

From *Cannonball* (a novel)

It is my brother I would speak of – I will call him that – though I begin with the Scrolls. How they made it through by water, as our people said they would who reportedly at their peril had slid them like rolled-up maps into a capsule – for in a way they *were* “maps” (though all Legend) – and sent them on their way underground secured from those who would have misused them. A great find, it was said, a weapon in the war. Yet the Scrolls floating hundreds of miles under the deserts from En Gedi, even Gaza eastward along a web of roughly horizontal wells, like missives arriving then with such long-range accuracy of time and place, proved less stunning on that day I record than the apparition on a diving board himself all too solid and familiar as the pool was notorious and strange. Suddenly here was my friend, *my* find – my borderline Chinese so far from our home – in the depths of a Middle Eastern palace standing immense and unlikely above waters put there once for a tyrant to swim, dive into, own, withhold, and worse.

It is my friend I frame, *my* find, found and lost, from the neighborhood of another desert himself not Mesopotamian or American (though he wished). Border Chinese large enough of body and of heart for three potentates or persons, quite recently a vagabond teen in the public pools of a Southern California city who, ineligible to serve, still went to war, tracked me to that palace or was lured, large soul.

Speak of what you know, it's said. Because you were there. With a company piece of junk, an Army video cam not neutral but more yours than your hand holding it, expected to catch the scene as if your job is all you need to do. At one level, the arrival of the Scrolls I had been told to keep to myself. As if that were doing something. Yet at the crucial moment a dive exploding off a sixteen-foot-long American-made springboard, someone I knew – a friend, I trust. Which largely escapes those at poolside humid, echoing – the nearly naked at their recreation, civilian, brass, in that still intact showplace of the capital's outskirts, one face, chin, set of eyes I thought I recognized if I could only recall his job – faintly like a teacher long ago? biology in the eyes, calculus in the heart? - - and a few plain-vanilla American women and men in camouflage fatigues (one in an old collector's-item flak vest, at least didn't probably have to share it) back near the pool's walls garlanded with mosaic scenes and Arabic codes, fingering grainy butts of holstered .45s or packing M4 carbines ideal for close-quarter potshots 'case something happens. Which was surely not the dive, left somehow above the deposed tyrant's pool as if it might end there, a second thought.

Though I, a house-to-house Specialist (slow on the uptake, I've been told) armed with what you see plus an equipment bag, fall back now on some other slowness of the diver my friend mid-air twenty feet above the water and more than that above what was to happen, feeling it like a wound in my chest. While time, of which there seems so little between springboard and water, instant and instant, all but ignores this unlikely diver huge as a Sumo wrestler in my own depth of field but only I knew how young up there on the old-fashioned cocoa-matting.

Why the diver came to make that dive in that place, a palace pool, I would know before I'm done. You know already, you *always* knew, I think he says (he could be right), this matchless, often absent friend, my bond, my shadow enlarged – a grandly begun, almost incomplete dive or aiming to meet the sounds the increasing Rock music temblors rising from under this pool. An unidentified arrival up there on the board other armed

watchers see the diver as this heavy out of nowhere, Asian or GI -- how did he get in? through the ceiling painted with lyrebirds and Egyptian vultures, arabesques of paradise with magenta wings?) – hailing from up there this witness his friend it seemed seeing me who aims a standard video cam automatically hurriedly from the hip, the chest, heart, history, in my pocket kept in reserve the world's neatest mini able to take stills too. The long desert day behind him, my friend launches like a game bird from the onetime marshes his upward dive (convertible at will we always recall back home into a tsunami of a cannonball) which ends still in shock, hope, the mind of an unknowing spy, forgetting his own language. My friend appearing in that palace pool nine thousand miles give or take a country from where I stand eighteen months later, an emerging professional or getting there, California veteran with a deal, to say what I saw, or show what I saved, really I see now suspend that dive, and maybe all it is is why I enlisted.

How fine a fool to be a spy and not know it – witness, but to what? For spies the art of war will avoid it, though more to war than spies we learn from Sun-Tzu, obvious if you ask strategists in Taiwan or, week in week out, subtle for the football coach who lays his success partly to Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. Yet what is new about our ignorance of those who would own us? How do we speak in the midst of what we're ignorant of? Nothing to it, let me tell you. What we're made for on this good earth. Plotting an arc of motions that plotted me. A dive that would swallow up the pool, while history saw it differently, this pleasure place of the lately apprehended tyrant tiled with the vineyards of a vision, minaret, turret, once rich ceramic alcoves, cellars, and arched halls, surprising gardens, erotic resting rooms, you might want to renovate, private mosque, and kitchens once red with lamb and trampled vintage, dark levels below even the strangely gamy waters of this pool – detainment quarters we'd erroneously heard housed even their captive leader, his bunker (ours now in the absence of our own bunker busters), and, most, the very wells or one that had been waiting to receive a weapon of critical instruction, long on its way encapsuled, sought for its own sake and to prove the rightness of the war if not even pay for it. A scroll or Scrolls it was said; and, recalling the Dead Sea discoveries, the Gnostic manuscripts at Nag Hammadi, a scroll for a scroll some strict-constructionist archaeologists say. And now I suspected maybe the thing I had been sent to shoot was under the very waters beside which I found myself, under the pool itself, another level down.

That one of our own specialists, so far from being dug in out among potshard and skull-sown hills, should have been instead wisely waiting for the find to come to *him* (his team) deep in the foundations of a conquered palace and by water along the wells and ruined sewers below pool level – seemed a feat – an Olympic-homing *How* shrouding the ancient *What* of the Scrolls themselves, their said-to-be-Roman/Syriac phrases and good news, ancient stuff of revelation itself. Yet revolutionary, we learn, in their firsthand word this time of the man from Nazareth, a fighter and free trader in ideas, economist this Jesus the Scrolls would profile in a rare interview, no less than a man who, having the experience to disappear and reappear, might later be one of us attending California Hearings on Competition and who'd somehow always known that to him who hath shall be given. Why did the thought seem familiar? That an undeniable weapon of instruction in the war of thoughts which is history should have turned up as predicted by our people seemed unprecedented because of this seldom piloted network of wells that had survived the mines parachuted in evidently, garden-variety bombs from other wars, our top-loaded

quake littering “their backyard” with burnt-out vehicles, roadside attractions, barbecued faces, and “headless horsemen,” as a tabloid back home had put evidently it, this “fertile croissant” where agriculture began, this cradle of civilization, of wine-growing, to say nothing of infrastructural casualties of the military war by now winding down, a clock stopped but ticking.

The late Hearings bring back the reasons for the War if for me, as if he was one, the full figure of my friend Umo. Elusive, illegal, happily homeless we would think in Southern California and Baja Mexico at going on fourteen (when we first knew him but wouldn't have guessed his age), going off a high board into one of our own outdoor pools he was later to find his moment, a disappearing act in that other pool nine thousand miles east. Biographers say “was to” (or “would”) as if they could have known what their man would do. We know better still. Make history our own. Or conceive what we could not know about my friend, competing with me as friends will, had we been never so christened with hindsight and what appeared to be the will to win for our city the site of these so-called “postwar” Hearings, their announced Spring theme Competition. Which, like the Scrolls, was good for anybody grounded, or trying to be, in gain and growth, gifts grounded but not to be hidden away. Even, as I found, in the Goals split up by the Conference organizers into panels and days of far-flung questions in the later Hearings embracing the Scrolls themselves, what remained of them, for they were Scrolls, and how belief in competition might eclipse belief-based competition itself, to say nothing of faith in your own time management business, the very fragrance you're marketing, and the newfound Master's ancient assurance that “if you give alms it is evil you will do to the beggar and your own spirit.” For I had rethought spirit coming home from my war.