Excerpt from Proles

a novel by Barry Bergman

It was this sad-sack cracker, Renfroe, who gave me my mining handle. The crew just coming off graveyard, drinking our breakfast at the company-owned watering hole. From then on I was Philly. That or Bussbaum, the name I was born with. For Philadelphia Jew. Something he'd picked up from our foreman, a retired army cracker who'd returned to civilian life strutting his sergeant stripes, same as a dozen other gum-popping flunkies too low in the pecking order to merit a plastic hardhat. The grunt didn't mean anything by it. The crew called him Special Ed because he'd left part of his skull in Nam. To his face it was Renfroe or just plain Ed, a given name Mr. and Mrs. Renfroe would likely have come to regret, had they known, along with their other, deeper regrets. Odds are he hadn't crossed paths with a Jew this side of Da Nang, or wherever it was he got shelled. It didn't bother me. We had a slag skimmer who went by Dago and a craneman called Chief. This was the way of things. Plus I wasn't much of a Jew. And I'd never set foot in Philly.

I was in exile from Queens. Self-imposed. I hadn't known any Southerners, my southern exposures limited to Coney Island and, once, Washington, D.C. I did fly south as a baby, supposedly, for a winter weekend in Miami Beach. But I have no memory of the trip, only my parents' word that it happened. Anyway South Florida wasn't the South. More like the Bronx, in those days, than Biloxi. I rode to D.C. on a school bus chartered by the Mobe, the National Mobilization Committee, in part to protest the war but more to watch the Yippies levitate the Pentagon. I was in junior high, too young to be drafted, too young even to sign the liability waiver you needed to get on the bus. Luckily the organizers weren't particular. At that age I

knew more about the Yippies than Vietnam, thought of Abbie Hoffmann as the big brother I never had. As opposed to the one I did. My actual brother said the Yippies were clowns and bourgeois to boot, so I went without him. I remember a march, and the Fugs and Allen Ginsberg and Norman Mailer and the smell of weed. Drugs were everywhere, and though the Pentagon didn't rise plenty of people swore it had. Either way the war didn't end. That's how Renfroe became Special Ed.

He was all right. You felt for him. I never called him Special Ed, even behind his back, even after he'd tarred me with his good ol' boy, half-witted slander. He wasn't all there. But he'd *been* there. Seen sights you couldn't imagine. I'd hardly seen anything. Never been west of Jersey, in fact, before turning up in the desert. Eastern Jersey at that. All I knew of the Garden State was Palisades Park, where a group of us used to go every summer. We'd take the A train like Duke Ellington said but continue past Harlem to Washington Heights, then hoof it over the GW Bridge. Snuck into the park through a hole in the fence. The hole was famous, everyone in the tri-state area knew it was there. The man who owned the park could have fixed it but never did. We'd use discount coupons from comic books to ride the roller coaster and see the animal freak show. Saved most of our cash for food. As night fell and we headed out I'd stop at one of the booths that lined the midway. A dime got you three ping-pong balls you lobbed toward a tiny bowl holding a goldfish. The fish circling in tight neurotic laps, more pacing really than circling. The bowl's mouth was the size of a baby's fist, and the idea was to keep from bouncing the balls off the rim. I never lost. That is, I lost, but I kept playing until I won. Using the word loosely. All you won was the goldfish. The goldfish, on the other hand, was free, or at least out of solitary. And what was its crime, besides being a goldfish? If I could save one from its puny, watery cage, wasn't this a step, at least, in the right direction? It wasn't Atticus Finch, standing against Jim

Crow on behalf of an innocent black man. But it was something. To me, if not to my friends. They'd whoop it up like I'd hit the jackpot, they were big on sarcasm, as if the goldfish was made of actual gold. As opposed to a living thing, like a two-headed turtle or two-faced cow. You couldn't laugh off a two-faced cow. The freak show spooked and riveted us, and we never spoke about what we'd seen. It was a funhouse mirror in reverse, a rebuke to the normalcy of our own existence. The midway brought us back to ourselves. The geezer who ran the goldfish booth—though what I judged to be geezerhood, looking back, was probably middle age —would pour the fish and its grungy water into a sandwich bag. Then we'd all traipse east over the Hudson, where mobsters slept with the fishes till their bloated corpses bobbed to the surface. The goldfish belly up, usually, by Jackson Heights, the final stretch on the E back to Queens. All of them, six or seven at least, given a burial at sea, sent off with a gentle flush of sparkling blue water. They were my only pets.

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Dissolve to an azure sky. Tilt to reveal a campus quad, a Daily News rustling in the breeze. NIXON LANDSLIDE. I was in college, nominally, due to inertia. Student deferments had bit the dust. Nixon had hatched his draft lottery, and your time in the barrel—a glass jar, technically—came around once you turned nineteen. Being in college was useless, as far as ducking the army, but so was being anywhere else but Canada. So I sheltered in place. It was in a film history class, one of the few I managed to get to, that I discovered *City of Emeralds,* or *Ciudad de Esmeraldas* in Spanish. An eight-millimeter print of a twenty-year-old movie, viewed on a torn retractable screen attached to a tripod. One of those portable projectors that hummed and clicked and made you worry the sprockets would catch and the film stock melt, the story replaced by a lava lamp.

But all that happened was the movie ran out halfway through and the lights came up long enough for the professor to change reels. Students chatted or played with their split ends during the intermission. Finally the prof called for quiet and the room went dark again. And we were back in New Mexico. Those of us, at any rate, willing to be transported. This willingness far from universal. Critics hated the film. You could see why. The writing was clumsy, the performances wooden. Townspeople, mostly, playing themselves. The kind of thing De Sica might have made in high school, taking his cues from the Kremlin. Or his funding. Aside from a sprinkling of pros, this was a reenactment bereft of believable acting, of craft or finesse or production values. The story not only shot in black and white but told that way. Black and white and red all over. A plea for fair play for the common man, more Woody Guthrie than Daily Worker. In a good way. Guthrie, a fellow son of the middle class, left his wife and kids to find fame strummin' and singin' about workin' folks and their wives and rugrats, all yearning to slip the yoke of the bosses and railroad bulls. *This land is your land*. Nothing about systems of economic and social oppression, no fingerprints, what Nixon would enshrine as plausible deniability. *Emeralds* was like that. A shared human impulse, revealed in spite of itself by the very artlessness of the telling. Childlike practically. And the nakedness of its need—sincerity, as Natalie Wood told Sal Mineo in a movie by Nicholas Ray, that's the main thing—this was its power. It wrecked me.

Emeralds told the tale of dirt-poor Chicano miners—backed by their resolute, dirt-poor wives—striking for dignity and equal pay. The real-life strike, in New Mexico, started in 1950, ended in '51 after eighteen months. Led by a man the movie called José Castillo. He put you in mind of Bogart, if Bogie had swapped his fedora for one of those straw Mexican cowboy hats—rugged features, hint of an overbite, bemused tough-guy expression. A real-life working-class hero, playing himself. Stiffly, sure. But could Bogie have led a strike? Could Natalie Wood? The

instructor, a lapsed English lit prof, likened the film to the *oeuvres* of Theodore Dreiser and, reaching for relevance, the Velvet Underground. He was a balding corduroy man in pressed jeans and a sad ponytail, straddling Waugh and Warhol. Style, he liked to say, was the enemy of perception. It mattered to him that we realized he smoked pot. I doubt he'd dropped acid. You could picture him scribbling notes in his study while Lou Reed droned about heroin.

Yet he, too, seemed sincere.

Then there was Jake. My brother knew things they didn't tell you in school. Often these things, like the things they did tell you in school, were suspect. Jake was teaching himself Marxist theory. He convinced our parents he was looking for work. This was either a brazen lie or a total fantasy, a distinction that no longer made much of a difference. Jake was a unity of opposites. A Marxist allergic to labor, a materialist who lived in his head. A negation, perhaps, of the negation, a concept I never grasped but which Jake had fully embraced. Jake was studying to be Trotsky. My parents believed, mistakenly, that he'd been rejected by colleges from Queens to California. That's why they let him stay. But he'd never applied to a single school, just as he'd never applied for a job. He mistrusted teachers—called them the educariat—and especially reviled those who taught revolution, in or outside the academy, who laid claim to revolutionary leadership. Especially them. Pretenders, he called them, worse than the worst reactionaries. You knew where you stood with reactionaries. Jake was blessed, or cursed, with the arrogance of the clueless. He was a self-canceling cry for help. He had started to look like Trotsky.

I hitched home that Friday. My mother was watching her soaps. I made straight for the hallway, knocked on the door of Jake's musty bedroom. He was sprawled on the bed, surrounded by open books. Gestured to grab the chair he kept at a small writing desk. Heard me out, impatient, rolling onto his back, avoiding eye contact. Signaled his boredom by using his T-shirt

to polish his pie-shaped lenses. This was a style of eyewear the masses associated less with Trotsky, those who recognized the name, than with Lennon, John, whose wife, Yoko, broke up the Beatles. I wasn't sure where he stood on the question of John and Yoko. Jake had always disliked the Beatles. He considered rock 'n' roll the work of the devil. The devil to him being capitalism.

After a minute or two he'd heard enough. "Sy," he said. "Don't be a *shmuck*."

He propped himself up in the bed, checked his lenses against the light from the window. Maneuvered the specs into his Jewfro and over his ears. *City of Emeralds,* he declared, was a lie. Not just narratively but ideologically and historically. Emerald City was a fictional stand-in for Silver City, site of the actual strike. Forgivable, Jake allowed, on grounds of poetic license. Who would believe a copper mine in a place called Silver City, after all? But there were lies, and then there were lies. Had my prof mentioned how the triumphant workers—José Castillo, real name Naldo Galvan, and all the others playing themselves in the movie—had fared after the closing credits? How their brotherhood of choice, the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers—there at the birth of the CIO in 1935, only to be purged like lepers during the Red Scare—would be swallowed up by the United Steelworkers of America? How that class-collaborationist sham of a union, hemorrhaging dues-paying members in the mills of Chicago and Cleveland and Pittsburgh, spent the '60s muscling its way into zinc and copper in the arid air of the Sun Belt? How *Emerald's* noble warriors, back in the real world, were betrayed, abandoned, and left for dead by the spineless cowards and sellouts in Big Labor, Inc.?

"He did," I said. "He mentioned it." He hadn't mentioned it. But Jake had moved beyond obnoxious into insufferable. And I wanted to know what he knew. This called for easing him back to earth, back to the present, back to some mutually accessible point on the time-space

continuum.

Jake, increasingly, adrift in another dimension.

Amid a lengthening list of confusions, my brother's latest passion was pride in his proletarian roots. Which, to the extent these even existed, had skipped big chunks of the family tree. Our grandfathers were merchants, supposedly, one in jewelry and the other in rags. Our father wore a necktie to work. Possibly a prole or two hiding among our ancestors, who lived and died in Russia and Eastern Europe, best guess, before there was Hitler or even a World War I. But nobody ever talked about our ancestors. Not even Jake. I suppose he preferred not to know.

He definitely knew the movie, though.

Jake had landed in Tucson the last time he went missing, Crashed with an ambiguous cadre of Tucson lefties. They weren't Trotskyists. Trotskyists weren't ambiguous. It was modern-day Stalinists who declined to announce themselves, who dressed in the wholesome clothing of popular movements. But he didn't think they were Stalinists. Lepers had better PR than Stalin. Khrushchev himself had disavowed Stalin. Jake had detected, however, a whiff of the cultish about these Reds. They were keeping the fires burning for Galvan, now a dissident in the USWA, nonferrous division. Galvanistas. Jake had forgotten all but one of their names. All he knew was they worked for ThreeCo, which stood for CoCoCo, which stood for the Cobra Copper Company.

I wanted to hug him. Jake knew people who knew Naldo Galvan? Alive and well and living in Silver City?

I found a pencil stub and wrote the name he remembered on a page from one of his spiral notebooks. Hitched back to school the following day. I found a decent-sized roach in the pocket of my only suit, wrapped in a yarmulke from some distant cousin's bar mitzvah. I sat cross-

legged on a pillow in front of the TV, wearing the skullcap, watching cartoons and staring at the name I'd scribbled with what I realized now was an eyebrow pencil. I tried to imagine Trotsky's eyebrows, but no dice. The name was smudged but legible.

Harold Shackleford. Thick dark letters. Daffy Duck on the tube. I could see my reflection in the set, so that from a certain angle Porky Pig stuttered the end of every 'toon in a yarmulka. I sat through Bugs Bunny. Tweety and Sylvester. After a while it struck me I hadn't eaten all day, and I got up and poured some cereal into a bowl. The milk had gone bad so I ate the cereal dry. Washed it down with a beer.

I turned off the TV, read the back of the cereal box. Toyed with a crossword puzzle in an old New York Times, but wasn't able to focus.

Silver City. Naldo Galvan.

From my Trotskyist brother, of all people, I'd got the key to the treasure.

Assuming, of course, he wasn't yet completely deluded. And I wouldn't be going to Canada.

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Not that it would have mattered. Maybe I wasn't sure about Harold Shackleford, or José Castillo either. Vietnam was a different story. Vietnam I believed in. The draft I believed in.

The war was winding down. But the draft went on. Come December I drew triple threes in the Nixon lottery, ensuring I'd never be locked in mortal combat with Ho Chi Minh's or anyone else's army. Word of my pardon came via a tavern TV. The magic digit had just escaped the announcer's throat when I leaped from my barstool, grabbing people randomly by the shoulders, grinning and cackling like Jimmy Stewart back from the dead. I hugged the kid on the next stool,

whose number hadn't come up yet, and whose wonderful life, for all I knew, might be the last snuffed in a Vietnamese rice field. It turned out Nixon was ditching his draft for a volunteer army, the better to stifle protests, and not one of that year's contestants was ever inducted. But none of us knew that then. And I didn't relish the thought of watching these unfortunate sons crash and burn, or, best case, shave their heads and live in an army barracks, doing pushups and cleaning their rifles. Would they have appreciated my condolences? Doubtful. Anyway I was gone. Off to the Southwest, where I would join *la lucha* and consort, time permitting, with the local *señoritas*. The desert loomed, a liminal borderland between plunderer and Indian, man and Gila monster, not-yet and long-ago. I could taste the copper dust, feel the nauseating gutwrench of wild peyote. I could taste the future.

I slept the sleep of the dead, only better. I was alive. Next morning I had the operator put me through to the outfit Jake told me about, ThreeCo, which stood for CoCoCo, which stood for the Cobra Copper Company. The woman who answered the phone said they weren't hiring, something to do with price controls, but offered to mail me an application to keep on file. Called me Hon. Her father and husband both worked underground at ThreeCo, she said, and someday her son would, too. She started her office job the same week she got her high school diploma. She would have told me anything I asked her about. She was a long way from New York.

January came and went. The application arrived on Valentine's Day. It included a questionnaire that went like this. Q: "Why do you want to work for the Cobra Copper Company?" A: "I have a passion for copper." Q: "Have you ever been arrested, or convicted of any crime, misdemeanors included? If so, explain in the space provided below." A: "_____." Q: "Are you able to lift a 50-pound bag over your head?" A: "~~Depends~~ Yes."

I had been arrested, once. I was trying to hitch a ride from one of those upstate towns that time forgot. A long-haired older guy in an orange Bug had dropped us there, a wide spot on Highway 17, before heading east for Poughkeepsie. Three of us heading back to school after Christmas break. A light snow was falling. Cars slowed down to give us the middle finger, par for the course when you didn't have girls along. But it was too cold to stand around getting the finger. We took a break in an army-navy store, where one of our group, an acquaintance named Brickley, purchased a large American flag. Planned to hang it upside down in his room, most likely, or make it into a curtain. As soon as we got back to the highway a deputy pulled up. He told us to open our bags. This was illegal even in Nixon's America, but we didn't have any pot, and a person could disappear down the memory hole in some of these podunk towns. Cooperation felt like the play. Then the cop saw the flag. What were you gonna do with that, he demanded, his tone newly belligerent, the *were* suggestive of imminent confiscation. Burn it, muttered Brickley, what else? I hated Brickley, at that moment, more than I hated the cop. The cop hated Brickley. And not just Brickley, but Brickley's flag-burning comrades. We'd crossed the line from stoners to insurrectionists. The cop was a vet, by the looks of him, still on Team Tricky Dick, had his fill of commies halfway around the world. Wasn't having them here. Get in the car, he said, and watch your hair. I breathed easier, hearing this. Still had his sense of humor. At the station he sat us down on a bench with a view of some empty jail cells. Said he was phoning the justice of the peace, though it might have been his wife or the guy at the Texaco. The JP couldn't hear our case till tomorrow, he explained, so we'd have to spend the night in the hoosegow. It also meant he'd have to feed us, and give up his own plans for the night. Which was more trouble than we were worth. He'd cut us a break, let us just pay a fine and be on our way. We had, all told, sixty dollars or so. He pocketed fifty and kept the flag. Then he drove us

back to the highway, right to the spot where he'd picked us up. Warned us to keep our noses clean. I remember him saying it just that way. Brickley was Italian, in fact, a lapsed Catholic. In the land of the WASP, though, probably close enough. The cop flashed us the peace sign as he pulled away. The snow had stopped, and we got a ride from a middle-aged man driving a Lincoln. He had salt-and-pepper sideburns and a baby blue polyester suit, and he'd lost a son in the war. He took us nearly all the way back to school, stopping once at McDonald's to buy us burgers and fries. We found that hilarious, the three of us, doing McDonald's drive-through in a Lincoln. But we felt bad about his son, and comported ourselves respectfully, answering his questions about how we liked school and what our majors were and how did our football team look this year, which none of us actually knew. We said it looked promising. We lied when he asked about pot, because you never could tell about people. But he didn't smell like s a narc. Probably just thinking about his kid.

I wasn't sure getting pinched for hitchhiking qualified as an arrest. In any case I doubted the cop kept records of that kind of thing. Brickley, if he'd been a cop, might have kept records. But he wasn't as smart as the cop.

I dropped the application in the nearest mailbox. Told everyone I was leaving.

My father's response, when I broke the news, was to sneer audibly and shake his head at having spawned what he called a matched pair of subversive elements. My mother said I was throwing my life away. Tears were not shed.

My brother looked up from his reading, mumbled something about leaving himself. So leave already, said my father.

And then, nothing.

I went back to school. It was finals week—all I had was an essay test on "Hollywood and the

blacklist"—when I heard from ThreeCo. A different woman, older than the first, asked to speak with a Mr. Bussbaum. I said she could. There was a pause. "I'm him," I explained. "Simon." She said she was glad to meet me. Everything was in order. The only problem was my being 2,000 miles away. I assured her this wasn't a problem.

We scheduled a meeting for two weeks out. I took my suit and my heavier clothes to the Salvation Army, along with a dozen cartons of books and records. Found a couple of duffel bags with zippers that worked. I wouldn't need much. I'd been renting a converted laundry room off-campus, month to month, with the help of a student loan and the odd dishwashing gig. You were supposed to give thirty days notice. But I'd had to pay a month's rent in advance, so we'd come out even. There was nothing to tie me down. Louise, an aspiring Laura Nyro I'd long expected to dump me, had finally dumped me. And it turned out Uncle Sam didn't need my services in the Postal Service any more than he needed them in the army.

I got some maps from the auto club and a bus schedule at the Port Authority. Made a deposit sight unseen—using some leftover loan money, which the bank would be wanting back when the school told them I'd flown the coop—on a place I found in a copy of a Tucson paper I found at the 42nd Street library.

I met a couple of high school friends in Jackson Heights for beers and eight-ball, an old favorite haunt under the el, and promised to stay in touch. This girl I knew had a birthday party at a bar in Jamaica, where I got to say some goodbyes. She'd heard about Louise and said maybe she'd come visit sometime in Arizona. We both knew she wouldn't. I hung around till I figured my family was sleeping.

I woke up early. Showered and stuffed the bags with clothes and miscellaneous belongings. I left a pre-written note for my parents, another one for my brother. Then I took the E to the Port

Authority. The train was crowded and ripe. The terminal was more of the same. Worse in fact. The city was swarming with rats, many of them human. Project babies petted the rodents. New York, New York, a hell of a town. The people rode in a hole in the ground. The Port Authority was the crossroads, the place they sold their souls for a piece of the action.

Parting was short and sweet, the antithesis of sorrow.