

THE GOURD & THE PALM

BY DANIEL ELEY

What is it the Scarlet Pimpernel used to say? What was his favorite expression when someone said something absolutely absurd to him and he wished to respond without offending? He said "Sink me." As if he were a ship out at sea. Which, if you think about it, that is exactly what each and everything in this universe has in common. Although every little thing is unique in its own way, at the same time everything has in common being afloat in a sea of time and bending to currents of the universal mind.

Do you think that Reagan dismantled the Soviet Union when he said, while spending time in Berlin as our President, "Mr. Brezhnev, tear this wall down"? If you think his words are the reason for the downfall of communism, you are stuck in some kind of demented hero worship. The reason Red Russia fell was that they spent all of their money and time trying to take over the oil fields in the Middle East. Specifically, they wiped out their national economy in the deserts of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Not to mention the lives of many brave and innocent soldiers on all sides of the conflict.

Those desert rats over there are pretty smart. They don't have to spend valuable time and money to transport their armies to foreign fields. They don't even have to spend much money on weapons. Much like the Viet Cong, they capture the weapons of foreign invaders and therefore have plenty of firepower to carry on defensive guerrilla warfare and in this way bring down the monolithic political powers of the globe which we live on. I know because I am old and have witnessed it. Plus they have this magnet that will assure them that after they dispel one nation's armed forces they will soon have the opportunity to do it all over again to the next nation that attempts the same folly. That magnet being their oil fields.

You know if you go after another person's spouse your own true love may just walk on by you without your taking notice because you are so intent on stealing what is not yours, and in the course of events you lose your chance at true happiness. What I mean to say is, as we spend all of America's hard-earned tax dollars on the military budget in order to free up the Middle Eastern oil fields, the one our heartstrings really long for could be passing us right on by; i.e., non-polluting energy.

It's a hell of a deal for a ship to get sunk in a desert, and there is no such thing as an unsinkable ship. Just ask the *Titanic*. I think the United States — both the government and the majority of the people — think their ship is unsinkable. In all my life of credible and criminal activities, I have learned one very important lesson: *You can't beat greed*. It will get you every time. Greed will beat you to the ground and then grind you into dust. That's what happened to the Soviet Union and it will happen to the U.S. if we let our oil greedy leaders continue to lead us down this murky path into a quicksand that will sink the U.S. into the same oblivion as the USSR.

One of the fronts in this war is national economy. When our economy pays for our so-called enemy to beat up on us, and pays for us to beat up on them, guess who's going to break in the end? We are. Guess who loses when we go broke? We do. Our children do. Our educational systems do. Our health and welfare systems do, along with agriculture, Social Security, highways, parks, etc., etc....

What other resources do those desert rats have? Let them have their oil and let them sell it at the true market value. They sucked us into this war with one strike upon our nation, and now the majority of our energy and resources are sourced-out to our military operations. In the meantime keeping us from developing a clean alternative energy source. At the same time keep-



KARL SCHMIDT-ROTTLUFF, 'WAY TO EMMAUS' (WOODCUT)

ing us dependent on their oil. And Bush and Texas go along with it because they are in the same business. They don't want us developing an alternative resource that would make their oil fields worthless. They are happy with the status quo, much like the kings of England when they had first rights to any bride.

You can bet these are fighting words — but we're getting killed anyway and so are they. Follow the money trail and/or the power trail and see who is profiting off this conflict, and that will be the one who initiated the conflict.

And who trained those people who hit the Twin Towers? George Sr. did back in the day when he was head of the CIA before he was ever President.

These are murky waters we are diving into, and I for one want out: so I will go back to where I began this story and bring it to a conclusion: *The Little Palm*. This will not be verbatim but the general gist will be understood.

Way back in the days before Christ, there was a man named Jonah. He was a prophet of sorts that God used to teach everyone lessons. At this time there was an evil city, Ninevah, and God intended to change their ways, so he sent Jonah into the city with instructions to tell them to change their ways or else they would be destroyed in an instant by the power of almighty God.

Jonah did this preaching for a couple of weeks and then retired to the desert. The people of the city had listened to Jonah but nothing happened to the city. Jonah felt like a fool and wanted to die — I suppose from embarrassment — yet he continued to hang out in the desert, and he complained God had made a fool out of him. So one day while sitting in a booth he had made

while the sun beat down on him, God caused a little gourd to sprout and grow to a size that provided Jonah with a bit of shade. Jonah was extremely pleased with this course of events until the next day when the tree withered and turned to dust. This caused Jonah to go into a tangent, railing against his God. During said tangent God spoke to Jonah, and I will quote from the King James Version of the Bible. (I hope this doesn't offend anyone.)

And God said to Jonah, Dost thou well to be angry at the gourd? And he answered, I do well to be angry, even unto death.

Then said the Lord, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the palm which thou hast not labored, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night.

And should I not spare Ninevah, that great city, wherein are more than six-score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand, and also much cattle?

I have an apartment in Astoria and inside I have a palm tree growing in a pot. I have been watering and fertilizing this tree for three years. About a month ago, I noticed the leaves of the tree were being gnawed away by something at the ends and little holes appearing in the centers. I have just noticed the holes. At first, when it was only the ends, I thought it was my cat I acquired last August chewing on them. I got the cat when she was only four weeks old and she had never been outside. She is a very beautiful six-month old Siamese and tabby cross. Unfortunately, while doing laundry in the laundry room directly below my apartment a few days earlier I left my apartment door slightly ajar, and without my seeing her, my cat gained access to the world outside. I haven't seen her since. I am fairly distressed over this but search and call as much as I will, I receive no response from her. And while looking at my palm tree, I notice the damage is continuing, so it isn't my cat. Yet the withering palm tree brought to mind the story of Jonah, and so the source of inspiration for this story.

I don't pretend to know what is going on on our earth, but I'm pretty sure something ominous is happening, what with this stupid war we as a nation are caught up in and the recent earthquake and tsunami destruction that happened around about the Indian Ocean. Sometimes I think we are inside some kind of magical bubble here in the Northwest that separates us from these violent happenings. But I know this is not true and that there is a connection, as closely connected as skin is to meat. If it hurts over there, it is painful to the whole being and there is no rest, only weariness and deterioration. To find the proper salve to bind and soothe the wounds; that would be a good thing to do. Yet every time this is done, the sword or knife or whatever it is strikes again and reopens it. And where is the salve? If I knew the way I would cut off the hand that swings the sword, but yet again, whose hand is it? Who owns the deep ocean and who owns the wars? And this leads me to a fatalistic reasoning that it isn't my gourd, it isn't my palm tree, it isn't my cat, it isn't my tidal wave and it isn't my war. And there really isn't much I can do about anything except myself; maybe, maybe not.

Please don't let this somewhat pessimistic and/or fatalistic article discourage you from supporting our troops or donating to the victims of the recent tsunami, or from doing anything else that would be good or helpful for the people or the environment. It could turn out that within the accumulation of many good and unselfish deeds done by each and many individuals is where the salve is found. Inspiration is truly a strange and weird thing. Sink me.

Daniel Eley is a poet and lives in Astoria.

BETWEEN FLIGHTS

BY TERESA BARNES

Stepping off a plane at 5:30 in the morning is a little like walking out of a dream. The edges of things are blurred and the memory of a world beyond the present is dim; you know what to expect, but only vaguely. You know that on the other side of this gray tunnel there will be gray walls and hard gray carpet and chairs. You know that you will see people, lots of them, and you even know their general stereotypes. There will be the businessmen on cell phones trying desperately to look busy and important, young couples with children who seem to be momentarily reconsidering the family life. What you don't know, however, is who *exactly* you will see and what *exactly* they will say, and this (along with the fact they will soon be hurtling through the stratosphere on a large piece of metal) is probably the only exciting thing about airports.

Stepping out of this dream, into this airport, the place seems to be filled with young men and women in olive green uniforms. The boys all have buzzcuts and the girls have their long hair pulled tight into buns at the nape of their necks. Were it not for their overtly military appearance, they might be high-schoolers flying to Disney World for their senior trip. They take pictures in front of the sunrise, they tell stories and laugh; in the bathroom one girl zips up another's backpack. I want to ask them where they've been and what they've seen, but of course I don't.

I decide to spend my wait in front of a large television with CNN coverage around the clock. After I've been sitting for a while, a red-haired boy a couple of seats down gestures toward the TV.

He: "It's not as bad as they say over there."

Me: (surprised and relieved) "You've been there?"

He: "I've been in both places, Afghanistan and Iraq."

Me: "What do you do?"

He: "I'm in Special Forces so I can't really talk about it."

Mostly we just sit around, though."

Me: (pause) "What's it like over there? Do you talk to the locals much?"

He: "You mean the Iraqis? They're all right, I guess. You can't be nice to them though, or they won't leave you alone."

Me: "That's usually what people are like who don't have anything."

He: (shrugs) "Sometimes the soldiers give them MR2s..."

Me: (interrupting) "What are those?"

He: "They're food rations, but they have pork in them. After the people have eaten them they're told what was inside. They don't eat pork because of their religion."

Me: "Why would someone do that?"

He: (shrugs again) "Sometimes the soldiers throw the MRs out into fields where explosives have been set up so the kids go running after them."

Me: (burying my horror so as not to seem judgmental) "You've actually seen that. Children getting their legs blown off?"

He: (nods).

Me: "I guess that's the kind of thing that sticks with you."

He: (long pause) "So what do you think of the war?"

Me: "You probably already know the answer to that. I don't believe in war, and even if I did I wouldn't believe in this one."

A soldier behind us gets up and walks away.

He: (pause) "I wish I could be like you. I wish I never would have started this."

Me: (nod guiltily)

He: (gesturing toward a crowd of green uniforms) "Those kids have no idea what they're getting into. They just graduated basic training and they're getting shipped out after Christmas."

The red-haired boy realizes that his departure gate has changed and gets up to leave.

Me: "My name is Teresa. It was nice to meet you."

He doesn't give his name but says that it was nice to meet me too.

Teresa Barnes lives in Astoria. She visited her mother in Florida during Christmas.

AVAGALLERY

ASTORIA VISUAL ARTS
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