



Source: Ed O'Loughlin, 'Israelis divided on legacy of Rabin', *The Age online*, 04/11/05.

Tags: [animals](#), [intimacy](#), [literature](#)
Writer/s: John O'Brien

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

Happy birthday, he said. It was just a few pages of his Night Novel. But they turned around her, they swung around her, these particular pages. She was their beacon.

He watched her read them. The silkworm moths were flutter-fluttering in their little box in the living room. Living their last few days, mating, laying their eggs. Silkworms were strange: it's the caterpillar teenagers who live for yonks, munching mulberry leaves, having all the fun, while the grown-ups breed, lay, die, over in a week. The cardboard silkworm box at the moment was sitting on top of her collection, or rather, on top of the intricate camphor-wood chest she kept it in. They were, she'd said, a puzzle, these works in thread and cloth. She owned about a hundred. But forty-odd of them, she believed, were by the same woman or family. The same letter worked into the centre, the stylistic similarities. She'd traced them to another dealer in Paris, and thence to a village in Macedonia. She was planning a trip there next year, and hoped he'd go with her. (Maybe for the honeymoon? he wondered.) From the net she'd learnt half a dozen facts about the village. The most poignant was that during the last or last-but-one Balkan flare-up the village had divided in two, with a bridge marking the boundary. The women of one side had had to cross to the other to get their water, and they'd had to pay the price. Tears streaming down her face when she told him.

And was that worked into the collection, he'd asked?

The thing about her, he mused while he watched her reading, that furrow sculpted into her beautiful forehead (Christ, he thought, I'm getting sentimental), the thing about her was that she was so 'into' women's pain. The suffering of women, tales and mishaps, made her angry, or weepy, or numb. Yet when it came to his pain, she applied as much energy but—somehow—it was a happier balm she rubbed into his ego. She loved him for his brain injury. She loved him for his bear-in-a-cave take on the world. He saw no shadow.

He saw no shadow. Suppose they went to Macedonia (or was it somewhere else? was it Serbia? Or Iran? Somewhere full of women's pain, at least).

He saw no shadow. She was finishing up. She smiled at him. She started to read the key bit, the gift, the dream,

back to him.

'Her temptress body lay there, emptying of blood. Her needle eyes pierced his. He was trying to stop up the wound, and she was trying to tell him, let it flow, let it flow, it's too late. Just get there in time next time, that's what the eyes were saying. He knew that he was on her side now. He knew that there was nothing he could do for her but stand in for her the next time some too-scared-to-stop shithead with a gun or a knife came down to the pubs by the docks looking for sex or angry at God for forsaking all shitheads, which seems to be the thing God does best. He watched her life ebb out but he felt her life flow in, too, a king tide of blood, the same blood around his hands, pouring up and into him. Her blood was his now—it didn't belong to the white-faced youth crouching cowering in the corner. So this was sacrifice, this was the miracle. The ugly miracle. He wondered if he could ever make that sacrifice himself.

'He prepared to say goodbye to her. That was when the ambulance guys came pouring in. And the rest blurred seamlessly into matt mute oblivion. Cops, cranks, quacks, a car, questions...

'And something else, something that came out of nowhere. It always comes out of nowhere, hope. She was alive, the surgeon told him. She would live.'

His work was all about reduction, pulling things back to the basic facts. One of her basic facts was that she was a woman. And had been hurt. One of his basic facts was that he was a man. And had hurt.

He thought: Maybe we could add a few more basic facts to what we've already got filed under 'us'.

She stopped reading. He touched the top of the cardboard box and the ththththth of the silkworm moths ceased.

Why not? he said. And we can honeymoon in Macedonia.

Bosnia, she said. This is good, she said, and kissed him.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by John O'Brien.