

Morris Lurie (b. 1938), "French Toothpaste" (1969)

My toothpaste is made in France. *Société Parisienne d'Expansion Chimique*, it says on the tube. *Pâté Gingivale Spécial*. It is pinky-red. They didn't have my usual brand. It has turned my toothbrush pinky-red, too. My toothbrush is British. Kent. Tipped nylon. M.

Isaac Shur, thirty, sometimes happy, sometimes sad, a playwright and a pod, came, after many stops, to the house of a friend in Lindos on the isle of Rhodes, and sat in a white upstairs room that stared out at the Acropolis and remaining third of a Greek theatre, and there, on an April afternoon, the sea almost white, and only one cloud in the sky, one only, like a puff of cannon smoke, slowly drifting, he lit a cigarette and made an inventory.

Stukas. Greek cigarettes. Are they named after German fighter planes, and is this Greek humour, to forever set them alight? My typewriter is Italian, my handkerchief is Swiss, my shoes are Danish, my cigarette box is from Yugoslavia. Handmade. The lid squeaks. Listen.

Instead, he heard the braying of a donkey. There is nothing so laborious, so seemingly painful, as a donkey's bray, and Isaac Shur waited and thought about nothing until the donkey had run down, pumped out its last sounds, and all was quiet again. It was very quiet. The donkey's braying, though it had finished, seemed, to Isaac Shur, still to exist, and he saw it, like a puff of smoke, like that one cloud in the sky, running down the cobbled streets, under the houses that arched over, wheeling and turning, between the white-washed walls, skin over skin over skin of white, forever peeling, down steps, turning corners, and then suddenly breaking out of the labyrinth of streets and bursting into the *platia*, expanding, rising, over the fountain and over the trees, out to sea, free. Then, in his mind, it rose, higher, higher, became blue, and disappeared.

My watch is Swiss, but bought in Singapore (he continued).

My camera is Japanese, bought in Hong Kong, paid for in American dollars. My string vest is Austrian. My shirt is Spanish, trousers British, the sweater from Scotland, my socks bought on a ship and not labelled. It was raining in Vienna. Who was it with blue eyes?

My wallet is Egyptian, my towel is made in the U.S.A. The film in my camera (Japanese) is English. My soap is Pears Transparent Soap. My razor blades are Canadian, the shaving lather American but made under licence in England. From Oslo, Jerusalem, Fez? Nothing.

He looked at his suitcases and noted where they were made.

He read the labels on all his shirts, on his underwear, inside his hats. The umbrella was bought in England, but there was nothing written on it to say that it had been made there. He lit another cigarette. Stuka. With an English Brymay match. Average contents 54. Large. Then he went downstairs.

The friend in whose house he was staying was in Athens, and had phoned that he would be returning in a day or two, Isaac Shur summoned to the post office by a short, stubby Greek, the postmaster's assistant, and speaking into that telephone on the wall and old women and children standing quietly and not saying a word, waiting for the day's mail to be distributed, and listening to Isaac Shur. The telephone, Isaac Shur saw, was made in Germany.

The house of Isaac Shur's friend is large, built around a courtyard, the courtyard paved, as are all courtyards in Lindos, in black and white river pebbles, as smooth as old coins, stood up on end and arranged in traditional patterns, and Isaac Shur noted that in one corner the pebbles had come away and were lying loose, flat, like spilt beans. On the walls of the house are prints, by Matisse, Picasso, Delacroix, Van Eyck, and suddenly Isaac Shur thought of his belt. That's made in Italy, too, he remembered. Bought in Florence. At a street market. And my stud box, too.

He stood in the courtyard and looked up at the white, puffy cloud in the blue sky, and then he looked at his watch. The band, he thought. The band was nylon. Bought in Gibraltar. Made in Japan. Seven minutes past five. He had been invited for drinks at five o'clock by a painter from Rio de Janeiro. He decided to take his umbrella. The door to summer is not quite open in April in Lindos, and the seemingly peerless blue sky clouds over in minutes and the streets run with rain. Umbrellas are cheap here, he thought. Also scotch and petrol. But the Greeks, he thought, don't drink scotch, and racket around on motorbikes and scooters that sound as though they are being run on the lowest octane fuel.

He took his umbrella and locked the door and walked to the house of the painter from Rio

de Janeiro. "Come in!" the painter called, and they sat up on the painter's roof and drank gin and orange and looked out across the roofs of the village, the Acropolis over to one side now, the Greek theatre hidden, at the sea. It had changed colour completely, as the sea does here, particularly in these months before summer. Now it was slate grey, and darkening fast. Isaac Shur found himself staring at the painter's espadrilles and wondered were they Spanish or from some place else.

The gin, he saw, was Gordon's London Gin, and the orange juice was in a Johnnie Walker bottle, from which the label had been removed. The painter told Isaac Shur an amusing story about a Frenchman in Athens who had been swindled buying what he thought was an old Greek coin, and Isaac Shur smiled, and when the painter bent down to refill his glass, Isaac Shur leant forward and tried to see the label inside the collar of the painter's shirt, but he couldn't quite make it out. The writing on it didn't seem to be in English. Rio, he thought. And at once a strange feeling came over him, not at all pleasant, not exciting, not that bustling, tight, nervous feeling he would have had three years ago thinking about Rio, South America, any place he had not been, and he immediately looked up at the sea and drained his mind of all thought. The sea was almost black.

At six, though the sky was still bright, it had become chilly, and they went downstairs and sat in front of the fire the painter's maid had prepared earlier in the day. That fire is Greek, Isaac Shur thought. Made in Greece. Made from trees that grow on the isle of Rhodes and burning Greek air. "What?" he said, when the painter asked him a question, "Sorry, I ... "

He went, at eight, to the house of a writer on the other side of the village, where he had been invited for dinner. He passed an old Greek with bent legs in corduroy breeches and high boots and nodded to him. The man was so old, tall and stooped, big knuckled, enormously moustached, that Isaac Shur thought for a second that he was in Russia and that this was a peasant from Georgia, where people live so long, he remembered. Georgia? Old age? He came out of a street and into that small square where the tourists never penetrate, with its old tree and wooden benches and a sign for beer clumsily lettered on a wall. Fix. Which had once been Fuchs. He thought about the beers he had drunk, Greek beer, Italian beer, Tuborg and Carlsberg in Copenhagen, Amstel in Rotterdam, Schlitz, Guinness in Dublin in a smoky pub where they turned the pot to form an initial in the froth that lasted all the way down, John Courage in Kent, sharp and bitter Australian beer, Tiger beer in Hong Kong, but the names of the brands in Yugoslavia, Budapest, Vienna, Berlin he couldn't remember.

Copper bells tinkled in the street that led up to the Acropolis, the street for tourists, and in another month this street will be crowded with Germans and Swedes, fat women bouncing on donkeys, sitting astride on the hard wooden saddles, the Greek boys running them up, laughing all the way. Rugs and plates hang on the walls, but it is too late in the day, too early in the season. "*Cali spera*," a woman with a water jug said to Isaac Shur. Good evening. He mumbled something in reply. I'll need sandals, he thought, if I decide to stay here. Made in Greece. I don't have anything made in Greece. Except for the Stukas, which don't really count.

The writer had prepared a bean soup and then chicken, and they ate by the light of lanterns, the writer playing for Isaac Shur the latest jazz records which he had received only a day ago. During the meal, Isaac Shur heard the wind rising, and he wondered was it going to rain. "These records are from America?" he asked. "Yeah," said the writer. "Oh, and you should have seen the rigmarole I went through at the post office to get them. Wow. I—" But Isaac Shur wasn't listening. That rug is Turkish, he thought. And these plates are—he carefully lifted his up and read what was written under it—Arabia Pottery. Made in Finland. He read, over and over, the label on a jar of marmalade that was standing on the table. Dundee Orange Marmalade. Dundee and Croydon. Made from sugar syrup and Seville oranges. Net Weight 1 lb (454 g). Dundee Orange Marmalade. Dundee and Croydon. Net Weight.

He left at twelve and walked back to the house where he was staying. He passed no one. It had rained, and the cobbles were slick and black. He unlocked the door, left his umbrella in the courtyard, leaning against a wall, and went upstairs to the white room with the view of the Acropolis and the remaining third of the Greek theatre, where he would sleep tonight, and sat down at the table and stared at his typewriter. Made in Italy. He lit a Stuka. Brymay

Matches. He turned in his chair and stared out of the window. The street lights in the village twinkled and lit up patches of white wall, but over the village they cast a haze and the Acropolis was invisible against the night sky. Isaac Shur stood up, cigarette in hand, and went outside. He looked up at the sky. It was clear, and he could see stars, but not as many, he knew, as he would see when the electricity went off. The moon was not yet up. He threw his cigarette down into the street below and went back into the room.

At one o'clock, the electricity in the village went off and Isaac Shur sat at the table in the dark and didn't move. He wasn't tired. His head felt clear, but not with that tingling sharpness that preceded creative thought. When that happened, when he was on the brink of a poem, or a scene, then his brain was as sharp as a fragment of silver paper in the wind, it rustled, clicked, spun, crackled, and he heard voices, music, he saw immense colours, and his hands trembled with excitement. But not this time. This time the feeling was quite different. My shoelaces are Portuguese, he thought, and then he went through all his possessions again, French, English, American, Dutch, over and over, shirts, trousers, luggage, typewriter, shoes, and when he had gone over the list three times, he said, "Stop!" out loud, but he couldn't. Made in Spain, said his brain. Made in Vienna, Made in Japan, Made in U.S.A. *Pâté Gingivale Spécial*. Pears Transparent Soap. Quink.

The village, without electricity, looked brighter and whiter lit by the stars. The moon, Issac Shur saw, was up. There was no sound in the village, none at all. The sea was invisible, a black hole. The wind had dropped away. Isaac Shur sat without moving at the table in the upstairs room of his friend's house. Then a rooster began to crow.

It crowed on the other side of the village, past the picture theatre and the church, a long way away, and yet its sound was clear. It crowed all alone, and Isaac Shur could picture it standing in a dark yard under a peeling white-washed wall, crowing with all its might. "Cockadoodle doooooo !" Its cry, to Isaac Shur, seemed filled with panic and alarm. It crowed again and again, each time exactly the same cry, with a pause between but there was no reply.

And then, from the other side of the village, almost next to where Isaac Shur was sitting in the dark, another rooster answered the cry.

They alternated, first one, then the other, across the village, the first still crowing in exactly the same way, in the same terrified, panicked tone, and in the pauses, the second rooster answered.

Then a third rooster began, then a fourth, and to Isaac Shur there came all at once an image of these roosters crowing in the night. He saw the first one waking, alone and afraid under the stars, and calling out in terror, "Is there a God? Is there a God?" his cry waking a Catholic bird who crowed, "Hail Mary Mother of God! Hail Mary Mother of God!" Then a Greek Orthodox bird woke and crowed with all its might, "Hail! Hail !" waking a fourth, "Amen! Amen!"

A fifth bird joined in, a sixth. "We believe! We believe!" they crowed. "Father, Mother and Holy Ghost!" "Amen! Amen!" shouted a donkey. "Hallelujah!" crowed the rooster right by Isaac Shur's window. "God! God!" barked a dog.

By now every animal in the village was awake and shouting, Jewish birds, Church of England, Presbyterian, dogs of all faiths, congregations of chickens, Mormons, Quakers, roosters from every church. They crowed to the sky, "Hallelujah! God! Hail Mary and the Holy Ghost! Amen! Amen!" and the sound of their belief was enormous.

Then Issac Shur heard doors slamming, feet running, tins crashing against walls. "God! God!" barked the dogs. "Hallelujah!" crowed the cocks. And on and on they went, ten minutes, twenty, the dogs barking without pause, the roosters crowing with all their might. More doors slammed open, more tins crashed, there were shouts, calls. And then, one by one, slowly, the voices fell silent. Three dogs barked, then two, then one, and then right round the village the chorus died, first this rooster, then that, and the last sound of all that Isaac Shur heard that night was the first rooster, on the other side of the village, past the picture theatre and the church, still crowing alone and afraid: 'Is there a God? Is there a God?'

And then, at last, that rooster, too, fell silent.