her, Ada cannot walk to his house. Her feet move faster and faster, she breaks into a run like an animal set free, or floors the accelerator and drives through red lights. The streets are alive with mercurial energy, the blocks around his house percolate, a half-opened shutter where a white curtain flutters makes her shiver with pleasure, a bas-relief of acanthus leaves above a majestic window makes her tremble, her nostrils dilate, the false columns of factories dating back to the industrial revolution vibrate, swollen with sensuality as she approaches the magnetic pole: he, waiting for her in front of his maquette on the top floor on Lispenard Street above the sweatshop where day and night two hundred Chinese women incessantly sew baby clothes in every color on two hundred

sewing machines. Sometimes three or four of them come to the window beneath the window where his chin appears foreshortened and he throws down the key. The greasy smell, the groaning of the freight elevator, excite her, they are charged with anticipation, with the vertigo of love which is nothing more than the movement that carries what I am toward what I am not, in a flood, in a torrent.

He, on the other hand, does not yield. She chooses not to know whether he is afraid, or slow, or refining a hit-and-run strategy, like a thief in the night. Ada follows his lead so as not to destroy an equilibrium that she guesses is precarious. He is a master of distance, he unrolls it like a carpet, spreading it out before them. Does she want to know why? No. Nor does she want to know if there's another life in his life. She doesn't even want to know that she doesn't want to know. She makes small, quiet gestures of love, sensing that if she dances more freely their limbs will collide, the mechanism will fail, she will invite sorrow, separation.

How did she dare to enter the house of love without knocking, without asking if she was expected? The house of love, or of misfortune?

"Ah," Ada replies, her expression mysterious, "that confidence comes from the way he makes love."

From the way he holds her "after." He knows how to make love. After his knowing, he rests his head on her belly, pressing as if he wanted to lose himself inside her. But he sees her only at night, very late, after his life. Never during the day. Only late, very late, after his life, to make love. In his loft bed that you climb to on a ladder, he feeds her by hand and Ada feels like a bird in a nest. He drops smoked oysters into her mouth, ergo he loves her. Kiki phones in the middle of the night, when he's big inside her. The iguana ate some of Kiki's jewelry. He raises his voice, leave him in peace, call the Red Cross, he wasn't a veterinarian. Kiki produced his pictures but that didn't give her the right. Ada throws her arms around his neck, in the center of his life.

Sometimes he tortures her. Pushes her gently until she falls on her back, opens her clothing and looks at her breasts. He doesn't touch her. He lowers her slip. He crouches, puts his tongue in her navel, moves it in a circle, holds it flat and very slowly, kneeling over her, traces a line of saliva from her navel to her sex, pulls her pubic hair up and back. He laps. He sucks. Again he licks, from her navel to the bottom of her breast. Too slowly he follows the curve of her breast, and when he reaches the hardened nipple with his sucking lips he aspirates and lifts his mouth and in the wave of breath Ada sees her nipple lengthen and slowly emerge from his mouth and he doesn't let go until the elongated, misshapen tip stretches and breaks free quivering like a spring, then suddenly recovers its original shape. At times he does the same thing below her waist, presses her clitoris between his lips and releases it slowly, pulling on it. Then Ada grows desperate, crying out at the pain of her nipple or clitoris becoming hers again. And he remains kneeling and looks at her again. She wants him to swallow her, absorb her, devour her. But he does nothing, only watches how Ada's breathing arches with the tide,



anticipating the wave of pleasure, asking for more, but no, he leaves the wave paralyzed, frozen, and Ada opens her eyes and stares at him. In her look perplexity, the tumult of her senses. He does not move. Until she, in a frenzy, panting like a windstorm, throws her arms around him and embraces him pleads with him begs him bites him implores him reproaches him pinches him and he grows enormous below his Chinese eyes. And only when she is almost weeping with desire and wants to die, only then does he storm her like a machine, like the piston strokes of a majestic, gleaming old steam engine, until she dissolves into cries, falls away into sighs.

One day he breaks it off. Completely. She leaves increasingly desperate messages on his answering machine, but he doesn't return her calls. When she does reach him he is with Kiki, he can't talk because the iguana is fighting with his cat. But he doesn't call back. Doesn't call back the next day, the next three days. On the fourth day he answers the phone. They need him. She and her body. His voice sounds as if it were coming through a tunnel. Very far away. Ada pleads, reproaches, demands, he becomes furious, they hang up. She leaves two apologetic messages, but he doesn't return the calls. She thinks of her pain as a bandage around a cut that won't heal, the sign of a much greater affliction that is hers alone, and for which Eric is not responsible. He can't. Not today or tomorrow. He's very busy. Day and night. One day she understands, emerges from her sorrow. Cries her way to forgetting. Day and night. A month goes by. Another month goes by. By the third month she forgets, convalesces, is cured. She studies African dance and paints with a Japanese brush. She sees the five women who are her friends. She doesn't talk to them about Eric anymore. But underneath there's still a hum, a noise running round and round, a constant uneasiness. As if she had left a cigarette burning, or the iron plugged in. One sunlit day she's on Fifth Avenue, turns onto 57th Street, passes a shop where mannequins sunbathe on real sand in striped swim suits and dark glasses, and while she looks at a blue cellophane sea trembling in currents of air from fans to simulate waves, all at once she feels a sudden calm, a foolish calm, the calm one feels after finishing a puzzle. As she opens the door to her apartment, the telephone rings. Eric has just come back from a month in Holland. That's why he didn't call. But now she's the one who doesn't call. She resists. She ties herself to the mast. He calls the next morning. He says she has to see his new Paris haircut. He summons her. He has to make love to her. Now. Take a cab. Ada refuses. She practices African dance. She paints with the Japanese brush. She sees her five friends. He insists, she resists. Weakness of the flesh? The past, the scars of childhood? She succumbs. Relapses. Back into the trembling, the uproar in her blood, the music in her bones.

"Ah, love, love," said Beatriz as she stood and began to whirl around, her eyes half-closed, one arm extended and the other encircling the air at chest height, as if she were waltzing with an invisible partner.

The floor at Agualdo's reverberated with dancing feet that sounded like galloping, and perhaps through association she recalled the old metaphor comparing man to a carriage pulled by horses that are his emotions. In

alcohol-induced confusion, as she danced alone and spun around, she imagined that she, Beatriz, could be represented as a carriage drawn by miniature, transparent ponies, or horses controlled to the maximum by the driver. That's why she had the feeling her life was not moving ahead. Just the reverse was true of Ada. Perhaps it was the contrast that attracted Beatriz to her story and compelled Ada to tell it to her: perhaps the two of them were opposite sides of the same lack of proportion. Ada's horses would be powerful, her driver too weak or distracted to rein them in. Her carriage finally halted by bolting horses, Ada too must feel as if her life were going nowhere. Still waltzing, she looked at her. Ada, who watched Beatriz as if she knew she was thinking about her, walked over to her and into her arms. They danced, laughing wildly and stumbling over the loose planks of the wooden terrace under the starry, moonless sky.

When the waltz ended, they stopped dancing and were startled by a burst of applause. Almost all of Agualdo's patrons, in a state of staggering inebriation, had crowded at the door to watch them.

When the music began again, Chicho approached Ada, Eladio came over to Beatriz, and the four of them danced island style, hopping and bending their waists from side to side. Several pairs of men came out to the terrace and joined the dance, but they crashed into each other in twos and threes and fell over each other to the uproarious laughter of those who were not dancing but gradually ended up on the floor as well. The culminating moment came when Rosa, dancing at full tilt, slipped and fell, legs sprawling, in the middle of the terrace, her sequined dress ripped up to her waist. The Chief of Police, her husband, and Señor Maximiliano, who covered her thighs with his jacket, bore her away in solemn procession, the three of them barely able to carry her. "Hunters and the wounded buffalo," whispered Eladio between hiccups. With all his customers outside, Agualdo began to close up.

Someone suggested building a bonfire on Boulder Beach, and the members of the group, followed by a dozen fishermen, headed for the ocean. They left the bubble of light around Agualdo's and entered the total darkness of the new moon. They had to hold on to one another to keep from falling. They formed a long, wavering, fragmented beast with many legs, arms, and heads. A human centipede slithering toward the shore, trailed by a pack of dogs and singing out of tune:

Who can forget  
that unforgettable sight  
the disaster seen  
that unforgettable night  
of March fourteen?

which referred to the sinking of the *Dresden* in 1915. Because of their mariachi style, this and the song of Juan Fernández were best suited to the high emotions of collective drunkenness.

After a while, when they had gone through their repertoire, the size of the group was reduced; many of the fishermen had been left behind, snoring *in situ*, the dogs standing guard and waiting, supposedly, until the men were in condition to take hold of their tails and be pulled home, a legendary canine tradition on the island, whose veracity was the subject of great controversy among the members of the group.

A few fishermen and the group finally reached the beach, accompanied by their adoptive dogs -- Toby, Chief, Tirana, Yougone, and Whereto. Two were Uto's, no one knew who the other owners were, but though no one fed them, at night the dogs always trailed after the group. They sang the island songs again, the dogs filled the pauses with a chorus of howls, and this, combined with Ada's irreversible attack of hiccups, produced a crisis of contagious hilarity. "These dogs may not dance, but at least they can sing," said Pablo, alluding to the dancing cats trained by Selkirk during his endless days of solitude on the island. Eladio interrupted Julio, who was quietly explaining the political crisis on the Mainland to some fishermen: speaking of dancing animals, Julio had to tell them what Rosa said when he danced with her in Agualdo's. They had all seen her whispering into his ear. To the accompaniment of catcalls and whistles, Julio told them he had a date with her in the morning. She had asked him to analyze a soil sample. On Juan Fernández that meant gold, and Eladio proposed an act of revenge: at that time, because of her eviction of Ada and Beatriz, they all shared his animosity toward Rosa Reed.

Opening his eyes very wide to compensate for the lack of volume in his voice, Eladio climbed a rock and murmured: "Don't say she doesn't look like a mastodon," Ada: "A mastodon with a goiter," Chicho: "No, something's wrong with her tonsos," Pablo: "Ton-sils," Beatriz: "And that's why she always wears that tiny little scarf around her neck," Ada: "It makes you want to cry," Eladio: "A bullfighter's scarf round a bull's neck," Ada: "Bésame, bésame mucho. . . ." Eladio, pulling his tee shirt into two empty cone shapes and strutting to show them off: "As if tonight were the very last time." And as he strutted he slipped and fell on the dogs, who began to snap at one another and bark.

Beatriz watched how Eladio stood up in a single agile motion, how his laugh revealed very white teeth in his broad Indian face. Everything about him was silky, oiled: a voice like air, a skin like velvet, something feline and silent in his movements. An absolute anti-intellectual, Eladio allowed himself to live. From a virtual front row seat, Beatriz watched him clowning with the others on stage: she always ended up watching others live, sometimes she even watched herself live. She dwelled in the background, since childhood she had preferred the anonymity of the bystander who listens so as not to reveal anything about herself, hiding with silence, rather than with words and noise, her lack of stories.

It began to grow light. Eladio said that Rosa's son, who lived in Valparaíso, wasn't the child of her husband but of Señor Maximiliano who, they said, was also Nano's real father. That was the reason, a few weeks back, that Nano rode his horse into the dining room at the Pensión De Rosa. With the animal rearing on its hind legs and neighing among overturned tables, he had shouted at Rosa that she could have given birth to him even though she treated him so badly. They say that in her nightdress, her hair in curlers, and with Señor Reed, suddenly gone deaf, standing beside her, she had lowered her head, "like a bull wounded by *banderillas*." One of the fishermen said that The Walker, the only vagabond on the island, was resting in the branch of a nearby tree one day when he saw Señor Maximiliano through her window. His pants were down, he held his erect member in one hand, in the other he had a reed and was tickling Rosa, who lay naked in her bed, covering Señor Reed's snores with a pillow. The Walker was so surprised, and tried so hard to see more, that he fell out of the tree.

Pablo, refusing to defend Rosa, yawned, took off his cap, leaned his head on Beatriz's shoulder, and dozed off. Julio resumed his conversation about the political situation on the Mainland. One by one, as dawn broke, they fell asleep on the beach in the company of the dogs. When they awoke the sun was high, and Julio ran to the Reeds' house. The rest complained about their aching bones and went to the dock to wait for his news.

It was, as Julio said when he came back, just what Eladio predicted. Rosa, who had received him in her bedroom with an icebag on her head, wanted a soil analysis to determine the presence of minerals, including gold. She was circumspect, saying she was interested in the soil's fertility, and was reluctant to reveal the exact location of the site.

Chicho proposed that they go fishing for cod. It was a project that had been postponed repeatedly because they always slept till noon, and by the time they went down to the dock the boats had already left. They agreed: it was a perfect morning for going out to sea; the sky was clear, the water sparkling.

As they were climbing into the boat they saw the youngest Aqualdo girl running toward the dock, her braids swinging behind her, her skinny arms waving, gesturing for them to wait. She was shouting something they couldn't make out because of the wind. They heard her only when she had almost reached the dock:

"A drowned man, a drowned man, a drowned man on Lobster Beach."

On Lobster Beach, which they could see from the headland where they stood, there was no body. Just something the size of an adult lobster on the tiny beach of pebbles and sand. The stones were hot. The girl, her eyes popping, pointed again and again at the empty beach. "There, there," she said, as if she were hallucinating.

As they climbed down, they saw that it was a decomposing human arm.

It was stretched out, resting on the small half-moon of sand. The waves nudged it, and the hand, extended and swollen, barely moved in the waves, closing gently over a stone as if trying to grasp it. Ada looked away. It was a man's arm, it looked big, and there was a scrap of cuff of what must have been a blue shirt.

The fishermen rolled up their trousers and walked into the water, rummaging around with sticks to see if they could locate the rest of the body. Julio and Eladio left to find a boat and inform the police.

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*MILE MARKER 25*

Am I on danger's road, thoughts in motion  
Toward the washed-out bridge around the blind curve?  
Quick, choose between careen and caution,  
Count what I want most, what I'd lose, now swerve  
To miss the fox and clip my ghost instead.

I should recognize this steep embankment,  
Where the car sped and spun, could gain no tread  
And flipped, like all other accidents meant  
For those who think them. The mind, drunk-driven,  
Can stay stalled all day and still cause a wreck.

I say stop here, I said stop here, driver,  
Let me out, alone I'll trace the trek  
To the site marked by a weathered-wood cross,  
Past the highway's safety ramp that I missed.

*HEATHER BURNS*

*CLEANING UP AFTER OURSELVES*

No tourniquet will stifle the pulse we share,  
 No effect will free the flutterbug  
 In the veins unless stars fall between us,  
 Through the dock, and scorch the water below.

Color the texture of butter  
 Packed into the spaces between the gills,  
 Sheen of metal in the full fish  
 Basket blinds market strollers  
 So they never guess what was responsible  
 For the sabotage.

Our conflicts will result in starvation.  
 It is widely known that you risk  
 Everything and jump wet  
 Into the grain pile with both feet.  
 My stomach is lined with the same  
 Knotted seaweed that runs  
 Out of my limbs and from my ears.  
 Sand fleas surface to gather around  
 And re-burrow.

Some darkness is necessary  
 For planets to know where they are  
 As they go from side to side dodging  
 The lovers who walk the evening.  
 Waiting on the steamy pier,  
 A flightless circumstance pecks  
 At an open-throated tuna.

Jealous gulls watch us eat  
 Our last meal in silence, and dive  
 For the skeletons left on the plates  
 When we've finished.  
 You go back to rinsing yourself off  
 And I continue to scrub at the chalk  
 Outline of a mermaid on the brick service road.

*HEATHER BURNS*

*DRUNK SUN*

Day forgets its night, drawn on by golden dawn,  
 Abandons the light sleepers who must go to work  
 And find rolled stones hidden in dirt. They drudge down  
 While day high on its noon starts crawling up the bricks  
 Chasing shadows over tarred rooftops, through windows,  
 And along tea-stained apartment wallpaper.  
 Afternoon peals into evening's bells and dark drolls  
 On as the work-wretched wearily follow  
 The toll roads home. Day beats them there, has already  
 Raided the liquor cabinet, calling welcome,  
 Welcome, pours rounds and rounds. The air reeks with  
 whiskey.  
 The moon's eye is half-shut and day hopes that nag  
 Won't be looking for a good time tonight -- Ah-- night's  
 Now and day's misthought its bounds again. Those sleep-  
 Less don't care how loud it'll sing in a few more hours.  
 Brighten, burned boy, smash through this morning's glass  
 panes.

*HEATHER BURNS*


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 ©Heather Burns, 1998, three poems



## A CONVERSATION WITH CORNELIA AND MICHAEL BESSIE (2)

Katherine McNamara

*In this, second, part of my conversation with Cornelia and Michael Bessie, publishers and editors of Bessie Books, now associated with Counterpoint, they told me about an event which took place more than a decade ago but which turned out to have contemporary, even immediate, resonance. The event they recount -- their publication of Gorbachev's memoirs, in 1987 -- involved (incidentally) Rupert Murdoch, then the new owner of Harper & Row. Michael Bessie, on the board of Harper, had opposed the sale. Murdoch had also bought William Collins Publishers, the distinguished English firm, combined it with Harper, and retitled the combination HarperCollins. The publishing house now sounded like an advertising agency. At the time of sale, Harper had a signed contract with Gorbachev for his political memoirs, negotiated by Michael Bessie. Murdoch, the neophyte publisher, was known to be strongly anti-communist, and he told Bessie he was "crazy" for publishing the book. The book appeared nonetheless; not long ago, Murdoch even took credit for it. But lately, Murdoch's heavy hand has fallen on another political book, and dropped it. In London in January, his courtiers, (as the English press likes to say) anticipating his disapproval of the political memoirs of Chris Patten, last (Conservative) governor of Hong Kong before its reversion to China, broke their firm's signed contract with the author. The erstwhile anti-Communist has huge business dealings with China, where "making money" is the order of the new day, while Patton had criticized the Chinese government. Nervous, Murdoch's managers provoked the "principled resignation" of the young senior editor who refused to go back on his word and abandon the book he had already praised in public. (See also, "Endnotes.") A number of prominent authors published by HarperCollins roundly denounced Murdoch, to no apparent effect.*

*The Bessies talked about the Gorbachev book late last summer, long before the scandal in London, when we met at their country retreat near Lyme, Connecticut. It is a pretty, book-filled farmhouse and separate office situated amid tall old-growth trees on a sloping back lawn, where they'll offer a visitor an afternoon drink. Michael Bessie is an open-handed host and worldly raconteur, while Cornelia, though more reticent, when amused laughs knowingly. Her handsome, blonde beauty, in no way masking a sharp intelligence, must often have been a trial to her inside the masculine offices of publishing. When she spoke about books and the surprise and pleasure of finding literature -- Lampedusa, Harper Lee -- her face lit up. Michael, the "outside person" at his old company, Atheneum, spoke with zest about the*

rough and tumble of publishing during the time when it was run by book men till the time -- the present era -- when it changed to something else.

Before this issue went on-line, I asked Michael Bessie if he would care to comment on the matter of the Patten book and Murdoch's getting rid of it. He declined, saying that on the one hand, this was hardly the first time a book had been in effect suppressed by the head of a publishing company; and on the other, that, at that moment, all he knew was what he had read in the papers, though he was acquainted with and thought well of the editor in question, who had done the honorable thing by leaving. In his voice I detected a certain dryness. Perhaps he was recalling the ambitions of young men and old men and the lay of once-greener playing fields; and, having had a long good run there himself, perhaps he wasn't sorry to be watching this one from the sidelines.

KM

### Art and Commerce

**MICHAEL BESSIE:** Up to now, I've been talking about what I'm not so much interested in; I've not talked about what I *am* interested in, which is literature and how does it get published?

**KATHERINE MCNAMARA:** Let me quote from an article you wrote for the *Virginia Quarterly Review*<sup>1</sup>: "If the publisher were simply a commodities salesman concerned solely with profit and loss, he might say, 'There it is. Fiction is down, so we concentrate on other lines, and the public be served. But of course, life is never this simple.'" And then you go on to say why life never *is* this simple, concerning the sales of fiction. But my question is: What does it mean to "serve the public"? Who is "the public"?

**CORNELIA BESSIE:** "Who is the public?" The public are all those people with all those different tastes, some of which may not be yours. You may not think that reading romances is the way you want to spend your evenings, but there are readers out there and they should be served.

What it means, in our lives, is the challenge of the book that may not have the audience, that may not have the obvious audience, but where you say, "This is very good, I want to do this." It comes down to great simplicity, for me. It comes down to whatever you think quality is, and have the arrogance to think that your notion of quality may have some validity.

**MICHAEL BESSIE:** Basically, of course, what you do, I think, is acquire along the way your likes and dislikes, and your own sense of how widely shared those likes and dislikes are. Give you a simple example: when I started Atheneum, one of the things I knew about myself, and said to Pat Knopf [*Alfred A. Knopf, Jr., co-founder of Atheneum*] -- because it was originally just Pat and me -- I said, "You know, I have an outstanding weakness: I have no real appreciation or appetite for commercial fiction. I wish I had. And there

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<sup>1</sup>Michael Bessie, "American Writing Today: A Publisher's Viewpoint," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 34:1 Winter 1958, p. 4.

certainly is some commercial fiction which I enjoy; but I don't have any gift for it." And Pat had already had the notion of inviting Hiram Hayden to join us, because Hiram had already demonstrated not only his commercial skills, but had published people like William Styron. A few years later, we got Hiram to join us.

One of Atheneum's failures during the time when I was in charge was the failure to develop commercial fiction. Now, I say this despite the fact that we published two or three of the most successful commercial books -- James Clavell's *TAI PAN: Herman Golub* [*an editor at Atheneum known for his strength in commercial fiction*] brought that in.

The thing that you learn from, mostly, is your mistakes. Cornelia and I muse from time to time over the books we've published -- and I can certainly illustrate this -- which we were *certain* were going to be commercially successful, and weren't! That doesn't teach you how to avoid such mistakes, but it gives you a notion.

I'm not blaming other people for the commercial fiction, or non-fiction, that I published that didn't succeed: I can't do that, that's undercutting my own judgment.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Do you mean, to succeed esthetically?

MICHAEL BESSIE: No, no, I mean, succeed in sales. Because, you know, if a book gets a half a dozen reviews, one or two of 'em are bound to be good, and if you forget the others, why, pronounce it a success.

Timing is such an important thing in this domain. There's such a thing as being ahead of the moment. For example, I would never have thought that any of these far-out, other-world, New Age fiction things would have gone, 20 years ago.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Sonny Mehta [*president of the Knopf Group, part of Random House*] said, about ten years ago, that perhaps the next big subject would be the failure of people who had made it in the stock market, then lost it all. He might have had a sense of "failure" as a coming topic.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Editorially, it's very hard to do things that way. For one thing, every book is unique.

The most frequent question you're asked by non-publishing people is, How do you decide what to publish? How do you choose? My answer has become simpler and simpler over the years. I say, "Well, I tend to publish something that I would like to read."

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: What is "commercial fiction"?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Most simply, it's fiction that --

CORNELIA BESSIE: Jacqueline Susanne.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Jacqueline Susanne?

MICHAEL BESSIE (chuckles): I'm tempted to say, anything that sells over 100,000 copies; but that's a cop-out. Commercial fiction is something that, I think most people would agree, does not have any abiding value, any literary value. There are a lot of ways of describing it: formula fiction, cookie-cutter fiction, fashionable fiction, fiction of the moment. There are a lot of borderline cases. In the eyes of some, W. Somerset Maugham was commercial

fiction; but I think that's wrong, I think that he had value longer. The fact that he is now hardly read at all doesn't prove that he won't come back. Is Patrick O'Brian [*the celebrated series of Aubrey-Maturin sea-novels*] "commercial" fiction?

I guess the standard of it is, if it sells enough copies.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Is *THE ENGLISH PATIENT* [by Michael Ondaatje] commercial fiction?

MICHAEL BESSIE: You've read the book; I haven't.

CORNELIA BESSIE: I loved the book; it's a very good book. It's an interesting book that, thanks to a movie and a sales push, has had a lot of readership.

MICHAEL BESSIE: I liked the movie a lot, and on the way out I said -- I like to talk about things afterward; Cornelia doesn't -- I said, "What's the book got that the movie *hasn't* got?" and, without hesitation, she said: "Words."

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: It was *Lawrence Out of Africa*.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Exactly.

CORNELIA BESSIE (regretfully): Hmm.

MICHAEL BESSIE: It was; but it was beautifully made.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA (laughing): How can you miss with sand dunes and gorgeous haircuts?

MICHAEL BESSIE: I assure you that a lot of movies get made with sand dunes and girls with gorgeous haircuts, but have failed. (Laughter from all) Anyway, my answer to that knowing question is, try to publish what you would like to read, yourself! Now, for some people, that's an indulgence.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Do you speak about what commercial fiction is? When you read manuscripts, do you sort of divide them, or sort them, into categories?

CORNELIA BESSIE: No. Because, like Michael, I'm not good at commercial fiction, it bores me.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: So, you know what commercial fiction is when you read it.

CORNELIA BESSIE: I know what it is when I read it. To be honest, it's not a problem we tend to have, because it doesn't tend to come our way. People know we're not interested. We can occasionally tell that something's going to be successful but that we want no part of it.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Also, there's a momentum for commercial fiction. If somebody's novel number one or number two or whatever has sold very well, that becomes almost guaranteed reading, because people who enjoy the first book will buy the second. They may be deceived by it, or it may not satisfy them, and that certainly has happened, but--

CORNELIA BESSIE: Ondaatje is a good example of the other, which is that the first books didn't sell.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: No, but they were terrific books.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Terrific books.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: *RUNNING IN THE FAMILY* is delightful; *IN THE SKIN OF A LION* is--

CORNELIA BESSIE: Is wonderful.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: I couldn't read *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*; I thought it was too *fine*; and yet, I think he writes the most sensuous, and sensual, masculine poetry in North America.

CORNELIA BESSIE: I read *THE ENGLISH PATIENT* under very special circumstances. I read it in central Italy while one of my best friends was dying, and so it had an enormous effect on me. I can't divorce my response to the book from that.

*Harper's, Gorbachev's PERESTROIKA, and Rupert Murdoch*

MICHAEL BESSIE: Is what I said reasonable? Should you publish what you like, or, more importantly, should you not publish what you don't like? Well, there are a lot of books out there, and I'm kind of opposed to publishing a book that you don't really like. I used to do a session at Stanford: I'd give 'em a list of books, saying, "Would you publish?" One of the books on the list was *MEIN KAMPF*: would you publish it? When I got into publishing, at the end of the war, this is the thing that young editors like me would sit around arguing about.

My own feeling, about myself, anyhow, as a publisher is: I don't want to publish things I don't like.

An example of how this came to roost: During the first round that I was in at Harper, Canfield was, as I was, a liberal Democrat. We had a problem, which was that we had virtually become publishers to the Democratic party. Canfield had published Roosevelt, Mrs. Roosevelt, Roosevelt and Hopkins. He and Jack Fisher and Evan Thomas and I all had friends in the liberal Democratic camp. The house was being increasingly characterized by it; so we *consciously* set out to find some Republican books. That's why we competed vigorously for Eisenhower, but didn't get it -- Doubleday got it -- and I think the reason we didn't get it, probably, was the reputation.

Now, interesting example of the opposite: It's a long story as to how we came to publish Gorbachev. Because it really started with an idea which I gave to a Russian friend at the embassy in Washington. It took a couple of years to come about. The year I'm talking about was 1986; it was at Harper and Row; we had not yet sold the firm to Murdoch. I had gotten this idea, and then all of a sudden it began to happen. [*Bessie Books was then an imprint financed by Harper & Row.*]

So: in April of 1987, the Gorbachev thing is cooking, very secretly, and Harper is sold to Rupert Murdoch.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: You were on the board of Harper and you opposed it.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Yes; but I lost. But profited financially. Now Rupert Murdoch suddenly is the owner; and Brooks Thomas, who was then the head of the house, said, "You know, I think you ought to tell Murdoch," who is very conservative, an anti-Communist. "I think you should tell him about this deal with Gorbachev." So I did; I called Rupert on the phone and I

described to him what the situation was. He said, "You mean you're going to give Gorbachev \$500,000 for a lot of Communist propaganda?" I said, "Rupert, I'll remind you: the understanding is that we don't sign the contract until we have a manuscript; and we don't give him a cent until we sign the contract." Believe it or not, that was the situation with the head of the Soviet Union!

CORNELIA BESSIE: And we got world rights.

MICHAEL BESSIE: World rights: I mean, I've occasionally been very lucky. And so, Rupert says: "Well, I think you're crazy. Are you committed to it?" I said, "Yes." Meaning, are you and the house of Harper committed to it? Yes. "Well, I think you're mad."

CORNELIA BESSIE: Just to interject: I think -- we don't know this -- but I *think*, also, that was a different Rupert Murdoch. He was, then, a book publisher for two weeks.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Trying to be, anyhow.

CORNELIA BESSIE: He was a neophyte.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Cornelia and I go to Russia, and we get the manuscript, finally, in English; and we like it; and we sign the contract.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: He [Gorbachev] had had it translated? You had it translated?

MICHAEL BESSIE: He had had it translated. That was, again, one of the conditions.

CORNELIA BESSIE: He had had it translated in a week, by five people, in Russia, into something that resembled English.

MICHAEL BESSIE: It wasn't really too bad. Cornelia did a very fine editing job on it, which he asked us to do. I don't know how I lucked into this understanding.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: He had done other things in life; he hadn't dealt with publishers. (Chuckle)

CORNELIA BESSIE: That's true! As you'll see, when the story goes on.

MICHAEL BESSIE: So now, as Cornelia said, she takes the manuscript back to New York, and I take it to London, where the person running HarperCollins--

CORNELIA BESSIE: Let's do some of the in-between.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Yes; do.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Well, what's interesting is what happened in Russia, then the Soviet Union. Our cover was the Moscow Book Fair, which meant there were a lot of foreign publishers there -- German, English, French -- and as our negotiation went on, the book fair ended and people started to leave. We suddenly realized that the apparatchiks who were going with us for one reason or another, had put all their eggs in one basket, and we had not yet said yes. That they were, in a sense, committed to us because they had said, "This is our choice." If we had said no, it could be very difficult for their careers. There were a lot of things going on at the same time. There was a day

when we were told, “The manuscript has left the place where he is vacationing.”<sup>2</sup>

KATHERINE MCNAMARA (laughing): It sounds like a code!

MICHAEL BESSIE: The whole thing was like Le Carré.

CORNELIA BESSIE: It was Le Carré. Gorbachev had a code name: “The Man,” as in, “The Man has finished the manuscript” -- that sort of thing. And so, we were told, “The Man has finished it, it is in a plane on its way to Moscow. We will put it in translation; you will have it in five days. Where will you be in five days?”

We said, “Er, um, in Leningrad.” I wanted to see The Hermitage. They said, “You will get it in Leningrad in five days.” Now, we had thought that the time would come when we would get the manuscript, sitting cheerfully in our office in New York, so that if we said no, we would be *there*. We had not thought this would happen. There were these good scenarios we told ourselves -- “Taxi accident on the Nevsky Prospekt.” (Laughing) Anyhow, we got the manuscript; the manuscript came in two copies. We read it; we decided it was certainly good enough to publish; and the contract got signed. And then came the phone call that said: “Do you have any editorial suggestions?” Which we never thought would happen. We had one day before the plane left. So we did something we’ve never done with any other book: we divided it in half, and we each edited half, and sent him those suggestions. We never thought the day would come when he would say, “Do you have any comment?” We were unprepared for that.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Neophyte author.

CORNELIA BESSIE (chuckling): Yes.

MICHAEL BESSIE: To finish with the Murdochian point: the head for Murdoch of HarperCollins was Ian Chapman, in London, and he happened to be in London then. I took the manuscript there because it was Sunday, and Ian and a couple of other of the people who ran things were excited about it. The big thing in London publishing for a book like that is to sell serial rights, because that’s big money; and so, we had to decide by Monday morning what we were going to do about serials. Rupert Murdoch owned the London *Times*. There were four big Sunday newspapers; Ian had decided we should show it first to the Sunday *Times*. He had also decided, knowing his way around those things, that we were going to ask £200,000, which was a lot of money. So he told the editor of *The Times* on Monday morning, “We’ve got this very exciting manuscript: we want to give it to you on first offer, not simultaneously with the other papers.” So the guy comes over and spends the day at the office. He read it and was sufficiently impressed to say, as he went back to his office, “I’ve got to call Rupert.” (Chuckling in the background.) And Ian said to him, “I remind you: you love an exclusive, and we’re asking £200,000.” So the guy goes back, and a little while later, calls Ian, and says, “I am

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<sup>2</sup>Gorbachev had retired to his *dacha*, apparently to work on the manuscript; rumors circulated through the capital that he was ill or had been deposed. Mikhail Gorbachev, *PERESTROIKA* (A Cornelia and Michael Bessie Book, Harper & Row, Nov. 7, 1987)

authorized to offer you £75,000.” Ian says, “Uh-uh.” “Well, Rupert thinks you’re all out of your minds. A book by Gorbachev can’t possibly be worth any more than that, and I’m not authorized to go beyond £75,000.” We say, “Well, that means that, tomorrow morning, we’ll offer it to the other three Sunday newspapers.” Which we did. And got three offers, of which the highest was £175,000, and that’s what it was sold for.

Now: why do I enjoy the story so much? Because, about three or four or five months ago, there was a long story about Rupert Murdoch in *The New Yorker* by Ken Auletta, and Rupert tells this story entirely differently: he had the idea for the Gorbachev book! So you see, history corrects itself.

KM (laughing): The first time as tragedy; the second time, as farce?

MICHAEL BESSIE: And either time, it’s profitable! (General laughter.)

CORNELIA BESSIE: You hope.

MICHAEL BESSIE: That book was an immense success, it made a lot of money. It made millions. We had enormous foreign rights -- it was an immensely successful book. It was more than a book, it was an event.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Is this the moment for comic relief?

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Yes, it is.

CORNELIA BESSIE: He [indicating MB] is still in London--

MICHAEL BESSIE: Collins [respected British publishing house bought by Murdoch and merged with Harper & Row] had the printing plant in Scotland--

CORNELIA BESSIE: What Gorbachev wanted: he didn’t argue about money; the one thing that he really wanted was to have it published on the 70th anniversary of the Revolution.

MICHAEL BESSIE: So it had to be published on November 1.

CORNELIA BESSIE: And this was September, October--

MICHAEL BESSIE: And I said it couldn’t be done. And he said, “Well, it has to be.” So we called London, and Ian Chapman said, “Of course it can be done, in our plant here.”

CORNELIA BESSIE: Actually, that was fudged; but that’s another story. Officially, we published on the day we had promised.

So: he is still in London. I’m in New York. They’ve had these excited calls from London, so they’re now, more or less, paying a little bit of attention. There’s a meeting. There was a changeover in the head of the trade department at that point; and there are these guys who have to throw their weight around. The first thing is: “*Perestroika*: who knows what that means?” We’ve got to change the title. I said, “That is the title.” “Well, we’ve got to change it.” “You can’t change it: that’s the title.” “Well, who knows what it means?” I said, “Two months ago you didn’t know what *glasnost* meant. It’s now part of the American language.” Finally, I lost my patience. I said, “Fellows: have you noticed: he’s a *head of state*!” (Laughs.) Silence in the room.

Later, since the press couldn’t reach the author, the calls from all over the world came to us. This started during the time while Michael was in London, and I and my assistant were the full might of Bessie Books. We got very good, very quickly, at handling the hard questions. On the one hand, we



wanted it to have as much exposure as possible; on the other hand, we didn't want to give away the book. What we were doing was presenting it as an event, which indeed it was.

This is, again, comic relief: When we were sitting in that plane as it took off from Leningrad, I said to Michael, "You know, we won't get lucky twice. We had one bit of luck when we had Sadat's book<sup>3</sup> in proof when he went to Jerusalem--"

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Oh!

MICHAEL BESSIE: Which is to say: we had not known he was going; we had the book.

CORNELIA BESSIE: We had it, and so we could publish at that time. I said, "Gorbachev won't come to America. We won't get lucky twice." Well, that was exactly the time when he came and when there was 'Gorby-mania'; do you remember when he was getting out of the limousine in the middle of Washington and shaking hands?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Footnote: we tried to figure out -- obviously, a lot of other things happened in this story -- we tried to figure out why we were selected; indeed, we asked the Russian ambassador in Washington. He said, "Partly because it was your idea, you were first."

But in the back of my mind was that we had published a lot of Russian stuff up until then: Solzhenitsyn, Mandlestam, all dissident literature. I thought this was going to queer us for the Gorbachev book; but quite the contrary. Nobody could say we were captive publishers.

### *Education of an Editor*

KATHERINE MCNAMARA (to CB): What did you do, from the time Atheneum was being sold [see Part 1] to the time you joined Harper's?

CORNELIA BESSIE: I worried. I went to India.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: But when did you *know*, in fact, that you were an editor, and even a publisher?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Ah. Interesting question. To go back to the then-Harper's, the "Canfield Plantation": one of the things that was very obvious was that I had had a very sheltered life as far as the business world is concerned. My father wasn't really a business man. I'd not heard business discussed, I had no business sense at all. My father was an art dealer, but he was an independent spirit, and what was talked about at table was never business. So, I came to Harper's really very naive; and also, as far as the female side goes, it was "pre-feminism." There came into Harper's, at exactly the same time I did, a young man who was a Harvard graduate, who came from the right kind of family, who, I think, was Porcellian, probably -- if he wasn't, he should have been -- and, because we happened to come in at the same time, I was quite aware that he was being groomed and I was not. If he hadn't been there, I would have been quite unaware of what was going on.

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<sup>3</sup>Anwar el-Sadat, *IN SEARCH OF IDENTITY* (Harper & Row, 1978)

And I left several times. I was fed up; I was depressed -- well, what I was is, I was a reading machine.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: You were then in your twenties.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Yes. So I left all the time. I went off to Spain once... I went to a lot of places; I supported myself by translating, which is a wonderful trade; it's like being a carpenter, you can do it anywhere. And so, that's when I did my traveling. -- Actually, because this is a nice kind of a story: as you know, there is what publishers call the "slush pile," the books that come in over the transom; and once in a blue moon, one of these things is good. Nowadays, incidentally, among the changes in publishing is that these things don't get read.

MICHAEL BESSIE: In many places.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Almost every place. If things don't come in agented or as "Friend of" somebody you know.... But at that point, if anything came up in the pile, it was then given to the lowest guy on the totem pole, which was me. I found a book, and worked with the author, and it became a book; and I was really in one of my I'm-sick-and-tired-of-all-this moods, when I was called by *The Reader's Digest*. They said, "We would like to take this book as a condensed book."

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Would you like to say which book it was?

CORNELIA BESSIE: It was a book called EPITAPH FOR AN ENEMY, by a man whose last name was Barr: George Barr. He never wrote another book.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Very nice book.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Yes, very nice book. Because, when that call came in from *The Reader's Digest*, had I not been in one of my I-hate-you-all moods I would have gone to the nearest handy male and said, "Will you handle this for me?"; but because that day I was sick of them all, I did it myself. And from that came, to everyone's great surprise, an offer of a job at the *Digest*; and the job they offered me was very interesting. It was a job that didn't exist; it didn't exist after me, either. It was that I was the liaison between Europe and America, for all of Condensed Books.

I was hired in Spring. I said, "Can I start in Fall?" And so, I went to Europe, of course -- and there was a day when I was visiting my future colleagues. *Reader's Digest* had an office on the Boulevard St.-Germain. While I was in the office of one of them, a man, there was a parade, one of those Sixties parades from the Sorbonne. I was fairly recently out of the Sorbonne myself, so, suddenly, I disappeared out of the window. There was my head out the window, and my ass in his office, with shouts back and forth between me and people in the street. When I reappeared in the office, my future colleague looked at me and said, "They hired you at *The Reader's Digest*?" (Laughs) That was the beginning.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: What was the real situation; what had the man in Paris told you about why you were hired?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Because the European editions wanted their independence. I was the stop-gap measure.

As a result of this funny incident, he then told me the truth about what was really going on, which was very useful: why I had been hired, what the real problems were, and so on. He was amused by me, and so he was willing to talk. If there hadn't been that parade under his window, he probably wouldn't have. -- But, in a serious sense, what Michael was getting to, is: I learned more. I got the publishing reports from all over the world. I learned more about publishing in that one year -- that was while I was waiting for Atheneum to be able to put me on a salary -- and it was a marvelous teaching experience. It also was a very interesting experience as an editor, because the people who condense those books, some of them, were extraordinary editors. The technique that they had evolved was a very sophisticated technique, which, once again, I learned from an older lady, and which served me in very good stead, in some ways. They had an eagle eye for the fat on a manuscript, that was a very good thing to learn; and I learned it there.

I also got a very good overview of world publishing that I could have gotten from no place else. After a year, I got an offer from Atheneum, and left. But I learned more in that one year than in any year before.

*She Reads* THE LEOPARD

CORNELIA BESSIE: I also had a wonderful publishing experience.

First I should say that Michael and I always had a game that we played when we were bored. This game was as follows: "If you had read WAR AND PEACE in manuscript, would you have known it was a great book? Or would you have said, 'We'll do this, Mr. Tolstoy, but would you please remove a hundred pages of manuscript?'"

So: on my second or third day I'm sitting in this office, looking out at the green fields of Reader's Digest in Pleasantville, and there is on my desk sat an almost impossible-to-decipher typescript. I started reading, and on page five I thought, "I don't believe this. I have spent years in a first-rate publishing house and have almost never met literature." And then, at *The Reader's Digest*, on my second day, there it was: literature.

It was Lampedusa's THE LEOPARD.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: My God. And it was *condensed*?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well, not yet.

CORNELIA BESSIE: I knew nobody. There was this odd thing: I had been hired, and was hired by seeing everyone, including both Wallaces [*Dewitt and Lila Atcheson Wallace, owners*] separately. I mean, here I was, not a very high-up person. I went down to see my boss, who was a lovely man, and said, "*This thing has happened. Here's literature.*" And he smiled and said, "Don't give it to anyone else. Give it to me." He took it home, came back in the morning, and said, "Come into my office. I'm going to give you a lesson in publishing." He called the Book-of-the-Month Club and said, "Have you seen this book?" "Yes." "Have you declined it?" "Yes." He said: "Recall it." *He* could say that to the Book-of-the-Month Club; and he did. They recalled it; they did it; *we* did it, and the book took off.

Now, *The Reader's Digest Book Club* polls its readership on what they like and they don't like. Just before I left, a year later, my boss and I had a giggling fit: because THE LEOPARD polled third from the bottom of *Reader's Digest* books! But he and I were very proud of ourselves for having done it. (Laughs)

MICHAEL BESSIE: Let me intrude here just to say that Cornelia's had the experience, and I've observed it also: if the *Reader's Digest* did nothing else, it developed skills, as Cornelia has said. I have yet to see any book that I've had anything to do with that wasn't, if not *improved* by the condensation, at least not destroyed.

CORNELIA BESSIE: They have a really extraordinary technique. You don't get the *book*: any more than the movie *The English Patient* is THE ENGLISH PATIENT; but you get a smell....

### *She Reads TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*

CORNELIA BESSIE: There was another moment. I went to my then-boss and said, "I've just read a very pretty book. It's quiet, it's charming; it probably won't do anything in the trade because it's quiet, but I like it a lot: will you read it?" He read it, and said, "Yes, let's do it." It was a book called TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD [by Harper Lee], which sold hundreds of thousands of copies.

I read the book in manuscript -- you got them in proof or in manuscript, so you had to make up your mind before you knew anything...

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: There's a very nice expression on your face as you tell that story.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Well, it was fun. (Laughs) "It's a very quiet book, it won't go anywhere, but it's nice." (Laughter)

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: After THE LEOPARD, it's a one-two punch, isn't it.

CORNELIA BESSIE: It does show you that there is something, whatever that instinct is, that is the "editorial instinct." You know. It's like falling in love. You know when you're barely into the book that something special is going on.

### *What Is a Literary Culture?*

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: I asked Marion Boyars [Vol. 1, No. 3] this question: "What is a literary culture? Do we have one?"

CORNELIA BESSIE: Very good question.

MICHAEL BESSIE: I don't think there is anything in our society that can be addressed in so general a fashion. For example, I don't think we have a literary society: I think it's a mosaic, and is constantly shifting, like a kaleidoscope. I think we have literary *cultures*. I think as in all culture, literary culture essentially consists in "high" and "pop," by not being all that clear and distinct.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Is "pop" different, do you think, than what "popular" used to be?

MICHAEL BESSIE: In a sense. “Pop” is short for “popular” -- it implies a lot of people. It also from a highbrow point of view implies cultural inferiority, or artistic or esthetic inferiority.

CORNELIA BESSIE: There are these weird phenomena, however. This is not answering your question, but it’s an interesting insight: When [Bernard] Pivot’s book program [*Apostrophe*] became so popular in France, the concierges were watching *Apostrophe*.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Prime time, Friday night.

CORNELIA BESSIE: In other words, there was a culture that could go from the concierge to the most high-brow author. I mention this because it is an unrepeatable phenomenon. We can’t even, in this country, have a television books program that people are really aware of.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: There’s Brian Lamb, on CNN, with *Booknotes*.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Which is on at a time when no one watches [*Saturday and Sunday nights*], and in a place with fewer viewers. Pivot was on prime time, and everyone watched. It was what was discussed the next morning with the taxi driver and with the colleagues in the office.

MICHAEL BESSIE: And it was a program that did not condescend.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Absolutely not. Thus, it’s a cultural phenomenon. It’s an aside to your question, it’s not an answer to your question. The fact is that we have no equivalent, and that there’s no equivalent anywhere else in Europe -- he is, he was a phenomenon --

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Melvyn Bragg [*of London Weekend Television, seen in the US on the Bravo channel*] is in no way in comparison?

MICHAEL BESSIE: No, he isn’t bad.

CORNELIA BESSIE: He’s not bad; and he gets good people. It’s interesting, you know, that we do have a national public television, and that there is no equivalent to these programs.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Not since [Robert] Cromie stopped doing his book program out of Chicago. For years, he did a book program on radio and television, and it was quite popular. He was good at it, but never got the mass audience.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Which Pivot did.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Do they have a mass culture in France?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Oh, sure. Every country publishes its trash and gobbles it up, like we gobble up junk food.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: On the way here, I was listening to a public radio program called “The American Musical Theater.” What was being played was a concert version, done in England, of Cole Porter’s *Nymph Errant*. It was quite charming. What occurred to me was that Cole Porter and the American musical theater, which we can’t talk about anymore except in retrospect, I think, were a variety of what properly was called American popular culture. And I think that is what I mean when I suggest there is a distinction between popular culture, framing it in time, and pop culture, that is, our media-oriented culture.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Exactly. *Porgy and Bess* is not junk!

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Alternatively, jazz is deeply popular, in every sense; but it's not pop. And Ellington is arguably one of the two or three great American composers of the century.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Jazz cannot be classified either as highbrow or lowbrow culture.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: No. But it is deeply *popular*.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Yes, right. And it crosses borders.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Is there any equivalent, or analog, in the world of books?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Yes: mysteries.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: That's nice.

MICHAEL BESSIE: But that's not the only one.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Is Simenon "popular culture" to you?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Why did we make the decision, at Harper's, way back when Joan Kahn built the mystery department, to call them neither "mysteries" nor "detective stories" but "suspense novels"? -- starting in the latter part of World War II, and, largely, with English authors. For example, I don't read mystery stories, I never have, but I'm an absolute devotee of mystery stories on television. Show me a Poirot, and I'm there.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: On public television, you mean--

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well, yes.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: --or, now, A&E.

CORNELIA BESSIE: There are those things that cross boundaries -- THE ENGLISH PATIENT, for instance. Or M.F.K. Fisher, who wrote about food, but really about life.

MICHAEL BESSIE: The lines are wavy, just as they are in high culture.

CORNELIA BESSIE: At this point, in America, "elite" is a dirty word. But, when you talk about a literary culture, you're talking about an elite, always. And that's very hard to do in America.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Nonetheless, although we don't like to talk about class, we operate on the basis of class -- even, I would say, often when we believe we're talking about race.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Very much. Also, as Peter Finlay Dunne once said: "It's no disgrace to be poor in America, but it might as well be."

### *Cornelia, Reading*

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Here is a question to braid into the one about literary culture: Is there such a thing as "illegitimate" reading?

CORNELIA BESSIE: What do you mean?

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: I'm not sure, but let me try to approach this. Literacy volunteers like to say that reading anything at all is important. They mean to encourage people to read. It is said by teachers, and becomes common thinking, that "Whatever they read doesn't matter: get them to read, and they'll go on to something good." People say this, knowing that in their

childhood they had read what would have been called bad books, and yet that, for some time, at least, they had gone on to read good books.

MICHAEL BESSIE: They acquired *reading*.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Yes. But I'm not necessarily convinced it happens easily. Of course, anybody can go on to read good books. But I wonder if there is a sort of "trash" reading that only leads to more trash?

CORNELIA BESSIE: I think that, as so often, both things are true. I think there is junk-reading that leads to more junk; and, occasionally, to the opposite.

I taught, briefly, in a community college; and the best student I ever had was a mail carrier, who came from an illiterate household, who was semi-literate himself for a period of time, and who told me the following story. One day he was delivering mail. The windows were open in a house, and music was coming out. He found out, later, that this was Beethoven. It transfixed him, and he decided that a world that included Beethoven could include other things, as well, and he started to read.

Any kind of anecdotal evidence is nothing but that: anecdotal; but if an adult, like the mail carrier, can be turned on by Beethoven, there will be, out there, somebody or other who can be turned on to Shakespeare.

MICHAEL BESSIE: It occurs to me that there is a perfect paradigm for this. When I was young, the reading of comics was banned in a lot of houses.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: It was banned in my house.

CORNELIA BESSIE: In mine, too. And everybody else's.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: In the fear that the child would grow up into "pop" culture. And it's happened. It did happen.

MICHAEL BESSIE: There was no notion that comics were "real." Well, we are now living the apotheosis of the comic: MAUS.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: They call it a "graphic novel." Although there were brilliant graphic novels in the 30s, for instance: the Germans were very good at them...

(to CB): You read several languages: would you say which ones?

CORNELIA BESSIE: French, German, some Italian.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: When you came to Harper's, what had you been reading?

CORNELIA BESSIE: I was an only child and a bookworm. There was a time, early on, when I read my way through my parents' library, just going counter-clockwise. And amazingly, in this way, when I was about 13 or 14, I discovered Ezra Pound for myself, and was mesmerized. We then lived in a suburb, and my parents went to New York. The first time I ever asked them to buy me a book in New York was when I wanted another Ezra Pound. This was right after the war, and my father came home snorting, saying, "The first time she asks for a book it's by a famous traitor!" (Laughter)

Anyhow, that was the background: I had read everything I could get my hands on. I think if you don't read those classic texts at a certain age, you're unlikely to, later. By that, I mean, probably before college, and certainly before the end of college. In order to have what we call "taste," you have to have

been exposed to, and, hopefully, set on fire by, the great readings, and if that doesn't happen at a time when you're ready for them, it probably won't happen.

As you know, my secret sin is riding horses, which means that you're usually riding with some teenaged female companion. I was constantly riding through the woods where I live in Connecticut saying to some damsel, "There is, you know, life after horses." (Laughter)

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: And you're met with skepticism. (Laughter)

CORNELIA BESSIE: Oh yes! My favorite of those incidents was: one day, I was riding through the woods with a 14-year old, and she said, "You know Hemingway?" I said, "Yep." She said, "Well, you told me he was good, but you didn't tell me he was *cute!*" (Laughter) She'd just run across a photograph! But she was exactly at the age when she *should* have been reading Hemingway, and I guess, trotting through the woods, I put something into her head that made her go to a book. The really sad thing is, when I look at the kids around me, is how few of them go through that marvelous stage of reading everything and devouring everything and finding things you love.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: I asked this of one of my assistants, and she said she used to read everything when she was a kid: Wheaties boxes, comics: anything that came across her eyes, she'd read. Because of that, she read everything, including good books. But she noticed that people who didn't read good books, didn't read *everything*: they didn't read Wheaties boxes, they didn't read newspapers; they just didn't *read*.

CORNELIA BESSIE: I've watched several kids at a very young age, particularly if it was at a house I was supplying with children's books, read with great pleasure; and, suddenly, in about the fifth grade, they stop. I don't know whether this is because -- for the males -- sports suddenly become all-encompassing; or whether it's because they encounter a computer for the first time...

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Is this true of girls and boys?

CORNELIA BESSIE: When I'm thinking of several kids who were wonderful readers... I think it is true of *kids*, particularly now that there's equality in sports, which means the girls are being pushed as much as the boys.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: If you were to think of a foundation of reading, or, your foundation of reading, what books would you name?

CORNELIA BESSIE: I fell in love with Shakespeare at a very early age, which amused my father because he was persuaded that I couldn't understand what I was reading. What he didn't understand was that I probably didn't understand, in his sense, but I was set afire by the beauty. I could understand the beauty, if I couldn't understand any more.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: When I was a kid, there was so much I didn't understand that it gave me a large desire to learn. That was very exciting. I understand children now are often discouraged by teachers and librarians from reading books that are considered too hard for them.



CORNELIA BESSIE: I think that's true. In fact, no one was encouraging me to read, which is probably one of the reasons why I read so much! (Laughter)

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: They weren't discouraging you, however.

CORNELIA BESSIE: They weren't *discouraging* me, but they certainly weren't encouraging. I don't know why.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Your father was an art dealer. Was he a reader? He had a library.

CORNELIA BESSIE: He was; he was. He had a Classical background. He was German; and not only German, he was Prussian. So there was a lot of this: "How can you read Shakespeare when you can't *understand* him?"! And of course, I was too young and too naive to answer. But now that you bring it up, I remember this scene: he was laughing, because he had a big, one-volume edition of Shakespeare, and I was reading my way through it. I was *very* offended!

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: How old were you: 10, 12?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Must have been. And I actually *didn't* understand, but the *love* of that has stayed with me, and the love of poetry, which started at a very early age. Poetry and music. If you love one, you often love the other.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Did you have the third in the trivium: mathematics?

CORNELIA BESSIE: No. No, I'm the genius who failed Math I twice. (Laughs) In fact, at the last school I went to -- you know, they give you these aptitude tests, and I had just been thrown out of a school, so getting *into* a school was quite a thing -- the headmistress, who later became a friend, said, "We've seldom seen such a disparity: such a low math aptitude and a high English one. We'll take you, but we will not attempt to teach you math." (Laughs)

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: And so, Shakespeare and Pound.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Well, Pound, whom I discovered for myself, as I've said, reading along the family shelves; Shakespeare; all poetry; and then, all those things everyone falls in love with: LE ROUGE ET LE NOIR, D.H. Lawrence--

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Did you read Stendhal in French?

CORNELIA BESSIE: No, I didn't; not the first time. We used to do something called Woodrow Wilson Fellowships, where we'd go to a college and teach for a short time. Michael and I did it together. You were supposed to talk about what you did, and I decided I would be happy to talk about what I did, but I'd also like to teach something, and I chose LE ROUGE ET LE NOIR. So I sat under a tree down South and reread it, which I hadn't done since I was a kid, and it was amazing how that book had grown up! (Laughter) The questions you ask yourself, such as, What choices did Mathilde de la Môle have? you of course don't ask yourself the first time through.

I talked to you earlier about my experience with THE LEOPARD. My experience with reading it in manuscript was that you knew on page five of the very faint typescript that you were in the presence of literature. But to explain to somebody how you knew this is like explaining how you know you're in love.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Can you think of any other books?

CORNELIA BESSIE: WAR AND PEACE.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Were you a Tolstoyan or a Dostoyevskian?

CORNELIA BESSIE: I was first a Dostoyevskian. I didn't read WAR AND PEACE until I went to Oxford, because I'd always saved it. I said I wasn't going to read it until I could read it through. While you're in school, you don't have that kind of time. I read it at Oxford shut up in a flat for the better part of a week, at the end of which I almost married the wrong man, since I thought I was in 19th century Russia. (Laughs) A 19th century character came down the pike, and I didn't realize till later that he was a 19th century character but he was also a son of a bitch. So much for the dangers of reading.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Was Harper's good for you?

CORNELIA BESSIE: No, because Harper's was so totally sexist. That was at a time when Papa Knopf could say, in print, "Women shouldn't expect to be paid in publishing, they should pay to be in publishing." And he could say that without blinking, and was quoted in a magazine. Harper's was super-sexist, which is why all those wonderful women were under-appreciated; and it was the women who did most of the work and had, I thought, the finer taste. Not that some of the boys didn't have it, when they could sit still for long enough. Already then, you were being rewarded for beating the bushes rather than for publishing good books. And I think that's still true; it's *more* true.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Yes, is more true; but it hadn't been true before?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Oh, I don't know. By the time I appeared, it was true. I suppose the question is, when did commercialism start? It was always there.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: You said that one of the jobs of the editor is choosing books well. For what purpose do you choose a book? It seems that now, books are chosen for marketability, for adding to the bottom-line; but I think that is not your purpose.

CORNELIA BESSIE: No. I have never been editor-in-chief or publisher of a large list, so I've never had the responsibility of making a viable list, which means that you have to balance off a few of the things that will pay the light bill with the things you love.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Those are almost always in opposition?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Mostly. I've bought a few books that I didn't dislike, and certainly didn't look down on, but that I sure didn't think were great literature, because I knew that they would do well. It's rare that I've had to do that. If you have a responsibility, as Lee [Goerner, 1947-95, *the final publisher at Atheneum*] had, for making a place live, then you have to have those thoughts. I've had the luxury of never having had to do that.

Whatever that book you take on is, you have to live with it. On one occasion there was a book that I really thought was quite remarkable; but the book was so horrifying, it horrified me so much, which meant it was so well done, that I suddenly thought: "I can't live with this." I couldn't see myself presenting it to the sales force. So far as I know, the book wasn't published.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: When you read now, do you think you know when a book is commercial?

CORNELIA BESSIE: Yes, and I'm so often wrong. I think it is commercial, and it isn't. I've come to the conclusion that I don't have that set of instincts.

I've been working for a couple of years with somebody who's never written a book before, and who comes from another part of the forest; who doesn't know about book publishing. One day I said to him, "There aren't that many people who would spend two years with you doing what I call an elementary writing course." He happens to be a very smart fellow and caught on immediately, and it's been a great pleasure working with him because he is so smart. But, you know, he thinks this is what publishing is like! And it's not, to a great extent, that way anymore.

And then the *New York Times* runs a piece saying, "How come we can't find any young people who will edit books?" I don't know if you've had any experience with cybernetics. In that field, they talk about "the payoff." Now the payoff is in the wrong place: I think that's one of the intrinsic problems with publishing now, that the payoffs are all in the wrong place. What do people get rewarded for, or get raises for? What do they get secure places in the system for? It's not for doing the grubby work late at night with a pencil. Not only that you don't get rewarded: people are absolutely *not* rewarded, they're told they're wasting their time. The pay-off work goes into making a best-seller.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Have you never considered writing, yourself, nor been drawn to it?

CB (pleased): Yeah (drawn out). I've performed small acts of the dread deed, yes.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: And are those available to be read?

CORNELIA BESSIE: (Laughs.) No.

I did do a lot of translating; my translations paid for my travel. Oxford I paid for with Simenon, believe it or not. And I've done one book which was a pure act of love. I announced at the time that it would be my first and last German translation, and it has been: it was a book by a well-known writer there called Ilse Aichinger. She's a lovely writer, and I fell in love with this book.

I met her again by chance about two months ago, and it was quite wonderful: we had the same sort of magical, instant communication we had had before. In German, the literal translation of the title is, "The Greater Hope," which doesn't work in English, and so I called the book HEROD'S CHILDREN. She's a great lady and, now, an old lady. The book is about a group of Jewish children in Vienna during the war. In each chapter their world grows narrower, smaller, as the Nazi edicts about the Jews progress, until the only place for them to go is up, into their imagination. It's both very real and a blessedly imaginative work of fiction. It still moves me as much today as it did when I worked on it, when I woke sometimes in tears in the middle of the night.

--And here's a book I did that was great fun to do.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Oh, this is marvelous. [BESTIARE D'AMOUR, Jean Rostand, Doubleday 1961, tr. Cornelia Schaeffer]

CORNELIA BESSIE: He was still alive when I did that. That was fun. I paid for my travels and studies -- at one point I did anything anyone would pay me to do. Most of it was from the French,

The Simenons -- you know, he wrote them all in 11 days, and so, my point of pride was that I translated them in 11 days! (Laughter.) (Except that I used the 12th day to revise. Maybe he did, too.) So, 24 days of work paid for a year at Oxford. That's not bad.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Not bad at all.

CORNELIA BESSIE: Mind you, I was paying £5 a week for my room.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Even so. Are the titles still available?

CORNELIA BESSIE: I don't have them in the house. He wasn't a bad writer, you know. At that time, he was married to a Canadian woman. The publisher was Doubleday, and she had editorial rights, and her notion of a good translation was that the words appear in the same order in the English sentence as in the original. I refused to sign the translations, because she mangled them. But they paid for my education.

### *What Happend to Harper & Bros.?*

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: What happened to Harper & Bros.?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Oh, lots of things. It depends on when you want to start the story?

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: From when you were there till when you left.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well. When I joined, in the fall of 1946, it was 130 years old; it had started in 1817, and had been, in the latter part of the 19th century, the largest English-language publishing house in the world. It published books and magazines, lots of them: *Harper's Bazaar*, *Harper's Weekly*, *Harper's Monthly*, and so forth. But, shortly after the turn of the century, it was going bankrupt; it had been bled by the various partners, a characteristic thing of a family-owned business.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: By then, the second or third generation?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Oh, yes: at least third. Four brothers started it, four brothers from a farm on Staten Island, like the Vanderbilts. It was saved by Tom Lamont, who was then the partner of J. P. Morgan, I think for the total of, I don't know, two million bucks, which then was a large sum. And it went through various hands; and in the middle of the 1920s was joined by a fellow named Cass Canfield, who came from a wealthy family, and who actually joined it to run the London office. Harper's at that time, and from early in the 19th century, was Harper and Brothers, New York and London, publishing in both places. Then Canfield came back to America, and he wasn't head of the house, but he became so in 1944; he might as well have been, he was the principal stockholder by that time. The stock wasn't listed, it was privately held; he bought the largest part of it -- he had about 22, 24% of it.

Anyhow, when I joined it, he was then the head of the house and principal stockholder. And, in addition to being an able businessman and administrator, he was also a publisher, a person who knew about and cared about books and edited a lot himself. Indeed, the jewels of the Harper 20th century list were his: Aldous Huxley and all the English, Thornton Wilder and that generation of Americans: they all were people whom Cass personally published, something which is rare in our time.

In any event, what was the house like then? It was one of the two or three -- along with Doubleday, and Macmillan, maybe -- largest diversified publishing houses. It published all kinds of books: medical, school, college, religious; and its trade department was certainly one of the two or three dominant trade departments. It had begun to seem predictable, by comparison with the new generation of the 1920s and '30s houses -- Knopf, Simon & Schuster, Random House, and Viking, etc.: they were brighter; the scene was brighter. They were more contemporary, although Harper still had great strength. Cass, for example, had an almost proprietary relationship with the *New Yorker*, because he had published the Thurbers and the E.B. Whites and so forth. He didn't maintain that monopoly, because it got passed around; but when I joined, most *New Yorker* writers published still with Harper's. The staff of the trade department was essentially Ivy League. Not everybody came from Harvard, Yale, or Princeton, but most did. Women were beginning to play a role editorially, though they tended to be assistants -- not in the role of secretaries. The place had a singular advantage in *Harper's Magazine*, which brought in young writers and gave us first crack at 'em. We got a lot of people that way

Anyhow, that was the house that I joined in '46. And I was there for 15 years, and then came the Atheneum adventure.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: What became of Harper's?

MICHAEL BESSIE: I left in '59. In about 1962 or '63, Harper & Bros. became Harper & Row, because elementary and secondary publishing became enormously expanded in those years, and there Harper found itself, in the early '60s, without a schoolbook department. [*So it bought Row Peterson, a textbook publisher, and added the new firm's name.*]

The Harper that I left in 1959 was doing about \$20 million worth of turnover a year, which was about as much as anybody else. The Harper I returned to, in 1975, was doing nearly \$100 million. But in the meantime, Harcourt Brace, for example, had gone to about \$300 million. Subsidiary rights had become considerably more important: book club, paperback, movie, etc. So, the things that we are now so aware of were beginning to develop. The increase of money, in every sense: Capitalization. Money needed for marketing. Money needed for advances. Everything got more competitive, more expensive. General publishing became more closely allied to show biz. The Harper I returned to was dominated by numbers: P & Ls, numbers, and by marketing, in the sense that the firm I had left 16 years before was not.

When I returned, as the senior publisher of the house and one of the corporate triumvirate who were supposed to run the place, I had to go

through about a three-week indoctrination, because I had to learn a new business. I learned what had happened to big publishing during that time. Of course, it happened to every other one of the big places: it had become “corporatized.”

I went back to Harper -- I was then 59 -- under an arrangement in which I would be senior vice-president, publisher, etc., until I was 65, and when I was 65, Harper would set up Bessie Books for Cornelia and me, as an imprint under Harper’s aegis, independently. We would own it, but we would have publishing and money arrangements with Harper.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: What did Cornelia do in the meantime?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Cornelia had been working for Atheneum, actually, until we were married; when Pat Knopf, who saw his mother in Cornelia, became impossible for her to work with, she went off to Dutton. But when I went back to Harper, she came into Harper; or shortly thereafter.

So that was the deal. And for the next -- well, from ‘75 to ‘81, I was at Harper. In ‘81, we set up Joshuatown Publishing, a small corporation which is ours, which is Cornelia and Michael Bessie Books. They kept me on the Harper board. I was on till ‘87, when we sold to Murdoch and the board disappeared.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: And you weren’t in favor of that sale.

MICHAEL BESSIE: I was very strongly against it.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Why were you against it?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Because I liked Harper independent, and also because I didn’t like Murdoch. The easiest way to answer your question is, Because I foresaw what has happened.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: And what has happened, that you foresaw?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Harper has become, or, starting in ‘87, became, huge. It became a minor interest, namely a cash cow, for Murdoch. See, he bought it for two reasons: he wanted a publishing house; he by that time had 40% of Collins [William Collins Publishers], in England.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Which was a respectable firm as well.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Oh, it was a great firm. It was a great old publisher, and a printer as well, Scottish printer. But under English law, once he acquired 40% he had either to stand still or take on the whole shebang. But he had a vision of a world-wide English-language book-publishing enterprise. I think at the time he had that dream first, he didn’t realize that his real dream was going to be movies and television. He also suffered, as did many another -- why did Paramount buy Simon & Schuster? -- from “synergy.” It was a widely-spread notion.

So, I was opposed to it, as were almost but not quite half the board. Harper was being headed by a fellow named Brooks Thomas, a lawyer by training, but not a book person. The firm was having a hard time adjusting itself to the situation that has since developed in big-time publishing. It was still, in the view of Wall Street, bound to the old-fashioned notion that you published books because you liked them, and so forth, and so forth. And it was beginning to have cash problems: it was profitable, but at too low a level.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Ah, yes; that dreaded notion.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well. RCA became disillusioned with Random House and sold it because they realized, as others have, and I suspect Mr. Newhouse [*S.I. Newhouse, head of Advance Publications, a family-owned company which owns Random House, Knopf/Pantheon/Vintage, and other imprints, as well as The New Yorker, Vogue, Vanity Fair, and a number of other glossy publications*] now has, that book publishing, even under present circumstances, is very unlikely to return more than five or six percent net profit. In a very good year, you might; but almost nobody does. It's certain nobody does over a long period of time. Almost anything else in media can and does do better. They're also capable of generating larger losses. But, you know, they gamble for bigger stakes.

You know what the economics of trade publishing are: about two-thirds of the books that you publish don't make a profit. So if you're good, the loss is smaller; the loss narrows. About a third of the books that you publish make a profit; and if you're good, some of 'em make a big profit. That's the economics of trade publishing. And in most instances, year in and year out, now, the profit comes from subsidiary rights. You may break even on the sale of books, but it's book club, paperback, movie and television, foreign rights, etc., where you make money. And one of the effects of the increased power of the agents is that publishers have a smaller and smaller share of subsidiary rights. For example, in the new world, the electronic world, agents of popular authors don't give book publishers an *inch* of electronic rights.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: They think there's going to be a windfall there.

MICHAEL BESSIE: They think that there may be, and they're negotiating from strength. And you know, when people start paying five, six, seven, eight, nine million dollars to acquire a popular author, as they do, there's a competition set up, and so, one of the first things the agent makes clear is this.

Now, just as in the old days -- by which I mean, before my time -- publishers would have 50% of movie rights, or more. It was then reduced to 10%, and then eliminated. That's, by and large, what's happened.

It's amusing that what's left of Atheneum [*the imprint, except for children's books, was closed in 1994 by its newest owner, Simon & Schuster, itself owned by Paramount, which is owned by Viacom*] -- since that's one of the things we share -- is children's books, and they're doing quite well.

What we've been talking about is obviously important. There has been a spate, as you know, recently in the *Times*, and elsewhere, of writings about the terrible troubles of book publishing. At various times during these 51 years since I got into this business I've had to give lectures and write about book publishing. So I've got a slightly tired but still not-bad research file on this. There is, in effect, nothing that's being said about the troubles of book publishing in the Computer Age that wasn't said about the troubles of book publishing in the Movie Age, etc., etc. In the '60s and '70s, when I was doing all this talking and writing -- there's nothing new under the Sun, or Mars, or Jupiter, but it takes different forms. I'm evenly divided between concern that, when I look at publishing and feel disoriented, feel a stranger in a strange

land, it is more a function of my age than it is of real change. That's one side of it.

The other side says, "Boy, it sure was a hell of a lot better." And, for the likes of me, it was. I'm one of those rare people in publishing who had the rare opportunity to do what many people would like to do, but almost nobody gets the chance to do, which is: start a new firm. And then, have it work. And have it publish a lot of good books. We were very lucky.



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*My novels are based on the fantastic designs made by real human beings earnestly laboring to maladjust themselves to fate. My characters are not slaves to an author's propaganda. I give them their heads. They furnish their own nooses.*

Dawn Powell

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## FANTASTIC DESIGN, WITH NOOSES

### 1. Making Money in China

A Chinese friend who is an antiques dealer in my town is doing very well, she notes wryly. Sotheby's comes regularly to select from her stock. As I write, she is on her way home from China, importing an enormous shipment of furniture and domestic accessories. For the last decade the peasants of China have been enjoined to "make money," and so they are selling off their households. Rivers of furniture are draining off to the West. My friend, in position to divert a wide stream of these things into her own warehouses, says this massive selling-off causes great pain to intellectuals, among whom she would rather be located. She is bored with making money -- it takes no *thought* -- and spends her days reading philosophy. However, the practical study of Chinese furniture has revealed to her marvels of her great civilization that she had never been taught on the Mainland. She is aware of the irony of this, and of her own position.

Rupert Murdoch, the naturalized American media baron, is said also to be making money in China. We presume the Chinese government, if hardly the peasants, is also benefiting greatly, as its leaders have given Murdoch rights to loft an exclusive satellite network across the Mainland. It is expected that this access will open China as a vast "market" to Western material and psychological goods. "Making money" replaces all previous slogans and spurs men to frantic destructive new activity. My friend the antiques dealer reports sadly that (in China) only good people are not making money, precisely because they are good people and don't know how to cheat, lie, and do the unethical things necessary to manage in the new economy.

### 2. I'm shocked. Shocked.

Last June Britain handed Hong Kong back to the Chinese. Via CNN we watched the last British governor leave: Mr. Chris Patten, late an advocate of democracy for the soon-to-be former colony, critic of the Chinese government. Soon after his departure several publishers, including Mr. Murdoch's HarperCollins in England, signed contracts for Mr. Patten's

political memoirs. Several months ago, Mr. Patten delivered the first 70,000 words to his editor, Stuart Proffitt, head of trade publishing at HC, who wrote back with enthusiasm that these were very fine political memoirs, so exciting as to quicken his blood, and certain to become a best seller. In late January Mr. Proffitt introduced Mr. Patten to the press as a coming author for HarperCollins and once again predicted great commercial success for the book.

But as we soon read in the papers, Murdoch wouldn't cotton to the plan. At least, so his minions worried. Patten had criticized the Chinese government. What would the boss think? Consternation followed, we infer, and down through the levels of Upper Management came the word: Drop the book. (Had Murdoch murmured, "Will no one rid me of this priest?") Stuart Proffitt, we read, was called into the office of a Senior Manager and told to take back what he had already publicly announced. He refused; was handed a gag order, then sacked (in effect, a "principled resignation," said Patten's agent, an old hand at the publishing game); and promptly sued his former employer for breach of contract. "It would have meant, in short, both lying and doing enormous damage to my own reputation," Proffitt said in a legal affidavit.

I acknowledge a certain bias, being acquainted with Stuart Proffitt. I've thought well of him as the editor of very good books by writers I care for: Patrick O'Brian, Doris Lessing, Penelope Fitzgerald, Richard Holmes, John Hale, among others. He acted as anyone would have expected of a serious editor and honorable person. I think as well that the very British elements of this tale are more complex and interesting than have appeared in the media. Chris Patten was, after all, once chairman of the Conservative Party; Proffitt also published the memoirs of Margaret Thatcher and John Major; Murdoch was long known as anti-communist (as noted by Michael Bessie, in our conversation, elsewhere in this issue). HarperCollins, like most major publishing conglomerates, is rumored to be on the block.

The *Financial Times* said reasonably, yet with underlying horror, that Murdoch's dropping the book was a "business decision." HarperCollins is a small part of the man's media/entertainment conglomerate [which now includes the Los Angeles Dodgers, and cable stations to broadcast their games]. It wasn't worth antagonizing the Chinese over a book; the possible "harm" to HarperCollins's "reputation" and "standing" was a price easily affordable for continuing good relations with the Mainland. Thus supposed the *Financial Times*. No doubt HarperCollins has a better reputation in England -- in good part, because of an editor the caliber of Proffitt, who also led Flamingo, HC's literary imprint -- than in the U. S.; but surely this is a relative statement.

In an earlier Endnote I quoted Steve Wasserman, editor of the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, who said, naming companies like HarperCollins, with memory recent of the publisher's arbitrary canceling of contracts with a hundred-odd writers, that after the conglomerations of the last decade, most of the publishers "left standing" have "debased the imprints started by their founders."

It's worth recalling Michael Bessie once more on the matter of Murdoch, big publishing, the stock market, and real profits to be expected from publishing books:

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: And you weren't in favor of that sale.

MICHAEL BESSIE: I was very strongly against it.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Why were you against it?

MICHAEL BESSIE: Because I liked Harper independent, and also because I didn't like Murdoch. The easiest way to answer your question is, Because I foresaw what has happened.

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MICHAEL BESSIE: Oh, it was a great firm. It was a great old publisher, and a printer as well, Scottish printer. But under English law, once he acquired 40% he had either to stand still or take on the whole shebang. But he had a vision of a world-wide English-language book-publishing enterprise. I think at the time he had that dream first, he didn't realize that his real dream was going to be movies and television. He also suffered, as did many another -- why did Paramount buy Simon & Schuster? -- from "synergy." It was a widely-spread notion.

So, I was opposed to it, as were almost but not quite half the board. Harper was being headed by a fellow named Brooks Thomas, a lawyer by training, but not a book person. The firm was having a hard time adjusting itself to the situation that has since developed in big-time publishing. It was still, in the view of Wall Street, bound to the old-fashioned notion that you published books because you liked them, and so forth, and so forth. And it was beginning to have cash problems: it was profitable, but at too low a level.

What interests me about this most recent act of bad faith in publishing is the public response of some notable British authors. It was grand, conveyed with the gravity and yet volume we desire of writers and intellectuals. The historian Peter Hennessey is quoted as saying, "I am appalled by this...HarperCollins has quite simply ceased to be a member of our open society and no one in their right minds of any worth will ever give them a book again." Doris Lessing called Murdoch "unprofessional" (of all things): "It is so shocking I can't find words for it." These writers, estimable without question, are published by HarperCollins. It is as if they had never considered the kind of man who owned the company whose name appeared on the

spine of their books. How is that? The writer's conscience, speaking historically, is a subtle, poised instrument and skillful at locating distinctions we might not otherwise have noticed.

### 3. Two Mortal Men Deciding Fate

MICHAEL BESSIE: [Harper] was still, in the view of Wall Street, bound to the old-fashioned notion that you published books because you liked them, and so forth, and so forth. And it was beginning to have cash problems: it was profitable, but at too low a level.

KATHERINE MCNAMARA: Ah, yes; that dreaded notion.

MICHAEL BESSIE: Well. RCA became disillusioned with Random House and sold it because they realized, as others have, and I suspect Mr. Newhouse now has, that book publishing, even under present circumstances, is very unlikely to return more than five or six percent net profit. In a very good year, you might; but almost nobody does. It's certain nobody does over a long period of time. Almost anything else in media can and does do better. They're also capable of generating larger losses. But, you know, they gamble for bigger stakes.

You know what the economics of trade publishing are: about two-thirds of the books that you publish don't make a profit. So if you're good, the loss is smaller; the loss narrows.

Michael Bessie, speaking last Autumn, was not prescient, I'd say, merely acutely observant, being a man who knows the territory. The landscape of European and American conglomerate publishing is being paved over. His "Mr. Newhouse" is S. I. Newhouse, whose huge family-held company owns "big" Random House, covering "little" Random House, Knopf, Pantheon, Vintage, Villard, and so on, and several English imprints. Bertelsmann, an immense German media corporation represented by Mr. Thomas Middelhoff has just agreed to buy all of Random House from Mr. Newhouse for a very great deal of capital. Mr. Middelhoff approached Mr. Newhouse with the offer, it's said, on the latter's 70th birthday.

Interested readers have seen media reports of the scale of this transfer of ownership. Bertelsmann is the Xth largest media conglomerate in the world, and holds Bantam Doubleday Dell, part of American On-Line, plenty of other entertainment companies, and, amusingly, RCA Records. Random House is the Yth largest publishing corporation in the U.S. and England, and publishes serious literature as well as lucrative high trash. Agents, always preferring the status quo, said glumly that now there would be fewer imprints and not as many editors to read their clients' work. Editors are holding their breath waiting to be fired, or scurrying about looking for likely mega-sellers. Everyone is fearful; no one will speak for attribution. Etc. Etc.

What interests me about this development are two things. One, "no one" inside or outside Random House seemed to know the deal was in the

works. Wonderful, when the gossipy publishing factories can be surprised. Two, once again the ground has been shaken underneath us who are writers and serious publishers. The quake isn't even a natural disaster or some great historical cataclysm, merely the banality of capitalist dealings and their unintended consequences. The Random - Bertelsmann deal: two mortal men deciding fate.

Feeling portentous, I e-mailed the last few sentences to a Contributing Editor of this journal, a novelist who replied sensibly:

“Serious writing is always a little unnerving. Or that’s my experience. It’s great, though, what’s happening in publishing these days. At least if we write seriously, we don’t have to worry about having anybody read it. But God reads all books.”

#### 4. Perspective

R. B. Kitaj, the painter, has moved to Los Angeles. The jingoist treatment of his superb retrospective at the Tate in 1994 by English critics caused him to leave London after decades of residence. He was interviewed before the show by Richard Morphet:

“Oh, I see myself in most exalted lines of descent of course, among those mad scribblers Delacroix, van Gogh, Gauguin, Whistler, Sickert, to name just five. The collected writings of Matisse and Klee are also favourites on my shelves, and I’ve already mentioned the crucial books written by Mondrian and Kandinsky in another context. Painters who write are also enacting a kind of play within a play... the larger drama is the work of the great confessional writers for me... Rousseau (a discovery of my old age), Proust, Montaigne, Kafka, Gide, the Russians, Canetti and the like. I came upon the confessional mode quite young. In the army, I read Gide’s superb Journals on guard duty in the Fontainebleau forest. Kafka’s Diaries changed my life later on, and Robert Lowell’s poetry also helped lead me to think an autobiographical art of painting was not only possible but deep within my bones. But painters have always written. Picasso wrote a lot of Surrealist stuff. At the top of the heap was Michelangelo.... He inspired me to try to write poems about my own pictures, to somehow extend the life of a painting while I’m still alive, maybe because I don’t want to die yet and poetry is a special life-force after the painting has been taken out of my hands. I’ve failed so far because my poems seem poor, but I’ll keep trying. Meanwhile, I’ve written some short stories or prose-poems for some of my pictures, as you know. I like the idea that they have no life apart from the picture. They illustrate the picture the way pictures have always illustrated books in our lives.”

KM

R. B. KITAJ: A Retrospective, ed. Richard Morphet. London: Tate Gallery, 1994

## About Our Contributors

**Moshe Benarroch** <moben@internet-zahav.net> translated the poems in this issue from the Hebrew. He was born in 1959 in Tetuan, “the northernmost city of Morocco and the Islamic world, facing Gibraltar; this is also the closest place to Spain in which Jewish Sephardim settled after they were chased from Spain in 1492.” In 1972, his parents emigrated to Israel. He has published two books: *THE LITANY OF THE IMMIGRANT* (poetry, 1994), and *THE COMING BOOK* (prose, 1997). He has had numerous publications in Israeli and international magazines. His works have appeared in Spanish, French and English; many can be found on the internet in *Visions; Poetry Magazine; Moonshade;* and in *Poems from the Planet Earth*. He has translated into Hebrew from the French, Spanish and English, works by Tahar ben Jelloun, Charles Bukowski, Borges, García Márquez, Hal Sirowitz, Claude Vigée, André Chouraqui, Benard Chouraqui, Vicente Huidobro, César Vallejo, and many others. From 1981 to 1987 he edited the literary review *Marhot*; he also writes reviews for the on-line magazine *Fame*. He is married to Danielle and they have three children. He lives in Jerusalem.

**Heather Burns** <hab3f@virginia.edu> was born in Gunnison, Colorado in 1965. She received an MFA from the University of Virginia where she was a Henry Hoyns Fellow. Her poems have appeared in *Antietam, The Blue Moon Review, The English Journal, Nimrod, Southern Poetry Review,* and *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. She has poems forthcoming in *The New Virginia Review* and *The Hollins Critic*. She works in the Fine Arts Library at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, and is a founding director of a community writing center where she teaches poetry to adults and children.

**Edith Grossman** has translated some of the finest works by major contemporary Spanish-language authors, including García Márquez (*NEWS OF A KIDNAPPING*, Knopf, 1997), Vargas Llosa (*THE NOTEBOOKS OF DON RIGOBERTO*, Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1998), Mayra Montero (*IN THE PALM OF DARKNESS*, HarperCollins, 1997), Augusto Monterroso (*COMPLETE WORKS AND OTHER STORIES*, Univ. of Texas, 1995), Julián Ríos (*LOVES THAT BIND*, Knopf, 1998), and the anti-poet Nicanor Parra. She is working now on Mayra Montero’s new novel, to be published by HarperCollins in 1999.

**Victoria Slavuski** <V.Slavutzky@iaea.org> was born in Buenos Aires. She is a resident of the U. S. and has lived in New York and Paris. A journalist specializing in cultural issues and the arts, she has contributed to numerous magazines and newspapers. She is also a translator for United Nations organizations. Her novel *MÚSICA PARA OLVIDAR UNA ISLA*, set on Robinson Crusoe’s island and in New York, was published in 1993 by Planeta Argentina. At present she lives in Vienna and is working on a novel set in that city.

**V. Digitalis** <bz2v@virginia.edu>, a book reviewer and an acquisitions editor at a southern press, uses the regular horticulture column “In the Garden” as a showcase for certain misanthropic views and periodic litanies of complaint.

## Recommended Reading

“True wit should break a wise man’s heart. It should strike at the exact point of weakness and it should scar. It should rest on a pillar of truth and not on a gelatin base, and the truth is not so shameful that it cannot be recorded.”

Dawn Powell  
DAWN POWELL AT HER BEST  
ed. Tim Page, Steerforth, 1994

**Jim Crace** (ARCADIA, Atheneum; SIGNALS OF DISTRESS, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996; QUARANTINE, Farrar, Straus, 1998): “Robert Frost is somewhat out of fashion at the moment. Readers find him too unyielding and grumpy, a New Hampshire smallholder and countryman who would gladly scatter any trespassers with his twelve-bore couplets. He’s also too conservative as a poet (‘Writing free verse is like playing tennis with the net down.’) But I like grouchy Farmer Frost. I continue to admire his cantankerous love of the land and his solid, intimate understanding of weather, water, stone. There is nothing Wordsworthian about his experience of nature. He has fixed that dry stone wall himself, walked ‘the sodden pasture lane,’ snagged his own axe into the alder roots. **Robert Frost, THE COLLECTED POETRY** (Henry Holt)

“**WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS**, by J.M. Coetzee, is the modern novel I would most like to have written, and Coetzee is the novelist who has most directly influenced my own books. His works are sparkling, disconcerting allegories about exploitation, oppression and imperialism both in and beyond his native South Africa, but written with immense narrative drive and great clarity. **BARBARIANS** is the story of an ineffectual magistrate, banished to the frontiers of Empire and only realizing too late that waiting for the barbarians to arrive has blinkered him from noticing that the real barbarians are already in command. Could be anywhere.

“**THE SONG OF THE DODO**, by David Quammen, is a recent personal favorite, my fantasy book in fact. If I hadn’t been a novelist I would have wanted to be a naturalist, an adventurer or a traveller. Quammen is all of these. His book is subtitled “Island Biogeography in an Age of Extinction” and is ostensibly a painstaking -- almost 700 pages! -- report on the distribution of animal and plant species on islands. This could have been a work of armchair scholarship, but Quammen has the nature of a prowler and the eye of a novelist. We end up hunting dodos, marsupial tigers, dragons and a pestilential outbreak of snakes in Mauritius, Tasmania, Komodo, and Guam while Quammen reveals his Theory of Everything. I have never before been so completely captivated by a work of non-fiction. A masterpiece of natural history.”

**Jeanette Watson** (owner of the late Books&Co., NY, and publisher of *Off the Wall*, a quarterly newsletter available from Books&Co./Turtle Point Press, 103 Hog Hill Road, Chappaqua, NY 10514): “As readers may know by now, I love erotic books and **Ted Mooney’s** latest novel, **SINGING INTO THE PIANO** (Knopf, 1998), has the most erotic first chapter I’ve read in a long time.

“I was riveted by **Christa Wolf’s** new book, **MEDEA** (Nan A. Talese/ Doubleday, 1998), an engrossing retelling of this classical tale which offers an important commentary on the power struggle between men and women and a new take on a familiar tragic figure.

“I thought **W.G. Sebald’s** **THE IMMIGRANTS** (New Directions, 1997) was one of the great literary discoveries of last year -- a remarkable work of imagination, compassion, and intelligence, and so I’m very excited to see that May promises a new translation of this German writer’s work entitled **THE RINGS OF SATURN** (New Directions, 1998).

**Isabelle de Courtivron** (Professor of French Literature, MIT): **Patrick Chamoiseau, SCHOOL DAYS**, tr. Linda Coverdale (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1997). **Eva Hoffman, LOST IN TRANSLATION: A LIFE IN A NEW LANGUAGE** (Penguin Books, 1989). **Richard Rodriguez, HUNGER OF MEMORY: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY** (Bantam, 1983)

“These three autobiographical narratives focus on the difficulties and rewards associated with growing up bilingual and bicultural. Although their authors relate different childhood trajectories (**Hoffman** is a Polish Jew who emigrated to Canada with her family when she was 13; **Rodriguez** is the son of Mexicans who moved to California where they brought up their children; **Chamoiseau** was raised in Martinique), they share many themes. One of these is the ‘hunger for memory,’ that is, the longing for a childhood paradise where the language of ‘home’ (Polish/Spanish/Creole) represented a linguistic unconsciousness and a



seamless, unfragmented, intimate world from which all three authors were painfully expelled. The authors all recount their alienation as they became 'lost in translation.'

"Hoffman analyzes the confusion involved in the divorce between signified and signifier in her attempts to adapt to a new American culture; Rodriguez emphasizes the painful split he experienced between the intimacy of the Spanish language spoken at home and the intrusion of the public language, English, in school, as it invaded and ruptured the familial harmony. Chamoiseau recounts the cruel transition from a reassuring Creole-speaking home to the hard apprenticeship of official French language enforced by the Francophile Martinique schoolteacher who has assimilated the values of the colonizer and is intent on banning all remnants of Creole from his students's speech.

"Finally, all three writers are transformed by 'school days' when each becomes obsessed with language, with mastery of the written word, with scholarly or intellectual pursuits which led them to become distinguished writers and journalists. Their stories offer very different resolutions to their experiences. Hoffmann concludes that in a postmodern world, her fragmented identity is in fact the best way to 'fit' into contemporary American life. Rodriguez makes a strong argument against bilingual education and affirmative action. Chamoiseau weaves Creole and French into the novels which have brought him international success."

**Joan Schenkar** (SIGNS OF LIFE/6 COMEDIES OF MENACE, Wesleyan University Press, 1998): "A brilliant exploration of aspects of nothingness: psychological, philosophical, mathematical, and dramatic." **Brian Rotman**, SIGNIFYING NOTHING: THE SEMIOLOGY OF ZERO (St. Martins Press, 1987)

"An insouciant examination of the ways in which women and computers are made for each other." **Sadie Plant**, ZEROS AND ONES (Doubleday, 1997)

"The great, burning, maverick novel of the 20th century, published in 1937. I consider her the Emily Bronte of Modernism." **Djuna Barnes**, NIGHTWOOD (New Directions)

"Originally published in 1968, reissued by Virago/Little, Brown, is A COMPASS ERROR, by **Sybille Bedford**, a brilliant novel of such moral complexity that it makes you shudder.

"And then, I recommend my own dazzling book of plays, SIGNS OF LIFE -- so much fun to read; designed to be read and staged in the head."

**Odile Hellier** (Proprietor, Village Voice Bookshop, 6, rue Princesse, Paris 75006): "I highly recommend John Banville's beautiful novel. He ironizes about the tragedy of a man but is never tragic; he sees from a distance yet highlights the atmosphere of the elite, intellectuals, homosexuals. Everything is closeted but also understood. For me it is the essence of mastery, a novel of maturity in which he is able to balance so many different elements that there is a nobility, almost, in that mastery." **John Banville**, THE UNTOUCHABLE (Knopf, 1997)

"I think THE UNQUIET GRAVE is *un petit livre de chevet*, a book that you should keep by your bedside. It's about beauty in a time of hardship -- the Blitz, when he is horrified by the dehumanization of mankind. The beauty of which he writes can be that of literature, of myth, of landscape in the south, of his house. He sees that if man needs the peace of the countryside, he also needs the city, the man-made world of civilization. He evokes life again -- conversation, cafes during the day, not the London Blitz at night." **Cyril Connolly** (Palinurus), THE UNQUIET GRAVE (Persea, reprint 1982)

"I felt that LeAnn Schreiber's portraits of life in the country were very good; not pretentious but good. In this narrative she has retired to the country because of the gravity of her life -- there has been much loss -- and there finds light. In the microcosmos of her life in this house in the country, she sees the cosmos." **LeAnn Schreiber**, LIGHT YEARS (Lyons and Burford, 1996; Anchor, 1997)

**Sarah Gaddis** (SWALLOW HARD, Atheneum): "In a flashback of an obsessive relationship, the novelist and translator Lydia Davis leads the reader in circles as she shifts beginnings and

endings and perceptions in this tale of loneliness, bitterness, and wit. Each scene of the unraveling affair, which is recounted by an unnamed woman and takes place in a fictional California coastal town, is at times as visually stark and stunning as a Hopper painting, at times fractured, as if seen through a prism. As readers we are invited to take the responsibility of confidante seriously from the first, circular sentence to the last." **Lydia Davis, THE END OF THE STORY (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995; High Risk Books, 1995; Serpent's Tail, 1996)**

**George Garrett (THE KING OF BABYLON SHALL NOT COME AGAINST YOU and WHISTLING IN THE DARK, Harcourt-Brace):** "In a season of Civil War books, some of them highly praised and commercially successful, quietly came *NASHVILLE 1864*, by Madison Jones; his first book in some years, a lean, evocative look at the Battle of Nashville from a child's point of view. Of Jones' fiction Flannery O'Connor wrote: 'He's so much better than the ones all the shouting is about.' That condition is unchanged." **Madison Jones, NASHVILLE 1864: THE DYING OF THE LIGHT (J.S. Saunders, 1997)**

"It has also been a season of Hollywood novels. Muriel Spark adds some new wrinkles to that genre; most of her story takes place in London and France and involves the gifted American film director Tom Richards, his complicated family life, and the dangers and daring of his craft." **Muriel Spark, REALITY AND DREAMS (Houghton-Mifflin, 1997)**

"The central figure of Anthony Burgess' latest and evidently last work is an artist also, a painter and a composer and a great seducer, and *BYRNE* is unlike any novel you have read or will read in a long time, being written entirely in fluent verse, four out of five parts in Byronic *ottava rima*, with one section of virtuosity in the Spencerian stanza, all of it, believe it or not, lively and accessible reading." **Anthony Burgess, BYRNE: A NOVEL (Carrol & Graf, 1997)**

## Interesting Sites and Resources

### Independent Presses

*Chelsea Green Publishing Company* ([www.chelseagreen.com](http://www.chelseagreen.com)) in White River Junction, Vermont, specializes in books about sustainable living, with selections of environmentally friendly, thoughtful, and hopeful books. The editor in chief, Jim Schley, wrote us about our conversation with the Bessies, in this issue and last: "As a younger editor who has every intention of emulating such ... predecessors, I find this conversation to be truly illuminating." This press has high standards.

*The Harvill Press* ([www.harvill-press.com](http://www.harvill-press.com)) publishes, among many estimable authors, Richard Hughes, Richard Ford, and in translation, Anna Maria Ortese (*THE LAMENT OF THE LINNET*), Ismael Kadare, Javier Marías. Many of their titles are available in the U. S., particularly at independent bookstores. Although their site is not yet active, we will keep the link open, and we also urge our Readers to look for their books.

*The Lilliput Press* (<http://indigo.ie/~lilliput>) is an Irish publisher founded in 1984 by Antony Farrell. Some 150 titles have appeared under its imprint: art and architecture, autobiography and memoir, biography and history, ecology and environmentalism, essays and literary criticism, philosophy, current affairs and popular culture, fiction, drama and poetry – all broadly focused on Irish themes. Its authors include Agnes Bernelle, Hubert Butler, Philip Casey, Elaine Crowley, Richard Douthwaite, Elynn Evans, Benedict Kiely, Sinéad McCoolle, John Moriarty, Tom Phelan, Tim Robinson and Paulo Tullio, to name a few. Since 1985 they have brought out four volumes of the essays of the late Hubert Butler. Hubert Butler's "The Artukovitch File" appears, with their permission, in *Archipelago*, Vol. 1, No. 2.

*McPherson & Co* ([www.mcphersonco.com](http://www.mcphersonco.com)) publishes such writers as the fascinating Mary Butts (THE TAVERNER NOVELS), Anna Maria Ortese (A MUSIC BEHIND THE WALL, Selected Stories Vol. 2, summer 1998), and the performance artist Carolee Schneeman. A beautiful story by Ortese, "The Great Street," appeared in our inaugural issue.

*Mercury House* ([www.wenet.net/~mercury](http://www.wenet.net/~mercury)) is a not-for-profit literary press in San Francisco. Members of the staff used to be associated with the respected North Point, before that imprint closed its doors. Alfred Arteaga's HOUSE WITH THE BLUE BED is out now; "Beat," from that volume, appeared in our Vol. 1, No. 3. They are to publish NARROW ROAD TO THE DEEP NORTH, a non-fiction narrative by Katherine McNamara, later this year.

### Fine Arts

*Colophon Page* ([www.colophon.com](http://www.colophon.com)) and *PhotoArts* ([www.photoarts.com](http://www.photoarts.com)) are two beautiful sites devoted to the fine arts. They are directed by the fine-art book publisher James Wintner, of JHW Editions. *Colophon Page* is devoted to artists' books, which are displayed as if in a gallery; there is an attendant shop, and review and forum pages. *PhotoArts* presents and offers for sale the works of fine-arts photographers and photojournalists. An on-line auction of photographs is to take place on the PhotoArts site. With a preview commencing in late April, it will be conducted during the second week of May, closing May 16; the auctioneers, specialists in photography, were formerly at Christie's and Sotheby's. The design and quality of reproduction of these sites are excellent.

*Fray* ([www.fray.com](http://www.fray.com)). Strange. Cool. Heartbreaking. A delight.

*Octavo* ([www.octavo.com](http://www.octavo.com)) is a digital publisher committed to conserving books, manuscripts, and antiquarian printed materials via digital tools and formats. They make original works available to readers and book lovers through partnerships with libraries, individuals and institutions. Faithfully depicting the beauty and craftsmanship of these works, their editions incorporate all the modern day benefits of digital formats, such as live text, searching and bookmarking. Schools and libraries receive special discounts and generous site licenses from them. As a sample, they offer a pdf download of William Shakespeare Poems. We are always pleased when web publishers use pdf files, as we do for our *Download edition*.

*Qwerty Arts* ([www.qwertyarts.com](http://www.qwertyarts.com)) offers, as "Words," "Art," "Books," and "Connects," innovative writing, art and criticism, encouraging active participation from readers and viewers. Their design is entrancing and should be viewed with all colors available. In "Connects," we are particularly interested in their links to Surrealist sites, as we ourselves published a spoof with photographs by the English Surrealist collage-photographer and painter Stella Snead, *Archipelago* Vol. 1, No. 3

### Literary Reviews

*The Barcelona Review* ([www.web-show.com/Barcelona/Review](http://www.web-show.com/Barcelona/Review)), Jill Adams, Editor. Carol Isern y Cristina Hernández Johannson, co-editoras. Issue 6 is now on-line with fiction by Nicholas Royle (London) and Lucinda Ebersole and David Alexander (U. S.), and a one-act play by L. A. playwright Ken Tesoriere. From Spain the BR offers a first English translation by a well-known author, Agustín Cerezales. As April 23rd is Sant Jordi Day in Barcelona, the city that inaugurated World Book Day in 1995, they offer a Shakespeare Quiz and a Cervantes Quiz with the offer of a free book to the first correct reply to either quiz. Also, book and film reviews, an essay on Shakespeare, and the Back Issues archive.

Ya está listo el número seis de *The Barcelona Review*. En él, con motivo del Día del Libro por Sant Jordi, encontraréis un test un tantocurioso sobre Cervantes. Además, contamos con

cuentos de Agustín Cerezales [saldrá lunes, día 20], Miquel Zueras, Nicholas Royle, Lucinda Ebersole y David Alexander y una obra de Ken Tesoriere.

<<http://www.web-show.com/Barcelona/Review/CAS>> Español

<<http://www.web-show.com/Barcelona/Review/CAT>> Català

*Jacket* (<http://www.jacket.zip.com.au>) was founded and is edited by John Tranter, an interesting Australian poet. "For more than thirty years he has been at the forefront of the new poetry, questioning and extending its procedures," according to his own biographical note. His own work has been published widely and deeply; and in this quarterly literary journal he publishes the work of other writers generously.

*The Richmond Review* ([www.demon.co.uk/review/](http://www.demon.co.uk/review/)) received approving notice (along with *Archipelago*) in the *TLS* last year. The founding editor, Steven Kelly, "lives and breathes" literature as an editorial consultant for various English publishers. He set up this site in October 1995, "when it was the UK's first lit mag to appear exclusively on the World Wide Web." Each issue carries short stories, feature articles, book reviews and poetry, and it comes out around ten times a year. We particularly like "Viennese Blood," by Sylvia Petter, in the current issue.

### **Bookstores**

*The Irish Bookshop* (<http://irishbooks.com>) is the place in New York where books of and from Ireland, in English and Irish, can be bought. The shop will take phone, mail, and e-mail orders.

*Politics and Prose* ([www.politics-prose.com](http://www.politics-prose.com)) is the largest independent bookshop in Washington, D.C., with a full and beautifully-chosen stock-list and a nicely-arranged web site.

*The Village Voice Bookshop* ([www.paris-anglo.com](http://www.paris-anglo.com)) lives in the heart of Paris, and makes American and English books available to customers on several continents, via phone, fax, post, and e-mail ([vvoice@europost.org](mailto:vvoice@europost.org)). Odile Hellier, the proprietor, is a Contributing Editor of this publication.

### **The Media**

*C-Span* ([www.c-span.org](http://www.c-span.org)) *Booknotes*: On Saturday and Sunday nights, C-Span 2 broadcasts interviews with writers, publishers, and bookstore owners, and then makes these and other book-related matters available on the web.

*The Financial Times* ([www.FT.com](http://www.FT.com)): For those who want to watch intelligently not merely the movement of stocks but the expansion of capital, this newspaper (on-line; in print) is essential. Its new format is more dignified than the carnival-like design with which it suffered for many months.