

3 (THREE) SHORTS

By Mike Clough

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor ADAM KELLY MORTON writes:*

These three short pieces by Mike Clough take readers on a journey to exotic and often dangerous places. Emotional connections that are made and broken feature in the narrator's travels, and we get a glimpse of lives that are full of regret and fear, while conveying experience that is meaningful. The language is strong and visceral, while subtle enough in moments to express feeling without spelling it out:

"The city wasn't how I remembered it. Garbage had been left to rot outside buildings. Black rats with saucer eyes peered out at me from alleyways."

Meanwhile, even the more strictly descriptive passages are often quite effective at transporting the reader not only in time and place, but in mood as well:

"I tipped the driver, thanked him in Portuguese, and then asked him to confirm in English the time he'd be back. He pointed to a path leading away from a square of sorts, a huddle of cheap Formica tables. After about a hundred yards, I passed a sign for what I guessed must be the sacred cave...the depiction so badly faded it could have been for anything."

Overall, these three immersive stories have plenty of mystery, agony and love.

(Spacing and font size are author's own.) Eds.

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Agapito and the Sacred Cave

The two-hour ride took me past Corcovado where, unsurprisingly, all the tourists with backpacks and bottles of water disembarked. I watched them trundle away from the station towards stalls selling cheap wooden masks and cans of unbranded cola. The driver had a cigarette break, leaning against the door which he'd thankfully left open. If not I would almost certainly have melted in the heat. The five-minute wait for the bus had been enough to soak my shirt, and it didn't help that I had on a three-piece suit. No harm in arriving hot and sweaty though, I supposed. There would a manner of symmetry to it.....a reflection of the torrid nights we'd spent together.

At last the driver stubbed out his cigarette and got back on. While he failed to acknowledge me – not even a nod or a look – I wasn't entirely bothered. This was a journey I'd prefer to be making alone, far away from any prying eyes. Clunking through the gears, the exhaust rattling, we ascended the narrow road towards the jungle. Every so often we'd come across a dusty clearing, with no more than eight or nine huts scattered here and there, children and dogs rushing out to greet us. We stopped twice, once for the driver to have another cigarette, and then for an old Indian woman with a black shawl wrapped around her face.

At first I thought they were arguing, two shrill voices competing to be heard. But you can never tell with the Latin temperament. For all I knew they were exchanging pleasantries. Forty degrees in the shade would be enough to unhinge the calmest of temperaments, after all. She sat as far away from me as possible, taking a seat at the front, and not for a second ceasing her jabber.

It occurred to me then that I'd never really spoken to Agapito, not in any meaningful sense. Eventually, towards the end, we'd been living our lives apart.....with separate everything from our beds to our network of friends. I couldn't even imagine us sitting on this bus together. If on an earlier visit I'd suggested the trip to him he'd have told me I was crazy.....he'd have been in his trunks, emptying a bottle of wine.

The bus terminated at a village jutting out of the mountainside, its few adobe pensions looking they would soon collapse into the ocean.

I tipped the driver, thanked him in Portuguese, and then asked him to confirm in English the time he'd be back. He pointed to a path leading away from a square of sorts, a huddle of cheap Formica tables. After about a hundred yards, I passed a sign for what I guessed must be the sacred cave.....the depiction so badly faded it could have been for anything.

Pushing ahead, taking deep breaths, I followed along for almost a mile climbing higher and higher, stopping every few feet to swig water. Poor Agapito! I imagined him hurrying ahead, calling over his shoulder for me to catch him. Then again in all likelihood he'd have been sulking, telling me he wanted a quadruple gin....to be back at the resort eyeing up young men in tight Speedos. I thought about the first time I'd been here....a million years ago it seemed....how we'd held each other's cocks would you believe and then sucked each other off in the bushes.

When out of a relationship, you tend to worry about silly things. It occurred to me that I might faint from heat exhaustion and be found dead and alone, weeks if not months from now, a shrivelled corpse. The incessant hum of the jungle had me thinking about strange, lurking creatures, how a jaguar or leopard was waiting to pounce and drag me away to its den.

At last I came to a wide, open plateau. There were more signs, some planted in the ground, others nailed to trees, all pointing to a dusty track at the end of which I saw what appeared to be a monument or tomb, the remains of thick, ancient roots entangled across its entrance. Unsurprisingly the place was deserted. I guess no one had been here in years....perhaps not since Agapito and me.

Strangely, there was a child's desk under the cover of a tipuana tree, and beneath this, along with a board marked with prices, a box of dusty helmets and flashlights. Back then there'd been a kiosk and guided tours every hour. But now it seemed you had to make your own way down. I fished around for a helmet and batteries, and then, inwardly saying a prayer to whatever god ruled the sacred cave, ducked through the entrance.

A flight of stone steps led almost vertically down for about a hundred feet. It then leveled off into a narrow corridor which turned a corner, the flashlight illuminating the cold, dripping limestone walls. There were arrows, which I was thankful of, and also the occasional sign telling you to 'keep your head' - I chuckled, presuming it to be a lapse of translation.

In truth, I'd forgotten how labyrinthine it was. Everywhere paths led into dark recesses. Most of these were either fenced off or had warnings about keeping to the main route, which is what I did, following on until I came to a vast opening with a pool of light streaming in from an aperture, stalactites hanging from the surrounding structure. Concerned by the possibility of the batteries draining and the backups failing, I flicked off the flashlight. When a cloud shifted across the sun everything became preternaturally dark, and I felt entombed in the stark, rigid earth.

When the sun blinked through I saw another path lower down, disappearing into a chasm. There were no warnings, at least none that I could see, and so I decided to continue onwards, the roof so low I had to duck to make my way through. Eventually it opened into a second fissure, about a quarter the size of the last and without the benefit of any natural light. I had to be careful not to trip over the ancient forest of stalagmites. It all seemed so solid in here, so eternal, as if nothing had changed in a million years. Just as I was thinking this a huge drop splashed against my helmet, striking it with such force I thought the roof was falling in.

I turned to go, the flashlight illuminating the black, crenulated wall to the side of me, and then I saw what at first I thought to be some ancient writing, from the era of the Aztecs or long before, propounding the wisdom of the ages perhaps, some divine truth. Only as I stroked the light across it did I see it was graffiti: Johnny WOZ Here '98, Reggie Luvs Val, that kind of thing. And there it was.....David and Agapito.....a love heart with our names inside, deeply provocative for then. And oh my....we'd drawn phalluses too.....and a lewd message about fucking. It all came back to me. Pressing my face against the wall I felt its coldness penetrate my flesh. Slowly, I traced a finger across our names. David/Agapito. Forever.

And then the clouds drifted back across the sun. At the same time the batteries in the flashlight failed. I cannot begin to describe how intolerably cold and bleak it all was. Shaking the flashlight violently, I longed to return to the outside world, to be on the bus again listening to the driver and the old Indian, or even to be with all those tourists flocking around the market buying trinkets and cans of unbranded cola, or better still, to be on the beach with Agapito, admiring young men playing volleyball and Frisbee, the material of their trunks so taut you could see when they became aroused. 'Agapito', I whispered. 'I love you Agapito. God how I miss your cock, you drunken sop.'

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The three stories are all about confronting change. With Agapito, a gay man seeks a manner of solace from travelling to a tourist site near Rio which he last visited with his lover. Although schmaltziness has its place, I can't say that I'm its biggest fan. I therefore have the protagonist remembering the sex they had. The cave is an extended metaphor.*

In Love and the Jungle a reluctant divorcee has a fling with a local. She invites him to a ceremony in which he imbibes a mescaline drink, and he undergoes a lustful transformation. As with Agapito, I steer clear of sentimentality. This is about libido not love.

In terms of style, Home is the closest I get in these pieces to minimalism. I prefer works which are easy to read, in which story, character and meaning take precedence over style. This doesn't make the writing easier. I will have redrafted several times, editing out any clause, word or punctuation mark which detracts from the experience. I also tend towards what might be referred to as a multivalent approach, leaving space for interpretation. America has clearly changed since the serviceman went away. Although he is derisive of this, it still remains his place of origin, his home. The narrative events are presented in such a way as to ask questions. Whether change is ultimately for the good or bad is left unanswered.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Mike grew up on the outskirts of a council housing estate in Greater Manchester. He worked as a bingo caller and shop assistant before attending

Salford University. As well as teaching at undergraduate level, he has published short-form literary fiction and is a features contributor to magazines for writers.

EDITOR'S BIO: Adam Kelly Morton is a Montreal-based husband, father (four kids, all six-and-under), acting teacher, gamer, filmmaker, and writer. He has been published in *Spelk*, *The Junction*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *The Fiction Pool*, *Open Pen London*, and *Talking Soup*, among others. He has an upcoming piece in *A Wild and Precious Life: A Recovery Anthology*, to be published in 2020. His story **See These Stars** was published in Issue 6.

