

## **Blue Has No South – by Alex Epstein**

### **The Angel that Brod and Kafka Dreamt Of**

Once, Max Brod dreamt of an angel who had only one wing. The angel knocked on Brod's door and asked him where Kafka lived. Max Brod gave the angel directions and thought in his dream that the one-winged angel was the most horrifying thing he had ever seen. The next day Brod met Kafka and Kafka told him that the previous night he had dreamt of an angel with no wings, who had asked for Max Brod's address.

### **A Short and Sad Imaginary Guidebook for the Traveler to Prague**

As in every other city, the snow that falls in Prague is very precise. If you walk the banks of the Vltava River at dusk, you'll discover that the city of Prague has the attributes of a postcard: a postcard with a photograph of the city of Prague on it. Of course, there is always the eleventh measure: at the edge of Priziske Street sits a beggar who lost a leg in a struggle with a streetcar. He has never been seen smoking a cigarette. Also, on the escalator of the Metro, the women ascending are more radiant than those descending. In none of the bookstores of this enchanted city is sold the children's book from which the Maharal read to his Golem, before putting him to bed. In none of Prague's streets do crystal streetcars travel. In the vast pear orchard on the slope descending from Strachov Monastery, the old walk by in couples, gathering fallen pears into bags from the Kenvelo department store. By the way, the jazz in Prague is excellent, the alcohol cheap, the public transportation efficient and easy. Everywhere there is graffiti smeared across the walls. Certainly in one of them it is written that in Prague, the tourist, like everyone else, is a marionette pulling its own strings.

Notes:

In the Talmudic tractate of *Kiddushin* it is written that ten measures of beauty were given to the world – nine were taken by Jerusalem and one by the rest of the world. Similarly, ten measures of witchcraft were given to the world – nine were taken by Egypt and one by the rest of the world.

The Maharal, renowned rabbi of Prague, was Rabbi Yehuda Low, who lived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Legend ascribes to him the creation of a *golem*, a clay figure that came to life.

### **Logic**

The psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott wrote once a very short prayer: "God, make me alive at the hour of my death." He died in 1971. Is it possible that one cannot compose a story about this? The neighbor from the apartment above, on the other hand, never wrote any prayer but did order a taxi once. When the taxi arrived and was already honking downstairs, he killed himself.

### **The Moon's Name**

Many years ago, when they had just met, they invented a nickname for the moon. Now, after dividing up between them the books and records and photo albums, they need to decide who gets the ceiling-fan.

### **A Very Short Tale from Across the Wall**

In old history books you'll find that the wall was built many years ago, in order to separate us from the madman who stood there painting graffiti messages in the air. After the wall was erected, our forefathers couldn't see what happened to him. Maybe he abandoned the place. Maybe he continued his craft for many years. (Those who want to frighten their children at bedtime locate him on the other side of the wall even now: his palms have grown paintbrushes, he moves them at the speed of a demon, etching into the wall, writing, scratching, writing...). And of course, those who claim the wall has only one side to it, abuse logic and law.

### **Magicos juegos del tiempo**

Once in a café where a Spanish record called "The Bewitched Games of Time" was playing, I heard an old man (no handkerchief was peeking out of his breast pocket. He sat at a table with a girl – apparently his granddaughter – who was unmarked by any tattoos, for instance, without the word "mascara", for instance without "sea-horse") announce suddenly: how is it that in Yiddish, the words all sound funny; how is it that in German they all sound frightening? It's possible he spoke Hebrew.

### **A Small Treatise on Immigration**

One was a family doctor, the other studied philosophy. The third, in his youth, boxed. Their days of glory are behind them (though the sounds of the fresh day hadn't changed at all: the chair dragging itself across the floor in the apartment above; the dogmatic opinions of the songbirds). Thus, early in the morning, behind closed doors, the old immigrants still sit at the table, marking in their imaginations routes for a journey, on old and fraudulent maps of the world.

### **The Crippled Angel**

The crippled angel sat in a wheelchair especially designed for such winged creatures and chain-smoked. From his regular spot in the plaza before the museum, he watched with concern those going inside. He was trying to guess who was intending to hang himself in one of the exhibition halls.

### **The Flawed Symmetry of Romeo and Juliet**

The symmetry between Romeo and Juliet (the only lovers who see each other dead) is marred only when Juliet, breathing her last breath with the dagger already embedded in her breast, looks into the open eyes of dead Romeo. Earlier, Romeo had looked at her certain that she, like a goddess who never was (and certainly never walked among us, her shoulders slightly bent with commonplace, everyday worries: the grayish

smoke of buses, the few stars that have gone missing, and yes, the great, great muddling of things which the dead poets, without blinking an eye, call love) died with her eyes closed.

### **The End of the World and a Very Short Tale of the Old Chess-Player**

After he heard, as we all did, about the end of the world, the old chess-player rose from his regular bench in the park and closed his chessboard for the last time. He didn't leave a single piece outside.

### **Another Conversation with Death**

The sick little girl opened her eyes and said: "What an old grandfather you are." She gave Death a sheet of paper and some pencils and asked him to draw her a pretty picture. "You are dying, aren't you? I think you should travel abroad. It's OK," she said when she saw that the sheet remained blank, "I, too, don't like it when people tell me what to draw." "But why should I travel abroad?" asked Death. "Because people always return from there," the little girl answered. "If that's the case," said Death, "I better hurry up and be on my way." "Don't forget your drawing," said the little girl. "I thought I leave it for you," admitted Death. "We can share it," said the little girl and closed her eyes, "there's a xerox machine down the hall."

### **Borges' Last Dream**

It's 1986, mid-June and Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentinean writer, is dying. He dreams his last dream. He is a boy and he is standing before a tigers cage. The tigers are asleep. The cage door is open. The boy enters the cage. One of the tigers (his eyes are blue) wakes up. He rises. The boy recoils, stepping backwards, and stumbles onto his back. Lying still, Borges tries to count his heart-beats: he reaches the number seven, then infinity – the one and only purpose of the alchemical endeavor which is sometimes called poetry and sometimes tiger-gold and sometimes just eternity – confuses him. He (that is, Borges the boy, who has become the sweet dream of Borges the boy standing hypnotized before a cage of sleeping tigers) starts again. A boy of seven enters the cage. One of the tigers wakes up. Borges counts in his heart... and so on. At the end of the dream the beautiful beast rests a front paw on the child's chest. "Finally, we meet," Borges says. The blue-eyed tiger lowers his head to the face of the old Borges and licks his tears.

### **The Last Dreams in the Garden of Eden**

Were he around in those days, Magritte would have represented well those raging rains which began falling in the afternoon and didn't stop for a moment, until the edges of night. That same night Eve dreamt that God has an umbrella. Adam dreamt a slightly different dream. After Eve told him her dream, he got confused and couldn't remember exactly how his dream was different from hers. It's doubtful whether it is worthwhile to look for the hidden connections between these dreams and the banishment, which took place a few days later. Even so, there will always be someone who claims that what is forgotten in the sub-conscious quickly becomes destiny. In any case, that same rainy and distant night in the Garden of Eden, Adam dreamt that God is an umbrella.

### **The Wonders of the Labyrinth**

"You probably think she is still waiting for her Theseus to come back for her, as he promised." They stood at the entrance to the labyrinth and looked at the slight old woman who sat there on a squeaky rocking chair, knitting a scarf. The tour-guide started to move forward into the labyrinth, but the second man, the one whose coat was dripping with rain, was still searching in his pockets for a coin to give her, wondering from where was she so familiar to him, had he heard of her before in some ancient tale. Of course, while they wandered in the corridors he stopped thinking about her. Of all the wonders of the labyrinth, what most impressed him were the many echoes, the torches dripping spots of light and shadow on the walls, and also one yellowish page placed on the floor right near the turn in the maze which led to the Minotaur's Hall, upon which was written, "Careful, Fresh Paint".

### **Shiva, the Mourning Week; a Small Story of Ambiance**

Then a friend said, "And when she was already 27 years old, you remember, it was in the fall, she tried to learn how to play the piano." From time to time they brought out the family photo album and searched in vain for black and white photos.

### **Penelope's Last Gaze**

Her husband died before her – the stories about him are what defeat him in the end. Too many hardships, adventures, betrayals. One night, two years later, the lazy hand of autumn leafs through the pages of the book resting on her bedside table. She rises from her sick-bed and strides four confident steps to the window. She already has no strength to wave her hand. She wants to see, one last time, a sampling of the dark views of the land whose beauty dare not be described. The book opens again on the first page: "Tell me, O Muse...." The curtain that separates her from that Ithaca snares three random gusts of wind. For one moment the moon situates itself at the point furthest from the center of the sea. Antinous again kneels and through the keyhole peeks at her naked. Outside Argos barks. The sails are stretched in anticipation. The pages flutter back and forth. The Sirens wave their red

handkerchiefs for the departure. Here and there a light rain falls. The room is flooded with a strong scent of jasmine. Far far from there one can apparently see the northern lights. They say it was September.

### **The Very Short Tale about the Poet's Typewriter**

Many years after he committed suicide, she bought the typewriter in a second-hand store, without knowing that except for a love letter to a woman he had seen on Monday in the flower shop (not a single tulip!), the poet had typed on the typewriter nothing.

### **The Melancholy of Old Telephones**

In '82 the horoscopes were never wrong. Ten years later, she changes the dial-phone in the living room and moves it into the bedroom. Every morning, after awakening, she picks up the receiver and listens to the rustling and whispering and tap-tapping as though on a window. Perhaps it's time, suddenly returning. Perhaps it's the rain. Perhaps it's her mother-tongue.

Note: 1982 is the year that Israel's War in Lebanon began.

### **The Miniature Mythology of Winter Bombings**

And winter began. The waiters in the cafe would later tell how, to the best of their recollection, until that moment the regular customer had never ordered anything but café-latte, with a little foam. And then, just moments before the explosion, sitting at his regular table by the window, he decided to try a new drink. Only the rain never asks for a menu.

### **The Very Short Tale about Chekhov's Daughter**

Once upon a time there was a very short and very strange tale, filled with so many flaws and contradictions, until within its own pandemonium of paradoxes everything worked itself out, as though of its own accord. For example, think for one moment about Chekhov's daughter. She never received a single love letter.

### **A Thwarted Tale**

This tale is almost as ancient as the world itself: God is dreaming the world. He dreams the chaos from which the morning mists emerge, the creation of the Taj Mahal, Alexander the Great, who in all his years of conquest never knew the taste of one restful sleep, but what can you expect when you sleep with a book under your pillow. On the day God wakes up, everything will vanish. Nothing will remain. Not Neil Armstrong's footprints on the moon's surface, not the British Isles, rhinoceroses, The Great Wall of China, symmetry and a-symmetry, Pall-Mall cigarettes for 12 shekels, music disguised as mystery around the corner, the Volga River, hydrogen bombs, the skyline of Manhattan, all of Shakespeare's writings, the skeletal frames of Phoenician

boats, clouds that look like the map of Holland, Mona Lisa's moustache, evergreen forests, artificial roses, orange garbage bags, migrating birds, electric poles upon which it is forbidden to attach posters (a partially furnished apartment for rent and the description of a lost dog who answers to the name "Yasha"), enchanted Venice, the pyramids, slippers, icebergs in the Arctic Sea. Nothing. Even the coffee-house where we first met. And more: time, memory, oceans. Nothing. Relative to the seemingly endless list of what was and will be no more, this legend is lucky. In a moment, the page in the book will turn. And...? Not even a breeze.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Rachel Tzvia Back*

*Alex Epstein*

# Blue Has No South

Very Short Stories

## **Sleeping Positions**

The rocket ship was sucked into outer space years ago. Its transmissions have grown infrequent. The cosmonaut sends regards to his wife and reports that, even in a state of zero gravity, in his dreams, he still wakes at her side, in a different position than when he went to sleep.

## **A One-Book Woman**

It's always a blind date when you meet your muse. But one night in October, two weeks after her birthday, a woman pulled a new book from a stack. One of the characters told the man she loved: "All your life you've been searching for yourself in a second-hand book." For a brief, yet-clear-enough-to-be-labeled-unsettling moment, something in that exchange reminded her of her past relationship with a man who felt his life was wasting away, even though he didn't know a single dead language. She folded down the corner of one of the pages and thought: "What if she and I switched places, taking each others'

roles; would he notice?" She continued to read. At times the book was a bit sugary for her taste (at long last he responded: "And each time I find you.") Towards the end of the book she came to another page—it, too, had a folded corner.

## **Love is a Pocket-Sized Book in a Foreign Language**

The age of electronic paper is almost upon us. All that remains are small consolation ceremonies which aren't intended to bump fate, that ghost from the future, off course: to wander the streets and look for any old book lost on one of the benches, pick it up, read a bit, and, before putting it back down, to place a bookmark between its pages—a thin branch or a yellow leaf. The woman with the weathered lipstick, for whom I wrote these lines, told me she once found an old metro card from a European capital with plenty of fares left on it in a pocket-sized book on a train. We sat next to each other; we tried to reach for the courage to ask the name of the stop the other needed. With time we learnt to ignore the monotonous voice that announced to all the other riders: "Caution, closing doors. Mind the gap."

*Translated from the Hebrew by Mitchell Ginsburg*