

ROBERT EARLE

From the Truman Balcony

In the early morning of May 19th, 2012, four bodies slid out of the right bank of the Potomac River, meaning the Virginia side, into the river itself. Said occurrence transpired in the vicinity of Arlington National Cemetery. It was observed by Lt. Col. Albert “Chip” Forger, who was biking to the Pentagon as usual between 0-five hundred and 0-six hundred. He worried that these shadowy bulges in the smooth surface of the dawn-brushed Potomac could suggest a hostile intrusion directed at the Memorial Bridge, which would soon fill with people who felt compelled to drive to work, skipping the bike path on which Lt. Col. Forger now stopped for a quick 911call on his cell phone.

Within minutes the U.S. Coast Guard had the bodies surrounded, the immediate conclusion being that someone had exhumed the remains of U.S. servicemen—or women—and pushed them out into the water, where for some reason they floated as the sun rose higher in the sky, melting away the morning river mist. They also were difficult to pull in. Make that impossible. Time after time Coast Guardsmen in rubber boats failed to hook or net the bodies. Wet-suited divers found it impossible to grab them, too. The bodies rolled, sank, and reappeared whenever another physical object got near them. After a half hour, the bodies had been so poked and pushed into evasive floating maneuvers that they disappeared. Intermittently the Coast Guard could spot them on sonar. Here. Gone. Here. Gone. Mainly gone.

There was no stopping word from getting out, but no, the President hadn’t been informed, The White House said. Informed about what? Yes, there seemed to be bodies in the Potomac, and no, the Coast Guard couldn’t get hold of them, and we don’t know why. There is supposed to be a difference between the quick and

the dead, but these apparently were quick dead, which isn't a known phenomenon outside of...what? Quantum mechanics? Simple answer: WE DO NOT KNOW!

Next morning the bodies were out there again, and there were more of them, like, dozens. The Coast Guard ripped right in. Along the right bank of the Potomac there were patrols of National Park Police. Overhead, news media helicopters were shoed away as a no-fly zone was established for the safety of a large mosquito-like drone.

Today, no kidding, they were going to get these things. Today they were going to see if somehow they were not being exhumed and tossed into the water but actually migrating through the earth and popping out of what would you call them, human muskrat holes? That's what the National Park Police wanted to find out. Could things have gone so wrong in Arlington National Cemetery that what would you call it—ejectile gas?—somehow fired our honored heroes through the red Virginia clay out into the national river, loading it up with these jiggling uncatchable quicksilver bodies moving in disturbingly military, or fish-like, formations. Six this way. Six that way. Twenty on their backs. Twenty on their faces. Present arms! Flip right! Flip left! Dive, dive, dive!

The President wasn't having coffee on the Truman Balcony just by happenstance. He never did that. When Lt. Col. Forger was out on the bike path, riding toward dawn, the President typically was seated in his favorite little nook by the window, the rest of the family still asleep, dutifully eating his oatmeal sprinkled with cranberries and walnuts and sipping the high-octane Turkish coffee he'd taken a liking to in law school. But today he had a feeling that if he had to deal with whatever was happening in the nation's river himself, if it came out of the press room at him with a machete, he'd get deplumed, whacked, and minced. The kids had binoculars—Christmas present, educational, scientific, never used—so he took them with him and stood there on the Truman Balcony and said to himself, I can't get any closer than this, but I want to see what's going on over there with my own eyes. Holy schmoly! Look at those babies wiggle!

Right then his Body Man, that's what they called Richard, tapped on the Truman Balcony door, requesting permission to board. Permission granted. The suggestion was that the President descend to the Situation Room to be briefed.

"About what?" the President asked.

"About whatever is going on over there in, you know, sir, over there in the...well, just like yesterday."

“Only worse,” the President said, handing Richard the binoculars. “See what I mean?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What do you see? Put it in words.”

“Sir, I...do you want Anne-Marie?”

“Is Anne-Marie the only person around here I can turn to for a simple statement of personal observation and perception?”

Anne-Marie was the President’s Word Woman. The President thought, the President decided, but she came up with the words. Not because the President couldn’t—he had made millions with words—but he was damned if he was going to do everything, and that was the feeling he had sometimes: these people are here to torture me, they are here to poke and prod and asphyxiate me with the obligation to not only understand, to not only come to grips, but also to stand up there and explain...and in this case, explain what?

“No, I don’t want Anne-Marie. I want you to TELL ME WHAT THE FUCK YOU SEE, MAN!”

Richard could be more emotional and verbal than you’d expect of a Body Man—he’d been educated at Duke—so out he blurted, “I see the Book of Revelation, I see the Rapture, I see Dante’s Inferno, I see Odysseus and Aeneas in Hades and the River Styx and I don’t know what else.”

“Now that,” said the President, “was one kick-ass description of whatever is going on in that fucking river.”

“Sir, you can’t say such things.”

“I didn’t say I could, but I can think ‘em, can’t I?”

“The Situation Room, sir?”

The President shook his head. “What are they going to tell me?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“More than you just said?”

“Sir, I really think if you even make jokes about that, Anne-Marie will be upset, and everyone else who doesn’t know what’s going on is going to be upset, too.”

“So wouldn’t I be better off staying here than going down there and looking at what I can see with my own two eyes instead of staring at giant screens that won’t explain a thing? Am I here to keep the National Security Council company or something? When they know what that is, we’ll talk about it. Tell ‘em that. And tell Anne-Marie I don’t want a donut from her that’s a sound bite full of nothing. I want something to say and I want it fast.”

No one in the Situation Room had ever been in a situation like this. There were protocols and drills and decision-trees for all kinds of things—oil blowouts, hijacked aircraft, assassinations—but this? This *what*?

By o-seven hundred on Day Two the bodies were gone, God bless ‘em. Flat out flipped and slipped away, or whatever they did: made it through netting designed to defeat mini-torpedoes the size of bowling pins. To look at the Potomac was to see a river, just a river. But folks in the Situation Room couldn’t let it go at that

The National Security Advisor and Homeland Security Secretary agreed, in a limited sense, that this was not a threat to national security. The Secretary of State said with a kind of wonder in her voice, or perhaps relief, that this was clearly not diplomatic in nature. She went on—the way she tended to do—to say that if what were occurring occurred in the East River in New York, well, then, you could wonder...did the UN have anything to do with this? The UN ambassador asked what the UN could possibly have to do with this, East River, Potomac River, or Snake River. (They didn’t like each other, and it showed.)

The Director of National Intelligence said the Intelligence Community had optical energy under consideration and was researching bodies in water. “Not bodies of water...bodies in water.”

“Such as what bodies in what water?” the National Security Advisor asked.

“Such as Sukarno and Indonesia’s rivers running red with blood.”

“There’s no blood in the Potomac,” Coast Guard Admiral Tom “Ticker” Cassidy said. “We’ve checked.”

“What does NASA say?” the National Security Advisor asked.

“No comment,” someone said.

“No comment as in ‘withholding comment’ or just haven’t commented?”

“They just haven’t commented,” someone said.

The Secretary of Defense was the least concerned. Chipper kind of guy. “Well, we’re certainly not going to blow reveille and find out who’s in his grave and who’s gone for a swim.”

“We still don’t know,” the Director of the FBI insisted, “that these whatever they are come from Arlington Cemetery.”

“Overhead gives us nothing?” the National Security Advisor asked.

“Nothing,” the Director of National Intelligence said. “What we see when we look right at them is what we see when we look at them from thirty miles up. It’s the same whatever it is.”

“But it moves in unison,” Anne-Marie said from her chair along the wall, not able to help herself but not being listened to, either. I mean, she thought, is it a kind

of muster, a gathering? She knew the President was going to say to her: “I want one word, one simple word, and upon this word we will build our church.” He’d definitely make that joke again, reminding her he could do her job if he felt like it but why should he?

The next morning Anne-Marie got on a helicopter that took off at o-dark thirty and sat there looking down at the water between Arlington Cemetery and the Lincoln Memorial until word came from the Truman Balcony that there was a glimmer somewhere else and the President wanted it looked at. *Now.*

And after that he boomed into her earpiece...everyone on board could hear him...telling her to tell the pilot to turn them sideways so she could look beyond the Wilson Bridge, which was as far as the President could see himself, and describe what the devil it was.

“You be the eyes and the tongue, I’ll be the brain,” he said to her. “See and speak.”

“You don’t want to come do this yourself, sir?”

“No, Goddammit! Go, A-M, go!”

He called her A-M sometimes because it was funny that she wasn’t a morning person yet those were her initials. But, like, how *could* she be a morning person when it took her all day and well into the night to finish the things that she had to finish?

Whup, they went sideways in a flash, not because she told the pilot to do that but because he heard the President of the United States say to do that, and oh my, look at what she saw!

“What *is* it?” she asked, the words just popping out of her mouth.

“What is what?” the President asked from the Truman Balcony. “Put it into words, A-M. ‘What’ is not really a word. Well, of course, it’s a word, but it’s for another word, a meta-word. Making what a word is a failure. I tell my kids that all the time. They get it, why don’t you? What the devil do you see?”

“They could be—I don’t know—human sized shrimp or—I don’t know—laundry, lots of laundry, and it’s like waving in the breeze, or in the water I mean.”

“Being washed?”

“I could see where you would want to wash it. It’s dirty and bloody, some of it.”

“What is some of it that *isn’t* dirty and bloody?”

“There isn’t much that isn’t dirty and bloody, but downriver I’m seeing grays, olives, reds, kind of filmy reds, khaki, and these wavering you could almost call them flags intermingled with all the big shrimp things.”

“How many big shrimp things”

“I—”

“Approximately,” the President said gently. “First thing, best thing. Spit it out. Rough numbers.”

“One, two hundred thousand.”

“What direction are they heading?”

“Heading up river, toward Washington.”

“Anything heading downriver, away from us?”

The helo pilot flipped his bird so hard she almost pitched and hadn’t even eaten anything. “There are things up river that are heading down river. We are in about the same numbers.”

“We? What do you mean ‘we’? Is there a ‘them’ and an ‘us’ out there?”

“We, sir, in the sense, that what is coming down past Reagan National is a mixture of blues, whites, greens, and camouflage.”

“Camo?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Like our kind of camo, you’re saying?”

“That’s what I’m saying, sir.”

“Do theirs do what ours do...all that group flipping and flickering?”

“Yes, sir.”

It was very interesting. From Alexandria down, through the pillars holding up the new Wilson Bridge and into the widening river that flowed toward Mt. Vernon, there were darting patterns that were bisected by columns that would reach a certain point and then burst, like fireworks, and seem to disappear, filled in behind by reds and what could be brass buttons on the reds and splatterings of what appeared to be multi-form helmets, not that a single helmet assumed different forms, but that the basic concept of helmet was articulated in an extraordinary variety of shapes and materials.

“If it were anything,” the President asked Anne-Marie, “what would it be?”

Could it be hypertrophic algae blooms bursting with steroidal chicken shit that ran off the sides of the Potomac? Anne-Marie could think that, but she couldn’t say it. All it would be was words, even the Word Woman knew that.

She said, “Sir, we have people in the water, don’t we? SEALS and things?”

“Of course.”

“I mean I see our red coast guard boats and I see gray Navy boats and there are these speed rafts with I guess Rangers and they are whirling around and whatever it is below us and whatever is coming down toward us is whirling, too, broadly speaking.”

“Broadly speaking gets us nowhere. Come on, A-M, spit it out.”

“Okay, more specifically I am seeing well I don’t know either a frontal assault, reconnaissance, a cotillion ball, or a lot of girls who are backing away from a lot of boys because they don’t want to be kissed.”

“Anne-Marie, cut the cute, okay? Cut the cute!”

She didn’t think that was fair. She’d spent months in The White House putting up with guy blather put-downs. Every day. Nothing but insults and jibes and come-ons.

She said, “Sir, we’re going down the Potomac and it’s filling in and extending and almost as fast as we fly, the whatever it is we generate up river is merging into whatever is heading our way from downriver.”

“Stop calling it the whatever. You said shrimp earlier. Are these multi-colored giant shrimp? Is the whole thing—are you listening to me down in the Sit Room? Got your radios on? Have you asked Agriculture about this? Are we talking about some kind of new fish genome?”

The Sit Room sages, which is how the President sometimes referred to them, had started up all the lines of inquiry the President wanted to know about including the national labs, Energy, EPA and so on and so forth.

“Oh, cut it with the so on and so forth. I’m tired of this going nowhere bullshit,” the President snapped at the National Security Advisor down in the Sit Room from his post on the Truman Balcony.

Whereupon the Secretary of State cleared her throat, never fond of coarse language, and said what she had been thinking and wanted to get onto the airwaves so that Anne-Marie, with whom she’d always sympathized, could take into consideration what she had been hearing from U.S. embassies around the world.

“Sir, I think we ought to scramble some jets down the Potomac and get to the end of this, if there is an end, or if there isn’t an end, which is possible—”

The President laughed so hard everyone listening, especially Anne-Marie with the headset in the helicopter smushed tight against her ears, gave a wince and jump.

“If there isn’t an *end*? Is that what you’re saying, Madame Secretary? Are you telling us that we are witnessing the end of everything altogether because the beginning is gone, it’s all end now, Armageddon?”

Anne-Marie’s chopper captain, not wanting to be outrun by a bunch of jets that wouldn’t see fuck-all at 500 miles an hour, flipped flat and went after the writhing horizon right on past Mt. Vernon toward what?

“Sir,” the Secretary of Defense interrupted, “Armageddon isn’t right because we are not witnessing any damage. Whatever this is, it isn’t hurting us. We can take it.

The river's navigable. No one has detected any alteration in the water quality. They aren't armed, and they aren't repelling our countermoves."

"What countermoves?"

"The moves of these things that came down out of—"

"You're back on the Arlington Cemetery thesis? What does the world say, that's what I want to know. Is that where you were heading, Madame Secretary?" the President asked the Secretary of State without putting his binoculars down.

"Sir—" she began before her answer was fuzzed over.

"Hey, guys, there's an intrusion in my earpiece," the President said. "Who's talking? Is that the VOA Arabic service?"

The Counterterrorism advisor spoke Arabic and knew that the Voice of America didn't broadcast the call to prayer, but that's what it was, a really big call to prayer, so big no one could stand it, so they all took their earpieces off, the President, too, but Jesus, you didn't need earpieces to hear it, and what's more, suddenly, instantly, it was more than the Potomac that had filled up. The Chesapeake was loaded. Sea lanes across the Atlantic were choked with a flotsam of bodies...and meanwhile this voice, where had they heard it before, a voice soft as pudding, softer than jelly, soft like tapioca, really, calling to prayer...calling to prayer...but gurgling a little bit as if it were rising up out of the water somewhere far, far off in the sea?

Anne-Marie put on her headset again and heard the last of the Secretary of State's commentary to the effect that she'd just learned this crying was on CNN and al-Jazeera and the BBC. And wow, was that beautiful or what—the thought and image that conjoined in Anne-Marie's mind, woven into a waterworld tapestry of what she knew in her heart right then and there, that what they were witnessing was the Muster of the Dead, the Parade Ground of the Dead, the Presented and Accounted For—take your pick of whichever phrase you liked best, sir—of every soldier and sailor and aviator who had died and been buried anywhere on earth throughout time, including the hoplites of the Greeks, the Roman centurions, the partisans of Yugoslavia, Apache warriors, on and on, up and up, out and out, round and round, bobbing and turning and schooling, that's what they were doing, schooling this way and that, bird flocking this way and that...what a beautiful, stunning thing...Sarawak spear hurdlers, Stonewall Jackson...bad killers, good defenders...responding to the call to prayer from she knew exactly where—couldn't get there in a helicopter—but knew where...the Arabian sea.

"The word is *adhān*, sir," Anne-Marie told the President. "That's what they call the call to prayer."

The Counterterrorism Advisor said, "She's right, sir, and you know whose voice that is?"

"Oh, get out of here," the President said. "It can't be. Didn't we put weights in there with him? He's dead. It's over. We killed him."

Anne-Marie watched as the bodies conducted some kind of kneeling watery obeisance. Billions of dead, probably, though she could take in only a million or so.

"What does this *mean*?" the President demanded. "Is this some kind of a loss, a defeat? Are we being mocked? Have we been desecrated?"

Anne-Marie said she didn't know but she'd think about it. The Secretary of State chimed in that a lot of other people would be thinking about it, too. This may have started here, but look....

"Look at what?" the President asked.

"Well, sir, we have all these screens down here you don't have up on the Truman Balcony, and TV all over the world is showing us Hong Kong harbor, Manila Bay, the Thames...it's like the wildest surf I've ever seen."

The call came to an end. The surf subsided. The world's war dead disappeared.

"But now it's just water," the Secretary of State said.

"The Secretary's right, sir," Anne-Marie said. "They're all just...gone. It's just water now."

The President had lost track of looking because he was thinking and listening so hard. Now he used his daughter's binoculars to scan the Potomac again and saw not a drop out of place, not a speck on the surface, not a ripple rising from below.

"I want this analyzed," he said.

The Director of National Intelligence said, "Sir, we can't."

"What do you mean we can't?"

"There's no recording of it."

"You missed it? We spend umpteen billion dollars a year on intel and you missed it?"

The Director of the National Security Agency piped up from Ft. Meade. "Sir, that was not a sound as we know it."

"Then what was it?"

"Sir, we're working on that. It had no physical properties. It just..."

"Did you hear it?"

"No, sir, I'm in a soundproof room."

"Did everyone else here it?"

The Sit Room sages had heard it. Richard standing beside the President on the Truman Balcony had heard it.

“Oh, I give up,” the President said.

“What, sir?” the National Security Advisor asked.

“Nothing, nothing.”

“But you said something, and I missed it.”

The President said, “No, I didn’t. I didn’t say anything, not a word, and that’s why you didn’t hear it. It wasn’t a sound either. Carry on, ladies and gentlemen. Anne-Marie, you get on back here. We’ve got to talk.”

“Yes, sir.”

Anne-Marie’s helo pilot whipped them around and slashed up the Potomac toward Washington. They crossed the Woodrow Wilson Bridge, passed Reagan National and Arlington Cemetery, and overflowed the Kennedy Center, heading for The White House, where she could see him standing there alone on the Truman Balcony, having sent Richard packing. What could she tell him? That none of the dead had wanted to die? That if they had the chance, they’d like to keep on praying? For what? She started taking notes and from time to time looked up to make sure he was still up there. She had a terrible feeling that if this began happening five times a day until the end of time, the president might put his binoculars down so the kids would have them after he jumped. It was just a thought, a crazy thought, but that’s how this made her feel sometimes—all of it, the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, the Capital dome, The White House and Truman Balcony... and this, *this!* It would make sense, wouldn’t it? Just stop fighting, pray, and jump?



ROBERT EARLE’S short stories and novellas have appeared in more than forty literary journals across the U.S. and Canada. He also is the author of two novels—*The Man Clothed in Linen* and *The Way Home*—and two books of nonfiction—*Nights in the Pink Motel* and *Identities in North America*. After two decades in the Foreign Service, Robert Earle now lives and writes in Arlington, Virginia.