

The Sniper

What I've achieved so far is, as the expression goes, chicken-feed, or, to cite the title of a recent Malouf novella – terrorism its theme – child's play.¹ * A dozen aims, a dozen shots, a dozen successes. In the parlance of ten-pin bowling, a dozen strikes. The actual score might in fact be thirteen or fifteen or eighteen by now, but I have lost count. No notches have I scratched on my rifle, I am not so vain. Nor are they, the underlings of the world, truly the prize I am after. Prime ministers are worthier fare. Besides, numbers, mere numbers have lost their spell. To put the matter into a certain perspective, though at the risk of intrusion – after the first few times, do you keep count how often you've made it with your wife/husband/de facto/lover/Pandar's Cressidas?² You see? – the original interest, the original stirrings, these remain, along with the exhilaration experienced in repeating or even improving upon the performance, in your case in the gratification of your libido, in mine in the collection of a bull's-eye. But tallies, overall scores, become quite irrelevant, in my sport no less than in yours, especially in an age when, think of it, think of say, South East Asia, the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, the Central Americas, life is so disposably cheap.³ We, homo sapiens, through rituals and codes consecrate our existences to worth, and through ordinances and injunctions, conventions and commandments⁴ exalt ourselves to the rank of highest and most sacrosanct in the living realm. And yet, reduce the

* See endnotes.

human body to the basic structures of blood, collagen, fats, calcium, starches, whatever, and only the untutored will insist that it is, *in essence*, different from that of the dog, or the weasel, or a mole.⁵ I acknowledge, let there be no inference to the contrary, that we are also possessed of minds and, to defer to our men of the cloth, of souls. But then, hath not a dog a mind, doth not a weasel think, doth not the mole reason and respond, albeit – this, too, I shall grant – at a different level? And as for soul, who is so wholly ready to assert, on the life of his mother, that such endowment is denied the bee, say, or the butterfly, or the snake that slinks furtively and, picture it, so gracefully in the grass?

So, it's not worth particularly much, the body. Boil it down to its components, extract its minerals, its oils, reconstitute it in different forms, and sell them. The soap that can be made from it, or the lampshades,⁶ would scarcely dent even a poor man's budget. While as fertilizer, here, too, large numbers of dried, denatured and desiccated carcasses are needed to cover the smallest viable lettuce patch, and fertilizer is, as is known, generally – pardon the pun – dirt-cheap. When you consider against this the price of mink, or a pound of veal, or a jar of caviar . . . When you consider that one gold tooth was not so long ago worth destroying breath, mind and soul for . . . When you consider that taxi-drivers, grocers and service-station attendants have been done away with for less . . .⁷ Why, for one tribe to be circumcised – or, conversely, for another, to remain uncircumcised – sufficed; for others still, to be born now with a cleft, now with a little frankfurt between the legs, was reason sufficient for a watery obliteration. And as for a hare-lip, a club-foot, or a strawberry mark – ha! these scarcely warrant mention.

None of this – let me say outright – is called forth to justify my actions. I feel no compelling need, let alone obligation, to justify. I am here merely stating the obvious and I have, I believe, made my point. It has to do with equality, equality before the law, the ultimate law – let me be explicit, the biological law, albeit an equality predicated on a common worth-

lessness, or, better still, expendability. A kilo of Skid Row soot is worth little. But, in material terms, a kilo of prime minister is not worth more. His breath, sweat, urine, shit – pardon the language – is the same as that of the sozzled boozer though his flesh warms that of the Mrs between the clean white sheets of Big Wig Grotto while his opposite number graces/disgraces (take your pick) the benches of Slubberdagullian Station, the Albatross Highway underpass or the Gardens of Sheol.⁸ But go shoot a prime minister and shoot a derelict. In which is the greater notoriety to be had, and with notoriety, fame? Yes, fame of a sort, fame – one's face in every newspaper, on every radio, every television screen through the world; a line, permanence in Professor Ivor E. Towers' revised *'History of New Macadamia: the Later Years'*; a chapter in some journalist's *'The Hundred and Eighty-Eight Days of John T. T. Creighton-Smith, PM'*⁹ and an in-depth study in some Ph.D. student's *'Tall Poppies and Bared Necks: the Price of Leadership, and Assassination of Public Figures as Temptation and Sport – From Lincoln to Creighton-Smith.'*

This is whom I have within my sights then. Metaphorically speaking that is, though for the moment only. Metaphor shall yet assume the garb of literalness when I am fully prepared to execute my purpose. (Forgive me, once again, my play with words. I do enjoy the occasional pun.) The time shall come, I swear, as surely as Adam is now dust fused with crud in some sodden subterranean shaly stratum, it shall come – when he emerges from the Grotto precincts in his limousine, say, or opens some new gas-works or civic centre, or walks out on public parade, something for which he, my quarry, John Thomas Titterton Creighton-Smith who professes to be a man of the people and for whom the people have a decided weakness, this actually being balm to his stupendous vanity by uncommon popularity fed. To that whole adventure of mine, that very popularity adds tantalizingly heady spice. When I contemplate the effects of its consummation upon the public . . . No chef by his concoction could be more transported. But

first I shall need to penetrate the tiers of bodyguards around him, of course, breach an opening, however slight, in their defences, and do a Booth or a Guiteau, a Czolgoz or an Oswald¹⁰ – a perfect hit, a strike that earns in full that dark and silent purgatory to which I shall – need I doubt it? – be eternally consigned. Near-misses, like near-hits, are the preserve of the inept, and the stigma of ineptitude is more ignominious than death itself. For just as the unexamined life is not worth living,¹¹ nor is the unachieved life worth the candle, and if I am to leave this earth – as biology dictates I must – then, not having scaled the heights in business or industry, in scholarship or the arts, at least it shall not be without this one accomplishment, this singular, grand, momentous, history-changing, riveting, all-mesmerising act. Ah, bliss, bliss, the very contemplation of it – a Prime Minister, a J. T. T. Creighton-Smith under my belt even as I hang, or fry, or in some other way bleed for my audacity.

There is, however, work to be done. Practice. That is above all the name of the present game. Practice. And this is where I return to my hobo. One of these was my first. From two hundred metres away, from a patio in the centre of the Deliverance Gardens¹² at five in the morning when the dew was rising as was the pearly light. But the sensation was, I must confess, that of shooting at a sack of potatoes. (This is not at all metaphorical; I *have* shot at a sack of potatoes.) I heard the thud; it reached me through the still, cool, glassy ambience. But my tramp did not move. He might indeed already have been dead, frozen and locked in rigor mortis. The preliminary exhilaration over, the matter proved a joyless anti-climax.

Less so the escapade that followed. A static target is scarcely a challenge. I could, of course, have spent an afternoon at the Jolly Nimrod firing blanks at mobile mechanized plastic ducks; or, out in the lanes plucking off cats, dogs, and pigeons, or sparrows in flight. But the one are too regular, too predictable in their revolving circuit and, after a while, quite boring; while the other, really, the other they're small fry against the bigger more newsworthy game to be had. So, radio

listeners and television viewers will have heard of or seen filmed shots of a station-wagon overturned along the Bone-break Highway just north of the township Tartarus, the vehicle having skidded off the road, rolled, and struck a tree, killing instantly its occupants – a man of sixty (so it was announced), his wife, and the sister of one of them. The mishap happened on a weekend when a further twelve people met their *Gotterdammerung* on the State's roads; the listener/viewer will therefore be excused if he does not recall the specific episode. Not known, however, and not suspected was the fact that, before that wagon veered into its terminal skid, a single pellet had rammed into the left front tyre, causing instant puncture and deflation, the laws of physics, so highly consistent and reliable, seeing to the rest.¹³ There was cunning in that – even I, normally quite fastidious and unimpressible – had to admit. I had successfully bull's-eyed a moving target; I had collected, numerically speaking, a fine prize; and had done so without arousing the least suspicion. After my deliverance of that park bench layabout from his mortal coil, a brief eight-line newspaper item appeared which referred to police investigations into suspicious circumstances. I guessed, however, that the law would not become overly excited over an instance which represented the removal of one more imposition upon the State's welfare resources. But here, with regard to the simulated accident along the highway, only a chance observation by an exceptionally astute observer, only a fluke, would render anyone aware of play that might have touched at all on the foul. I must say that the whisky I downed that evening as I watched the scene on the news had an exceptionally exquisite and piquant taste. Pity was that, on the Monday, I could not tell my colleagues in the office about it other than to say, deliberately off-handedly, 'Old Mephistopheles certainly had a picnic this weekend collecting souls, didn't he?' They, however, preferred to talk about Mick Forward's eight goals for the Bloodred Arsenal's and the spectacular high-flying marks of backman 'Hawkeye' Eagle. Yes, 'spectacular' was their word, but not for me was it to redefine

for them its usage as I would apply it to my own forthcoming deed. How tediously, then, did the day pass as, abstractedly, I continued to scan the ever-incoming taxation returns.

No virtue is there in elaborating separately on all my meagre operations. Quite early on, I had the police wonderfully mystified. Why should anyone wish to do in a gas-man on his rounds, for instance, they asked, or a bag-swinging school-boy running with a class-mate home from school? Reasonable questions, to be sure: after all, a discern the motive, and you uncover the villain. Or why should one pick off an electrician fixing wires at the summit of a light-pole, or a cooing clucking young woman wheeling a pram? Or a paper-boy, an upholsterer, or a Salvation Army brother? The papers began to tell of a madman terrorizing the streets, of a psychopath on the loose; the television news-readers conveyed the law's regret that no composite picture of the culprit had yet been assembled, and appealed to the public to report anything untoward; while the public itself was becoming somewhat restive. Psychopath, they called me! I rather liked that. I still do. Not so much the label itself - I am, in my faculties, as sane as the next man; it is only that I dare perform what others merely strait-jacket in dream - but rather, what I prize is the fact that by being endowed with a label, I would even call it a title, I have acquired a distinct identity, I am already singled out from the rest of mortality, though I swear the last place our officers of the law would consider looking would be in a government taxation-office where that 'psychopath' is in a sense faceless among forty to fifty others. They find it hard to accept, this too I swear, that even in a mass, a man can be truly unique.

One strike that gave me especial delight - the delight I would guess of that little tailor who got seven with one blow¹⁴ - was that tally of four I bagged with a single bullet cutting clean through a scaffold support outside the twelfth-floor window of an office-block in the process of construction. One moment they were scraping, plastering, painting, whatever,

one of them had to all appearances probably told a joke for they were also laughing, the next they were spinning and careering like squawking hens down the face of the building. An added bonus to the expected thud, bounce and spread-eagling of those bodies abruptly become corpses on the bitumen below was the impaling of one of them on a steel upright, where he flailed about for a full ten seconds I'm sure as the blood coursed from his innards down the length of the pole. What I relished still more, though, was the irony of an ambulance, of all things, sirening in haste towards Azrael Hospital with a victim of a genuine accident careering crash-bang into a tram which, in halting abruptly, precipitated a magnificent concertina-ing of three vehicles into its rear, the whole - mangled steel, shattered glass, excoriated flesh, bone exposed, teeth dispersed - caused by one live coil penetrating the ear of the ambulance-driver just as he was beginning to turn into Leveller Avenue that runs direct towards the entrance to the hospital. The television news that night was certainly worth watching. All the more so as, in one of the panning shots, I caught a glimpse of myself, spectator beside a tree, none suspecting what it was I truly carried in my clarinet-case.

With a gin in my hand, I indulged in a nice little giggle then as I watched the television news and felt close, nearly ready to tackle the big game, for me the biggest game of all. At the moment, he is probably sleeping, my John T. T. Creighton-Smith, PM, who knows but that he may be making it with his wife - or, having heard of the peccadillo ways of politicians, I suspect, possibly with one of his panting glazed-eyed secretaries by his charisma and eminence charmed. Ah, the animal nature of man! And of woman, for that matter! Such pleasures, however, *any* pleasures he shan't know for much longer. Sheol is waiting for him, for as I said before I have him within my sights. I am a mere hair's-breadth short of perfection in my aim. A little more practice, a more total sense of being wholly at one with my rifle, the need to steel myself utterly against the possible quivering of hands at the crucial moment, the need above all to be secure in the knowledge that

my quarry, however fast he may be moving, and in whatever direction he may turn his head, is, from the moment my aim is trained upon him, irrevocably doomed. The power, the power! Whether from a rooftop, behind a garbage can, behind bushes, from my car, the rim of a headland, beside a highway, perched between the branches of a tree – there is no place from which I cannot now home in on my prey. For all that you, dear reader, good reader, Mr/Mrs Everyman, may know, as you next head for the golf-course, the tennis-club, supermarket, concert-hall, will you have any certainty that you shall to your haven hearth and home return? Look well at it whenever you leave, fondly, ruefully, nostalgically, however you will, for who knows but that as you pass by, say, Huntsman's Hill or Marksman's Pass or even Tony Delilah's Il Paradiso Pizza Bar, I might be somewhere close, a head rising a jot above a hedge or balustrade, releasing from there a shell that may deliver you faster to your El Dorado than your vehicle at its swiftest ever could. As you sit now and rummage through your mail or play with your children or instruct your broker to purchase more bonds, give time to the thought that, tomorrow, for instance, that moment you step across the threshold of your castle/temple/home-sweet-home may well turned out to be your last. You do, after all, read the newspapers, don't you? And surely, you must by now be impressed by the randomness, that utter unpredictability with which that supposed madman-psychopath's innocent lambs have fallen.

This is one of those delightful bonuses that make the whole exercise so intriguing – the basic unpredictability of it all. Neither I, nor my prospective booty, know one another, and yet, tomorrow, we shall, in a sense, cross each other's life trajectory. The thought that it could be anyone, someone at the moment scratching at a mole, or flushing a toilet, or picking his/her teeth, is a notion exquisitely piquant indeed. My daily quarry's happy obliviousness to his/her fate moves me to headiness, while no less affecting is the fact that my catch I do not have to choose but is, in truth, already chosen. Yes; chosen.

His fate is, to use philosophical jargon, determined.¹⁵ There is something of the Sophoclean/Aeschylean Greek about it. The Delphic oracle has spoken. My Orestes/Oedipus/Electra is caught irretrievably in the spider's mesh. Were he to know, he might kick and tug and thrash about in the silken warp of that filamentous web, but fulminate as he may, by this time tomorrow, my butterfly shall lie congealing behind steel doors in the city morgue. A haunting thought, perhaps, if by notions of death and inevitability the reader is haunted. But more haunting still is another thought – the meditation that to such an end should the man, as child, be born; the reflection that man in his growth should study, work, love, laugh, play, agonize in his time over cosmic mysteries and private woes, marry perhaps, and perhaps divorce, do good, do evil, requited, unrequited, attain to notoriety, attain to fame, and engage in all that tellurian earthlings are given to do, only to be cut short in a milli-second of time by the dead-on flight of a mini-cylinder of metal. Epic writers endow their heroes with the strength of steel. But, truly, ah how fragile the flesh, how flimsy! Powdered talc is scarcely as brittle.

So he is already chosen, my prize, already caught, as I have said, in the spider's web. He cannot escape, simply cannot. The choices he shall make, the decisions he shall act upon will, simply because he shall have made no other, lead him to his Calvary. Acting as he will, his fate is even now rubber-stamped and sealed because tomorrow – I have already selected the site – I shall be crouching in the vicinity of Consignment Bay where he, in the enactment of his decisions, shall be passing. Of course, were he to take other decisions, were I to select another site, not he then but another should be the fruit I bag. But the truth of what I have here written shall remain no less true; it shall merely be transferred to that 'other' whose fate would then accordingly be indelibly writ. I could also choose to abandon altogether my poacher's game, in which case my ferret's rendezvous with the Reaper should be to some later time and circumstance not of my making be deferred. But were I to do so, I should render wholly void of meaning

the extinction thus far of my many and separate Jonahs who through their unwitting unanticipated martyrdoms¹⁶ have at least paved my way to John T. T. Creighton-Smith, PM, and that would be – my conscience could not bear it – damnably unconscionable.

The perceptive reader will note a shift in gear towards those favorite playthings – casuistry, argument, what they like to term philosophy – of our sophists, in this instance the set question being how much of my quarry's actions and his forthcoming denouement is determined, how much of these is freely willed? In other words, to what extent, if his end is beyond repeal, is he locked into a system which had directed and continues to direct towards this consummation his every step; to what extent is he truly free, given the myriad variables that act upon him and are acted upon by him in turn, to choose and to follow the logic of his every choice?¹⁷ What formerly fell into the province of pure philosophers has now claimed mathematicians, logicians, statisticians and a newly-cloned breed of calculating animal called probability theorists. These last I harbor strong affinity for, for they add to the whole operation, already fascinating in its Heisenbergian elusiveness, the recognition – which I have long maintained – of a third dimension, the more untamed, by-guess-and-by-God, haphazard workings of chance. In this cosmic, multiplex, multifarious scheme of things, by Aristotle, Copernicus, Galileo, Newton and Einstein explained – though some Nostradamuses would attribute all to the stars – may I beg leave to intrude my humble two cents' worth? When my prey shall expire under the impact of my aim, why will it have to be he and not another? Of the thousands, the millions all around, why is it that it is we, he and I, who shall be brought by our separate paths to that common crossroads for that one swift, demolishing, obliterating milli-second of time? To extend my sights: when my baby brother Uriel died of sepsis, why was it he and not another who had died, as Mother kept asking? Or when young Cousin Stella slipped under a bus, again, why she and not another? Had she in that moment not been there; had

the bus come early, come late; had the sky poured sunshine rather than rain; and had not my nervous Aunt Mary called her back at the moment of leaving to fetch her raincoat . . . All these little 'hads' and 'had nots'. Go, deny the machinations of that rollicking jester Chance¹⁸ that leads couples to meet and to marry, fortunes to be made, fortunes to be lost, miners in shafts to be crushed, airliners to collide, or buffoons to hoop the hoop on the peel of bananas. The whole thing is so tantalizingly intermeshed. I can't help but reel at the thought, in anticipation of tomorrow, and more intoxicatingly of the day Prime Minister John T. T. Creighton-Smith shall fall, that what for me shall be an action willed, for them, my prizes, shall be determined, ordained by all that has preceded in a fateful – call it fatal, if you wish – ineluctable confluence arrived at through chance.¹⁹

I have him within my sights then, Prime Minister John Thomas Titterton Creighton-Smith. But no hurry is there. The day will come. The day will come when through an act of choice, an act of unfettered will discharged at the time of my choosing, I shall alter the course of history of the nation, change it categorically – so is it ordained, if not by anyone foreseen – and, in so far as waves and ripples reach out from shore to shore across Neptune's seven seas and other waters, so shall I, in some definite way, touch upon the course of other nations, upon the course of all the nations, as well. Ah, the effects! The effects! – on foreign policy, defence, stock markets and currency exchange, migration, trade, hot war, cold war, United Nations numbers games, power play, none of them escaping, not one, if only because with the liquidation of one helmsman another is there to offer his neck in filling the void, that 'other' of necessity possessed of views, perceptions and doctrines, and temperaments, endowments and styles different from the *primus inter pares* and master of the deck I will have plucked off.

It's nice, it's nice in a world willy-nilly tossed and rocked on 'the ever-whirling wheel of Change'²⁰ to exert an

influence, to press upon this universe a thumb-print, to know that one will not have lived wholly in vain and passed through this all-deracinating cosmos unnoted and unremarked, a thingummy Monsieur un Tel, a Richard Roe and What-Have-You, when immortality is so easy, so absurdly, swimmingly, exquisitely easy to attain. But, as I have said, there is no hurry, there is no rush; the headman's terrestrial dusk and millennial dawn will come, until which time, from rooftop, window, embankment, ridge and underpass I shall wing and snuff my earthly pigeons, now one, now another, at play with singleton and nation in the way that up there, somewhere, somewhere, in the heavens, or in the spheres, another sits and plucks off, another angles and snares his spoil, another scythes and reaps and harvests, that other – or Other – a revered worshipped Moloch gathering unto himself each man/woman/infant on the Clapham omnibus in exulting, self-exalting, exuberant, lively, clandestine, merrily-private sport.

1 David Malouf: *Child's Play* (Chatto and Windus, 1982, Penguin Books, 1983).

2 A play on the name Pandarus who, according to mediaeval legend, procured Cressida for Troilus.

3 The examples cited could as readily have been substituted with South America, Africa, the Middle East, India and Pakistan. Any issue of the weekly Time Magazine, the Year Books of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* or of the *World Book Encyclopaedia* or the annual reports of Amnesty International will attest to the validity of the assertions made.

4 The reader may prefer 'Commandments' to 'commandments'.

5 The reader is referred to any standard text on comparative biology.

6 Students of recent history will recognize that none of this is either hypothetical or fanciful.

7 The merest intelligent perusal of the daily newspaper will vouchsafe the truth of all that is stated here.

8 As the reader will have guessed, the narrator has, in this instance, elected to substitute fictitious names for more identifiable stigmatizing landmarks.

9 Here, the name is real, however inflated.

10 The list is confined to despatchers of American Presidents – Lincoln, of course, Garfield, McKinley and Kennedy, the date of the latter's dispatch falling, by odd circumstance, on the day when, turning twenty-one, I celebrated my accession to responsible manhood. Numerous other instances may be cited, though none so notable and consequential in our time as that of Gavrilo Prin-

cip's wiping out of 'fat churchy' Archduke Ferdinand of Austria, an event which unfailingly evokes that hilarious opening of Jaroslav Hasek's *The Good Soldier Schweik*.

11 Attributed to Socrates in Plato's 'Apology.'

12 See Note 8.

13 I refer here to Galileo's dictum - some attribute it to Newton - that an unimpeded body, moving on a smooth horizontal plane, moves with uniform velocity in a straight line. The corollary is, of course, that with impudence, that body shall depart from its course. Precise calculation of displacement - which must consider forward motion, sideways deflection, vertical roll, the force of impact with the ground with each turning and other variables - then enters the realm of higher sophisticated mathematics, a not-impossible task for those with nothing better to amuse them in this computer age.

14 Fairy tales are well behind me, but I believe the story is told by the Brothers Grimm, Jakob and Wilhelm. Actually, I prefer their Rumpelstiltskin, especially when he goes through the floor.

15 The ensuing reference to Electra notwithstanding, I shall in deference to convention revert to the masculine gender, this in no way, however, excluding from my remarks the purportedly fairer, weaker, more delicate daughters of Eve.

16 I employ the word 'martyr' only in echo of the mounting press hysteria which is now referring to my spoil as 'martyrs of some unhinged dement.' It's nice to have an identity. Others talk of a modern incarnation of Jack the Ripper, Dracula, and, inevitably, Frankenstein. In the wake of the rising panic, several mistaken arrests have taken place. The police are beleaguered by a flurry of hoax calls along with calls from such who genuinely believe that they are being hounded and swear to being next on the hit-list.

17 A complete list of variables would be beyond the scope of this *oeuvre*, but I shall offer a number of them at random: the city of one's birth, the neighbourhood in which one's been reared, one's parentage, genetic endowment, influence of teachers/peers/spouse/inamorata/sibs, and then one's reading, work, education, skills, one's health, skin color, language, faith or lack thereof, standards or lack thereof, and so on. Name but one contingency and that, too, cannot be ignored.

18 Readers may be reminded of Chance the Gardener (or Chauncey Gardiner) in Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There*.

19 Having looked into mathematics texts to help my vernaly-flowering niece Angela, whom I must admit I love, albeit in a platonic paternal way - if, as the public says, I am a maniac, I am nonetheless capable of love; I would kill to protect her every hair -, I have alighted on the Venn diagram which might best pictorially describe that quickening bewitching triumvirate - determinism, free will and chance - the influence of each to every circumstance conceivable related to the degree of separateness of space between or overlap.

20 Edmund Spenser: 'The Faerie Queen,' book VII, ch. VI, i.