

BEHIND
BARBED WIRE

Creative Works
on the **Internment** of
Italian Canadians

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Creative Works on the Internment of Italian Canadians

Edited by Licia Canton, Domenic Cusmano, Michael Mirolla, Jim Zucchero



GUERNICA

TORONTO • BUFFALO • BERKELEY • LANCASTER (U.K.)

2012

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Guernica Editions Inc.

P.O. Box 117, Station P, Toronto (ON), Canada M5S 2S6
2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, N.Y. 14150-6000 U.S.A.

Distributors:

University of Toronto Press Distribution,

5201 Dufferin Street, Toronto (ON), Canada M3H 5T8

Gazelle Book Services, White Cross Mills, High Town, Lancaster LA1 4XS U.K.

Small Press Distribution, 1341 Seventh St., Berkeley, CA 94710-1409 U.S.A.

First edition.

Printed in Canada.

Legal Deposit—First Quarter

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2012930743

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Behind barbed wire : creative works on the internment
of Italian Canadians / edited by Licia Canton ... [et al.].

(Essential anthologies series ; 1)

Issued also in electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-55071-388-6

1. Canadian literature--Italian Canadian authors. 2. Italian Canadians--Literary
collections. 3. Canadian literature--21st century. 4. Italian Canadians--Evacuation and
relocation, 1940-1945. 5. World War, 1939-1945--Prisoners and prisons, Canadian. 6. World
War, 1939-1945--Italian Canadians. 7. World War, 1939-1945--Canada. I. Canton, Licia,
1963- II. Series: Essential anthologies series (Toronto, Ont.) ; 1.

PS8235.I8B44 2012

C810.8'08951071

C2012-900448-0

Acknowledgements



The Association of Italian Canadian Writers (AICW), in partnership with Guernica Editions and Accenti Magazine, wish to thank the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (Community Historical Recognition Program — CHRP) for making this publication possible. We are grateful to Marianna Simeone (CBC journalist), Filomena Rotiroti (Quebec MNA) and Salvatore Bancheri (Director, Frank Iacobucci Centre for Italian Canadian Studies, University of Toronto) for writing letters of support. Heartfelt thanks to the contributors for their co-operation. We acknowledge the work of Venera Fazio, Anna Foschi, Agata De Santis, Giulia De Gasperi, Sayeeda Alibhai. For their assistance and excellent advice, we are grateful to Claire Andrews, Laura Clarke, Loe Garavito-Bruhn and Isabel Zuccherro. Special thanks go to Program Officer Thérèse Rochefort. We could not have completed this project without the unconditional support and encouragement of our families, especially Holly and Charlie; Liana, Dario and Decio; Jackie, Medea and GianCarlo.

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Preface



In April 2011, the Association of Italian Canadian Writers (AICW), in partnership with Guernica Editions and *Accenti Magazine*, undertook a national literary project to increase public awareness about the internment of Italian Canadians during the Second World War. During this period, about 7,000 Italian Canadians were identified as enemy aliens and obliged to report regularly to the RCMP. Approximately 600, almost all men, were sent to internment camps in Alberta, Ontario, Quebec and New Brunswick. None of the internees was ever charged, yet some were held for more than three years. The internment years not only impacted the families of the interned, it slowed the progress of the entire Italian Canadian community for decades.

Behind Barbed Wire is a collection of short fiction, memoir, poetry, drama and visual art inspired by the internment. *Beyond Barbed Wire*, a co-publication with Columbus Centre of Toronto, is a collection of essays examining the internment from historical, social, literary, and cultural perspectives. The volumes are simultaneously published as print and e-books. A series of articles in *Accenti Magazine* previewed the two companion volumes, launched across Canada in March 2012. The project is funded by the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (Community Historical Recognition Program — CHRP).

We are extremely proud of our literary project, which was completed in record time. By breaking the silence of past decades, our project bridges the generations and encourages a better understanding of the past so as to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

This project has also given us a unique opportunity to build bridges between individuals and communities across Canada, while emphasizing the endeavours of creative writers, artists and scholars who often work on the periphery of the Italian Canadian community. Let us continue to build bridges. Let us work together on new ventures, not only among writers and artists, but also with other Italian Canadians and organizations at large.

Note: Style choices are those of the individual contributors.

—*The Editors*

The image features the text "BEHIND BARBED WIRE" centered on a white background. The text is rendered in a bold, dark grey, sans-serif font. The words "BEHIND" and "BARBED WIRE" are stacked vertically. Four horizontal strands of barbed wire are superimposed over the text, with each strand passing through the middle of a letter in the top row and a letter in the bottom row. The barbs on the wire are small, sharp, and point in alternating directions.

BEHIND
BARBED WIRE



LICIA CANTON



Introduction: Looking Back, Moving Forward

Although their body of works is relatively new, Canadians of Italian origin have influenced the evolution of writing and literary criticism in Canada. In 1978, the publication of Pier Giorgio Di Cicco's anthology *Roman Candles* brought together previously unheard solitary voices and, by so doing, gave a sense of direction to Italian Canadian writers. Before the 1980s, Italians in Canada wrote in isolation. Since the 1980s, the appearance of specific collections and anthologies has had an important impact on the visibility of the Italian Canadian community's literary voices. Some of these titles include *La Poesia italiana nel Quebec* (Caticchio 1983), *Quêtes: Textes d'auteurs italo-québécois* (D'Alfonso, Caccia 1983), *Italian Canadian Voices* (Morgan Di Giovanni 1984 and 2010), *Ricordi: Things Remembered* (Minni 1989), *Contrasts: Comparative Essays on Italian-Canadian Writing* (Pivato 1991), *Echo: Essays on Other Literatures* (Pivato 1994), *Social Pluralism and Literary History* (Loriggio 1996), *The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Writing* (Pivato 1998), *Pillars of Lace: The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Women Writers* (De Franceschi 1998), *Sweet Lemons* (2004) and *Sweet Lemons 2* (Fazio, De Santis 2010).

A number of national magazines have focussed on issues of a literary and intellectual nature, thus providing a forum for Italian Canadian writers: *Vice Versa* (1983 to 1997), *Eyetalian* (1993 to 1998) and *Accenti Magazine* (since 2002). Publishing houses have also contributed to the evolution of Italian Canadian letters. Since 1978, Guernica Editions has published over 400 titles and 500

the “shame surrounding the subject” that lasted decades, thereby discouraging discussion and writing on the internment. “In the Italian community where I grew up,” says Mazza, “people knew about the camps. They would whisper about it, but not talk openly. They tried to keep it a secret ...” (“City of a Perilous Legacy”).

This volume, *Behind Barbed Wire*, presents fiction and nonfiction, poetry and drama, and visual art — works which bring to life the internment of Italian Canadians. Through words and images, writers and visual artists attempt to reconstruct a hidden past and give a voice to those who were silenced by shame or the inability to speak up. These works interpret the painful reality that Italians in Canada lived during, and after, the period of the internment.

The titles of poems included in this volume clearly indicate the emotion and climate of the period: Giulia De Gasperi’s “Pensieri / Worries,” Loretta Gatto-White’s “Strangers,” Domenico Capi-longo’s “hour of the round up” and “nessun dorma.” In his poem “Horses for Mussolini,” Frank Giorno pays homage to internee James Franceschini.

Pietro Corsi introduces us to Roberto Pio Cassanelli, a body builder and dance teacher, who was interned on St. Helen’s Island. Mélanie Grondin contributes letters written by Guido Nincheri, the “Michelangelo of Montreal,” while he was interned. “Of all the humiliating moments Italian-Canadian artist Guido Nincheri may have gone through in his life, this was surely the most humiliating one of all, because he never, ever told his family,” writes Grondin. In “Dancing with the Devil,” Anna Foschi Ciampolini writes about Vancouver’s Italian Canadians affected by the internment. As one interviewee says:

“Those were difficult times for our community ... The RCMP came to arrest some of those poor fellows. Most people in

our community were just busy working at two or three jobs trying to save money, rather than meddle with politics, but that's how it was." He paused for a moment, and then added: "Yes, that's how it was. It was a long time ago. Anyway, they were not mistreated in those camps. Maybe it's better not to talk about it anymore."

Joseph Ranallo's "Remembrance Day," is about remembering those who experienced war in different parts of the world and looking towards a future of peace. The story also illustrates the resignation and resentment which the internment elicits. Mr. Canesci's comment, "They were good to me" at Camp Petawawa, provokes an angry response:

"How can you say that?" John Battista retorted. "They took away your most prized possession, your freedom. You had no criminal record. You were almost born here. You spent most of your life in Canada. You were the Consulate's representative. There isn't another person in Trail who is more loyal to Canada than you are. They used the War Measures Act to arrest you without cause and without reason. You should be furious."

"Hello to Our Friends, If There Are Any Left," by Paula Mascioli and Giulia De Gasperi, tells the life story of Paula's grandfather, internee Leo Mascioli. A creative nonfiction account, it is a good example of an internee's desire to bury his experience. The story is inspired by an old box of documents and letters that Paula Mascioli found in her mother's basement. From this box of papers, Paula pieced together what happened years ago and recreated an episode in the life of the grandfather she never met.

Delia De Santis' story — "An Ordinary and Innocent Outing" — illustrates the uncertainty and fear of the early days when

men left their home on a regular outing and did not return. Venera Fazio's "Song of My Heart" remembers those "more fortunate" individuals who were not interned but who had to report regularly to authorities. In his story "Where One Hears a Noise Like This," Ernesto Livorni describes an internee's despair as he is unable to comprehend his confinement and unable to reach his family. Terri Favro's "Angel of Petawawa" recounts an Italian Canadian soldier's journey home from Petawawa and the events surrounding a friend's internment.

A number of excerpts from novels that set characters within the internment years are included in *Behind Barbed Wire*. In 1979, Elena Randaccio published *Diario di una emigrante* under the name E. MacRan. *Diario di una emigrante* is narrated by Climene, who describes in detail how her husband Beppe is taken away by two policemen and interned for three years. In his 2002 historical novel *Down the Coaltown Road*, Nova Scotia writer Sheldon Currie describes the struggle of Italians in industrial Cape Breton during the years of the internment. Rene Pappone contributes an excerpt of his forthcoming book *The Italian* which brings characters to life during the internment.

This volume also includes an excerpt from a film script that is set inside Camp Petawawa. In *W.O.P.=P.O.W.: The Internment of Italian-Canadians During WWII*, Gary Clairman and Michael Mirolla present a fictionalized account of the day-to-day life experienced by Italian-Canadian internees. Originally written in 1994, the script evokes humour as well as tragedy as the internees from all walks of life struggle to cope.

Julie Campagna presents sculptures which interpret the emotion associated with a difficult truth. "The challenge for me as a sculptor and observer is to try to find a way to relate to a world that feels worlds away," says Campagna. And Darlene Madott introduces "Horses," a pen and ink drawing by her late father John Madott,

that celebrates the perseverance of Italians in helping create the Canada we know today.

No doubt, the internment years have influenced the identity of the Italian Canadian community and affected its progress. We cannot erase the painful experience of individuals and families, but we can grow as a community by revisiting and speaking about the period. In bringing together the works of established and emerging writers and artists to break the silence of past decades, *Behind Barbed Wire* bridges the generations. The many different contributions reflect the various ways of approaching the subject of the internment and commemorate those who suffered. The appearance of *Behind Barbed Wire* — and its companion volume of essays *Beyond Barbed Wire* — marks the passage of Italian Canadians from victims to agents of social change. The two volumes are important contributions to Canadian letters and to the history of Italian Canadians. They revisit a painful period so that we can all move forward.

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JULIE CAMPAGNA



Sculpting Truth: Introduction to the Sculptures

With thoughts of war in my mind, I looked for themes in my work that dealt with resilience and courage, fragility and sorrow, conflict and rage. Whether it is through countries, families, neighbours or oneself, the potential for war seems to lurk just beneath the surface of words.

The sculpture “Weapon” is about the repercussions of judgment. An exaggerated hand with a finger pointed in blame is propped and aimed like a rifle at the viewer. The figure is on the verge of falling backward, barely able to sustain the weight of this ridiculous body part.

In “Faces of Destruction,” I examine the idea of one who is unchangeable through a form that changes. A human body is constructed from a grenade and comes with pin, cap and removable heads. Regardless of which expressive head is threaded onto the grenade-body the outcome remains the same — the form is set to explode.

The two characters which make up “Company” are extreme opposites. One figure holds tightly to his being with suspicion in his eyes and nothing in his bowl, the other looks out wildly, in want, spiralling out of control. They are at odds with one another but are nonetheless couched together.

...

“Earth and Sky” is about perseverance: the figure looks out towards tomorrow yet feels the weight of yesterday in today’s heavy, useless, hands.

Reading can inspire thought. I seek out books to gain some sort of understanding about the world in which I live and the creature that I am. There are times when an author articulates what is in my mind even though I had never thought of it before, provides an insight so great that a truth is revealed — comforting or terrible. “Search and Rescue” is about that kind of discovery, that kind of power.



Figure 1 (Top): **Shell**
Figure 2 (Bottom): **Company**



DOMENICO CAPILONGO



camp petawawa moon

no one can sleep
without wives
without the touch
of lovers

the moon
an empty plate
is claimed by every man
in this forgotten moment

secrets of the heart whispered
to this lone *luna*

messages sent across kilometres
across cities of war
sealed in silent
starlight kisses

hour of the round up, 1940

it's time to dig up all your *pomodori*. turn the radios down low. take all your laundry off the line. hide the *prosciutto* under the bed. mop your floors and pull the curtains closed. it's time to get *nonna* out of her black dress and tell her to stop humming *tarantellas*. burn all your letters and bury all the books in the backyard. talk with your hands stuck deep into your pockets. smile at all your neighbours without letting them see your teeth. lock your *vino* in *cantinas* and raise the union jack. it's time for you to register. for your photograph. your fingerprints. it's time to let the RCMP know when you're in the washroom. you are the enemy. the alien. please don't let the children know they are italian. the time has come for all of this.

nessun dorma, camp petawawa, 1940

My head was still resonant with song ...

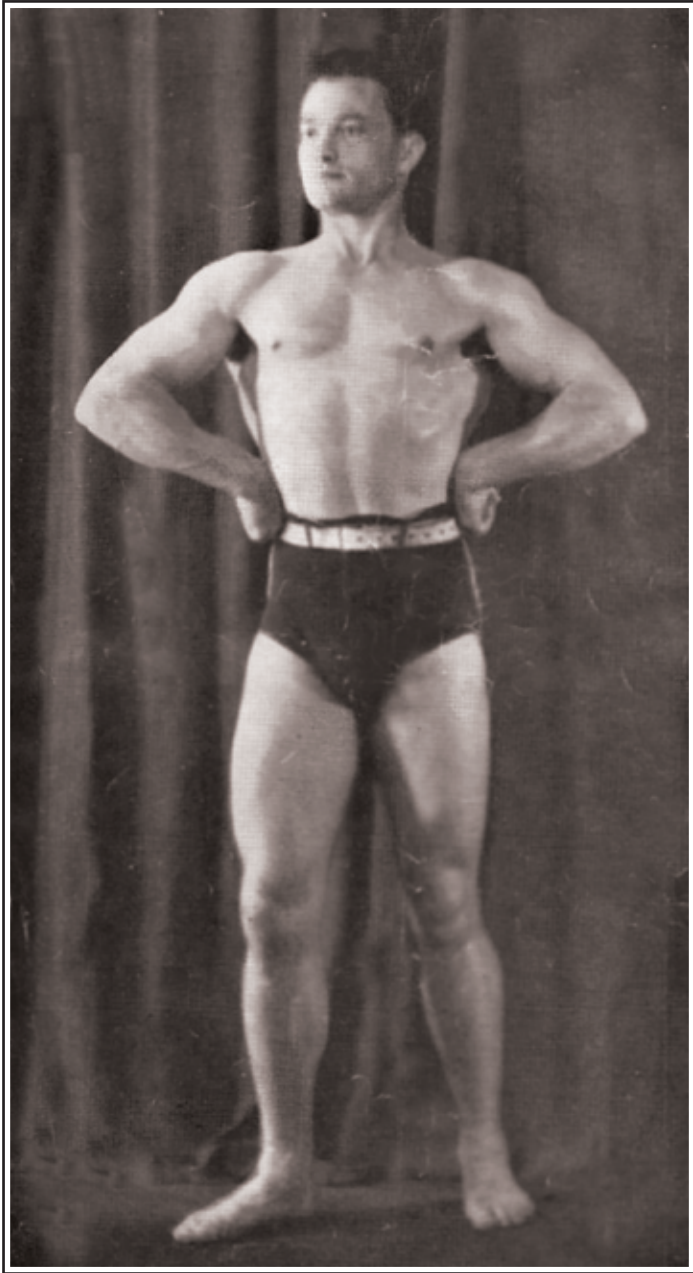
—Mario Duliani

they sent hundreds of italian men to petawawa. to sit out the war
just in case they tried to start a revolution. just in case they turned
the whole place upside down.

they sang on the train going up
sang in corners of the camp like shy birds
blew out a village tune at midday
threw together a mandolin band
plucked the corners of their hearts
like lost balding barbers of seville

at night without women no one slept
they hummed a baritone of blues
arias of ancient operas never written down

these spies
these forgotten fascists
of backyard gardens
and homemade wine
sang until *il duce* hanged
sang until the gates swung open
until they felt their wives
sleeping quietly beside them again



Bodybuilder extraordinaire Roberto Pio Cassanelli, age 27
Photo courtesy of Marie Caluori-Cassanelli

PIETRO CORSI



Roberto Pio Cassanelli, Master Body Builder and Dance Teacher: From Italy to Tripoli to London, Then on to Camp 43 on St. Helen's Island

It was in the spring of 1959 that I first heard of the internment of Italian Canadians at the onset of the Second World War. I had recently arrived in Montreal, via Halifax, to work at the weekly newspaper *Il Cittadino Canadese*, then on St. Lawrence Blvd., across from Dante Street, in what was, and still is, the heart of the Italian community.

Founded in 1941 by Antonino Spada, the Italian language newspaper had recently been sold to Nick Ciamarra and, together with the travel agency and the print shop, to Emilio Putalivo, printer extraordinaire. Already well into his sixties, Spada was not one to sit idle and do nothing. His visits to the newspaper were a daily routine. So much so that, while dreading his presence, we would worry when he didn't show up before noon.

Spada was well known for his anti-fascist sentiments and for his hatred of Mussolini's dictatorship. This helped explain why, when other prominent Italian Canadians were forced to the internment camps, he was left alone and allowed to found the newspaper in time to cover the war in progress. He loved to chat and exchange views on the most important daily events, particularly those involving the Italian community. Above all, he delighted in saying this and that about what was being written in the pages of *Il Cittadino*. To be blunt, he liked to provide unrequested (but welcome) constructive criticism. He loved to do so in riddles, like

a good teacher or a good trainer would. And a teacher and a trainer he was. At least, that's how I like to remember him. He was also a good community historian, as his book *The Italians in Canada* (Montreal, 1969) illustrates.

He loved to chat, as I said, but refused to freely talk about the internment of Italian Canadians during the Second World War. A horrible human injustice, he would say, if and when solicited. His attitude reflected the spirit of the community at the time: lay low, do not say more than you need to say about those sad days.

That was way back then — until November 1990, when Prime Minister Brian Mulroney saw fit to publically declare the internment an injustice, although not officially in parliament. Antonino Spada's unspoken sentiments, and those of hundreds of thousands of Italian Canadians, were finally vindicated.

I left Montreal and did not hear again about the Canadian internment camps for enemy aliens until I came to California and ran into Roberto (Pio) Cassanelli. Upon learning that my first stepping stone into this continent had been Montreal, he commented: "I was there too — Camp 43 St. Helen's Island, Enemy Alien prisoner No. 242." Remembering Spada's few words about the internment camps, I asked Cassanelli to tell me more about his experience in Camp 43. And he gladly did so, with the gentle words and manners that distinguished him throughout his life.

Born in Gussola (Cremona) in 1913, he was the last of ten siblings. His elder brother, Nino, had started working in hotels as *piccolo di camera* at the tender age of 12 and, when Roberto became of age, had already made a career in the hospitality industry. (He later became owner and operator of a fine hotel in Bordighera, a few steps away from the beach). He insisted that his younger brother follow in his footsteps and at age 16 sent him to work at the Hotel Savoia in Rome. After a few months, he dispatched

Roberto to Tripoli, to work at the Grand Hotel there. Having gained more experience, he was first sent to Belgium at the Hotel de la Plage, and then to the Grand Hotel Britannique of Ostende. Back in Italy, he happily wandered from Cortina d'Ampezzo's Miramonti Majestic Hotel to the Majestic Hotel Diana of Milan; from the Excelsior in Florence to the Miramare Continental Palace in Sanremo; from Viareggio's Grand Hotel to Salsomaggiore.

At the beginning of 1939 his destiny was to take him to London, where the hospitality industry thrived and life was good. Just what he had been looking for all along. His Alien Certificate of Registration No. 736439, issued on June 12, 1939, dates his arrival in Dover on March 14 of that year and residing at 14 Eatham Street W.C. 2, London.

London was to be quite good for him, away from the vigilant but loving supervision of his elder brother Nino. While working as a waiter at the Ivy Restaurant on West Street, he started training his body to become as strong as his mind. A London trade publication shows how he had been able to build his physique, with dumb-bells, to a fit "10 stone 7 lbs at 5'6" tall, expanded chest measurements 43."

His happiness was not to last long, however. A diary written years later shows how he ended up at Camp 43 on St. Helen's Island. This was an abandoned piece of real estate in Montreal that was later to become, together with the newly created Île Notre-Dame, the site for Expo '67.

At this point, let Roberto Pio Cassanelli tell the story of his confinement in Camp 43:

One morning, Saturday June 15, 1940, at 7 am, two policemen picked me up at my house and took me to the police station. I will always remember their words: "Don't worry fella, we don't take too much time

all the prisoners to announce this big event. He told us that both Mussolini and Hitler had been defeated, and that Fascism was dead.

May 17 we were told that all civilians would be returned to the U.K. Friday May 18th, 1 am, we left Camp by bus and we arrived at St. Johns at 6 am. We left St. Johns at 7 am, arrived Halifax at 7 pm. At 8 pm we boarded the vessel "Ashton Castle" for the Trans-Atlantic crossing. The overall conditions were much better this time around. We arrived in Liverpool on Friday, June 1st, and disembarked at 5:45 am.

After touching English ground again after five long years, the moral and physical suffering of the last five years seemed a dream. I have often thought, since then, how can a human being survive through such ordeals. Dreams and nightmares. This horrible furrow forever embedded in my mind.

So, we disembarked at 5:45 and were conveyed to the Isle of Man, where we arrived the same day at 8 pm, Ramsey Camp "N", House No. 10. On the 27th of July I was informed of my imminent release. I left camp on the 30th, and on Tuesday, August 1st 1945, 6 am, I left Ramsey. At 10 pm, August 1st, I was back in London and was able to resume work.

Years later, Roberto (Pio) Cassanelli moved to New York, where he worked at the Stork Club, at the Savoy Hotel and at the Ritz Tower. Then on to California, where he became a dance teacher and owner/operator of a dance studio in the San Fernando Valley under an Arthur Murray franchise. He passed away on Sept. 12, 2008.

SHELDON CURRIE



Excerpt from *Down The Coaltown Road*, a novel about the internment of Nova Scotia Italians.

Had Gelo visited the wash house on that day he would have seen the front page of the *Sydney Post-Record* that one of the miners nailed to the wall:

Rome, June 10 - (AP) - Italy joined Germany tonight in war against Great Britain and France.

Premier Mussolini made the announcement to Fascists gathered throughout Italy that the fateful declaration had been handed to the Allied ambassadors.

The formal welding of the Rome-Berlin axis in the steel of war was set officially for tomorrow, but Berlin reports claimed Italian troops already had entered France through the Riviera.

Gelo was never in the house when the news was on the radio. Like his father, he visited the house for bed and board. He saw the Newsreel Movietone News at the Savoy Theatre but he paid little attention to it. Sadie berated him for his inattention but he didn't care. He was called wop, dago, and bohunk more often now, and not so often in jest, but he brushed it off. He learned from his Indian friends how to deal with it. It was only scum. It washed off. It thickened your skin. He was content. He was not prepared for the shock of the afternoon. The shock of his life.