

VICTOR ROBERT LEE

# Cortical Fields

*stories*

PERIMETER SIX PRESS





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Versions of the stories collected here were originally published in the following publications: “Salvage,” in *Arroyo Literary Review*; “A Question of the Tide,” in *Lowestoft Chronicle*; “Border Control,” in *West Branch Literary Magazine*; “Your Mothers Must Come,” in *Serving House Journal of Literary Arts*; “A Morning Swim to North Korea,” in *The Wang Post*; “Cultural Revolution or Cultural Decapitation,” in *The Wang Post*; “Flames on a Hot Day,” in *KYSO Journal of Arts & Literature*; “Fresh Papers,” in *Whistling Shade Literary Journal*; “Your Eternity,” in *Fiction Fix Literary Journal*; “Imagicon Farm,” in *Lowestoft Chronicle*; “Put Your Death in the News,” in *Poydras Review*.

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*Stories by Victor Robert Lee*



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PUBLISHED BY PERIMETER SIX PRESS

Perimeter Six is an imprint of The Pacific Media Trust

[www.perimeter-six.info](http://www.perimeter-six.info)

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2018950864

ISBN 978-1-938409-09-7

eISBN 978-1-938409-10-3

First published in the United States of America

Printed in the United States of America

Cover design by Joseph Langdon

*Dedicated to the freedom of lives and minds.*





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## S A L V A G E

Seven people of the island drowned that summer, but Isaac was not among them. The others were seized by a wave as they fished, or lost as they swam out to sun themselves on an islet of slate, or sucked down by a current that didn't belong there, where the water lapped at a well-known rounded boulder.

Isaac, little Isaac, was floating in a child's raft in hand-deep water while his mother sat just three steps away talking to another young woman on the beach. The low sun cast orange light everywhere, except on the graying surface of the sea. The sound of the women's conversation was like two rattles shaking, and soon it left Isaac's ears as the raft drifted out with the soft breeze and caught a surface current flowing south, toward Africa. The women's chatting was undisturbed by Isaac's departure; perhaps the shimmer of the sunset hindered their vision.

“Women—their talking eats them up,” Simeon would say later.

Simeon heard the screams and slid down the rocky butte to the strip of sand, already seeing a spot that didn’t belong there, near the horizon, a floating coin.

“Simeon!” The women were crying out and waving their hands, pointing to the sea.

“Isaac! Isaac!” Simeon shook off his sandals, ran, dove, swam.

Three-year-old Isaac was riding both the current and the wind, and after ten minutes of swimming, Simeon knew it would be a race against nature to save him. He settled into a heaving rhythm, occasionally lifting his head in mid stroke to see his mark. It seemed closer. It seemed farther away. He wasn’t sure.

He threw his arms forward like spears with each stroke, then ripped them back as the rail of muscles from hand to hip on each side burned in its turn and was released. Each breath went out with a jetting *whoosh*, and as the rhythm intensified, he saw in his mind last week’s bodies again. Two sons of a cousin, just becoming men, taken off a rock by the same wave and sucked under by the currents. It was seventy feet down where Simeon found them, wearing his diving tank. Eyes open, the boys’ familiar faces were stoic, and their limbs spread-eagle. They looked like upturned starfish.

Maybe it was the late-day faltering of the breeze, or a slackening of the current, or the surge of desperation that filled Simeon's chest and set him churning faster; after almost an hour he reached the boy.

"Isaac, you are too fast!" Simeon sputtered and grasped the raft, careful not to indent the few inches of inflated rubber that kept the child from the sea. The boy prattled as Simeon looked into his brown eyes, searching the dark round planets. Then Isaac laughed.

Simeon pulled and stroked until the sky had turned to deep violet, and the man and boy reached the sandy-bottom shallows not so far down the coast. The young mother screamed the boy's name and rushed into the water, followed by Simeon's fiancée. Like the women's hysteria, Simeon's anger had ebbed during the long swim back. Now it surged again.

"What kind of mother are you? Are you trying to lose the boy?" He grabbed Julia's arms and shook her as she cried and hugged her son. "Any moment he could have fallen in. What were you thinking?!"

Her head was whipped around by his shaking. The other woman grabbed his arm to stop him.

"And you, Nina! Sitting there. Will you do the same with our babies?"

The three of them were still waist-deep in the water. At last the boy was crying. As Simeon plodded onto the

sand, he said, “You see, now he cries in his mother’s arms. When I reached him, he was laughing. A child of the sea, like me.”

He left them. The women picked up Simeon’s sandals in silence.

On the dock at sunrise the next day, Simeon could feel in the sluggishness of his body that he had not slept well. The four men, four who had grown up together, were quiet as they threw their gear onto the old cargo boat that during the war had shuttled to Malta the meager food that kept thousands from starving. A “lifeline boat,” they had called it, always on the verge of sinking under its own overloading, or under gunfire.

Its bilge required constant pumping, but its engine never failed on the six-mile chug out to Filfla Island. Simeon’s three friends had rigged the boat with a large winch to pull up the unexploded bombs that littered the seabed. Filfla had been the practice target for the British, and now the island yielded a precious grainy mash of explosives, which Simeon’s friend Jonas knew how to harvest from the old bombs and package into loud fireworks for the celebrations of each village’s patron saint. In the old times, a patron saint got a single day of feasting, but now the villages carried on their festivals for as many as five days, and none of these days was complete in a Maltese mind without continual explosions. It was common on a summer evening

in the countryside to hear detonations from three or four celebrating villages at once.

They anchored near the island's sun-facing cliffs, blindingly bright at this hour. Simeon wanted only to hunt rays and bream and eels and octopuses, but he couldn't shake off the chiding and pleading of his friends; he was the only diver, the only one among them born of dolphin sperm, they said. They had to force him to take money for his work, because diving for him was not work. His share of the money was small because, unlike the others, he had no taste for the onshore drudgery of scraping and rolling and wrapping, turning a man into a factory. More than that, he had no taste for what they produced—little grenades of pointless idolatry.

On a dive a few days before, he had seen an oblong shape shadowed by the crevice in which it was lodged. Simeon hadn't told the others of the blurry find. He'd only said, "I think there is more, to this side, for next time."

He found it again on the first dive, a bulky silhouette. He came up for a marker buoy and eighty feet of steel cable, saying nothing of the size, only, "If I can get the loop around it, it will be heavy."

The bomb was wedged with its nose pointing down, half wrapped in sea moss and so tightly gripped by the rocks that the figure eight of cable with which Simeon usually hitched the front and back would not pass around the nose.



He ascended and called for the pick hammer. He went down again, chipped away some stone, and slipped the noose over the troublesome front end of the bomb.

Back on the surface, it was a struggle for Simeon to get into the boat, even with his friends' arms hoisting him. He felt unsteady as he slid the tank down to his side and pulled off his fins. The winch took up the slack and the engine stammered, jerking the cable. The load responded to the steady pull. But then the engine suddenly whined, and the cable started spinning loose around the winch drum. The bomb had slipped out.

Tariq stiffened in fear of a blast. Jonas and Nico laughed at his panic.

"Don't worry, little Tariq!" said Nico. "They're like old men—no more spark left."

"Maybe it's better to let this one get away," Simeon said as the others readied the line for another try.

Jonas put his hands on Simeon's shoulders, squeezing the dense muscles and rocking him back and forth. "But Simeon, he's too big to let him get away."

On the next dive, Simeon saw that the bomb had cleared the crevice, and now sat on a jumble of rocks with many gaps available for the cable to be threaded through. He made his loops, checked the metal clips again, and took his time ascending. The sun was higher now and made the underwater landscape glare, erasing its deep blues. He would never hunt at this time of day,

preferring sunrise or dusk, when the colors were just coming to life or slipping away, and the glints of light made sharper tears in the water's violet curtain.

The three hauled it in as Simeon sat and drank from a sun-warmed beer bottle. Jonas had to swing the crane arm to the stern because the boat listed too sharply when they tried to bring it over the gunwale. Even Nico worried that the rusty arm would crack under the weight.

But there it sat, shiny in its coat of gelatinous sea lettuce, as long as the men were tall.

More beers went around. The men were all sweating; there was no wind. Jonas, the ringleader, sat on the prize, nearly slipping off because of the slime. He pretended to ride it like a horse, yelping. Its girth was so great that his feet did not touch the deck.

He dismounted and held his bronze arms wide to hug Simeon.

"Simeon! One day you save my baby, and the next day you give me a new one."

At the dock, they finally got the bomb onto a dolly. Simeon left as the other three pushed it across the packed yellow dust to a shack in a walled enclosure, their workshop. The day's task was over. Opening the big catch and removing the filling would have to wait another two days, until after the town's feast of Our Lady of Pompeii. It was only afternoon and already the rumbling fireworks of another village's celebration could be heard miles away.

The next day, the main square of Marsaxlokk and all the narrow lanes leading to it were draped with flags and banners. Bright greens, loud yellows, and red crosses of the Knights in a dozen permutations. Families sat in a sprawl of wooden tables and chairs in the streets, the kids chasing each other, an occasional four-year-old dancing to the clangs and trumpet screams of the makeshift bands in the parade of mannequin saints. The cracking booms of the afternoon fireworks echoed off the old limestone façades.

Simeon sat alone at one of the outdoor tables, and through the din he did not hear his friends calling his name. Tariq came up from behind and gave him a slap on the back. He pulled up a chair, his face reddened by the grappa and beer. Nico and Jonas and a few others walked over and leaned on the tables.

“Nico, what about that one, the one named Sylvia?” said Tariq, nearly shouting. “She’s got no one; no one in sight anyway. Maybe she’ll like you even with that nose of yours.”

“She’s some cousin of Simeon’s, right?” Nico was interested.

“You know, we’re all related,” said Simeon. He was distracted, trying to overhear the sunburned man with the tight British accent two tables away.

“Arab blood and Catholic rites, with too much Sicily mixed in . . .,” was all Simeon could make out. The war

had brought the British as soldiers; now the noisy spectacle of saints brought them as tourists.

“Yes, all related, even if we don’t know it.” Tariq was giddy. “One man’s wife is another man’s—” Another loud boom cut Tariq off. A sprinting kid spun around a chair, grabbing Simeon’s sleeve to stop himself from falling down. Simeon scrubbed his hand on the boy’s head.

“A natural-born father,” laughed Tariq. “Too bad you lost your chance with Julia.”

“No loss. My best friend got her.” Simeon raised his beer bottle at Jonas. “Like family.”

Tariq jumped up. “Hey, Nico! If you get that Sylvia—better chain her to your bed or she might hop in with Jonas!”

Jonas clamped his arm around Tariq’s neck and squeezed. “Enough of the old times. You single guys will choke on your own balls.”

Tariq struggled, trying to breathe, and he and Jonas fell on Simeon, knocking him and his chair to the ground. Tariq jerked himself out of the suffocating neck hold, sending Jonas’s elbow into Simeon’s head. Simeon responded with a fist to Jonas’s face, and then the two of them were punching each other and grappling on the paving stones, covered with dust and liquor and smashed bread. They collided with chairs and knocked over a table before their friends dragged them apart. Blood was dripping out of Simeon’s nose; Jonas’s right eye was already swelling shut.

The two stood panting, glaring at each other, until Simeon walked away.

He wandered along small lanes, the dusk settling in and the explosions unbearably loud. "We'll all go deaf, or worse," he said out loud. "For a bunch of saints."

"Simeon Azzopardi! Having a nice talk with yourself? Well then, try not to argue!" The widow Fiteni cackled with laughter. She had been sitting on a nearby porch and now stood up feebly.

"It's sure," she said.

"What is sure?"

"Your big find; the boys scraped it off and it's the same. The same as the one that dropped in on the church. The bomb that in all his goodness the Lord made a dud. How they could drop it on a Sunday evening, knowing we were all there . . . and no one was killed, not a one."

Everyone knew the story. During the war, a German half-tonner had crashed through the church dome in Mosta, up the road, when Mass was just beginning. It thudded on the marble floor and rolled, but didn't explode. There were plenty of broken bones, but no one died, unless you counted widow Fiteni's husband, whose femur got cracked. He bled to death, but it was slow, so he didn't expire until three days later. She didn't count that.

"Maybe my buddies will give the bomb shell to the church, to put on display up there with the other one,"

he said, his voice sour. "After they get the powder out and get rich."

Simeon walked through the zigzag of narrow streets in an arc around the village center. The back lanes were empty except for cats and dogs wandering in and out of the glows of candles mounted on windowsills. He turned a corner and almost ran into two young women.

"Happy saint's day to you," said Julia. She was walking with a girlfriend, arm in arm.

"And to you."

"You've been fighting?"

"Just a scuffle. With the boys." A moment passed.

"Simeon, thank you for bringing Isaac back. I . . .," Julia's voice faltered and she lowered her eyes. The girlfriend strolled on by herself.

"He's too happy on the water," Simeon said. Then he frowned. "Are these from me?"

Julia followed his gaze to the bruises on her arms. Her face reddened in the candlelight but she said nothing.

"I'm sorry for doing that. Too much feeling for the boy."

"Simeon—I am sorry."

"Sorry you switched beds?"

"No! I am not." Julia folded her arms across her chest and took a step toward him. "What kind of life would I have with you, always in the water, having your fun? And a little shack. Nina can have it."

“Your love is for a big house then?”

“I loved *you*, Simeon.” Julia kept her voice lowered. “You know I did. You know I wanted to spend every minute with you. But you would rather spend your time out there diving, playing, finding just enough fish for the next meal. Jonas is a good father,” she said, sharply nodding her head.

“*Father.*” Simeon spat the word. “*Father?* There is just as much chance that *I* am his father, and you know it.”

“No! It’s not you. I’m sure.” There was another crack-ing boom followed by a chorus of loud pops.

He tried to grasp her hand but she lunged away.

“Julia!”

She ran toward the cigarette ember of the other woman down the lane, and the two disappeared in the darkness.

In the morning, Simeon went up to Nina’s house. Her father was slapping an octopus on the top of a stone wall, next to a mound of bougainvillea and morning glories in shades of pink and orange and dark purple. The brilliant pink was a color he never saw in the sea; he stared at it. The clap of the octopus rebounded off the wall of the house. Nina appeared in the doorway and took Simeon’s hand as he approached.

“I looked for you at the *festa*,” she said.

Simeon shrugged. “The guys and I made a little scene. Just as well you missed that.”

"I heard. Why do you fight with your friends?" They were still holding hands. She had a jasmine flower and pressed it to his nose.

"It was no fight. We were just celebrating, like all the rest. I'm going for a swim. Maybe you'll have a big *sargu* to cook this afternoon."

"Tariq said Jonas wants to open it today. The bomb. They can't wait."

"Better than another fight in the square." He kissed her on both cheeks and said goodbye to her father as he walked down toward the shore. It was sunny, as always in the summer.

"We'll bury the *sargu* in garlic," she called after him. Simeon waved back. "Don't let the mermaids seduce you," she added more softly.

He entered the water and glided through it. When he reached the patches of sea grass and rippled sand that lay just before the drop-off, his eyes were teased by a hand-size flatfish skidding over the fine-grained seabed, the kind he had learned as a child to catch by snapping out his hand to pin it to the sand. Simeon let his speargun fall, swam toward the speckled fish, and dove down. When at last he had it, wriggling between his hand and the sand, and he was running out of breath, he heard a sharp, tinny smack. The concussion that rocked the water a moment later made him recoil with the dread of the air raids of his childhood.



The fish fluttered away from Simeon's loosened grasp. Simeon pushed off the bottom, his eyes filled with the vastness of the blue void beyond the drop-off. As he rose, he twisted so he would be facing land when he reached the surface. The cloud of black smoke and brown dust was still billowing from the site of the workshop, and a whole corner of the bay was in shadow. Simeon stroked violently toward the nearest land, a spit of rocks that slashed his feet when he climbed out and ran across them. It was hard to get close, through the choking dust, over the sharp-edged rubble. And when he got close, there was only the crater.

He had to back up a long way from the crater before he found pieces of them. They were such close and long-familiar friends that he could even distinguish whose shoulder it was, and whose knee, and whose foot. Hands, when he found them, at a greater distance, were the easiest of all.

"*Mama. Mama.*" It was a small voice, and it came from behind the exploded wall that had rimmed the work yard. Little Isaac was covered with large broken stones, one of which had nearly cleaved his right leg just below the knee. Simeon unburied him and squeezed a hand around the tiny thigh to keep the rest of the blood from running out.

"*Mama. Mama.*" Simeon stood holding the boy, his eyes searching. Julia was there, three paces away, her

body crushed and obscured, except for a slender arm in a festive sleeve of lavender.

★ ★ ★

Simeon no longer enters the sea. He watches it now, two years later, from the shore or from the splintered fishing boat that takes him out on the odd day when there is a respite from his job and from caring for Isaac, who will soon have an artificial leg but has not yet managed to talk, or even laugh. Nina cares for him, too, but she must also tend to their six-month-old daughter, and to her piecework sewing.

Sometimes Simeon stops his car on the road above the Dingli Cliffs. He stands and looks down at the spray jetting up from the boulders hundreds of feet below, and stares over the cresting waves at the distant rock faces of Filfla. The air at the top of the cliffs whips erratically, and Simeon instinctively braces his legs against the heavy gusts. Each time he stands there, he knows that in a single unguarded moment, he could be taken. Each time, he looks out to the blue rim of the sea and relaxes his body and is sharply buffeted as he thinks of that day, but he is not lifted away.