



Source: Abraham Rabinovich, 'Young defector fitted mold of martyr', *The Australian online*, 19/04/06.  
Tags: [disenchantment](#), [streets](#), [violence](#)  
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Beneath the thumb lies a shadow, and beneath the shadow lies a map, its valleys hills and rivers delicately shaped, passing one into another like the whorls of a fingerprint, and in its principal valley, nestled in early morning smog and birdsong, cut with the hum of traffic, the clanks and thumps of frenetic construction, lies the city where I live.

The valley is named after a river, once laden with tin ore, one flooding its mud banks, where once a man pushed his bare feet into the lazy current, gazing around him with narrowed eyes. Where this river met another river the waters swirled thick and spreading, and the mud beneath swelled up to meet the imprint of his hands. This place became the oldest city in the valley.

In the part of the valley where I live the city is new. It's already open for business, all of its precincts numbered in order, its lush gardens, lakes, waterways and wetlands already excavated, flooded and populated with all manner of wildlife: luminescent fish, vibrant fowl, even a brace of befuddled hippopotami. Its highways and bridges are already a buzzing bouquet of flat noodles strung from one edifice of national importance to another. All of its streets and buildings have long been designated on the map, are fulfilling the map's tracings, although from certain angles these show, as yet, only skeletal soarings, the magnificent shells of buildings.

The city's name is, alternately, 'Successful Prince' or 'Prince Who Has Succeeded' or 'Prince Who Will Succeed', and in this city what we who live here do, primarily, is wait. We wait, and look, and listen. We are waiting for what has happened, for what happens, for what will happen. We are waiting to see. In this city, as in the valley, time moves both fast and slow and sometimes flutters backwards from one of our many flagpoles. The vast tiled dome of our mosque glints its double in the lake below, built for that purpose. But not many of us, gazing up from the steps of the Palace of Justice, can see it. We'd have to go where the acute angles are.

I gaze up from the marble steps of the Palace of Justice, up through the mottled ranks of red t-shirts and blue-and-white banners, past the incongruous old estate women perched about in clusters like birds. The young moustachioed men jostle about the topmost step, subdued, ready for speeches. Guards with walkie-talkies block the entrance to the Palace, but not the blasts of air-conditioning that accompany every slide of the automatic doors. Our riot police in red and black are assembled nearby in neat formation. Our water cannon trucks are primed.

His hands are the least of him, I think, gazing up from the

marble steps of the Palace of Justice, where he holds them out to the already quiet crowd. His arms are the least of him, scarecrow sticks poking out from the sleeves of a white business shirt. His face is the least of him, framed in lank peppery hair and eyeglasses scotch-taped across their bridge. Even where I'm standing, casually passing, carefully not listening, I can see his eyes weighted in shadow, red-rimmed.

He says: The world is mysterious, insoluble. This thick life, thick time and space, and you are passing through it like a thin blade. You pass once, gazing behind you, thinking only of all that you didn't pass, that passed you by. All that you missed: the uncut pages of your misery, the rich plains and fruitful valleys you never walked. You are thinking of your life in all its thick layers, epidemic in lost possibilities, epidemic in depths never experienced, lying like a wasteland behind you. Is the knife that cuts cut too?

So you spread oil on the surface of your stealth blade, slip over and by and only very occasionally into. You pass through without too much fuss or even notice. Papercut thin. You are caught up in don't-care cottonwool, distracted, tired, over-busy on your lunch-hour, sometimes more than a little depressed. You are indulgent of your sadness and unable to make a story of it. You are afraid.

Because it's so sad, all this watching and listening and waiting in the lush gardens, lakes and waterways not of your own making, while you wait for something to happen, for something to be made from nothing, some new life from a papercut scar, something of your body and your mind. You have lived so long with this sadness, carried it around with you like a friend, someone a little under the weather, taken it to bed with you, shared with it your holiday snapshots, your favourite DVDs.

This sadness sustains, feeds on itself, and you, and eats away at anything else, makes nothing of the small something you have, even if the something is only itself—your sadness—to begin with.

He holds up his hands. His fingers spread thin. His thumbs reach upwards. His words are the least of him. Impressions glancing over the bruises on the skin of each of my shoulders.

He says: Now is not the time for watching. Now is not the time for listening. Now is the time.

The riot police begin to muster. The water cannon trucks rev their engines.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Beth Yahp.*