

No Plumed *Serpent* Here

BY GRETA HOFMANN NEMIROFF

... It was as if, from his body of blood could rise up that pillar of cloud which swayed and swung like a rearing serpent or a rising tree, till it swept the zenith, and all the earth below was dark and prone, and consummated.

—*The Plumed Serpent*,

D. H. Lawrence

Mira tries to avert her eyes, but she can't. She simply cannot break her gaze, and luckily no one seems to be noticing her.

The young man is lying several rows away. He is in a deep sleep, flat on his back on a chaise-loungé which, like hers, belongs to a beach café. Sweat has curled his black hair thick against a firm young neck which pulsates slowly and visibly. She admires his silky resilient Mexican skin. But it is not his face, transported in sleep well beyond this crowded beach in Zihautanejo, that attracts her attention.

This is what rivets her: the young man in modest grey swimming trunks is asleep in a visible state of sexual arousal. Various expressions for his condition course through her mind: pitching a tent, getting a hard on, having a wet dream. She can hardly remove her eyes from the grey fabric which seems to stir with a life of its own. The shape beneath it defines itself by moving upwards, visibly hardening into a sturdy phallic shape which sets the folds of material in a slight quiver as it moves in its slow arc.

Mira sternly reminds herself that such vignettes should not stimulate a woman of her age, especially on her first Christmas after the divorce. She has become a member of those armies

This is what rivets her: the young man in modest grey swimming trunks is asleep in a visible state of sexual arousal. She can hardly remove her eyes from the grey fabric which seems to stir with a life of its own.

of aging *gringos* travelling in winter without male protection within the safe and mercenary embrace of Mexican tourism. Briefly she eyes two such women from the North as they stroll purposefully down the beach in state-of-the-art elaborately clumsy running shoes. The veins on their legs have been rendered almost invisible by well tended tans and layered applications of expensive creams. In the brilliant sunlight, their freshly dressed hair curls auburn around nautical sun hats.

As her gaze returns to the dreamer who is still in a state of somnolent arousal, she wonders idly if those women are unwilling divorcées like herself or *bona fide* widows. Widowhood presents itself to the world as the least shameful way of being single ... especially for women her age. Perhaps never having been invited into marriage is worse, she reflects.

She has been cheated of honourable widowhood and would have greatly preferred Harry's premature death at

60 to his decamping with a 30-year-old patient. Although she herself has never experienced an affair with a much younger man, she knows of women who actually end up married to or living with men 20 years their junior. It is often said parenthetically that one of these younger men must have "low self-esteem," little income, or few prospects to resort to older women. She has seen such young men take on the smug agoraphobic persona of house husbands. She cannot overlook the fact that no one ever accuses young women who attach themselves to old men of lacking self-esteem. At worst, they are accused of being economic adventuresses or of being hopelessly enmeshed in the toils of paternal deprivation. Mira is not attracted to the thought of attending to the domestic needs of either young or old men. However, she would not be averse to a flattering and passionate affair. That is unlikely again in this life, she reflects.

"Who would have me at 58?" she sometimes asks her friends. She knows her financial comfort is most likely to attract new dependents—adult male babies, super-annuated men who lack the initiative or mendacity to embark on relationships with demanding young women. Women of her age are of interest to society as consumers of expensive goods and over-priced services. "Are we even interested in ourselves or each other," she wonders, remembering the sense of incompleteness with which she sometimes leaves well planned social events with her women friends.

She knows that it is not only women of her age who must advance

these painful questions to themselves. At thirty-five, her daughter Suzanne takes vigilant care to look younger than her years. Even Suzanne has been singled by the machinations of the barely post-nubile for whom she has been unceremoniously dumped by a few men. If this is the inevitable fate of women, Mira reflects, perhaps it is preferable to live in openly polygamous societies where the oldest and first wife at least enjoys some status and privilege.

Mira glints briefly at a May-December couple frolicking on the beach. She is slender and supple in a brilliant red bikini; he preens under the greying pelt covering his arms, legs, and torso right down to the abbreviated sling of his bikini.

As she draws her glance back to the now rigid armature stretching the grey fabric of the boy's trunks, she feels a wave of erotic longing pass through her entire being. She knows she is safe in the crowd; she will be invisible to the young man when he awakens. She imagines him joining the endless parade of tanned and oiled young male bodies strutting on the beach, battling the surf, and calling out to wandering groups of undulating young women who pretend to ignore them.

"Get a grip on yourself!" Suzanne's often repeated words chide repetitiously in her head as she follows the young man's progress from beneath the cover of her wide-brimmed hat. Suddenly a dart of pain penetrates her heart, bursting in her chest like a guerilla bullet. The trajectory of her pain carries with it the memory of Harry's last half-hearted attempt to make love during his long years of intermittent impotence.

A late Saturday winter afternoon. Harry rising from the shadows between her legs. "I can't get it up any more. Go ahead and fuck whomever the hell you want from now on."

Now on the Playa el Gato, Mira cannot recall his exact tone. Were those mutinous words uttered in anger or in resignation? That evening she had lain silently, watching the

greyness of his shape withdrawing into its own impenetrable darkness and leaving the room in a sudden shaft of light from the hall. As she listened to sounds of pleasure emanating from his shower, she stared out the window at fat snow flakes dropping slowly to the frozen ground. She had wanted him to return for his

**She cannot discern
whether the
pain comes from
recollecting
Harry's reflexive
acts of rejection
or from her
certainty that
never again will
she receive an
erotic gaze.**

clothes with the loving and comforting words she had never heard him utter. He had gone directly downstairs and turned on the TV. She had hoped that by concentrating on the snow, she could anaesthetize the pain in her heart. Finally, she simply got up, made dinner, and provided superficial conversation at the table. Harry had seemed relieved; it was never mentioned directly, that painful event. Later on, as if out of the blue, Mira would occasionally suggest that they "seek help." Harry would either change the subject or claim that he was content with their current arrangements. He, who had always been an atheist, now claimed to be enjoying a heightened spirituality of restraint. He never could meet her eyes when he followed that line of explanation.

Even here on a distant Mexican beach, she re-experiences the enduring chill of his presence and how he could lock her out simply by focusing his profiled pale eyes on the

middle distance. She could not remember the last time their eyes had locked.

Mira now regrets having awakened these memories because they have evoked that familiar pain in her chest. It is as if a powerful and indifferent hand were simultaneously squeezing and twisting her heart with ever sharpening intensity. Again she has been ambushed by sadness without end. She cannot discern whether the pain comes from recollecting Harry's reflexive acts of rejection or from her certainty that never again will she receive an erotic gaze. She turns her eyes away to the sleeping young man's unselfconscious abandonment.

In through the nose, slowly... slowly filling the void in her chest... slowly, slowly pushing the air right up to the top of her head... then out through her mouth. Slowly counting from one to ten each time. Only three times, the yoga teacher at the health club said, or one could hyperventilate. Mira opens her eyes to the shimmering turquoise surf and then slyly gazes over at the anonymous young man fast asleep at the very apex of his youth. His erection has dwindled to a softening mound under pliable folds of grey fabric which, moments before had been so promisingly, so seductively, stretched.

Mira reaches for her watch. Time is slow here; she has an hour and a half before she must meet Suzanne and her new beach friends at Las Palmeras, a restaurant up the beach. There is no reason to leave just yet, but to keep the peril of further recollection at bay, she will embark on her customary afternoon stroll.

Approaching the lagoon, Mira notices a knot of children and adults silhouetted against its darkening stillness. A mangy horde of beach dogs desultorily mount one another near by. As she draws closer, she realizes that all attention is focused on something on the ground: an alligator. Faced away from the crowd and

crouched on muscular haunches, the animal lies still, its saw-toothed jaws closed, its eyes still and hooded. Immobile on the wet sand, the beast appears dead except for an occasional flicker of its lids ... attentive over obsidian eyes. Its tail describes an arc, mid-lash on the sand. The erect zig-zag of the tail's serration gives the creature a prehistoric appearance. With bravado, the beach dogs approach and bark; children run perilously close, millimetres from its reach. Unwilling to join such a craven curious group, Mira remains transfixed, but at a safe and detached distance. Finally it is the children's titillated screams and fistfuls of sand and shells which goad the alligator to action. It glides forward on its haunches, then stops abruptly. Adults sharply grasp children. A gringo nearby idly speculates that the animal is about to be butchered for stew.

"*Es mi amigo!*" exclaims a tall rosy Mexican man in faded shorts, bending to stroke the alligator's rough flank. Smiling seductively, the man snatches open the long narrow jaws and displays its yellowed nail-like teeth to the retreating semicircle of admirers.

Spasms of repulsion seize Mira's gut; panic constricts her chest. She must hurry off to gather the book, bag and towel which she has left on the chaise-longue. She will take a shower and a short nap in the safety of her room before dressing for dinner.

Although she is proud of Suzanne's fluent Spanish, Mira is resentful of her own exclusion from conversation at the table. How does Suzanne always manage to find people with whom to "hang out," she wonders, knowing this might be generational rather than simply a matter of personality. Of the people at this reserved table in a prime location on the terrace of Las Palmeras, she knows only Lallo, the puffy faced owner of a boat rental service which seems to operate out of the restaurant. He has been hovering around Suzanne's

chaise longue for two days. There is a middle-aged lawyer, his wife and young daughter from Mexico City. Another couple has simply been introduced as "Lallo's cousins." The two adolescent boys, it emerges, are Lallo's sons from an old marriage who have come for their Christmas vacation. Suzanne never mentioned

"What may I order for Mamita?" Lallo bends condescendingly towards Mira as if she were a little old lady rather than only a few years older than he." "Shrimp, perhaps?"

that he is divorced, Mira realizes, but then she recalls that they have not spoken all day. It's just not fair, she fights back tears; she who has spent the whole day alone on the beach is now forced into linguistic solitude.

She should be more forgiving of Suzanne, she castigates herself fretfully. Suzanne is just getting over a bad patch after Jorge, her partner of eight years, abruptly left her for a "helpless" 18-year-old Salvadorean girl. Mira does not wish to dwell on the unrepaid money she herself has lent Jorge for legal help in establishing his status as a *bona fide* political refugee from Chile. She knows that a fling in Mexico could help restore Suzanne's confidence. She appraises Lallo across the table. He seems to be enjoying the role of holiday father ostentatiously whispering secrets to his sons. He looks older than the forty years he admits to. His hair has been dyed that purpling jet black favoured by so many men, and he has a definite tendency to hips. He is

closer to 50, she decides. Although he is presiding self-importantly as if they were all his guests, Mira is certain he will not foot the bill.

"And what may I order for Mamita?" Lallo bends condescendingly towards Mira as if she were a little old lady rather than only a few years older than he. "Shrimp, perhaps? Fish is the specialty here. Or perhaps you would prefer chicken? It is a beautiful evening to be alive, is it not?"

He is right, it is a beautiful evening. The terrace offers a wide view of the Pacific Ocean in riotous sunset. The air is balmy, tropical. Behind the voices and clatter of the restaurant, she hears the shushing of the receding tide. She will try to enjoy herself, she decides, and makes her dinner choices which Lallo triumphantly translates to the proprietor whom he has introduced as his partner.

"Oh, you have more than one business?" Mira queries. "I thought just the boat rental business was yours."

Lallo shrugs delicately and turns away to speak very quickly in Spanish to the proprietor. Both men laugh resoundingly. Mira wonders if they are laughing at her, but no, they seem to be laughing at something behind her. The background music is getting louder, its rhythms become more insistent as they are clapped out by the other clients. People call out in incomprehensibly excited tones. She turns around in her chair to see what is happening.

A brilliantly peroxidized woman in a tight dress is loudly arranging a group of similar women into a line which she joins. Each woman has been posed to wrap her left arm around a neighbour's neck and to stretch her right arm forward. Mira notices a photographer facing the group, motioning them where to station themselves. He does not come forward as they strike their pose. Everyone seems to be waiting.

Then, suddenly and to great general applause, the man from the lagoon appears with the alligator in his



Diana Dean, "The Shadow," 48 "x 60," Oil on Canvas, 1995.

arms. He has changed into a faded maroon track suit with silver racing stripes down the legs. He offers the alligator to the row of women who shriek in titillated fear. His gaunt face beams a slack-jawed almost toothless smile. As he moves toward the women, holding the animal out from his body, he executes a few bumps and grinds, jerking his pelvis towards the alligator. Reverently he lays the beast across the armature of the women's right arms. Then it all happens rapidly. At a signal from the photographer, the women stretch their faces into a communal scarlet smile; the flash pops, and with surprising grace, the man from the lagoon manages to scoop up the animal and pocket the pesos showered on him. He smiles vacantly and bows elaborately to his public. In the melée, he calmly puts the alligator on the floor. Slowly and lazily, the beast glides around the perimeter of the tables filled with applauding patrons.

Mira turns away to Suzanne who has resolved her danger by tucking her legs and feet under her on her chair. She motions to her mother to do the same. Other diners appear unafraid of the creature as they become engrossed in their meals. An empty grin hangs on the face of the man who walks beside the animal, edging it towards a table where he joins the photographer for a beer. The women who were photographed are now making toasts at their table. The proprietor is making margaritas at the bar. It is as if nothing dangerous has happened.

"This is totally unacceptable!" Mira recognizes her voice haranguing the startled faces at her table. As from a distance, she notices Suzanne pointedly ignoring her as she raises the intensity of her conversation with the lawyer's wife. Mira shakes her daughter's shoulder. "We're leaving! I can't spend one more moment here," she hisses at Suzanne's unre-

ceptive face.

"My dear *Mamita*, what is disturbing you?" Lallo's face wears the expression of one used to allaying the hysteria of women. "It is not that little animal, is it? The man's little pet? Come and sit beside me. I will protect you." He deftly empties one of his sons from his chair and motions him to change places with Mira. "There is nothing to fear. Pablito comes every night with his alligator. Nobody has ever been hurt."

"Either that animal leaves immediately or I go!" Mira can barely contain herself. She is no longer truly afraid that the animal will attack her. She is simply filled with repugnance at its lazy gliding movements combined with the gyrations of its keeper. She pulls her arm away from Lallo's discreetly restraining hand. He has come to escort her to his side of the table. "I did not come to Mexico to dine in a zoo. Please ask your partner to dismiss the man and his disgusting animal immediately." She did not want to sound so imperious. A dangerous flicker behind Lallo's polite gaze signals that she has overstepped an important boundary.

"Dear Lady, I cannot do that. People come here to see Pablito and his alligator every night. They are a big attraction of Las Palmeras. People like to have their photographs taken with the alligator. It is exciting ... a good souvenir. Those women over there work for the telephone company. This is a special party for them. They leave their families and come here together to celebrate the holidays, to have a souvenir picture of themselves with the alligator. We think it is very sexy, is it not?" Lallo winks as a man of the world and puts his too warm, too soft, hand between her shoulder-blades. "Ah, they are bringing our food. You have made a good choice, *Mamita*. Las Palmeras is famous for its fish. Sit down with me! Enjoy yourself! I take full responsibility for you and your charming daughter."

"I can't stay here. It's dangerous—and unclean." Mira has lowered her

voice; she is no longer certain of her ground.

"I personally can guarantee the cleanliness of this restaurant. It is of the highest quality." Lallo's smile has transformed, frozen into a rictus. Looking fully into his face, Mira realizes that he sees in her only a stereotypical menopausal *gringa*. She cannot find the words to change his vision.

Instead, she concentrates on Suzanne, trying to will her daughter to meet her gaze. "Do you intend to stay in this hell hole?" She asks this as if confident that no one can understand her meaning. Her voice has become crisp and efficient, but she feels the world folding neatly away and continuing without her. Even the lawyer's wife, who has apologized through Suzanne for knowing no English, is pointedly looking away. Mira hears terrible silence and vacuity fill the air. All efforts at mutual understanding, at exploration of the other, at the collective stalking of holiday pleasure has deserted the group.

She picks up her bag and makes herself walk slowly and with a stiff carriage as she avoids the alligator crouched at Pablito's feet. Her last dispiriting view as she turns into the staircase is of Suzanne attacking her fish with gusto.

Mira crouches to pick up a small empty conch washed in by the tide. It is almost perfect and whole. Her fingers register the deep pink glossiness of its interior in contrast to its chalky rough exterior. She shows it to Suzanne who nods neutrally, but does not touch it ... a gesture communicating that she is not a child but a woman with her own preoccupations. As Mira straightens her body, the beach slopes and shimmers around her. They are spending the New Year weekend at Troncones, a little-known resort some miles from the airport. Here miles of barely populated beach are pummelled by the treacherous surf and current of

the capricious ocean. She squints against the sun and surveys the beach. The landscape is layered horizontally: hot sky, a row of palm trees, a layer of dense dark green undergrowth, a strip made silvery grey by piles of driftwood, a narrow strip of white sand, and then the endless turbulence of a grey and turquoise surf.

Mira knows that Suzanne is staring at her, trying to gauge her mood. She must mimic normalcy, she tells herself, as she stretches and drapes her red towel over a driftwood tree. Her tone is casual. "I think I'll go in for a swim. Want to join me?"

"I'll just watch for now." Suzanne's tone echoes her own. "Be careful, they told me there's a really strong undertow. You can keep your bearing by watching out for your towel."

"Don't worry, I won't take any risks," Mira calls over her shoulder as she walks into a wall of waves. As she stands in the churning froth of the surf, the sands shift and swirl under her feet. She must struggle for balance. She has always been a strong swimmer, but today she feels incompetent, feeble ... old. She inspects her arms; they look scaly and desiccated in the sun. She feels loose skin under her upper arms wobble as she stretches out for balance. There are numerous brown spots on her limbs, hands and chest. She used to have poreless golden skin like Suzanne. Her mind drifts to Harry, the sharpness of his features, the evasion of his pale glance. She recalls him in an ambiguous posture ... his body turned slightly away from her, his penis flaccid, the bald spots on his head and legs bone white in the sun. She remembers how confident she would feel when they were taken for a contented older couple. She has hoarded the photograph taken of them a few weeks before he left. She has her arms around him and is smiling at Suzanne who is taking the picture. Harry's one visible arm seems to be holding her warmly. It is the other, the arm concealed behind her, which pushed her roughly away as

soon as the camera had clicked. She cannot forget Harry's phobic mis-handling of her body.

Unbidden sobs rip through Mira's chest as a wave tugs her off her feet and hurls her into a whirlpool of salt. As she bobs up and down trying to gain a foothold, she can barely make out the red dot of her towel far up the beach.

"How could you, Harry?" she screams above the crashing water. "I did my very best!"

Like a sponge, her heart fills with the detritus of decades of Harry's wilful meannesses, subtle withholdings, unrelieved gestures of rejection. When she'd mention her hurt to him he would reply: "You're imagining things. You're becoming a total paranoid!" Eventually Harry would withhold love and finally even recognition of her until he had made himself fully disappear. "Look, Mira, it was never really any good between us. Yeah, I know, I was the one insisting on marriage. But what do you want? I was very immature." He'd smiled with narcissistic self-acceptance at his dangerous youthful foibles.

"You never said those things until you were sure of having caught someone else," she'd said on the telephone one day, realizing only as she spoke how many lies and half-truths she had settled for on the way. "It's all fine for you, but this is the end for me. How can I even begin to trust anyone again?" It was only through the dense silence which met her question that she'd realized he'd cut the line some time ago.

Mira's heart is twisting and grating within her. She howls into the waves as she turns to struggle further out beyond the breakers. It suddenly occurs to her that she should keep on steadily moving outwards into the ocean until she becomes a perpetual and mindless force like the sea itself. She will be relieved from all worry and pain. She will not be called upon to revive a diminished but acceptable semblance of her former self. She will not have to dissemble or to com-

fort other survivors.

Another wave submerges her. Salt water pours through her, rinsing every cavity within her body. She lands on her feet facing the beach. The current has moved her far down the beach. Animal sounds surround her. It is her own keening, she realizes; she has never made or heard such sounds before.

Suddenly she sees Suzanne, directly level with her on the beach. She is frozen into a strange position with one foot in the shallow water and the other on dry sand, her face arrested in an expression of panic. It is her posture which best communicates her dilemma. Should she go after her mother herself or should she run for help?

Mira stops keening. "This is my child whom I love more than life itself." She repeats her "mother's mantra" to herself as she registers her daughter's confusion and fear. Superimposed on Suzanne's worried adult face, Mira recalls the open flower of her four year old face at the dinner table, asking about death because her cat had been run over. What happens after you die? She listened attentively to their answers and grasped their hands in hers, forming a small family circle. "When we go," she'd said, "let's all go together."

"I can't abandon her," she realizes. Half walking, half swimming, Mira starts in to shore. She is shaken by those animal sounds which she was forced to recognize as her own. Steadily moving towards Suzanne who is wading out to meet her, Mira attempts a regal breast-stroke, although it is really the tumultuous sea which carries her in to shore.

Mexican nights are a deep velvety black. The guest house is plunged in darkness. The shushing of the ocean has turned to a roar that hurls and retreats, clamours and withdraws, leaving a fearsome rattle of gravel, shells and coarse sand in its wake. There is an emergency. The house is filling with water. Mira feels its salty

buoyancy surrounding her, inexorably rushing towards her through the plant-filled courtyard, up onto the verandah, dislodging wicker furniture, submerging the player piano in the lounge. Other people's belongings bump against her legs as the tide carries her perilously close to the ceiling. She has glimpsed the darkened shapes of palm trees flying through the air. Inches from suffocation, she knows Harry will save her. Surely he will not refuse her this ... her life. "Harry," she cries, "save me!" There is no one there. Her forehead crashes then scrapes against the stucco ceiling. There is no air left. She can no longer breathe. "Help me!" she screams.

"Mom?" Across the room Suzanne turns on her bed lamp. She looks disoriented, frightened, and angry. "Are you okay, Mom? You must have had a bad dream. Go back to sleep now!"

Mira doesn't attempt to respond. She leans on her elbow and watches Suzanne turn off the light and settle into the bed, trustingly wrapping herself in her sheet. Soon she hears her daughter release her breath softly into sleep. She wonders briefly if Suzanne has had an affair with Lallo. She came back from Las Palmeras late that night. No, Suzanne is far too susceptible to beauty to choose Lallo with his middle-aged mannerisms. There surely has been no exotic love affair or fling for Suzanne. For Mira there has been only the sleeping young man oblivious of her presence. There is no plumed serpent here, not for them.

She knows she cannot shed her pain like a tattered garment. Neither can she become her daughter's child. Her keening was in vain as were her decades of myriad schemes to link hearts with Harry. There are no new important roles for her to play. She is no longer near the centre stage. The drama has already edged far away from her. She feels nostalgia for the intensity of new loves, but she knows she will have to settle for novelties ... stolen moments of exquisite voyeur-

ism in the great Elsewheres of this world. In the dark silence of the night, she hears the ocean's dependable cadence. As she listens, it begins to cradle and rock her. Invaded by a numbing exhaustion and consoled by the music of the surf, Mira finally settles down, dropping heavily into a dreamless sleep.

Greta Hofmann Nemiroff is Preseident of the Sisterhood is Global Institute and teaches and coordinates Women's Studies at Dawson College in Montreal. Her fiction and articles have been published in numerous journals and books in English and French.

JOAN BOND

Return

Cold
in your absence
the toaster is
my lightbulb
the sun on sofa
my blanket
In the TV news
I finger your face

Empty
in your absence
I pour oatmeal
in a teacup
toothpaste on my comb
In the fridge dust
I write you
lists and letters

At the airport
my hands
cold and empty
reach for yours
and speak spring

Joan Bond is a poet and artist living in Manitoba. Her poetry has been published in various literary journals and magazines.