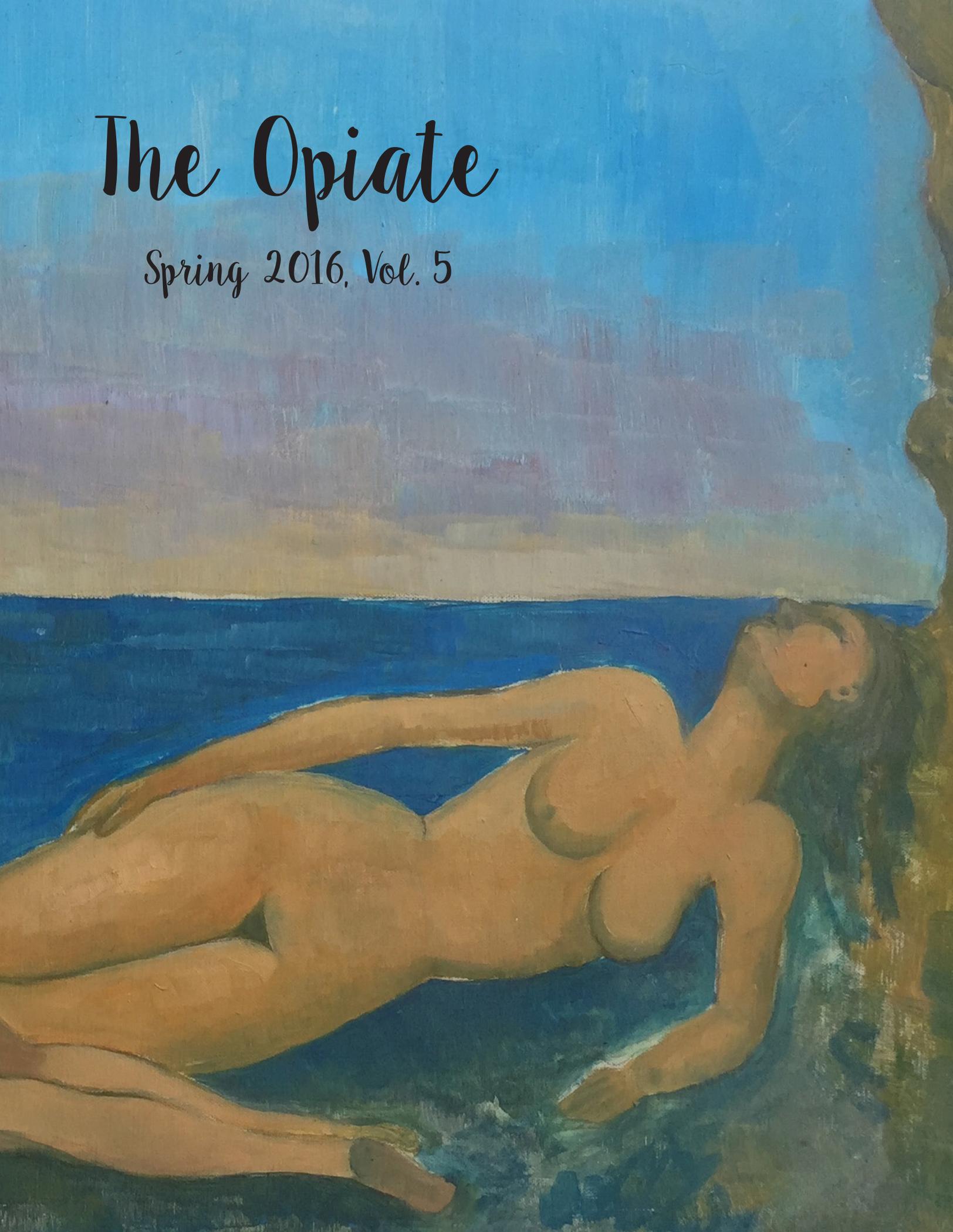


# *The Opiate*

*Spring 2016, Vol. 5*



# The Opiate

Your literary dose.

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“Once I’ve written something it does tend to run away from me. I don’t seem to have any part of it—it’s no longer my piece of writing.”

-David Bowie

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## *Editor's Note*

I began compiling the spring issue in early January, and it was, as you are probably well aware, right around the time of David Bowie's death, hence my introductory homage to him for Volume 5 of *The Opiate*. I found it mostly disconcerting (like just about everyone who suddenly jumped on the bandwagon of not only loving *Blackstar*, but also paying somewhat horrifying tributes, specifically at the Grammys), and yet, at the same time, there was something comforting about knowing an artist of his caliber was mortal, subject to the guillotine of time just like the rest of us. And, again, it iterates the notion that the only thing that really lives on is art-granted, it has to be good art (very few people still deem Jay McInerney an "exciting," "brilliant" author; though, how many people really deemed him as such at his height?). But what made Bowie superhuman in this respect is that he wasn't an asshole the way a certain majority believes you need to be in order to succeed at your art (e.g. Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Salinger). He had an enviable romance with Iman and a family he cared for deeply. When you're a slave to "creating" (a mildly blowhard way to put it), it can be reassuring to know that a non-selfish form of existence is possible—though that's hard to remember when the isolation and surrounding of the self comprises so much of the writing process.

The stories and poems contained within our spring issue run a large gamut of human experience, from Scott Rooker's tale of a simultaneously unconventional and cliché businessman to Tamas Dobozsy's epically surreal Uncle Ödön, a man who will haunt to and beyond his death to ensure the careful consideration of his field recordings. We've got bizarre funerals, Venetian letdowns, gritty happy hours (with the associated colorful characters that pepper any cheap bar) and slightly uncomfortable memorials set in nature that conjure the automatic auditory recall of "Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown)." In short, I feel like I should be saying, "Step right up to the greatest show on Earth. We've got something for everyone." Which brings me to our poetry section. As usual, the poets "collected" here accent the many not so splendedored things about being a resident of existence. Rich Ives' "Pruning Shears" explores the complications of over examination and its relation to contentment; James Capozzi's "The Myth of Origins" brings to light a certain (and extremely warranted) fear of the future; Catherine B. Krause's quartet of poems range from the delightfully esoteric to the pervasively relatable (my personal favorite is, let's be honest, "your fetishes"); Greg Moglia may just make you rediscover your sexuality

at any age, as well as your voraciousness for high art; Michael Berton is sure to incite you to join a subculture and forget about impressing the proverbial man.

And, once again, to conclude the issue, there is a piece of criticism I have written... apparently no one else is as passionate about the merits of the genre short of someone writing an academic thesis because they have to. This time, I'm focusing on Roberto Saviano's *Gomorrah*, which I had the eerie pleasure of reading while in Naples, the backdrop of the reportage itself. I spent some time there over a four-month period this year that may have been the most emotionally harrowing of my life. I think I can safely say, based on this experience, that 1) you should never uproot your entire life because you believe someone when they promise they're going to rendezvous with you after they travel to places you could never bring yourself to go to as a white girl with sweeping Wi-Fi needs and 2) I am way more American in character than I ever thought I was. Neither of these life lessons are really evident in the criticism. In any case, I hope you enjoy our fifth issue, an additional breath of fresh air to the spring season.

*Sincerely (and often too oversharingly),*

*Genna Riviaccio*

# *FICTION*

# The Businessman

*Scott Rooker*



I had been eating breakfast at Whitey's Restaurant almost every morning for sixteen years, but I hadn't been there in two months. The wait staff were worried about me. They could hear my Cadillac engine idle and stop. By the time my cane touched the pavement, my order was already written: black coffee, water, Western omelet, grits and whole wheat toast.

I balanced my weight on the handle of the cane, and walked slowly over the cracked parking lot. I opened the glass door. Bells jingled. The waitress, Lauren, smiled.

"Where have you been? We were worried sick about you."

"I had an appendicitis," I said. "I was in

the hospital. Then I went on vacation."

She looked at me from behind the hostess stand. "Well, you look thin. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. It's just been a slow recovery," I said.

She marked a laminated sheet, and took one set of silverware from the basket.

"Two," I said. "I've got someone joining me. A booth, please?"

I followed her to table thirteen and sat. She left and came back with a coffee and a water. I blew on the surface of the coffee, and swished it through my teeth, to cool it. A pale stranger entered. He walked past the gum and candy dispensers, and turned towards my booth. He

wore a polo shirt and pleated khaki pants. He had stringy bleached hair. As he sat down on the other side of the upholstered booth he said, "You are John Ball."

Lauren came by.

"What can I get you to drink?"

"Decaf, please," he said.

I leaned in and said to the stranger, "I've got what you asked me for."

Lauren returned with decaf coffee, water, a bowl creamers and my Western omelet. She placed each item on the table and said to the stranger, "Do you know what you'd like to order?"

He didn't, but he picked something, right then.

"Two-egg breakfast," he said.

"How would you like your eggs? Over easy, over medium, over well, scrambled, sunnyside up or poached?"

"Over medium."

"Home fries, grits or a fruit cup?"

"Fruit cup."

"Toast, biscuit or English muffin?"

"Toast."

"Last question, I promise," she said. "Would you like white, whole wheat, sunflower or rye?"

"Whole wheat," he said.

I unfolded my silverware from the rolled napkin. Taking a sip of coffee, I pulled an envelope with a wad of cash from my pocket. I set it on the syrupy table.

"Here is the sum we agreed upon."

He took it, and counted with his silent lips moving.

I sprinkled my omelet with

Texas Pete. I took a bite, wiped my mouth and said, "He goes by the name of 'The Cowboy'. He is a Japanese gangster, who wears western wear and cowboy hats. He controls Tokyo's underworld; drugs, prostitution, smuggling, you name it. The police won't go near him. They work for him."

I stopped talking as Lauren returned. She filled my cup with regular, and his with decaf. She smiled as she poured. I watched her as she walked away with her pots. I thought about how I had seen her naked. I thought about how years ago, I had had sex with her. We never spoke of it, again. She moved away for a while. I never told my wife. I always tipped her well, accordingly.

# Field Recordings

*Tamas Dobozy*



Viktor had been listening to them forever—disgraced politicians sipping tea and reminiscing about how different the Chrysanthemum Revolution of 1919 was from the events of October 1956; boys singing as they marched into battle against the Soviets with no more than a few single-shot rifles and Molotov cocktails during those cold autumn days; people gathered around a tuner whispering their hopes during the November 4 Radio Free Europe broadcast promising Western aid for Hungary; Russian soldiers singing along with Elvis’ “Tutti Frutti” on a phonograph they kept in the tank for down time between shelling apartments and smashing barricades; the men’s lavatory off the

lido deck of the Fairsea Ocean Liner on October 1, 1957—with its ticks of plumbing, flushing toilets, whispers and zippers—minutes before a brawl broke out over whether it would have been better to stay in Hungary and fight, or run away like this to Australia. The recordings were all part of Uncle Ödön’s collection—reel to reels, magnetic tapes, even some wax cylinders—stacked neatly on shelves in his old Budapest apartment.

Uncle Ödön came from his mother’s side of the family, not that it mattered to Viktor where he came from, or that he looked so old and frail, flapping around like a stick man in those black suits he wore whether he was on stage with his jazz band or not—whatever Uncle Ödön did, he

was as scary as hell. Nor did it matter that before emigrating to Canada, Viktor had driven the 83 trolley bus to and from Józsefváros, the filthiest most dangerous district in Budapest, and whenever some drunk went crazy, or a pickpocket was caught, or a pimp started beating a woman, he'd get up, put them in a headlock and drag them off, he didn't care how dangerous they said they were, or what friends they said they had, or when they'd last fucked his mother in the ass. He'd toss them out and stand there with his arms crooked, flexing his biceps like a world champion indifferent to the taunts of lesser men.

It was precisely because Uncle Ödön was *not* a lesser man that Viktor was so fearless with everyone else. They were all worms in comparison. The fear started early, when he was a child, Uncle Ödön always a dark presence no matter what the occasion—a picnic at the height of summertime, a fishing trip to the Tisza, a baptism in the stained-glass light of Mátyás Templom—sitting there sharp eyed and silent, radiating bad energy. His reputation was no secret—his band members whispered it to anyone who'd listen, the fans made a game of who could recount the worst story, and Viktor's mother, Gizela, shuddered like a horror film heroine whenever his name was mentioned—as if there was something to be gained from broadcasting it as far and wide as possible, the malice he was capable of. And Uncle Ödön reveled in it most of all, testing his infamy every chance he got—smiling at a young bride for a second longer than normal, handing a knife to someone across the table just a little too fast, holding open a heavy door for an old woman like he was daring her to

get through before he let go—as if his biggest thrill was to watch them squirm or jump or hesitate, their fear flaring up without him having to do a thing to earn it other than simple courtesy. He had a way of making visions flash through Viktor's mind without the boy's consent, impossible to block out or stop—what Uncle Ödön would do to your fingers if you actually took up his offer of running them through the icing on the cake; how Uncle Ödön would drown you face first in the punch if you fell for his trick of accepting a drink before the family elders took their turn; why Uncle Ödön showed up at his mother's place every Sunday with an envelope of cash that was just an excuse to remind his nephew of who was really taking care of him, and in that same gesture corroborate Gizela's story—told over and over to Viktor from the moment he was old enough to listen—of who *wasn't*, who was absent, who *should* have been there except he was so chickenshit he'd let Uncle Ödön frighten him away.

His name was Gömör, but Gizela refused to let her son use it, even legally, for fear of insulting Uncle Ödön. Gömör had been a bassoonist in the band, but he'd run off after getting Gizela pregnant, scared that the old man would murder him. Uncle Ödön always referred to Gömör, even in front of Viktor, not as “the bassoonist” but “the buffoonist,” saying it wasn't his fault Gizela fell in love with “idiots who shit their pants when they think they've seen a bogeyman.” He frowned, but showed up every week with the money anyhow, and in return Gizela let him take charge of Viktor's upbringing “on all levels,” and followed his instructions to the letter. “Uncle Ödön is your

true father,” she said, “and he is to be treated like an angel.” It made Viktor feel like an imp whose job it was to pretend that Lucifer still had his wings and magnificence, that the fall from heaven through the burning layers of the netherworld had not diminished him one bit.

And the analogy fit, because the old man seemed to defy every power, up to and including death. He'd disappeared once, picked up from his apartment in 1955 by the secret police, taken away for three months nobody knew where, and then an official letter arrived informing Gizela of “an unfortunate incident in the Csillag prison involving the late Ödön Ecséri,” only to have the old man stumble home a week later saying that once the guards had retaken control after the prison riot, and found the decapitated head, they realized the body they'd found earlier had not belonged to him after all, but since they'd already processed the paperwork, and since Uncle Ödön's sentence had been to rot in prison until he was dead, and since he'd retained a Party lawyer who was at that moment in favor with the Kremlin, the old man was free to go. In 1974, Uncle Ödön crashed his car through a guard rail at the dunakan-*yar* and was pronounced dead on the scene (once they'd fished him out, of course), only for the police to discover a month later that the deceased was actually *Ádám Halász*, an Ödön Ecséri impersonator (and who'd ever heard of a jazz musician impersonator, even one that was, like Halász, a car-jacking drunk?). Uncle Ödön, in the meantime, used the break from his identity to travel to Australia “for the purposes of research.” The third time he died was 2001; Uncle Ödön

was old by then, eighty-five, and the doctor called in Yvette, the old man's mistress, who couldn't stand to get the bad news alone and asked Viktor to come along, and they were told the great jazz composer had stage four lung cancer, inoperable, three months to live. They watched Uncle Ödön go through the chemo, the radiation, the old man growing ever thinner, more sallow, and then one day he told them

driven to it by merciless teasing in preschool, sneaking over the fence and off into the city as if it was nothing to fetch Gömör and bring him back and prove to the other kids that he really did have a father. It took Gizela, Viktor's teacher, and four policemen a day to find him, not sitting in an alley crying as they'd expected, but fighting them off, demanding his rights, not at all discouraged by the fact that

birthday, and which Gizela had kept "as the sum total of your cringing paternal legacy," she said. He'd show the address to people in the street, they'd scratch their heads, some would try to entice him into their cars or take him by the hand, and Viktor would kick them if they looked weak or run off if they looked strong, always escaping into a city that never seemed as unfamiliar as it needed to be, as if

**"Each time they found him, he was always a little further along the outskirts of the city, and they'd shake their heads at how the punishments for running away, no matter how severe, seemed to be having the opposite of the intended effect."**

he was going off to die alone, "like a pharaoh," and refused to change his mind when Yvette wailed and begged, shaking her off and limping out barely able to carry his suitcase. He returned six months later slender and fit as ever, his pallor gone back to skin tone, an enormous sixteen-inch scar running down the middle of his chest that he referred to as "a souvenir of my adventures in the west."

There was no getting away from Uncle Ödön.

Viktor learned this early. He was four years old the first time he tried to find his absconded father,

after eight hours he still hadn't found Gömör. This behavior would continue until Viktor was eleven. Gizela would drop him off at school, or at the church where he was supposed to dress as an altar boy, or tuck him in for the night, and Viktor would be off, fleeing the schoolyard, hopping the tram that ran behind the church, tiptoeing along the carpeted hallway to the elevator. He'd be gone sometimes an hour, sometimes the better part of a day, sometimes until dawn, walking along with the return address he'd torn off an envelope in which his father had sent a card for his second

bewilderment itself was what he was after, escape from the way his mind automatically marked the numbers on trams and trolley buses, the criss-crossing of their routes and stops, for the truth is Viktor never dared to go to the torn-off address, some part of his boy's mind, unacknowledged but in control, telling him it was better to circle the place than face the doorbell and the person who would not answer it, though his feel for Budapest grew so quickly it became harder and harder to get disoriented and stay that way, to guarantee that the moment of arrival—when all hope would

be finally and fully lost—never took place. Each time they found him, he was always a little further along the outskirts of the city, and they'd shake their heads at how the punishments for running away, no matter how severe, seemed to be having the opposite of the intended effect.

Finally, Gizela took the address away. It was already frayed, limp with folding, the ink rubbed to paper, but still crisp in Viktor's mind. "You want to meet Gömör? You want to betray Uncle Ödön? Very well," she said. "You will meet him." Then there'd be a letter, a phone call, a telegram, and Gizela would dress up Viktor in his one good shirt and pants, his bowtie, and off they'd go to the park or czukrázda where she'd leave him at a bench or table saying his father would probably be late, he'd never been on time in his life, but that he'd agreed to bring Viktor home after their visit, so she'd see him later.

Gömör never showed up. Ever. Viktor would wait hours, the mornings lengthening to afternoons lengthening to evenings. He was alone, and it wasn't like before when he'd take off into the city, for that was a search, a mission, whereas this was abandonment. Where was his mother? Now Viktor would cry, curled into himself on a curb, eventually discovered by a policeman who drove him home and gave Gizela hell until she took him into the kitchen and their voices went low and when he came out he was smiling, almost laughing, tipping his hat to her as he exited.

But when he turned eleven—after numberless failed grades, report cards saying he was "terrible at Spelling, Grammar, Reading, Languages,

Cursive, plus attendance and general behavior"; and police drop-offs and escorts; and refusals to give up the search for his father even though he never actually went to the magical address—Gizela took Viktor aside, her face aged with worry, her hands chafed with the wiping of acid tears, and said that Uncle Ödön had had enough, Viktor had "fatally wounded," those were her words, "the old man's feelings," and he'd cut them off financially. "He wants to be your father," she said, "but you won't let him. So he's going to find another boy to look after. We can't stay here anymore." She got out two suitcases, filled them with clothes, a loaf of bread, cheese, water, carrots and radishes, and out they went into the night, Gizela turning Viktor around one last time to say goodbye to their home, the boy refusing to cry or rush back inside for one more toy, even though he wanted to. She turned out the lights, locked the door, and the two of them rode the elevator into the street where they boarded the 291 bus. It took Viktor fifteen minutes to realize where they were going, and then he did start to cry, saying he was sorry, not just for wanting to see his father, but for everything, for being bad in school, for hurting the other kids, for the last seven years, couldn't they go to Uncle Ödön's instead? He'd say sorry to the old man, he really would, anything. But Gizela just shook her head. "There's only one man who can help us now," she replied, holding Viktor's hand as he struggled to break free. They got off the tram, climbed up the winding road to the apartment, to the front doors, his mother running her fingers down the names

by each buzzer as Viktor finally tore away, running down Rózsadomb, his legs almost buckling with each leap, all the way to Moszkva Tér before she finally caught up, hugged him to her chest, wiped away his tears, and said there was only Uncle Ödön, nobody but him, Viktor's only true father. The boy nodded, though what he wanted was to punch her in the face, and she smiled and said it was time to go apologize.

They wandered down Villányi Út, the suitcase dragging behind Viktor, its corners shredded by asphalt. He wondered why they didn't take a tram, only to realize it was because his mother had no money, this was what it was like to be homeless, deprived of all resources but your feet and the man you'll soon be begging from. When they arrived at Uncle Ödön's, Gizela let herself in with a key Viktor never knew she had.

Inside Pál László, Uncle Ödön's saxophonist, and Erika Szász, the percussionist, were waiting. Why hadn't they answered the door? They sat at the kitchen table, Viktor's feet throbbing from the hours of tramping across Buda. Erika pushed a plate of smoked bacon, salami and peppers toward him, but pulled it back the minute Viktor reached for it. "Your Uncle Ödön asked us to be here," she said. "He's too angry, was worried about what he might do." She glanced at Pál, who blanched at the mention of the words "Ödön" and "angry" in the same sentence. Erika pulled back a lock of hair hanging over her eye, revealing a long scar running into her cheek. "Your uncle gave me this," she said. "I wasn't following the beat properly, so he

whipped me in the face with his baton. It was like a burning wire. Split the skin so bad the doctors couldn't match up the sides of the cut when they put in the stitches. I almost lost the eye."

She looked over at Gizela. Pál leaned forward and parted his oily hair to reveal a scar running from his forehead back to the crown, dotted with the mark of sutures.

"He smashed a cymbal into my head," he said, miming the action as if he held a cymbal in both hands, bringing it down edge first. "Thirty stitches."

Pál flipped his hair back to cover the scar, then looked at Viktor.

"Your uncle is an old man, but he cannot be defeated." There was a moment of funereal silence.

"What . . . ?" Viktor asked, staring at the plate of food. "What can I do?"

But what he really wanted to know was how long it would last, how long it would take to get his punishment over with, how soon before he could leave again? "Funny you should ask," replied Erika. It would be Viktor's first experience with all those recordings devoted to 1956, soon to become his regular punishment, in that back room transcribing them word for word, and then, once he was done, translating the transcripts into English, he had no idea why. It depended on his particular crime, its severity, but Viktor was in there often enough, sometimes hours at a time, after school, evenings during the week, even Saturdays and Sundays when things were really dire, sitting by the desk with the bulky headphones on, putting the words down as neat as possible, Gizela fetching his work to take to Uncle Ödön in the kitchen, then returning with instructions to rewrite what hadn't been done properly.

Once it was all translated, corrected, approved, she'd put the sheets into a large envelope and the next day mail them off—Viktor had no idea where—before he did something bad again and it started all over. Whenever he got a lousy report card, or a note from school, or the vice-principal requested a meeting with his mother, Viktor was ushered into that room, Gizela never switching on a light, letting the place go dark as the day wore on, until Viktor could hardly see the page in front of his face, hitting the start and stop buttons on the machine, trying to keep up to the words and sounds, until it was pitch black and finally she'd come in and flick on a light and give him a hug and thank him for saving them from Uncle Ödön's mercilessness.

When Viktor got older and harder to control physically, she'd lock the door and not open it until he was done, and as it grew darker he started to believe Uncle Ödön was in the room with him, Viktor jerking his head left and right as he saw the glint of a conductor's baton, always gone the instant he looked, sounds that couldn't possibly be the drapes, like a wraith flitting back and forth as he wrote the words faster and faster, trying to keep the handwriting clean. Still later, Viktor would dream of killing Uncle Ödön, rising from the chair to get his hands on him, as if all you needed to navigate the dark was sufficient rage. Within a few years Viktor's grammar and handwriting, in both Hungarian and English, had become impeccable.

There were some days Gizela would burst into the room and start putting things away (she *always* made sure the room looked untouched afterwards), sweeping up the work he'd completed to that point, saying Uncle

Ödön had decided he'd been punished enough, it was time to go, get your shoes, your coat, push the chair back in how it was before, out the door, locking it quickly, let's take the stairs, it's good for you, seven flights down, out the back way, let's spend some time in the garden, isn't it pretty in the rain?

Once or twice they ran into Uncle Ödön in the hall, the old man looking at them piercingly, though Gizela was always the first to speak, saying, "We're done. I've left the place spotless for you," as if she were a cleaning lady, and when the old man replied, "I have Lili for that," Gizela muttered, "But I'm your sister," as if that settled everything.

"Yes, I have a sister," he said, looking at her like he regretted the fact, and then down at Viktor as if the extent of that—his regret—depended on the boy somehow, as if the two of them were equally alone in their relations with Gizela, and that whatever togetherness they might have had, or still might have, depended not on bridging that distance, but on her removal. It made Viktor grip his mother's hand tightly, and she frowned as they tripped down the stairs away from the old man.

Eventually, Viktor started bodybuilding. Like everything else, it was Gizela's idea. She felt it was good for developing his self-discipline, though mainly it was because she worried that the punishments with the field recordings, her victory in making him behave at school, had made him weak, passive. It wasn't enough that Viktor be a slave; he also needed to be a man. And Viktor excelled at it, identified early on by the coaches as a rare talent. They built him up to achieve that potential Eastern-bloc style, with the hard stuff from the GDR—dianabol, pervitin, turinabol. Viktor took it all, dom-

inating regional qualifiers, winning first in his age category at the 1975 nationals, though he was pulled from the Olympics the following year when they realized he wouldn't clear doping, and by the time the next one came around he was too old, too unstable, for competition. But he kept at the training and drugs anyhow. In those days, whenever Viktor was around Uncle Ödön, he made sure to wear tight t-shirts as a warning that he better not be messed with. But the old man didn't need to touch him, he was too powerful for something as proletarian as that, and the more Viktor went at the weights, the skinnier Uncle Ödön became, like a blade that could cut through anything, even death.

Viktor was eighteen the first and last time they fought. It was his graduating year, and he'd had enough of the room, the recordings, the growing dark that seemed not so much to hide Uncle Ödön's presence as to be that presence, inchoate and everywhere. Gizela had long ago stopped locking the door, since Viktor was more than big enough to break it down, and her plan had worked anyhow, for what kept him inside now was no longer locks but his mind. Or at least it did until that day Uncle Ödön burst in on him, back prematurely from a cancelled tour, white-knuckled on the doorknob, gazing at his nephew as if he'd caught him desecrating the family grave.

Viktor tore off the headphones. "What are you doing here?" he snarled, as if the room was his, and the old man an intruder. Uncle Ödön stayed quiet, eyes bulging. "What?" said Viktor. "After all these years, you've finally decided to look in on

me?"

In that moment he wasn't afraid, something was wrong in his brain, synapses flickering like a rotted fusebox. Viktor was out of the chair in an instant, hitting the old man on the side of the head. Uncle Ödön slumped against the door. But he was smiling, as if the bruise spreading on his cheek meant nothing. Viktor hit him again. He was pulling his punches, it was beyond his control, as if the old man had infected him with weakness. Uncle Ödön stayed on his feet, holding onto the doorknob, his smile so broad it was almost a laugh.

"Why don't you hit me back?" shouted Viktor, and he realized he was not talking about now so much as the past, the last seven years, as if the cruelty of his punishments had nothing to do with the room and everything to do with the old man's refusal to dignify his sins with the directness of a slap, as if even in this, the correction of his faults, Viktor was below notice.

"You hit everyone else. Why not me?" He punched the old man again. "Bash a cymbal against my head!" he screamed. "Poke my eye out with your baton."

But Uncle Ödön was laughing now, as if it meant nothing to take the abuse and not strike back, the sound tearing from him with such force Viktor thought the old man was going to start coughing up bits of broken rib. The more Viktor hit him the more amused Uncle Ödön seemed, the more removed, each blow growing weaker and weaker in its failure to affirm what the old man was supposed to have become, the father Gizela had set him up to be, as in those days years ago when in trying to arrive at the one address

he wanted—the one written and not written on that slip of paper—Viktor had driven himself ever further along the outskirts of Budapest, his journeys always a little more wayward, detoured, as if distance was the only way to make definite the thing he was distant from, as if distance itself made up its expression and promise, the address coming into clearest focus the second it passed from view. Hit Uncle Ödön long enough and he'd be dead, inaccessible, in exactly that place his father had always been. Viktor could see it in the old man's eyes, he knew it as well as he did, that pitiless gaze that said the boy could only get what he wanted by not getting it, and that wavered only when Viktor himself did, falling into his uncle's arms sobbing, power gone, dropping to his knees like a slave except Uncle Ödön's arms came round to keep both of them standing, the repulsiveness of his touch lending Viktor strength.

He would never forget this display of power, it completed the old man's mystique, and Viktor began treating him like an addiction—to go too far off made him feel lost, bereft; to stay too close made him feel dependent, overwhelmed. In return, Uncle Ödön smirked or smiled, you couldn't tell. Once he'd recovered from the assault, he took his nephew aside and told him he'd decided to punish Gizela in Viktor's place, which made sense, since it was a way of causing both of them the maximum of hurt.

"You do not deserve to care for this boy," the old man said, and shortly after that Gizela wrote Viktor saying she had to go away, that without support she couldn't live, and Uncle Ödön was only willing to send money

if she moved to Szeged.

“Besides,” she wrote, “it’s horrible to think you might throw away your future by choosing my company over his.”

She died in that distant city two years later, sick, living at bare subsistence, friendless, as if Uncle Ödön was making a point—to not be part of the old man’s life was to have no life at all.

Viktor, meanwhile, had to move in with Uncle Ödön, which was the most horrific punishment of all.

“You’ll be in charge of this section of my field recordings.”

“This section? There are others?”

“It doesn’t matter. These ones—1956—they are the most precious.”

“Why? Are they important for your music?”

He tried to recall if he’d ever had to listen to anything like that, samples of rattling teacups and bad choirs and flushing toilets, when Gizela had dragged him to all those terrible jazz concerts.

“They *are* music, Viktor. All by themselves. I don’t need to do anything with them.”

There was an intense expression on the old man’s face, his eyes closed every time they put on a recording, like a king listening to the murmurs of a conquered nation. He made room for Viktor, saying it was okay, really, the field recordings were fine stacked against the wall like that, and why was he still driving the bus, he could quit, Uncle Ödön had enough money for both of them, there was no need.

Viktor wondered what he was up to—pretending to be so nice—may-

be put him off guard? Or was it total dependence the old villain wanted, just like with Gizela?

“You shouldn’t spend so much time at the gym,” Uncle Ödön said, six months in. “I found this in your room.”

He placed a syringe on the table. “You need to stop, Viktor.”

*Sure, and then I’ll grow pitiful and weak,* Viktor thought. I see what you’re up to.

It went like that for the first year, Uncle Ödön trying to break Viktor down, bring him under his power, even feminize him, what with the soft mattress for his bed (Viktor always slept on the ground), the fine wine (Viktor only drank his own rotgut), the delicate French meals (Viktor would return from work having already gorged on pörkölt at the Gül Baba diner), the envelopes of money on the dresser (Viktor threw them in the trash), the pre-paid fee to the Akadémiai Gym and a private trainer (Viktor went there, waited for the trainer in the parking lot, and challenged him to a fist-fight to see who was tougher, in better shape, and then beat the shit out of him when he refused)—until one day Uncle Ödön just broke (to Viktor’s delight), gave up all the subtle attacks and strategies to undermine his nephew’s self-assurance, and brought his megalomania into the open.

“Things are going to change around here!” he yelled, so angry he was crying. “From now on, you get home from work, you start looking after the recordings. Look at them!” He pointed into the room, where they sat in a jumble on the floor, and Viktor wondered, how did that happen?

“Before you go out, before the gym, before anything, they get dusted,

they get fresh labels, they get entered in the ledger and transcribed and translated, got it?”

Viktor nodded, the muscles in his neck bulging in and out, his body like a heart always expanding a little further but never quite to the point of explosion.

He couldn’t believe how fast the recordings now built up, every day another pile. It was all he could do to get to work on time. He had to cut back at the gym, though Uncle Ödön always left him enough time for three workouts a week, as if he’d realized there was no fun in turning Viktor into a sissy. That’s what you did with an enemy—if you couldn’t beat him one way, making him soft, you beat him another, by making things hard. Eventually the recordings built up to the point where Viktor had to move to the salon, where Uncle Ödön told him he’d have to sleep on the floor, no more soft bed, along with no more fine wine or dining, only the acrid reds of Eger, the grease-infused food of peasant kitchens, and while he was at it Viktor could do his own laundry, too.

Then, in 2005, when Uncle Ödön became sick again, when it looked like he was going to die for the fourth time, the old man summoned his nephew, pretending it would be their last conversation.

“Listen, kid,” he said, somehow managing to look down at Viktor even though he was lying on his deathbed, “it may not seem like it, it may look like I’m terminal, it may seem like the odds of surviving bone cancer are zilch, but I’ll be back, mark my words, and those recordings better be here.”

Viktor believed him. Uncle Ödön could not be killed. Violence,

accident, age, these were ruses where Uncle Ödön was concerned, as if there was the reality everyone else had to live with, and the reality he commanded, totally different. But what Viktor was really thinking was that the old man's death was an opportunity, maybe the only one he'd get, to escape, to put as much distance between himself and his uncle's inevitable resurrection as he possibly could.

And sure enough, as if confirming the decision, a month after Uncle Ödön's funeral, Viktor started getting messages, always delivered in code—two old men at a bus stop whispering how Jesus never walked on water after he rose from the dead; or a Sociology article misaddressed to him about how a remarkably high percentage of refugees who escaped communism to settle in France or Spain admitted to not “being good enough” for passage across the Atlantic, as if their sins, or some ancestral guilt, tied them forever to the bloody earth of Europe; or that time in the Városliget when he saw an old man, skinny like Uncle Ödön and in the same black suit, dipping his toe repeatedly in the canal then jerking it back as if the water burned, and turning to run the minute Viktor got close; or the invitation from a relative working for the city of Toronto, who said they were looking for bus drivers, and had Viktor ever thought of moving to Canada, with the most telling phrase of the invitation being: “There's nothing like having an ocean between you and the worst of your life,” even though the relative had been writing about himself.

Within two years, Viktor had emigrated. Within another six months, the shipping container filled with the field recordings traveled over the At-

lantic. He decided to bring them along just in case Uncle Ödön ever came looking, though the hope was that with an ocean between himself and Europe the old man wouldn't be able to make it. He got a membership at Kick Ass Fitness in downtown Toronto because it had a real fighting cage for mixed martial arts, and became stronger than ever, especially with the stuff he was buying in packs of hypodermics from a guy called Juan in the parking lot every Saturday.

“Imported straight from Mexico,” Juan said, fishing around in his trunk for Viktor's order. “And not your usual gorilla juice either, nothing but grade-A DNA enhancement, stuff guaranteed to keep your balls big and bouncy.”

Juan didn't sound like he was from Mexico, in fact he didn't sound like his real name was Juan, but Viktor didn't care as long as the stuff worked. He was driving the notorious 36 Finch West run, the night shift, and despite his desire to apply regular headlocks, he'd been told this wasn't done in Canada—no, no, you had to call the cops—a rule that made Viktor's head feel as if it was on fire, so bad that sometimes he had to pull over, get off the bus, and walk around to cool off.

But, then, Viktor's head always felt as if it was on fire, holes burnt into his brain never to be replaced, and it was only the thought of Uncle Ödön trying to figure out a way across the Atlantic that pulled him together. There were days Viktor would wake up feeling like he'd escaped, he'd made it, but then he'd overhear some passengers saying, “There are tunnels under the sea, man, I swear, that's how the Indians got here in the first place”; or “Scientists have postulated the exist-

tence of wormholes on earth, not just the heavens, whereby travellers have disappeared one day and suddenly reappeared hundreds of miles away, all within the blink of an eye”; or “Talismans, get it? With so much magic in 'em they're like magnets for evil, embedded under your skin by priestesses without you even knowing it, so you can't figure out why the same old bogeys keep tracking you down”; and then Viktor would be glancing over his shoulder to see who'd said what and thinking he should grab them by the throat and demand they reveal who'd sent them, who'd forced them to deliver their messages, where was Uncle Ödön hiding? There wasn't a day when a stray sentence didn't bring the old man's specter back to life.

But it wasn't until he read the article that Viktor thought of looking for a victim, someone to pass the recordings on to, like a curse. He'd been regularly scanning the net for news of his uncle, keeping an eye out for stories about a burst grave at the Farkasréti Cemetery. The article, “All the Black Hearted Villains,” had appeared in a magazine called *Agni* in 2009, four years after the old man's death. It was the only piece of writing, talk, rumor, that had dared to be so negative about Ödön Ecséri. Normally people went out of their way to make excuses for the old man, saying it was okay, he was a genius, you had to expect eccentricity, even violence, from someone like that. But not Dobozy, it hadn't mattered to him, Ecséri was a rotten bastard who'd abused his musicians in the name of art. Viktor read it and whistled. Did Dobozy know who he was trifling with?

He was just the guy to take the

recordings. Then Viktor would be free. And anyhow, in a worst case scenario, Viktor could always claim that he was still *technically* taking care of them, only that he'd trained someone else to do it, i.e. by proxy. Uncle Ödön had left detailed instructions for their care, but he'd never said a thing about finding *someone else* to do it. Besides, by then Viktor would be gone, back to Hungary, and as tough a bastard as the old man was, there was no way in hell he'd have the power to cross the Atlantic twice. Just thinking about it made heat waves waft from Viktor's ears.

Dobozy was easy to find. There was an Internet trail miles long, left by people who loved and loathed him, with more loathers of course, as is typical of the Internet, especially students, many of whom thought he was an asshole. *An asshole is good*, thought Viktor, scrolling through *ratemyprofessor.com*, *an asshole is exactly what I need*.

It didn't take long to find a work number.

"Hello?" said Dobozy.

"My name is Viktor Ecséri," he said, in Hungarian. "You knew my uncle."

There was a long pause. When Dobozy's voice came on next he sounded a little tentative. "I didn't know him. I just wrote an article about him."

"Shit article," said Viktor, switching to English.

There was no answer other than a short, dry laugh that suggested neither agreement nor disagreement, and was more like a way of avoiding the conversation altogether.

"Shit article," Viktor said

again, wanting a bolder reaction, something to indicate that Dobozy was capable of tackling Uncle Ödön.

"What do you want?"

Dobozy finally said. "Why are you calling me?"

"Are you aware of Uncle Ödön's . . . Ecséri's field recordings?"

Viktor was speaking in Hungarian again, and Dobozy switched back as well. "The stuff on 1956? I heard about it, but it didn't fit into the article. There was a word limit."

"You should reconsider. Your portrait of my uncle was biased and incorrect. You made him sound like a monster. He was a good man."

There was another long moment of silence. "I wanted to believe he was," Dobozy said, "but the evidence against him was overwhelming."

"Circumstantial evidence," said Viktor. "Hearsay."

"Well, I didn't have anything else to go on. It's not like I could talk to him in person. You have these recordings? I heard he was interested in collecting 'the sounds of peace in Central Europe'—that's how one person put it anyway. Can I listen to them?"

"Maybe," said Viktor. "It depends on what you're going to do afterwards."

"I'm working on a book," said Dobozy. "Part of it deals with 1956. If you're right about these field recordings, maybe I'll write another story on your uncle—a nice one."

"I'll think about it," said Viktor.

"Well why did you call me, then?" said Dobozy, exasperated but still cautious.

"Shit article," said Viktor, switching back to English and hanging up.

Viktor waited six months, every minute of it a terror, wondering if Uncle Ödön had gotten wind of what he was planning, if whatever spiritual networks the old man was hooked into were even now buzzing with the news, hastening his resurrection, helping him hone in on his nephew. Thank God for the Atlantic, thought Viktor. Thank God for the spirit world's laws and taboos that only the dead have to observe.

He'd call Dobozy once in a while to sound him out, tease him, ramp up the fear and desire, since these were the only motivations Viktor knew.

"You again?" said Dobozy. He was pissing his pants; Viktor could hear it in his voice. "If you aren't willing to give me the recordings why don't you leave me alone?"

"In your article," said Viktor, "you say so many bad things about Ecséri"—Viktor hated using Uncle Ödön's last name like that, so disrespectful, and always cringed when he did it—"you're as guilty as him. You need to explain that to me."

There was a long pause. "What are you, a book reviewer for *The Globe*?"

"I want to know how bad you really are," said Viktor hopefully.

Dobozy slammed down the phone, but Viktor kept holding it to his ear for a while, smiling and thinking that Dobozy might just be perfect.

Shortly after that, he started stalking Dobozy in person. He'd

pump himself up first, an hour at the gym, juice up on Juan's shit for good measure, put on a t-shirt two sizes too small, tight jeans, Dayton boots and drive to Kitchener. He knew where Dobozy parked at the university, and he'd lean up against his minivan and wait for him to come within sight, then slowly jerk himself up and stroll off before they had a chance to speak. It became a ritual for Viktor, once a week, at random days and times.

It took three weeks for Dobozy to start calling campus security. The first time he did it, Viktor nearly ripped the heads off two very average-sized officers, staring them down, flexing his fists, telling them shut up he knew what they were saying, they didn't need to tell him twice, he was an immigrant but not an idiot, someone they could push around, sure he'd leave, but at his own speed and they'd regret it—their wives and children and boyfriends would regret it—if they touched him. They didn't touch him.

Viktor wept that night, lying in bed, wept for things he wanted and didn't want—for freedom and dependence; for Dobozy being strong and weak; for someone who'd carry him all the way to where Uncle Ödön had gone and also far away from there.

The next night, he went to the gym. Afterwards, he got out the t-shirt, the jeans, the boots and Dobozy's home address. He tossed the field recordings into the back of the panel van in an absolute fury. Then he was on the road to Kitchener, flying along the 401 sometimes in the fast lane, sometimes along the

shoulder, past the meridian where you were not supposed to go, tires stuttering on the grooves placed in the asphalt as a warning to keep right, and which Viktor ignored no matter who honked at him from the fast lane.

Knocking on the front door of Dobozy's house, he gazed up at the windows, trying to guess which of the professor's children were still awake, which asleep, listening for the sound of movement inside until the latch clicked and Dobozy was standing there in the doorway, not saying a word, his face creased with worry, like a child in the moment his candy's been taken away but before he knows for sure that it won't be given back.

"I want you to come with me," said Viktor.

Dobozy looked over his shoulder into the house, then turned back. "No," he said.

*That's better*, thought Viktor. *Much better*. In an instant he reached forward and grabbed Dobozy by the throat, the man's lips parted with a puckering sound, and then he spun him close, reaching around with the other hand to clamp it over his mouth. He dragged Dobozy like that down to the van, his throat gripped in one hand, his face in the other, so fast the professor was barely able to stay on his feet, never mind break free. The doors of the van were open, the overhead light on, and the field recordings lay in the back in a messy pile as if they'd been lobbed in there with a catapult.

He was whispering harshly in Dobozy's ear. "I don't know about other recordings, if there even

are any. These are from 1956. Pick up any tape and I'll tell you exactly what's on it. I might even repeat parts of it, *long parts*, word for word. Every single one of these is from some moment before a fight started—*just before*—do you understand?"

Dobozy had stopped struggling, he'd gone limp, but it only made Viktor tighten his grip. He knew that trick. He'd tried it himself once, long ago, thinking that if he stopped resisting, if he did as his mother and Pál and Erika said and accepted his punishment, it would be finite, and afterwards he'd be allowed to slip free and chase after his father again. But all it had gotten him was deeper into Uncle Ödön's back room, and he'd never been allowed to leave, not even now, with the old man dead, for he was still there.

"It's not about peace, like they told you. It's about not fighting," he hissed, "about how you might as well give up before you've even started." He giggled, then cut himself off. "Give up, give up, give up, you're overwhelmed, the force against you is too strong, too unstoppable, the more you fight the more you hurt yourself." Viktor was crying. "He'll come back. He always comes back."

Dobozy gently reached up and pulled Viktor's hand from his mouth. His wife, Marcy, was yelling from the front door, which had been left open: "Tamas, everything okay?" She couldn't see them behind the van. Dobozy yelled back it was fine, everything was great, just a visitor, someone he needed to talk to, he'd be back in a second.

Viktor was standing there,

tears pouring down his cheeks, flexing his big hands as if he wanted to put them over the professor's face again.

Dobozy climbed into the back of the van, picked out a box and pulled back the flaps on the jumble of recordings inside—streamers of celluloid unspooled from the reels, creased and folded, even knotted in place.

"I can't do anything with this stuff," he said quietly. "It's a mess."

Viktor was silent, gazing at Dobozy hopefully, like a kid expecting a magic trick.

"I thought you said you'd looked after this stuff," Dobozy said.

He was becoming angry now, aroused by what he'd been pushed to, the months of Viktor's phone calls and bullying, the threat to his family, the choke-hold, all for this, these boxes of broken recordings, enough futility and waste to turn the adrenalin of his fear against itself, into a wrath that would not back down from anything.

"You came all this way, you harassed me, for this?"

There was a hotness to his words now, no longer caring what he said, or how Viktor took it. "I can't do a fucking thing with these! They're ruined! They were left in your care and you destroyed every reel!"

"So what are you going to do about it?" said Viktor, but his voice was timid, expectant, and he was smiling.

"I'm not going to do a

thing," Dobozy shouted. "This is your mess." He wanted to say something more, about how he didn't care what Viktor threatened him with—how often he called late at night or leaned against his car in the parking lot—but Viktor only nodded in agreement and climbed into the van and squatted by the box Dobozy had opened, hopelessly trying to re-spool some of the tapes.

"You're right. I'll do it," Viktor said. "I'll do it." He sounded like a little boy.

Dobozy stared at him for minutes, then, after he'd calmed down, said, "You'd better. I want all this shit cleaned up before I look at it."

"I'll do it. I'll do it," said Viktor, fumbling hopelessly in the dark, his big hands unfit for the careful work of untangling the tapes.

He was humming under his breath as he worked, a melody as hopeful as a school holiday, and though the words were in Hungarian they were closer to music than to sense—

"I knew you'd come back, I knew it"—singing it over and over as if it were an invocation, as if they were not in the van at all but far off, at the limit of something, the unspooled tapes forming a border uncrossable except in this, the way Viktor had ruined them, rendering a sacrifice in the form of disobedience to force a reluctant spirit back into existence. For this was the only thing Viktor had ever wanted, a father to meet him not in a place he had to get to, that

he had to find, but out here, where he'd lost his way, back in the days before Gizela had done her terrible work, warping his love so badly its only possible appearance, its only chance of happening, was in the fear she'd taught her son to crave, and which Uncle Ödön had sadly provided in the recordings and their curse when it became clear there was no other way, that it was too late now to help the boy who'd only ever wanted to be found, gathered up, taken home.

Dobozy reached out carefully and put a hand on Viktor's shoulder and dug his fingers into the hard-packed muscles.

"The important thing now is to get them all cleaned up and organized," he said, and when Viktor nodded Dobozy laughed, though it was a soft noise, not triumphant at all, like an old man visited by one last spark of life.

# Happy Hour

*T. E. Wilderson*



Let's get one thing straight. Having been around the block more than once—occasionally feeling dragged around behind a truck (either way, I been around)—I can say in no uncertain terms that I have learned from my licks. I'm not saying I'm some kinda changed man. I mean, I am changed. I sure the hell am not the same I was. I'm just saying I'm not "changed" in a Up-With-Jesus kinda way.

My wife Number One up an' left on accounta she says I never listened, an' aside from being quite in tune to the TV, she woulda thought I couldn't hear at all. Number Three said I wasn't sensitive enough to others, meaning her, I guess, in particular. Number Two has some kinda court order on me. It probly says I can't so much as

spell her name out loud 'less I get approval from a judge an' pay some kinda fee—the hell if I know. I never understood her basis. But, anyway, I guess that's not your problem. All I gotta say is, thinking on things lately, I ain't so sure I was not wrongly thought upon at times. I mean, not so much all the time, but maybe I ain't the complete baby asshole I been made out to be.

The point is, lately, I can't seem to get a shit bit of sleep. Seem like I'm turning into some kinda—I can't quite remember the word for it, but there is a word—I'm one of them folk who just can't get no sleep. I got my best shot at shut-eye on Sunday nights, on accounta Mondays for the most part being a cakewalk. The closer it get to the weekend, the more I can count on counting crickets 'til the birds start chirping. Not that I ever been so good at falling right to sleep,

but before, my sleepless times were more or less at least think-free times. Now, it's thinking-on-top-of-thinking, til I've thought myself to sleep. Which is tiring. And also just ain't right, far as I'm concerned. Which, I guess, is not the real point, an' also not, I'm sure you're thinking, your problem. Anyway. This all goes back to a supposed "flaw" of mine. What, despite walking down the aisle in not-so-cheap-to-rent tuxedos a total of four times counting for something, it apparently don't. An' which flaw is the only item specifically given as a reason for marital disillusion by the mentioned-before *Wives One* an' *Three*. Four was so pissed off at the end, I'm not real sure on her perspective. But thanks to who I got my present job on accounta when she bounced me outta the house, I took up over at the *Stanford Arms*. Which, in spite of having *Stanford Arms Fireproof Hotel, Rooms for Rent—Daily, Weekly, Monthly* painted there on the brick wall facing the parking lot an' the freeway overpass is neither a total flea bag. Or fireproof. Either way, I found myself drowning my sorrows in a pretty okay joint around the corner. Apparently, it takes a long ass time to really drown yourself in liquor. I started a saying: Southern Comfort—it's not just for breakfast anymore, on accounta that being Janis Joplin's mother's milk, and Wife Number One liking her music and all. So when the usual barkeep, Old Gruff-n-Grumble, decided to hang it up, an' what with me being what I call under-employed an' what have you, I guess it was a easy match. What I bargained for was some steady walking-around pocket change, as

well as a little weekly pay. An' free eats for the most part. I don't particularly remember signing up for major sleep grief behind the goings-on about the place. From the other side of the bar licking chicken grease off my fingers, it was all cheap liquor, an' usually some pretty ones getting offa work an' like that, what with being right there borderlining downtown an' all. An' it's not so far from the college that we don't get those types, too. We get all types, now that I'm looking at the folks coming in straight on, an' not sideways or over the shoulder from my own stool. Which is not only closer to, but may actually be, the point. It has been suggested that I oughtta join up with one of those help groups for folks that don't much know what to make of people. You know, how to act on a personalized level. An' I can't say as though I might notta agreed at times. Like now, in particular, what with people coming in an' getting all personal five seconds into knowing you. If making eye contact, me asking a simple question, an' them replying is enough to call knowing.

So, this is how it goes. When I punch in, all of a sudden I'm expected to be Mr. Liquor-n-Sympathy, or I may as well be the Devil. I just think that there must be some kinda limit to what I should know about you for pouring you a half-priced well drink. Tip or no tip. Happy hour or last call. Period. An' on that point, I don't know so much that I'll come to change my mind.

I don't so much mind the regulars, on accounta you kinda know what to expect. You got Mr. Brill-Creme-Scotch-n-Soda. I see him coming, I just set the first one

down and keep 'em flowing. He need anything else—which rarely he does—he'll give me the two-finger wave an' get straight to the point once I'm in earshot. Saturday nights like the atomic clock comes Miss Cleavage-n-Jeans-Fuzzy-Navel. She comes with a guarantee of not leaving all by her lonesome. It could be round two or ten, she ain't paying for the ride home, I can assure you that. Sometimes her friend Mrs. Over-Eager-Margarita comes around to join her. But only for one, then she's gone. I prassume to the Mister, who musta dug halfway to China for that rock on her finger. Always for just the one, 'cept for tonight, which I shoulda seen as a sign. No sooner'n she starts sipping on her second drink, she starts getting all chatty: A) like I give a half-a-goddamn, an' B) she got this slightly lazy eye makes her seem kinda throwed off—so no thank you, I'll pass. Some folks confuse me hearing them with me listening, an' for the most part I guess that's fine.

Right about then, this fool come in in a wheelchair, his head all flopping about. He so drunk I can't understand a lick a what he's saying, an' the nerve to get cross when I can't figure what he's asking for. So, I tell him straight out, I don't take that kinda guff from no one—wheelchaired or not. I'm pretty close to just tossing Old Drunken Wheeler to the curb when these two policemen come in, an' sidle straight up next to him. I'm about to ask what I can get 'em when the younger slick cop asks me if I served old boy in the wheelchair. I says, no—I can't understand a shit bitta what he's saying. Both police look at me like I'm the one with

the affliction. Then one says to Old Drunken Wheeler: You gotta stop doing this or we're gonna have to take you in, an' like that. An' they start rousing the guy—who's all whining an' moaning now—to his feet. To his goddamn feet! I'm standing there watching the whole thing thinking, now, I seen it all. Come to find this guy's just a regular old drunkard who, on occasion, borrows his old man's electric wheelchair when he's too drunk to walk to the bar. That shoulda been a goddamn blinking light, like at a railroad crossing, that the evening was goin' straight to hell in a big old hand-goddamn-basket. But not like the place done gone up in flames or anything. More like the place across the street went up in flames, an' everybody got all strung out an' overly excited. Or you got a car wreck aftermath, with the cars all smashed to hell like they been in a compactor, but with no dead bodies. Or even nobody with so much as a scratch on 'em. What I'm saying is, it's like when you're all shaken up an' dizzy, but everybody looks okay. What nobody sees is the internal-type bleeding that one of them is gonna die from later in their sleep.

So now, Old Drunken Wheeler is getting the toss by the cops—which is fine by me—an' Mrs. Over-Eager-Margarita is so giddy over the floor show, she's tossed back drink two in record time. She woulda ordered a third, but her loose-pantied friend has conjured up a ride home (as usual), an' done no more than suck the liquor outta the maraschino in her fuzzy navel before she splits. So, Over-Eager-Margarita makes

the questionable decision to finish off Miss Cleavage-n-Jeans' drink. You may think you can see where this thing's going. Maybe not. I sure the hell didn't.

Mrs. Over-Eager-Margarita is sucking on her swizzle stick, an' looking around the room like she might like to be on the make. I know I mentioned old girl's slightly lazy eye. But, if you saw the spindles on her, you'd also know she mighta got a shot at getting some. Anyway. She's making google eyes all over the room—which coulda been pitiful 'cept for nobody much taking notice—when a coupla usuals come in. These two—I don't even know where to start with them. They usually come in on the weekends wearing those silk scarfs about the neck an' pinky rings, an' tippie one back before heading off to one of them raised-pinky parties, I guess. I think you know what I mean. So they walk in like Puss-n-Boots (times two) an' sit at the bar next to Over-Eager-Margarita. Now, I see her alternate googling each one of them, and it's real apparent she ain't seeing the complete picture. So, she gets chatty-chatty with Mr. an' Mr. Ascot-Aquanet-Rusty-Nails. Three minutes later it's some kinda love-in like they known each other all their life. Laughing an' giggling. Then, heads start tilting, eyelashes batting, an' so on, an' I'll be goddamn if Mrs. Over-Eager-Margarita don't slide her hand right up the trouser leg of Ascot Number One. I don't know who it come from, but I swear somebody gasped. It coulda been me, I'm not altogether sure. I try an' remember the last time I saw a real live catfight, an' if this would count if one broke

out. But mostly I'm not wanting to referee any kinda fisticuffs, no kinda way, so I go check on Miss Fat-Lip-Shiner-Jack-Neat at the other end of the bar. I'm pouring her drink when it becomes obvious the dramatics are rising down the other end. Outta the corner of my eye, I catch sighta Over-Eager-Margarita draping a whole arm round Ascot Number One. In addition to sliding her hand all up around his pant leg, the two of them are playing all coy an' looking at Ascot Number Two like a couple of Cheshire cats. So I decide to stick to the far end, start drying glasses an' minding my own, when Miss Fat-Lip-Shiner-Jack-Neat lets out a little whoop, an' kinda starts laughing. Well, the three-of-hearts down the way take note of being laughed at, an' Ascot Number Two, all calmly, picks up his drink an' pours it straight in the lap of Ascot Number One. Now comes the Fourth of July. I couldn't quite make what the Ascots was saying to each other. But, Ascot Number Two is making for the door with Ascot Number One pulling on his sleeve trying to stop him, all while scraping off Over-Eager's tentacles trying to get free. In the end, the Ascots trounce on outta there one behind the other, steady squabbling, leaving Over-Eager to somehow make like she's still part of the equation. Seeing how she's sitting all alone now, that's a tough one to pull off. Plus, her drinks almost gone dry, so she drains the glass, an' lights a smoke. Fat-Lip leans towards me an' says she'll buy old girl a drink. I'm not so willing to be a part of this, but it's not so much my call. So, I go an' ask Over-Eager what she'd like, on accounta someone'd

**“When I punch in, all of a sudden I’m expected to be Mr. Liquor-n-Sympathy, or I may as well be the Devil. I just think that there must be some kinda limit to what I know about you for pouring you a half-priced well drink.”**

like to buy her a drink. I never seen a mood swing quite like that in my life—I mean you’d think I’d just told her she was gonna be the next queen of England the way she sat all upright an’ alert. She says: Another margarita will be fine, an’, please be sure to thank the gentleman for her. Then, she leans in with her kinda googly look, an’ says, Thank him very much. I take in a lotta air before I squeeze

out that it was the gal with the shiner down the bar she had to thank. Well. Over-Eager pushes herself back from the bar like I turned into a serpent, looks at me with this face of stone, then looks over at Fat-Lip the same way. She stuck like that for a good, long while before looking back at me an’ saying—with absolutely no kinda tone in her voice whatsoever—Thank her just the same.

Well, we just then get that all squared away, when this yahoo with a ponytail an’ a bunch of attitude come strolling in, carrying these motorcycle helmets. Walks straight up to Fat-Lip an’ shoves one at her. All of a sudden, before I looked twice, they was gone. Somehow that seemed to fluff up Over-Eager’s sails a bit, an’ somehow, I was kinda glad for it. Things got so quiet after that, I almost started

hoping Old Drunken Wheeler would take another joyride. I said almost. Aside from the old colored guy drives a yellow cab coming in an' pissing himself in one of the booths, the rest of the night was kinda quiet. Easing up on bar close, I'm trying to decide if I should have me a pulled-pork samwich or some buffalo wings when I knock off. Sunday night when the tipplers start dribbling out, an' you can actually hear what music they got playing, I'm coming up on my best shot at shut-eye for the whole week. This, I tell ya, is *my* happy hour.

I got so caught up in the nothing that was going on, I forgot to holler last call. Which, I don't usually forget on accounta that being my one chance to let the world know, out loud, that I'm soon to be the hell outta there. At least I only got half a dozen folks left in the joint. It ain't until this late moment I come to take note of Mrs. Over-Eager-Margarita still propped up down there on the end of the bar with about a eyedroppers worth of liquor left in her glass. I'm fixing to suggest it might be about time to roll on home, when she looks at me all wide-n-lazy-eyed, an' asks if I don't mind if she finish off her drink while I clean. It may have been one of them flashbacks to all the nights I no kinda way was ready to go home my damn self that made me say that wouldn't be so much a problem. Why I poured her a fresh drink on the house is kinda overkill, an' beyond me, but that's what I did.

The kitchen sends out my pulled-pork samwich just as I'm done with my closing chores, an' I set myself up on a stool behind the bar an' start greasing back. The sauce

on the meat is making me feel almost like I been breathing helium outta party balloons—it's that good. When I finally break outta my pork trance, I notice Over-Eager looking at me. Not hard, just simply looking, an' for the first time since I lain eyes on her she seem to be relaxed. The set of her lips have almost loosed into a smile. I try thinking about the last time I ate a meal with a woman sitting across from me. I come up blank. Completely blank.

I guess I had a look of being at the moment lost, which is the kinda thing women can sense, an' not only sense but seize upon—which is exactly what she did. She says, "Do you mind if I ask you a question?" Because I am not completely on my mark, I say "No, go 'head."

She says, if I were her husband, would I want to know she was pregnant even if she was going to have it gotten rid of? I'm so throwed off by the question, I may have somehow implied I needed it repeated. Which I didn't. What I needed was either a hole in my head to free me from giving a answer I did not have, or a hole in the goddamn floor to drop me straight to the hot center of the earth. Which'd be a damn sight cooler'n the seat I was at the moment planted on. Matters worsened when she took my body twitch to be some kinda answer, or maybe a shrug of acknowledging, 'cause she scoots down a few stools closer. She goes straight on about how she deep inside wants to tell him, on accounta she loves him an' he is her husband, an' whatnot. But, the reason she doesn't want to tell him is the reason she gotta get rid of it in the first place. An', the reason she's

even remotely thinking along those lines at all, is on accounta she loves her husband an' they'd had no luck in getting themselves in the family way so far. An' since, given the odds of the kid not being her husband's, it makes her even more sure she should do what she's gotta do, an' keep it to herself.

I can tell she knows what I'm thinking—how if she got knocked up behind fooling around on her husband she gets what she gets. Come to find the truth is, she's in this situation on accounta not wanting to hurt her husband's feelings. An' how she an' the other guy had no time for formal-like introductions before he attacked her down there in the laundry room. Then she lets out this sudden laugh, which in no way implied humor. She goes on about how she thought an' thought, an' finally just thought better of telling her husband anything. Then he wouldn't know how unclean she felt. Wouldn't just see her as forever dirty an' never touch her again, so they'd truly never be in the family way. Wouldn't come to hate her—maybe wouldn't even stay long enough to say how much he hated her dirty-whore self—because all she wants more than anything is to have a little baby boy what looks just like her husband. They'd get another chance, wouldn't they? But if it comes out....If she lets it come out on accounta she didn't get rid of it, there might not be a pair of eyes in the world won't be able to tell it ain't her husband's, an' what kinda chance would they have then, huh? Huh?

I take her meaning, an' all I can see in those eager eyes is the need

for her fairy goddamn godmother to swing her wand an' make it all right. When, in truth, I see no option that includes her ever being all right, far as I can imagine. I think I say to her, You seem like a good woman. I'm sure it'll all work out in the end.

So, it's goddamn near dawn, an' those mourning doves have started their early cooing. Which is a prelude to the whole goddamn bird-world chirping. An' the only thing occupying my mind more than the indigestion I took home behind the pulled-pork samwich, is a slide show of different scenarios to the end of Over-Eager's story. As soon as the image of her living alone down the hall from me in the Stanford Arms Fireproof Hotel in a room smells like the output of twenty-odd cats an' stale cigarettes fades, a picture of her getting her living nightmare (or alternately her dream-baby-come-true). Hoovered from between her legs by some clinic doctor comes up. Then, an image of her laying sleepless like me for the next thousand nights thinking about what if she had done the opposite of what she did. Next I'm seeing her with a fat lip an' black eye, an' the red fingerprints wrapping round her throat being camouflaged by a funeral parlor makeup lady before her being-laid-to-rest viewing. The viewing that her husband won't be at, on accounta being responsible for the fingerprints an' the black eye an' the fat lip, an' all. An' neither will the guy who raped her into this place on accounta he's catching a matinee a few towns over, licking popcorn butter off his fingers. Point is, the pictures won't stop until the bird chirping drowns them out with

the daylight, an' all there is for me to do is get up an' make a cuppa instant coffee, an' go on about my business as usual. But, I guess that's not your problem...

# Reclamation

*Barrie Darke*



The weather forecast for the weekend had been fairly accurate, except it was running a day late. It was as if the clouds had been snagged by mountains or whatever on the way over to them. So on Sunday they got sudden showers, mostly overcast, but not too cold. Monday would be fine, though.

“We should still go anyway?” Richard said. He had a way of posing half-questions only, leaving it to the listener to decide if they were being asked anything.

Marie nodded. “Weather shouldn’t matter much,” she said.

“Good, yeah,” he agreed.

They didn’t have a hamper, if such things were even still available, so they put their tubs and tubes and bottles in knapsacks and carrier bags. They distributed the load evenly between the two of them, made sure they were comfortable with the handholds and shoulder straps, and set off. It was always, unspokenly, Marie’s job to lock the door behind them. Technically, the wood was far enough away to justify taking the car, but it was

tradition not to do that, even when laden. It meant they didn’t talk a great deal, though both were fit and made the journey without much strain. This was late morning. Lots of joggers were around, lots of them women, the tops of their arms spindly and raw looking. Some clouded faces as well, walking off the drink of the night before, not convinced it was working. There were plenty of lumbering, inward-looking dog-walkers who nevertheless smiled and said hello to Richard and Marie when their dogs struck out with wagging tails for the carrier bags. They were called away, some more obedient than others, a couple of them cheekily licking the air around the bags before they turned away. Richard and Marie always exchanged a smile when dog and owner had passed. They’d long talked about getting a dog, but hadn’t done it yet and doubted they ever would. Things quietened as they stepped deeper in, and the deadened sound made their breathing louder in their ears. They followed the paths they always did, another unspoken tradition. The first bee of the year circled them for a while, Marie glad

without showing it when it left them alone. There had been no discussion over where they would stop; they trusted they would know the spot when they came to it.

Richard brought up a few memories, tentatively chuckling as he did so. None of them involved Ellen yet, and Marie went along with them, only contradicting him once or twice. It had been a bottle of Teachers that time, not Jack Daniel's, and the other one was just a random day, not her birthday, she was pretty sure. But yes, he was right, horribly drunk both times.

Marie didn't proffer any memories of her own, and Richard let his drain away after a while.

It turned out that the right spot didn't jump out at them after all. Time got on and their stomachs started to moan, that was the main thing in deciding.

"Somewhere round here might do?" Richard said, in a spot that had nothing to recommend it above any other.

Marie made a noncommittal sound and led them on a few minutes further. "Right then," she said. "This'll do, I think."

"Fine," he agreed softly.

It was slightly more open, less densely laced above with heavy branches. The sky could be seen, unimpressive sight though it currently was. They sat on the old towels they tugged from their knapsacks, Marie springing loose a pack of biscuits she didn't know was there. It rolled under a bush, and she scratched herself scrabbling for it.

Salads and rice were the main components of the meal, both of them being on a health kick at the moment, but it turned out they hadn't packed the tub of grated cheese. This was a big loss to Richard, who practically sprinkled it on his toast these days. They were politely apologetic, though they knew this was Marie's fault.

No dogs were around to bother them while they ate. Marie's appetite hadn't come all the way back, but Richard as usual gathered pace as he went on, lack of grated cheese or no lack of grated cheese. He tended to make small, moaned, appreciative noises down his nose as he munched, though these were lost in the aching bones of branches and mild thwaps of wind.

He swallowed a few belches, and they sat quietly for a while. Then he said, "We could listen to the song now?"

Marie breathed in deeply through her nose, let it out, and nodded. "Okay."

Richard took out the iPod. Anything to do with music was usually his domain. Now, however, the choice of song was hers, or not quite hers. It was the one she had heard coming from Ellen's room most often when they were growing up: "Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown)" by The Beatles.

He had it ready to go before they'd left the house. He shuffled round on his hands to sit next to her and handed her one of the earbuds.

"Ready then?" he asked. Marie nodded.

"Okay," he said softly and pressed play.

It hadn't been going long before they looked at each other. Stereo in the 60s was a little rickety; Marie was getting the music without the voice.

Richard pulled a face, then nodded a few rapid times and held up a hand as an idea came to him. When they got to the end of the song, which didn't take long, they swapped earbuds and listened to it again. That would have to do.

"Sorry," Marie mouthed, when Richard was putting the iPod away. There was a chance that Ellen would've found it funny, but you never could tell with her.

They packed, heaved themselves up, and walked on deeper in. Richard started to talk about Ellen, but Marie's head-down, one-word answers caused his voice to turn tight and stop altogether before he was very far along with what he wanted to say.

Marie, after a few minutes of a silence that wasn't quite easy, embarked on a spate of people-watching, and he warmed up to that eventually. There weren't too many people around to watch, but that only made them work harder with what they had.

Later, the day sunk into a quieter patch. The dogs were at home, twitching in their baskets, the Sunday lunches were ready to be served up, the barstools in the club were comfortable as the draw was being called. Richard took her hand as they walked.

At first, it was all to do with reassuring squeezes. Then, with his shoulder bumping hers, there was something warmer meant by it.

So she stopped walking and they turned to each other, and there was a kiss. Marie broke it earlier than she normally would've, though she didn't take her hand away from his. It was easier to start him walking again that way.

That worked out for a few minutes, but no other conversations were going to spring up.

He said, "I think it might be good if we...stop and..."

She shook her head, kept walking.

"I think it'd be all right, you know," he said. "Strange at first, maybe, but it'd be good. Healthy, definitely."

"No," she said, not looking at him.

"I know, but if we give it a try ..."

"No," she said again, this time looking at him. She took her hand away and walked on. He followed quietly behind at first, then sped up to walk alongside her.

In a while, her voice roughened, she said, "Let's stay until it's dark. How does that sound for an idea?"

"I don't know. What do you mean?"

"I don't mean anything. I mean let's stay till it's pitch black. Just stay till then."

He looked away.

"You don't like that idea then?" she asked. "It's all right, I don't either."

Marie moved away and leaned against a tree, head down with her hair hanging over her face.

"Christ," she said. "Christ, this is..." She stopped, her breath loud again.

Richard took a few steps over to console her, but she didn't want him to or need him to; she shook her head and he stood off to the side, looking away into the trees.

"Christ," she said again.

There was no one else around, but they soon heard the giddy blundering and heavy breath of a running dog. Marie rubbed her eyes, stood up straight, tilted her head back.

"Right, right," she said. "It's all right."

"It's fine, take your time," he said.

"I'm all right now," she said. "We can go back, if you want."

Richard nodded. "Good idea," he said.

It always seemed to take less time to get home than it did to get there. On the way, it rained and they put their hoods up. More dogs were around, sleek and gasping, into everything.

# Obstreperous Throat

*Jonathan Doughty*



Professor Ding’s funeral was well-attended, some three hundred odd souls packed into the aerobics room of our local Church of Scientology. Local homeless had helped in setting up collapsible pews for the occasion, earning free audits for their effort. I arrived very late, feeling rushed and unfocused, just as Ding’s long-time rival for tenure, Dr. Thighbath, was finishing up her run-on memory of the deceased. She stood behind a wooden lectern, with Ding’s simple white funerary urn placed underneath the lectern’s in-built microphone.

“...Still,” Thighbath was saying, “we should keep in mind that Ding’s arch-claim to fame was that, while he was a graduate student at USF in the seventies, he had sex with Foucault in a bathhouse. USF, mind you...” Thighbath always breathed through her mouth, a quality that intrigued me for my first week in her psychoanalytically-informative seminar. In time, however, I found her respiration inadequate to hold my attention—even as she would explain, loudly and in wheezily an-

imated detail, why the unprotected speech zones of college campuses should necessarily extend to the deepest, darkest abscesses of Canadian thought life.

“Consider this your last peer review,” Thighbath finally said to the urn, extending to it a middle finger. Following some desultory applause, she sat back down on the first (reserved) row of pews.

In our best reenactment of an uninspired Friends meeting house, we all listened to ourselves breathe for a few minutes. Then, Bradley Shaw, a part-time lecturer in the field of Aboriginal Art, stood up from his seat in the audience’s wide middle and paced up to the lectern. He was all smiles, but seemed to have some dandruff in his piratey black beard. He thoughtfully recounted: “Ding was fond of telling me, ‘Brad, you’re such a weak little faggot, any hot girl could turn you straight. You’re a *homo sacer* sexual.’” Shaw tapped his middle finger’s oversized gold ring against the urn, as though to knuckle-bump with the dead. Then, with a minimum of audience reaction, he re-

turned to his seat.

Now it was time for the commemorative music. The seven members of our university's graduate musical act, The Warriors of Antisocial Justice, rose in unison from the penultimate left row. Their fashionably used skate shoes squeaked in the crowd's breathy silence as they filed forward with their instruments. Before beginning their performance, the twelve-string guitarist lit himself a cigarette, which he allowed to dangle insouciantly from the corner of his mouth.

"Hey, we can smoke in here?" Spencer called out, neither loudly nor with any effort to minimize his volume, from the back of the room. No one responded.

The music, a modal groundswell of acoustic guitars, bouzoukis and tambouricas, proved unexpectedly engaging—that is, until the vocals, a formless endeavor of sinusy wails and spoken-word observations in some minor Balkan tongue, began in earnest. I turned around to glance at the anteroom. Stress-filled hockey moms and carefree gay men were awaiting our dismissal so their yoga class could commence.

I righted myself and stared forward at the back of the bald head to my front. Directly underneath the occipital bone was a thick pink, oily meat handle that silently begged to be squeezed. I imagined how its owner, who appeared to have lifted weights on a near-daily basis for several decades, would react to such an overture; indeed, given the solemnity of the occasion, this risk intrigued me all the more.

My thoughts were interrupted by shouted noise at my behind. Some manner of scrap was threatening to throw down in the anteroom, daring to ignominiously expose either a gay-basher or woman-beater in their crowded midst. *Allah forbid*, I won-

dered, *which would the media portray as worse?*

I twisted around just as an elementary school-aged girl, sandwiched between her parents, slunk off her pew and dashed forward. Knowing in advance, it seemed, that her height was insufficient for her voice to reach the microphone's amplification, she simply stood to the lectern's side. She surveyed the whole lot of us, with absolutely no indication of sheepishness at assuming the focal point of a much older audience's attention. In a serene voice, she reported, "For my after-school craft class, Mr. Ding taught me how to make a merkin."

Someone in my immediate vicinity yawned, exposing a halitosis so rancid I actually coughed. Then I realized the yawner had been I.

The young girl returned, skipping, to her parents. The more feminine of her mothers gave her a big kiss on the cheek.

"—He didn't *have* gold teeth!" objected an androgynous voice, apropos of something I didn't detect, from a place somewhere down my pew. The voice passingly reminded me of my least favorite uncle, now favorite aunt, after a solid month's regimen of gender-reassignment hormones.

Suddenly aware of time's slow dribble, I glanced at my wristwatch. No one else seemed poised to speak at this moment, so I stood and walked down the center aisle to the lectern.

I didn't say anything; I wasn't going to follow their leads. I just stood facing the audience and shook my right fist at them. Not with overt violence, but with something they could have liberally mistaken for late-stage Parkinson's. Then I opened the urn and tapped out a smidgen of Ding's ashy ash onto the lectern.

I leaned over and snorted the ash up my nostrils. Ding didn't burn, but *damn* did he drip like a ghetto fire hy-

drant. With singular, refocused intent, I rushed back to the bathhouse before my meal break ended, contemplating how there will always be a little Ding in me.

# Sebastian's Babylon, Chapter 5

*Daniel Ryan Adler*



They say you don't know someone until you travel with them.

Sebastian met Lexi at JFK. Waiting on the gangway, he whispered so the two-year-old in front of him wouldn't hear, "Are you a member of the mile high club?"

"We're going together as *friends*." Her eyes glittered fiercely; he receded into his shell.

In the taxi to the hotel, Sebastian said, "We have to go to St. Lazarus Island. That's where Lord Byron learned Armenian. Did you know that the Armenians have their own quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem simply because they were early adopters of Christianity?" The fields of water engrossed her, as if she might miss a revelation, a flash of light.

Their suite had a king size bed, which he fussed over, saying if you want we can stay in another room. Lexi peeked into the marble-showered bathroom and walked onto their private patio that overlooked the canals and tiled roofs. She said, "Whatever. You stay on your side, I'll stay on mine. We'll put a pillow between us."

At the Gallerie dell'Accademia they admired the Tiepolos and Veroneses, Titians and Tintoretts. He let her walk ahead of him up the stairs as a gentleman should, and he studied her body's shape under her light, expensive dress, every fiber in him attuned to her. With a glance she made

his heart jump. "My Countess Guiccioli," he whispered, reminded of Byron's mistress.

"Talking to yourself?" she smirked.

Within an hour she tired of art so they walked the city. She said, "I haven't been to Venice since I was six. I only remember the pigeons in St. Mark's and the bridges over the canals."

"It's my first time," said Sebastian.

That night he asked her for a goodnight kiss. He thought that by okaying their sleeping in one bed Lexi was giving him permission for at least that. But when she didn't say anything and he leaned in anyway she screamed, "WHAT ARE YOU DOING!" He rolled to his edge, stuttering apologies. He was shook. The fancy dinners, plane ticket, Ca' Pisani—he still hadn't touched her lips. He listened for subliminal messages in her sleep-breaths.

Next morning boundaries were up. He distanced himself and suppressed ideas of possessing her, avoiding her eyes unless pressed. Yet she stayed near and asked if they could ride a gondola. Between the trceries, the almost organic growths of the Grand Canal, Sebastian thought of Canaletto and Guardi and Tasso, imagined that he was being persecuted by Shylock or Iago—for what? His nature of desiring the past, the splendor of doges and masques, days of empire and grandeur; for noticing the brighter Adriatic

light; for being still too young, a modern Dandolo, suffering through pain and blindness before coming into power in old age? The weight of empire rested on his shoulders and Byzantium threatened; how long would he wait to sack Constantinople and found a modern Latin Empire, what Marriage of the Sea would he know, what Bucen-taur; when would be his Battle of Lep-anto, *his* Fourth Crusade? Her fingers on his arm. “Beautiful, huh?”

He nodded, surprised and slightly irritated. After rejecting him, those fingertips below his triceps were an insult. But perhaps it was an attempt to make amends. Or more. What if... But no. She was only a friend. Last night made that clear—she was to be like a sister or cousin with whom there cannot be intimacy.

Lunch lasted four hours with two bottles of wine and many questions from her that he knew the answers to but did not take pride in knowing, such as, “What’s the difference between a Sunni and a Shiite?” and “Who was Titian’s master?” and “Why did Pe-trarch move to Venice?” The prior night’s rejection was forgotten. They walked back to the hotel arm in arm so she did not fall on the cobblestones in her drunkenness. He pitied her and she became unattractive. Had he made a mistake by taking her here? But then at least he was learning. In their room, she vomited the eighteen-euro braised rabbit and shuddered into bed. He felt like a babysitter and retreated, closed himself off. But when she whispered his name and sheets rustled in the dark and he felt the heat from her body, they softly kissed and it seemed natural. She moaned with such abandon that he wondered if she would remember in the morning. When it was over he ordered room service to sober her up. She ate enough French fries to hiccup. Hours later, after a light rest, in the husky dawn of their room her tanned

arm lay beside him, her face covered by brown hair and white sheets, her fingers curled like a pillow fight casual-ty. What they shared would hover over them in the ether after they returned home; now he carried a divine com-prehension of her soul.

After another morning of museum-going she wanted to siesta, which he took as an invitation. In their room she drank a six-euro bottle of San Pellegrino and lay down. When he tried to kiss her she said: “No, Se-bastian—we’re *friends*.”

He had taken her for granted but now he was not sure she remem-bered and he felt hollow and alone. He pressed, “What about last night?”

She shrugged. “I was drunk...” She shook her head and laughed. “I figured I *owed you*. Sorry. I didn’t mean to give you the wrong idea.”

Acres of sheets lay between them. *I owed you* echoed in his ears and he could not help his face from squinching in embarrassment. Eyes closed, he admonished himself for vaulting his expectations after getting what he had so long wanted. But to have it reduced to a transaction was worse than never knowing her at all. He wanted to shake her and ask if she forgot the sales tax. He was worse than a pimp, his feelings didn’t even qualify as passion, they had been reduced to hunger. Once he digested this and began to fall asleep, she woke. He waited for her to come out of the shower before he emerged from bed. Say little, do little. That’s the way to win.

Dinner was Trentino and cicheti. They didn’t talk much. He pretended he didn’t care about her earlier comment, that in her black dress she was unspacial: everyday beautiful. Then they saw Rossini’s *Barber of Se-ville*. The opera distracted him from her, though when an older couple ad-mired them together, he swelled with pride. Surprise floated him when she

held his arm after, on their way to a bar. He hunched over a ginger ale and palavered with the Italian bartender while she flirted with a tall bar-back.

In the hotel, she came out of the bathroom naked. This time, it was satisfying for both of them. After, when it was over, he could only think about how his breath ricocheted off her cheek.

The next morning he was wary at first and coveted her only with his eyes, but the fact that he didn’t say anything about how he felt made her give in. With only two days left, which she didn’t want to spend in musty doge palaces, she ordered a mimosa at breakfast and asked him if they could stay in the hotel all day. And they did. They took the cool elevator upstairs with the low ding of each floor until the top and he called room service for a bottle of Lacryma Christi and waited for the sound of the ice click-ing against the pail coming down the corridor and the boy’s knock. He said leave it there please because they were not wearing any clothes and the swal-lows flew over the roofs of the houses and afterward he opened the bottle with the door locked and the room cool and quiet, the only noise between them the hum of the air conditioner, that whole afternoon, when they loved each other and everything was how he knew it could be before they started this journey to Italy.

At times she felt guilty—not for the expense of the trip or her disre-gard for his tedious art history lessons and obscure name-dropping—but for letting him touch her like he was holding a baby. He was falling and she didn’t want to stop him because he was paying for everything. She almost told him to be meaner, so at least she wouldn’t feel obligated to lie on her back every time he spent a grand. In-stead, she distanced herself from her body when she presented it to him.

On their last day, they woke up late and walked through the Rialto Market watching tourists buy overpriced Murano jewelry. They sat at a restaurant and she drank Lugana wine. For dessert they had twelve-euro gelato *al fresco* in Piazza San Marco while an accordion player sang. Night fell over the piazza as a moth fluttered into the candle on their table. It lay stunned on the red-and-white checkered cloth, black-spotted wings trembling.

"Big one, isn't he?"

She shuddered. He picked it up by the wing and as though waking, the moth flew into the darkness. Within the hour, they were smoking on their patio, looking into the stars. He exhaled a long stream and sighed. "Right now, I am utterly entirely purely happy." She stayed silent, pitying him, knowing it would not be long before he was miserable again. She crushed out her cigarette. "I'm going to pack."

When he entered the room, she was on the Internet, thinking of New York and when she would see Dom and what else she would do back home. Sebastian would find satisfaction in his memories of her, later, when he was masturbating.

The next day, they woke early for their flight to Amsterdam. The layover wasn't long enough to leave the airport and get high, as Lexi wanted, so they ate at an overpriced resto-bar in the terminal, crowded with drunk British tourists.

She had more trouble than him falling asleep on the connection to New York; he was lights out. She laughed to herself when she remembered how he had wanted to join the mile high club and now that she might have been willing, he was asleep. Her inner thighs dampened, she considered going to the bathroom for a solo, but instead closed her eyes and lay her head back. She was satisfied.

At JFK, it was dusk and he said

the cab line would take longer than public transportation; so she followed him upstairs. On the platform of the A train, he asked her, "Do you ever want to marry and have kids?"

"Probably not," she said. "At least not now."

He paced in front of their luggage. She folded her arms across her body. "But isn't the point of life to procreate? To raise babies and show them the filial tie? That's what drives the animals."

"That's why we're *different* from the animals."

"But we still have animalistic tendencies. Isn't it ironic that baser humans reproduce without a second thought whereas certain higher beings are reluctant to endow their genes to posterity? I suppose it's because you have great ambitions, and then of course, the world is hard. But if you find someone you can revere, for being more than rich enough to take care of you, would you marry him?"

"I don't know, Sebastian. Maybe."

"I bet Jesus' main regret was that he never had children."

She snorted, "Christianity is to blame for marriage's bad connotations. Humans aren't supposed to be monogamous. Why would we be attracted to others if we were?"

He furrowed his brow.

"I'd rather be in an open relationship."

"REALLY?" He looked at her like she ate babies for breakfast.

"Can you imagine sleeping with one person for twenty years? It makes sense for evolution too. As cave-men, multiple partners made for a more diverse gene pool. Stay together long enough to raise the kids, then find someone else. But Christianity came along and made it a contract."

"What's so bad about that?" he asked.

"Not marrying makes more sense. Or the French way, taking lovers after a while. I would do that if I was unhappily married. I mean, it's more mature than divorcing. Because isn't true love about giving your partner pleasure anyway?"

He rubbed his chin. "I suppose. Americans are litigation crazy. We're taught to break up as soon as we start hating each other, that we'll find someone else. Most people don't realize you can't love until you've transcended that hate for the other person."

"Have you ever hated me?"

"Of course."

"I've never hated you."

"Because you don't love me."

She was disgusted by his dandruff. But he was right, that wasn't hate. She stared at the TV antennae on the pre-war brick buildings and realized how far Rockaway is from the city, how typical it was of Sebastian to not wait in line for a cab like normal people. Now they were taking the subway like commuters, like the poor folks who lived out here. "Maybe we should take the bus like a coupla low-lifes."

"You want to take a bus? But the train is faster."

"I was kidding, Sebastian."

"Ah." He sighed a near-cry. "In every parting a moment comes when the beloved is no longer with us." He grinned, eyes shiny with emotion.

The train rattled and he looked down the platform to see it coming down the tracks. "Thank god," she said. She wanted to be home, back in her bed in South Chelsea.

They didn't speak until goodbye at his stop, when he put an arm around her and smelled her hair. Her stomach was like wet clothes lumped in a dryer and she couldn't press start until she exited the train. She felt him staring at the back of her head as he rolled away.

At Fourteenth Street, the streets

were quiet and food smells leaked from windows. New York seemed ratty after the romance and history of Venice. Even her apartment was foreign; when she opened the door and inhaled she recognized the scent, but it surprised her that that's how her life smelled.

Day for work and night for sleep. As a little girl, she wished night would never come. Now the Chinese lanterns hang and glow, fans whirl and the sky has gone from blue to black. She crawls into bed and falls quickly and deeply asleep.

*POETRY*



# Pruning Shears

*Rich Ives*

1.

A while back I had tracks. Even mother had a handle then. To arrive at humor, I'd risk having sex. Predators know that about me.

He offered, and she gave a start at the lack of his head when she discovered she had already begun. She continued. Insect-like of course, but not so literal. There were no spices left in her as various as all the heart parts contained in an amateur still eating her way to the center of the colony. If he smells better than you do, it's only because he's still not you. He wants to be you.

Ever since I expanded my record collection, I seem to think whatever I can't see must be Harry Belafonte hawking bananas with a dark circular vinyl pretention.

Mother's handle will grow back and point to thorns and cold temporary devices.

You can see where I've been, the exodus orderly and blunt, like everything you owe me.

2.

A heartless man goes looking for a heart, but when he finds one, its pain is not his. If the answer to his question is simple, it cannot be the answer he is seeking.

If the heartless man does not feel badly for what he has lost, he has lost nothing. But why then is he searching? Outside, his beast is singing. The surface of his song may be smooth, but surfaces are more volatile when there is something deep beneath them. Shallow water flees from itself. You can hear it in the slippery fluttering melody.

Sometimes between body and soul there is no waterway, no song. The body's scars are not tender, but everything close to them is. Get up. Start walking. Go to sleep. If you have lost nothing, it does not guarantee that you will not feel badly.

3.

If the post office does not acknowledge your death, you will be eligible for many free offers. If your will is attended to and your resources disbursed as directed, reasonably quickly, even those offers which require repayment will become free offers. However, it will probably take you longer than you might expect to respond to them, and they too have an expiration date. Theirs, however, is known ahead of time and thus does not require the acknowledgement of the post office.

Something nefarious absconded with the velvet armadillo's compassionate and mysterious appearance on my dining room wall.

We built the walls to enclose the inner walls. The inner walls contained only the opposite surfaces. This made them pleasant to be around since they had nothing to say and did not say it.

4.

Why is a steel-colored cloud always so fragile? It would shock you, the way the ordinary clouds there looked so real.

5.

If the door's large enough it always sighs, especially at the doctor's, where even the shadows have shadows. Sometimes it's like one of those antidepressant Somalia mornings there, where the vegetables are so huge they seem to be sighing when you pull them from the ground. I'm afraid I might be the ground.

6.

The man was part spider and part grasshopper. I knew better than to try to talk to it. Its abdomen was golden and full. Its eyes swayed on stalks leaning out from its full head. It seemed to have grown from the smell of the countertop. Paint and damp grass and an under-taste of marsh. None other was like it. The creature moved as if newly hatched. It walked in starts and waited a long time before continuing. Finally, it leaped, with a long low whirring sound, and its wings carried it beyond the fence-line, the border within a border. The man tried to suggest that it was merely a story. *You might try to deny it, but it has a life of its own in you*, I said without opening my mouth. The eyes of the creature glittered like obsidian in moonlight, the tiniest touch, so surprisingly small, of a shadow in the brushed meadow that seemed suddenly framed in gold above the bartender. I could not have been sleeping although I did fall into at least one dangerous part of the creature's understanding.

7.

He had achieved a certain mastery of dishevelment. Even the finest clothing would make his body appear unbalanced if it had not already been maneuvered in some direction it did not want to go and been unable to completely return from its ordeal.

8.

Because of my previous activities, I discovered that I was not prepared to leak vast quantities when leaking vast quantities was what was called for. This is only one of the ways in which my love can still be deceitful.

9.

I tried to live in a place behind the place that I thought about, and behind that there was another place, but I didn't try to live there. I just tried to be satisfied that I knew that it was possible to live further away.

# Myth of Origins

*James Capozzi*

1. We call things by empty names. Dead names.
2. It becomes unbearable noise. A cacophony of personalities
3. invading the air around us, on the train on the beach. We reflexively reach into it. We recoil from its touch  
but breathe each other in.
4. For days on end: stop speaking, play you my music, show you films about my interests.
  
5. These million internal transitions out of stasis.
6. Waking up with grass, twigs, pine needles on the mattress  
as if we'd been abroad in the night.
7. Ending up in positions that unlock you, then going on humiliated and more humane. You no more, afraid of pain and more desirous of it.
8. But in some ways we want to remain who we were.
  
9. The sleeper rolls over between two dreams.
10. I shave then step into the street, where something of terrible beauty occurs in the sky above me. I swoon and know I will not be alright for quite awhile. Maybe not ever.
11. Give it a minute. Here comes the interregnum.
12. A constant entrance into more bodily experience, zeroed out emotionally.
  
13. We are liberated by disaster and can only be.
14. You crack open the box and look into the box. Its object confesses its deepest secrets without much work on your part.
15. Where are we today? In the pleasant, shallow depths of an addiction or post-Cartesian error: isolate bodies in a mindless room, scanning for patterns.
16. And always the big question: what happens to us next?
  
17. Surely through great windows cops observe our night-thought, unexpressed but in potential, forming deep auras.
18. It can end in only one of a few ways: as the lower part of a cycle, as the end of a precedent, rendered unto the lovers.
19. As movement out of language (or to a more embodied language).
20. Or these are not the words at all.

21. We become like them, alive in a vision  
    fetched down through history entire. By that time she is a person  
    with scratches all over, her back especially. I felt I could see through them.
22. We enter the cycle by night and are consumed by ice.
23. Even stepping out for a smoke is a slog through frozen earth to the waist.
24. We have not yet perfected our sentence.
  
25. From the book of faces radiates a ceaseless proleptic procession of ages.  
    Which one is your war face? Everything else is furniture.
26. How does one get from here to the deep Interior?
27. At the cabin all day in bed, examining each other carefully for weakness. Testing  
    each other's weakness.
28. May nothing but eagles tear us to pieces.



# The Church of Nothing

*Catherine B. Krause*

Don't worry about it. Tell no one.  
One foot in front of the other,  
as fast as you can. "What's wrong?"  
"Nothing's wrong. It's fine. Don't  
worry." Give your throat a wash,  
get it nice and clean. You'll  
need to relieve the pressure.  
Join the pack! There's strength  
in numbers, if you're one of them, but  
you don't chase rabbits down tunnels  
and rip them apart. You're the rabbit,  
and you know it. Keep calm, now.  
Find yourself a hole to crawl into.  
Drown yourself, blow up your heart.  
It's too late.



# My Ex-Partner

*Catherine B. Krause*

My ex-partner profited off the Napoleonic wars.  
They insisted that their shoelaces were tied.  
Their moon was the size of a pair of blue eagles  
And they couldn't construct a proper cheesecake.  
I sat and listened to their droning about Neptune,  
Felt their long whiskers pat me on the back  
As if I could afford to drink ginger tea.  
Their dog whistled sweet nothings into the void.  
Everyone loved them except for you.  
You didn't know how to play the triangle.  
That's why I left them for your house of books.  
Don't you understand? They were an octopus,  
And you were always seventeen minutes away  
From the pit of an avocado's frustration.  
Sensitive Persephone

The Queen of Hades loves to be felt up,  
all the more by Pluto's cold dead hands; she  
isn't a teenage girl, but she knows her likes,  
and being played by DJ Dīs is one.

When Springtime rolls around, she feels deprived.  
Flowers notwithstanding, life is lifeless.  
Certainly no grown woman should live with Mom;  
it's better to be in the world to come.

Nonetheless, lifelessness also can liven our misery:  
Cora leaves for Hades, hence the leaves die,  
coloring bitter yet beautiful, decadent Autumn like  
the lovely candy rotting all our teeth,  
exactly like how Pluto's winter bride  
loves his deadly touch upon her nipples.



# Fine

*Catherine B. Krause*

Yes,  
Everything is fine.

# your fetishes

*Catherine B. Krause*

if you spit on my face  
do it when you are  
walking past me  
not when I am  
naked



# The Silk Nightie

*Greg Moglia*

The sales associate at Victoria's Secret is all smiles  
I ask her the guy question ***I'm not sure about the size***

She gives my aged line that "so you got yourself a trophy" look and says  
*Give me an idea about her frame*

I say ***About the same as you, kinda slim, tall...***  
Then she surprises me *This for the wife?* ***No, a girl friend***

Now a gossipy gleam in her eye  
Oh, about how old is she?

I say firmly ***She's 68***  
Now, she glows, I've just become a geezer sweetheart

She flips to a caring mode  
*Maybe you want something more subtle?*

***Oh great! Back to married nights and birth control jammies***  
*Oh no, I'm sorry...I'm so sorry I just thought you might go for something quieter*

***Yeah, I say We do try to have old fogey sex...nice and quiet***  
***God forbid a yell, a deep moan, a screech - wake the neighbors***

She says *Well, sorry again just trying to be helpful*  
I say ***There's more to look forward to than you believe***



# Famished

*Greg Moglia*

Hungry, she is hungry. What to devour next?  
Some Chekhov, a bit of Tolstoy, a tease of Buber?  
A beast she is, great gobs of ideas, clawed at then chewed  
Finally, swallowed in grand chunks

At the multiplex showing a foreign language movie  
She goes after the subtitles, then the images  
Patrons want their movie back, the screen in tatters  
She comes to be hated, why all this learning?

After all they ask what do you do with all this stuff?  
Show us a job, a career, a profession and she laughs  
Says *I do architecture* and chomps on a new wave chair  
The crowd runs from her fearful that once home

She might devour their rarely used dining room  
*Terrorist* they say, put her away and she laughs again  
I turn to her say I too am hungry, always have been  
*Then let's eat* she says and we feast on my books of poems

Begin with Frost, linger on Neruda, then finally Yeats  
Then we look at each other still hungry  
I offer half of my head, she half of hers  
Jaws chomping happily an not a bit of waste

And heaven had never  
Seen the likes of it  
*What beasts are those?* an angel cries  
*They play without rules*



# And Then There Were Those...

*Michael Berton*

that left no daily record  
or followed any meticulous routine  
committed no heinous crime  
acquired no fortune  
that left only a name  
a few habitual belongings  
in a run-down  
one bedroom apt.  
in a crime  
ridden neighborhood

that had no soulmate  
or fuck buddy  
too aloof and weary  
to procreate  
a son or daughter  
just a wanderlust  
adrenalized in the body  
that kept them mindful  
of acknowledging themselves

that took no risks  
never looked a second glance  
that boogied no shake  
shagged no carpet  
fostered no addiction  
followed no faith  
or curiosity in the bland

who abbreviated their passions  
raged no protest  
mimicking the status quo quagmire  
then who rested  
when the rowing went upstream  
whose madness  
found a calming  
in unraveling the future  
then there are those  
who became a thought  
in a character's mind  
or a persona in a poem  
written by the anonymous  
in a language  
on its last print run

on the cusp  
of being archived  
in cyberspace

those that represented wealth  
as their life's goal  
feeding on money making  
time from other people's lives  
a gift to the world's misery  
where currency markets never close  
on a glimpse of immortality

and then there are those  
who disregarded their own inner music  
hindering their ability  
to dance alone  
in a downtown  
rush hour  
while civilization  
blared and bellowed  
a cacophonous disapproval



# Knock Yourself Out

*Michael Berton*

One person's gibberish  
is another person's nonsense

Some nonsense is poetry  
masquerading as public art

One person's nonsense  
is another person's hipness

Now knock some nonsense  
into your creative self

Inside mediocrity  
glides the hipster  
circulating contradiction

Hip is wearing a mask  
pretending argot  
functioning in ambiguity

Pushing the hip  
against the immovable truth  
falls into kitsch

One square person rising to work  
is another person resting  
from a night of hip

One person's hip  
is another's bum

Now square yourself out  
and knock some hip  
into your bum

Now knock some squareness  
into your creative self



Now hip your bum to the tale  
or trade your bum for a hip

Said the square man  
to the hipster woman  
can I bum  
some hip off you

Said the obnoxious woman  
to the nonsense man  
may I bum  
a hipster off you

Said the gibberish man  
to the kitsch woman  
may I grasp your bum  
and hip off you

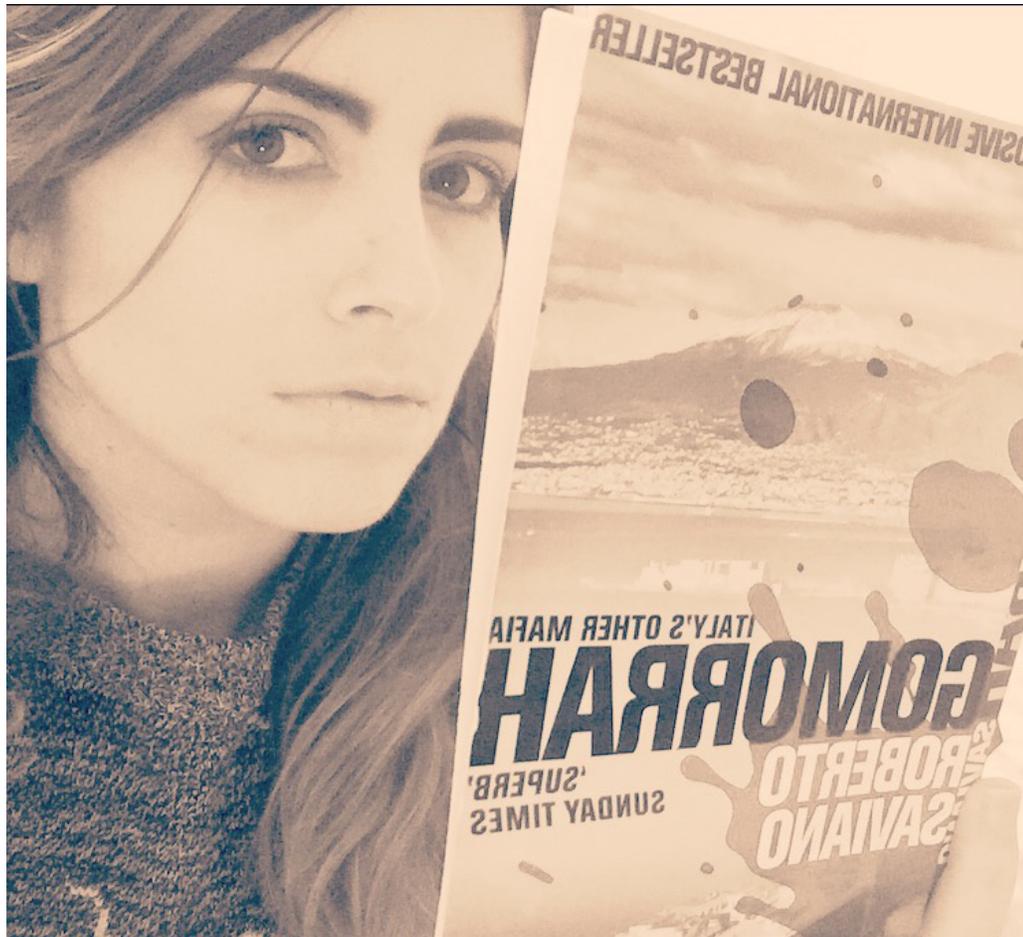
Tales of gibberish  
fool faux argot  
into copacetic squareness

Is the nonsense person  
the square hipster  
when ambiguity masks the kitsch

If a square  
has a curvy bum  
does that make them  
awkwardly hip

If a bum speaks gibberish  
is the nonsense considered hip

# *CRITICISM*



# The Vividness of Non-Fiction in Roberto Saviano's *Gomorrah*

*Genna Rivieccio*

In 2006, Roberto Saviano managed to unscrew the lid on a tightly closed institution: the Camorra. Gathered from behind-the-scenes experience that Saviano endured at great personal risk (a risk that would, of course, increase tenfold in the wake of his novel's publication), the gory details of the daily goings-on of the System—as called by the *camorristi* themselves—is told with such horrifying vividness that one is left to wonder how this corrupt mode of everyday functioning could possibly have been allowed (and

continue) to persist. But by the time Saviano is finished telling the tale, you almost understand: it's easier to pay the forces of evil to do your bidding in Italy and later blame them for the way things are than actually do anything to make a difference.

Opening with an unforgettable image of the Port of Naples depicted as the hub of every single item that originates not just from Southern Italy, but the far reaches of the East as well, outsiders are given a true insight into the omnipresent power of the Camorra as never before. The port is, as Saviano eloquently puts

it, “an open wound.” He insists, “Everything that exists passes through here... There’s not a product, fabric, piece of plastic, toy, hammer,

why wouldn’t you take advantage of a chance to exploit a government that’s done nothing but infer you’re worthless with its legislation and

“Here the proverbial slowness that makes the Neapolitan’s every move molasses-like is quashed, confuted, negated.” That “here” is the

**“So it goes that Naples is the epicenter of an unspoken rat race to make money off of every possible entity that enters its underlooked entrails.”**

shoe, screwdriver, bolt, video game, pair of pants, drill or watch that doesn’t come through here.” So it goes that Naples is the epicenter of an unspoken rat race to make money off of every possible entity that enters its underlooked entrails. For when you’re a forgotten population, deemed uneducated and unrefined,

nepotism toward the North? Saviano himself born and bred in Naples, it’s easy to comprehend his attachment to this particular non-fiction subject, one he treats with the utmost detail and care. Obliterating the stereotype that Neapolitans are ineffectual and unenterprising due to their impotent political backdrop, Saviano remarks,

alternate reality of the port, the axis of all Camorra profit. Regardless of the fact that it’s been ten years since the original release of *Gomorra*, the reader can’t help but think that very little has probably actually changed in response to the mass knowledge delivered by Saviano’s bitingly accurate prose. Because even when

one names names, the very nature of the Camorra is like a Hydra: if you cut off one head, more still will grow back in its place. In many respects, it has almost lent more credibility and respect to the “institution” in that television and film renderings inspired by the novel have offered a sort of Hollywood cachet to the Camorra in the same vein that Martin Scorsese’s *Goodfellas* did to Brooklyn gangster Henry Hill. That’s the thing about highlighting corruption: it only becomes all the more glamorous as a result—especially to Americans. Like the *camorristi* responsible for keeping the death toll steady in the Campania region, objective bystanders have found a way to make it effortless to distance themselves from what’s actually happening. To spectators who see it unfold in narrative form on TV, it’s art. To the Camorra, it’s called “to do a piece.” Saviano debunks the origins of the term, explaining, “The expression...came from contract labor or piecework. Killing a human being became the equivalent of manufacturing something.”

And there’s no more valuable product than a human life—what it holds in the balance for those who are threatened and held at the mercy of an AK-47 (they’re quite cheap to buy in Naples). Like aspiring actresses living just within the reach of Hollywood (think Marilyn Monroe growing up in Hawthorne, California), those born in particularly opportunityless Naples areas like Scampia or Secondigliano can only dream of growing up to be a Camorra soldier; it seems like the most glittering thing a person can do with his life. And it isn’t just the plethora of available women and drugs that come with it, but the unbridled immunity to any sort of authority.

If anything, it is those in positions of alleged power—government officials, CEOs and even the clergy—that are at the mercy of what the Camorra’s whims dictate. After all, how is the North supposed to dispose of its trash in the South if it enrages a *camorrista* in charge of getting rid of massive quantities of waste? For as maligned and oppressed as the South is by decades of stagnation, it manages to clandestinely run the entire nation of Italy through the channels of trash, drugs and just about any other product or service that can be sold. Thus, to go against the juggernaut that is the Camorra ends up being self-flagellating rather than self-righteous.

The implications of doing what is wrong being not only more profitable, but also more beneficial even to the commoner in the short term is a testament to just how disturbingly unstoppable the Camorra is. They even have their hands in the Oscar pot, as evidenced by Angelina Jolie’s 2001 red carpet ensemble at the Academy Awards: the infamous white pantsuit. According to Saviano’s account, a minion working in a Camorra sweatshop was the true party responsible for its intricately tailored design, which would later be attributed to being made by Dolce & Gabbana. At least the credit was given to *somebody* Italian, but still, the ubiquitousness of the Camorra extending all the way to the world of “haute couture” is not only sickening (and not in the good, Latrice Royale on *Drag Race* sort of way), but extremely alarming.

As Saviano weaves our psyches in and out of every territory along the Vesuvius from Torre Annunziata to Ercolano, we are given

the sort of day to day account of Neapolitan life that shatters illusions of nothing but simple times consisting of pasta, Sophia Loren movies and tarantella music—the damage that Neapolitans must live with because they’re victims of the System that has cropped up in place of what should be the real system.

Ironically enough, Saviano would go on to be accused and found guilty for plagiarism of certain portions of the novel in 2015, extrapolating entire sections from—among other journalistic outlets—two Southern Italian newspapers, thereby betraying the very region that catapulted him to fame. Perhaps crime begets crime. Whatever the case, it’s not going away anytime soon in Campania—and no one makes that clearer than Saviano, “stylized” account or not.

