

2013 First Place Winner

Friends of Polish Art

Estelle-Wachtel Torres, MD Literary Competition

Lancelot Du Lac

By Henry Joseph Tyszka

We enjoyed having one another for the company and the conversation, so much so that I didn't notice when yet another round of drinks was ordered up. Our bored, distracted waiter unflinchingly bought me yet another Pastis, an aperitif. My spit was going to be anise flavored for the next two weeks.

There wasn't a lot of evening entertainment in town except hanging out at the bars. Tonight's company included an articulate correspondent, a Brit consultant who converted everything to percentages, an African American who wasn't saying what he did at the embassy, and our own visiting hydrologist. All men.

I returned home from the shot up, old neo-colonial hotel on the river with the hippo pool out in front. There I am at home brushing my teeth and listening to the BBC World News on my short wave radio on the shelf above the sink. The BBC was the most credible source of world news and they were usually the first to break a story. That timeliness could prove to be directly linked to my well-being. When the French Jaguar based at the airport was shot down while enforcing the no fly zone in the north, which was not a good day. That particular incident didn't really impact me directly, but I wanted to know what was happening so I would be ready to get out. I love Africa and the Africans, but I

wasn't quite willing to die for them. It just wasn't my fight. I was there on a one-year technical assistance project and then I was out of there. So I always tried to catch the BBC at least once a day, usually late at night when the reception was best.

It was a slow night on the BBC. No one was currently being killed or undergoing an increased potential for being killed, either individually or collectively, in an organized or unorganized manner, anywhere within a radius of all the nations surrounding me and the landlocked nation where I was now brushing my teeth. Sounds like lawyer talk, but those were my criteria.

Every few years or so, some tribes from the north backed by a dictator from a country yet again father to the north, would swoop down, take over the country, and eventually be booted back up north. In reality, takeovers came with so much regularity there was hardly any surprise when they did come; but there was lots of trauma. The tall, skinny, Muslim, tan, Arabic featured men from those particular tribes in the Sahara would come in and take over the capitol and thus control of the country, from the shorter, squatter, Christian/Animist, black Negroid featured tribes from the Sub-Saharan south. These takeovers were called 'les evenements' (the events). I presume that rather generic term was used because there wasn't a precise historical term that captured the regularity of the back and forth takeovers. I would use the term 'tidal'.

During the last events the invading army didn't have any money to pay its troops, so the new government declared three days of official looting. Issa, my driver, told me a truck with soldiers would pull up in front of your house and you

would just help them load up your furniture. When 'normalcy' eventually returned it was impossible to legally sort out just who owned what, with all the looting. So a date was picked and it was declared that whatever you had in your possession on that date was forever after legally yours.

It was the eleven o'clock edition of the news that I was listening to. That is when I heard the irregular rumble. It wasn't so much loud as large, if that makes any sense. If the rumbling was light, it would be like the lights during a night baseball game. You don't need sunglasses or anything, but it is like full daylight. There is plenty of light to read by, being not so much bright as all pervasive. I was feeling the rumbling more than hearing it. It didn't seem at all near. I just couldn't process it. I turned the radio volume low and then back up several times somehow thinking the noises must be coming from the radio.

Each time I turned the radio lower it was still there. It was sporadic and spaced far enough apart that it seemed at any moment they would end, burn themselves out, like the small arms fire I would hear at night. My inquiries about those drew responses that it was a marriage celebration, thieves, or someone running one of the checkpoints that went up every evening in the town.

I had the illogical expectation that the BBC would come on and explain what was going on. After several cycles of volume indecisiveness it occurred to me that determining the immediate source of the reports would probably be more germane to my health than listening to the BBC or getting plaque off of my gum line. Multiple Pastis' and the malarial pills of that era could be expected to cause such processing delays.

I turned the radio off and put my pants back on. I went to my bedroom window and peeked out at the house next door through the adjustable wide metal slats on the outside shutters. I saw my landlord on my neighbor's veranda talking to my neighbor. Seeing my landlord at all was rare because he was hard to get a hold of, keeping himself scarce. Seeing him this late at night was significant because it was so out of the ordinary. I had never seen him at my neighbors.

My landlord, overweight and obnoxious, was one of those rare entrepreneurial blooms that in Africa have to overcome immense difficulties such as labyrinth bureaucracies, lack of materials, corruption, plain old wheeling dealing, and extended family restraints, just to stay in business. In this country everyone had to hustle just to stay alive. Encounters with him were typically infrequent and hurried. There was always an air of scattered energy about him. When you talked to him you had the feeling that he wasn't listening to what you were saying, probably for good cause.

There was always something wrong with the house so whenever he saw me it usually meant work for him. Once he finally did send his workmen over, it invariably took another outside repairman to set right the situation made worse by the attempted repairs. Amongst his other dealings were these three, small, identical, 'European' houses in a row that he had rehabbed after they had been looted and pillaged during the last 'events'. They were sure moneymakers with the chronic shortage of housing for all the staff and short termers of CARE, CRS, the UN, USAID, and such.

My neighbor, also a tenant of the landlord, wasn't my full time neighbor. He was a Moslem from the desert tribes to the north, in the Sahara. He was a cousin of the President and Mayor of the capitol. He had just taken a new, young wife. She was very attractive and seductively gracious. I don't know if she was his second or third wife, but I know she wasn't his first wife. And I don't mean his second or third wife after divorcing; she was his second or third wife as in polygamy. He had set her up in her own house and some nights, such as tonight, he would stay there with her.

On those nights I would guess he was my neighbor. He was young and always neatly dressed in traditional garb. He was not the tall, skinny type, as most of the tribes from the north were. He was slim but of just average height, and very polite and cultured. Both the Mayor and the President were from desert tribes to the north, but not 'those' desert tribes. It was other northern tribes who would give us the events. It was unusual and refreshing that this president was actually voted into office.

The polygamy situation is often misunderstood. People of a Puritan heritage usually presume polygamy is indicative of a primitive culture or imagine sexual romping from bed to bed. The basis of polygamy as was explained to me is that it is economic; a means of optimizing limited resources in the face of scarcity. It is hard for westerners from capitalist orientated societies to grasp. Many African countries are *socially* driven. If you are fortunate enough to have more than just enough money, it makes little sense to keep it only to yourself. That money needs to be distributed in such a manner that as many people as

possible can survive hence extended families and ... multiple wives. It is a societal expectation. The flip side of the coin, from what I have gathered, is that a household with multiple wives has (how to put this politely?) let's say two or three times the joy and happiness of a household having just one wife. Even more of that same joy and happiness can be found amongst the wives themselves. No, it is not quite the romping around one would think as the husband and the wives may be the first to acknowledge.

I went outside the front door of my house. My night guardian, Nassir was there on the veranda, with his flashlight and machete. The machete was just for effect. You had to have someone on duty all the time. Just a pair of eyes was enough. They kept the goats out of the yard, the beggars from the gate, and the house from being burgled. Ahmed was my day guardian. Jobs were so scarce and wages so low that if you with your western salary didn't hire three or four people, you weren't doing your duty.

In the hazy dust glare of the streetlight I saw Nassir was wide eyed. He wasn't nervous or fearful, but he definitely wasn't comfortable with what he was hearing either. Neither Nassir nor I spoke any language the other knew.

The rumble was still coming from the same direction, over to the northwest where the army's headquarters were located. The periphery of the camp was still half rubble from the most recent events.

A constant, pervasive, undercurrent of tension was everywhere, all the time, like the midday heat. One of the less insidious effects of that undercurrent I discovered when on leave in Paris. I found myself in a nice park but I could not

break the habit of constantly watching my path so as not to step on an unexploded shell. There were other such behavioral adaptations that were rather more intrusive. These current explosions were just another layer.

The size of the noise made me think of the bombing two weeks ago of a city in the country to the northeast. The bombers had the markings painted over, so said the BBC. What was keeping us from getting bombed? It seemed that nobody was playing by any rules that I could see. While in-country, I had taken pilot lessons at the aero-club. After work I would go to the club bar located at the end of the taxiway. It was a large round hut with a tall conical thatched roof open on most of its circumference, right out of central casting.

My instructors were French mercenaries piloting for the country's air force, usually transports. I would sit at the bar under the out of balance ceiling fan and the bug-swirled fluorescent lights and listen to my flight instructors with day jobs debrief with the French fighter pilots coming back from their runs. They had said that they would fly patrol, see some trucks with troops, and swoop down. The men in the trucks would wave, the pilot would wave, and that was that. Whose side were the men in the trucks on? Who knew? When they were done trading stories I would either get my lesson or they would tell me it was too late and come back tomorrow. Either way I was learning.

During one of my lessons I experienced the perpetual dusty haze in the Saharan atmosphere blending in with the ground of the same color (if it had been snow it would have been a white out), and there was no longer any 'horizon', which is a rather essential reference in piloting a plane. Furthermore, the size of

the capitol was such that after ten or fifteen minutes of flying you were out of sight of any signs of civilization, another critical navigational reference point.

I saw how critical landmarks such as the river flowing through the capitol were for visual navigation and an ideal reference for a bombing run; follow the northern bank passing over my house, thence downtown over the army headquarters, next the presidential palace, on to the airport with the French Mirages and Jaguars, and finally the Foreign Legion and African Union barracks. Probably a run of two or three miles, all lined up in a nice straight line along the river, visible day or night. But there being no planes overhead, aerial bombing was out. Even so, in the pit of my stomach I had an 'Oh shit, it's happening' feeling.

I went to the front gate to take a look-see, Nassir in tow. Out from behind the shared wall between my courtyard and the Mayor's courtyard limped an older man in western dress who I had seen often at the Mayor's house. He seemed to be sort of a household manager, if I had to guess. He limped out of the Mayor's courtyard cradling an AK47. He went and opened the driver's door of the Mayor's government supplied Peugeot 504. Oblivious of me, yet right in front me, he put the Mayor's AK between the bucket seats, butt forward and down, muzzle up pointing to the back. I said right in front of me as the Mayor's vehicle was invariably parked so as to partially block my own gate, as it was now. Again.

What was striking was the grace with which his man handled that rifle. This takes me aback because it is always so unexpected when I see it. In certain situations, whether a telephone or a door handle or now the AK, there would be

such grace and delicacy brought to bear it would make a Japanese tea ceremony look like a bull in china shop. Those instances always made me feel brash and unpolished.

Next the Mayor strutted from behind the wall, strapping on a webbed khaki ammo belt with clips on both haunches over his white Nehru type tunic, white pants, and a white lace Muslim beanie. The man with the limp held the door as the Mayor sat down in the driver's seat. The Mayor had to rock forward and rearrange one of the clips that he was half sitting on.

Before starting the car the Mayor picked up the AK, muzzle up and forward, butt between his legs, and he wrenched off the safety with a tinny snap and he pulled back the action and chambered a shell. He replaced the rifle back between the seats where the guy with the limp had first placed it, and started the engine. The man with the limp had gone around and was now in the passenger seat.

"Il semble qu'il y a un peu d'activité ce soir" (There seems to be a little activity tonight), my comment to him through the open passenger window of the car that was, as I said, in front of my gate. "Ah oui. Il y a un peu d'activité", he responded not looking at me or even turning his head, and without further ado off he drove.

He was ready. Not gun happy or unconscious of what he was doing. He was going forward to contend with a situation he could only hear. He knew it was large and from whence it came. It had to be investigated, assessed, and dealt with. His AK may or may not be adequate to deal with it, that he couldn't know

yet; but it was his ante to get into the game, or perhaps get out of it. We have all experienced at one time or another where we go forward tight chested and do whatever we have to do.

Twenty-five meters down the wall lined dirt street, just before the corner, a Land Cruiser pick up, lights on, engine running, sat askew, effectively blocking the street. This was how the 'Combattants' (kom-ba-tawn, the 's' is silent) usually parked. They invariably dressed in tatty beige or camouflage Nehru suits and sported unkempt frizzy afros under dirty turbans that are wrapped and wrapped around their heads, faces, and necks, day or night, hot or cold. They wrapped them as if they didn't have a mirror to look into and it was only by chance that the wrappings somehow covered a nose or mouth, or perhaps both. In the daytime, sunglasses covered the only human facial aspect that remained. The feeling was that the wrappings were more for concealment than traditional headgear.

The area they are from is one of two immense mountain regions smack in the middle of the Sahara desert, readily visible on any topographical map. The Sahara easily being as large as the contiguous United States, just one of those mountain areas looks to be as big as Ohio. Being tall and skinny, they are examples of humans adapted to the climate; maximum surface area for a minimum mass, the opposite of the Inuit. When they are not just subsisting, they list Warrior on their resumes. Cocktail party rumors hint at their use of drugs procured from our neighbors to the south who produce the LSD and import the pills.

The Combattants look and act as if they are just in from the desert, which they are. Instead of sand and rocks, there is a city and civilians. When they park they just stop the car wherever they are and turn it off. If there should be some sort of Combattant gathering, your street will be blocked for as long as it will be blocked. Sometimes, even if there is only one truck parked on your street, your street may be blocked. Based on their trucks and driving style, their most visible behavior pattern, conformity or social conventions in urban areas appeared to be new to them.

Their transportation merits some discussion because this isn't just about transportation but this is about fighting platforms. The preferred vehicle is a four wheel drive Toyota Land Cruiser, gas engine - not diesel, as gas engines are easier to keep running. The Cruiser is a simple and strong machine. It is more mundane, less temperamental; parts are easily had, and it is a more appropriate machine than the previous platform, a Land Rover. The absolute favorite color is desert tan. Indeed, some expatriates refer to a Land Cruiser of this color as a 'Combattant Special' and this greatly increases the chance of it being taken away from you, should you encounter a group of Combattants on foot in the bush. You are sure to be asked for a ride, whether they are two or fifteen, and if you are lucky. They may not ask. They may take. My service Cruiser was immune to this as it and I were prohibited from leaving the capitol.

To fit the profile of a mobile desert-fighting platform, certain modifications have to be carried out. The cab roof is unbolted and removed. The fold down windshield is removed. While the doors are retained, the window frames are not.

One working headlight and perhaps one working taillight (always white and never red as the lens is invariably broken or missing) were typical.

One eerie aspect of the vehicle took me some time to figure out, due to its absence, like the dog that didn't bark. Despite crumpled bodywork, sand dulled paint finishes, electrical wires hanging underneath, the pick-ups are spared from the most obnoxious aural aspect of clunker hood. They are all quiet. For tactical reasons the exhausts are always intact. This gave them the ominous illusion of gliding like vultures on final approach to a still warm carcass, as they sped around town. As the Combattants drive around in a vehicle so modified, they give the impression of sitting in a bathtub taking in the elements; as if they just could not get enough sun, heat, wind, and dust.

That silence, the speed, and lack of any traffic law enforcement, may well have been a factor in the incident of the nurse, she was either French or Swiss, who was hit and killed by a Combattant Special while riding on the main street in town on her mobyette.

The details in her story are not exactly clear, but it evokes a typical image. A cut down Land Cruiser, two or three masked figures, a muzzle or two projecting at odd angles, gliding along at 70 or 80 kph down the center of the street, not slowing up for the numerous potholes and bumps, never any license plates, the imagination doesn't have to make any large leaps. After hit and running, word has it that they turned themselves in the next day and that got them a ticket to the front in the north.

In a macabre aftermath, the Nurse's coffined remains had been loaded into the cargo hold of one of the thrice-weekly commercial flights to Paris. The airliner was sitting in front of the passenger terminal, as usual. There was never more than one plane and you just walked out of the terminal and onto the plane by the rolling stairs. Well someone threw an explosive into the hold. The plane, and everything in it, was reduced to a melted aluminum hulk, incredibly with no loss of life. For some time the cocktail talk was accompanied with wagging heads trying to even imagine what the deceased Nurse's family on the other end must be going through.

Back to the Land Cruiser askew at the corner; skinny turbaned figures on foot were passing back and forth in front of the headlights, kicking up dust. A small displacement Japanese motorcycle out of tune drove hoarsely past in the dust of the cross street behind. Civilians were not to be seen.

The erratic rumbling was still coming from the same location at about the same rate. Still no small arms fire audible. I didn't know what that implied. I was new at all this.

Returning to my own compound, I started up my own Land Cruiser pickup and squeezed it between a tree and the house, parking it around the back. Out of sight, out of mind. Going back into the house, I motioned to Nassir to gather his thatched sleeping mat and to come into the house, thinking his usual guard post on the front veranda was not optimal. Nassir wrapped a chain around the front gate, padlocked it, gathered his belongings and came inside, a rare event. He laid his mat in a corner of the salon and took up his position there.

It occurred to me that perhaps Nassir might not want to be here at all. I gestured questioningly asking if he wanted to leave or stay. He was a bright young man and we communicated non-verbally rather well. He indicated he wanted to stay.

My houseboy, Hassan, yes that is what they were called, had already closed all the slatted metal shutters for the night before he left. I latched and locked the front metal doors.

I withdrew to my bedroom and locked that door. My bed was about a foot and a half off of the floor and suddenly it seemed very high. I was trying to figure out where on the floor to put the mattress so I had the most walls between the outside and me. Nassir had chosen an inside corner so there were two walls on two sides of him. This question of walls was important because there were plenty of houses around with thumb sized bullet holes right through the red baked honeycombed blocks of which most houses were built.

I got out my travel wallet with its small dollar emergency fund, credit cards, and my papers. I laid out my evacuation list I had previously made up on top of the dresser.

As I laid out my Kabar knife in its sheath next to the little pile, I felt stupidly outgunned and pathetically impotent. If someone was going to do something to me or mine, my immediate reaction has been and is that they are going to get some resistance. I know that in a combat situation I would hardly be much if any resistance. But whether I wet myself, fainted, or whatever, up to the point that time came I would rather have the illusion that I had a fighting chance. When all

is said and done outgunning or being outgunned is just the default mode for the way the world works. Still.

The muffled booms were still going on. I decided to go ahead and take my pre-sleep shower and fought the impulse to turn the short wave back on.

I was thinking about Michele's long planned for impending visit next week from London, where she was posted at the French Cultural Institute. She wanted me to send a telegram or telephone if there should be any unexpected shift in the situation. She was willing to risk a bad work evaluation by taking a whole month off and flying down. Willing to risk bombs in luggage compartments. She just didn't want to arrive when everything was coming undone. I wrote her earlier, pointing out that with car bombs going off in front of Harrod's at Christmastime, I wasn't quite sure of any distinctions on a cosmic scale between there and here. She would have to make up her own mind and she did. She was coming. Part of our desperation to see each other was death. We had each experienced several recent unexpected deaths in our families, middle age was creeping up on us, and we had a feeling that life was passing us by. We wanted to make each day count.

I overcame my equivocations about her maybe not coming and thought I might have to send her that telegram not to come. Reflecting on my decision revealed to me that what we had was more than just physical. Transcending the physical even if only temporarily (Michele being very nice to sleep with), put my other feelings for her in relief.

I was naked with one foot under the shower waiting for the hot water to wend its way from the hot water heater on the wall of the detached kitchen in the back yard. No matter how hot it is outside, a cold shower is never nice.

Then I heard a car pull up and car doors slam.

“Voisin! Voisin!” (Neighbor! Neighbor!) It was my part-time neighbor the Mayor calling me.

I turned off the shower, slipped on a pair of pants and sandals and worked my way to the front porch. I was sure the next event had come and my neighbor was really an operative. He was now going to take me hostage and send me to the north. (The people currently in control of the south were one faction of the same tribe that was always causing problems. I wouldn't know who was really on whose side.)

I approached the gate.

“C'est les obus des Zairois qui ont pris feu!” (“It's the Zairian ammo dump that caught fire!”)

Most of the foreign military contingents were located on the periphery of the airport, probably the most vital element to protect. The country was landlocked and just about everything that could come in came in by air. I lived relatively near the center of the city. The airport was on the far northwestern edge of the city, way past the army camp I guessed to be the source. The Zairian troops were on the far side of the airport. They must have had some big shells out there.

There was some noticeable relief in the Mayor's voice as he told me. It was as if I was the first person he had a chance to tell and telling it to me somehow helped him to process it and to calm down in the telling. There was also a bit of a smirk and contempt as any proud warrior race would have for any foreign contingent sent from another country. The insult was in the fact of their very presence. The contempt was in the fact they let their ammo dump blow up.

I thanked him with my own grateful relief evident, shook hands with him and a couple of camouflaged combatants that had come back with him. Nassir gathered his things and moved back outside to his usual post on the front veranda.

The jerky pacing of the thuds still had not changed.

Even though I slept that night, I awoke the next morning groggy. Maybe it was all those Pastis', or the experience?

I showered, dressed, and went outside. Issa had arrived. I told him I would back the truck out if he preferred. No, it was ok. He would.

I went back into the house, ate my breakfast, and then Issa drove me to work.