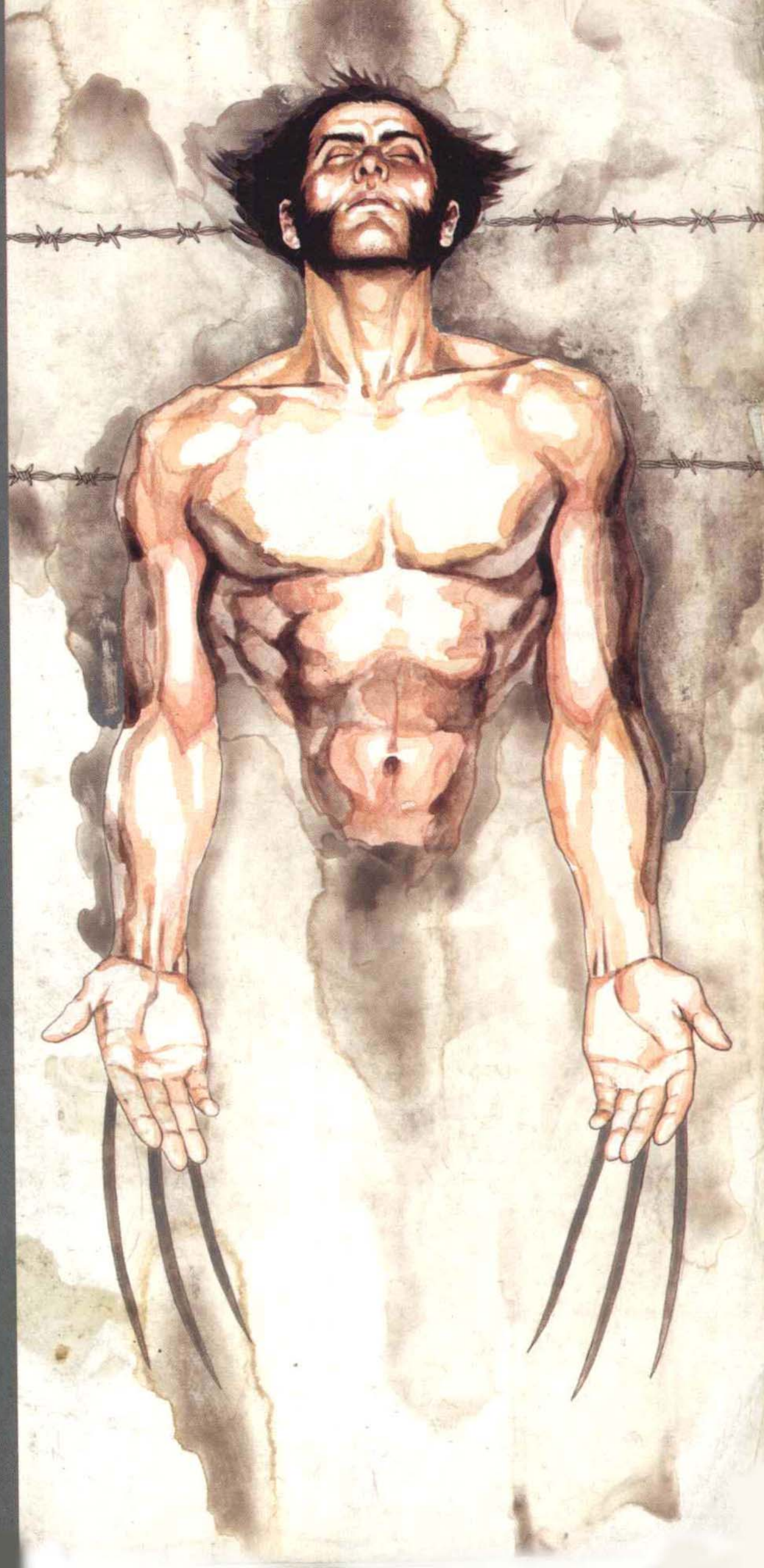


WOLVERINE®

LIFEBOOK

HUGH MATTHEWS



WOLVERINE®

LIFEBLOOD

**a novel by
Hugh Matthews**

**based on the
Marvel Comic Book**



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Logan rose and stepped through the kitchen door of the tavern, took in the scene beyond. A mustachioed man in white was at a gas range to his left, shaking a skillet full of something that sizzled on the heat. The waiter who had brought his wine was arranging slices of crusty bread in a basket at a granite-topped table in the center of the room. He looked up, startled, as Logan came through the door.

"Signor," he said, "you cannot come here. It is not for the customers."

Logan ignored the protest, ignored the bartender in the public room behind him, who was also saying, "Signor, Signor," his voice getting closer. He let his mind go, let the sight and, most of all, the smell of the kitchen just come to him, without trying to focus on any one detail. And again, it happened: *The stove, that's different. The counter, that's the same. And the door leading outside, it's been painted but I know it.*

As he looked at the door that led to the tavern's backyard, it opened. Through it came an old woman in a black dress, her face lined but full of dignity, her dark eyes meeting his with a challenge that left Logan in no doubt that she was the authority here.

The bartender was tugging fitfully at his elbow from behind, the waiter was advancing toward him with a worried look and making shooing motions with both hands, and the chef had turned from his cooking but the expression of outrage that had begun to appear on his face was rapidly dying. Logan did not see any of them.

His eyes were locked on the old woman. The look of resentment that she had first cast at the intruder in her domain had been shattered by an outbreak of astonishment, tinged by superstitious fear—as if she had walked into her own kitchen and come face to face with a ghost.

She stood frozen in the doorway, eyes wide and mouth open. Then she brought one pale hand to her lips and her voice came in a whisper. "Patch!"

Ottawa, Canada, the present

COLD.

Just as the gray day slid toward evening, the north wind brisked up, bringing rain so cold it turned to ice that stuck to whatever it touched. The bare branches of the trees along Elgin Street were sheathed in a glistening armor that dragged them down and froze them to the ground. The smallest twigs had snapped but the chill coating held them in place, would not let them fall.

The small man in the plaid wool jacket and black knitted cap walked into the wind, broad shoulders hunched, scarred hands deep in the pockets of his tattered jeans. But his face met the icy blast straight on, let the frozen crystals sting his skin and make the bones beneath the flesh ache, as if they were being scraped by knives.

Pain was good. Pain was real. It cut through the fog inside him, slashed through the roiling, colorless nothingness that stuffed his head. With pain came memory—or what passed for recollection in a mind that could not connect faces to names nor places to events, a mind that did not know if the pictures it conjured to fill its inner screen came from true recall or false, maybe just from dreams, or stories he'd heard.

Or from the nightmares that chased him, screaming in rage and horror, back into wakefulness, back into the fog.

Heya, heya, heya. At first he thought the chant was coming from inside his head. Sometimes he heard voices, random scraps of speech, mostly in English, sometimes in other languages that he understood. *Heya, heya, heya* it came again, louder now as his steps took him past Confederation Park. Off to his right, unseen behind the white rain, someone was beating a drum, a simple double-beat rhythm to accompany the voice.

I've heard that before, the man thought. He stopped and let the sound pass through him, held his mind back when it tried to get a grip on the memory. He'd learned that grasping didn't work, would make the recollection disappear, like trying to grab smoke.

Heya, heya, heya with the drum beating underneath—*bom-bom, bom-bom, bom-bom*—like somebody had cut open the world to show its living heart, he thought. And that brought up an image: a man split from gullet to groin, lying on his back, looking up, his eyes clouding in death.

Who is that man? He couldn't help reaching for the memory, but even as he grasped for it, the picture faded, the dead eyes the last to go. Still, the drum and the chant continued. The small man turned toward them and went into the park, not following the concrete path that was slick with ice but walking through

short winter grass that crackled and broke beneath his heavy boots.

Something big ahead, he thought. Through the rain he saw a block of gray surmounted by dark shapes—people, animals, a great bird with wings spread wide. Now he came close enough to see that it was a monument. On a massive granite base stood four figures, three men and a woman, cast in dark bronze. Around them were four animals—grizzly, wolf, bison, and caribou—and above their heads a giant eagle soared. On the front of the plinth, a plaque announced in English and French that the monument commemorated the sacrifices of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit men and women who had worn Canadian uniforms in wars and peacekeeping missions.

The drumming and chanting were coming from the far side, but the small man's eyes had dropped from the heroic figures to the two rows of flowered wreaths, standing on wire tripods, that were ranged along the steps leading up to the monument. He had a vague sense that the presence of the wreaths meant that it must be not long since the Remembrance Day observances of November 11. The date brought a flash of memory—a soundless image of men with weary faces and mud-spattered uniforms throwing helmets shaped like soup bowls into the air, some with mouths set in bitter smiles, some weeping openly—then the picture was gone.

One of the wreaths drew his gaze. It stood apart

from the others, a small circle of dark red flowers woven through evergreen boughs. At its center, encased in plastic, was a framed photograph of a man with strongly aboriginal features, the cheeks flat-planed, the narrow eyes almost asiatic. He wore a beret with a parachute badge. Beneath the picture, a wide ribbon bore the legend SGT. THOMAS GEORGE PRINCE, 1915–1977.

The chant and drum grew louder, but the small man did not move. He stared at the black-and-white image and the man in the photo looked back at him with the confident half smile of the consummate warrior, a smile that said, *I know who I am and I know what I can do.*

But it wasn't the smile that held the man motionless in the freezing rain, staring at the image while the ice built on his shoulders and covered his wool cap like a helmet. He stared at the picture of the aboriginal sergeant in the old-fashioned, British-style Canadian Army uniform and more images came: bright sunlight on dry earth, small trees with dark leaves and clumps of green fruit—*olive trees*, said his own voice in his head—a dusty road and soldiers marching in puttees and canvas webbing, bolt-action rifles slung from their shoulders.

"I know you," he said, his voice a grating whisper. And as he spoke the drum ceased, the chant ended on one last *heya*. The small man stooped and reached for the photograph. It came free of the wreath. He pulled

the ribbon loose and wrapped it tightly around the plastic-covered cardboard, then he opened his coat and stuffed both prizes inside, against the worn checked shirt that covered his hard-muscled torso.

He buttoned the coat back up. Now he stood in the falling sleet that whispered as it struck the ground, no longer noticing the bite of the wind that made the ice-covered trees rattle like dead men's bones. He put his hand to his chest, pressed the cardboard against the beat of his heart, and said again, "I know you."

When he stepped around the monument to find the drummer and chanter, no one was there.

The Empty Quarter, Saudi Arabia, the present

HEAT.

Outside the camouflaged hangar, disguised to look like a low-rise in the barren landscape, the air rippled with desert heat under a sun so fierce it seemed to turn the sky white. The lean man with close-cropped iron-gray hair stood within the open doors, the toes of his polished black boots just behind the line of light and darkness that separated the hidden building's shade from the searing blast of the sun. His ice-blue eyes followed the progress of the VTOL jet as it came in low and slow to hover in a cloud of grit a short distance beyond the open hangar. The plane, mottled

with desert camouflage paint, settled onto its three wheels. Its whining thrusters throttled down, then turned aft to roll the jet slowly into the hangar.

Wolfgang Freiherr von Strucker turned on his heel with parade-ground precision and accompanied the aircraft into the darkness. Behind him, swarthy men in loose, long-sleeved robes of white cotton, their heads bound in flowing white scarves secured by a doubled black cord, rushed to roll the outer doors closed. The jet's engines cycled down and its double canopy levered up as the Arabs pushed a wheeled staircase into position. The pilot remained in his place, making notations in the airlog, while the man in the rear seat left the plane and descended to the hangar floor.

"Salaam aleikum," said von Strucker, the traditional Arabic greeting accompanied by a curt dip of the head and a click of heels brought sharply together, which the baron had learned as a cadet in a Prussian military academy long, long ago.

"Aleikum salaam," said the visitor, in the accents of Yemen, adding only the smallest gesture of one hand. He wore a Savile Row suit with an understated pin-stripe, but his olive-skinned face had the stark griminess of a desert warrior and his liquid brown eyes were lit from within by a gleam of fanaticism that had made him the chief of operations for the shadowy Islamist cabal known as the Foundation.

"We will go below," the Prussian said, leading his

visitor toward an elevator at the rear of the hangar. A moment later they were descending deep into the living rock of the desert, the elevator door opening on to a subterranean corridor walled, floored, and roofed in reinforced concrete. Boot heels clacking on the polished surface, von Strucker led the way to a heavy metal door guarded by an Arab man in combat fatigues, who snapped to attention as the two men approached.

Von Strucker acknowledged the salute with a fractional nod, then reached behind the guard to tap a code into a numbered keypad beside the door. The barrier slid silently into the wall, revealing an unlit room beyond. The two men advanced into the room, the door sliding closed behind them. The Prussian indicated a low square table, ten feet by ten, that dominated the center of the space. Its top held sixteen square blocks of a city in miniature: houses in the classic Arab style, with windowless outer walls enclosing courtyards and gardens. The models were faithful replicas, von Strucker knew, of a particular neighborhood in the city of Amman, capital of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The walls surrounding the table were covered with huge blown-up photographs of the city and large-scale, detailed maps, marked in places with broad red arrows and concentric black circles that represented lines of fire and calculated gradations of blast damage.

The Yemeni cast his eye over the table and the wall displays, his face impassive.

"The plan is complete," von Strucker said. "We

have run simulations based on all likely scenarios and several that are barely possible. The outcome in each case is certain: neither the Jordanian foreign minister nor the American ambassador will survive their encounter with the Green Fist.”

The visitor leaned over the table, reached into a representation of a street, and touched a manicured fingernail to the rear of a toy limousine whose fender bore a miniature Stars and Stripes. He flicked the little car, sending it careering down the avenue to strike the curb outside the model of the foreign minister’s house. It flipped over, its tiny wheels spinning.

The Yemeni’s dark eyes looked up at von Strucker. “The plan,” he said, “is changed.”

The Prussian stiffened. “The plan,” he said, “is perfect.”

The visitor picked up the overturned car and set it aright again. “Yes,” he said, “*this* plan is. But a new opportunity has arisen. We are calling it Operation Severed Head.”

The baron was used to sudden changes of strategy from the Foundation. “Who is the target?” he said. “And where will we strike?”

The Yemeni smiled a cruel smile. “The Green Zone,” he said, “in Baghdad.”

“And who is the target?”

The Yemeni’s thin lips framed their heartless smile again as he savored the thought. Then he told the baron the name of the man who was marked for death.

Ottawa, Canada, the present

“I WANT TO FIND OUT ABOUT THIS MAN.”

The librarian hadn't heard the man's approach. She looked at the photo of an aboriginal soldier that had appeared on her desk, then at the hand that had placed it before her. There were strange scars between the knuckles, scars on top of scars, as if sharp knives had been thrust into the flesh more than once. She looked up and a cold shock went through her when her eyes met his. She'd seen plenty of crazies—the public library was where the street-dwelling insane passed some of their tortured days—but this one was different. She saw a hunger in his gaze, and behind that hunger she sensed a savagery that was barely contained. He was like something from a bygone age, a time when disputes were settled with spilled blood and torn flesh.

“I want to know who he was,” the man said, the voice more like an animal's growl than human speech. And now he flung something else onto the woman's desk, a small bundle of wadded cloth. She pulled at an edge and it became a crumpled ribbon of black satin stitched with letters of gold. She read the name and the dates and a great wash of relief went through her. She could be rid of him.

“Come with me,” she said, rising. Her desk was on the edge of the open area that welcomed visitors to the main branch of the Ottawa Public Library. She now

set off across the foyer toward a free-standing set of six shelves that displayed several books beneath a computer-printed banner, decorated with stylized red poppies, that read LEST WE FORGET. On a middle shelf stood a small hardcover book, its title *Tommy Prince, Hero*. She took it and handed it to him and as his scarred hand closed on the small volume, she saw a light come into his eyes. It put her in mind of a scene she'd seen in a nature documentary, when the camera had caught a close-up of a timber wolf just as it came out of a stand of pines and saw a yearling moose calf stranded in deep snow.

She shivered, but the man didn't notice. He was already turning away, carrying the book toward a table and chairs. She watched him as he sat and spread its pages open before him, hunched over it as if he were starving and the book was food. Melting ice dripped from his knit cap onto the paper and he carefully wiped the droplet away with his sleeve, then took off the hat and set it down beside him.

The woman backed away, then turned and went swiftly back to her desk. She got her purse out of the bottom drawer and went quickly to an inner door, using a card slung from a lanyard around her neck to swipe open the security lock. The library would be closing in another hour and she had decided to spend that time downstairs in the quiet of the stacks. If the man needed any more help, let someone else provide it.

• • •

His name was Logan. He was pretty sure of that much, because the envelopes with cash in them that were slipped under the door of his apartment once a month had that name printed on them, and nobody had ever showed up to say, "I'm Logan, where's my money?"

The apartment was a nondescript condo in a converted warehouse in Bytown, the oldest part of Ottawa, named for the colonel of Queen Victoria's Royal Engineers who had laid out the original town next to the fork where the Rideau and Ottawa rivers met. Logan was also sure he didn't own the space he lived in—he never got tax notices—and he figured that whoever was sending him the money was also taking care of the rent.

He'd tried waiting at his door, ready to yank it open the moment the envelope was slid under. But all he had achieved was that he got no money that day. Loitering in the hallway or keeping a watch on the building from across the street brought the same result. So when money day came, he went out and walked the streets, peering into faces that always found a reason to look away fast, wanting to see just one person he recognized—one body he could grab and hold immobile in front of him while he said, "I *know* you. Do you know me?"

And now, at last, he had found a face that rang his bell. Tommy Prince—the name meant nothing. But

about the face he was sure. When he stared at the photograph, he could see that same face wearing other expressions, could see it from other angles.

Now, hunched over the book at the library, he wanted to tear through the pages, rip the information out of it, satisfy the craving. Instead, he carefully wiped away a drop of water that fell from his hair. He turned to the first page and began to read.

The Empty Quarter, Saudi Arabia, the present

“IT CANNOT BE DONE,” VON STRUCKER SAID.

“It must be done,” the Yemeni said, adding, “*In-shalla*.” If God wills it.

The Prussian passed his hand over the stubble of his hair and said, “The security is too tight.”

“There is always a way,” said the visitor. “Find it.”

“Why there? Why not somewhere else?”

The Arab’s eyes shone. “Because it is Baghdad, the city of the Caliphs, the successors of the Prophet, blessings and peace be upon him.” He paused, then said, “And the timing is most propitious.”

“What is special about the timing?”

The Yemeni clasped his dry palms together and touched his crossed thumbs to his lips. “It is a time,” he said, “when the enemy is at his most . . . sentimental.”