

Flight Is For Those Who Have Not Yet Crossed Over
a short story by Jeff VanderMeer

The only sounds inside the prison are the drip of water, the weeping of prisoners, and the chink-chink of keys on Gabriel de Anda's belt as he limps through his 2:00 a.m. rounds of the third floor. The prison walls glow with green phosphorescence and, from far below, Gabriel can hear the ocean crashing against the rocks. A storm builds out in the Gulf, where sargasso clings to drowned sailors and does not allow them to sink into the formless dark of deep waters. Gabriel feels the storm in the pressure of air pushing against his face and it makes him wary. He has been a guard at the prison for so long that he can see it in his mind like a slowly-turning, dark-glittering jewel. The Indians call the prison "Where Death Walks Blind of Justice." It is a block of badly-mortared concrete, surrounded by barbed wire, electric fences, and jungle. Resembling nothing less than the head of a tortured, anguished beast at sleep, a twenty-four hour lamp at the front entrance its solitary eye, it hunkers three stories tall, with tiny barred windows checkering a brackish, badly-lit interior where bare bulbs shine down on graffiti, guard, and prisoner alike. No one has ever escaped, for the prison, its foundations rotting, dominates the top of a cliff on the eastern coast of that country known more for its general, El Toreador, than for its given name, a name once Indian, then Spanish, but now forgotten. Gabriel's rumpled uniform scratches his back and fits poorly at the crotch. He shuffles over the filthy catwalk that leads from one side of the third floor to the other. Muttering to himself, he fights the urge to spit over the side, into the central courtyard, where the secret police hose down the violent prisoners. His gimp leg throbs. When only twenty-two, Gabriel was visiting Merida, Mexico, his brother Pedro driving and jabbering about some girl he knew in Mexico City "with thighs like heaven; no better than heaven." Enraptured, Pedro took a curve too quickly and careened into oncoming traffic. Gabriel remembers only a high-pitched scream and the pain that shattered his left leg, the bone breaking in two places. It gave him a limp. It gave him grist to chew as he navigates the catwalk. The janitors have not cleaned the catwalk from the last food riot. Dark, scattered lumps form an obstacle course, exude the stench of rotted fruit and flesh. What sweet relief it would be to press his face up to one of the outer windows; then he would see, framed by moonlight, the breakers far below tumbling against a black sand beach. The first refreshing hint of summer gales might touch his face in forgiveness, but afterwards, he would only have to return to the catwalk and the last prisoner, Roberto D'Souza. Roberto D'Souza has been held for five days and nights, charged with aiding the guerrillas who live in the northern mountains and call

themselves Zapata. Gabriel has nothing but contempt for the rebels. If not for them, rationing would be less severe and goods would be more plentiful in the stores. Gabriel's pace quickens, for he can leave once he has checked on D'Souza. He can drive the twenty miles to his small house outside Carbajal, the capital, and his wife, Sessina. She has worked late hours setting up window displays and may still be awake, perhaps even have supper waiting for him: huevos rancheros with hot tamales. His stomach rumbles thinking about it. But first, D'Souza. D'Souza sits in the corner farthest from the bars and the only window, his knees drawn up tight against his chest. Gabriel sneezes from the stench of shit and piss, wonders yet again if it is necessary to deny political prisoners a chamberpot. Why haven't the janitors at least hosed down the cell? None of the cells have their own illumination and so Gabriel shines his flashlight on D'Souza. D'Souza's back is crisscrossed with red and black. Where whole, the skin appears yellow. The spine juts, each bone distinct, below a ragged mop of black hair. As the light hits him, D'Souza flinches, hides his head, and tries to disappear into a wall pitted from years of abuse. Gabriel flinches too, despite himself. He must remember that this man is an enemy of the state, a guerilla, a terrorist. "Number 255," Gabriel says, to confirm and then leave, limping, for home. No answer. "Your name, please," Gabriel says. D'Souza does not stir, but when his voice comes, it has a wiry strength, a determination ill-matched to the wasted body. "Roberto Almada D'Souza." "Good evening to you, Roberto." "Is it? A good evening?" Weariness in the voice. "The sky is clear outside, as you could see if you looked. The waves are still low. Tomorrow, though..." "I don't need to see. I can smell it. I can taste it. Rotted wood and salt and the last breaths of lost lovers. Can't you feel it? It will blow us all away." Unfolding his long arms and legs, D'Souza rises with gangly imprecision. He is shrouded in shadow shot through with flashes of skin as he turns toward Gabriel, who cannot see his eyes. D'Souza says, "I have children. A father who is blind. How can I feed them from in here?" "My father is dead." In the coffin, his father still wore the shabby black blazer and gray

trousers from his days in prison, looking like an actor trapped in an old black-and-white silent movie.

"Should I feel sorry for you?" D'Souza says after a swift scrutiny of Gabriel's face.

"Tell them what they need to know and they will let you go."

A frustrated sigh. "I cannot tell them what I do not know."

"Everyone is innocent here," Gabriel says.

"Everyone except for you."

"It's a living."

"Is it?"

"Good night," Gabriel says and turns to leave.

"Would you take a message to my wife?" The faltering timbre of D'Souza's voice, the anticipation, the hope, sends a tremor down Gabriel's spine, even as he faces the prisoner.

"What?"

"My wife's name is Maria. Maria D'Souza. She lives in Carbajal, in the projects. Please. It is not very far. She is tall and thin and has hair as long and thick as the silk of angels. Please. Her name is Maria. Tell her where I am. Tell her I think of her. Tell her to visit my father and let him know where I am. Her name is Maria."

Inside of Gabriel, something comes loose. A lurching nausea, a dislocation. It will pass, he tells himself. It has always passed before, no matter how they plead - which is not often because most times they just sit and stare at the walls.

But he says only, "No. I cannot."

"Please?"

"No."

D'Souza comes swiftly to the front of the cell, silent, his white, white skin stretched over his scarecrow frame, mottled by moonlight and shadow.

His hands around the bars are gray and splashed with a violet color that would be red by any other light. D'Souza has burning pink flesh instead of fingernails. His face is a welter of dried blood and yellowing bruises. An apparition from the Night of All Saints, a carnival figure, but too grim for a clown. D'Souza stares at Gabriel and Gabriel, transfixed, stares back, wondering at the passing resemblance to his brother Pedro, the drawn cheekbones, the fiery black eyes, the anger that pins him, helpless: a priest hearing a confession, a vessel to be filled.

"Do you know what they have done to me?"

"I don't know what you mean."

Gabriel is not a member of the secret police, but he has at times come to a cell at the wrong time and seen things that have made him retrace his steps while thinking desperately about the current football scores and his country's chances in the 1998 World Cup. A door left open. A shriek, abruptly cut off. Blood under the fingernails.

D'Souza's hand snakes out from between the bars. He clutches Gabriel's wrist so hard it throbs. Gabriel smells the blood and filth on D'Souza, feels the sticky cool softness of D'Souza's nail-less thumb against his palm. He struggles, wrenches away from that touch, backpedals out of reach, confronted with a rage accumulated not over years but days.

"I must shit where I eat and I eat nothing because what they feed me is less than nothing. They come at all hours, without warning, with electric cattleprods. They beat me. They have torn my fingernails out. They have attached electric wires--"

"Shut up!"

--to my scrotum and stuck needles up my penis. They have tried to make me confess to crimes I haven't committed, never committed...They are tireless and well-fed and confident, and I am none of these things. I was a painter before they took me. Now I am nothing."

"I said to shut up!"

But Gabriel does not pull out his nightstick or walk away from the cell.

His lack of action mystifies him. He cannot understand why he finds it so difficult to breathe.

D'Souza loses his balance, slides slowly down the bars, into the darkness of the floor.

"Take a message to my wife or do not take a message to my wife..."

And then, in a self-mocking tone: "It truly does not matter. I have dreamed of flying to her myself, you know. Flying over this country of El Toreador. My arms are like wings and I can feel the wind cool against my face. All the stars are out and there are no clouds. Such a clear, clean darkness. It seems almost a miracle, such clarity...Below me I can make out the shapes of banana plantations and textile factories. I can tell the green of the rainforest from that of the pampas. I see the ruins of the Maya and the shapes of mountains, distant...and yet when I wake I am still here, in my cell, and I know I am lost."

D'Souza looks up at Gabriel, the whites of his eyes gleaming through the broken mask of his face and says, "My wife's name is Maria D'Souza. When I have died, you must tell her so she can come for my body."

By the time Gabriel has stumbled back along the third floor catwalk, ducking the swinging light bulbs, and down to the second floor and finally the first; by the time he has passed through the endless security checkpoints in the first floor administrative offices where the secret police lounge, still wearing sunglasses; by the time he has lit a cigarette and limped through the rain-slicked parking lot to his beat-up VW, he has managed to distance himself from D'Souza and think of other things. The car, for instance, which is a present from Pedro, now a used car salesman in Mexico City, perhaps not where he wanted to be at fifty,

but happy. It is like the shedding of some insidious skin, this thinking of other things. The car crankily shifts into gear and Gabriel turns on the headlights. He backs out under the glare of the moth-smothered lamp post and drives past the outer ring of guard stations, waving at his friend Alberto, who is good for a game of pool or poker on the weekends. The road is bumpy and ill-marked, but as Gabriel speeds down it he reaches an exhausted calm; his shoulders untense and he slides back in the seat, slouching but comfortable. Mottled shadows broken by glints of water reflect the stars. There is no traffic at this hour, the bright murals and billboards depicting El Toreador muted, rendered indistinct by a night littered with broken street lamps. Magnified by the hush of surrounding trees, the silence is unbroken, except for the chugging huff of Gabriel's VW, the even sound of which reminds him of an old Mickey Mouse alarm clock; the ticking had more than once lulled him to sleep, wedged between three brothers on a small bed. His father had been alive then, and they had been poor, although well-off compared to some families, until he'd been caught selling drugs to supplement their income. A thin, short man in a shabby black blazer and gray trousers too baggy for his legs; eyes that had once reflected laughter become as flat and gray as slate; shoeless feet a flurry of scars from working hard labor in the quarries. Mother had had to find work in a clothes factory, making bright cotton designer shirts that would be shipped off to the United States, to be sold in shopping malls with names like "Oaks" and "Shady Brook."

The silence, then, and the space, which allows Gabriel to pretend that nothing surrounds him, that the road passes through an infinite bubble encompassing the sky, and within that bubble he is the only person alive; that once he passes through the silence and space, washed clean by it, when he is home, he enters his second life. Glancing at the stars, Gabriel gets a crumpled feeling in his chest. Once, he had dreamed of flying as a career: a commercial pilot or a member of the airforce, like his grandfather. His grandfather - Ricardo Jesus de Anda - whose hands were so soft and supple it was difficult to remember that he was a hard man who had spent many nights in his MiG defending the country's borders from attack. Before the coup, his grandfather shot down three F-15s in four hours over Honduras and they gave him a medal. The next day, he was at Gabriel's house, laughing, holding a beer, and looking at the ground in embarrassment while Gabriel's mother detailed his exploits. And Gabriel had thought, What could it possibly be like to fly at such a speed, no longer bound by the earth, curving the air with the violence of your passage?

Gabriel's leg begins to throb and he remembers D'Souza saying, "When I am dead..."

He stops thinking and stares ahead, at the road. Soon he pulls into the gravel driveway of his four room house. It forms part of a state-sponsored housing project, not much different from the relocation sites made available to Indian tribes uprooted from the mountains. His house is constructed of unpainted concrete, single-story, with the gracelessness of a building block. As the VW comes to a stop, Gabriel blinks his headlights three times before turning them off, so that if Sessina is awake she will not mistake him for the police.

Gabriel knocks on the front door and then unlocks it himself, certain she is in the kitchen, preparing his meal. Inside, Gabriel can smell rice, beans, and eggs. Sessina has turned off the lights to conserve electricity and he has to orient himself by the glow of the kitchen and the television in the living room. The bedroom is off to the left. They share an outdoor bathroom with the couple in the house next door. The living room wall is half-wallpapered, half rude concrete.

"Sessina?" he says. "Are you in the kitchen?"

"Yes," comes the muffled reply. "You are late."

Gabriel unbuttons his shirt, places his guard's cap on the baroque iron hat rack. Another present from Pedro.

"A little trouble with a prisoner," Gabriel says. "Nothing to worry about."

"What?" she says as he walks into the living room. A replay of the football game is still on and the national team is up three to two, with thirty minutes to play. The green sofa calls to him, but he disciplines himself and walks into the kitchen, shielding his eyes from the angry white light of the naked bulb that hangs there.

"I said I had a little trouble with a prisoner."

Sessina stands before the stove, spatula in hand. The light illuminates her face in such a way that her beauty is almost painful to him. Her hair is black and shines a faint metallic blue, her eyes large and evenly-spaced, her nose small and slightly upturned, her lips full and liberally painted with red lipstick. She still wears the dress she wore to Garcia's Department Store in downtown Carbajal, but she has taken off her black pumps. The grace of her small feet, their contours clearly visible through her pantyhose, makes him smile. He comes close to her and touches her lightly on the shoulder.

She smiles a tired smile and says, "It was a long day at the store, too. I had three window displays to set up. We finished very late; I got home after eleven. Sit down and watch the game. I'll bring you your dinner." A peck on the cheek and back to her skillet.

Although Gabriel wants to linger, wants to say how good she looks to

him,
into
now
half
to
Pedro
onto
Sessina
rice,
in
no?"
again.
a
The
the

he walks into the living room. The sofa springs are old and he sinks the cushions with a grateful sigh. His back muscles untense and only now does he really feel sleepy, lazy, relaxed. He lets the low hum of the announcer's voice, broken by moments of excitement, lead him into a doze.

After eighteen years, Gabriel is still bewildered that Sessina agreed to marry him, although at the time he must have appeared to be a man who would make something of his life. But then had come the leg injury, having whisked him away for a "little bachelor fun" a month before the marriage. While Gabriel was still in Mexico, El Toreador staged his successful coup and his grandfather was stripped of his rank, forced to retire because he had refused to join El Toreador.

"Stay in Mexico," Pedro pleaded. "Don't go back. I'm not going back. No one can make me go back. It will be Guatemala all over again. Don't go back."

But he had gone back. He remembered getting off the plane and walking onto the escalators at the airport and, seeing the black-red banners of El Toreador, realizing it was not his country anymore. Until he saw Sessina waiting for him. And then it didn't matter.

"Here you are," Sessina says, and hands Gabriel a steaming plate of beans, and huevos rancheros. From beside him, Sessina kneads his back just the right spot while the game drones on.

"Thank you," he says, and begins to eat.

"What was the trouble with the prisoner?"

"He wanted me to get a message to his wife," he says between bites of food.

"And what did you say?"

"No, of course."

"Did you have to say no?"

"He's a prisoner, Sessina."

"What did he do to get put into prison?"

"Traitorous things. A traitor to the country. An enemy of the state."

"Oh. That explains why your back is so tight. Was it difficult to say no?"

Gabriel shrugs, then shouts, "Yes!" when the national team scores again.

The television blips to a news brief: more bad news about the economy, three murders in the southern city of Baijala were still unsolved, and a boy had poured a pot of boiling water over a puppy and felt no guilt.

The last item makes Gabriel feel sick inside.

"How terrible."

"People are terrible," murmurs his wife. "You could find another job." They have discussed this before, it is old news, and Gabriel does not answer.

Sessina's hands draw larger and slower circles across his back. Soon the hands stop moving altogether.

"Sessina?"

Gabriel finishes his meal and puts his plate next to him on the sofa.

He

carefully lifts Sessina's arms away from him and sets them down in her lap. He turns off the television and walks into the kitchen holding the dishes, puts them in the sink.

A rosary hangs on the wall over the faucet, on a nail, and next to that,

a

photograph of his grandfather, beside his MiG, smiling with his wide

mouth

so that his tan, leathery forehead crinkles up even further. Sunglasses hide his eyes.

Gabriel turns away and comes back to the couch. Sessina still lies

there,

her mouth half-open, her breaths shallow, the top two buttons of her wrinkled white blouse unbuttoned.

When they married, Sessina had aspirations of a modeling career. Now

she

dresses up the porcelain-perfect mannequins that decorate the window displays of Garcia's Department Store. In the bustle and fatigue of day-to-day living, the dream had slipped away from her, fragment by fragment, until she must have forgotten, or believed she had never

dreamt

of such a thing.

And does she, Gabriel asks himself, stare into my eyes and think the

same

thoughts, and there we both are, caught in moments that trickle away endlessly, lost in the inertia of doing the same rituals over and over? Looking down at Sessina, her beauty remote from him, a movie image, not flesh and blood, Gabriel knows he still loves her - a sudden intake of breath when he sees her at night, a palpitation of his heart, the sense that even caught in the morass of simply living she makes it

worthwhile.

Yet there is such distance, as if, were he to reach out and touch her,

he

would find that she is really miles away.

D'Souza, pressed up against the bars of his prison cell. Might Sessina have met his wife in Garcia's shopping for clothes or perfume? How difficult would it be to simply whisper, "Your husband is in prison." Gabriel gathers Sessina up, a feather weight in his arms, and she locks her arms around his neck and, half-asleep, nuzzles up against him. Not bothering to turn on the light, Gabriel takes her into their bedroom,

past

the chest of drawers with the photographs of her mother and father,

Pedro,

and Gabriel's mother; another of his grandfather, months before his

death.

He lays Sessina on the bed and undresses her. Instead of turning the covers down, he slips out of his shoes, sheds his trousers and

unbuttons

three buttons on his shirt. He pulls it over his head and drops it onto the floor to join the pants.

Sessina has curled up on her side and so he slowly gets into bed

opposite

her, slowly makes his body fit the contours of her body. He puts a hand

on

her breasts and kisses her freckled back. Her skin feels warm to his touch. She makes a purring sound and reaches out with one hand to

stroke

his hair. He runs a hand along the side of her hips and she arches her

back until his calves come to rest against her buttocks. She is very hot; he wonders if she is a fallen angel, come streaking down from the sky, to be so hot. Such a beautiful stranger in his bed. As he is about to fall asleep, Gabriel hears the sudden whisper of rain, and then an echo, and then a thousand voices, a speechless, rumbling patter. The storm will come in the morning, he knows, and he cocks his head to one side, as if listening beyond the sound of falling water for some other sound entirely.

Waking to the patter of rain against the roof, Gabriel looks groggily at the clock, which blinks "1:04 p.m." Sessina left for her job at the department store hours ago. The bedroom window has fogged over and he smells the rising sweetness of orchids laden with moisture, bromeliads nearly choked with it. Drains gurgle with water. Gabriel rises with a half-groan, half-yawn, his neck muscles aching.

His mouth is dry; he feels parched, weak. Eyes blurry with sleep, he trudges out to the communal bathroom to take a shower, then dresses and eats a quick lunch. At three o'clock, he leaves the house, hurrying to the car under the shelter of a tattered gray umbrella. His shoes are soaked by the time he closes the VW's door. The engine starts reluctantly when he turns the key, then growls, as if the rain has done it good. The drive to the prison takes no time at all under the gray-black sky, blurred further by his faulty wipers, so that the concrete blocks of houses, the shiny metal of cars, and the sharp straightness of trees become patternless streaks of green and brown.

As Gabriel passes through the prison gates, he begins to discard thoughts of Sessina, Pedro, the news on the television. He begins to think of his rounds, the fifteen minute breaks he will have as the night progresses, how he will have to speak with the janitors about cleaning the third floor catwalk. He knows that the ceiling leaks and that moisture will bleed through the walls, bringing with it lizards and cockroaches. In the administrative offices, Gabriel passes the secret policemen.

They are frozen in the same positions as the night before, only now three of them smoke and one man gazes out a window at the cliff face and the downpour falling onto the black sand beach below. The sea bellows and shrieks against the rock.

These men always look the same - outwardly relaxed, but poised so exactly that Gabriel believes them guilty of a hidden tension, as if, full to bursting with secrets and mystery, they must sit just so, their clothes pressed perfectly so they resemble figures in a wax museum. What new secrets do they possess that they did not know yesterday?

Gabriel thinks as he checks in at the front desk.

Administrative work awaits Gabriel and he spends six hours sorting and filing various forms in a ten-by-ten room with flickering fluorescent lights. He can feel the pressure of the sea colliding against the

impervious rock: the crunch of waves, maddened beyond reason, so compressed and thick that something, somewhere, must give way, the entire world unmoored.

His friend Alberto - short and swarthy and enjoyably foul-mouthed - enters three or four times to share a joke and a cigarette, but for the most part Gabriel is alone with his aching leg and the red tape of El Toreador's bureaucracy. As Gabriel places one file atop the next, one piece of paper atop another, he thinks of D'Souza's face pressed up against the bars, and then of his father's face.

Gabriel cannot remember many times that his father was not in prison, pressed up against those bars. The wane smile. The sad eyes. Gabriel can remember the feel of his mother's hand in his during those visits, the hand progressively thinner and more bony, until it seemed she was only made of bone, and then even less substantial: a gossamer strand, a dress blowing, empty, in the wind. She had survived her husband by less than three months and Gabriel knew that his incarceration, his death in jail, had diminished her, so that she had died not so much from a broken heart as from a sense of shame that burrowed beneath the skin and poisoned her every action.

The sheets of paper he collates seem as thin as his family history, the only depth provided by Pedro, who once caroused with him around a Merida traffic circle and crashed joyously into oncoming cars. Lucky Pedro, well-fed and sequestered in Mexico.

At last, Gabriel has filed the last file and he begins his rounds with the common prisoners on the first and second floors: the murderers and rapists and bank robbers.

The wind buffets the prison walls; Gabriel thinks he can almost feel the floor shift beneath his feet as if moved by that wind. Or perhaps he is just tired and afraid. Afraid of what?

Lightning strikes nearby, followed by the boom of thunder, and the lights flutter violently. The beach will be drowning in water soon and only the cliff will stop the water from rising further and flooding the interior.

The rush of water is almost a second pulse.

When Gabriel reaches the third floor, he is out of breath, in darkness lit by the bare bulbs. They swing like low-strung stars, blinding him with their glare. The janitors have yet to clean the mess and he moves through it cautiously.

The guard at the entrance to the political prisoners' section is not on his stool.

The hairs on Gabriel's arms rise in apprehension. Has the man abandoned his duties or gone to the bathroom? Gabriel hesitates. Perhaps he

should

return to the first floor?

Instead, ignoring his fear, he moves to the first cell. He shines his flashlight on the bed. He shines his flashlight in the corners and

under

the bed. The prisoner is gone.

The flashlight shakes in Gabriel's hand. He feels nauseous. Perhaps the secret police have taken the prisoner for questioning and not bothered

to

inform the guards. Perhaps the third floor guard accompanied the secret policemen.

But when he comes to the next cell, it too is empty. The next cell is

also

empty, and the next, and as each new cell is revealed to be empty,

Gabriel

walks faster and faster, until he jogs and then runs, sweeping the flashlight over each bunk as he passes it. No one. No one at all. They

are

all gone.

Panting, sweating, Gabriel comes to the last cell: Roberto D'Souza's

cell.

The cell is lit by the moon shining into the window: a huge burning

white

globe shrouded by the torn ends of purpling storm clouds. Gabriel drops his flashlight to the floor. His mouth opens and closes. He does not

even

know what he is trying to say.

D'Souza floats next to the window that faces the sea, his eyes tightly shut and his arms outstretched like wings.

There is a raw churning in Gabriel's stomach. He wonders if, perhaps,

he

is still lying next to Sessina in their bed.

He pulls out his nightstick. He takes the cell key from his belt ring

and

unlocks the door.

D'Souza continues to float next to the window. The wind sends his long hair streaming out behind him.

"Come down!" Gabriel shouts. And, in a lower voice, "Come down."

D'Souza does not open his eyes. His body is still scarred and pitted

with

the excesses of his torturers, but the wounds are clean and unmarked by red or black. D'Souza floats toward the window until his head is

pressed

up against it.

D'Souza melts or wriggles through the window. It happens so slowly that Gabriel should be able to tell what has occurred, but he can't; it is

as

if he blinked and missed it. Gabriel runs to the window.

In the light of the moon, he sees D'Souza and dozens of other

prisoners,

washed clean by the bracing wind, the stinging rain. Their open eyes

are

filled with wonder and as they dip, gyrate, and glide through the sky, Gabriel can hear distant laughter, faint and fading. As they fly

further

away, they appear as swathes and strips and rags of darkness swimming against the silvery white of the moon. He stares until he cannot see D'Souza, just the shapes of bodies moving like dolphins through water.

Watching their flight, Gabriel feels a weight in his heart, an

emptiness,

a loss, and a yearning. He shuts his eyes so tightly they hurt and
wills
that his spirit too should fly up into the moonlight, into the clouds,
the
torrential rain, and the wind. But as he wills this, as his body starts
to
become lighter than air, than life, he sees the images he has sought to
block out: the scalpels edged with blood, the secret police gathered
around their victims, the rubber gloves and the wires.
When Gabriel opens his eyes, he is still on the ground, in the empty
cell,
with the door open.
Gabriel stands there for a long time before he takes off his guard's
cap
and lets it fall from his hands to the floor. He walks downstairs to
the
first floor, where the secret police no longer lounge, but instead run
back and forth, run into each other, scream, shout, and gesticulate
wildly. This secret is too big for their minds to hold. Boots clatter
against cement runways. Automatic rifles are loaded with a desperate
chut-chut.
Gabriel walks past them and out into the rain. The rain feels good
against
his face. It dribbles into the corners of his mouth and he tastes its
sweetness. Above, the prisoners and, ahead, from the parking lot,
guards
and secret police, soaking wet and strangely silent, shoot at the
prisoners as if their sanity depends on it.
Ignoring them, Gabriel gets into his car and drives off, past the empty
observation posts, past the twenty-four hour light, past the useless
barbed wire, past the ludicrous outer fences, and onto the twenty mile
stretch of road that leads home. He shivers and his shirt sticks to his
skin, but he feels the cold only as a numbness that has no temperature.
The night along the roadside no longer feels like an infinite bubble;
it
is static, dead.
Finally, he drives past his neighbors' ugly concrete houses and into
the
driveway of his own home. He gets out of the car and stands in the
rain,
but it no longer invigorates him. It makes him tired and old. He walks
to
the door, opens it, and shuts it behind him almost as an afterthought.
"Sessina?" he says, expecting no reply and hearing none.
He walks into the kitchen. Beside the stove he finds a message: "Dinner
is
in the refrigerator." He does not look in the refrigerator.
Instead, he unbuttons his shirt and takes it off, letting it fall to
the
floor and, as he makes his way into the bedroom, he frees himself from
shoes, socks, pants, underwear, so that when he enters he is naked. He
does not bother to towel himself dry before he gets under the covers
with
Sessina. Ignoring the photograph of his grandfather that stares
accusingly
in his direction, he snuggles up next to her and finds that he trembles
against her skin, his heartbeat as rapid as if he had just run three
miles. Clutching her to him, he is relieved to hear her pulse slow and
even beneath the pressure of his hands, having feared in some
irrational

way that she might prove to be a phantom. But she is here, and she is real.

Sessina stirs in her sleep and murmurs, "Gabriel."

"Yes."

"How was the prison?"

Gabriel's mouth curls into a smile and a frown at the same time.

"I...I saw a miracle. A miracle," he whispers, and now the tears come softly as he holds her. "He flew. He flew before my eyes...and I could

not

follow him."

But she is asleep again, lost in her own dreams, and does not seem to

hear

him. No matter. Soon he too is drifting off to sleep, so tired and confused that he cannot think of anything and yet is thinking of everything, all at once, for the first time.

Afterword

Fly?"

"Flight..." was inspired by a song by Freedy Johnson called "Can You

which meshed in my mind with a Latin American landscape. At first, the story was to be from the perspective of the political prisoner, but I

got

stuck writing it from that angle. So, instead, I wrote a poem from that perspective (which, first published in The Silver Web, oddly enough won

a

Rhysling Award and was reprinted in a Nebula Awards anthology):

Flight Is For Those Who Have Not Yet Crossed Over

You never thought

it could happen this way,

in a Guatemalan prison

among men armed

with rubber hoses, scalpels,

piano wire, and propaganda;

men who scream at you

to tell what you cannot tell,

until you mark your days by

the visits of your interrogators,

muttered prayers to God,

and the screams which echo

down the hall.

In a dream on a moonless night

it came to you from beyond the window,

mixed with the smell of palm trees,

sea salt, and rotting wood;

it came to you like a whisper

from your dead lover,

an exhalation of her breath.

You woke sprawled against

the wall opposite your bed

and the guard said, "Dios mio!"

It was a miracle, a visitation,

the work of saints or devils.

You had flown around the cell

like an eagle, your arms

outstretched, fingers reaching

for the sky.

Miraculous, and yet you

laughed along with the guard,

because to fly in your cell

cannot save you, because

the only flight you desire
is the flight of an angel,
spiraling upward, freed
from the sharp, clarifying
edge of pain.

Writing the poem made it impossible for me to write a story from the prisoner's perspective. Besides, I suddenly saw the possibilities in writing a kind of every-man as the guard character: someone caught up

in

these horrible events, who can be blamed for his inaction, but has

little

recourse for escape or for doing anything about the situation. To accentuate the emphasis on his character, I removed any references to a particular country in the story and made the political prisoner an important but more minor character. I also wanted to contrast/compare

his

life at the prison with his life at his house. Finally, I needed a miracle--something which would jolt this every-man out of his tunnel vision, and which would simultaneously create the need for faith in the reader. If the reader does not buy the flying scene, then I've failed

in

character development, because the reader will only buy into that scene

if

I've effectively (for that reader) portrayed the main

character--because

at that point, we want to believe in his story.

Readers and critics have been evenly divided over whether this story works, based on the "miracle" which some readers can believe in and

some

cannot. A 50-50 split is more than I could have hoped for.

© Jeff VanderMeer 1998, 1999

"Flight Is For Those Who Have Not Yet Crossed Over" first appeared in

The

Third Alternative.