

Three Visions

by Kevin Esser

1. Renaissance Boy

There is a hotel in Marrakesh... where a boy of twelve stands naked before the wardrobe mirror in bashful admiration of his own beauty, one foot poised forward, dirty toes flexing against the floor's glazed red tile. With my fingers I comb slowly through his hair – tight black tendrils damp with sweat – baring his slender brown neck for a moment, just one sweet moment, a fragrance like new-mown spring grass teasing me, coaxing me... now. Yes: the musk of Milout, my precious Berber pup.

Milout: a velvet name, soft as a flute's trill. At the Renaissance Bar, where he works as a kitchen boy and scowls at the customers through the grease-pungent smoke of the brazier, they call him “Azik”... but his scowl softens to a smile whenever he sees me, and with ten dirhams slipped to the old proprietor I buy his freedom each day, watch as he tosses aside his apron and wipes his nose on the sleeve of his ragged purple sweater and slips grinning beneath my outstretched arm. I smile, almost weeping, at the warmth of him. Azik. But “Milout” more perfectly captures the cocoa-satin splendor of him. Sweet essence of spice and silk and little-boy moans as he strokes himself stiff on the bed, already slippery with my saliva, tensing now, pointing to himself and murmuring, “Monsieur, monsieur!” I nod, my hand caressing his gristle-hard thigh... as he surrenders a single opalescent strand of himself onto his taut brown belly.

He speaks only Berber. Knows two or three words of French. No more. (With my fingertips, I smear the lamb's-milk on his belly and whisper “lait” as he nods, grinning, in eager acknowledgment.) He calls me “Monsieur”. Always “monsieur,” like a polite little Parisian schoolboy addressing his master.

And do you remember? ...the first night I met you? Full moon pasted cold in ebony-slick sky. Then, but also now, forever now... through Renaissance glass I see you resting in a chair beneath the white smoke, one elbow propped on the counter, eyes so dark they smolder inward, I swear, burning black, angry, hot. But we know each other... as my hand caresses a cheek that gives no warmth – until now, finally now, when in the park you sit against the tree's swollen trunk (nocturnal Druid rite performed in unholy Moroccan sanctum) and slide your pants down to your knees, wagging yourself hard as I pull you gently to your feet and lean forward, my lips parting. Crickets buzzing in midnight splash of silver. Remember, remember. I brush the grit from your buttocks muscled tense and hard... tasting you as your hips begin a gently rhythmic thrust. I hear you murmuring from above, your hand squeezing my shoulder... then a warm, sweet dribble on my tongue, like the seep of juice from a ripened fruit.

Slipping beneath my outstretched arm... the boy takes a stick of gum and smiles as the cinnamon nips his tongue. Marrakesh sun slices in neon-shafts through a lazy swirl of dust. Milout scratches his nose, hitches up his saggy black trousers. A whorl of pubescent sideburn fuzzes his dark cheek. He peers at his feet as we walk to the hotel around the corner... and once, feeling my gaze, he lifts his sulky panther-black eyes and offers me the timid riddle of his smile. I want to kiss him, now, capturing his joy... but I wait until he sits before me on the bed, yanking off shoes, socks, pants, sweater. I nudge his shoulder, and he swings his bare legs up onto the mattress and stretches out brown and lean with hands clasped behind his head, chin on his chest, watching me savor the smooth perfection of him: the first traces of hair like black whisker-stubble sprinkled across his sweat-damp groin... and then the wonder of him swelling in my mouth. (I let him slide out after a moment... glance up to discover his head lolled to the side against his upraised right arm, eyes closed, lips parted: a face of gentle dreaming, waking now in sudden sheepish delight as he opens his eyes and returns my grin. I wish I could tell you, Milout, how much I adore you. But of course you know; without words, you know. Our smiles crackle with love.)

Sometimes when I climb from my taxi in front of the Renaissance, I find Azik embroiled in raucous horseplay with other boys, unleashing a kung-fu flurry of kicks and chops that ends abruptly when he sees me... becoming once again my Milout, squinting into the sun and wandering like a shy little faun to nuzzle beneath my arm, against my side, the

sweaty noonday afterplay scent of him sharp as a burst of citrus and fresh spice... tempered with subtle whiffs of mutton and onions, coriander and mint – my boy, a feast of cunning aromas. (If I could keep you with me – like some exotic young beast of sinew and sleek brown flesh – would I? Would I dare?)

But when I came for you today, I found Abdullah standing near the door, black beret pulled down over his shag of dark curls. Shaking his head, he tells me that you've gone with someone else. “He wants to make sex with European man,” grinning now, shrugging. “He tells me that, my friend, yes he does. I don't lie.”

So easy to forget your face. A blur of dark, dream-vague beauty. Nothing more now, though I can still conjure the fragrance of you, the taste of you, the smoothly muscled warmth of you as I kiss your hair and feel the kitten-gentle puff of your breath against my chest. I commune with you through dreams, a grim sorcerer weaving spells, terrified of your beauty. Do you remember any of this, or have I died in your sleep?

“He wants to make sex with European man.”

“And later?”

“Maybe, my friend.” Abdullah has no molars, cannot chew meat, subsists on harira and kif and mint tea. Beads of sweat weep down his tendon-bulging neck. “Maybe tomorrow when you come back.”

“I have to leave tonight.”

“You stay another day, get nice boy, clean boy...”

No, of course not. No other boy. How do I make Abdullah understand that my life is already bleeding away?

“This boy he's dirty, my friend.” His thumb stabs toward an imaginary Milout. “I find you good clean boy, much better.”

“No other boy. Forget it. Never mind. No other boy.”

No other boy... and Milout, brown as a totem of polished cedar, curls against me, head on my belly as I pet his black swirl of hair and urge his head down, his tongue working in slow, rather awkward circles. Then he reminds me that he's still a child by looking up with a grin and pulling the wad of gum from his mouth and sticking it – until he's finished – onto the wooden bed frame.

And last night in your sleep you whimpered like a lonesome little pup. A rooster crowed from the alley behind the hotel in a midnight false alarm. Drums thudded a pagan tattoo from the Djemaa-el-Fna... as I wiped the sweat from your forehead with my thumb and whispered a lullaby into your ear. I soothed myself soothing you, my hand on your back, feeling the panic in your heartbeat begin to subside.

So much... more. I forget by trying to remember, kissing each of your fingers, the nails blackened with the grime of your play and redolent of the adolescent tang I breathe in greedily, like a penitent inhaling incense, each time you slip off your pants and spread your legs slowly, slowly to my caress, your eyes fluttering half-shut in a gentle haze of delight. Each fingertip pungent with memory: Did you scratch yourself, idly, while wafting off to sleep? – one knee bent slightly, lolled to the side, moonlight teasing over your nakedness like a silver mist. And in the morning – window tinted ice-pink with dawn – did you stretch like a supple little kit and giggle, softly, as we both glanced down between your legs? Yes, sheet crumpled at our feet, I rolled you towards me and pressed my mouth against yours, sighing into you, letting my eyes drift shut as our tongues played together in gentle, slippery swirls.

And now... Milout is a dream of textures and aromas and subtly musical charms, and I bleed memories of him. He resides in my wounds, grinning, murmuring enchantments. And I ask his forgiveness daily for leaving him before we could say goodbye. And yet, I have to smile – my pain anesthetizing an older, deeper despair – for I know now, finally, that I can go back, and I can have him forever... even if I never do.

2. Tangier Lament

“There's horror in them eyes, Sir... like none I ever seen before.”

And so the cadaver lies rotting, untouched and untouchable, in its shroud of sunlight and maggots. Rumors of plague sweeping Tangier like the babble and shriek of nightmare. Donkey carts and rusted trucks rattling with coffins through the noonday inferno.

...sudden sting of disinfectant forces tears to my eyes as I blink, amazed.

“It teaches us all a good lesson, it does.” And the old sailor nods. “Makes us remember a thing or two about how we all end up sooner or later. Nothin' like a good bout of plague to shake a body up!”

Wisdom sends me spinning in disgust... I scramble whimpering from the scythe.

Palm breeze teasing enamel-blue sky as little Lossif dances before me, coaxing me with a pixie finger through alleyways reeking sour with urine... rubbish heaps where flies seethe in shivering sparkles of black.

Wail of muezzin calling the wretched to prayer... echoing spectral.

The boy pauses in a pool of sunshine. "This is where we do it."

Soothing me with velvet lilt of his French .

...fever-image of blackened skulls strewn cracked beneath desert sun. Yapping of savages... faces tattooed in indigo revelation of despair. Boys stripping away scarlet cloaks to display pubic hair twisted in jet-black braids, erections painted bright orange with herbal dye. Undulation of slender brown arms, shoulders, hips as the drum's pulse quickens... cobalt moon drooping bloated in Satan-black sky.

"There's horror in them eyes, Sir..."

Lossif lifts his robe and holds it clasped against his chest... stands naked with sun flashing sparks from his wild touse of black curls. He squats, gazes down at his penis hardening between dark thighs shiny with sweat... it pokes straight out, bobbing slowly to the rhythm of his heart. Eyelashes lift in soft flutter of silk... cat-crinkle of nose.

"It squirts when you pet it."

Shy gleam of teeth, gums shining as he tilts his head, grinning...

"...like none I ever seen before."

Fling open the door to room shuddered against midday solar burst... two youths sprawled naked on the bed, slats of sunlight glowing across them as mice skitter frantic between the shadows... the bellow-puff of breath... young genitals pressed together in slippery, grinding circles.

"I'll teach you good..."

Moktir licks the neck of the younger boy: virgin lad from Spain with tangle of chestnut hair plastered slick around his face... whimpers as his penis stiffens. Moktir rolls him gently onto his stomach.

"I'll teach you good, Chico... like my little brother."

Blink, amazed... then turn away as Moktir dribbles saliva between Chico's pale buttocks and corkscrews a finger, slowly, into the tight hole.

A sigh, soft as the breeze stirring tattered gray curtains near Chico's head... sweat glittering on his forehead, eyes screwed shut, he lifts his face and moans through clenched teeth. Rump pulled higher by strong hands clamped beneath his hips.

Moktir pumps faster...

...smiles with eager hiss of breath as the boy beneath him shivers, sucks in his belly, squeezes out spurt after spurt of semen onto the bare mattress.

Chico's penis softens... dangles skinny and red in its own puddle of ooze.

...chamber of delights. Bare light bulb swinging from frayed black cord amidst chaos of shadow-play. Chico sits on the mattress, cross-

legged, nude below the waist. Reek of stale semen. A white blouse embroidered with gold slips loose down one frail shoulder as he licks his fingers and reaches down between his legs. His penis sticks up straight, glistening scarlet.

“I never get tired of it...”

Moktir pulls on his striped robe. A moth plunks maddened against the light bulb above his head... luster of black hair curled soft over his ears.

“I’ll teach you more tomorrow.” He bends down and kisses the top of his young friend’s penis, runs his tongue slowly around the reddened knob. “...more tomorrow.”

Chico is left alone. He croons Spanish to himself. A black spider speckled with red hangs glinting near the window... its strand of silk glistens like spittle in the harsh glare.

“I never get tired...”

He leans back against one elbow and raises his knees, strokes lazily between widespread thighs. The gauzy white gandoura slips farther down his bare shoulder...

“...horror in them eyes.”

Sickness seeping through streets thronged with beggars staggering blind – eyes sticky with mucus, lips eaten away by sores. Demon-cunning of thieves sliding daggers expertly into heaving ribs.

“I kill you with my knife...”

But turn away... turn away slowly with regret escaping in a sigh and follow the Arab boy returning from the beach... hair still wet, tangled in black tendrils, dripping... footsteps glistening on white cobblestones. Skimpy lemon swimming trunks caught tight between young buttocks flexing lean as he saunters. Glances over his shoulder, beckons with subtle inclination of his head.

Alley humming with heat, plumes of dust swirling chalk-white around the boy’s ankles as he turns... one hand already caressing the bulge between his legs.

Cat darts between us, hisses like a viper.

“I’m called Ali...” Wiggles the lemon-yellow trunks down brown legs powdered with dried salt... penis flips up hard, waggles stiffly as he grinds his hips in coquettish shimmy.

...semen streaked glistening on the dust between his feet.

“I’m called Ali...”

He sets down his shoeshine box. “You leave it here, Ali?”

“Sure... I leave it here.”

...velvet lilt of French.

I point. "My room is there... on the hill." The shadow of my hand trembles against the wall like a shiver of black smoke.

...whiff of cinnamon as our lips slide together in wet, hungry chews... tongues swirling... a crackle of saliva, sweet-metallic as I lick inside his mouth.

"I'm called Ali..."

The supple pup stretches naked near the window... skin glowing a cool, dusky rose in twilight sun.

"I'm almost fourteen, and I've done it before... lots of times."

"Ali... you break my heart."

Bare feet slapping softly across tile floor. Jiggle of young thighs, genitals. He licks his lips with kitten-pink tongue, crawls into my embrace.

"... the beauty of you breaks my heart."

Warm boy nuzzling closer... a husky giggle as my hand pets his rump.

Whiff of cinnamon... "It gets big when you suck it."

...wisdom sends me spinning in dismay.

"Do you know Lossif?"

Stumbling over bodies... claws smeared black with soot and feces clutching at my arm... stench knotting in my gut, swelling nauseous.

"I thought I saw him yesterday, on the boat."

But it couldn't have been him. Beautiful, but too old. Surrounded by Berber women slashed with tattoos. Leaning over the railing, curly black mane swirling... eyes squinting against the sting of salt-spray as he turns his head and looks at me with wary, feline eyes, face dark and panther-fierce. Shifts his weight from right foot to left, still leaning over the railing, buttocks stretched taut beneath faded denim, gray T-shirt flapping frenzied against his sleek brown back.

...regret escaping in a sigh. "Do you know my Lossif?"

"I know many, my friend..."

Palm fronds shuddering as the storm boils black over the bay. Mektir pulls the hood of his burnous over hair whipped in shaggy riot of curls... wind snapping his robe, he hugs himself, takes one step before turning to me with eyes narrowed against the prickle of dust...

"I know so many." The hood flutters around his pagan-dark face. "Maybe on the beach I saw him... maybe in the Medina."

Lightning slithers silver through tar-black clouds.

"There are so many sick, my friend. So many sick..."

I touch boys who huddle drenched beneath the palms. Strange faces lift to mine... lips parted, eyes staring with fever, sweat and rain glittering

on reddened cheeks.

“It teaches us all a good lesson...”

Ali places my hand between his thighs... he throbs warm and hard in my grip.

“I have to get back... do it fast, please.”

“Do you know Lossif?”

“Sure...”

Hips pumping... rhythmic creak of springs... young penis slippery with saliva, sliding back and forth in my fist.

“You know my Lossif?”

Gushes of sperm oozing warm through my fingers... as Ali stiffens his back, lifts his head groaning, then falls back limp against the mattress... sighs like a contented kit.

“Sure, he's with Mektir... he likes it hard up the ass.”

Stumbling over bodies... stench knotting in my gut.

“... a good lesson.”

Sinister Tangier moon. I return its stare.

Grinning zombie grabs for my crotch... his blistered eyes blink back tears as I shove past him cursing.

A boy wearing skimpy white gandoura embroidered with gold sings to himself to accompaniment of flute and tambourine. His voice climbs and falls in rococo wail... silver chatter of bells as he flutters his wrists, his ankles.

I pause, shivering, before stepping through the door.

...velvet wailing spirals higher as the boy glides across the room and greets me with penis rubbed bone-stiff against my thigh. He grasps my hand and croons Spanish into my ear.

“I'm called Chico.”

“Do you know Lossif?”

Mektir kneels near the window, one cheek shaded black, the other glowing silver with moonlight. He gnaws on fried locusts with sharp wolf-teeth, nods toward half-open door, shrugs.

“I know so many...”

Bed lustrous as slab of marble. Lossif glances up with plum half-eaten in his hand, chin glistening with juice... chews with mouth open as I step closer.

“So many sick, Lossif... but you're safe. We're both safe... for now.”

I lick the juice from his chin, slide my tongue slowly between plum-sweet lips.

“But I hate your being here... it breaks my heart, Lossif.”

Shrug of frail shoulders. Lightning teases like neon-flicker across his bare chest. Clean flash of teeth.

“...it squirts when you pet it.”

We both smile in laser-flashing solitude. The horror hovers outside where cats writhe snarling beneath needles of black rain.

But we're safe. It's not enough... but for now I think we're safe.

3. Solar Visions

Mexican swelter of flies and cracked pavement baking under white-hot sun wreathed in pale wisps of vapor... dead animal eye, staring lidless, brilliant as sudden carbon flash in sapphire-slick sky. Helter-skelter of cars, trucks... diesel fumes and steaming tar pinching at the throat like all the exhalations of hell... as boys scramble through the demon-maze of traffic and push-carts and garbage bins.

“Gorgeous boys. Fiercely beautiful faces with dark wolf eyes...”

A sigh. Pain clutches like sickness at my gut. It shouldn't be... but I go on and on, ranting like Ahab. Beauty is the curse and I writhe, maddened in this thrall.

“Blink – rapt – as a lad with bronze skin glowing softly saunters closer... eyes lifting in accidental discovery, shifting down with timid tilt of head... then up again, smiling.

“Perhaps I can confide in you,” I whisper as the candle flickers... phantom fingers clawing streaks of soot against the walls.

The boy nods.

He breathes his name into my ear... soft as the murmur of a shell: Kiko. The taste of orange on his lips as our kiss lingers. Hiss of wax spit from the flame.

“It gnaws like a cancer, Kiko. I spend my days running from the pain... like a mad dog ripping at its own guts.”

...breath citrus-sweet and warm against my cheek. Don't tarry long, stranger. Love sickens like a poison, sucking like a whirlpool till we vanish, screaming, in a tangle of arms... and the hand, just visible above the steam, grabs skeletal at shreds of neon.

Yet... through the blasts of flame I spy angels: street-boys kicking cans along the rutted sidewalk. One turns aside and approaches with sway of shoulders sturdy beneath T-shirt striped scarlet and gold... tattered jeans showing dirty knees as he steps beside me... my shadow

shrouds him below the waist. Alone in a throng of specters, we pause. A flash of teeth strong and sharp as a cat's... stay calm... maintain control in the clutch of passion. Fear down the spine like a spider, crawling. Always a risk when beauty is confronted suddenly, face to face.

“You make me happy almost to despair, Kiko.” The sheet flutters like a wraith in icy moonlight as the boy rolls onto his back and raises his knees. Hands warm behind my neck, strong as a man's but smooth... boy's hands holding me. Panting of breath in the sweat-rank darkness... the buzzing of flies as they carom clicking against the ceiling.

“Can you understand how I feel?”

“A little...”

“You're so young... maybe in a few years... maybe never, if you're lucky.”

“I'm sorry you're sad.”

Fingers in my hair, like tiny birds nesting. “Not sad... not now.” The fragrance of him sharp in the nose, pungent as fresh spice. “You're a good kid, Kiko.”

...and it don't come easy. Not all beer and skittles, mate. Bleedin' 'ard to get by, it is.

Down and down and down we go... to the hills outside town, to the fields lying parched beneath the swelling sulphur eyeball... to the web of cracks like blackened veins – bloodless – where scorpions skitter with legs clacking brittle as bone.

...and where Ramon kneels serenely in sombrero and white pants. A farmer boy. Brown torso, smooth as polished teak... beads of sweat around the nipples. His face a dark triangle with sharp cheekbones and fragile chin dimpling now as he smiles and watches his fingers undoing each black button of his fly... revelation of hairless belly, reddened penis already hard.. pants shoved down to his knees, buttocks bouncing against his heels as he rocks, enraptured, to the languid dream-rhythm of his own hand. His head lifts... slowly... lips parting in something like a smile. Tears shine in his eyes. Stark silence of desert noon heat disturbed subtly by rasping of breath, quickening friction of skin against skin... then a raven's shriek as the boy's belly spasms, hips thrust forward, penis spurts semen like clots of cream onto blood-red clay.

Crouching beside him, I pet his hair in grateful admiration. “Nothing so beautiful can be real,” echoes through the hills in a voice reverent as a pilgrim's... cathedral hush of desolate summer eternity... locusts chirring in solemn harmony of desert prayer.

Ramon touches his own semen glistening on the red clay... it smears

like blood on his fingers as he lifts it and shows me with a grin the miracle of himself.

“I know... you should be proud.”

His sombrero of frayed straw falls away onto the cracked earth behind him as he throws back his head... the laughter trembles within his throat, his chest. “... and I can do more, too!” Turning and crouching on all fours... cocoa-brown buttocks splayed wide as he lowers himself, stretching like a kitten, arching his back, resting a dirt-smudged cheek against his hands. “But I need your help senior. I need your help...”

And his incantation continues as I probe inside him... young voice keening like a dog's howl... sweat-slick rump grinding against me in a frenzy that sends me shivering deeper into him...

“It's the joy that frightens me, Kiko.” The flame sputters higher and I see his face near mine... copper-skinned cupid with fatal almond eyes. “Nothing this good can last.”

In his shrug I find comfort. He tenses as I toss back the sheet.

A jabbering of ape-voices in my head. Forgive me Father, for I am about to sin... and see again the insect-flicker of candlelight against his cheek as he turns his head, breathless... feel again the skin of this boy, reverent fingers exploring throat, chest, belly... hips trembling upward in eager consent... the slow spreading of legs still thin and lean as a child's, still feather-soft.

Nothing so beautiful can be real. Nothing this good can last... but not least, I watch Juanito circling me like a hungry coyote. The film breaks, melting with a hissing orange glow... and the boy stops, frozen like an icon, but primitive, cunning, a young savage in white loincloth... with Lucifer-halo of black curls.

Nothing so beautiful...

“I've been looking for you, senior.” Voice husky... a feline croon. “Waiting for days. I know Ramon, too. And I need your help. I need your help...”

He looks down at his bulging loincloth and slips his erection out the side where it presses twitching against his dark thigh... one hip lolled to the side, opposite knee bent, he poses with a casual grace under the connoisseur's stare. Offers an impudent smile. Drops to his knees. Unties one knot, then the other... lets the loincloth flutter away like a flower's discarded petal as he lowers himself to his belly and begins slowly to rub his stiffened penis back and forth across the ground turning jelly-soft beneath him... wet slurping of boy-flesh pumped in and out of mud, brown buttocks shiny with sweat as he thrusts, faster and faster,

face turned to the side in mask of agony until suddenly he shivers and sends semen squirting in milky strands onto the black muck beneath his belly...

“Sometimes I'm sure I've already gone mad, Kiko.”

...not yet. The job's not finished. Touch Juanito's shoulder as he lies panting, sprawled naked on his stomach, legs still spread wide and bent slightly at the knees. He glances up through eyelashes flecked with mud. Fallen angel... rising unsteadily to his feet as I lift him beneath the arms.

“I need your help, señor...”

“You'll be fine now.”

“I feel a lot better... but my brother... you have to help my little brother.”

Bars of sun and shade striped white and black against the wall where roaches scurry, frenzied, as the door swings open. Young boy hunched on the bed stands up as sunshine splashes him like a beacon.

“I fell asleep...” Rubs his eyes with a lazy fist. “Is it OK? Are we alone?” His Spanish lulls like music in the uncanny twilit silence.

I see my shadow, nodding, against his bare chest. “All alone... no one can bother us, Kiko.”

“But Juanito and Ramon...”

“...they don't mind. No one can hurt us.”

Lean young faun in white underpants... skin a lustrous amber in evening sun.

“I've never done it before.”

“I know.”

Peeling the underpants down legs quivering with anticipation... brown fuzz glossy with sweat above the half-erect penis bobbing at a stiff angle between his copper-smooth thighs.

“Nothing so beautiful can be real.”

“I'm just a kid.”

“I'll help you.”

Creaking of springs as we fall weightless to the foul gray mattress.

“It'll be dark soon.”

Hand cupping young testicles slippery-hot with sweat... the aroma of boy wafting sweet from between spreading thighs as sunlight fades to pinpoint of flame fluttering in sudden night breeze.

“It's the joy that frightens me, Kiko.”

Sheet tossed back... the mattress already stained with a blot of semen – dark as blood in the moonlight and cold beneath my shoulder as I rest my head on the boy's belly.

“...violent delights have violent ends.”

“Do more, señor...” A slow upward squirming of hips... skin luminous as cool pearl.

“...loathsome in his own deliciousness.”

Stars scattered like ice outside the window... boy moaning like wounded pup as he slides salty into my mouth, the taste of him biting tart against my tongue.

...when they kiss, consume. But not now. Resume the battle tomorrow.

...and tonight, scatter the demons and revel in this boy's caress. Beauty is the curse... and the blessing. Smell him. Taste him. Marvel at the splendor of him.

...and smile.