

Créations

Creations

« *The Raven* » d'Edgar Allan Poe

Présentation suivie d'une traduction nouvelle

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Ce texte est celui d'une contribution faite le 28 avril dernier à « State of the Art », colloque interne des anglicistes de la Faculté des Lettres d'Orléans. N'ayant pris le risque de lire cette traduction devant collègues et étudiants qu'après avoir demandé à Marc Amfreville de me donner son sentiment, je la lui dédie chaleureusement.

« The Raven » paraît en 1845 dans un journal de New York. Le poème est un grand succès littéraire ; il est immédiatement repris dans de nombreuses publications et vaut à leur auteur sa plus belle heure de gloire... Il avait d'ailleurs été écrit pour cela. Poe l'avait conçu comme un tour de force littéraire, et il a réussi. Faisant allusion à « The Gold Bug », qui lui avait valu une belle notoriété deux ans plus tôt, Poe écrit dans une lettre : « The bird beat the bug all hollow ». Acte de conquête, donc, presque un énorme coup publicitaire, et d'ailleurs le personnage du corbeau restera attaché à son auteur dans l'imagerie populaire – mais cela n'empêche pas Poe d'attacher à sa composition une grande valeur puisqu'il en signolera le texte jusqu'à sa mort, quatre ans plus tard.

« The Raven » est d'abord un tour de force verbal. Le poème est constitué d'une séquence de dix-huit strophes régulières qui tournent autour d'un refrain obsédant, d'abord « nothing more » dans la plupart des premières strophes – puis, avec la première intervention de l'oiseau, ce « nevermore » qui ne lâchera plus le lecteur. Et ce refrain détermine une rime en /o:/ très insistante, puisqu'elle commande quatre vers sur six dans chaque strophe. Un axe sonore, donc, très contraignant.

Autour de cet axe, se met en place tout un jeu de sonorités : rimes internes systématiques et qui sont souvent aussi des rimes riches, allitérations, images sonores en miroir et autres paronomases – tout cela faisant du poème une chambre d'échos très fabriquée, voire surfaite, mais dont on ne se libère pas facilement. Le lecteur cultivé fait la fine bouche : il y a là trop de rimes trop riches et éculées. Ainsi dans la seule strophe 2, on trouve « ember/remember/December », puis « morrow/borrow/sorrow », c'est-à-dire la grosse artillerie du versificateur romantique. Ainsi encore, à la strophe 6, alors que le poète-narrateur vient de nous dire qu'il avait l'âme en lui toute brûlante (« all my soul within me burning »), voilà qu'il se lance dans une triple rime acrobatique digne des *limericks* :

*“Surely,” said I, “surely that is something at my window lattice;
Let me see, then, what thereat is, and this mystery explore.”*

Tout cela est empreint d'une énorme théâtralité et d'un goût du jeu verbal qui, bien interprété, peut offrir un plaisir du texte, mais qui peut aussi déstabiliser le lecteur sérieux et l'inciter à rejeter une poésie trop « m'as-tu-vu », ou plutôt, en l'occurrence, trop « m'as-tu-entendu » – mais justement, c'est le problème, on l'a entendue et elle nous colle à l'oreille.

Et puis ce jeu massif sur les rimes et les échos est celui d'un poète-narrateur enfermé dans son passé amoureux et qui nous fait revivre le drame cocasse et symbolique où s'est trouvée confirmée son incarcération dans le deuil. Car tel est le sujet du poème ; « The Raven » est un poème de la possession, de l'obsession : obsession de la perte de la femme aimée, obsession du « nevermore ». Le poète s'amuse avec les barreaux en « -ore » de sa prison.

Ce poète-narrateur est en effet aussi un amoureux du verbe et un grand lecteur. L'ouverture du poème nous le montre penché sur des volumes oubliés :

*Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore...*

C'est donc tout naturellement qu'il va investir l'oiseau échoué chez lui en cette nuit, en ce minuit de tempête, des qualités occultes qu'il rencontre dans ses lectures. Si bien que ce corbeau qui parle (et l'on sait que cela

existe) va aussi très largement devenir, dans la diégèse même, un produit du verbe.

Ce qui nous mène au second tour de force, celui de la vraisemblance, factuelle et psychologique. L'action rapportée est en effet totalement improbable et rendue parfaitement possible par le ressort psychologique mis en jeu.

L'oiseau est bien un simple oiseau ou du moins, il peut bien, à la limite, être considéré comme tel. Il entre, s'installe, et commence par être pris par le jeune homme comme objet de moquerie. Mais son premier « nevermore » change tout. Car ce vocable entre tellement en résonance avec l'âme de notre intellectuel endeillé que ce dernier va s'obstiner à venir buter contre lui comme à plaisir. Pris dans la logique de la mélancolie, il presse l'oiseau de questions, apparemment pour être rassuré, consolé, mais en réalité avec l'assurance masochiste qu'à chaque fois un nouveau « nevermore » le confirmera dans son incarcération.

Donc une psychologie retorse qui ne manque pas de finesse – et qui, de plus, donne une nouvelle justification à l'usage de la rime en /o:/, la rendant en fait indispensable. En effet, c'est en terminant ainsi ses questions, puis ses ordres, que le narrateur provoque la réaction langagière de l'oiseau – l'invite, en fait, à donner sa monotone et désespérante réponse. Nécessité fonctionnelle, donc, de cette rime omniprésente.

Chacun aura compris, à ce stade, que l'oiseau est appelé à fonctionner comme une projection du narrateur lui-même et que le poème est une histoire de doubles. C'est ainsi que le narrateur attribue à l'oiseau une âme qui s'exhale tout entière dans le « nevermore », c'est ainsi également que ce volatile, mélange de dignité hautaine et de misère râpée n'est pas sans pouvoir apparaître comme un portrait-charge de Poe lui-même. Jeu de doubles encore. Jeu d'échos.

Traduire « The Raven », c'est donc un peu relever un défi, et je ne suis pas le seul à avoir été tenté puisque, sans avoir fait de recherches systématiques, j'ai déjà recensé dix-sept traductions françaises – dont dix en vers ; et l'on comprendra, je pense, après cette présentation, qu'une traduction d'un tel poème se doit d'être en vers, avec mètre et rime, évidemment. Ce n'est pas chose facile, mais aucune des traductions versifiées que je connais ne me donnant satisfaction, la tentation était forte d'en oser une onzième !

Le choix décisif était celui du refrain, et donc la traduction du « nevermore ». La traduction mot à mot, « jamais plus », n'offre pas une gamme de rimes intéressantes. J'ai finalement jeté mon dévolu sur une sorte de devise : « mort emporte ». Et comme j'ai été tenté par un autre mot que « corbeau » pour traduire « raven », c'est à cette formule, « mort emporte », que j'ai demandé de servir de titre.

Mort emporte

Voici par un minuit lugubre où lourd et las j'élucubrais
Sur maints volumes curieux les gloses d'une gnose obscure –
Quand déjà je dodelinais – que soudain : un tapotement,
Comme si quelqu'un toc-toquait, toc-toquait à ma lourde porte.
« Quelque visiteur, marmonnai-je, qui toquera doux à ma porte –
Cela seul, et rien d'autre sorte. »

Distinctement il m'en souvient, c'était au désolant décembre
Et les reflets d'un feu mourant dans ma chambre tordaient leurs ors.
Combien je désirais le jour ! ayant en vain des livres sourds
Souhaité l'obole d'un sursis au deuil de l'en-allée Lénore –
Au deuil de la fleur précieuse par les anges nommée Lénore –
Nom qui sombre ici dans la mort.

Aux froissis furtifs, aux soupirs de la soie pourpre des courtines
Venaient me saisir, me transir de fantasmiques terreurs.
Lors j'allais donc me répétant, pour pacifier mon cœur battant :
« Ce sera quelque visiteur mendiant accueil à ma porte –
Quelque visiteur mendiant, sur le tard, accueil à ma porte –
Cela seul, et rien d'autre sorte ».

Ainsi se raffermi mon âme et bientôt sans plus balancer
« Monsieur, dis-je, ou ma noble Dame, vraiment votre pardon j'implore :
C'est que j'étais dodelinant et vous, si doucement toquâtes,
Si doucement tapotâtes, tapotâtes à cette porte
Qu'à peine je vous entendis » – et sur ce j'ouvre grand la porte –
Que le noir ! et rien d'autre sorte.

Dans ce noir mon regard plongea et longtemps me tint là l'alarme
Et le quet de rêves que nul n'avait osé rêver encore.
Mais scellé resta le silence, l'obscurité ne fit pas signe,
Et le seul mot articulé fut le là murmuré « Lénore ? »
J'avais parlé, et par l'écho me fut remurmuré « Lénore ! »
Ce seul mot, seul, et seul encore.

A peine rentré dans la chambre, le trouble au cœur et l'âme en feu,
Voici que de nouveau j'entends toquer, toquer un peu plus fort.
« C'est donc à mes persiennes, dis-je, que quelque chose fait des siennes :
Il faut percer ce qu'il en est et que ce mystère j'explore –
Que mon cœur un instant s'apaise et que ce mystère il explore –
C'est le vent, c'est le vent encore ! »

Vivement j'ouvre et, sans détour, d'un pas princier de pénétrer,
Avec force ébrouements de plumes, un Freux que, solennelle, escorte
L'ombre sainte des anciens jours. Sans le moindre salut s'avance
Et va, comme dame ou seigneur, prendre perchoir dessus ma porte –
Dessus un buste de Pallas tout juste au-dessus de ma porte –
Prendre perchoir, sans une volte.

Or l'oiseau d'ébène aux grands airs, le sinistre sire leurrant
Ma tristesse vers le sourire en se comportant de la sorte –
« Bien que de ton cimier la plume soit tondue, dis-je, preux tu es,
Freux macabre, lugubre aïeul, hôte égaré des Rives mortes –
Dis-moi donc, aux Rives de Nuit, quelle devise haut tu portes ».
Le freux proclama : « Mort emporte ».

Si peu signifiante que fût sa peu pertinente réponse,
M'ébahit que l'affreux oiseau put ainsi paraître si docte ;
Car de ce côté de la vie quel autre homme eut le privilège
De voir semblable animal, plume... ou poil, au-dessus de sa porte –
Juché sur le buste sculpté, tout juste au-dessus de sa porte,
Et proclamant que « Mort emporte » ?

Mais seul sur le buste placide, il émit ces seules syllabes,
Comme si, seules, sur son âme, elles avaient droit de mainmorte.
Plus rien dès lors ne prononça, plus une plume ne froissa,
Tant et si bien que m'échappa : « Il est amis que vent emporte,
Amis, Espoirs : les emporta ; demain ce gueux, de même sorte... »
Mais lui de couper : « Mort emporte ».

Saisi que rime si précise s'en vint river ma rêverie,
« Sans doute, dis-je, sont-ce là les seuls sons que l'oiseau colporte,
Sons saisis sur les lèvres lasses d'un maître dont l'odieux Désastre
Réduisit les chansons au seul refrain qu'encore il supportât –
Au seul, sombre refrain qu'encore son cœur désastré supportât –
“Ah, la mort – ah, la mort emporte !” »

Mais le freux n'en leurrant pas moins ma tristesse vers le sourire,
Je roule un bien moelleux fauteuil devant bestiole et buste et porte ;
Puis m'affalant sur le velours, je laisse mon esprit muser,
Musarder sur l'oracle dont, hiératique, Corvus avorte –
Sur l'oracle dont, hiératique et grotesque, Corvus avorte
Quand il croasse « Mort emporte ».

Tout cela je vais explorant, me gardant bien d'en souffler mot
Au freux maigre dont l'œil de feu lors me poigne de fièvre forte ;
Cela, et plus, vais devinant, la tête mollement versée
Sur le lourd velours feuille-morte dont la lampe couve les moires
Mais où plus jamais ne viendra se presser comme en ma mémoire
Celle que Noire Mort emporte.

*Lors voici qu'au tapis des pas... d'anges... tintent, que s'épaissit
L'air du parfum d'un encensoir invisible en des mains accortes.
« Fou, m'écrié-je, Dieu t'octroie, par ces messagers, Il t'envoie
Le répit, le philtre d'oubli, le si doux oubli de la morte
Lénore. Bois, bois le doux oubli, bois le mol oubli de la morte. »
Le freux rappela : « Mort emporte ».*

*« Prophète, dis-je, et de malheur ! Dépêché par le Tentateur
Ou par la tempête craché – cœur ravagé mais tête forte –
En ce désert ensorcelé, ce logis par l'Horreur hanté –
Diable ou oiseau, mais prophétique ! dis-moi donc vrai, je t'y exhorte :
Y a-t-il baume en Galaad ? Dis-moi, dis-moi, je t'y exhorte. »
Le freux proclama : « Mort emporte ».*

*« Prophète, dis-je, et de malheur ! diable ou oiseau, mais prophétique !
Par Dieu qui sur nous tend son Ciel – sur les êtres de toute sorte –
Dis à cette âme de douleurs si contre elle aux verts Paradis
Elle serrera une sœur qui le nom de Lénore porte –
La rare et radieuse fleur qui le nom de Lénore porte. »
Le freux proclama : « Mort emporte ».*

*« Que ces mots soient ton viatique », hurlai-je en me dressant, rageur,
« Plonge à nouveau dans la tempête, rejoins des spectres la cohorte !
Et ne laisse pas une plume en signe de ton noir mensonge !
Ne viole plus ma solitude, quitte ce buste et cette porte !
Ôte enfin ton bec de mon cœur, ôte ta forme de ma porte ! »
Mais le freux : seule Mort emporte.*

*Ainsi l'oiseau, loin de broncher, reste perché, reste, perché,
Dessus le buste de Pallas si pâle au-dessus de ma porte ;
Et ses yeux luisent comme luisent les iris d'un démon qui rêve,
Et la pluie, sur lui, de la lampe projette au sol son ombre morte,
Et mon âme prise en cette ombre, ombre noire où mon âme est morte,
Attend là que la mort l'emporte.*

A Soldier of Fortune

A short story by Anne Marsella

He was a man of tremendous beauty who smelled of fresh raw lamb and sesame. His looks were biblical, abrupt and stunning. Had his been a much earlier era and had he been so commanded, this man could have taken the foreskins of the two hundred soldiers as trophy. He had the stature and allure of a King David and dark locks as forthcoming and as unwieldy crowned his head. But this man was not a Jew. He was a butcher and a Mohammedan. His name was Ramzi.

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Ramzi's butcher shop, like many in the northern quarters of Paris was called *Boucherie A-Salaam*. Why a meat shop would bear the name of Peace, for "Salaam" meant that, went largely unquestioned. Perhaps it served as a propitiatory gift, for even in times of peace there is strife and slaughter and perhaps then the need for offering. In any case, the name was commonplace enough. Ramzi was doing a thriving business and advertised his specials on *Radio Orient*; six chickens for one hundred francs, an entire mutton for three hundred. Many people found this to be quite a bargain and came to him. All his meats were halal which meant the animals were swiftly knifed according to tradition, at the throat, disgorging the blood at once. He sold no pink flesh or pork. Few decorative measures were taken in his shop; he did not, as the Frenchmen of his trade, dress carcass in the vitrine with flowers in the orifices and bows around the ankles, he did not lay livers, rognons and small undressed brains one by one in neat rows on pink waxy paper. The meats in his shop did not seduce, they were set on stark white paper for the staunch of eye and nose and for those with good appetite.

Without a doubt Ramzi was prospering in a way which would hardly have been possible had his parents, when he was yet a small child, not fled Gaza for Beyrouth and shortly after, Beyrouth for Paris. For surely, had these fugacious moves not happened, he would have grown up a disfranchised youth and his talents and the sheer strength of his body would have availed perhaps his performance as a revolutionary and little else besides. His destiny was decided before he could even speak, although it seemed to have had little bearing on the man himself. Indeed, Ramzi was a man who, regardless of the shifts in the cards of fate, had remained irrevocably himself. There had not been in his life of thirty years one singular event which had altered the man or brought him to a deeper understanding of his life's seeds. Perhaps this was because too much of life had been given to him, because he was a blessed man and did not know it. Had he thought his vigor and handsomeness were extraordinary, he would have turned his head to hear the mocking bird behind him, as those who acknowledge their gifts and offer thanks do. But he didn't cock his ear and the bird flew away unheard. As it was, it hardly mattered what he did in his life, be he butcher or soldier.

Ramzi did not run the shop by himself but with his cousin, Ali, a timid man as hairless and pale as he was pilose and dark of skin. Ali waited on customers and hacked at the meats. He quietly kept up with the neighborhood happenings and gossip and was very circumspect with female clientele; even veiled women who showed only their hands and plain faces to him, made him keenly aware that he was handling flesh and must be methodically attentive and land the knife squarely. If Ali seemed at times somewhat embarrassed to work with meat, he was really in fact mildly ill-at-ease with himself for this line of work suited his nature as it did Ramzi's. This is not to say that either man was blood thirsty. Not at all. It is one thing to want to drink the blood and another to have a hand in it, a providing hand. Theirs was a sanguine nature, like that of the human race.

While Ali tended the shop with a stained white apron wrapped twice around his thin body, Ramzi was usually out on business at the abattoirs of *La Villette* where he met with his suppliers, two Moroccan brothers by the name of Haddad. There he would select his meats and deliver them himself to the shop in a yellow truck he had purchased for this purpose. Few butchers actually did this work themselves, but Ramzi got ahead this way. He did not mind the strenuous loading and unloading of heavy meat sacks and wore everyday that he worked a money holster. It was black leather and resembled the paraphernalia worn by body guards to hold guns or walkie-talkies. The straps of it were pulled tight across his chest and over his shoulders as if to pit strength to strength, as if to taunt him with containment so that he could contain himself more masterfully. It was indeed the sort of vestment worn by a man as a reminder that he was a

man. He put it on in the mornings and again in the afternoons after changing his bloodied clothes. It was at this time that he worked with money. He counted and multiplied it, he recorded it in his books. He bought dollars with it from a Lebanese restaurateur and invested those in convenient and precarious markets vaguely related to a hippodrome. He often won out. In the afternoons he shook men's hands and took advantage of bargains other than his own. He also met with women; he had plenty of them. On days when he had great appetite for one, he would step out of the office flipping through a pocket-sized address book.

"Tell me, Ali," he would say, turning sly green eyes on the man, "Who shall it be today? You name the hair color. I'll find her."

"I'm not telling you anything," said Ali displeased. His cousin's blatant concupiscence and the thought of what he did with these girls made him uncomfortable as he was a modest man. "You should marry and stop it with those girls. Leave them and let them marry one man as it should be. You could have a good wife upstairs waiting for you and giving you children. Remember Mustafa Habibi, the false prophet, cousin. He professed to issue the seed of Mohammed and laid with five hundred women. All were unprotected and bore children, but terrible, deformed ones with more noses than arms! Do you remember this cousin? Do you remember how they all came back to him and left their babies in front of his house? And how he wailed stepping through the sea of his hideous offspring? Cousin, we, men, have been warned of our excesses!" Ali shook his head slowly and resumed his chopping of a leg of lamb.

"Don't worry cousin," said Ramzi putting his hand on the other's shoulder. "I will marry soon enough. You'll see."

"I'm not so sure although I hope you're right," said Ali still cutting the lamb. "You have too much choice and don't know how to choose. You say no easily enough. But when will you say yes?"

"When it pleases me. I'll say it when I like."

"Then may it please you soon. Peace of Allah be with you."

"Allah's peace be with you."

Ramzi left the shop a bit disgruntled. He recognized a certain truth in what his cousin had said and this left him feeling uneasy, as if he had wronged himself in a fundamental way. Yet at the same time he could not name this wrong. Was it that he hadn't married and produced offspring? He did not believe it was. No the wrong was more deeply rooted in him. It had more to do with his propensity to eliminate rather than to rightfully pick. This idea puzzled him as he walked down the street to his truck but he dispelled it quickly enough. He had caught the eye of several long-haired school girls leaning against the wall of a dry-cleaner. And the other knowledge came to him, the one which until then had gone uncontested. He could have both of them and needn't choose. It hadn't occurred to

Ramzi that he might act without a need and so create one. In this way he was a simple and unspoiled man. He stayed with himself.

Ramzi came back to the shop that evening at around seven o'clock and went through the mail sitting on the desk in the office. Ali was waiting on a customer but said to him over his shoulder, "There are two letters from Shlomo. That's the second time this has happened. Go take them over there if you have a minute." Shlomo was a butcher two doors down on the same street, the *rue de Kabylie*. He was number twenty-six and they were thirty. On the orange awning in front of Shlomo's shop was written, *Boucherie Cacher* in white letters. Although Ramzi and Shlomo owned adjacent shops of the same trade, they were nevertheless not competitors. Each man had his clientele and neither attempted to put his hand into the other's pot, for what would be the use? Those who bought kosher meats went to Shlomo and those who ate halal meats went to Ramzi. This of course went unquestioned and would continue to as long as identities and their respective practices were upheld.

When Ramzi walked over to his neighbor's shop to drop off the mail, he did not find Shlomo but his wife behind the counter. She was talking on the phone and nodded to him as he walked in although she didn't curtail the call.

"No, Shlomo's out. He went to pick Rachel up at the airport... Didn't I tell you? She's getting in from Tel Aviv. That's right, tonight. I haven't seen her for two years." Rather than simply leave the mail on the counter he waited and looked around the shop. He checked prices and found that his own were lower all around. He saw that Shlomo carried a wide selection of canned kosher goods and wondered if he wasn't planning to expand into a grocery. He was thinking of doing the same himself only he hadn't found the right supplier yet. He was estimating the surface area of the store when Shlomo's wife, still on the phone, turned to him suddenly.

"What can I do for you?" She lifted her eyes to him, still holding the receiver clenched between her shoulder and ear. He found her quite an attractive woman despite the fact that she dyed her hair a brassy sort of blonde as seemed to be the fashion among the women of the quarter.

"We got your mail again," said Ramzi handing her the letters.

"Again? Well thanks for bringing it by. I'll have to let the mailman know."

"Yes, you might do that. Have a good evening."

"You too," she said smiling at him for a moment, then promptly getting back to her call.

Ramzi left Shlomo's store, turning over ideas about expanding his business. He was thinking of opening a grocery or a restaurant as well as a second butcher shop in a different quarter. He felt it would soon be the time to make the move, whatever he decided it would be. Ramzi was not one to

give in to worry. When he took a course of action, he followed it through in a fashion others might deem negligent. However he wasn't at all careless, simply he had the freedom of heart and mind to let things happen in their time. And they did happen. His actions were paced by an oriental timeliness which had seasoned in him. That evening after closing the shop, Ramzi left without having dinner with Ali, to spend time with a woman. This time he said nothing to his cousin about his plans, but got his jacket and went out the back door. He was thinking of going to see a girl named Naima who had a warm, generous body and rosy cheeks from the mint tea she drank. She was also a very good cook. He had a package of lamb shoulder under his arm to take to her. But if she were not there, he would try someone else. This was never a problem.

A month or so later an offer came to him which, despite the fact that he had never before given a proposition of this sort a thought, was such a deal that he took it up nevertheless. He purchased a fashionable and much frequented discotheque called *Club Shéhérazade*, for which he paid half in cash, signed the papers transmitting ownership, and became proprietor of a nightclub for which he never paid in full. For as it turned out, the previous owner disappeared and never reclaimed the rest due to him. It was thought that there had been a price on his head and that it had been paid. Ramzi had indeed made a remarkably good deal. During the day he attended to his meat business while at night he made his appearance at *Club Shéhérazade*, where he occasionally acted as bouncer. He was the seductive element of his own property and was granted there an exposure which might have awoken him to this fact but did not. He added a ladies' night and noticed simply that business was moving along well.

In the afternoons Ramzi took care of the paper work for both businesses in the office behind the shop. It happened again that sitting on his desk when he came in from his morning doings was mail for 26 *rue de Kabylie*, Shlomo's store. Before settling down to his book keeping, he decided to drop the letters off right away. He had heard rumors that Shlomo had after all expanded into a grocery and took the opportunity to see what had been done. But what had been done, he saw when he went in, was not much in fact. Perhaps a few more shelves of kosher goods had been added but this was all. "Shlomo must be getting ahead some other way," Ramzi thought to himself, looking around the store. That one didn't take up every opportunity, be it an orthodox one or not, to prosper, was unthinkable to him. Why else would someone come to a country such as France where one was not wanted, if not because one wanted and could get more? In the homelands it was enough to live even with little, but in France one must improve one's lot. It was an understood obligation.

Shlomo was waiting on a customer when Ramzi walked in. In fact there was a line of customers. No one seemed to notice him. He looked at

the letters and saw that one was addressed to a Rachel, the other two were for Shlomo. He put them under his arm and held them for a moment, then decided to leave them on the counter. As he walked up, he saw that someone was seated on a chair behind Shlomo. It was a beautiful young woman and she was looking at him. And while she could have captivated him with her lovely body and skin, she was scantily clad and enough of it was showing, she held him with her gaze and cast her glamour from there. He had never before seen a woman with golden eyes and was sure he had come upon a treasure, one that might adorn him, one that he might keep in a locked box. She did not provoke in him feelings replete with pleasure, but rather a sentiment of righteousness so foreign to a man as he, a man who did not account for his own conceit.

Without saying a word, Ramzi leaned over a customer and set the mail on the counter. He caught Shlomo's eye and nodded his head but he did not look at the girl again although he was burning to do so. As the door to Shlomo's shop closed a bird chirped behind him. This was a door bell of sorts and Ramzi, who surely had heard it before though without paying it any mind, heard it then for the first time; he turned his head to see the bird but saw instead the steady and unrelenting gaze of a tiger's eye. He felt a shelling of hard stones against his heart and nearly collapsed in the chest. But he regained himself quickly and held out against a beckoning sweetness which he apprehended as a mirage. And he chose for the first time, without even submitting himself to choices. He did not flounder, doubt or weigh possibilities. In a sense it was a most passively made choice. In fact, it was not entirely made but appeared and made itself known. It was his recognition of it which was determined and which would demand from him a stolid resoluteness.

Ramzi did not go to Club Shéhérazade that evening but stayed in and had dinner with Ali in the apartment above the butcher shop. Ali cooked the meal with great pleasure for he was delighted to share his dinner with his cousin. So often he ate alone.

"It's good to have you here, Cousin. You should eat with me more often," he said as they sat down at the table.

"I believe I will," said Ramzi as he served himself some lamb stew. "Every night for three months I have been out. And I can tell you, that a man who lives outside of his house this much is a man who will one day lose that house. Look here!" he went on, tugging at the straps of the leather holster he wore. "See how tightly it's fastened? Still, it can hardly contain me," His voice then dropped to a near whisper. "Do you see what kind of man I am, cousin? I am a man who is blessed in things that even the blessed are cursed in and damned when the cursed receive blessing. This is why I have little mercy." Ali listened to his cousin with his eyes on the other's plate which was piled high with food. And he thought of Ramzi who

could never get enough to eat because his appetites were many and simple nourishment would not appease them. Then he looked at his cousin's face which despite the years they had lived at each other's sides, was difficult to behold because of its raw beauty; the strong, willful bones of his face spoke challenge to any man, his green eyes, cut from an almond's mold were luminous traps and could wound, his mouth and tongue were red and knowing. Ali was a simple man and perceived this outstanding demeanor as a violence.

"Ramzi," he finally said, "I have never met a man as blessed as you. All good things come your way without your even asking. You pray but your prayers neither give thanks nor plead for blessings. I have often wondered what purpose they served. But then, you are not like other men. What have you ever been in need of? How can you know what mercy is when it has always been bestowed upon you and you haven't known the other side of its coin? You might be a good man but you also might be a cruel one. For this reason, Cousin, if suffering comes to you, I will be relieved. I'd rather see you as a good man."

Neither of the two said any more but ate steadily, picking up the bones with their hands to chew at them. They ate two loaves of bread and marinated chick peas as well. For desert they had vanilla ice-cream and ate that silently too. Each man had retreated to his own thoughts or prayers. Ali was a thoughtful man and his words often had this quieting effect on Ramzi. Ramzi respected his cousin's opinions and judgments and could be upset by them. He brooded but did not argue a point. Eventually he might forget everything said. While Ali cleared the table and washed the dishes, Ramzi went over to the couch to lie down. He was tired and fell asleep promptly although a lamp missing its shade at the end of the sofa was flooding light on him. When Ali came out of the kitchen, he expected to see his cousin still sitting at the table reading the newspaper but he saw instead a dormant, illuminated godhead, a giant man on the crest of sleep and all dreams.

Ramzi did not wake up until eleven o'clock the next morning and when he got up and stretched his arms over his head, he felt as refreshed as the traveling man who sleeps off his jet-lag in an unfamiliar room. Indeed, it was as if his surroundings had changed, as if the circumference of objects had been tampered with and altered during the night. He recognized them but as one in a foreign country recognizes those things similar but different. He had no recollection of the dream which had taken him through slumber and left him there, awake in the living room. But perhaps it was one which offered him an armoire of elegant clothes expressly made for a three tailed pasha, or in which he was hailed on a large ship setting out for the Arab world. Whatever it was, it gave him a sense of being newly landed and revered. Ramzi ran his hands through his

thick locks as he walked into the kitchen to make some coffee. His hair felt unusually long and wild and he thought that he might get it cut that afternoon. It was a Friday and the butcher shop below was closed. Ali had already left for the mosque. As there wasn't any more coffee in the cupboard, Ramzi changed his clothes and went down to the cafe on the corner to have a cup there. As he walked down the street, he passed by the neighborhood hair salon, *Coiffure Quick* and looked at the sign on the door. "Open till noon on Fridays" it read. He deliberated for a moment as to whether or not he should spend what was left of his morning in a hair salon, then, running his fingers again through his hair, decided that he ought to. *Coiffure Quick* was a salon for both men and women, which Ramzi preferred as he didn't like being handled by a barber. He always had lady operators massage his scalp and play with his curls and was used to this. Ramzi went in and sat down in an empty chair. He had not sat there for long when a girl with bright pink lipstick and a pixy cut came behind him, swept a black smock over him and tied it behind his neck. Then she said, "come this way please" and led him towards the back to the reclining chairs and washing sinks. Ramzi enjoyed getting his hair washed and relaxed as the girl held his head and gently massaged the back of his neck and behind his ears with pineapple smelling soaps and creams. She was rinsing his hair with a warm shower of water when he heard someone come up next to her. Then he felt her set him down and drop the shower head in the sink behind him. His head was picked up then by different hands, bigger and more pointed ones. These hands had long nails and scratched at his scalp aggressively. They pulled at his hair and not one of them supported the nape of his neck which began to ache. Ramzi grew uncomfortable and peeved. He lifted his head to look at this woman who was so rudely attending to him and saw aureate eyes staring at him as steadily and as noncommittally as a cat's.

"You're hurting my neck," he told her as he made an attempt to lift his head out of the sink. But she pushed it back down.

"Don't move, I'm almost done," she said with authority. And Ramzi did not shift again in the reclining chair but endured her brusque handling and developed a crook in his neck. When she finished she dropped a towel on his head, put his chair into upright position and led him to her booth where her name was written on the drawer. This was Rachel, the daughter of the butcher, Shlomo. And it was here, in this booth, that Ramzi became aware of the entirety of her loveliness. As she cut his hair, she pressed her soft body against his. Several times he had her breasts in his face and could smell them, taste them even. They were perfumed. From time to time she pushed her hair back from her face. It was voluminous and fell past her shoulder. It was the same luminous color as her eyes and could beacon the darkened souls and twisted hearts of men. She was often

followed on the streets because of it and had learned over the years to lead a man to his own abyss so as to keep away from hers. As for her face, it was perhaps more handsome than beautiful as there was an angular severity to it which was slightly exaggerated rather than softened by her hair.

Ramzi was aware of two things at once, that moving behind, to the side and in front of him was his beloved and that she was taking cruel liberties with comb and scissors. He had never been so yanked and clipped. He had plucked many a chicken and was this not the same? He grew cross at his own sense of dignity which pleaded with him to get up and leave. "So now you let a woman have her way with you? You let her cut you down?" it challenged him. And Ramzi, caught in this turmoil and judgment could only muster back, "I will stay with her. Leave me here!" Indeed, he remained in the chair and endured her until the end. When she took the last bit of hair off, she slammed the scissors back in the drawer, brushed off the back of his neck and undid the smock. Then she stood back for a moment with the smock in her hands and waited, like the toreador waits for his bull. Ramzi got up slowly, unfolding his limbs and spine until he had stretched back into his large body. Whether Rachel noticed that he was double her size in height and that the muscles of his thighs, chest and arms had the same solid thickness as the cedars of Lebanon was unclear. But she did drop the smock to the floor as he approached and headed swiftly toward the back room. She was either suddenly frightened or suddenly bored. Ramzi paid at the cashier and left in Rachel's drawer, a fifty percent tip.

Despite the time that Ramzi had spent in Rachel's booth in front of the mirror, he had hardly bothered to look at himself. He did not see then, that it was as if she had set hungry goats loose in his hair and that they had fed on his locks down to the roots. She had left his head barren and without ornament. It was exposed and unsheathed. He left the salon with a head of a shorn ram but thought nothing of it as of course, he knew nothing of it. His mind was occupied with visions and the fragrances of his chosen woman and with the mean feel of her hands on him.

That night Ramzi went to Club Shéhérazade around nine o'clock before it opened to check on some things. Friday night was their busiest night of the week and he always went then to welcome the full house. When he arrived, the bartender, Brahim was already there, washing and stacking glasses.

"*A-Salamalicoum,*" said Ramzi reaching over the bar to shake the bartender's hand. The other stood there smiling playfully at him and saluted him instead.

"So they finally enlisted you, did they? Shaved your hair off. Which army is it? You should have come in uniform tonight. The women love it."

Ramzi was taken aback by Brahim's greeting but was quick enough on his feet and played along with the joke.

"I would have worn it, my brother, but it's at the dry cleaners." Ramzi could hear the other man laugh as he went downstairs to the cellar. He was shaken up a bit. Brahim's words were as good as a mirror; in them he saw what he had become. Beads of sweat broke out on his brow as he realized what exactly his beloved had made of him. She had cut him into a soldier. She had rid him of accessories so that he better fit the mold, that of his birthright, the mold of a soldier. But the question that precipitated him into bewilderment was the inevitable one; a soldier of what? From above he was answered with women's piercing ululating, the kind which celebrated the end of Ramadan or the circumcision of a coddled boy-child. A rhythmic and torrid Egyptian music followed and Ramzi could hear the men upstairs dancing and clapping hands. He took the stairs up three by three and with his arms in the air and bent at the elbows, he moved past the bar and out onto the dance floor propelled more by his pelvis than by his feet. The other men roared and applauded, making a circle around him. Ramzi felt a fire surge through his blood and heat his muscles. He pulled his belt out from the loops of his pants and held it stretched out over his head using it like it were a cane. He held it taut and rigid dropping his arms in front of him, then raising them over his head again, and his hips kept time with the rhythm of the music. The men standing around him, had never seen their boss dance, had never seen him so much as clap his hands. He looked to them, like a cornered man, bursting from his body. The circle began to break up and by the end of the dance, Ramzi was standing alone on the floor with a strap of his belt in each hand. During the dance, he had snapped it in half.

By midnight, Club Shéhérazade was full and only when some left could others be let in. Ramzi stood outside the door in front of the line of people to supervise this. He stood a head taller than most and could look out at all the faces before him. And while he had never before cared to notice that they too, could look at him with discerning eyes, he had suddenly become acutely aware of this possibility. Indeed, he felt all eyes upon him and himself too denuded to shield. He believed he saw then, questioning and mocking gazes, all asking him at once, "But a soldier of what?" He called one of his employees over to take his place at the entrance and went to the bartender to give him some instructions for closing. Then he left out the side door. As he walked down the narrow, dimly lit back street, he was conscious of the sound his shoes made against the pavement, he was aware too, that if an unescorted woman were to cross paths with him then, she would see him as a dark and threatening man, she might fear for her integrity or life. This consciousness, newly born in him, was crippling, as he did not yet possess it. He had not addressed it

as his and as he walked, it awakened him to the fragile course of his blood's itineraries.

The next morning Ramzi woke up early to the smell of coffee. They opened the shop at nine o'clock Saturday mornings and Ali having gotten up first, got the coffee and breakfast ready and was sitting at the table. Ramzi dressed quickly and went to join him.

"Good morning," he said as he pulled himself out a chair. Ali looked up at him and nodded. He poured his cousin some coffee and looked at him again.

"You're quite changed, Cousin. Who did that to you? Who shaved your head?"

"No one shaved it. I had my hair cut at the place down below."

"You went to Shlomo's place?"

"What do you mean, Shlomo's place? I went to a hair salon."

"Well, that hair salon belongs to Shlomo. He's had it for several years now, I thought you knew. His brother has a chain of them in Tel Aviv. I've heard he's got plans to sell out here and join him." Ali's voice then dropped to a more intimate tone and he shook his head regretfully. "Look how they took off all your hair! I wouldn't have gone there if I were you. Look what they did!" Ali frowned and Ramzi drank his coffee resignedly. He had expected this from Ali and could hardly have explained how it was not what was done to him but the touch of those deciding hands that did it that mattered. Where others saw a virtually bald head, Ramzi felt the fullness of two hands cupping like a fez. He was understanding that he had been made into a soldier of fortune and this under the auspices of his beloved. He was ready to serve her and to lay his heart on her palms.

For the next few weeks Ramzi worked as strenuously as ever. His pining for Rachel did not leave him an idle man but on the contrary drove him to near ecstatic heights of toil. For he was preparing for something he sensed required generous financial grounds. He was preparing of course for a woman. He wore the holster tightly about his chest and filled its purses with rolls of franc bills. Every day and several times a day, he walked past *Coiffure Quick*, peering in for a glimpse of her and although two huge photos posted in the window obstructed his view in, he conjured her nevertheless with gemstone eyes as golden and desolate as Saharan dunes. His intention was of course to go back to her for a second cut and fortunately for him, his hair grew at such a rate that three weeks later it was passably long enough to justify another.

When Ramzi went into *Coiffure Quick* this time, he stood by the cash register and waited as Rachel was busy with an elderly lady client. Several other operators offered to take care of him but he declined each time, pointing to Rachel and nodding. Rachel turned around to look at him once, with the same lingering and indifferent gaze. It claimed to own him but not

to recognize him. It was with this imperious boredom that she looked upon everything. In this way, Ramzi was not the recipient of any special attentions, be they pleasant or otherwise. He watched her cut the old woman's hair and saw that she was abrupt and unkind and that she pulled harshly at the hair. It looked to him that she was cutting crookedly as well. All of this he noticed with an indiscriminating curiosity and when he was eventually taken into her care and treated with equal brutality, his wonder became trust. He did not even bat an eye when she nicked his scalp and it bled. He was quiet and waited for her to take care of it. Ramzi was not at all diffident with Rachel. He was confidently set on her and expecting.

"Here," she said pressing a cotton ball on a spot where he bled. "That should take care of it. Put your finger here." She lifted her own finger and he put his down in its place. Then she went to the back of the salon to wash another client's hair and left him to tend to his wounds. Surely had most any other man found himself in the butcher's predicament, he would have scorned the woman who brought him to it. As for Ramzi, he did not allow himself such indulgences; if he had chosen a distressing woman then so be it. For it was the choice of her that had importance; his heart had been since rigorously ordered and ordained. He had pledged himself to serve and protect her. He was her sentinel and standing guard, he waited. Did he love her? He believed he did for she was the chosen one and from the moment she was chosen a terrible need for her took root in him.

Ramzi continued to work both day and night with the same ardor and certainty, however he was oddly given to occasional dizzy spells. This happened to him twice at Club Shéhérazade where he was obliged to lie down behind the bar and beneath the feet of Brahim, and once when with the Haddad brothers who rubbed his forehead with thyme and oil. Perhaps he was simply overworked and needed rest. Or maybe it was misery at last visiting his veins in a prescribed dose. Or a woman's witchcraft, conjured with scissors, flakes of scalp and wands of blood-tasseled hair. Ramzi would not think about it, nor did he tell Ali of his dizziness and headaches. As much as he could, he kept this illness buried within him where only God could know of it.

So it went that God knew and then soon, Ali too, as it was he who found Ramzi one evening on the sofa shaking and delirious with fever.

"Cousin what's wrong?" he asked kneeling down next to him and setting his hand on Ramzi's forehead to feel his temperature. "You're on fire Cousin! Let's get the taleb here for you." He stood back up and hurried up the stairs to the third floor where the Algerian taleb, a regular customer of theirs, had his office. He was just leaving when Ali came up behind him out of breath from having run up two flights of stairs. "Please come with me. My cousin is not well at all. I have never seen anybody with such a fever. I'm afraid he's cooking away!" The witch doctor followed him down and

had a look at the young butcher, touching him at the head, wrist and heart. Then he shook his head at Ali.

"I'm afraid I can't do anything here. It's better to take him to the hospital. It looks to me that his blood is spoiled. The hospital takes care of that."

Throughout his illness which lasted nearly fourteen days, Ramzi was prey to a delirium that staged an ongoing eventless scene. It was of himself guarding an elaborately decorated arched door, similar to the ones he had seen in Beyrouth, with a scimitar in his hand. Behind this door was a woman as lovely as the moon, a woman both dangerous and in danger. He heard her laughing and imagined her mouth opening like a small pomegranate split open and baring its rubies. From time to time against his back he felt a light and heat transpierce the door and he guessed the feline shape and intensity of her eyes looking through him and out into the world.

Ramzi left the hospital a bald man as his head had been shaved there. He had lost some weight but was nevertheless still a formidably large man and was rapidly regaining his strength. Ali came to pick him up with a fresh change of clothes and the money holster. "Put these on cousin. You'll feel like yourself again." Ramzi dressed and the cousins went out to the truck parked in front.

"Let me drive," said Ramzi holding his hand out for the keys. Ali stopped and looked at him for a moment wondering if he were really well enough but then tossed them to him.

"Sure cousin. Go ahead. It's your van isn't it?" The hospital was just a few blocks away and soon they were driving down their street, the rue de Kabylie. As they approached the hair salon, Ramzi slowed down and leaned over Ali to see in. Indeed he'd been expecting this moment hungrily. His desire for Rachel had again peaked in the consistent and scheduled way as it had before only this time, it had imbued his anticipation with great wells of pleasure. Ramzi did not simply drive slowly by, but stopped the car in front of *Coiffure Quick* and stared at its storefront. His jaw dropped and he furrowed his eyes as if he were reading something he didn't quite believe or understand. It was a sign that read, "New Ownership. Closed for remodeling." The place looked desolate, several of the mirrors had been shattered, chairs were upset and torn fashion magazines littered the floor.

"What's this?" asked Ramzi with a sense of urgency which surprised Ali. "Have they moved somewhere else?"

"Yes, Shlomo moved his family back to the homeland."

"What homeland?" asked Ramzi, truly aghast at this news.

"Ours."

"But why would they go to Palestine?" he said still not understanding fully. He was stunned and could not think straight.

"Because to them it's Israel, I suppose."

“Yes, that must be it.” Ramzi drove further up the road and parked. The sudden exodus of pleasure, the pleasure for which he had suffered to know, left him distracted and drained. Ali offered his arm to help his cousin from the car but the other refused. Indeed he was not enfeebled but disoriented. By the time he got settled in the office working on the books, he began to apprehend what had happened and despair set over him. “Allah!” he said. “You do not allow a man despair and a man must not tolerate it either!” And when it was time to close the shop a clearer comprehension came to him and knifed at his heart. “Allah! I have been betrayed! While I was guarding the front door she was let out the back!” He re-played the scene of his delirium searching for the moment of her departure but could not find it. Anger rose in his blood at having been so foolishly betrayed by his own choice, by his very beloved. His anger was the sort which moved a man to curse God and the mysterious paths of all things divine. This kind of anger led a man to his beast.

The following morning Ramzi got up early and went to the Haddad Brothers’ before they opened to customers. He got there as the workers were filing in and spoke to one of them.

“Let me do your work for you today. I will pay you twice what the Brother’s pay. But give me your knife. I’ll meet you afterwards and pay you the amount you name.” The man thought this over quickly and handed Ramzi his knife with a shy smile. Ramzi took it and brandished it in the air. His day of butchery had begun.

He slaughtered according to tradition but with a voraciousness and speed that made a great impression on the others who neatly killed one animal in the time he swiftly killed three. And like them he recited the benediction, “*Bismillah Bismillah, Allaho-akbar,*” or “In the name of God. In the name of God. He is almighty!”, before each slash of the knife across the animal’s throat. But something in his voice raised the blessing as a question and the others feared he was challenging Allah. They kept away from him and eyed him suspiciously. When it was noon and time for lunch, Ramzi did not leave with the other men but stayed there in the stench of slaughter in his blood-drenched clothes and smoked cigarettes. He went to the bathroom to relieve himself and found that his sex was bloodied and his thighs and belly as well. He made no effort to clean himself but went back out and smoked some more until the men returned and work resumed.

When Ramzi got back to the shop, his clothes were crisp and caked with dried blood and it was only at Ali’s adamant bidding that he bathed and changed himself.

“No man leaves the slaughter house looking like that, Cousin! I don’t want to know what you were doing but I refuse to stay near you until you do an ablution.” Later that evening the cousins ate dinner together in silence. Ramzi had spent the day bleeding his shame and was exhausted

beyond recognition. Ali suspected he was dining with a stranger and kept to himself. Each man said his prayers after supper and went to bed.

The next day, Ramzi did not go to pick up meat at the Haddad Brothers' but stayed at the shop and waited on customers while Ali did some errands. He recognized many of them and inquired after their health and families. These people were mainly from the neighborhood. At around eleven o'clock a very pretty woman came in, a woman whom Ramzi recognized immediately. It was Naima, a girlfriend he had always especially enjoyed and who cooked splendidly. He was genuinely glad to see her.

"Naima! What brings you here?" he asked as he walked around the counter to greet her.

"I have something to tell you Ramzi. I've been by several times but you were gone. Your cousin wouldn't tell me where you were."

"Yes, he's shy with the ladies. Don't take that badly." He caressed her cheek and drew her nearer to him.

"Ramzi, there is something I have to say," she said taking a half step back. "This will be a surprise to you but I hope it will be one that pleases you. I know it pleases me." She dropped her eyes but kept her voice steady. "You see Ramzi, I'm carrying your child." Her words were followed by a round and stirring silence. Ramzi pulled her to him and held her against him as if to apply pressure to a sting. He could feel her swollen stomach and breasts.

"Let us have this child and many more, Naima," he said finally.

"Yes," she said looking up at him. "Because Allah wants it so." Ramzi did not contradict her but continued to hold her in his arms. He did not say, "Allah wants it so, yes, but if I had not?" This question he did not put to her. For he had indeed said yes and although this was uttered in an instant, there had been long and unusual preparation behind it. He made it known, to himself and to all.

When the wedding was celebrated at Club Shéhérazade and twenty roasted lambs were served, Ramzi made a strikingly handsome but bald groom. And some months later when his child came into the world his head was then too, as smooth and as vulnerable as this new-born. For as it went, his scalp had grown arid and the hair did not attempt to grow back. And this was his great fortune. When he caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror a warm recognition flooded him. He would nod his head and say, "Because Allah wants it so." And so it was. These were words of thanksgiving.

The Uptown Melville Black and White Blues Collage

Laurie Robertson-Lorant
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Unique personne de race blanche à se trouver dans la rame conduisant de midtown Manhattan à Harlem, l'auteur, biographe de Melville, se sent incapable, malgré le plaisir qu'elle prend au spectacle de la diversité ethnique new-yorkaise représentée par les passagers qui l'entourent, de chasser la peur engendrée par certaines images médiatiques de violence raciale. Hantée par le spectre d'Amasa Delano, le naïf et bien intentionné raciste blanc si finement dépeint par Melville, elle entremêle les observations et les réflexions que lui inspire son voyage à Harlem avec divers passages de « Benito Cereno » – pour aboutir à un texte où récit personnel, critique littéraire et interprétation culturelle s'entremêlent à leur tour.

New York City, September 25, 1991. I'm on my way to the Melville Society's centennial session on "Melville & Race" at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. On the subway from Penn Station to a friend's apartment at 84th Street and Central Park West, I notice that few whites take the subway anymore, even in midtown Manhattan. In fact, white people seem to be the minority in New York. There's more color and vibrancy on the gray streets of the city these days, and the people of color I meet seem friendlier and a lot less uptight than whites.

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As I hike up Columbus Avenue then crosstown to my friend's apartment, I'm feeling very good about New York. The weather is gorgeous: Indian summer sunshine, blue sky, and clean, fresh air. I like walking. I enjoy seeing so many different kinds of people and hearing a full chorus of accents and languages, and despite all the nasty rumors about the city, my theory that if I smile at people they will smile back seems to be holding so far. Is it such a bad thing to have "a good blithe heart" like the Yankee captain in "Benito Cereno," Melville's 1855 adaptation of Amasa Delano's narrative of a mutiny aboard a Spanish slaver.

I've been doing workshops on approaches to teaching Melville's "Benito Cereno" as a multicultural text, so the story is on the surface of my mind. This complex and ambiguous story plunges the reader deep into the "heart of darkness" that beats in the jungles of America, exposing the moral blindness of the whites, not the bloody rebellion by the blacks, as the most insidious form of violence, the primal New World evil. Melville likens the well-meaning Delano to an albatross, or "*white noddy, a strange fowl, so called from its lethargic, somnambulistic character, being frequently caught by hand at sea.*" Is the urban jungle really turning into a garden in 1992? Am I a fool to let down my guard this way?

My friends are at work, so I stow my backpack in their apartment, but then, I start having second thoughts about taking the subway to Harlem. I've never been to Harlem in my life, never mind by subway, and story after story of atrocities committed on the underground train flashes through my memory: ugly confrontations with resentful, honky-hating blacks, muggings, purse-snatchings, knifepoint gang rapes, and brutal murders. Although I feel foolish and hypocritical letting a handful of sensationalistic newspaper stories intimidate me, I can't turn off my anxiety. When I check my watch, I see there isn't time to take the bus, and I'm not about to go bankrupt on a taxi. Figuring male company might be good insurance, I phone two friends who might be going to the session, but neither can leave his office, so I'm on my own.

Maybe I'd be safer taking a taxi, but I never take taxis in New York. I consider them a needless extravagance in a city with such fine public transportation, and besides, I like to walk. I remember a Radcliffe classmate who got off the train at 125th Street and hailed a cab for LaGuardia, only to have the driver try to abduct her. She managed to jump out at a red light, abandoning her luggage and Christmas presents in order to save her life. I don't remember hearing anyone mention the race or ethnic origin of the would-be kidnapper/rapist, but that was in 1960-61—in many ways, a kinder, gentler era.

An embarrassingly self-conscious "innocent abroad" about to enter territory at once unknown and incestuously familiar, I walk to the nearest underground stairway muttering to myself like Ishmael just before he

overturns the ash-box on the porch of the African church in New Bedford and gets a face full of soot. Despite my “best intentions,” racist stereotypes attack like killer bees, injecting their venom into my bloodstream. Racism is toxic, but I should be immune. After all, I’m a liberal scholar who wrote a doctoral dissertation on racial themes and imagery in Melville’s writings, a teacher who champions multicultural education at an elite prep school that was once all white and all male, and a citizen who agrees with Ralph Ellison when he writes, “I believe in diversity, and I think that the real death of the United States will come when everyone is just alike” (“That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure,” 1961).

But I’m toting a lot of invisible baggage along with my shoulder bag. Stories, real and fictional, flash garishly across the white screen of my mind: businessmen beaten, robbed and stabbed to death on the IRT and women sexually harassed or raped by gangs of teenagers on the BMT. I have a vivid, even melodramatic imagination at times, so it’s not only in situations involving race that my imagination tends to run wild, but what strikes and chagrins me about these vagaries is how unoriginal, how self-centered, and how racist they all are. Racism seems to be in white genes, and although I have faith that “we shall overcome” it, I doubt we can ever completely burn it out. Although it seems impossible not to be racist in America, white guilt is not the answer. It’s tedious, boring, counter-productive, and beside the point. Still, as myriad tabloid horrors metastasize in my brain, I feel queasy.

Angry at being victimized by the cancer of racism, I commit to the uptown subway ride to Harlem. The car is crowded and all the seats are full, so I stand holding the metal pole to brace myself, swaying to the motion of the train like the clapper of the flawed bell aboard *San Dominick*, the Spanish slaver Melville calls a “slumbering volcano.” I look around me. The other people riding in the car all seem to have better things to do than hassle me. In fact, they don’t seem to notice me at all. Most of the other passengers are reading newspapers or magazines; a black student, knapsack on his knees, is studying chemistry from a textbook. A young couple sits close together on the orange plastic seat, the man holding the 2-year old on his lap, the woman pushing a baby stroller gently back and forth while they talk quietly and intently in Spanish. Where, I wonder, is the distrust and hostility I imagine these people must feel toward a white woman riding their train? Where, indeed, if not in my own mind, the collective white primeval ooze which engenders all our “it came from the black lagoon” ideas about race.

Intellectually, I know we’re all one human race. The three-races-of-mankind concept I was taught is obsolete, but its ghost lives on. I’m a haunted honky cursed with a self-consciousness about race that makes it impossible for me to relax and enjoy a simple subway ride. Is it because

black people are around white people all the time and are so used to seeing me that I've become invisible? Or are the lurid reports of violence actually white supremacist propaganda, designed to widen the gulf between whites and blacks? Maybe white violence isn't reported? Maybe white violence is called "law and order." Maybe white violence is a *double entendre* called "just war."

The man standing closest to me on the crowded train is very black, with a mountain of dreadlocks for hair and a face that bears scars from a knife-blade. Dressed in dark slacks and a white shirt, sleeves rolled up and open at the collar, he looks like a cross between the bogeyman and Walt Whitman in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, except that he's not wearing a hat and he has several scruffy bundles between his feet. When our eyes meet, I'm not sure how friendly I ought to be, so I give him a tight-lipped urban smile and look away. The "unasked question" W. E. B. Du Bois talked about hovers between this world and mine.

My parents wouldn't have considered themselves bigots, but when I was five, they moved from Manhattan and bought a house in an all-white, nearly all Protestant suburb in Connecticut. Somehow when grownups talked about the "bogeyman," I knew he lived in the city, he was jet black, and he hated me. I pronounced it "boogieman" which, at best, conjured visions of black musicians in juke joints wreathed in reefer smoke that undulated to a rhythm far more seductive than the mechanical white smoke ring pulsing from the Philip Morris billboard just above Times Square, and at worst, visions of a brutish black man breaking through the window of my house with a knife in his pointed teeth, intent on raping and murdering me. This terrifying brute coexisted in my mind with the lovable, shuffling Sambos portrayed by Amos and Andy and Stepin Fetchit. I learned about race as from Hollywood, and later I realized that, as a child growing up in white suburban Connecticut, I was culturally deprived.

Across the aisle, a white man dressed in a business suit is reading a newspaper. He's the only other white person in the car, and even though for all I know he's a preppy psycho-killer, I instinctively consider him an ally. "[W]ho ever heard of a white so far renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost, by leaguing in against it with negroes?" muses Delano. The white businessman puts down the paper and turns to the person beside him, a woman with straight black glossy hair and almond eyes. Is she Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, or Malaysian? It makes me uncomfortable that I can't distinguish one Asian national from another. Is she Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Thai? Why do these names all make me think of wars?

A few minutes later, I feel a gentle tap on my arm and the Rastafarian asks me, "Hey, what's that sound? Is that a radio?"

I listen. It's the white businessman's voice, which has a harsh, metallic sound. "It's the man over there," I tell him. "It's his voice."

"Oh," he responds with a genial drawl, "I thought maybe they's puttin' radios on the trains these days."

At the next stop, several people including the white man and his companion leave the train. I am now the only white person in the car, and the only woman. I walk to the empty seat, and "*like one running the gauntlet*," I feel the "*apprehensive twitch in the calves of [my] legs*" that Captain Delano felt as he walked by the hatchet-polishers. Thus, even as I am gaining confidence in the geniality of my fellow passengers, the thought comes, nasty and unbidden, that perhaps they are only waiting until the train crosses some invisible line known only to black men after which we will enter a dark tunnel immune to the normal rules of civilized conduct and that there, at an inaudible signal, they will all rise up against me in an orgy of rape and murder. "*The idea flashed across him, that possibly master and man, for some unknown purpose, were acting out, both in word and deed, nay, to the very tremor of Don Benito's limbs, some juggling play before him.*"

The fancy that I am that "Massachusetts man" Amasa Delano in a woman's body gives me the creeps. Someone I consider a racist fool has insinuated himself into my soul, and for an instant, I feel confused. Was Delano the racist, or Melville himself? Was I wrong when I argued in my dissertation that Melville wanted to expose the "benign" racism of northern liberals in an attempt to exorcise the demon that was sucking the lifeblood from the heart of America? Was Melville a closet racist after all, or was he using Delano to show how paranoia is projection of the oppressor's shadow? I believe the latter. With his revision of Delano's narrative, he exorcised whatever demons of racism haunted him.

Melville's Yankee captain personifies the moral blindness of well-meaning whites whose unspoken belief in white supremacy is a more subtle and corrosive form of racism than overt bigotry. "*Foreshadowing deeper shadows to come*," Melville's "Benito Cereno" expresses Melville's sense that the Negro's view of history is the long view and that white America's moral blindness will bring about a social Armageddon. This complex and unsettling story is about revising history, about giving voice to the untold stories of oppressed peoples, about dealing with what Ralph Ellison calls "the moral implications of the Negro." It's about asking new questions of the American experience; for example, is there any difference between a revolt by kidnapped Africans determined to secure their own liberty by rerouting the slaver to free Senegal and the American Revolution? John Quincy Adams didn't think so; he got the *Amistad* mutineers acquitted by appealing to the Declaration of Independence, as Melville does in the subtext of the story.

“Benito Cereno” is a tough-minded tale, with Melville refusing to sentimentalize either whites or blacks. In a desperate attempt to gain their freedom, the Africans kill their owner, Don Alexandro Aranda, and most of the Spanish crew. The women, whom Delano later fancies are as docile and sweet as does with their fawns, flay Aranda alive and pick his bones clean, after which they eat his flesh and hang his skeleton on the bowsprit with the legend “*Sequid vuestro jefe (follow your leader)*.” When the slaver meets an American vessel, the ingenious Babo orchestrates an elaborate pageant of dominance and bondage so the Yankee captain will not realize the blacks are actually in command of the Spanish vessel.

Melville modeled Babo, the leader of the revolt, after Haitian patriot Toussaint Louverture, whose polished manners made a favorable impression on his French colonial master. Delano, who feels comfortable with blacks as long as they behave like stereotypical slaves, is so impressed by Babo’s doglike devotion to his Spanish master that he pays him the highest compliment he knows how to pay a slave; he offers to buy him for fifty doubloons. It crosses my mind that whites who met Toussaint Louverture while he was still a slave may also have thought “*there is something in the negro which, in a peculiar way, fits him for avocations about one’s person. Most negroes are natural valets and hair-dressers; taking to the comb and brush congenially as to the castanets, and flourishing them apparently with almost equal satisfaction.*” Melville, who had experienced oppression at home and aboard whalers and a naval frigate, instinctively understood the role-playing of slaves.

“Unquestionably one of the greatest and best men of his age,” according to Lydia Maria Child’s *Anti-Slavery Catechism* (Newburyport, 1839), Toussaint drove the French out of Haiti and established the first Black Republic in the Americas, thwarting Napoleon’s dreams of a New World empire and making it possible for Thomas Jefferson to purchase the Louisiana Territory. Today, U. S. immigration police seize boatloads of Haitian refugees and ship them back to prison and almost certain death, a policy which supersedes the policy of interning them at Guantanamo, whose concentration pens were filled soon after the INS abandoned its initial practice of bludgeoning Haitian refugees to death like baby seals when they managed to reach the beaches of Florida.

Melville strips away the bias of historical narratives composed by colonizers whose victims experience their “discovery” as an obscene invasion. “[T]he negro Babo showed him a skeleton, which had been substituted for the ship’s proper figure-head, the image of Christopher Colon, the discoverer of the New World [...] ‘Keep faith with the blacks from here to Senegal, or you shall in spirit, as now in body, follow your leader.’” In the end, the revolt fails and the Spaniards decapitate the ingenious Babo, “*whose head, that hive of subtlety [...] met unabashed, the gaze of the*

whites” and stick his head on a pole in the Plaza. Melville seems to be saying that black leaders, like Babo, will have to be “in our face” until America lives up to the promises of the Declaration of Independence.

The subway screeches to a halt and I’m safe and sound in Harlem, that “nigger place” with its “alleyways of dreams,” to quote Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen. “*You are saved; what has cast such a shadow upon you?*,” Delano tells Don Benito once the mutiny has been put down. My nightmares have not come true, my idealism, albeit wavering, has been vindicated. Even so, I’m totally unprepared for what I see as I emerge into bright sunlight and a wide blue sky. Instead of a “ghetto,” I see green trees and low red brick buildings that remind me of buildings on Boston’s Beacon Hill. How different this streetcorner is from the concrete canyons of Park Avenue! “*See yon bright sun [...] and blue sky; these have turned over new leaves.*” How much more human the scale, how much more relaxed the people seem than the uniformed brief-case-toting businessmen of Madison Avenue, how much more like an old-fashioned neighborhood, this is! This is Lucille Clifton’s “inner city / or / like we call it / home,” yet, how much shabbier, how much more run-down this block is than it needs to be. Is it because this black “Athens of America” has been bought up by absentee landlords who are white?

The signs tell me I’m at 135th Street and Malcolm X Boulevard. I’d forgotten until just now that the old Lenox Avenue I’d read about in books on the Harlem Renaissance had been renamed for my generation’s Babo. As I stand in front of Harlem Hospital waiting for the light to change, I think of an interview I heard on WBAI last June as I was driving back to Massachusetts from an anti-racism workshop in Pennsylvania. A male nurse from Harlem Hospital was talking about the effect of budget cuts on human services, he pointed out that one week after the city spent 12 million dollars on a parade for troops from Desert Storm, applications for welfare benefits from veterans of the Gulf War had increased dramatically, health care workers were being laid off, services in city hospitals were being eliminated, and mental health centers were being forced to turn patients out into the streets. “The city is hemorrhaging from these budget cuts,” he said bitterly, accusing the city of targeting neighborhoods selectively. “*‘You are saved,’ cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; ‘you are saved; what has cast such a shadow upon you?’*” When the light changes, I cross over to the Schomburg Center, and at 2 p. m., I enter the Langston Hughes Auditorium and take a seat beside Melville friends who’ve come down from Vermont. The panelists, David Bradley, Bruce Franklin, Skip Gates, and Arnold Rampersad, are intent on the worthy enterprise of rescuing Melville from burial in a common grave with “dead white males.” Even so, during the question period, a tall black man rises from his seat in the balcony and asks somewhat truculently what

the Melville Society can do for Harlem. I imagine a chorus of black voices chanting, "Eggheads! Tweedy eggheads! There goes the neighborhood!" There goes the neighborhood, indeed. It's no coincidence the university is called the "ivory tower." Ivory makes me think of Kurtz, his skull white and shiny as a billiard ball, slaughtering elephants and Africans with equal relish, guerdoning the compound with human heads stuck on poles, scrawling "exterminate the brutes!" at the bottom of his report.

During the past few decades, the gulf between scholarly studies and classroom teaching has widened dangerously. How can academic scholarship improve the quality of teaching and learning in our schools if scholars merely talk to each other and to tenure committees? We denizens of the "ivory tower" need to follow up our foray into Harlem with a battery of questions: How can academic scholarship better serve the broad educational needs of a sprawling, brawling, pluralistic democracy? How can we balance affirmation of western culture with affirmation of diverse global voices? How can we create new generations of voracious readers when the ever more precise and refined critical theories alienate people away from literary studies? How can schools and colleges—in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson—"set the hearts of youth aflame"?

My students find Melville's language nearly as foreign as Shakespeare's. The finely-honed descriptions and subtle indirections of "Benito Cereno" are exasperating and boring to them until we spend time exploring the story from different angles, like the gold doubloon Ahab nails to the mast of the *Pequod*. My well-meaning students think racism ended long before they were born; yet, private schools like mine with their well-equipped classrooms and science laboratories, their acres and acres of grassy playing fields, their expensive athletic facilities contrast sharply with public schools such as the one I saw on the avenue named for Christopher Columbus. This urban playground was a 50 x 50 foot concrete courtyard enclosed by a chain-link fence, with two rusted basketball hoops opposite each other at the far end, and clumps of teenagers laughing and talking at the other end. A couple of white teachers were leaning against the fence, smoking and chatting, looking very bored. Melville saw segregated elementary schools in Honolulu in 1843, and in *Omoo*, he remarked sarcastically that, "*to preserve white culture from moral contamination, a play-ground for the children of the missionaries was enclosed with a fence many feet high, the more effectually to exclude the wicked little Hawaiians.*"

Ironically enough, as I stroll to the door of the Schomburg Center, someone hands me an invitation to a reception for Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide. The sidewalk outside is teeming with police, who've set up black and white crowd-control barriers warning "Police Line Do Not Cross." At the corner, two blacks teenagers ask me what's going on, and I

reply, "Aristide is coming." They give me looks as blank as the looks my own students would give me at the unfamiliar name. Clearly, Aristide doesn't have the same recognition factor as Michael Jackson. "He's the president of Haiti. A great leader," I hear myself say in trite, teacherly tones. "He's in New York to address the United Nations." They exchange looks and bounce off down the street, no more interested in global politics than most American teenagers seem to be.

I stand there for a few minutes, hoping Aristide will arrive before I absolutely have to leave for a dinner date downtown. One minute I'm thinking I don't want to miss a historic event like this; the next minute, I'm wondering what difference it makes if I see Aristide or not. I approach a huge white cop with a walkie-talkie and ask when Aristide will arrive. "He's supposed to be here now," he grumps back at me. If I were black, would I dare ask this fellow anything? I know from black friends how often the words "Nigger bitch" spray like sour jets of tobacco juice from white lips. I know from black students at my well-manicured suburban school that passing motorists yell, "Go back to Africa!" at them as they cross the road between the classrooms and the dorms. I wonder how much courage it takes to be a black woman in America? How much courage to be Anita Hill?

After an early dinner with a friend who lives near Lincoln Center, I stroll back to my other friend's apartment. Her place has the cozy ambiance of a country home and a spectacular view of Central Park. When I wake up there in the early morning, I will be able to see the skyline of 5th Avenue over the tops of the trees. There will be no "*imputation of malign evil in man*" from my friend's window, no hint of the horrors of being raped and beaten by a gang of rampaging teenagers who may attack you because you are white, or may not even notice your color because they're so high on crack. You are there, you are female, you are wearing jogging shorts, and that's all it takes to be raped in America today. In fact, that's more than it takes to be raped at a fraternity party by a gang of whites, though at the average frat party you probably wouldn't be beaten half to death with bricks and baseball bats and left for dead. The difference between the two crimes, Melville might say, is the difference between savagery and civilization: a few bruises, contusions, and maybe a little brain damage.

My friend, who is of Swedish extraction and very blonde, makes tea and asks about my day. Her husband is in the next room watching a prospective presidential candidate being interviewed on public television. When I tell her I went to Harlem on the subway, she says I must be crazy. I'm feeling good about my day in multicultural New York (now that I know I'm not a statistic), so I say smugly, "Frankly, I think it's silly that so few white people ride the subway anymore even in broad daylight. I had a

perfectly peaceful ride. More people wearing colorful dashikis and turbans would make this gray city a more human place.”

“Listen,” she says, striking sparks with her blue eyes. “I’m sorry, but I’m sick and tired of black people. I don’t wish them harm; I just wish they would disappear. My purse has been stolen six times in six months, and every time, it was a black person. The other day I was sitting at an outdoor cafe right near Lincoln Center and a black man wearing a business suit snatched my bag right off my lap and ran away before I even knew it was gone.” I remember seeing a pushcart full of Hermes bags on Columbus Avenue, and wonder if one of them was hers.

“Look,” I say, “of course it happens, but that doesn’t mean we should treat all black strangers like potential thieves, does it?” My friend rolls her eyes, and I have to admit to myself that I’ve been conditioned to do just that.

I remember my mother explaining benignly that our cleaning woman wasn’t like “those other colored people” because she didn’t steal. When Lurlene found coins under sofa cushions while vacuuming, she brought them right to us. “*Not until I visited Honolulu, was I aware of the fact that the small remnant of the natives had been civilized into draught horses, and evangelized into beasts of burden,*” Melville’s narrator comments in *Typee*. To prove that she wasn’t prejudiced, my mother referred to Lurlene as a “friend,” not a maid, but Lurlene never called her “Elinor.” My little brothers and I called her Lurlene, too. Every once in a while, we gave her some cast-off clothes to take home to her family in Stamford, and it made us feel good about white people. In *Omoo*, Melville decries the ludicrous appearance of South Sea islanders forced to wear ugly, ill-fitting clothes donated by missionaries; to him, charity was a poor substitute for justice.

Suddenly, her eyes boring into me like power drills, my friend says, “You’re not PC, are you?” making “PC” sound like “HIV positive.” From her point of view, “PC people” are a dangerous tribe of intellectual savages who practice “*heathenish rites and human sacrifices*” in the fetid jungles of the Academy.

I respond with a spirited defense of multicultural education, explaining among other things, how my commitment to diversity dovetails with my work on Melville. She’s always shown great interest in Melville, but when I talk about Melville’s “multiculturalism,” she loses interest fast.

“It’s fine for you to talk. You don’t live here. You wouldn’t last long walking around aimlessly smiling at people who’d just as soon cut your throat.”

“What’s the answer?” I ask. “To give up smiling and avoid the subway?” She doesn’t answer me. A voice in my head croons, “*B. B., honey, am I living my life all wrong?*”

We live in parallel universes, I'm thinking, and both of these realities are true. It isn't an issue of which one of us is "right," but rather, of how to live together peacefully amidst infinite possibilities in a universe whose randomness forces us to invent concepts like cause and effect to create the illusion that we're in control. We all want guarantees that bad things only happen to other people, not to us: maybe if I don't wear shorts, jog alone, or walk through Central Park, I'll never be raped or mugged. Unfortunately, there are no guarantees, only statistical probabilities. I could jog through Central Park wearing fluorescent gym shorts and a tank-top on a hot, humid night and come out fine, or I could be strolling just off Fifth Avenue in a conservative jacket, mid-calf skirt, and smart pumps when a blond, blue-eyed white man wearing a Rolex watch and Gucci shoes would pull a handgun from a leather attaché case and force me into the bushes to rape or kill me. If one, or both, or neither happens, does it prove a thing? Is there a lesson here?

My friend is right, but so am I. Like the sperm whale whose eyes are on opposite sides of his head, both views represent a truth, but not the Truth. Melville had the ability to acknowledge two or more different points of view at once. His iconoclasm, his irony, his fascination with ambiguity, his writing "the other way" were all responses to the gap between the official story of America and the Truth as he knew it in his heart. Sometimes truthseekers dive and come up empty-handed; sometimes they fetch up treasures from the deep. He had that sperm-whale vision. Sometimes whales bump into a ship and sink them on their way to open water, but that doesn't stop them. (*"He bumped me, he insulted me. Shouldn't he, for his own personal safety, have recognized my hysteria, my 'danger potential'?"* asks Ralph Ellison's invisible man. Couldn't this be Moby Dick speaking as well?). I guess what matters is to keep swimming. Swimming for our individual and collective lives. Swimming against the undertow.

One sunny spring day while I was working on my biography of Melville, I was strolling along the waterfront near South Street Seaport trying to imagine how it must have looked, smelled, and sounded in Melville's day. It wasn't an easy task with cars and buses whizzing by and carbon monoxide choking the sea air, so I closed my eyes. As I was ambling along, the edge of my sandal caught a cobblestone, toppling me onto the sidewalk smack in front of a black man about my age. Wearing black pants, a white shirt, and a black bow tie, he looked like a Pullman porter from the 1940's minus the red bellhop jacket and silly hat. "I'm so sorry," he said over and over again in gracious tones, his eyes a mixture of

genuine concern and real terror. He didn't dare get near or touch me. Scraping my bruised dignity up off the pavement, I said, "Don't worry, it's not your fault. I lost my balance and fell down. Really, it's not your fault." Would it have helped if I'd explained that I was pretending it was 1820 because I'm writing a biography of Herman Melville? Somehow I doubt it.

This black stranger and I seem to be a primal American couple: a white woman, walking blind, losing her balance and falling to the pavement and a black man watching, horrified and humiliated that he has to repress his naturally chivalrous instincts. Like Adam and Eve in a New World Garden poisoned by racism so venomous that to reach out one's hand is to risk being either bitten by the snake or, worse yet, being the snake that bites a fellow human being's hand, we are both diminished and dehumanized by racism. He can't extend a helping hand to me without the specter of lynch mobs and castration rising in his mind, and I can't do much besides dust myself off, mumble a few words to set his mind at ease, and get on with my scholarly somnambulism so he can concentrate on his much more practical and useful occupation: parking cars.

Race in America: it's the intricate knot an old sailor on that "slumbering volcano" the *San Dominick* weaves for Amasa Delano in a vain attempt to alert him to the Truth, "a combination double-bowline-knot, treble-crown-knot, back-handed well-knot, knot-in-and-out-knot, and jamming knot." Like the old sailor, I want to scream, "Undo it, cut it, quick."