

**Of White Doves with Dirty Work, Barlen Pyamootoo (Mauritius)  
[Translation by Hodna Neurnberg]**

I came to Iowa, after which I'll spend three months in Pittsburgh, to write. Before leaving my country, I had envisioned two projects : 1. Finish my novel, "The Island of Venomous (or Poisonous) Fish," which I'd begun in 2002, but abandoned in 2004 in order to devote my time to a film and another book. I began working on it again in 2009, but only intermittently for lack of time. The novel recounts the story of a man who disappears, and it has a strong connection with the world of Dashiell Hammett, whom I admire. For this trip, this novel was my priority. 2. Work on my other book project--a sort of travelogue of my trip to the United States, which I am visiting for the first time. The travelogue was to be a kind of respite; it would allow me a break from the novel, the writing of which exhausts me. This second book was not at all my priority.

*It wasn't until a month after my arrival in Iowa City that I began to write about my trip to the United States, and yet, a week or two before my departure, I had already imagined the first letter I'd send Chloé, in which I would tell her of the view from my hotel room, of the mist, of the stationary silhouettes, leaning into the wind, of winter surely--all that from my fairly lofty heights. It was a dream of elsewhere, the beginning of a story, but one I put aside no sooner than I had landed and, head down, without a word for the sky that is not so gray, for the trees that line the riverbanks, illuminated by the light of the evening, for all those people on the footbridge, who saunter around, looking for eyes, who run all day long. I shut myself away in my room and plunged into my novel. The title: The Island of Venomous (or Poisonous) Fish. I was still undecided.*

After this first paragraph, I'll write about the notes I took for the novel, notes that I will sift through, cross out, intertwine with the exterior that I so often neglect because it distracts me from my writing. Those notes, along with recurrent, insistent images – for example, the cartography that entices the narrator, who takes pleasure in roaming across maps, plotting them out, or, another recurring image--the narrator who, while walking, traversing streets of his village, imagines the books he'd like to write, one of which will be on white doves with dirty work. And, finally, that desire to confine the story about the man who is disappearing into the background, at least in volume, like in Bruegel the Elder's "The Fall of Icarus," in which a pastoral scene fills the foreground, relegating Icarus's fall to a corner of the canvas. And still! As for the exterior: parties, the streets of Iowa City where smoking is forbidden, that first evening at the Fox Head, all the writers. It's also New Orleans, which reminds me of my country, the same social structure, architecture. It's jazz in the streets, in clubs, it's Faulkner's house and those two booksellers, it's absinthe, it's Alisa, who reminds me of Carson McCullers, and when she dances, it's almost magical.

I'd like to sift through those notes with a fine-tooth comb and discover the different versions of the story, the characters' names that have changed, and ask myself why. Just as I'd like to evoke the exterior at length, the city, my vision of the people and the things, a vision that is changing, sometimes in relation to the state of the book, either progressing or stagnating. Hopeful that I will write many pages about this whole voyage, both interior and exposed, before returning to the moment my project changed. Why did I suddenly abandon, one month after my arrival in Iowa City, the novel in order to turn to the travelogue?

The first sequence, which evokes this turnaround, took place one Sunday, the 30<sup>th</sup> of September, two days after my return from New Orleans. For multiple reasons. There was Kecia's email informing me that Professor Paul Dilley would like to invite me to speak at his Religious Studies Colloquium on the 15<sup>th</sup> of October, to talk a bit about my work in general and about something I'd written recently, as it relates to religion – in other words, how I engage religion in my books. My answer to Kecia: Yes, it's fine. I'll talk about my book *Bénarès*, about the part that relates to religion, to Hinduism. It was the first time that I'd been asked in seriousness to speak about religion – I, who am an atheist. I thought it over; I asked myself

Iowa City Public Library and the International Writing Program Panel Series, October 12, 2012: 1  
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how religious people conceive of the world. For the Hindus, it would seem that in the beginning there were three moons and five suns, the Christians invoke the earth, the sky, heaven – something like that, a kind of comprehensive vision of the world, vertical or vertiginous, with the All as an inaugural scene, and I tried to compare this vision with my own vision as a writer, a vision that is singular, horizontal, I believe, from person to person and impressionist, in any case, not dogmatic. It was an absolute literary delirium.

An hour or two later, Andy stopped by my hotel room – it was the first time he'd stopped by – and he was impressed by the view, the most beautiful in all of Iowa City, at least that's what he told me. So, I looked out the window, I thought again about my imagined letter to Chloé, which was supposedly going to be the beginning of my travelogue. I must say that it was a cloudless Sunday, that the luminosity and those other events helped me to change tack: Alina, Dimitris and Luis on the grass below my window, a friendly gesture inviting me to join them, Christopher and his whole-hearted thanks, the memory of Alisa in New Orleans, and I thought that one writes, too, so that nothing and no one will ever die, and – of course – Kecia's message about religion and literature, the most beautiful view according to Andy, Chloé's letter.

The story continues, perhaps with this dream of Pittsburgh, like the one I had about Iowa. And, intertwined with the description of the exterior world, to ask myself the question: what to do with the novel? I don't quite know yet, this project depends on what happens next, or maybe the book I've just told you about will be no more than a prairie fire, a vivid but short-lived sentiment.