

*Susan Perly*  
*Stella Atlantis*

*a novel*





*Stella  
Atlantis*

Also by Susan Perly

*Death Valley*

*Love Street*

*Susan  
Perly  
Stella  
Atlantis*

*a novel*



A Buckrider Book

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*para mi querido Dennis*





*There is a world elsewhere.*

– WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *CORIOLANUS*, ACT 3, SCENE 3



1

## WE HAVE NO HOURS

*WITH THE DEAD you can float. With the dead you can go anywhere. Finally, you can fly; finally, you are airborne to Soyuz and Cassini. Surfing the aurora borealis through the astrophysical waves.*

*The rain moves in from Tripoli, Benghazi, Latakia, the Mediterranean stations. The windy rain crosses the water to Iberia from Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, those North African shorelines.*

*The dead are dead, yet the dead tremble against us. The dead are dead, yet they leave strange vibrations. The dead are wet with knowledge. People: the dead are known to the rain.*

*The wind blows across the Atlantic fissures to the Costa Brava, Catalonia, Barcelona, the old stone tunnels in the fisher quarter. El Born. November 2016*

YOU SEE . . .

. . . sometimes when it was still dark and too many gallant shivs of loneliness came into him in his rooftop attic, Johnny Coma shuffled out the door to the roof patio, crossed the red tiles all wet with rain, found the right key in his pyjama pants, inserted the key in the slot to call the elevator, descended alone in what he always thought of as a tomb for two and stepped out into the stone alley in his blue striped pyjamas, just to be in the world. The solid arch over the alley where he lived gave the sense of long ago, a

narrow stone box, with the ancient signs tacked onto the stone of *Entrada y Salida*, entrance and exit.

He shuffled about thirty steps in his well-worn pale green espadrilles, exiting at the wider Passeig del Born, his local pedestrian concourse, quiet, grand in its ancient modesty, the seven-storey buildings all attached to each other with their signature Barcelona balconies, the green blinds laid over the iron railings.

Johnny saw a light in the mist and stone.

Shit. Yeah. The one coffee guy. He always forgot that one coffee-sandwiches guy was open. Like a lantern in the dark. Johnny shuffled along. Nobody cared if he was in flippers or a clown suit or his same old tattered night stripes. All he wanted was rainy days and routine. Rain, routine and the words for the story of his daughter, Stella.

Grief has hair. Grief eats you. You are grief's BLT.

He entered the lit coffee spot, asked the man behind the counter, a short gent about fifty, for a cortado. The man shouted in a pleasant alto, "Cortado," to the back of the shop. A much older gent got up from a chair hidden by the coffee machine. He creaked to the machine. He pressed the buttons. He creaked to the counter, handed the coffee in a paper cup to the man behind the counter, who handed it to Johnny. A euro and a half. Life felt better already.

"¿Cuál es su horario, Señor?" Johnny asked. Sir, what are your hours?

"No hay horario." We have no hours.

Perfect. Perfection.

Johnny shuffled out the door to the backless stone bench on the street.

The beer cans stashed by the street sellers had been stowed in the trash bins until the hours became after-hours and further street *cerveza* was needed. A few humans further down the Passeig del Born near Rec were waving pizza slices at each other in duelling disputations, ragged-trouser orators squaring off with pepperoni and anchovy triangles, about migrants and tyrants. Here on cocktail bar row.

Johnny Coma, the lone figure on a stone bench, near Montcada Street, in the rain shadow of the basilica Santa Maria del Mar. Saint Mary of the Sea,

who has watched over the seamen, the fishers, the shoreline for a modest seven hundred years and change. He reached up to his ear, felt his writing tool tucked in there, felt the pencil's ridges, took his trusty Palomino Blackwing 602 grey pencil down. Reached into his pyjama pants for the silver triangle, his pencil sharpener.

He twisted the faithful grey Blackwing round and round. Silver-edged sails emerged from the pencil sharpener, fell onto his blue and white stripes, along with sprinkles of moonlight scurf.

He wrote in his notebook: *We have no hours.*

HE SAT ABSORBING the light mist. He did love it here in the medieval quarter called the Born, El Born or El Borne, folded into the larger neighbourhood called La Ribera – the Shoreline – the little walled alleys, with names evoking hand-labour: the *gremios*, guilds, artisanal work over the centuries, Kettlemakers Street, Glassmakers Alley, Fishmongers, Hatmakers . . . It situated his knuckles and wrists.

The Mediterranean briny air. In the stone warrens he was a twelve-minute walk to the sea. Every time he returned to Barcelona, he was struck by the same eternal-return feeling, a return of the rush of love he had felt the very first time. Every sojourn entry was layered with every departure from the past, and every return again. Barcelona was separate from him, yet Barcelona was his secret lover.

And the old stone barrio had from the very first been waiting patiently for him, a mere thousand years.

He ran his thick calloused index finger on the golden metal part of the pencil, the ferrule between the pencil proper and the eraser at the end. The eraser was flat and pink and replaceable. Johnny loved all these details.

Ear to the rain. Lost in the kairos circle.

One of the disputatious guys down the way got up, ambled toward Johnny on the Passeig del Born, stopped, waved his pizza crust at the amber street-light and whispered in a gravelly hork, "The swallows have fallen from the sky. The wings have come off. We are flying into unknown angles of attack."

He reached over to Johnny's smooth shaven head. Pulled out a night

errant hair. “More for my treasure box,” he mumbled as he rounded the corner into one of the walled alleys, Vidrieria, Glassmakers Lane, his voice echoing up the ancient stone. “Tonight the Lady Hillary shall be regnant at last!”

“Of course,” Johnny said to the empty street. “Sancho. My old pal from the Pla de Palau. Good old Sancho.”

A WHISTLE FROM one of the rooftops across from where Johnny sat, alone on the barrio promenade. The whistle bounced from the stone walls of Montcada out into the wider Passeig del Born.

A lean figure with long wavy hair leapt out of the dark of Montcada Street. In a black leotard under the amber rain of the high streetlights. From somewhere – a pocket? – the figure produced a length of rope.

Another high whistle.

A second figure appeared on a slim balcony five storeys up, above the shuttered *cocteleria* where even the lively vermouth was taking a snooze with fellow dead soldiers, and the figure lowered a length of rope from above.

The street figure caught it, tied the two ropes together. Began to climb.

Like Rapunzel in reverse, climbing with long wavy hair on the rope to the balcony. Then she – it looked like it could be a woman – turned a somersault, climbed further up.

Then she climbed down, hand over hand on the rope, feet curved.

Making circles with her hands, she walked toward Johnny.

“Gyrotonic,” she said, stopping in front of him. “Gyrotonic, Gyro-tonic, I’ve got gyro eyes on you.”

She smiled at the sky, the ancient welkin of this medieval precinct. She reached into a black jersey sleeve. Voila! A shiny black shoe. The other sleeve, another shoe. The shoes reflected the lamplight on the Passeig del Born. Quickly putting her feet into the shoes, tying them up, the mystery woman straightened up, appeared to pull energy from her knees to her waist, and hell on mirror wheels, she tap danced the syncopation out of the stone street in front of Johnny.

As if click-clacking in low taps offstage, she tap danced down the dark passageway of Montcada.

And walked on, waving at him over her shoulder.

They appear; they vanish. You see them once, never again. This is the city. You have to invent a life for a stranger. This, too, is the metropolis. Mister No Hours, Mx. Gyro, Sancho. The performance space called a city.

Johnny opened his arms, stood up, windmilled them to get the blood flowing, the right arm and the left arm going in opposite directions.

Deep breaths. He sat down on the backless stone bench. Dark and empty morning.

The world is contrapuntal, he thought. He could feel the muscle music coming from his shoulders down his forearms to his wrists. He retrieved his pencil from behind his ear. In his plain brown Moleskine notebook Johnny wrote:

*November 2016, Passeig del Born, BCN, bench*

*Dear Stella,*

*You're in my mind, but where are you? You walked like electricity through the storm in a dream I had last night. It was you.*

*Stella, the atoms coalesce. Yet, where are you, small bones I used to read to? Little fossil. If the child dies, the father is an orphan. What is the word for the father whose child is gone? It's your dad, Stel, I'm so messed up – in the dream last night, I saw you shining. You swam toward me. Your skull was lit up. Inside your lit-up transparent skull your eyes looked out at me. But you swam past me, like you didn't know me. I said, "Stella, it's me. Dad. Johnny."*

*You swam on the lam with feathery know-how.*

*Dad*

He shuffled the ninety seconds back to his home alley, medieval and about fifty footsteps long. Such a tiny alley it rarely appears on maps. No door visible. Number – ½ – on a cruddy piece of old wood, weathered. A motorcycle strategically parked in front of a larger random-looking piece of wood covered in peeling posters, paint tags. Dark ill-lit alleys are great security. Johnny squeezed in the narrow space between the moto and the wall. He waved his key fob at a wooden board with a peeling photo from a yellowing twentieth-century newspaper: it was a photo of Dario Fo – the



Italian left-leaning playwright disrupter called a clown – from the day Fo won the Nobel Prize in Literature, in the fall of '97.

Johnny Coma waved his key fob at Dario Fo's nose.

The wooden board opened. Johnny entered the dark foyer, about the size of a bathroom stall, put one of the keys on the key ring into an unmarked slot in the elevator. He felt like a wastrel indeed, returning to his roof studio like a thief with stolen words, nabbed from the world in its few thoughts in the rain time.

He lay down on the patio tiles. He wrote the word *Gyrotonic* in his notebook. He took a nap as the light before the dawn crept down the old stone quarter.

IT WAS SIX forty in the morning. Official sunrise was about seven thirty this time of year. Dawn's creeping light would start about seven. Time for him to visit with Sancho on the old familiar bench around the corner, the bench where they had kept company with each other over the years, when Johnny turned up in Barcelona and kept to himself in a self-contained way, writing.

He walked the one hundred steps from his front door to the square called Pla de Palau. The Palace Plaza. Though, as many an urban spot named *palacio*, it was modest.

There in the half-dark, was that really Sancho air-typing? Hands low, all proper as a touch typist on an invisible old Underwood typewriter, pinkies aloft on his p's and his q's.

"*Pase adelante*. Come on in. Welcome. *Bienvenido*." He patted the wet slats. "Have a seat, we will be right with you." Then he pulled an invisible sheet of paper out, placed it on top of an invisible ream sitting – apparently – on his other side and tidied the edges. "I will launch from Petrograd to Saint Petersburg."

Johnny stretched his legs out. He was still wearing his blue-striped pyjamas. Sancho had on baggy pale-blue blue jeans, the kind that tell you that the wearer was American. A local Catalan man would be wearing indigo or black jeans, or cotton pants in a rust or a chore-coat blue. But what with the long moth-gnawed tweed topcoat and his matted hair and his public perch

in the square, the baggy pale jeans were simply one more element of the hodgepodge.

“Perhaps, before Leningrad, I will do a local launch, a tour from Espaseria to – Esparteria!”

“Sancho, dear pal, Espaseria and Esparteria meet.”

“Oh dear, oh dear. One more typo waiting to happen. Then we shall launch from Comerç to Comercial.”

Johnny stayed silent on that one. Two streets a half a block away from each other.

“My liege,” Sancho said. “For your esteemed perusal.” He handed the invisible ream to Johnny, about a hundred invisible pages by the amount of space between Sancho’s palms.

“A perfect amount,” Johnny said.

“My yes,” said Sancho.

“To throw away?”

“Throw away?”

“I’ll tell you a little secret,” Johnny said. Whispering, “You can tell a pro by the number of pages they throw away. A beginner –”

“Huh,” Sancho said with haughtiness. “Beginners. *Well.*”

“No, listen, friend. A beginner brags, ‘I wrote a hundred pages.’ A pro brags, ‘I dumped four hundred pages, I’m heading back in to dump more.’”

“Will Stumpy win the election?”

“Throw it all away.”

“Bakunin blurbed me.”

“Sancho. Write five hundred words a day.”

“To throw away.”

“Away.”

“I think you’re daft. I hear on the Interweb you can binge in November and voila! Novel done. Mikhail will bring Miguel to my launch soiree . . . You did know, my liege, did you not, that Miguel de Cervantes, the very scribe of *Don Quixote*, washed up a couple blocks from here, in our own neighbourhood?”

“Yeah, I heard something about that.” Of course Johnny knew about

Cervantes's sojourn in Barcelona. After all, Miguel de Cervantes wrote the Second Part of *Don Quixote*, in this very area, right around the corner on Colom at number 2. His eyes looking out to the wharf, the port, when the water was closer in.

The nautical dawn was painting itself with olive, aubergine, fair virgin oil of the arbequina.

Sancho closed his eyes and, with an air of contentment, said, "We *scribble*, we *have scribbled*, we *will have been scribbling*."

"*Scribbling* is a word professionals use, Sancho, to deflect from the grunge and rejection of art labour," Johnny said. "Please don't use it in an unearned way. Earn your stripes before you flaunt the lingo of experience."

Sancho, almost like a dear devoted husband, was snoozing right at the key moment of conversation. God bless the beginners, Johnny thought, calmed counterintuitively by human company in the life of the city waking.

The two men stretched their legs out, Johnny in pale green espadrilles and Sancho in espadrilles in rose.

Sancho mumbled into his tweed collar, "Ah, many a Google and oft . . ." then began to snore so loudly the foghorns were alarmed.

Johnny, for his part, had gone back into a dark mental channel. Behind his eyes, he dove down into water, entering the bathymetry of underwater mountains. He swam down into the Atlantic Ocean, the S-shaped Atlantic, a basin with its fine ocean trenches. The Atlantic, which separates the Old World and the New World. He swam down into the submarine canyons – was Stella there?

The abyssal plains, he wandered them in his brief sleep on the public bench, woke with his pencil moving in his hand, which looked disembodied. The guyot, yes that underwater volcanic mountain, the tablemount. All the pelagic levels. The S-shaped abyss.

His hand wrote the word: *abyssopelagic*.

When he opened his eyes, he had written a paragraph, and Donald J. Trump was the next president of those United States. Slowly, then all at once.

## THE SURF DOCTOR

*SCALP MUSIC. LORN. Burnt jazz on my pate. I am Medusa of the atomic buboes. My photographs emerge from my bald scalp like dream worms of the war mess. My own face is the green and smothering mask I wear to survive. I starved when my daughter died; the ladies admired my new svelte body. Grief and E. coli slimmed me. Women, we walk with masks. Our masks are the siren calls to our own selves to throw off our masks. My art is my obstacle to my intention to make it. These green and smothering things, this ether we put upon ourselves. These snakes, these masks, these avatars of the lorn.*

VIVIENNE PINK WALKED the night watch alley north. She held her camera at her hip in the amber hours, passing a back garage workshop where a group of guys were sending off sparks, dressed like a hazmat posse in a foundry. Her father, Izzy Pink, Mister Mayor, had died in this alley, taken a heart attack on a night walk. Every time she set out on an assignment, she came to the alley, to say goodbye to her dad.

The taxi rolled up to the house. Out through Metro in the dusk diorama, travelling west through distress and needles and shop glory, the eateries in the light rain lit from inside, and that November there was a heat wave. A guy at Dovercourt and Bloor was beating a red Canada Post box with a baseball bat, warbling, "Fuck the hokey-pokey and you fuck the hokey-pokey." Democratic paradise was overheating, flooding with too much money, yet in

the wide low streetscape of Toronto, leaving again to chase down a rumour of terror chatter in Amsterdam, Vivi Pink snapped her hometown through the rainy taxi window, everywhere drive time so pretty. She was bald from the atomic bomb test in Death Valley in 2006. The rain got heavy, the windshield wipers moved back and forth, the taxi moved north in the ravine-laden city, driving on old geology where canoes once paddled the swerve onto the 401, busiest highway in North America, the four-oh-one where polite Canadians took risks, jerks choking or mis-steering or jerking off or just in a spin on a wet patch right before the airport so handy to the excellent trauma ward at Sunnybrook Hospital but not today. Terminal 3, KLM. Flight 062, YYZ to AMS. Departure 16:30, arrival in Amsterdam 7:20 a.m. A Boeing 747-400. On the terminal screens, oversaturated images of Donald John Trump and Hillary Rodham Clinton, with one day left in their race to the White House.

Vivienne Pink paid the taximan, unzipped her backpack, reached in, checked that she had her good luck amulet with her before she entered the terminal. Yes. Okay. It was there. She stroked it: a slim hardcover book of poetry, *Poeta en Nueva York. Poet in New York*, by Federico García Lorca. She took it everywhere, its fuchsia cover and green ribbon bookmark steadying her. When Lorca returned from New York to his homeland Spain, on a road near his home in Granada, the Fascist military shot him in the back. He was thirty-six years old when the soldiers in his own country assassinated the poet Lorca.

Through Terminal 3, where the soon to be departed lined up, in the eternal slow shuffle with their goods, looking down as if in panicked prayer at the lit devices in the palms of their hands, mumbling, davening in call-and-response to the latest news before the airliner took them to the clouds, the tiny screens on the seatbacks where the map of their voyage would show them as a minuscule plane flying over the continents, the oceans, the great rivers. Vivi Pink had intel that there might be a terror attack in Amsterdam. She was flying there to bear witness in photographs.

Over the St. Lawrence, the big river opened its mouth into the Atlantic Ocean. Vivi had dozed at takeoff, her Lorca in her lap. She was in that

Economy Comfort section, forward in the plane. In seat 15E, as always. A two-seater, empty aisle seat on her left.

She opened her eyes.

Across the aisle, a tall guy in seat 15C. He had his legs in the aisle, his right hand on his right knee. Her fingers went to her red silk shirt left breast pocket where she kept a credit-card-size spy camera. She pressed her pocket; the miniature lens was aligned with her open buttonhole. The shot she wanted was of the man's long fingers resting on his indigo jeans. How the hand tensed.

She had fogged her way through the terminal. It hit her now that she'd seen him in the KLM lineup, in front of her. Of course. She'd checked him out, from the shoes up. Dark shoes, laces, good leather, cordovan maybe. A beaten-up leather jacket in chocolate, bleached folds of wear. He carried a black bag, a cross between a medical bag and a briefcase. He had turned around – it came back to her airborne brain – briefly, but long enough for her to see how overtly he was not looking at her as he scanned the line.

He wasn't on a phone. He'd unzipped his bag, fished inside, nodded to himself, zipped it back up. Hanging below his leather jacket was a rust sweater. The dark jeans. He could be an architect or a chef or a biophysicist, boarding in Toronto, dreading the legroom designed for elves. Long fingers, staying tense near his knee. Vivi snapped a second spy shot.

They flew in the deep dark toward morning.

Mister Legs was reading a book, a hardcover. Vivi the snoop always wanted to know what someone was reading, but she couldn't see the cover. She dozed off again, woke somewhere over Greenland according to the little screen.

IN THE NOWHERE place in the nowhere time of a plane at night flying over the ocean, Vivi took Lorca to the loo. Occupied. A loo door opened. She stepped aside. A hulk in a baggy blue suit lurched onto her tits, meaty paws up in muscle memory, apparently, of maulings gone by. "Mile-high club, you and me, what say?"

She aimed the Lorca at his balls. Direct hit. As he grabbed his lower

nethers, she snapped a pic of him with her spy camera. He looked bothered and bewildered, as if a pumpkin he was going to hump had attacked him with poetry. Poor sod, Vivi thought, with that chronic eye disease called misogyny. Red tie flapping between his legs, he limped out of the vestibule.

She returned to her seat. The green letters on the fuchsia cover transmitted a kind of melismatic *verde*. The plane was going through turbulence. She read the poem called “Christmas on the Hudson,” about Lorca’s visit to a Jewish cemetery; she read the one about the king of Harlem. Small sketches Lorca made of New York, of himself. How precious the doodles become.

The barometric pressure changed, she felt it in her ears filling and emptying, popping, filling again, as the plane began its descent. The ear pain is so much worse on the landing, though the landing is the best part, it is all ahead and nobody knows the story to come.

“*Verde que te quiero verde*,” Lorca once wrote. Green how I love you green. Green Amsterdam water rose up to meet the plane.

The low water was rising to the sky and the plane’s belly.

She held on to the Lorca, stroked the green endpapers. She loved the care put into the physical book, attention had been paid. The signatures, those groupings of pages all sewn together up the spine of the book, nestled together in subtle curves. And how sweet was that green ribbon sewn right in, to use as a bookmark. *Seda verde*, green silk. The sturdy delicacy was erotic. Attention is erotic. *Versos verdes*.

A pixel is a pixel is a pixel, but a beautiful book is a sex object forever.

THE PLANE BUMPED down.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, we have landed in Amsterdam. Local time is 7:23 a.m. The outside temperature is twelve degrees Celsius.”

Amsterdam, known as *Mokum*. Once upon a time, when Amsterdam was a city of Jews, Yiddish infiltrated the everyday language of Amsterdammers. The Yiddish word *mokum*, meaning *place*, was the local slang name for Amsterdam itself: Mokum, or Mokum Aleph. The Place. The First City. And when the Nazis killed thirty thousand of the forty thousand Jews of Amsterdam, Yiddish remained woven throughout the civic life, language

being the great resistance, always. She and Johnny used to like to go to the *nachtcafé*, the night café in Amsterdam called Mazzeltof.

The silver wings set down in the sinking city wet with Mokum Green.

The green was so bright in the city of Amsterdam, it hurt the grass to grow. The green was so potent, it made poets begin. The green was so *groen*, the new shoots could feel the power of their own chlorophyll.

Mister Long Legs sat with his hands in his lap. His eyebrows were interrogating his forehead, scrunched up lines below his close-cropped dark hair, the eyebrows making some kind of a math equation with the sides of his lips, which were twitching in a nuanced way. She was feeling giddy dread; she pressed the wafer-thin camera in her shirt pocket. His legs, his cheek with a not pretty scar, *snap, snap*, and for good luck, his right hand, still tensed on his thigh.

Vivienne stayed in her seat while the trudge up the aisle to exit began.

Mister Legs was content to sit, wait.

When the aisle was clear, he got up. His long arm took her backpack down for her. “Thanks,” she said, making eye contact, upward.

“I like to surf at Las Canteras,” he said. He reached up on his side and took down his black leather bag. Genuine leather, she noticed, worn, experienced. His voice sounded like one of those “maybe” voices. Maybe Dutch. Good English.

“It’s great in winter,” she said.

“The wind is pretty fantastic,” he said. Maybe Belgian. “The left break.” Maybe Dutch, maybe Israeli. Places where you accepted without thinking that everybody spoke excellent English. Vivi Pink, photographer of war and its many parentheses of peace, knew that the real picture of somebody is their voice. She had trained herself to listen to vocal intonation so that she could replicate it in a visual tone. His tone was in the neighbourhood of “I’d like you to enjoy this moment, even if it’s passing.”

The parade down the aisle. The world is one long lineup around the belt of the planet. Vivienne was in no hurry to say goodbye to the two-minute acquaintance with the tall guy. “The trade winds,” she said. “I don’t know if they are trade winds, but it can get crazy in January. I was there in a hurricane once. On the Big Canary.”



“Gran Canaria,” he said, his eyes crinkling. That too. The charisma. You can’t buy it, rent it, imitate it. “Your picture of the green light on the water, that one guy who was on his board, that was pretty incredible. How did you get that shot, the wall of water?”

“That was the January, the hurricane,” she said. Whoa. Believe it, he had seen her book of the Canary Island surfers, he had focused on one of her classic Atlantic surf photos. Charisma is the gift, charm is the way a man works what he is given.

He said, “Also, Mundaka is pretty spectacular.”

They started inching down the aisle. Or, okay, maybe a Swede, she thought. He kept his voice low, friendly. She could do that, too. “Mundaka?” she said. “Also, in January.”

“Winter’s the best in Mundaka,” he said. “I used to live at the Hotel Mundaka. Funny little semi-hole in the wall. Kind of place where the reception’s about as big as your basic phone booth, Hotel California like, and –”

“And they’re playing,” she said, “on some old – seriously? – tinny cassette player some old *Purple Rain*.”

“RIP,” he said.

They were halfway up the aisle.

“What a year,” she heard herself saying, as if the two of them, having just met, were old pals having lazy coffee down the street. “Bowie, January; Prince, April. What the hell is going on?”

“Thanks, thanks very much,” he said to the captain as they got to the exit, the breezeway. Cold Amsterdam morning came into the breezeway cracks. “Bowie goes slowly, secretly, yeah? Prince, now I have to say I was pretty shocked, OD on fentanyl.”

“They say.”

“Oh Lord. What a life. I hope I’m ready when the time comes.”

They were in the Schiphol Airport. Known to Vivi Pink as Schlep-all.

“We’re never ready, nobody’s ever ready,” she said.

He smiled at her with that old-pal smile.

“Well, nice to have met you.”

Neither of them strode off. The airport prepared its delicado tortures of

all the spaces between our hopes. He reached into his jacket pocket, took out a business card. She took it, put it in her pant pocket, zipped it in. She didn't look at it.

He had mentioned Las Canteras, the surfing beach out in the Atlantic Ocean on one of the Canary Islands. He had referenced Mundaka, the world-famous left break surf spot in Spain's Basque Country. He had, thus, said without saying that he knew who she was. That he had seen her photographs, that he had bought her book of surfers, or other books. But what about those sad dark eyes? It could be surf eye. Or war. There is a kind of postwar loneliness that is beyond the ordinary definition of lonely. It is that your daily carry is existential dread.

She had felt like a rescue creature in the pound called existence for years now. It was possible there was no real proper home for the likes of her anywhere.

They stood, two awkward adults.

He said, "Good luck." Then walked on with his long legs, a slight stoop in his upper body. Sadness, or a spinal fracture. Carrying his small black bag into the netherworld of fluorescent light of Amsterdam Schiphol Airport. Yellow signage, letters of the alphabet ordering you around, arrows on the verge of a nervous breakdown pointing to ceilings and floors.

THROUGH THE LOW country in its dark old grey waters, the spiffy taxi sped with a driver who looked like a righteous club bouncer, muscular arms in a tailored suit, a head so shiny he must buff it like a shoeshine guy in the morning. Vivi loved the security of everything in its place, including your carefully polished skull. Male driver, female passenger, each with a bald smooth head. The taxi entered the Old South section of the city, curving into the pocket corner of Roemer Visscherstraat, the one-block-long street where the Owl Hotel sat.

The Owl, charcoal paint, high windows, amber in one window lit at 8:00 a.m. The beautiful old city of Amsterdam, so much of it already below sea level. The words *Owl Hotel* lit in lime green on a canopy, the street empty except for the hundreds of bicycles parked, high riders leaning back like

two-wheeled horses on the street named for the poet Roemer Visscher.

She paid the well-built taxi driver who carried a suit as brilliantly as Leonard Cohen, walked down the stairs from the street to the hotel entrance at the bottom, and into the narrow lobby. The memory of past times at the Owl flooded back, visual memories. The surprise of how small the spaces were, the reception counter immediately when you entered, the eye-view down the narrow space past the four-seat bar, past the cozy public lounge, through glass doors to a beautifully calm scene: the garden wet with rain.

Iron tables, iron chairs, the welcome soothing green planting, offhand, intended, that disciplined seeming-casual ambition she loved in Amsterdam. Masterly, casual, a small hotel in the off-season.

Into the frame down the space two long legs stretched. Oh, come on, Vivi said to herself, *him*.

The guy from the plane who mentioned the surf spots in the Canaries and the Basque Country. In her hotel, in her lobby lounge, what are the chances? Mister Legs in the airport in Toronto, on the plane across from her across the Atlantic, now in her same Amsterdam hotel? He got up, slid open one of the glass sliding doors to the patio garden, looked back, an ibis eyeing her through glass. She took the closet-sized elevator to her room, enjoying the acid lemon-green colour of the metal curtain. She waved the key card at the electronic eye on the door to room 46.

Vivi had asked for 46 for reasons. At the Amsterdam Owl Hotel in room 46, twelve years ago, in early November she had unfolded a note from the front desk to call home urgently. On the phone in this room, she had heard that Stella had been in an accident and was in surgery. The mother, away from home, working. Her sister, Rhonda, saying, “You never cared about your own daughter. I told you something like this was bound to happen. Don’t worry, Rhonda is handling the mess you made.”

She unpacked. She unzipped the security pocket on her pants, the business card Mister Long Legs had given her was there. It read: SURF DOCTOR. *Surf therapy for the wounded*. There was no phone number, no address, no code. No name. She had heard of surf therapy, of course she had. She had even tried it, in fact, at Mundaka. Was this guy there then? There were a few

veterans who brought the wounded to the water, damaged bodies, partial bodies, bodies whole outside partial inside like hers, put them on boards, taught them how to paddle into the waves.

At the window looking down to the patio garden, she snapped a first-look best-look. It was habit – she always took snaps of the hotel room before she inhabited it, and its surrounds. Like antemortem pics of the scenes about to happen. There he was in the garden sitting at a table, all raindrops. Mister Legs sat alone, the autumn shades of his sweater, his pants, his cordovan shoes in harmony with old leaves, terracotta pots, the garden shed in matte grey. Dress like Amsterdam in November, you'll never be wrong. His arms open, his chest released to the Old World.

Now he goes and pulls a notebook from his leather jacket pocket, begins writing in it. He looked up. What was with this guy? Could he, like a pro cop, or a forest creature, sense the pitch of being watched from above? A man who worked in the shadows and who, thus, could hear shadows . . . maybe. She snapped an aerial snap from room 46. He leaned his long upper body into his notebook on the patio table below, like a man protecting food in a prison. Mister Legs a.k.a. the Surf Doctor. Self-contained. Tall, dark and therapeutic.

HER HEAD HURT. Her body ached. She headed to the Vondelpark to see about the Netherland terror rumours she had heard from protected sources.

She walked down the one long block of Roemer Visscherstraat, the buildings all attached to each other, rust brick, cream trim, arched windows and arched entranceways, the familiar Amsterdam hooks on high to hoist furniture up to swing in through windows.

At Van Baerlestraat, a heavy stream of bicyclists rode, centimetres from her toes. To get across to the Vondelpark was a trial in waiting. Immediately off the perpetually surprisingly narrow sidewalks of the city granted to the low species on the food chain – pedestrians, in Amsterdam – that stream of steady straight-backed beautifully fit endlessly pedalling Amsterdammers on bikes allowed no purchase for a walking person. Next to that traffic stream, the slightly lighter stream of cars. Next to that, the trams going one way next

to the trams going the other way next to the cars going that way next to the endless stream of bicycles. Shit.

No romance, bikes here were transportation. Where everybody gets around by bike, it's one more traffic headache in your life, and a pedestrian could be stranded on a street named for a poet. An old memory of being here came back. A fix for the fix she was in. Of course, the stairs.

She hung a left, walked a half a block to – yeah, of course – the stone stairs on Van Baerlstraat down to that part of the Vondelpark, then you walk under the underpass and into the green, up to the big lovely building, the Filmmuseum, with its outside terrace Café Vertigo. The palette would suit a Hitchcock. Twice as many bicycles in Amsterdam as people. Hitchcock could rise from the grave, remake *The Birds*, call it *The Bikes*. Nine hundred thousand bikes, 1,800,000 wheels swarming the back of your knees. Oddly, she had never seen a single bicyclist wearing a helmet in Amsterdam. You didn't see it. Go know.

Past stone benches, past wooden green benches with iron scrollwork depicting birds, muddy mustard reflections of dying tree leaves, empty trees, stone shadows to the large bleached imposing film museum.

A man gently rode past her on his bike, in a brown garment with a loose ecru top on it, he too with that eye-sunken ferociousness she had seen in the TO alley man yesterday morning, also in the Surf Doctor.

She felt dizzy. The willow trees were doubled in the ponds. She was sweating. No vehicles were allowed in the park; here came an unmarked white van. She didn't like white vans, period. Unmarked creeped her out. The van drove way too close to her puffer coat. The man at the wheel had on a baseball cap, which was unusual here. She turned to look back at the Filmmuseum; she headed toward it, retracing her steps. No one sitting at the Café Vertigo, only chairs and tables, empty. Where were the people? The white van was keeping pace with her, at the speed of a fast walker. She upped the pace, walked faster. The man in the van crept his vehicle alongside her, toward tables, chairs, the stone steps to the Filmmuseum entranceway. The van kept making gear-noise adjustments to ride beside her, the man in the baseball cap staring at her, then lagging a bit behind, then right beside her

again, a smirk on his face.

The van dropped back on the path, so that it was directly behind her. The engine revving, the vehicle heat on her coat, the back of her legs. The man had encased himself inside the weapon with which he was pursuing her. Steel under combustion.

She got to the bottom of the stairs up to the Filmmuseum. The van moved so that the front hood was at the bottom of the stairs, beside her. She ran up the old wide stone stairs. The van tried to mount the stairs after her, rearing back, slipping. Vivi got to the top. She tried the door. The Filmmuseum was closed. Café Vertigo's hours didn't start yet. Her clock was somewhere else in her body, she was in Amsterdam but where was she in time, was she too early, where were the *people*? What time had they landed?

At the bottom of the stairs, the van waited for her, the man smirking at the wheel, revving the engine over and over.

Vivi ran down the stairs, ran at full speed toward a path straight ahead. Oh no there was no path, she realized too late, it was an illusion of water sending her running into a pond, green full of willow, muddy.

She began to swim. She could see in her peripheral vision that the van was slowly trying to track her around the water. She dog-paddled. Her puffer coat was weighing her down.

At a wet cold corner, she came ashore. The coat was all down and sodden. She took it off, laid it down, sat there. The van wasn't near. She leaned against a tree. When she got up, dragging the coat like an otter, she could see off in the distance by the Blue Tea House, the round spaceship-looking café in the park, the white van, its front facing her, a predatory vehicle, blinking its headlights off and on.

## FLOTSAM WITH A PENCIL

THE SUN GOT up slowly in Barcelona city. The old rooftops pushed into the rainy dawn. While he slept, Johnny fought the bedside lamp, and the lamp won.

Shit, there was broken glass on the floor. His knuckles on his left hand had ripped skin, a deep gash. There was blood on the pillow. Yeah, he'd been at it again.

Back when he and Vivi were in bed together every night, she'd wake him up, yelling at him to stop hitting her, as he pounded her back, the back of her head (when her thick hair, back when she had hair, protected her from his sleep pummelling), and he'd be in a battle royal with some sleep enemy, some REM nemesis when he went nine rounds with Vivi's spine.

The bedside water glass was way across the room, under the little high window, where the roof profile of Santa Maria del Mar was framed against the morning blue. Stone and azure and blood on the bedcover. What the hell time was it?

Shit. Ten after ten. He better get up and get to the beach for his ritual morning caffeine.

There was no time to clean up the mess. He was on a quest. He needed to bring his daughter back to him. The only obstacle was that Stella had died twelve years ago. He had entered his grief, then he had run from his grief. He was living in full incompleteness, and he knew it. Being a clever guy was one

sure way to be stupid. He was a know-it-all from the get. But grief was a rat who chewed the art right off your cheeks.

He threw on a windbreaker, went down in the elevator, saw on the cobbles he had bare feet. Oh well.

Walking down to the water of the shoreline in PJs and callouses. And that hand, a deep gash, blood dried. What a fine chivalric suitor am I. He giggled. Giggly nutcase in pyjamas on the city sidewalk, what else could he be but a well-known novelist, not remotely in hiding? A nut in a mumble of that rhythm he didn't want to lose. The light ahead was pure Mediterranean. The sidewalk was wide on Joan de Borbó, the restaurants asleep, a few bars, a few touristic joints serving food in English to Brits. Over yonder, the sails of docked boats, the old port, the wharf. The city presented itself like ghost opportunities. The dead had always been happy to sail to Barcelona. He had fallen in love with Barcelona so long ago, and he had indeed betrothed himself to the city. He and Vivienne had been here together, now he was here alone and often so. The public life consoled him. The light consoled him. It was lost like him.

He could feel the gladness of lament coursing in his bloodstream. From his lungs to the oxygen exchange between his in and out heart parts, and then it hit his rib cage, made its way out to his shoulder blades, down his forearms like an ink tattoo in its desiring to be brought to life, to his wrists.

He sat down on a random moto on Joan de Borbó, beside the recycling bin lineup, pulled out his Moleskine and ideal Palomino Blackwing 602 pencil and wrote:

*Dear Stella,*

*The icebergs melt, the walruses have no shelter.*

*It has been raining for a long time and the plastic has risen from the sea.*

*We have all gone down to the hadal zone, where midnight is forever and there is no day.*

*We're down in the onyx without oxygen, and as it has been written, the cities have been built by architects and apocalypse and when the Red Sea did part, it was festooned with plastic bags over fish heads, the migrant sea was a mass murder scene*



HE GOT UP from the moto. The music in his wrist had receded.

At the spot where Joan de Borbó met the beach promenade, humans were shadows, backlit. Humanity, out early – 10:30 a.m. *was* early for Barcelona – the shadow bicyclist, the shadow man alone at the shore, the shadow dog walker and her shadow chihuahua.

He felt like flotsam with a pencil. Kelp carrying a Palomino Blackwing 602.

He was moving toward waste and softness.

This had to be the year. He had to go into the Stella Zone and find her. Finally.

He had no tools, no idea how to do it. But he did have chops. He had that. He knew how to take a line for a walk. Maybe this *was* the year. Maybe this November, he could walk that line right up to the return of Stella Coma, who died one November long ago, at age eleven. His little girl.



Susan Perly is the author of *Death Valley*, longlisted in 2016 for the prestigious Scotiabank Giller Prize, and *Love Street*, told in the voice of late-night DJ Miss Mercy. Her memoir on art and marriage, “Picasso’s Pigeons,” set in Barcelona, appeared in *Zone 3* in 2013. A former journalist and radio producer, she broadcast eyewitness reports from Guatemala, El Salvador and Argentina during the Dirty War, and from Baghdad during the Iran-Iraq War. Susan Perly lives in her hometown Toronto with her husband, poet Dennis Lee.



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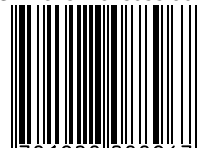
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