

A LITTLE JAVANESE

ANDRÉ MANGEOT lives and works in Cambridge. He has published two well-received poetry collections: *Natural Causes* (Shoestring, 2003) and *Mixer* (Egg Box, 2005). He was a prizewinner in the 2006 Peterloo and Wigtown/Scottish National poetry competitions and is a member of the performance group, The Joy of Six. *A Little Javanese* (Salt, 2008) is his first book of short stories. A second volume will be published in 2009.

Also by André Mangeot

Natural Causes (Shoestring, 2003)

Mixer (Egg Box, 2005)

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For Alan Ross (1922—2001)

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MADISON AND PENN

HARRIS STOOD WATCHING the far end of the compartment, the connecting door, and through it the next carriage. Every surface, each window and screw, juddered and shook, striving to break loose. His gaze played back along the walls, the ceiling. The graffiti was everywhere: formless coils applied with a spray-gun. The longer he looked, the more it resembled an alien script. Or like watching language disintegrate.

He wondered how it would be, down here, were the coupling to fail. The darkness, the heat, the diminishing air. Twenty-six people, he'd counted. Most, he assumed, strangers to each other. Would even panic or fear induce them to speak, acknowledge their neighbour? No, he thought, they'd keep it to themselves. Expire quietly as the oxygen thinned, what passed for their dignity intact. In fact, it occurred to him, survival rarely depended on

oneself. From moment by moment one existed, or ceased to, because of chances like this, the randomness which threw people together. The selfless, the courageous, the doctors . . . one never knew. They might be here, they might be one carriage along.

Swaying, adjusting his hold on the rail, Harris glanced at his watch. 4:02. Dully he recalled altering the dial on the plane. By how much, though? Time was effectively meaningless until he remembered. He yawned, rubbed his eyes.

The South Ferry—Bronx. A main line. The cars had to be full. At least till the Switchblade Angels and Love Vigilantes—names carved in the overhead panel—slipped after midnight from the sidewalks above. Right now he'd almost have welcomed them. After only two stops he was tiring of these faces, their masks of identical vacancy. And fatigue had deadened his professional eye: acute enough, usually, to determine income, occupation. Thank God, he thought, the lecture was already prepared, secure in the case at his side.

They hurtled on through the tunnel, one more bubble of wind. With listless carnality he perused the female passengers. A gum-chewing punk tuned in to her iPod briefly held his attention; then his thoughts turned guiltily to home. He'd promised, dammit, to call Ruth when he landed. How could he forget? He cursed again, half aloud. No one could hear, of course. Had he yelled in this din he doubted one head would have stirred.

He tried to calculate where precisely they were, under which street. At his elbow was a vandalised diagram of the

route: several stations erased, torn away. From the tip of Manhattan he traced the line as best he could along Varick . . . Sheridan Square . . . yes, somewhere here, between Madison and Penn. He wanted out at the next stop, regardless. Any sidewalk, however ice-bound, seemed suddenly preferable. He longed to look up and see open sky. Wherever he emerged he could always take a cab. Deciding this, he felt better.

The door he'd been watching slid sharply aside, snapped shut. It was possible to pass freely between carriages, though no one had appeared to do so. A vacuum, he thought, a tilt in the bend. For they were rushing headlong now, somehow too fast. Then—down the aisle, a long way down, between legs drawn back—an elderly, dreadlocked negro rolled into view, a narrow trolley like a primitive skateboard propelling him forward. Little higher than the seats, his shoulders were so broad he was virtually square. He appeared to be sitting, though below the groin there was nothing: the rest of him simply vanished.

On he came, plaited hair swinging like frayed grey rope. Shaken from the lethargy into which he had fallen, Harris became aware, amid the uproar, that this movement alone was effortless, silent. The train's manic oscillations were here transformed into balance; a force both graceful and new. Still no one spoke. But where before their muteness had been individual, self-contained, he sensed now a current run between them, an air of conspiracy. Withdrawal was suddenly a weapon, one they agreed mutually to employ.

The beggar (for whatever else he might be, this was not in dispute) held up a tin as he moved, but his gaze remained distant and fixed, dead ahead. Only the camouflage jacket, the still-polished medal fixed to the lapel, suggested where the rest of him lay. And all at once, as the man approached him, Harris was touched by the strangest abstraction. So vividly was the image before him that he could not be certain he imagined it . . . the gangway dissolving to a swamp-pale channel, reeds parting each side of the men as they waded. Their upper bodies alone broke the water. On its sharp, reflective surface each trunk appeared to glide without sound. Raised at arm's length, their rifles were the only thing dry . . .

As the man drew beside him, Harris tensed. Don't get involved, he was thinking. The others are right. Show me a land without poor, without maimed. He looked hurriedly to the occupied seats, the drawn-in heels, paperbacks and newsprint shielding each face. Fella, he thought, pulling his bags out the way, you're wasting your time. Forget dollars. Even pity's in short supply.

Next to him the guy manoeuvred himself on the board, was reaching for the door to the next carriage. Involuntarily, Harris leaned across, grasped the handle for him and pulled.

In the blast of wind the huge shoulders half turned. The bloodshot, feverish eyes played over him for an instant, without hostility or gratitude; indeed, there was an emptiness there that led Harris to doubt they registered him at all.

Without warning the bulbs flickered again then expired altogether. In the smother of darkness, Harris winced at the screaming of steel, the visceral fumes hard in his face . . .

Once the lights rose, the door had slid to. The contrast was like silence. It was only then that Harris's fingers encountered his wallet, deep in his coat. The touch of leather was strangely unpleasant, the skin warm as though alive, and he removed his hand quickly. Spread his feet and braced himself as the brakes were applied. A great force pushed him back against the curved wall, held him fast.

Free of the tunnel he bent to read the name on the platform.

TIMES SQUARE, it said.

HOPE

I FIRST CAME to the valley ten years ago. My wife was still alive then, though seriously ill. We found a house in the village where things were all on one floor, which made the wheelchair possible.

It was a fine summer. Most mornings we drove somewhere local—a château or market, a view she'd seen the day before and wanted to paint. The days were hot though, and by noon she would tire. After lunch, once she was sleeping, I often went for a walk. Never far, just round the village. But I took to it from the start. It felt a good place—I suppose because Hope was happy there—and on those walks, for the first time really, I began to look to the future.

Montpeyroux has its own château, so called, though in truth it's just a large country house. (We'd enquired locally about seeing inside but were told it was privately owned. 'Ah, the old lady,' people would say. 'She keeps to herself.')

It's a beautiful building, perfectly proportioned: a simple

T-shape of weathered sandstone, each corner flanked by small circular towers. The turrets seem to grow naturally out of the trees. A lived-in place, not a monument. Still, one couldn't mistake the signs of neglect. The overgrown gardens; gaps pitting the roof where tiles were absent or broken; the flaking shutters and stonework. It was almost a sin. I used to stop in the lane by the tall iron gates, always closed, and idly imagine, if the *château* were mine, how I'd put things to rights.

It was a lunatic thought, of course. Yet each time I passed it recurred, took root a little deeper. It's difficult to convey how seductive the atmosphere was there, in the warm shade, disturbed only by the cooing of pigeons.

I decided it would be callous to speak of this to Hope — though such *folie de grandeur* might have amused her. From time to time, naturally, we'd discussed what would happen, afterwards; what I would do. She insisted — with that forcefulness she kept to the end — that not to discuss it was 'ridiculous, unhealthy.' Still, this was something I found harder than her. In those conversations some protective mechanism took over: I developed, though it shames me to confess it, a way of not really being there. Likewise when we drove out past the *château* and she'd say, as she did more than once: 'Such a pity . . . I'd love to look round,' I'd smile and agree but leave it at that.

Three months later, back in Paris, Hope died.

Does it seem odd that I chose to return the following year; alone, to the very same house? I suppose it must. But as

I've tried to make clear, all the memories I had of our time there were positive. In our apartment on the Faubourg St Honoré everything of Hope's, even her scent, remained. I touched nothing. So why, in that unfamiliar village, in those few simple rooms, did I feel closer to her? That, I would say, is the strange thing.

But the château, too, continued to haunt me. To discover more about it became an obsession. I didn't understand, but never questioned, why I felt driven this way. I took for granted there could be no reason; that on occasion one is simply compelled.

From here and there I gleaned what I could about the châtelaine. I had never seen her myself but then nor, it transpired, had most of the village, not for many years. Those I asked—the butcher, a natural gossip; the barman at Hector's—would shake their heads, click their tongues and confess it was all a sad story . . . Notwithstanding her enviable home, they claimed the old lady had no proper means of support; that she survived only by selling, piece by piece, the heirlooms around her. Portraits, tapestries, manuscripts, furniture. A large van with Parisian plates was alleged to appear now and then.

'I'm telling you,' said the postman one morning, 'there's nothing left in there now! Just a chair in front of the fireplace, a lit-bateau in one corner. It's true.—She left a shutter ajar. Good God, it's a scandal! All that history . . . gone! Someone should lock her away!'

It seemed to me the poor creature had achieved this herself, but I kept my peace.

I couldn't stay long before business took me north again. As a young man I used to baulk at admitting what I did for a living. I daresay a certain stigma remains, but I'm past caring now. I owned the abattoir at Clichy, the largest in Paris. My father began as an apprentice there, aged fifteen; just him and three others in a couple of sheds. This was 1904. Twenty years later it was the biggest slaughterhouse around and he was the boss. He retired in the early Sixties; I took over after my national service.

Before leaving the village this second time I stopped by the house of the notaire, anxious to broach the matter informally. I told him of my interest in the château. Had he any idea, I enquired, if the châtelaine had a family; if, at some future date, the property might be available? The fellow prevaricated at first, treating my approach with the disdain it probably deserved. However, he did suggest I 'keep an ear to the ground'. He hinted at 'certain debts' and 'the sorry state of the fabric' and said that he knew of no immediate family. I thanked him.

'Should matters change . . . I mean, should there be any, you know, sudden development . . . I wonder if you might call me? I'd be indebted.'

He took my card, glanced at it non-committally. Nonetheless his parting words seemed to leave the door open. 'It's sad to see the place as it is. Time someone cared for it.'

When I returned, the following June, nothing appeared to have changed. Again — it was like celebrating a new anniversary — I could feel my wife's presence in the little house on the square. Once more I did very little but renew

acquaintances, in the process eating more than I should. Among those who invited me to dine with them were the Courbets.

They live just across the valley, close to the most visited site in the area, the Château d'Yquem. This was the family seat of the Montaignes, among them the great statesman and essayist. Hope and I visited there a few years ago: the tower where Michel de Montaigne did most of his writing, immuring himself toward the end of his life, is faithfully maintained. Indeed, how can I forget that day? Faced by a shrewish guide who muttered audibly to the ticket-man that really, she wasn't paid to cope with such disabilities, Hope sent me back to the car for her sticks. Then with a smile of steely politeness, pushing up from the chair, she assured the woman: 'Don't worry, I don't expect you to carry me.' And with me behind as insurance, she proceeded to mount the narrow stone steps that twisted up within the tower. The climb must have taken a good twenty minutes and caused her much pain. In any other circumstance she might have let me carry her myself, but once Hope's mind was made up she wouldn't be denied. I felt torn between pride and anger; sharing her pleasure at the sour-mouthed bitch being forced to follow beneath us, step by agonizing step; but all the while wincing at the effort it cost her. Finally, at the top, we reached the tiny chapel and bedroom-cum-study; the cased manuscripts; Montaigne's saddle. I said to the guide, by this point stonily silent: 'It's alright, you can start now.'

And that evening Hope held no bitterness. Over a bottle of Margaux she made fun of the episode, mimicking her

own bloody-mindedness as much as her appalling tormentor, until we were crying with laughter . . .

I recalled some of this at the Courbet's. They are a charming couple. Pi re, a great-nephew of the artist, imports rugs and kelims from the East. There were several other guests. We passed a most pleasant evening and I left around midnight. Even at that hour the air was heavy and warm. With the car windows open I drove back through the valley, delighting in the stillness, the gnarled and silvery vines speeding past, the big white disc of the moon. Above and directly before me stood the small and beautiful ch teau I coveted; and by chance, when I glanced in the mirror, there on the ridge behind was its famous but forbidding counterpart, the ascetic's retreat, its sharp black battlements piercing the skyline . . .

It was then that the engine began to misfire. Quite without warning. It was a newish Citroen and had given no trouble. I peered mystified at the gauges (knowing I had plenty of petrol) but they offered no clue. I could only grip the wheel tighter and curse. A series of lurches ensued; then, all at once, no sound but that of the wheels, gliding to a halt.

There was nothing to be done. I'm no good mechanically—even lifting the bonnet would have wasted my time. Happily on such a night, with the house no more than a mile or so further, the walk ahead promised no great ordeal. I managed to push the car crookedly onto the verge before locking up (a Parisian habit), then set off. The crickets sawed away all about me; now and then an owl would shriek from the wooded hillside, the trees

round the château. I loosened my tie and carried my jacket. I found myself smiling as I walked, experiencing a curious content. The valley seemed becalmed. So still, so lovely, it was almost unreal.

The road began to bend and climb round the château grounds, leading up to the village. I'd begun to breathe harder, could feel the sweat on my forehead and back. Suddenly to my left a gap opened in the foliage (winter storms had accounted for several trees) and there, like a dream, was the château: the whole façade close above me, half-face, gilded by moonlight.

I can't say how long I remained, gazing up in delight, before my eye was drawn to that far upper window. So dim was the glow there—yellowish, anaemic, diffuse—that I thought I was mistaken at first. Then, seeing it pulse and fade as I watched, a shiver of excitement ran through me. Might I, at last, catch a glimpse of the occupant? I focused harder on the window, afraid even to blink. And shortly I realised the light's source was actually moving: first up to, then away from the glass. The rhythm was hypnotic. I could see neither shadow nor silhouette, but my mind ran ahead. It must be a lamp or candle to produce this effect; in all likelihood, if she'd not paid her bills, the electricity was cut. I pictured a bent and white-haired old woman, shuffling distractedly through her empty rooms.

I'd actually turned away, convinced of all this, when a faint sound from above realerted me. I looked back.

The window had opened.

I stood utterly still, scarcely breathing. A tall glass lantern now stood on the sill. I made out the hand that held it, a white wrist-length of sleeve. Then, leaning out to push the old latticed frame wider still, the other arm appeared. And finally the face.

A man's face. Middle-aged, long dark hair, disheveled, as though roused from sleep.

I heard the air release from my lungs. Shock? Disappointment? Confusion? What did I feel?

Even without moonlight I'd have made out his features quite clearly, lit from below by the lamp. He had a full beard, dark, neatly trimmed; a high forehead from which the matted locks straggled down to his collar-less shirt. For some while he gazed fixedly out at the valley—I could draw that profile from memory: the wide brow, long nose, bearded chin. Calmly he scanned the night sky, pausing now and then as though engaged by particular stars. Finally he leaned back and took in deep draughts of the sultry night air. Then, lifting the lamp and withdrawing inside, he pulled the window to. Some moments later the light was extinguished.

I stood for a while, looking up at the now-darkened room. Moving on, I felt ill at ease. Who was he? What was he doing there? I would have taken him as a guest of the châtelaine had I not known of her aversion to visitors. And something in his appearance still troubled me; perhaps the initial intensity of his gaze. My immediate thought was to call the police, fearful some harm might have come to her. But by the time I reached the house I'd talked myself out of precipitant action. I could hear my

sobriety being questioned; my reasons for stopping where I had. This was merely weakness, I accept. Nonetheless I resolved to wait until morning. Reflect on the matter, perhaps visit the gendarmerie in person.

Once I awoke, in fact, my first call was to the garage. Shortly afterwards Gaston came by with his tow-truck and picked up the keys. Then, with some coffee, I spent an hour or so at the table, writing. I found I could describe the man, the sequence of his actions, my own feelings, to the smallest detail. This convinced me. Around noon, with the notes in my pocket, I set out via Gaston's repair-yard. He came toward me, wiping his hands on a rag.

'A right mess,' shaking his head. 'Time you traded her in.'

I must have looked at him aghast for he grinned and said quickly, '*Faites pas de souci*, just fooling! Your fuel-feed was blocked . . . a new filter, that's all. Carburettor's getting a blow down right now. Oh, and your ignition-line's worn. Best replace it while she's here.'

'Right,' I said. 'Well . . .'

'I'll give her a run once we're through . . .' He looked at his watch. 'Say about three?'

Back in the square people were going quietly about their business. Daylight, normality had returned. For a minute or so I stood there, anxious to convince myself nothing untoward could have happened. But the nagging doubt wouldn't leave me. If she was hurt, say, who would ever discover her, summon help? Passing the Bar de Hector, I went in for a glass of Dutch courage.

The place was full of regulars—burnt men from the fields, a few of the shopkeepers, just closed for the afternoon. I had a Ricard at the counter. Maurice Treufet stood next to me, director of the local pressing plant. We fell into conversation and almost at once I realised I was after a second opinion. I don't know him well, but he's one of those people, quite often strangers, whom you confide in instinctively. His natural reserve fails to obscure a sharp intelligence and, I believed, an open mind.

When I confessed there was something I'd like to discuss with him, Treufet replied that he was about to take lunch. Would I join him?

I accepted with pleasure and he drove us back to his house. It lies about a mile from the village, close to the press and the bottling plant, but down a rough track. A new and comfortable bungalow, masked by a line of young poplars.

Fortunately Mme Treufet, a loquacious woman who more than makes up for her husband, appeared to be out. Treufet raided the fridge for foie gras and cheese; tossed a quick salad together. And we weren't short of wine.

He listened as we ate—his only comment an occasional frown or smile as he chewed. I omitted nothing from my account.

'Well?' I concluded. 'What do you think? Is she alright? Should I tell the police?'

My host dabbed at his mouth with a napkin. 'One thing's for certain,' he said finally. 'The old woman hates guests. But truly, *m'sieur*, I don't think we need worry. This fellow you describe—he's not unknown around here.'

'I'm sorry?' I frowned. 'I don't quite follow. You mean . . . a vagrant of some kind? He squats there?'

Treufet smiled to himself. 'Yes, in a way.' He pushed back his chair and got up. 'Bear with me a minute. I've something to show you.'

When he returned he was carrying a large ledger-like book of some age, bound in dark leather. 'You came to the right man,' he observed, turning the pages as he sat again. It appeared to be some kind of scrapbook: a *mélange* of photographs, cuttings, handwritten text. 'Something of a hobby of mine, the Montaignes.' Treufet glanced up. 'You didn't know that?'

'No idea,' I shrugged.

'Interesting,' he muttered. 'Ah, here we are.' He passed the open book across, tapping a photo with his finger. 'Seem familiar?'

Half-prepared for a photo of the man I had seen, what confronted me was a copy of an old engraving, clearly photographed from another book. The caption underneath read: 'Auguste. Le frère de Montaigne. 1536-98.'

'Good heavens,' I admitted, studying the face closely, 'it's quite uncanny. You wouldn't believe they could look so alike. These old portraits . . . I've never really trusted them but . . .'

'They?' Treufet interjected.

'This fellow here and the man that I saw. I mean, if they're related, why is our friend . . .'

'Forgive me, you misunderstand. Auguste had no children. Michel had six, but none survived beyond infancy. No, they're not related. Not exactly.'