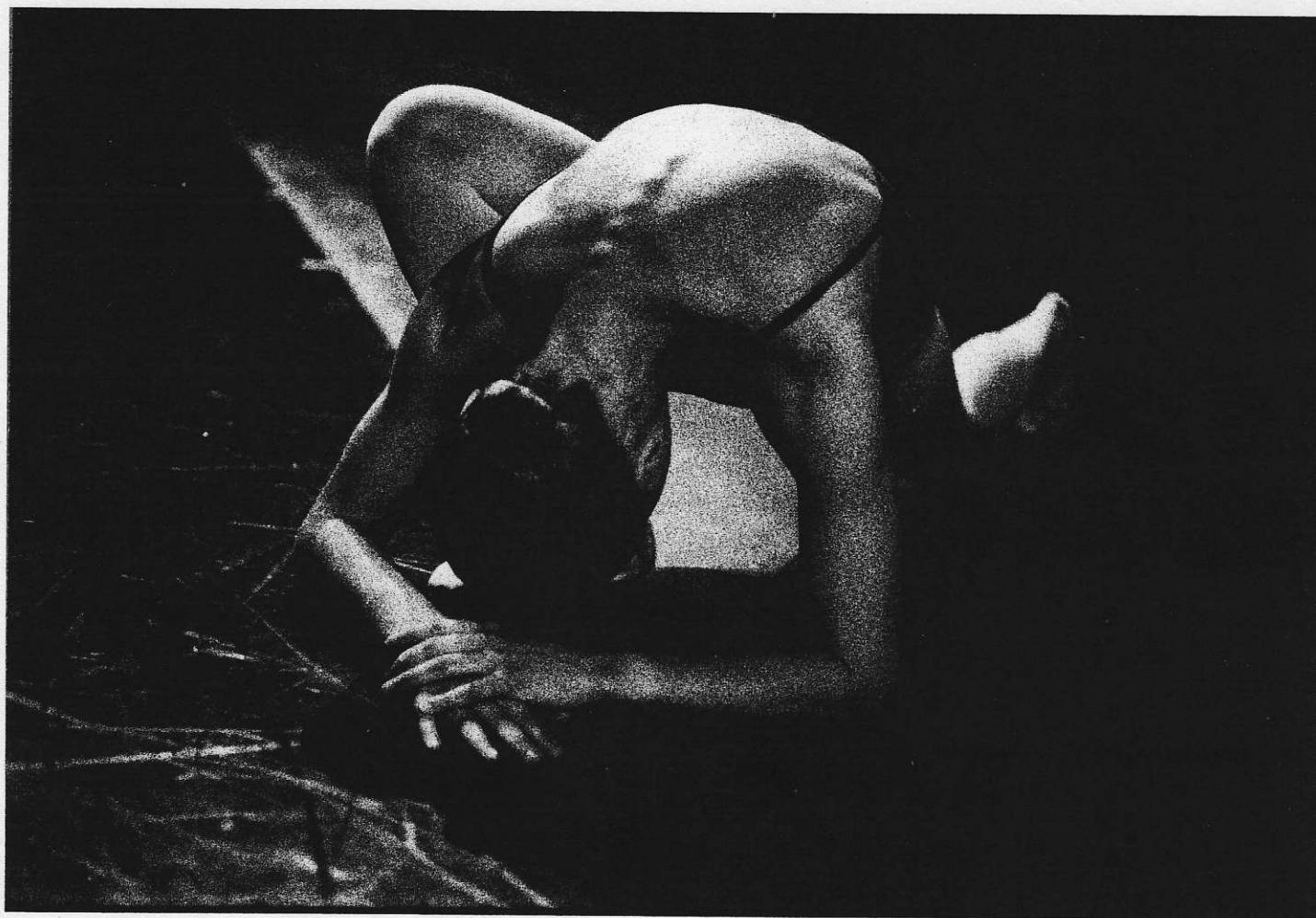


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Maggie

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**A Literary Life: Interview with Michael Dirda
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Bait and Switch

Winner 2003 Literary Contest

by Phil Harvey

My friends Bentley and Roberta are meeting me here in Curaçao. I say friends. I don't have friends actually, don't need them. But there are a few people whose company I find less distasteful than others.

Bernadette is here also. Bernadette will be the bait.

Roberta and Bentley are coming down off a high. They were heroes in India's famine fight last year—or thought they were. I was there with the United Nations. India decided that the 1967 drought and food shortage—predictable as those had become—constituted a "famine." Bentley and Roberta were among the volunteers rushed down to the state of Bihar to help see to it that no one died.

They rode the wave, played save-the-world. Bentley arranged compromises so that the untouchable castes, for example, got fed—after the others had eaten of course. Roberta was devoted to the cause. She insisted that the women of Bihar be given some stature, some dignity. That was a pipe dream, naturally. Saving the world is a motive that almost always leads to mischief.

When the famine crusaders needed a break, they came to one of my parties. I had the most reliable air conditioning in Patna and a good source of black market scotch from Calcutta.

There were a lot of parties in the sleepy provincial capital city of Patna in Bihar, in 1967. The harder and more demeaning the day's work, the stronger the party urge. The more dung fires and cow shit the workers had to inhale all day, the more determined they were to come to homes like mine where the air was clean and smelled of good food. "We're headed for Richard's" had become something of a rallying cry.

Roberta's idealism was a sixties cliché. She believed in the revolution. And her insistence that the world could be remade in her image made her exactly the

kind of woman I wanted to seduce, to violate. I was drawn to that idealism the way a lecher is drawn to young virgins. I wanted to get inside her vital parts, penetrate her in a way that would undermine her childish beliefs.

Couldn't do that in India. Her extended affair with Bentley had been burning too brightly. Bernadette and I had arrived in Curaçao a day ahead of the famine heroes, and we met them at the airport. It was warm, a tropical fertile dampness in the air.

Bentley and Roberta looked much as I remembered. Bentley a little wooden, pedantic, but humorous for all that. Roberta, tall and somehow graceful despite the occasional awkwardness in her movements.

*I don't have friends
actually, don't
need them.*

She and I embraced. There it was again, that barely perceptible but unforgettable odor I remembered from the times I'd stood close to her in my house in Patna or when she'd been sweaty coming from her jeep or at an outdoor party in the heavy Indian heat. It was a musky wisp of smell, incongruous, sourced in crevices, armpits, or between her legs or behind knees where flesh creased against flesh. I wanted to trace that scent to its source and spend some time there. Bentley had been to those places no doubt, and he didn't even know the honor of it, the privilege.

We disengaged. I shook Bentley's hand. He seemed glad to see me. I probably served as a reminder, someone who took part in his holy war, someone who was nearby at his big moment. Foolish sod.

I was driving a Fiat Jolly, a petrol-pow-

ered golf cart with an awning fluttering overhead, its insubstantial tinniness a good metaphor for life. It kept going but wasn't worth much.

Roberta and Bentley sat in back, cramped. Bernadette, my silent, earthy, fertile mistress, sat beside me in front. We queued up for the floating bridge, which had been opened for boats.

"Picturesque," Bentley said. "Good tourist attraction."

"Tourism is good business," Roberta said.

"Always the loyalist," I said.

"I'm not loyal to anyone," Roberta said. "I just have my opinions." A promising start.

"Well," I said, and Roberta laughed.

"Drive golf cart over bridge," said Bentley a little roughly. Things were going beautifully.

We were going to Curaçao's supposedly undiscovered Italian restaurant, which friends had recommended. "Our treat this time," Roberta said.

"I wouldn't hear of it," I said. "My father couldn't spend his money before he died, despite what some saw as a Herculean effort, and I'm out to finish what he started."

"You paid for the last two meals," Roberta said. "We're going to pay for this one."

"Principled wench. Pig-headed too," I said. Then I turned to look at her and said, "I accept."

"You remember introducing me to Roberta?" Bentley said.

"I suppose I was drunk," I said.

"You were. You said something like, 'Bentley, this is the most charming and graceful of all the water seal latrine experts in the state of Mysore.' Of course Roberta wasn't one of them."

Roberta said, "I don't see how you could have thought I was one of the latrine volunteers. They're so intense."

"You're pretty intense yourself," I

said. "I should have realized that a woman as tall and sensual as you must have been in agriculture." That was probably overdoing it. I'd have to be careful.

"Maize. Good crop. Good food," Roberta said.

"I'm a wheat man," I said. "High-class stuff. Maize is crude. Pig food."

"In a pig's eye," Bentley said. "Corn is good. Nutritious. Amino acids." Give Bentley credit. He kept trying.

"Okay," I said. I draped my hand along the back of Bernadette's graceful mocha-colored neck. Bentley would be looking at that neck. He was human. Bernadette tilted her head back against my fingers.

A half hour later we were seated at a large and annoyingly wobbly table on a flagstone terrace looking out over a valley of palm and hardwood trees toward a line of sky and ocean. On the horizon a freighter trailed white smoke, moving slowly from left to right. It was sunny. Two big worn umbrellas were stationed at the corners of the long table. Roberta, Bentley, and I were shaded. Bernadette always preferred to be in the sun, and there she was, her bare shoulders shining in the light. Lines of shadow moved along

her smooth brown arms.

"I want some real Italian Chianti," said Roberta. "Without the little baskets." She sat next to me, facing Bentley and Bernadette.

A young woman stood attentively beside us. "Chianti Classico?" I said.

"One bottle or two?"

"One bottle's plenty for lunch," Roberta said.

"Sounds like it probably won't be," said Bentley.

I asked her, "What's your best beer?"

"We have Dutch of course," she said. "Amstel, Heineken, American. Whatever you want."

"What's your name?" I said.

"Netty."

"Well, Netty, you are a lovely Dutch-Caribbean person, and we're glad you're going to take care of us. Bring me a good cold Dutch Heineken and a bottle of Chianti Classico. If I drink beer, maybe one bottle will be enough." I looked around, then back at Netty. "Antipasto for everyone. Lots."

"That may not be what we want," Roberta said. "Remember, we're not your guests."

"Yes. We're paying," Bentley said.

"I'd really prefer it the other way."

"But you can't. You're the guest."

"Okay. I'll have an antipasto."

"What about you, Bernadette?" Roberta said.

"Bernadette loves antipasto," I said. There was a brief silence.

"Antipasto is nice," said Bernadette. She shifted her chair, and the sun found a sharp angle into the cleavage between her breasts, two inches of shadow disappearing into the square dress top, everything about her perfectly symmetrical. Bentley, beside her, had a good view.

"Okay, antipasto all around," Roberta said. "Whatever you've got."

When the wine arrived Roberta sipped from her glass and stared out at the ocean. I stared with her. It was impossible to tell that the ship out there was moving, but we could see that it was farther toward the right-hand end of the ocean line, smoke drifting lazily from the stack. "See that ship?" Roberta said. "It's moving against the surface of the sea. But if the earth is rotating the other way, it wouldn't be moving at all. Or would it?"

"Everything is relative," I said.

"Movement is," Roberta said. "Maybe other things aren't."

Bentley said: "We're on an orbiting planet. What's the point here?"

"The point, my dear chap, is whether or not there are constants in our lives

Florence and Sour Biscuit Move West

They had to be fires first. No one would have named them, otherwise. The fork of lightning which shatters the brush, collapsing against itself, still goes nameless; impotent flies arching past fly through nothing—campers with trousers off could extinguish it—and then, there it is, a thing, then another, something else again streaking through to join the first, too soon for marriage but nevertheless the beginnings of woman and man: first Sour Biscuit then Florence, him leaping and tumbling naked and blue down the creepers, mottling the trees where the recent shade is escaping, while she, exclaiming, the banshee, a single spot—I am here! This is here! Here is here! and curling up to sleep with elms. Surely this can't happen anywhere but here, beneath these clouds which are nameless, beneath fronts stopped at the march, nameless too, like the touch of their electric fingers, exploding through birth to meet again where the farmhouses are, toppling a water can; but here is a name, where empty sparkle came off its heel and let two fires be one—and being just one, steal a name from the dead.

Seth Abramson

or whether everything is good or bad only in relation to other things."

"Of course there are constants," Bentley said.

Netty brought thin slices of sausage, tomatoes with olive oil and mozzarella, sardines with hard-crust bread, and olives.

"The Chianti is perfect," said Roberta. My beer glass had beaded with moisture which ran in rivulets onto the round base of the glass and onto the table. I solved this problem by draining the glass.

The afternoon felt warmer. Another freighter was moving along the horizon, forward across the surface of the ocean at perhaps fifteen knots but, given the rotation of the earth, perhaps backwards. I didn't care one way or the other.

"Do you remember that party in Bangalore?" Bentley said. "Melanie and Ivan what's-his-name came out of one of the bedrooms in their underpants."

"It was a good party," I said.

"I thought that was over the line," Bentley said.

"I thought it was funny," Roberta said.

"She was half naked!" Bentley said.

"That was her choice," Roberta said.

"That's what she chose to do," I said.

"I think she was drunk," said Bentley.

"Then she chose that," Roberta said.

"Exactly," I said. "She chose that. Do we choose to do everything we do?"

"I think so," said Roberta. She thought a moment. "Not the women in Bihar though, the women in Indian villages, or other women like them. They don't choose. They can't choose."

"You won't give up on that, will you?" I said.

"There was a lot of banging in Bangalore," Bentley said. "Too many bare butts."

"Your friend has a flare for alliteration," I said to Roberta.

"Bentley can make words sound good. Of course you do that too," she said to me.

"I am more ironic. The big difference is that I am utterly insincere. That gives me an advantage."

"What are you talking about?" Bentley said. "Of course I mean what I say."

"Always?" I said.

The Chianti bottle was empty. I looked around for Netty, clapped my hands in a manner I'm told is characteristic of me, and waited a moment. Then I gave a piercing whistle.

"Don't do that!" Roberta said.

"We're going dry. Got to have fuel." I ordered another bottle and another Heineken. Then slabs of grilled snapper appeared with crisp fried potatoes and Italian bread.

"Do you think we should try to mean what we say?" Roberta said.

"Of course not," I said. "Civilization would crumble." I looked at Bentley. "What you mean, I think, is not that you mean what you say but that you care about it," I said. "Unlike me. I'm just a wraith." I turned to Roberta. "A sophisticated and discerning wraith perhaps. A moderately wealthy wraith. But basically inconsequential. Bernadette is a beautiful sexy wraith. She reminds men of their duty to perpetuate the species. But otherwise she's also inconsequential. Bentley thinks that you and he are not like that. You take up space in the world. You matter. Perhaps not much, but some. Because you matter, you must care about things. If you care, you can be hurt."

Bentley said, "That's not quite right."

"I think it's bullshit," said Roberta, her tone friendly. "To say that you or Bernadette aren't consequential is just metaphysical bullshit. You're unique. You're independent. You make your own choices. That's consequential. I think you're important." There was a long silence.

"Well," I said. "It's nice that you think so, but I expect you're wrong."

Bentley said, "How can we argue about who matters? That's why we went to India. Even the untouchables in Bihar, the dirt-poor landless workers, matter. They're consequential. All of 'em."

"Surely you understand the difference between being engaged and holding yourself apart," I said.

"Yeah, well, I'm engaged," Bentley said. "If you've decided you don't want to be, you don't have to be."

"There are some sardines left," Roberta said. "Are you really that aloof?" she asked me. "Maybe you just fool most of

the people most of the time. That has consequences all by itself."

"I wish I could say that you have found me out," I said. "But I don't think so. Bernadette and I don't bleed."

"What?" said Bernadette.

"Nothing," I said.

Bernadette had moved to stay in the sun as I knew she would. It was warm enough now so that tiny beads of moisture had formed along her upper lip. She'd had very little wine, but ate quite a lot of the fish and tomatoes and cheese. Her breasts pressed against her thin cotton dress, and a tiny line of sweat was visible between them, her nipples outlined by the fabric.

"This snapper is terrific," Roberta said. "If you put a little of that garlic sauce with it, and some lemon and salt on your fork with bread crust, it's absolutely wonderful." She glanced at Bentley. He said: "Okay," and tried to follow her directions.

There were two steamers along the sky and ocean line now. The first had disappeared, but a third had moved in behind the second. Wisps of smoke from their stacks mingled with low-lying stringy clouds.

"Those ships could be the same ones that brought the food to Bihar, to India," Bentley said.

"Reliving our moments of glory?" I said.

"Yeah, maybe," Bentley said. He still believed they had done noble stuff. Sooner or later they'd all learn how little difference it had made.

A breeze rustled the leaves that shaded part of the table. There were muffled voices inside the restaurant. A song-bird made a shrill rather unpleasant sound.

"Have you two ever swapped?" I said.

"What?" said Bentley.

"Swapped. Traded partners with another couple."

"Are you kidding?"

"Not at all."

Bentley couldn't stop himself from looking at Bernadette's damp cleavage. Her eyes were closed.

"Cheese?" Netty set down a board with cheese and triangles of toast.

"I'll have the last tomato and mozzarella," I said. Why not? I took a long and

very satisfying draught from the Heineken.

"Are you really a nihilist?" Bentley said. "Nothing matters? The people who might have died in Bihar, sex with anyone—it just doesn't matter, it's all crap?" He looked at me. His anger was building.

I paused a beat, then spoke slowly. "On one level some things may seem important, things like other people. But what you do, what I do, that doesn't matter at all. The difference between you and me is that I recognize that I have no impact, and you feel quite the other way." I took another swallow of beer. "In a few years you'll see what I mean."

"I think you're just trying to invent yourself out of being important," Roberta said. "But you can't make yourself disappear."

"Oh, I think I can," I said. "In fact, I've given it a lot of thought. Even tried

it once or twice."

Roberta took a sip of her Chianti. She left enough for one good mouthful. "What's does Curaçao mean?" she said.

"That was part of George's work in Ambal," Bentley said, smearing some brie on a piece of bread. "You know. Swine project. Sick pigs. He had to..."

"Cure a sow!" Bernadette said. This was the only thing she had volunteered during the entire meal. There was a silence.

"If you have an impact, you're of consequence whether you care or not," Bentley said.

"Seems to me that's self-evident," Roberta said, looking at me. I let it ride.

Roberta paid the bill. I left the tip. She didn't object.

Bernadette asked for the two empty wine bottles for her collection.

A half hour later we were on the beach, Bentley staring at Bernadette's compact,

smooth body as she walked toward the ocean, her bikini riding well up above the buttock line, the round globes of her behind jumping with each step. One hundred thousand years of evolution, the signals emanating from that body, that perfect, round, symmetrical ass. Bernadette took two more slow steps. Twitch, twitch. She reached behind herself, running her index fingers inside the bikini, pulling the fabric down until it slid into the crevice of her buttocks. I'd watched her do that a hundred times, and it was still mesmerizing.

I had invited Roberta and Bentley for drinks at six o'clock. When I heard the knock on my door I turned Bernadette just a little bit so she would be in perfect profile when they came in. She was topless, her bikini bra hanging over the back of the chair. I had her sitting on the end of the writing table, her legs apart,



Untitled

Vicki Kelch

and I stood between them. "Come in," I said. I heard the door close, and then they came around the corner where they could see us. They froze, staring. And why not? Bernadette has almost conical breasts, bullet shaped. They drop just a little when she takes her top off, but they still point straight ahead with sharp, dark nipples. She was holding the edge of the table with her hands and looking at me, then over at Roberta and Bentley, then back at me. I had her turn a little toward them, so they could see both her breasts. Irresistible they were. Roberta made a tentative move to leave. I grasped Bernadette's upper arm, squeezing it, leaned forward and whispered. Bernadette stood, turned toward Roberta and Bentley, and very awkwardly pushed down her bikini bottoms. They stopped at her knees. Now both Roberta and Bentley were frozen, stock-still.

They started whispering to each other. Roberta glanced my way quickly, then turned, went out, and I heard the door close. Bentley stayed still.

I whispered a few more words to Bernadette. She nodded. The bikini bottoms fell around her ankles. Very slowly, very deliberately, I walked toward the door. "Do your duty," I said to Bentley as I passed him. Then I reached the door, opened it, and went out.

Roberta had gone, as I expected. I went to the hotel bar. It was predictably pretentious. The hotel had no beach frontage and only a rectangular shaped swimming pool, so the folks who ran the bar apparently felt they had to compensate. The result was nets and fake broken buoys, port-starboard red and green ship lights, also fake, and three cages with parakeets or parrots, one of which made unpleasant noises. I asked the bartender to put one of those idiotic parasols in my Johnny Walker Black on the rocks.

I waited a half hour for Roberta to show up, and then she did.

"Thought I'd find you here," she said.

"Have a seat," I said. "Have a drink with a parasol. That's what's on. We can drink while our lovers copulate."

"Perhaps not."

"Why do you negate your own existence?"

"Not drink?"

She shook her head.

"Not copulate? That would require inhuman restraint," I said.

Roberta took the other chair, sitting carefully on the edge of the seat with one elbow on the table. I persuaded her to have a frozen daiquiri in accordance with the general mendacity of the décor. Her drink arrived, along with my third.

"Why did you do it?" she said.

"Why did you let him do it?" I said.

"He can do what he chooses to do."

"You won't hold it against him?"

"No." As she said this I saw her right hand in a fist, the tendons visible in her arm. Things would not be the same again for Roberta and Bentley.

She followed my gaze and relaxed her arm. Then she looked at me. "I just want to make sure you don't think that all this implies anything about you and me."

"No," I said. "I understand that you would never engage in a sexual relationship as a result of any kind of deal." I lowered my voice just a bit. "I hope that one day something may work out without a deal." She met my eyes. "I'm a very patient man," I said. "I believe the time will come."

"If you don't kill yourself first."

"If I don't kill myself first," I said.

"Why do you negate your own existence? What purpose is served by trying to make yourself invisible?"

"One comes on the stage for sixty, seventy, eighty years, then one disappears. What happens between birth and death isn't really very important."

"You don't think you can make a difference? You don't think that your seventy or eighty years can change things?"

"No," I said. "And neither can yours."

"Sometimes I think about the wavy lines that show vital signs, weaving

across the monitor screens in hospitals. Those lines have some blip or squiggle if the patient they're hooked up to is okay. I've got to make some lines squiggle just a little bit by being here. If all those lines just keep running across the screen like lemmings, if everything is just going from birth to death without any jumps or squiggles, I couldn't live with that."

"My point exactly," I said. "I recognized some time ago that I'm not going to make anyone's lines jump. Whether my life continues is not a matter of very great consequence."

"Life matters. You're just flat-ass wrong."

I shifted gears. "At least I don't want to possess you the way . . . well, as men often do. I don't want to own you."

"Yes," she said. "I see that. It has an appeal, but not enough of an appeal to make me sleep with you."

I looked at her. Half my job was done. I would have to be precisely positioned for the other half, and it would not be now.

But now, clearly, so very clearly, I could see her long graceful body with its hard flowing muscles stretched out on the beach, legs like scissors against my sides. The sun would be setting over the ocean.

I caught a whiff of her. It was private, compelling. I said, "Do you think they're finished yet?" Her fist doubled up, and I could see an artery pulsing in her wrist.

It was good that this take time. It would be no fun if accomplished too soon, too easily. Life would be worth living in the meantime.

AR

One of Phil Harvey's stories, "Roberta's River," has been nominated for a 2003 Pushcart Prize. Another will appear soon in Potomac Review. Several of his stories also appear in his third book, Government Creep, published by Loompanics Press this year.