

New Fiction by David James: Oxenstone



“Is that an ox skull?”

The tourist guide looked up at the carved stone symbols I indicated and said, “I think so, yes.”

“Why is it there?”

“I’m not sure actually,” she said, before adding, “Perhaps it was part of the coats-of-arms of a rich patron.”

The answer was unsatisfying, and we continued the tour into the ship-like interior of the Basilica Palladiana. Walking up wide flat steps to the upper terrace revealed a view of Vicenza that gave a bird’s eye view of the grid of narrow streets I had been gradually learning the past two months. Dark clouds were building over the mountains to the north, like Giorgione’s Tempest. I bought a glass of red at the rooftop bar and stayed to enjoy the view. The tour was over.

In the piazza below the people were scurrying to and fro. I sent a text to my friend and fellow Army officer, Rachel, asking her to come up and join me. She said she was on her way. I pulled out my book but had to read each sentence three or more times. I was too distracted by people-watching to absorb the prose. There is always something seedy or secretly shameful about being alone at bar or restaurant with no apparent diversion. At least that’s how it feels to me; the families and couples at the other tables probably didn’t care if there was a young man sitting alone at the neighboring

table. The book, like a newspaper-reading pensioner on a park bench, gave me an alibi. The wine and late afternoon sun relaxed me to the point that I entered a trance-like state for a few moments.

I looked up and saw Rachel approaching my table with her big, white, American teeth smiling. My heart beat faster.

"Hi, Drew. What a great place!" she said, turning her head to take in more of the panorama. "I've never been up here."

"It's my first time, too," I said nonchalantly. "Did you just finish work?"

"Yeah, I had to sit through an interminable staff meeting."

"Sounds like more fun than mine. I had to do a sensitive-items inventory all afternoon with the supply sergeant."

"Did any of the items get their feelings hurt?" she said with a little giggle.

"Ha ha."

"What are you hiding down there?" I lifted up the book's cover to show her.

"Oh, I loved that book!" she exclaimed.

"It's alright I guess. I checked it out of the library because I liked the cover. It seems a bit childish so far." I was keeping my cards close to my chest, as they say.

"It's really good. Wait till you get to the ending. It's so powerful that it actually helped me make up my mind to join the army."

"Was it in English?"

"Obviously. I'm starting to learn a few words of Italian slowly. Ciao. Grazie. Vino Rosso. Anyway, apparently this Palladio guy was a really big deal. His buildings are all over town, and in Venice, too."

"I know, I've heard a lot about him since I've been here. I love art but I'm not really into architecture too much."

"Same here, but I am into history and cultural stuff. Did you know that Thomas Jefferson designed Monticello based on Palladio's Villa Rotonda, which is just outside town?"

"That's cool."

"I'm going to go take a look at it later if you want to come," I mentioned casually.

"Sure. Might as well see the sights."

"Maybe this weekend then?" I inquired.

"Sure!"

I was feeling confident now, especially after having already finished half the carafe of a robust local wine.

"Look at those stone carvings up there." I pointed at the friezes encircling the top of the building.

"What is it? A cow skull?"

"I think it's an ox."

"Really? How did you get to be an expert in bovine skeletal patterns?"

"I asked the tourist guide about it but she didn't have any idea."

"Not surprised."

"What do you think it means?"

"I don't know. It could be a secret symbol for something."

"Obviously. There's no point in just surrounding the top of a great Renaissance building with ox skulls."

"Now that I think about it, I remember something from my art history class in college. There was an Italian artist whose name had something to do with oxen. Cimabue, I think it was."

"Never heard of him."

"He was the teacher of another artist, Giotto. His name meant ox-head, if I recall."

"Giotto I have heard of. In fact, I think he did some famous paintings not too far away, in Padova. We should go see those, too," I proposed.

"Ok, I'm going to try to see as much as possible in this country. And there sure is plenty to see around here."

"Thanks for the tip on Cimabue, by the way. I'll look into it."

"So you're really into this ox mystery."

"I don't know why, but it's just striking. It gives me something to explore. It's like a treasure hunt."

"Hey, I know: maybe it'll end up like a Dan Brown book where the ox was the symbol of some secret society that tried to assassinate the king," she said giggling again. I couldn't help but smile and break my cool facade to play along with the joke.

"The doge of Venice, possibly. Or the Pope. There was no king of Italy back then. Maybe Marco Polo was a member of the society and he brought back mystical knowledge of the cult of the ox from China. That book sounds even better than this

one.”

“Don’t joke like that,” she teased.

“You want to go and find a pizza place? There’s a really good one just down the street” I queried hopefully.

“Let’s do it!”

The streets around the center of town were almost empty at this hour, except groups of army soldiers running in formation. My platoon was doing squad-level training around the inside of the base, so I took the opportunity to do a long run outside with the company executive officer, First Lieutenant Mark Brodie.

As we left the asphalt and entered the cobblestone section of the old city center, I saw occasional signs of life in the form of street cleaners wearing high-visibility vests, a businessman in a three-piece suit holding a briefcase, and a delivery man on a bike pulling a cart full of packages.

“Let’s do a detour here towards the main square,” I said through my heavy breathing. We finished the last slight incline that opened onto the biggest open space in the city, surrounded by palaces, high-end shops, colonnades, loggias, and the Basilica Palladiana. We came to a stop next to a pair of columns in the middle of the square.

“How about a pushup contest?” asked Mark suddenly. I agreed and we dropped to our hands and knees on the dewy flagstones of the piazza.

“You ready?”

“Yeah.”

“Go.” We started pushing ourselves up and down in unison while counting out the numbers. At forty I was really starting to slow down while my colleague was still going strong.

“Forty-five...forty-six,” he said, while at this point I dropped to the ground and ceded him the victory. He did four more to make an even fifty. We were both gasping for air for a couple minutes as we shook out our arms and legs.

“Nice work, man. I’m out of shape, I guess.”

“No worries. You want to get back to the run now?”

“Let’s take another minute to stretch out here. It’s nice having this whole square to ourselves. I came through here a few mornings ago after P.T. and it was absolutely packed full with the weekly market.”

“Sounds like fun. Did you buy anything?”

“No way. It’s all a bunch of Chinese crap. Anyway, look up there,” I pointed up to the stone carvings. “What does that look like to you?”

“Stone carvings.”

“Of what?”

“Some kind of animal skull. Maybe a bull, or an ox.”

“I think it’s an ox.”

“What’s the difference between a bull and an ox, anyway?”

“I believe oxen are just castrated bulls. Probably made them easier to control when they had to do all the hard field work.”

“Sucks to be them.”

“And it also makes you wonder about the phrase, ‘strong as an

ox.' I doubt any well-built men would find it a compliment if they knew that oxen had no balls."

"Let's start saying 'strong as a bull' instead. I just won the push-up contest because I'm strong as a bull. You, on the other hand, are strong as an ox."

"Thanks."

"Alright, let's keep going." We started again at a moderate pace.

"I just thought of something," said Brodie after a minute. "I've been reading up on Afghan history to get ready for the next deployment. They've got this fierce, independent streak that goes back to the time of Alexander the Great; it seems that they've never been conquered. Greeks, British, Russians, nobody could fight the mountain tribes in their own territory. I wonder if that's what's going to happen to us Americans next?"

"Who knows? Anyway, let's not forget the Mongols. They conquered the hell out of Afghanistan and everyone else they encountered. They just slaughtered everybody and moved on."

"Maybe that's what we'll have to do, too."

"More like building schools and hospitals. We are trying to 'nation-build,' not burn everything down, Genghis-style."

"The thing I wanted to mention was that Alexander the Great's famous horse was called Bucephalus. Do you know what the name means?"

"No, but it sounds like a good name for a rapper."

"It means ox-head."

"Wow, that's strange. Last night I showed Rachel the same stone carvings and she mentioned an Italian artist named ox-head."

“So you’re seeing a lot of Rachel lately? Anything going on with you two?” he joked, half-seriously.

“Let’s race up to the top of this hill. If you win, I’ll tell you. If I win, you’re an ox-head.”

Later that evening I stopped by my apartment to change clothes and go out for another pizza. I met my landlord, Giulio, in the stairwell.

“Ciao, Giulio.”

“Ciao, Andrea!”

“Just call me Drew.”

“Everything is working in your flat?”

“Yeah, everything’s great. I’m almost never at home though.”

“Yes, I notice. You leave early in the morning and you come back late at night. Sometimes I see no lights in your flat for many weeks.”

“We do a lot of training events at other bases. Sometimes in Germany.”

“You take a drink upstairs with me?”

“Sure, thanks.”

“You help me practice my English.”

“I need to learn some more Italian, too.”

“Yes, you do! You drink red wine?”

“I love red wine. It’s so good and cheap here.”

"This is homemade, by my uncle in the country."

"It's delicious. Fruity, almost spicy."

"It is called a new wine. The grapes were picked only last month."

"Giulio, you must know a lot about Vicenza."

"I am born here."

"Have you ever noticed those stone carvings at the top of the Basilica?"

"Hmm. Yes, I think so."

"What do you think they mean?"

"I am not so sure. Probably they are symbols for something."

"That's what I thought. The tour guide said maybe they were symbols of a rich patron."

"I think not. Those would be different, more personal to each family. On the loggia going up to Monte Berico you will find many of those, for example."

"We run up there at least one morning a week, but I never looked so closely. I'll check it out tomorrow."

"These animals were very important for ancient peoples, you must understand. It could represent something mythological."

"Probably, like how Zeus turned into a bull to rape some mortal woman."

"Yes, these metamorphoses were famous stories in Italy also. They inspired many great painters, like our Tiziano or Tintoretto. You have seen them in the Accademia in Venice?"

"I haven't been yet. But I was just telling my friend yesterday that we should go see Giotto in Padova."

"Oh, yes, of course. It's very nice. You will like."

"Do you know a lot about art, then? It seems like Italians are way more into art than Americans, or maybe any other country."

"No, I studied *letteratura*. Literature. But we study many years of art in school."

"Well, this was the center of the Renaissance."

"Italy has a unique history. It has only been a united country since 1860, you know? Before that it was many different kingdoms and independent cities. There was much competition to make the best art."

"I guess so."

"And there was a different language and culture in each region. In fact, most people here today still speak Venetian dialect. Maybe you should learn this instead of proper Italian!"

"I don't know about that. Maybe if I stay here for 10 years and become fluent in Italian, then I'll start working on the dialects."

"Yes, you should. That reminds me of a famous *indovinello*—that is, a type of mysterious word game."

"A riddle."

"Yes, so this riddle was the first written record of modern Italian language. That is, not Latin but the vernacular tongue. It comes from Verona and is about oxes working in the fields."

"Plural is oxen, not oxes."

"Ah, yes, of course. Oxen, like children."

"Or women," I joked.

"Anyway, the riddle was written by a monk who was describing the process of writing like plowing fields with oxen. There was even a type of ancient writing called boustrophedon, which means something like turning the ox. Instead of lines of text always left to right, the scribes would finish one line left to right and then start the next one on the right and move back left."

"Wow, that's interesting. And weird how oxen keep coming up. My friend this morning just told me that Alexander the Great's horse was called ox-head, and there was an Italian artist also named ox-head. The teacher of Giotto, I think."

"Yes, Cimabue."

"Oxen were all the rage back then."

"All the rage?"

"It means they were popular."

"Certainly. Without them the people would probably die."

"You're probably right," I said and gulped down the last of my glass. "Thanks for the wine. I've got to go get some dinner now. I'm meeting a friend."

"You're welcome and enjoy your evening," he paused, and then added, "And don't work like an ox!"

"Ha, nice one, Giulio. See you later."

Two days later, a Friday, I found myself in the company headquarters on base, doing paperwork, shooting the shit with the platoon sergeant, and waiting for the company commander to give the weekend safety brief so we could all go home.

“Sir, did you see that leave request that Hunt and Faust put in for next weekend?” asked Sergeant First Class Rollins.

“Yeah, the commander already signed it,” I replied.

“What in the hell do two 19-year-old privates want to do in Greece?”

“Faust is twenty. I heard the plan was to visit Sparta. They’re part of the Spartan warrior fan club, I guess.”

“Ha! Hunt could barely pass sit-ups on the last APFT. Couple of knuckle-heads if you ask me, sir.”

“I don’t think they’ll find much to see there. They should stick to Athens.”

“I suppose you and the other LTs already been there on one of the last three-day weekends?”

“Yeah. Last November. What about you? Got any travel plans for the weekend?”

“I don’t get that big officer paycheck.”

“Come on, Sergeant. You must have plenty saved up from all those deployments.”

“It don’t go far after child support. Besides, got no interest in seeing more of this third-world country. Two years from now I’ll be back in Bragg.”

“You’re telling me you prefer backwoods North Carolina to this beautiful Mediterranean country with its ancient ruins and world-class art?”

“I didn’t go to college, sir. And I seen plenty of ancient ruins after we jumped into Iraq. This place ain’t much better.”

“What’s so bad here?”

“Roads are tiny, cars are tiny, coffees are tiny, buildings falling apart, shops never open, can’t find anything you want, nobody speaks English.”

“Yeah, but the food’s good.”

“I don’t go out to eat.”

“Not even to get pizza?”

“Had it once when I first got here. The crust was too thin and I had to cut my own slices.”

“You ever looked at the big building in the main square when we run by that way in the morning?”

“Sir, I ain’t got time to look at the architecture. I’m trying to keep tabs on my platoon, most of which are still half-drunk during P.T., including the squad leaders,” he said looking at me, and then after a brief pause, “And probably the officers.”

“What else are soldiers gonna do between deployments when you send them to Europe?”

“It’d be better if they weren’t allowed to leave the base. Stop a lot of the drunken fights downtown with locals every week.”

At this point the platoon’s four squad leaders walked into the office. “The guys are all in formation, sir,” said Staff Sergeant Garcia.

“Thanks, Sergeant,” I said.

The platoon sergeant sat back in his chair and propped his boots up on the table and said, “What’s the hurry? You boys don’t got nothing better to do than wait.”

“Listen, Sergeant Rollins and I were just discussing weekend plans and the relative merits of seeing the local sites. Let’s conduct a little survey: has anyone noticed any of the

architecture in the main square?"

"I sure as hell know the bars!" said Staff Sergeant Courtney. "Galleria 15, Settimo Cielo, Grottino, Borsa."

"There's also those two columns, one with a lion or something," added Garcia.

"Lots of gelaterias, too," said Staff Sergeant LeBeau.

Sergeant First Class Rollins was smirking from his laid-back position of authority, and commented, "Bunch of jokers, sir. That's an 11B for you."

"Nobody ever noticed that huge building lined with columns and statues taking up, like, a third of the square?"

"Oh yeah, something with a 'b'," said Courtney.

"Big-ass building," said LeBeau.

"Baghdad bomb shelter," attempted Garcia, weakly.

"Basilica Palladiana," said the previously silent Staff Sergeant Monroe.

"That's it," I said, while the other NCOs eyed him warily. "Have you ever noticed those animal figures carved along the upper level? Bulls or possibly oxen?"

"Not really. But carving animals on old buildings used to be pretty common. The Ishtar Gate of Babylon was full of lions and aurochs, which are the ancestor of modern cows and oxen, for example."

Now everyone, including me, stared at Monroe for a long moment, mouths slightly agape. "Sometimes you seem dumb as an ox, Monroe," exclaimed Rollins. "And then sometimes you come up with some shit like that."

"Where did you learn that?" I asked.

"There was a replica of the Ishtar Gate in Baghdad built by Saddam. I saw it when we were there."

"I was too busy trying not to get blowed up," said Courtney.

"That's it. Drop down and give me fifty," said Rollins, dead serious though he was still smirking.

"Let's all knock 'em out," I said. Everyone in the room occupied six feet of floor space in the cramped office and started doing pushups.

Just then, the First Sergeant walked by and said in his usual screaming voice, "What are you second platoon idiots doing in here?"

"Trying to get in some extra P.T. while we wait for formation, First Sergeant," said Garcia, happily.

"Well when you finish, get outside and join the ranks. The C.O.'s coming to give the safety brief in five minutes."

"Got it, Top," I said.

"Don't call me Top, LT," said the First Sergeant as he left the building.

"Let's go then, men," I said. We all brushed off our hands and straightened our uniforms and started filing out of the room. I said to the group in general, "So, anybody going away this weekend?"

"I'm going back to Florence to try to find some American college girls," said Courtney.

I met Rachel the next morning and we started a walk up a seemingly endless sets of stone steps outside Vicenza.

"Do you ever run up here during P.T.?" I asked.

"Sometimes. At Brigade HQ we don't do as much training as you hard-charging Infantry types," she said.

"We did five laps sprinting up and down these steps on Monday," I said between increasingly heavy breaths.

"Sounds like fun," she said flashing the wide smile I had been thinking about all week.

We finally reached the top landing where the path levelled off. From here there was a panorama of the city.

"It's nice up here," she said. "You can see all the way to the mountains up north."

"Yeah, still snow on some of them."

"I bet there are some great places to walk up there. Have you ever been?"

"We did a battalion staff ride up to Asiago last summer. It was mostly a chance for everyone to get drunk at the restaurant at the end," I said. The intended joke didn't come out as smooth as I had intended.

"You Infantry guys also seem to drink a lot," she said still smiling, but with a more serious undertone.

"Can't dispute that. Helps us feel better about being on the sharp end of the spear, I guess," I said, before changing the subject. "Let's keep going. We turn left up ahead to get to the Villa Rotonda."

We followed a narrow cobble-stoned path down a gentle slope for a few minutes.

"Listen to this: yesterday I was asking my NCOs if they knew anything about Vicenza. It turns out that they only know about the bars, and probably strip clubs, to tell you the truth.

Some of them never even really leave the base.”

“It’s probably intimidating for young guys who have never left their own towns and don’t know much about the world. From what I’ve seen, most of the guys in the army are more immature and naive than you would think, even the ones in their teens and early 20s,” she said while shooting me a quick side-eyed glance.

“Well, one of them, a silent, serious guy, knew all about the Basilica Palladiana and even started talking about the Ishtar Gate in Babylon. Apparently it was full of carvings of animals, including something called an aurochs. I had to look it up and it’s an extinct type of ox.”

“Maybe not all enlisted men are as dumb as you think, just because they signed their lives away in the army. No one forced us to sign up either, even if we’re officers.”

“Right. Seemed like a good idea at the time,” I joked, falling back on yet another tired cliché. “Anyway, I just remembered something about aurochs from Caesar’s De Bello Gallico. We had to read it in Latin at West Point. He talked about how the soldiers hunted them and used their horns as drinking cups. That’s what made me remember it.”

“Fascinating,” she said sarcastically. “I see you’re still into that oxen thing. You’ll be happy to know I solved your mystery with five minutes of research on the internet.”

“What is it?”

“The carved ox is called bucranium. It was common on ancient buildings to symbolize sacrifices to the gods. It was brought back during the Renaissance by neo-classical architects like Palladio.”

“Incredible, thanks.” I was fairly speechless and didn’t know how to continue the conversation, which seemed to be

hopelessly stalling. "That just goes to show, I guess."

"What?"

"I don't know. Something. Anyway, you learn something new everyday," I responded stupidly.

We arrived at a closed gate through which we could see the perfectly symmetrical Villa Rotonda sitting upon a grassy hillock under an azure sky.

"It's beautiful," she said sizing up the impressive edifice. "Too bad we can't go inside."

"I think it's better-looking from outside," I said quietly while looking at her. She was still looking up at the building.

We slowly circled around the stone wall to get a better view. There was silence for several minutes.

"So do you have any plans for the long weekend next month?" I asked.

"Actually, my boyfriend's coming for a visit."

I kept my stride and expression intact, while my brain furiously processed this new information.

"Oh. So what does he do?"

"He's doing an MBA at Harvard Business School."

"Wow."

"That's probably where my parents wanted me to be by now, too. It's pretty boring hearing about business case studies all the time."

"Right."

"Anyway, he doesn't want to go into the corporate world. He

wants to work for an NGO.”

“Great.”

Silence again for a long moment.

“It’ll probably be hard to maintain a long-distance relationship while you’re deployed for a year or more,” I ventured.

“I’m not deploying to Afghanistan, Drew,” she said. I stopped walking and turned towards her to check if she was being serious. “As a logistics officer I’ll be on the rear detachment pushing supplies back and forth.”

“That makes sense,” I said as I resumed walking and looking straight ahead. “So you’ll have plenty of time to keep seeing the local sights.”

“I would imagine.”

“When we get back you’ll definitely know much more than me.”

“Most likely,” she said in a deadpan, before flashing her smile one more time.

“I must be dumb as an ox,” I added in a subdued tone.

“I wouldn’t say that,” she laughed. “Maybe just an ox-head.”