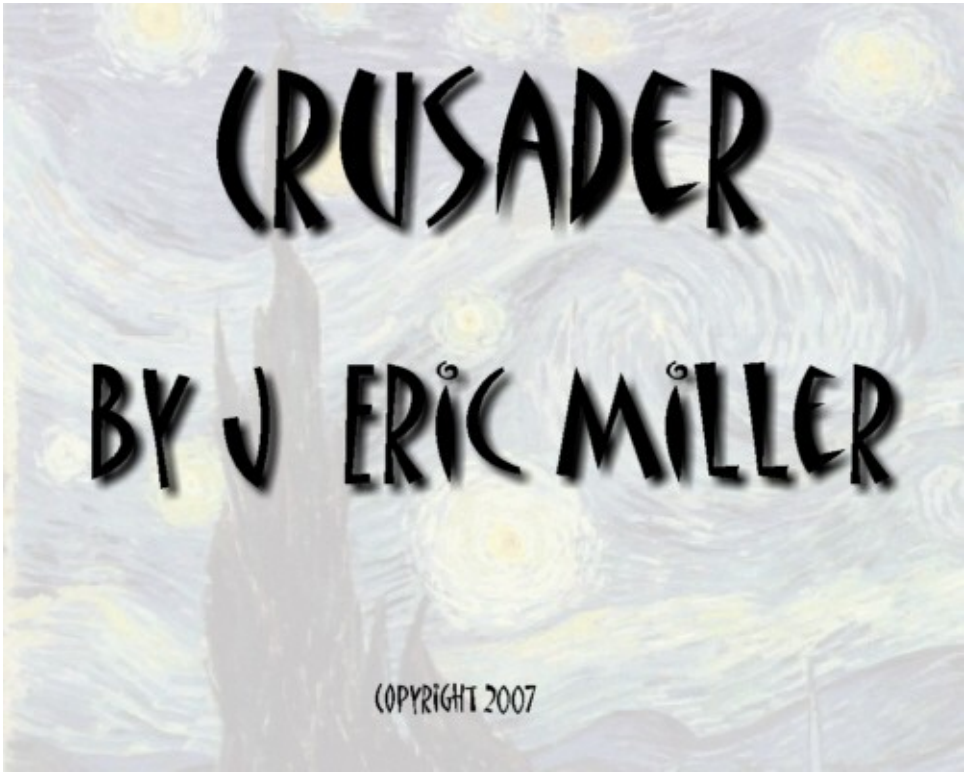

Boarding the plane in Beirut, I realize the only virtue is that I don't know what it means.

We are all at standstill at the end of the walkway, waiting for those people inside to push their carry-ons into the overhead bins and sit down.

It is almost real. This is a story I'm being told about myself and the thing that the me in the story is supposed to do, he's really going to.

He just tells himself he doesn't need to be able to say why.

Robert and Hank have their reasons.

Robert lost co-workers in the Twin Towers and now a son in Iraq. Hank has got this cross tattooed on the back of each hand and doesn't talk much. He's the one with the ideas about what you can fill with gasoline, how to hide sharply edged and pointed objects in your laptop.

Three Americans meet in a bar in Beirut. Only there, it's called a pub. Bars are where you go to choose between prostitutes.

Three Americans meet in a pub in Beirut.

No, this isn't joke.

One of the Americans nearly went native. This American, he almost married a Lebanese girl. The second American, he must be some kind of missionary or crusader. And the third, he wears dark glasses and white button down shirts. You'd almost think him government, and maybe he was.

Who knows, maybe he still is.

Everybody has his own story about what he's doing in Beirut, but I only really know mine, and even that, too me, is sketchy.

People from what I'd call home used to ask me why I taken the assignment. *Thirty five years*

old, I'd say, *and I guess I need to see the world*. The kind of cliché you offer up when you don't really know the answer.

The braver ones from back home, the ones who think they know you well enough to have the right, would ask you questions like, *What are you running away from*?

Anyway, for about a year now, I haven't talked with anybody from what I'd call home.

Three Americans meet in a pub in Beirut. Three weeks later, they're boarding a plane together, but separately.

The line moves forward and I think I'm glad. You can't stand still forever.

What I really need, more than anything I can remember ever needing, is to sit.

In Mecca, the Muslims come by the millions to circle the Kaaba. They walk around and around. This is the end of a pilgrimage. Every person of Islam with the means, he or she is expected to make this journey at least once in a lifetime. This is called the Hajj, one of the five pillars of Islam.

In Lebanon, I pick up some of the language, some of the customs. Sometimes, in Beirut, I get the sense I've blended in. As well as I've blended in anywhere, anyway, whatever the virtue is in that. Sometimes, in Beirut, I get to thinking: This place is as much a home as any place has been.

The pilgrimage has reached its climax, the enddays of this year's Hajj. All these Muslims, with their crescent moons, coming to Mecca, some of them having saved money half of their lives to make this journey.

What I wonder about those Muslims is what they think about when they walk around and around. What they think it buys them. What peace, what absolution, what relief of what debt.

I remember my religious days. Not like Hank with his pocket Bible and his suitcase Bible and his nightly prayers and the prayers I hear him mumbling as he enters the plane ahead of me. What I remember are the money making days when I thought true and daily monetary profit would bring meaning to my life, longevity, some kind of absolute fulfillment.

I'm not even saying it didn't seem to buy something like at least the potential for those things.

I'm not even saying these people marching around in Mecca aren't getting approximately what they're after.

All I'm saying is everybody's got to buy into something.

Money. Love. Allah. Everybody gets to looking for some type of crusade.

I buy the statue in a shop in Achrafieh. The salesgirl is pretty. Most of the women in Beirut seem pretty, though you don't know what they really look like. Those who have the means spend a lot of money and time on clothes and upkeep. Eyebrows plucked. Hair straightened. These girls are Muslims and Christians. Standing around in a pub or a club in Beirut, you can't really tell them apart. Making love, if you want to call it that, you don't really know the difference.

I've been in Beirut two years. People in what I'd call home, when I was still in touch, they'd ask

me, *Why are you still there*?

They'd ask me this after they knew I'd disassociated myself from British Financial, the company I came here to work for.

I'd say, *Well, I can throw an apple into the Mediterranean Sea from the balcony of my hotel room*.

I'd say, *I like the food and the climate*.

I'd say, *You should see the women*.

All of this is sort of true, but that doesn't mean I really know why I've stayed.

One thing I'm certain of: I didn't stay for the girl.

This is an expensive shop, the place I bought the statue. Beirut, as I know it, is a city of people with expensive tastes. The stone is smooth. You've seen these kinds of statues, only as candles. Two people, side by side, a man and a woman, we can assume, their heads and torsos and thighs touching, this silhouette of love, of the idea of people nearly combined so that they would cast but one shadow.

The pretty salesgirl calls the piece charming.

In Beirut, the people with means, often speak with a French accent.

In her French accent, she says, *It's comes from Cairo, of course.*

I nod.

I notice her throat, the swell of her bosom, the things I always notice. You picture yourself leaning against her as if she is one of the figures in the statue and you are the other. As if this would finally save me from whatever it is from which I think I need to be saved. The kinds of ropes we grab for when we're falling. The kind of ropes we leap towards when we think there's something better just an arc away.

The girl I almost married comes to mind. That French accent, a girl of Islam but devoid of faith, from a family whose fortune was waning. We meet in the evening, at a club. People from what I'd call home, I used to tell them, when I still felt I could explain myself, *The nightlife in Beirut, it's something else.*

I meet this girl on Monot Street, in one of those clubs into which it is difficult to gain admittance, unless you're a person of means, or a beautiful girl, or a Westerner.

You meet and she never asks if you're American. Everybody is well dressed. Everybody is well coiffed. The women are perfectly made up. Those of them that are Christian wear small golden crosses on thin gold chains around their necks. The men are clean shaven or have well maintained stubble or trimmed beards and moustaches. Those of them that are Christian wear thick gold crosses on thick gold chains.

Nobody seems to care about crosses or lack of crosses, not in the clubs, not in the pubs, not in business.

Everybody moves with grace. By the end of the night, you're holding the girl, as lovely as she seems and as impossible as it should be, you're pulling her close in this dream world of beautiful people.

For a little while what you think is that this is what you've been after.

There were girls in New York. For a little while, with almost all of them, sometimes for a very little while, they were what you thought you were after. If you can just keep touching her, everything will be all right.

This is an exclusive club on Monot Street in Beirut; I'm working for British Financial and I think I know what it all means, where I am and where I've been, and all the whys.

Where it all goes wrong is that I wake up beside that girl in the Mayflower Hotel, in the same bed and the same room for which my employer has been paying for the last year. I'm an independent contractor, having walked away from my corporate job, the one for which I was perfectly trained, the one at which I used to tell people I'd been aimed all my life. When I talked like that, I learned to remind myself: once I was a little boy and I wasn't aimed at anything.

I'm not going to tell myself this is my destiny, to be boarding an airplane in Beirut.

I'm not going to tell myself it is anything.

British Financial, that's where I end up after quitting my New York corporate job with the idea that I'd be free of something. Whatever that something was; whatever I meant by freedom. British Financial is, of course, just another corporation, and though I call myself an independent contractor, I'm just another employee.

When I wake up in the hotel bed that night, I don't know who she is. I don't know where I am. And even after I think about it for awhile and get it mostly figured out, I still don't really know. I think I used to feel that way in New York a long time ago, but I can't be sure.

When I wake up in the Mayflower that night, I don't know my job or why I do it. I don't know the places I'm from or why I should return to them. I don't know the places I've imagined going or what the use in that would be.

It's not just that every trip seems pointless. It's that every movement does. So I don't move for a long time.

The girl and I'd been drinking that night. By then, you'd call her my fiancé.

And I wake the girl eventually, and I tell her: *You must leave.*

At first, she doesn't know what I'm talking about. She's saying, *Baby? Baby, what's wrong*?

In the early morning, in the Mayflower pub, which they'll re-open for you if you're a person of means, with my cell phone still warm from the grip of my hand, with my ears still ringing from my employer's high pitched refusal to understand the absurdity of my late night call and insistence that I'm finished working for the company, I have a change of heart.

I want to call him back. I want to call the girl and tell her to return. But it's too late. They've already seen that hidden side of me. They would always wonder when I was going to wake afraid and confused again.

The way I must have done in New York.

The phone is on the table.

By then, I'd started drinking pretty much every night at the hotel pub, but right then, that's when I begin to drink seriously.

Enter Robert. Enter Hank.

The shop girl, she's still smiling.

Do you like it? She's talking about the statue. The women of Beirut are not what you'd think. You hear the word Beirut and you imagine Berkas and angry faced old women and shy overly-dressed girls, but that's not the reality. In Beirut, the women wear mini-skirts and low cut shirts. Paris jeans with fringed waists. These girls, they spend a lot of time with the makeup, with the hairdresser, with the surgeons. They might sleep with you just like a girl in New York or Dallas or Portland might.

My fiancé, sometimes I see her after that night, though of course fiancé isn't the right word for her then. She's my ex by then.

Everything gets ex'd eventually. The places you live. The people that were yours. The people that you were.

You wake up in the Mayflower Hotel in Beirut, Lebanon, and you remember that once you were just a little boy.

What I'm doing getting on the plane, I can't say with certainty. Call it what you want. Call it a mission. Call it revenge. Call it midlife crisis.

In any case, I see this ex her from time to time.

Beirut is a big city, but the people of means are limited to a relatively few areas. She's arm in arm with some man, she's laughing, head tilted back, mouth open. That appearance of peace and joy you want to think only you can bring a particular woman.

It's all right. I gave up on all that. All those things I used to buy into, I've put them behind me.

Ask me what I'm still doing in Beirut, really really doing, and maybe that's the answer, that I'm not buying into anything anymore.

Robert, he's quietly creative. He has the idea of gluing a thin strip of razor all along the edge of a computer disc. He's got the idea of slipping hatpins into the battery pack. He talks about the innocuous looking things into which you can pour gasoline and from which you can spray it.

What I start to tell myself is that it doesn't matter what I'm doing in Beirut. What I start to tell myself is that that not mattering can just pour out from here. That it already has. That it spreads forward and backward, like something spilled.

I roll the statue in my fingers. What I'm feeling it for is its gripability. Its weight.

Trying not to be conspicuous about it, I swing the statue a couple of times.

The pretty shop girl is smiling at me. Her white teeth. The smooth of her upper lip where it has been waxed. The swell of her breasts where they've been enhanced.

What I think is, Goodbye to all that.

What I think is, Once there was when there was nothing you imagined any woman but your mother bringing you.

What I think is, Then there was a time when what a given woman could bring to your life seemed the only thing, that and what money you could make.

What I think is, It never saved you anyway, not one of them. Not any of that.

And if I look through all of this for a real reason, for a real catalyst, I'm not going to find it.

I carry my bag. Robert carries his laptop satchel. Hank is already in the plane, with a bottle of hairspray that's not really got hairspray inside, with a book of matches from the Mayflower Pub.

I don't think about any of this going through security. Security at the airport in Beirut is no joke, or it shouldn't be. Not in a city with this history. Not in a city where the Syrian soldiers marched. Not in a city fringed by Palestinian refuge camps. Not in a city where your taxi drivers have Hezbollah decals on their windows and the Israels send planes to bomb the power station. Where the Christian groups have militias. Where even the Druz are armed.

American airlines are not even allowed to fly into this city.

But it seemed an awful cinch going through security

What I felt was numb, in that way I've been feeling on and off through half my life, that good old blank feeling, moving past the metal detectors, past the grim faced soldiers, down the hallway toward the gate.

But now the numbness is wearing off.

What I'm feeling now is nervous.

I'm starting to smell my own sweat.

I'm starting to wonder if I can really do this.

Enter doubt, not just in my ability, but in the purpose. Or rather the lack of the necessity of purpose.

I'm starting to wonder if I could put a stop to all of this.

Or at least put a stop to just my part in it. Though in reality, we're all in it now, every person around me, the pilots and the attendants, all these passengers. It goes on with or without me, and we're all bound together.

I wonder if I could just lean over to Robert and say, *Let's not*.

Just shake my head at Hank.

Then I'd go where we're heading, come back a week later.

Be in Beirut again.

Where the security at the airport isn't staunch.

Where the girls with means lie in string bikini's on the beach and a vodka tonic costs you seven fifty and nearly everybody you know owns a cell phone and has had at least one plastic surgery procedure. Where a person can just be and be, at least until his means run out.

There was the flight I made from there to here. From New York to Frankfurt to Beirut. I try to remember what I thought on those planes. I try to remember how I felt. I try to remember if it occurred to me that I'd never cross the sea again.

There are all these ways to say goodbye.

Or not to.

That girl, we had seven months together. I knew her mother, her sisters. Her father was dead, a casualty of the civil war. She was proud that her family stayed through it. That they didn't go to Paris, to Sydney, to Toronto, didn't go wait out the fighting, as many of the people of means did.

For a little while with her, everybody else was gone. All that lovers I'd had, or conceivably would, just disappeared. What a calm and good time that is.

The fiancé, the ex-fiancé, the building in which she still lives with her mother and sisters has the family name. One wall is chinked where bullets hit and sharded. I remember standing with her beside it, beneath a tree she said her grandfather planted, her pointing to the pock marked wall, saying, *It's held up through a lot, stood through everything.*

In Beirut, like every place, not everything refused to tumble.

Beirut, when I get there, is a city in rebuild, a city rebounding, a city trying to rise from ashes and rubble to grow again into what it once was,

I wonder if I could just stop this. Start my life again. A new job in Beirut. A new girl.

You go through life looking for something to which to really attach.

In the pub at the Mayflower, Robert unfolds a newspaper photograph of ground zero.

People settle into their seats. I can't look at Robert or Hank. I pay attention to the voices, Arabic and French and English words. Everything blends into airplane din. We're pushing back, the ring of those little electronic bells. It's pretty much the same where ever you fly. Dallas, Texas. Grand Rapids, Michigan. Beirut, Lebanon. Planes pretty much lift up and touch down the same way everywhere.

Around me are Lebanese and probably some Europeans. At least two other Americans. Everybody has got his or her story. They've got broken or unbroken connections with people they'd call friends and lovers and family and with places they'd call home.

We're going to Abu Dabi. Beaches. Palms trees. Desert golf courses. These vacation zones in the Middle East. The places people with means visit.

The mood is light on the plane; most people are flying away from their day to day troubles.

People think there is such a place as rock bottom. That if you're sinking, eventually you hit the floor and begin back up again. That's what people want to think. That if you get back to what you once were, everything will be all right.

Beirut tires to become Beirut again.

And I'm in danger of buying into the good old days. The good old job. The good old girl.

Abu Dabi.

That's where we're supposed to go.

The pub, it's for expatriates, for tourists, for foreigners and half foreigners. A group of middle aged Irish. UN guys, big and dark-headed Fins, they come in here off duty; they bring Lebanese girls in beautiful dresses. The soldiers stand close to their girls, girls who smile with their white teeth, who look at you with their dark eyes.

Robert asks me, *What are you doing here?*

For the first time, I try to tell the truth. For the first time, I really recognize there is no such truth, that the story of my existence here can't really be unwound. I say, *I don't know.*

I say, *It has something to do with paralysis*.

He looks me over. And I say, *No, up here*, and tap my head.

He nods. I feel like he gets it. I felt like he got it before he sat down. The way he peers at you through his dark glasses and you believe you see his eyes surface in them sometimes. That's why I try to tell him the truth.

He buys me a drink. He orders himself tonic water. He says, *I've got an ulcer.*

I remember that as the people settle more fully into their seats, as a baby cries and goes silent, as a woman speaks in Arabic with the flight attendant about a bag too big for the overhead.

The faithful of Islam kneel four times a day and face Mecca, or where they think it is. They face and kneel and pray.

And I wonder, What do they think it buys them?

Robert, he says the real war, it's a war of symbols.

Robert, he says whoever destroys the most of the other side's symbols, that's the side that wins.

Three American meet in a pub in Beirut.

A joke could easily begin this way, but this is not a joke.

All means are limited. I can't just stay at the Mayflower forever, not in a room I'm now paying for out of my own exhaustable funds.

My accounts are long dry. My credit card is edging closer to its end.

I kept giving things up to be free. Of what, I'm not sure. Of my expectation for them, I suppose. Of what I thought I wanted to get out of them that it turns out I wasn't going to get.

Before I board a plane in Beirut, all I'm really doing is dwindling my means away in the

Mayflower on seven dollar and fifty cent vodka tonics and an one hundred and ten dollar a night room.

At a table in the corner, beneath a framed portrait of some British Lord, Robert whispers his philosophy. Hank sits with his hands folded around a pen.

Robert is saying, *There are real statements to be made.*

He's telling us he's flown professionally.

He tells us he's been studying the plane on which we'll purchase tickets, been looking at flight manuals.

Robert says, *What I've been looking for, it's for people, men, who are ready to sacrifice in the name of something grander. Who understand that the history of the world is made up of wake up calls, that everyone is just an echo of the first. I'm looking for men who are ready to respond.*

And Robert, what you learn in various meetings at the Mayflower pub is that he really doesn't drink. He doesn't talk about girls or listen when I do. What he is is an ascetic. A person who deprives himself of the pleasures of the body in order to at least have the appearance of a higher spiritual being.

Everybody has got to buy into something. Everybody has got to attach to something. In moments of clarity, I can't help realizing that if Robert were born in, say Damascus, he'd be just as effectively focused, but on an opposite endeavour.

Robert is saying, *The country we've left, as great as it is, it's overly trained, overly soft. They tell you to think outside the box, but they don't really want that from you. What I'm about to suggest, it is something from outside the box. The box has already been blown up. People just refuse to acknowledge it and what we, the three of us could do, is wake them. We're losing the war, and the war around ther war, but we don't have to.*

And Robert goes on and on. Hank has heard it before, already been recruited.

There's something hypnotic about Robert's voice, not necessarily what he is saying, but the not quite deadpan way he's saying it, a solid and muted rhythm.

In tribal war, you understand that none of the enemy can survive. That where there was two, there can only one. The survivor. The winner.

Hank is nodding and writing on the napkin.

Robert is saying, *What we've got to do is show them the relationship with the box is a mime.*

On a napkin, Hank has written the word: Crusade.

Okay, maybe, depending on who you are, this is a joke.

Three Americans meet in a pub in Beirut. One of them writes Crusade on a napkin. What do you think happens next?

Three Americans huddled over a pub table. If these were Arabs in a café in Paris or Montreal, in a strip club in Detroit or Roanoke, what you'd say was forming would be a cell.

We can only pretend to know what it is about.

I look around the airplane and I see people who try to make sense of their lives. Of the world they inhabit. Who want to make everything mean something.

For most everybody on planet Earth, all these people are about to become symbols. As will Robert. As will Hank. As will I.

The attendants, all four of them, are thin and pissed off looking, tired, probably, but still, if you do more than glance at them, you might start to tell them apart.

We're at cruising altitude. The flight is not long. There's only so much time.

I never once asked myself if I have it in me. I never asked myself if I should.

I look at the man beside me, plump and older, a little salt and pepper moustache, the kind my father had right up until he died, the kind he had even after that, laying in his own personal and eternal coffin.

I take the little statue out of my bag.

What I'm doing, I'm not sure.

This thing is already in motion. Robert and Hank won't turn around. Me, for a second, I hear a voice in my head, like my own voice from a long long time ago, and it's telling me this is all wrong.

I could shake my head and whisper, Stop, but that isn't going to mean a thing.

Robert and Hank, I could try to stop them. I could hit Robert first and then go for Hank. I could shout for the other passengers to help me. Perhaps we would win out. We'd still be symbols, just with different possible interpretations.

What I'm supposed to do is to hit one of the flight attendants, hard enough to kill, though it doesn't matter if she dies. She's just supposed to go down. Her fall is just supposed to put shock into the passengers, overwhelm them into obedience.

That and what Robert and Hank do.

At times like this, you don't just think about your own end. I've been thinking about that for a long time. What you think about in a context like this one, it's the end of everything. The world just gone. A final solution.

We're going to sink a plane into Mecca, all those circling Muslims. That's what Robert whispers in the bar at the Mayflower.

Right now, in this thing that is not a story I'm being told about myself, but which is a real real moment, we're going to take this plane over.

Either that, or I'm going to try to stop them.

I hold the statue. I don't know what I'm going to do.

I hear Hank opening the disc drive to his computer.

I see Robert pulling out his hairspray bottle. He looks at me. He looks at Hank. Hank touches the tips of his fingers together and closes his eyes. I expect to see his lips move, but in this

prayer, they don't. Then his eyes are open.

The statue is the heaviest thing I've ever held, so heavy that I'm going to drop it. But then I don't. Then it's not heavy anymore. It's not even droppable. It's just an extension of my hand, something I annexed or something that annexed me.

Robert says, *Let's roll*, and then he stands up.

J Eric Miller's novel, *Decomposition*, was published by Ephemera Bound Publishing in March of 2006; it is being translated into French and will come out from Lattes Editions in Paris in the summer of 2008. His collection of short stories, *Animal Rights and Pornography*, was published by Soft Skull Press in July of 2002, and has since been translated and published in Russia by Limbus Press. His short stories have appeared in a number of print and online journals, including: *Burning Word; LitPot*; *Outsider Ink*; *Pindledyboz*; *Manera;* and *Clean Sheets*. He has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Denver and a MPW in Screenwriting from the University of Southern California.