

BEAT THE DUST

January 2010

Featured Writer, Tony O'Neill

Introduction

The first edition of Beat the Dust in 2010 is devoted to the work of our fifth Featured Writer, the novelist and poet, Tony O'Neill. And we've got quite a few exclusives for you, including stories from his 2009 collection, *Notre Dame Du Vide*, originally published in French by 13e Note Editions, a new poem, an early film review, and on the live site, Tony reading an extract from his forthcoming novel, *Sick City*, to be published by Harper Perennial later this year. In addition, Dan Fante, our last Featured Writer, has kindly interviewed Tony exclusively for this issue of Beat the Dust. So, let's kick off January's special Featured Writer edition with that interview...

Dan Fante interviews Tony O'Neill



Tony O'Neill author pic © Nicolas Guerbe

Dan Fante (DF): You've been married before and have had other relationships. Compare your current lifestyle and relationship to your previous ones.

Tony O'Neill (TO): Many less drunken late night car chases, death threats, suicide threats, overdoses, almost no incidents of cracked out gunplay, and many fewer evictions.

DF: You live in New York City. Does living in a New York environment help your writing? If so, how?

TO: It helps me because New York is totally dead, and so I don't get distracted. When I go back to LA and I see how available everything is right out in the open – hard drugs, cheap liquor, etc etc, I realize that I would have probably never written a word if I hadn't left. People say there's a scene in New York, but the scene bores me, and most of the new wave of New York writers

who are considered hip at the moment totally bore me. This is a good thing – I spend my time writing instead of hanging out and drinking.

DF: You co-authored an American football book. How was it for you as a writer, being from the UK, to take on a book about a sport you've never played?

TO: Ha – it was interesting. The way I sold it to the subject was this – you can teach me all about football. You couldn't teach a football guy all about being a junkie. You have the football skills; I have holes in my arms, so let's meet in the middle.

DF: Franz Kafka once wrote: "A good novel should have the same effect as a blow to the head." What is your goal as an author? What is your message to the reader?

TO: My goal is always to make the reader feel something. A lot of stuff bothers me about literature and the scene right now – a lot of the new stuff coming out is all tricks, and no soul. I suppose I write for the people who don't want their books to be perfumed and sweet, and aren't afraid to get some dirt under their fingernails. I suppose my message to the reader is a message of freedom. That there is another way, an escape from the tyranny of the work week, of being sane. In my autobiographical writing, it's never about warning people off my path – it's about lighting the path, and showing people that the less traveled paths can be much more interesting, exciting and thrilling than playing it safe. The fictional stuff is about that too. It's my way of celebrating my favorite personality types – the bastards who aren't afraid to go insane.

DF: You've been a successful musician. What influence has that career had on your writing?

TO: It taught me to be suspicious of anyone who tells you to sign papers in exchange for becoming either rich or famous. I never made much money playing music. I was always broke. I barely made my rent, I could barely afford drugs, I could barely afford booze and I had to rely on hand-outs for food. But it did pull me out that whole school–college–work thing early on, which I think was good for me. It got me used to instability, no money, but the exhilaration of scraping by doing something you believe in. It also ruined my employment prospects early on, so now I write very much without a safety net, which is a good thing. The best motivator for a writer is fear.

DF: Tell me about your favorite music and what it is about that music that inspires you?

TO: I have fairly wide tastes when it comes to the types of music I listen to. I hate pop shit. Music has to speak to me in the same way that books or any art has to. I have to feel something – some pain, or some joy, something real. I musically came of age in the whole Britpop thing, so I still have a soft spot for that stuff – the Charlatans, Pulp, Elastica, that whole thing. But I like old rock and roll like Gene Vincent, Little Richard and Hasil Adkins; I like Howling Wolf and Bukka White, Sun Ra and the MC5, Suicide and Johnny Thunders, and a bunch of other stuff. The best music of all is the clack of the keys when I'm getting off a really good piece of writing.

DF: If you weren't a writer what would you be doing today?

TO: Honestly, I'd be bumming around trying to make it in some other discipline of the arts and probably failing. I think that the honest answer is that I might be dead or possibly one of the living dead.

DF: Writers inspire other writers. Tell me who the writers are who have had the greatest influence on you and your work, and why?

TO: Herbert Huncke was the first writer who really grabbed me in terms of giving me clues towards how I wanted to tell stories. Alexander Trocchi's artiness and political thought is inspiring to me. Your own work has been a big influence and I have talked about that in many interviews so I won't embarrass you by doing it again here. William Burroughs I think happened upon something very powerful in his writing, although he's a dangerous writer to be influenced by because even the slightest bit of Burroughs-aping can be detrimental for a new writer. He was one of those weird ones who burned a trail that is wonderful to admire, but almost impossible to follow without falling into being a hack copyist. Donald Goines is a big influence on me, in so far as his ability to crank out work in the face of personal adversity and tell a story with no frills and fuss. Jim Thompson for many of the same reasons as Goines, but I always admired the way Thompson would stick in the sickest, weirdest detours into what were really straight-ahead thrillers – like the whole part with the vagina farm in *Savage Night* and that book's completely surreal ending. I think that a lot of modern writers are fakes and frauds. If you only followed what was going on now you'd get the impression that writers are a bunch of pussies, so there aren't many current writers who are influencing me at the moment. I should be influencing them.

DF: What is the future of the small press in America? And the future of book publishing in general?

TO: I actually think that the small press is in good health. I just put out a chapbook with Black Bile press up in Canada, and I think it's important that writers who have started putting books out on bigger publishers should keep engaging with the smaller presses. I think for small presses, the digital revolution has made things easier. As for the big publishers they seem to be hurting, but it would take a much smarter guy than me to tell them how to fix it. Maybe if they spent less money signing moronic memoirs by airhead idiots like that girl from *The Hills* or Screech from *Saved By The Bell* and concentrated on their job of nurturing new writers, they'd be doing better. I was gonna throw Sarah Palin in there, but then again that particular idiot has sold enough books to keep Harper Collins in caviar and champagne through the next fiscal year. I gotta say that Harper Perennial are doing a pretty good job of concentrating on signing new, interesting writers and not television personalities, so I don't want to tar 'big publishing' all with the same brush. It's not that they're all morons. Just most of them.

DF: Being a writer is not exactly like striking gold. Why keep doing it? What drives you?

TO: I think it's the same for every writer – this weird mix of delusional self belief, fear of getting a real job, a borderline personality imbalance of some kind, and a terror of dying without ever having left anything worthwhile behind. Basically if I couldn't write, somebody might have had me committed at this point.

Untitled Poem, 2000



This poem is an early one, written sometime in 2000 when I was at the height of some drug-induced madness. I would often get very productive when I was injecting crystal meth, and start grand projects - a series of paintings (I found a bunch of canvases in a dumpster in Hollywood, and shoplifted a set of oil paints), a novel, poems, and a screenplay based on the life of Joe Meek (for that story, you can read *not quite joe meek* at <http://www.fiftytwostories.com/?p=22> - it's the second story down). Of course, I never finished anything. This poem is one of the few to survive that I still like. I found it in a bloodstained notebook that somehow made it back from LA to London. I put it in my book, *songs from the shooting gallery*.

Untitled Poem, 2000

Hollywood
 You are a dirty whore
 I love you
 Lets get married

Lets get fucked up, lost,
 Take me down the worst parts
 Of Sunset
 Lets score crack at Donuts Unlimited
 Lets get bleeding tattoos
 Of the Virgin Mary

Lets lose our accents
 Lose Ourselves
 Say goodbye to Dave:
 Let him walk to Cambodia
 In a coke induced freak-out-
 Lets snort crystal with Marty
 And his leather chaps
 In the Spot Light

Lets laugh and love
 And vomit and shit
 Lets drink with the day laborers
 In The Gold Room
 And listen to heartbreaking
 Spanish love songs
 On the old Wurlitzer
 Gargle whiskey and soda
 At The Frolic Room
 Until the barmaid throws us out

Then we can lay down on the sidewalk
 With the cigarette butts
 And the gum
 And the old movie stars:
 Just you
 Me
 Rita Hayworth
 And the California
 Moon

Don't Look In The Basement



Some of my earliest writing was movie reviews, for fanzines. I started doing this again on the Guardian's movie blog, but I really hate most blogs. I'm beginning to hate the internet. The internet depresses me because people depress me. On the internet everybody has an opinion. Some people think it's funny to laugh at all the idiotic comments people leave on youtube, or on news sites, but for me it just makes me sad. Sometimes not being aware of how utterly fucking stupid most people really are, is a good thing. With the internet, people seemingly can't wait to reveal what idiotic shit suckers they are.

Anyway, this is a movie review I wrote a long time ago (maybe around the time I was writing *digging the vein*). Can't remember who or where I wrote it for, but I don't think it was ever published.

Don't Look in the Basement! (1973) Dir: S.F. Brownrigg

In the 1970's there was a definite trend towards exploitation movies warning us not to do stuff. "Don't Answer the Phone!" the posters screamed, "Don't Go Near The Park" they warned. "Don't Torture A Duckling," they confusingly advised. Some were good, some bad, most were just plain strange. One of my favorite movies to emerge from this trend was "Don't Look In The Basement."

When it first started showing at drive theatres in the early 70's, "Don't Look In The Basement" had the good fortune to be paired with one of the most notorious exploitation movies ever made: Wes Craven's rape/revenge shocker "Last House On The Left" (you know, the one with the great tag line "To avoid fainting, keep repeating... it's only a movie... it's only a movie...") The coupling was incredibly successful, and both movies ran for years on the grindhouse circuit, horrifying and disgusting audiences the length and breadth of America.

"Don't Look In The Basement" is a grimly effective, low budget shocker from trash auteur S.F. Brownrigg. If you haven't come across Brownrigg before, his movies include "Don't Open The Door" (you might be noticing a theme with his titles here), "Scum Of The Earth" (a kind of "Deliverance"-influenced tale of psychotic hillbillies), and "Keep My Grave Open" (a gender-bending slasher movie). The Michigan Daily reportedly called "Scum of the earth" one of "the worst movies of all time". They obviously hadn't seen The Da Vinci Code yet.

Besides having a fantastic, evocative title, "Don't Look In The Basement" is also a very creepy movie. Brownrigg was a master of "less is more" and he managed to make a very small budget go a long way. It had the tagline "The Day The Lunatics Took Over The Asylum!" and although it was no "One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest," in amongst the tongue removals, axe murders, eye gougings and hideous overacting, there was a pretty neatly scripted thriller.

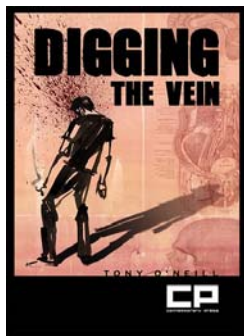
The story opens in an isolated asylum, where Dr Stephens takes a very unusual approach to treating his patients' mental disorders. Instead of suppressing their fantasies, they are encouraged to live them out. So we have one guy who calls himself "The General", running around in full army gear, and shouting orders at everyone. One woman cradles a raggedy-looking doll, convinced it is her dead child. When Dr Stephens receives an axe in his back for his troubles, the sadistic Dr Geraldine Masters takes over. This happens just before the arrival of the new nurse, who then spends the rest of the movie being menaced by the inmates and trying to work out why people keep showing up with body parts missing. Is Dr Masters hiding some kind of grim secret...?

Now, I don't wish to oversell this movie: the acting is theatrical and hysterical, and although Brownrigg may have been a master at churning out movies quickly and cheaply, he was certainly no Hitchcock. Most of the movie has the terrified nurse running through corridors that all look exactly the same as the one in the previous shot. Although the plot twist towards the end is clever, it takes maybe 20 minutes too long to get there.

That said, "Don't Look In The Basement" is the kind of movie that is easy on the eyes (and the brain) and unlike some of the "cult movies" that are being dusted off and released onto DVD, it won't bore you in between the gory bits. It also has a finale so gory and hysterical, that it almost topped the final scene of the 1980s' slasher classic "Maniac" for sheer brutality.

I love these movies because of their lack of pretension, and because they were made in an era when low budget mavericks could still get their movies onto a cinema screen. A bad movie from a major Hollywood studio usually involves Will Smith and 30 million dollars' worth of special effects. Even the very worst 1960s/70s exploitation movie will usually have the good grace to be entertainingly inept. I know I would rather sit through 10 Herschell Gordon Lewis flicks than another Ron Howard snoozefest. How about you?

The Cure Is The Curse



It's no secret that I spent some time in the methadone clinics in LA, which were a pretty rough place. It did inspire quite a bit of writing though, including a long section in *digging the vein* and this poem. Having been a methadone patient in both LA and London, I can definitely say that things were much more humane in London. That said, it's kind of like the choice between a kick in the balls and a kick in the teeth. This poem featured originally in *songs from the shooting gallery*.

The Cure Is The Curse

the cure is the curse
in the methadone clinics of L.A.
generations of misery
a mountain of abscesses
armies of hurt
pent between dirty fluorescent lit
institutional walls

the old Chinese
points to his down-turned mouth
and you say ahhhhh
after swallowing:
they own your balls
they own your soul and now
they own your spit.

in the parking lot out back
only those able to regurgitate at will
into label-less brown medicine bottles
can make enough for a quarter
of a bag of dope

isn't it beautiful
making out
in the land of the free?

life on methadone
at first is like walking
through a sea of ink
like your brain has been pulled out
and replaced
by pond scum:
you can't think, your prick
doesn't work
and you can't even
get high anymore.

then they cut your dose
and the trouble really begins:
on the outpatient reduction cure
no-one ever
gets clean.
many don't come back
but no-one
gets clean.

the sign out front says
"Here to Help!"
but 2 weeks in, when
12 dollars doesn't get you enough methadone
to stay well

and a bag of heroin is 7 dollars downtown...
 (Well,
 you do the math)

in the methadone clinics of L.A.
 and in the 12-step meeting rooms
 and anyplace – anywhere
 the cure is the curse
 because when the anesthesia wears off
 life buries you
 under a kinetic landslide of
 images, emotions, fear,
 pain, futility
 your fighting arm has withered
 and died through non-use
 and each successive blow resounds like
 a thousand atomic bombs

How Maria Lost Her Tooth



This one is one of those weird stories that came out of nowhere. I always watch the people who dress up in goofy costumes outside Mann's Chinese Theater and wonder what goes on in their private lives. I recall once seeing a dwarf dressed in a Chucky (*Child's Play*) costume cursing out a tourist who tried to pick him up without asking permission first. The tourist kicked the dwarf and ran away, leaving Chucky laid out on the sidewalk.

How Maria Lost Her Tooth

At four o'clock Charlie Chaplin walked into The Frolic Room, on Hollywood Boulevard. He pushed the door open, bathing the startled afternoon drinkers in vicious white light. They screwed up their faces and blinked with eyes long used to beer light and cathode hum, then looked away until the door fell shut again. Chaplin adjusted to the gloom and sucked in the cool, stale air. His shirt was undone at the collar, the bow tie hanging askew, crushed hat in his hand, and his tattered jacket slung over his arm. His white face was melting away at the forehead, patches of pink dissolving through the pallor, the exposed neck and throat a different hue than the face.

Chaplin didn't raise any eyebrows as he shuffled across the bar and pulled up a stool next to a pock marked old Indian with hair down to his ass. The Indian was reading last week's *LA Weekly* and nursing a beer. Chaplin ordered a Budweiser and a shot of bourbon, carefully placing his crushed hat in a beery pool. The girl returned with the beer and the bourbon. Chaplin raised the smaller glass to his lips and drained it in one defeated flourish, sliding it back over towards her. He motioned for a refill, and dug through his baggy pant pockets for a crumpled twenty. He placed it on the bar as she brought him another.

The barfly to Chaplin's right watched as he drained the second shot glass in the same manner that he had the first. He slammed the glass down, and quietly rested his head in his hands. "Arugh," breathed Chaplin.

"Wass with the costume, man?" the barfly asked.

Chaplin turned and stared at him. He stared at the barfly for several seconds without blinking. His look wilted the barfly, who returned to his paper without another word. Chaplin raised his pint glass to his lips and took a long drag from it; sucking the beer down, down, down in a practiced, languid movement. He replaced the frothy pint glass on the bar and burped. He collected his change, and left his hat and two dollars at the bar. As he stalked out, the bar was momentarily thrown into light once more.

When the darkness returned the barfly nodded at the hat and said to the bar girl "That guy forgot his hat." When she didn't respond, he picked up the hat and punched the inside of it, knocking it back into a semblance of its original shape. He placed the bowler hat on his head, and continued with his beer and his paper.

*

After the second knock, Maria put an eye to the peephole. She saw Manny standing there (for that was Chaplin's real name), disheveled and sweating in his ridiculous get up. She undid the chain lock and opened the door.

"What's the matter with you?" she said, "You get fired or something?"

"Yes. Very perceptive."

He walked straight past her and into the apartment. He opened the fridge. There was a single can of Schlitz left, sitting next to a carton of leftover ramen noodles. He opened the can, and took a slug.

"I hope you're gonna replace that beer, motherfucker." Maria said, without humor.

"Fuck off, baby, I had a hard day."

*

"So what happened? You show up drunk again?"

"No. I only had one drink. To steady my nerves. I needed a drink. So would you if you had to go out there and demean yourself for beer money."

"What, so your boss smelled it on you? Old Mr French finally booted you for showing up drunk?"

"Nothin' like that," Manny snorted. "He didn't smell shit on me."

This was true. He had bought a quarter bottle of Russian prince vodka and a pint of orange juice, downing it all in the sick, morning sunlight, before walking over to Mann's Chinese Theater. At the Theater his job was to pose with the fat tourists from Arkansas and Delaware who swarmed around the boulevard like flies on shit. After he'd finished the drink he had chewed on a clove of garlic to mask the smell. An old drinkers' trick. After you chew on the clove, nobody will want to get close enough to smell the booze on you.

"So what went on?"

"I was attacked. Some fucking nigger pushed me, so I clocked him. The next thing I know Mr French is ranting and raving about calling the cops, and I'm booted."

"He attacked you." Maria repeated.

"Yeah, you deaf or something?"

"Out of the blue. Totally unprovoked, some guy just attacks you."

"I stepped on his foot. I tried to apologize, but he started getting in my face, showing off in front of his girlfriend. I guess he was wearing Nikes or whatever else it is those people put on their fuckin' feet. He wouldn't listen to reason. Then the prick shoved me. He knocked my hat off and stamped on it. I had to hit him! It was self defense..."

"Bullshit!"

"Huh?"

Manny looked up, startled by the sound of Maria's voice. He had been so caught up in his own story that it was as if she hadn't even been there anymore.

"Manny... how long have I known you?"

"I...uh..."

"Five years? Six? "

"Sure, but what-"

"Then don't give me fucking fairy tales, Manny. Save that for your fucking probation officer! I know you. You were drunk, right?"

"No!"

"Kiss my ass, 'no! You were drunk. You just told me you'd had a drink before you showed up for work."

"One drink! My nerves can't take it otherwise."

"One drink. Uh-huh... So you show up fuckin' sauced, and then you attack some black kid because he looked at you funny. Again. "

"No! It wasn't like that at all! He attacked me! It was a RACIAL attack!"

"Racial! All I hear out of your mouth is nigger this, nigger that, and you have the nerve to claim this kid attacked you because he was a racist? You're the most racist person I know!"

"I am not racist! I just call a spade a spade!"

"No you don't, Manny. You call 'em fucking niggers, and you know it!"

"Ah, there's no talking to you!"

Manny drained the can, sat on the bed and started pulling his shoes off.

"What you doing?"

"Taking my shoes off."

"No you ain't. You're going to the liquor store and getting more beer. You finished the last one!"

"We'll drink wine."

"I finished the wine."

"Then we'll drink whiskey!"

"I finished the whiskey too. Now go to the store. You got any dinero?"

Manny started cursing and pulling crumpled bills out of his pocket. Maria counted through them, stuck the majority of the money in her bra, and handed Manny a twenty.

"Go get a bottle," she said.

"You really finished the whiskey too?"

Maria nodded.

"Jesus Christ."

Manny pulled off the outfit, changing into a plain white t-shirt stained with grease and full of holes. He slinked out of the apartment reluctantly. Maria went over to the mirror and started applying her makeup. She was in her 40s but life had taken a hard toll on her. Her face was spider-webbed with broken blood vessels and swollen in the manner of those who drink every day. While she loathed Manny, and learned to fear his drunken rages, she loved him too. They both clung to each other, even as their weight dragged each other down under the surface.

*

It happened later, after he had returned from the liquor store, and they were both sat silently drinking and smoking in their underwear. Her tits flopped lifelessly against her corrugated torso, nipples pounding towards the threadbare carpet in a lifeless fashion. When she was drunk enough, Maria stood and walked over to where Manny was sitting. He had tried to wash the shit off of his face, but he still looked pasty and strange. Maria was drunk enough to ignore it. She asked Manny, "So you gonna fuck me, Charlie?" Manny put down the glass and said, "Sure."

He needed something to take his mind off the idea that he would be back to walking the streets tomorrow, trying to figure out a gig that would make money in the short term. This world was so ugly, so pointless. He took another swig, draining the glass. "Come here," he grinned and Maria straddled him, pinning him under her soft, meaty legs.

"I love you, Manny..." she whispered, breathing alcohol fumes softly into his face. He grunted his acquiescence as he started kneading her soft tit.

*

"Don't look at me that way!" Manny hissed

"What way?"

They were on the bed, naked. Maria was looking at Manny with a detached expression, and Manny could not stand it. She had refilled her glass, and sipped at it silently. His limp, lifeless penis was between them, small and useless.

"Maybe you drank too much?" she said, softly.

"Don't talk to me!"

Maria shrugged, "Hey don't take it out on me. It's not my fault you can't get it up. Maybe you're getting too old, Charlie... past your peak."

Manny closed his eyes, and visualized taking the glass from her hand and crushing it into her face. Shoving the broken shards in there, turning her face into hamburger meat. He groaned again and repeated it, almost a mantra this time. "*Don't... talk... to... me...*"

"Okay. Okay." Maria watched him, his face collapsed in, eyes closed, breathing softly. On the television they were talking about elections and bombs. The same old song, over and over. Maria sniggered to herself a little, choking it down inside of her throat. Manny opened a single eye, and looked at her with a lizard's calm.

"What?"

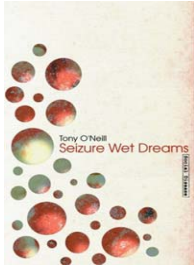
Maria shook her head quickly, and said nothing.

"I said what *is* it, Maria? What's so fucking *funny*?"

Maria's face grew hard and she stared Manny down. Then a smile, which betrayed no humor, cut itself into her face. "I was just thinking," she said, "That it's the story of my life. I think I'm getting the great dictator," she said, pointing to his limp penis, "and instead I get the little tramp."

And that is how Maria lost her tooth.

Finisterre



This poem originally appeared in *Remark*, a really beautiful poetry book. It was printed in an edition of 125, which came out 3 or so years ago and was guest edited by Brian McGettrick, who is a really great poet in his own right.

Finisterre

today feels like
 I am trying to stuff
 my cocaine-impotent prick
 into the too-tight cunt
 of an unconscious whore

today feels like
 the dread realization
 at the end of every detoxification:
 I am clean, but the world
 is still a daily holocaust

today feels like
 waking up
 in bed sheets sopping
 with your own
 ice-cold piss

today I am too tired
 to even say
 "fuck the world"
 instead the world
 is slowly fucking me

today Fante, Exeley,
 Trantino, Burroughs,
 Miller cannot save me
 from myself

these are the days
 which drive us to
 suicides of one kind
 or another

a day
 were I find myself
 on a flickering transmission
 across continents

linked by sadness
 to every crushed soul
 that sits alone in a rented room
 listening to the shipping forecast

our hung over souls cast out
 upon lonely, exotic-sounding
 and wind-blasted pieces of rock:
 stoic, unmoving,
 marooned in furious inky seas

Park Avenue Motel Aria



One thing I love about NYC is reading the gothic sounding accounts of violence in the newspapers. "Child stabbed multiple times, set alight in dumpster" - headlines like that. This poem was inspired by a murder in a sleazy motel called the Park Avenue Motel that happened a few years ago. A guy picked up a drunk girl on the street, took her back to the motel, and then in front of his girlfriend, he raped and murdered her. The girlfriend watched the whole thing, and helped to dispose of the body. Like everybody I guess I'm fascinated by human beings' capacity for cold blooded violence, and this poem was my way of wondering exactly what was going through people's minds at the time.

Park Avenue Motel Aria

I told him
 don't be bringing
 no bitches back here. But,
 he don't listen

don't be fucking that
 skinny bitch on this bed
 don't be playing me like that. But
 he don't listen

afterwards I check her purse
 the shady fake ID says she's 22
 her real ID says 17. Shit,
 I *told* that motherfucker

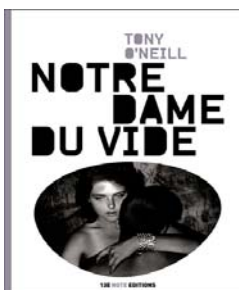
underage too, but
 he don't care

somebody got to that nigger
 long before me
 fucked him up good, too
 that slow motion suicide
 fuck the world shit
 turns me to jelly
 and shit, don't he know it

he put the first nigger
 who ever turned me out
 into the ground; smiled
 that little boy smile
 and my ass was his

now he flashes
 those puppy dog eyes again
 and I am already driving
 to Wal-Mart
 against my better mothfuckin judgment
 to get the bleach
 and some garbage bags

Loving The Dead



I wrote a whole series of stories set in various drug rehabs in LA, and they are collected in *Notre Dame Du Vide*, published by the French publishing house, 13e Note Editions. This is one of them.

Loving The Dead

Word around the place was that Mercedes had died and come back, and now she believed she was immortal. I never heard it from her own lips, we spoke less than twenty words in the time I

knew her, but I had the sense that not only did she believe this but that it was also true. She was beautiful in the way that only those possessed by immortality can be. I do mean, "Possessed by immortality". One cannot possess immortality, nuh-huh, it happens the other way around. For thirty days, while my roommates snored, I silently conjured her face as I manipulated myself into orgasm. When I came I wept sometimes because I knew I could never have her. I was a mere mortal, bound by flesh and blood, and therefore superfluous to her needs.

*

"When you were younger... a child... there was... *abuse?*" His voice goes up expectantly at the end. I have been looking the office over again, the utilitarian grey carpet, the desk stuffed with post-it notes, pens, sharpies, folders, what seems to me to be a concerted effort to look "happy" and "productive." When his voice goes up I realize that an answer is required of me. I look back to him, confused.

"I, um, I, uh, no."

"No?" [Tap, tap, tap goes the pen against his chin]

"No."

"Forgive my skepticism... It's just that I have found that in cases of, uh, chronic drug use such as yours... there often tends to be... *abuse* at the heart of it. Sexual. Physical. Emotional. Even verbal. I mean, in very many cases, the patient is *totally unaware* of the connection..."

"Well, no. Not me. Nothing like that."

"Hm."

He makes some notes. I notice that he hasn't turned his calendar over. Today is the first day of July. I have been here for three weeks already, and I feel no better. My birthday comes in another week. I am about to point out the calendar, when he says "So why do you *do* drugs?"

I start to laugh. Oh God, this stupid fucking question again. He smiles at me, pained, and says "You consider this a silly question."

I'm still laughing. I wave my hand at him in apology. I get the laughter under control, and say, "Yeah. Kinda silly."

"And why is that?"

"You used to do meth, right?"

He shrugs, and gets that puffed up look that the counselors get when you mention their own drug use. Most all of the staff here are ex dopers, drunks, fuck ups. Maybe he regrets telling me about his history with meth, in an attempt to get me on side at the beginning of our sessions. There's a small part in every ex-junkie that still wants the approval of current dope fiends. They still want to be considered "one of us." The thrill of being outside of regular society is a much harder habit to kick than dope.

"Yes," he says, "That's right."

"Why did *you* do it?"

"There were many... complex reasons..."

"But – did you like the way it made you feel? The first time you did it, did you like it?"

"Yes, of course."

"So you did it because it feels good. That's why I do it too. Because it feels so fucking *good*."

*

After the session I pass a woman sobbing in the corridor. Other guys walk right past her as if she were invisible. She is by the payphones, which are right up against the wall of the head office. People say the phones are tapped. You often see people crying here. Phone use is heavily restricted in this place, and usually when phone privileges are finally granted, the first news that patients get isn't good.

They are going to press charges.

Tony OD'd.

The court wants your kids.

Can you sit down for a moment? It's just that we got the results of your blood test...

I know this woman vaguely. I heard her share in a meeting. She is almost fifty, and looks much older. She has been an alcoholic for many years. She has two adult children, one is a born-again Christian, and one is a heroin addict. The Christian can't have children; the heroin addict has three but can't look after them. The Christian is threatening to call child services if her sister doesn't get baptized and join a born-again commune that is supposed to specialize in helping addicts to get clean. That is the last I heard. Now there is more, because the woman is sobbing pitifully, wiping the snot from her face with a shaking hand. I fight my instinct to ask her if she is OK. I walk past her instead, as I am not permitted to talk with any of the female patients. That is called "consorting" and it is frowned upon. In the week that I have been here, I saw two people kicked out for "consorting".

If I get kicked out, I will be back on the street. If I complete the ninety days, maybe Susan's sister will trust us enough to allow us to crash on her couch for a while. Her sister is up in San Francisco. I hear that the dope is pretty good up there. Seven more days of this, and I will be sitting in the City Lights bookstore, high as a motherfucker, and reading a musty smelling old paperback. At peace again.

*

Cigarette break. The heat in the concrete yard is phenomenal. The first week I was here I couldn't take my leather jacket off. I just couldn't seem to warm up. Now I find the heat stifling, unbearable. We are talking about Mercedes; Paddy, James and I. Paddy is a New York Irish crack head who went through detox with me. On the outside he is an air traffic controller at La Guardia Airport. James is here for Oxycontin. He is my age, mid twenties, stupid and rich. His father is someone high up in the Republican Party. James is a stupid son of a bitch. He is wearing two hundred dollar sunglasses, and a lot of gold. He is dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, just like the rest of us, but his T-shirt and jeans cost a lot of money. A lot of his father's money.

"I'm gonna talk to her," James says.

James acts with total impunity in this place. He has been here for a month, but this is his third visit. He has been booted out twice, but is always allowed to return, no questions asked. This is also something to do with his father's money. James and Paddy are roommates.

"See if what's true?" Paddy asks.

"The thing about her being immortal."

"Fuck off! Immortal! You talk a lot of shit, sometimes."

There are tables all over the yard, and the women all group together at one end, and the men at the other. It is like a fucking high school dance. I can see Mercedes, alone and thoughtful. The other women think she is crazy, or maybe they hate her because of the way she looks. She is staring at the backs of her hands.

"I don't know about being immortal," I say, "but she is beautiful."

Paddy nods his head and stubs out his cigarette. James openly stares at her.

"She's not bad," he agrees, "You know, for a wetback."

"Fuck off!" Paddy snaps. Paddy has a wife. She is Columbian. James just laughs, and says, "Chill, bro, I'm kidding!" Like I said, James is a stupid son of a bitch.

*

The only time I spoke to her, I was late for meditation class. I was bounding up the stairs, when I found her alone, sitting on the steps in between floors. She had an unopened copy of the Big Book in her hands. She was wearing black jeans, and a tank top. Her hair was tied back away from her face. I just stopped, shocked to see her, and stared for a few seconds. The sun was streaming in through the skylight, and it made her skin glow. Her mouth was insolent, her nose regal, and her eyebrows thick and shapely. It was this glimpse of her face that would fuel my fantasies for the forthcoming weeks.

"Hi," she said.

I just stared. Then, caught off balance, I stuttered, "Hi, Mercedes..." I looked at her arms, at the fresh needle marks that traced a history of pain and self-abuse starting at the backs of her hands up to her elbows.

"You know my name," she said. She didn't seem surprised. I heard a door swing open somewhere beneath us, and the clatter of approaching footsteps. Panicked I spluttered, "You have pretty hands," before I ran past her, towards my class.

For the next hour I sat in silence with the others, but I could not concentrate. I was thinking about the backs of her hands, how torn up they had been by the needle. Why did I tell her that her hands were pretty? Why not her mouth, her eyes, her nose? I was sure that she now thought that I was either being cruel, or that I was a complete idiot.

"*Breathe in...*" the instructor, whispered, "*Now out...*"

*

"Step one is the key, you do realize that..."

He has turned the calendar since our last session. I will soon be twenty-two years old. I have told no one of my upcoming birthday. Last week some poor bastard turned thirty in here, and they brought out a crappy cake, everyone sang happy birthday in the echoey, cold canteen. Then we ate hot dogs and drank fruit punch. I found it depressing, so I have kept my mouth shut about my own impending anniversary.

My counselor is a little put out that I haven't thrown myself into the steps with as much vigor as some of the others in here. He tells me that my contrarian streak will kill me one day. My problems with the twelve steps begin with step one.

1: We admitted that we were powerless over drugs and alcohol, and that our lives had become unmanageable.

"But I don't..." I sigh, "I don't think that I'm powerless."

"Have you tried to stop using heroin before?"

"Yes."

"And what were the results?"

"It didn't work."

"Have you tried to control your use of heroin before?"

"Yes."

"And what were the results?"

"It didn't work."

"So can you explain to me, why you think that you AREN'T powerless over heroin?"

I could explain this, but I don't. I could tell him that by granting this mysterious, talismanic power to a man-made substance like heroin, I am cementing my inability to keep clean. I am admitting that I can never beat my addiction. I am making heroin God, and myself just it's subject. Even if I quit heroin, by admitting I am powerless over it, I am saying that I will always self-consciously be 'in recovery'. One day I would like to be something more than an ex-heroin addict.

But I don't say this. Because that response leads to another response from my counselor, which leads to another from me, and it goes on and on and on, and no one ever wins. The debate is structured in such a way that the best I can hope for is a stalemate. My urge to resist is strong, though. I know that once I concede my powerlessness, they have driven in the first wedge. Then God comes next. And I'll be damned if they start making me accept God in any way, shape or form.

*

Somebody else went home today, a woman who went through detox with me called Lori. Lori was an alcoholic. It was weird, because I saw it happen. We were at an outside meeting in a

church basement, and Lori tripped and fell down a short flight of concrete steps. She twisted her back, but seemed OK. When she woke up the next morning I saw her limping around in the breakfast hall barely able to walk. The staff made a big fuss of her, and she was driven to the local emergency room.

The driver happened to be an old guy called Jimmy. Over the weeks, Jimmy and I had talked a lot. He was a dope fiend like me, and we shared the garbage detail the first week I was there. When we were throwing out rotten heads of lettuce and festering gravy, he would regale me with tales of hanging out with Lenny Bruce, or sitting in on drums with Art Pepper, during the glory days of LA's dope scene. Jimmy had landed a prime job – van driving. When your movement is restricted, driving detail is one of the most liberating, sought after jobs there are.

Next day in the kitchen, Jimmy told me that Lori had been kicked out after the trip to the hospital. I was shocked. She had seemed real serious about getting straight. She had said in group that this was her last chance to have a relationship with her kids.

"She done fucked her back up good," Jimmy told me.

"Yeah? So what?"

"So the doctors gave her a shot. When she got back the staff tested her urine, and boom! She tested positive."

"Oh Christ! She got hold of liquor at the hospital? How?"

"No, man! The shot the doctor gave her was a painkiller! She tested positive for opiates."

"So what? A doctor gave her that shot!"

"Bur she's in here. She can't have nothing like that when she's in here."

"Jimmy, that's fucked up. That girl wasn't even a junkie. She was a drunk. What's the harm if she gets something for her pain?"

"The screws say that she should have called her counselor to see if it was OK, before accepting the shot."

"Why? Her counselor ain't a doctor! He's an ex-crack head! What's she gonna ask him for?"

"Thems the rules."

I shook my head. "That's fucked up. What about her kids?"

"What about `em? They don't give a fuck bout that!" Jimmy laughed. "That bitch ain't nothing but a number in here. Shit, they done filled her bed already."

I thought about Lori all day long after that. In the evening meeting, we all greeted the new girl. Her name was Christine. She stood up and introduced herself. She looked young, maybe sixteen or seventeen years old.

"My name is Christine, and I am an addict," she said.

"Welcome Christine!" everyone responded.

Lori was never mentioned again. When someone leaves by any other means than a proper graduation ceremony, the staff never talks them about again. It is as if they had never even been there. Lori was nothing more than a ghost now.

*

The truck driver got beaten up yesterday. Some guys in the dorm rushed him in the shower, and beat him with their belts and fists. Something about the truck driver upset a lot of the others. I felt it too: like there was an undercurrent of darkness about him that you couldn't quite pinpoint. Sometimes he made jokes about fucking young kids, and he was the only one who laughed at them. He killed a few lighthearted moments like that. A bunch of guys sitting round, swapping stories, bar room tales, that kinda bullshit, and then he'd barge in. "OK, I got a good one. What's better than fucking a ten year old?"

Everybody falls silent and glares at him. He seems utterly unaware of the poisonous effect his jokes have on the others here. He is sat with some serious people too. Gang bangers, hard men, and jailbirds. Nobody says anything. Then Paco, a muscle bound Hispanic whose entire torso is a tapestry of jailhouse tattoos says, "I dunno, Mork" (they call him Mork in here, because he looks a little like a young Robin Williams), "What IS better than fucking a ten year old?" "Fucking a ten year old against a barbed wire fence!" Mork announces proudly. He starts to guffaw. Everybody just stares at him.

"Well you'd know, you motherfucking freak," Paco hissed, and the conversation started up again unsteadily.

Anyway, today Mork sits alone with two black eyes, bruised ribs, and a bloodied lip. He isn't talking about what happened. James is telling me that the word is that he creeped out too many people. "He got what's coming to him," James laughs, dragging on a Marlboro, "I mean, shit, a joke's a joke... but kids? That ain't cool."

"They're a pretty judgmental bunch for a gang of ex-cons and junkies," I say. "Most people in here would steal the morphine suppository out of their dying mother's ass."

James laughs, and then leans in, conspiratorially. "Anyway, fuck that shit. So listen. I was in a meeting with Mercedes last night. Heard it straight from the horse's mouth. Says her heart stopped for three minutes. Overdose. She says that she saw her mom and grandma, and that God himself was holding them in his hand. Then the doctors got her heart started again, and she woke up."

As he talked, I looked around for her. She was alone, as usual, sitting under the shade of the only tree in the yard.

"She says that her mother told her that once you see heaven, you don't have to fear death anymore. Fucking bitch is crazy. I'd bang the shit outta her, though. I made sure that I shared next. Told the story about the time I nodded out and crashed my Bentley into a bus stop." This was an infamous story around the place. He'd hit a young mother who was carrying a three year old in her arms. Nobody died, but the child needed stitches. It had taken nearly ten thousand dollars to make the family go away. The first time I heard James share that story, the meeting chair had asked, "And how did that make you feel?"

"Terrible. It was a beautiful car, and it was just *totaled*. It broke my heart..."

"Why'd you share that story again?" I asked.

James looked at me as if I was retarded.

"Immortal, crazy, or whatever – every chick digs a guy who drives a Bentley!"

Another day passes like a dream.

*

That night, after I came, I had a dream that I was driving Jimmy's van on a winding dirt trail that ran through a forest. In the passenger seat was Mercedes. She was giving me directions, "Straight on... right... straight... past this tree... now stop." We got out of the van. Underneath a gnarled oak tree, lying amongst the twisted, mossy roots, was a clear plastic bag, about the size of a shopping bag, filled with something solid, and off-white. As I got closer I realized that it was full of grotesquely oversized rocks of crack. The air around the bag was infused with the chemical stench of cocaine. Mercedes was naked, her skin glowing in the same way that it had on the stairs that afternoon. She was handing me a glass pipe. I tore into the bag, and loaded it. I handed it to her, watching hungrily as she smoked it. She put her lips to mine, and exhaled the smoke into my mouth. I sucked it in.

I jerked awake, bathed in sweat, heart pounding, still holding my breath. When I realized where I was, I groaned in disappointment. I tried to sleep again, to recapture the forest, the crack, Mercedes, but it was useless. It was all gone.

*

At the breakfast table that morning, Billy tells me the news.

"James is gone. He split just before lights out. Said he was gonna get a motel room and get fucked up."

I laughed. "He'll be back."

"I dunno. Mercedes left, too."

"What? When?"

"Same time. Word is, they left together. Ran off."

I let my head hang. I stared at my toast with butter, my weak coffee. Oblivious to me, Paddy sighed, "That lucky bastard is probably banging her right now. Shit."

I said nothing. It was time for the morning meeting. We already had two new faces: Shawn and Marianne. The cycle continued.

Days crawled by. Paddy graduated, and I gave him my phone number and sister's address. He gave me his mother's address in Queens. We promised to keep in touch. I never saw nor heard from him again. My counselor told me that I wouldn't be allowed to go through the graduation ceremony, citing my resistance to the program as the reason. This was fine by me. It was August, and mentally I was already in San Francisco. Susan was already planning her escape from the hospital. I wondered how long it would be before our habits necessitated our stealing

from her sister, or some other betrayal of trust, and we would be put out of her house. No matter. For now, at least there was a bed. A chance.

*

"I wish we could have worked more towards your recovery," he sighed. "I fear for you. I fear for your life if you leave this place without engaging with the program. You had a shot at sobriety, but you seem intent on blowing it."

"I'm thirty days clean," I told him.

He tapped his forehead: "Not up here. Up here you're as sick as ever. Up here," [tap,tap,tap] "you're already high."

The day before I left, James was back. He looked terrible. He'd lost weight. Some of the cockiness was gone from him. He'd stood up that afternoon and was introduced as a newcomer. The turnover is so fast in a place like this, that to most people here, he *was* a newcomer.

"My name is James," he said, "and I'm still an addict."

"Welcome James!" everybody chimed.

I didn't get to speak to him until the next day, during the morning cigarette break.

"So, you graduate today, huh?" he said, sitting down. I shook my head.

"No graduation. My counselor says that I didn't complete the program."

"Yeah, well fuck that guy. What the fuck does he know?"

I shrugged. "So what happened to you?"

"Ah... Mercedes and me. We shacked up together for a while. A motel, like twenty minutes from here, called The Sea Breeze. A real shit hole. It was a mess. Oxy's. Crack. Mercedes had all of these sketchy Mexican heroin dealers camped out there. God, man, she was so fucking hot, but she was fucking crazy. A nut job. She'd like cook the crack down in lemon juice and shoot it, you know? And then she'd have seizures. Sometimes she'd make me drive her over here, and she'd sit in the car, staring at the gates and just *sobbing*. I'd tell her, *If you wanna go back, I can pay for you!* But no, she'd wanna go back to the motel. She insisted on shooting me with that heroin shit once, and I went under. She had to like pump my chest, breathe into my mouth, the whole bit. I came around and she was all, *Did you see him? Did you see God?* Crazy fucking bitch. I told her she was gonna die if she didn't slow down."

James stubbed out his cigarette, and I noticed his hand was shaking.

"Anyway, two night ago we're getting high and the greedy bitch takes too much dope, and hits the floor before she even gets the needle out of her arm. I tried to bring her out of it, but nothing doing. She's turning blue and shit. So I grabbed my shit, got the fuck out of there, called an ambulance, called my pop... and here I am. They say if I don't complete this time they can't keep me outta jail. Can you believe that shit? God or jail! What kinda choice is that?"

The bell was ringing. It was time for my last counseling session. James went to stand, but I managed to croak, "What about Mercedes?"

James shrugged, "Her? What about her? The short version is, it turns out that the bitch wasn't immortal. Surprise, surprise, right? She was very fucking mortal. And did I mention the bitch was crazy?" He leaned in and winked, "But I'm telling you man, what a piece of ass she was. Incredible." He slapped me on the back, and laughed. "See you around, bro! Clean and serene, right?"

I remained seated. I wondered where James would be the next time I saw him. I had the terrible, sneaking suspicion that he might one day end up as President of the United States of America. He had the connections, and he certainly had the personality.

I looked around the yard as it emptied. I had blown my last chance to accept my powerlessness over heroin. Tonight the graduation ceremony would go on without me. I would be written out of this story, off to join Mercedes, and all of the other ghosts that this place had produced.

Las Vegas Man



Las Vegas Man is based upon my last trip to Vegas. I've only been there twice. The first time I got married to a girl I had known for less than a week. The second time was two years later, and I was divorced from her and heavily strung out. I thought that if I drove to Vegas, where I didn't have any dope connections, I would somehow be able to quit. I took a bag of magic mushrooms with me. When the withdrawals started I was in a room at the MGM Grand, a hotel which had a *Wizard of Oz* theme. I ate the bag of magic mushrooms and my brain almost melted. Lesson: heroin withdrawals + magic mushroom = instant terror. The result was me stalking the streets of Vegas half out of my mind trying to score dope. I ended up fleeing Vegas so I could get to downtown LA and my dope connections before I lost my mind. This poem is inspired by that trip.

Las Vegas Man

Las Vegas man
suck my cock bloody
neon craps tables
and the grinning tin man

another breakdown in the MGM grand
the wheel spins and he starts
screaming, screaming
until the security hustled him out of there

off the strip in Vegas is where the action is
 the tiny motels populated by whores and burnt out drinkers
 red noses and discarded bottles of Ensure
 nothing but pawn shops and crack dealers around these parts

a dead coyote on the road
 a massacre of red and browns
 turned inside out by a speeding Dodge
 fleeing to the city limits

substituting heroin with mushrooms
 going insane as the wallpaper melts off the walls
 4am elevator rides
 talking to a biker called Fuck Face, making a connect for meth

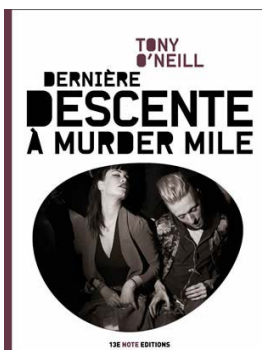
he has breath
 like a hung-over Chinatown morning
 staggering around garbage bags
 under the toxic July heat

*whatcha want meth for
 ya seem like a junkie to me
 I don't fuck with that shit*
 and he flashes me a mouth full of tweaker teeth

Las Vegas man
 50 dollars for a license
 and 2 years hard labor
 two years of black dildo and crying jags

Las Vegas man
 tears across a thousand miles of desert
 the sky contains no possibilities anymore
 and the tape player doesn't even work

The Heart Is A Small Amputated Thing



Here is another story from the collection *Notre Dame Du Vide* published by my French publisher, 13e Note Editions, who've also published my novel *Down And Out On Murder Mile*.

The Heart Is A Small Amputated Thing

Nicole drove away from Raphael at a good clip as soon as they had copped the drugs. Nicole was focused and silent. Carl was too. Carl could not drive. Since he hadn't acquired the skill in all the years he had lived in LA, he safely assumed that he would go to his deathbed without learning.

Carl was in the backseat, tearing open one of the black balloons with his teeth. He had the spoon balanced on his knees. He poured some Evian into the spoon and dropped a nugget of dope into the water. Nicole had the radio on. It was an 80's flashback weekend again. Every weekend in LA seemed to be an 80's flashback weekend. Rodney Bingeheimer started to play "Dead Man's Party" by Oingo Boingo and Carl yelled, "Turn that shit off, you're gonna kill my high."

She stuck a tape in, The Smiths self-titled first album. Carl instructed her to drive steady, as he cooked the dope, dropped a cigarette filter into the solution, and drew it up into 2 syringes. On the backseat was an empty bag of Jack In The Box from last week which had made the whole car stink of stale onion rings. Not even the smell of just cooked heroin could mask it. Carl had a rubber tourniquet around his arm and his syringe between his teeth.

People were honking at Nicole because she was driving slowly, mindful of Carl's activities in the back seat. A Toyota Corolla pulled around them, the driver gave the finger, and cursed at her in Spanish. Nicole yelled for him to suck her dick. Carl slid the needle in his arm.

He was burrowing around in there. It was 11am on Saturday morning, and the heat was already oppressive, stifling. They had just spent their last 100 dollars on heroin and crack. They had another 2 weeks' wait until the next disability check arrived. It was hopeless. But they couldn't figure out what else to do. They couldn't figure out a way of spending the 100 dollars that would save their asses. 100 dollars didn't go far. It represented either a few more nights in the hotel, food for the week, gas for the car. Other than that it had little practical value. Spending it on drugs seemed to be a much more sensible thing to do.

Carl had been an addict for several years. Before he was an addict, he ghosted from job to job, girl to girl, always feeling somewhat sad and dissatisfied with life. Sex made him happy sometimes, but after he came he would feel slightly sick in the pit of his belly and melancholy in a way that he couldn't quite understand. As if he had taken advantage of the girl, or himself, and he couldn't quite figure out how. Every morning he woke up with a sad, disconnected feeling that the day was something to be overcome, like a bout of illness or a mathematics test.

Heroin was rife in the music scene in LA. It seemed that nobody left turds floating in the toilets of LA bars anymore – just crumpled bits of tin foil. Heroin was not hard to track down. For want of a strong pull in any other direction Carl had tried it and liked it, and kept doing it from that day on. It didn't cure the ache inside of him, but it cured the boredom he felt. Life on heroin was as much of a chore as life off of it, but at least on it he woke up with the feeling that something interesting might happen.

Carl pulled the needle out of his arm, causing some black-looking blood to gout out a little. He thought "Where were you when I needed you?" He stuck the needle back in, a little further down, and started probing around again.

Suddenly the car bounced, and he shot straight out of his seat, hit his head on the upholstery, and tore a hole in his arm the size of a nickel. Carl looked very bloody, and he had somehow bent up the needle too.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he demanded, "Drive slowly, bitch!"

"It was a pothole!" she yelled back, "You can't expect me to take the blame for all of the goddamned pot holes in this city! And don't call me bitch. Stop talking like a nigger! You're Polish, for fuck's sake!"

Carl got it in. The needle was bent, but he managed to strike red gold on his third attempt, and he fed the shit in, slow and steady. Somebody else was honking at them, as Nicole made a turn into an "El Pollo Loco" parking lot. As the dope hit, the frantic, staccato horn started to sound like John Coltrane blowing on his tenor. When the second guy that day started to curse them out in Spanish, it sounded like he was reading Lorca.

"You just couldn't wait two fucking minutes. Look at you. You look like you've been in a bar fight. You're such a fucking pig."

In the parking lot Carl sat back, jaw slack and mouth wide, while Nicole fixed in her groin, knees up on the steering wheel. When they were both high enough that the question didn't hurt, she asked him: "So what are we going to do now?"

Carl said: "I don't know."

They had already moved their shit out of the hotel, and stashed it in bin liners in the trunk of the car. There was no more money for drugs.

"My mom keeps saying we should stay with her to get clean."

"Will she give us food?"

"Yes."

"Money?"

"Nope. But I know the combination of their safe. As long as we don't take too much, they would probably never even know. We could detox ourselves, just take the bare minimum and reduce."

"That doesn't work. That never works."

"People get clean that way. I've seen it on TV."

"TV isn't real, Nicole."

"Look – some people get clean. They have to. Where do all the ex junkies come from?"

Carl shrugged. But then it was decided. They were going to stay in Nicole's mom's house, in Venice.

When she first told him that her mom lived in Venice, Carl stupidly thought that she meant Venice, Italy. But there was nothing romantic about the part of Venice that Nicole's mom lived

at. It was called Ghost Town. It was a crack neighborhood. Nicole's mom's house was beautiful. Nicole's stepfather had built the whole thing himself. He was a city architect. He had built it in the early 80's, convinced that Ghost Town was a neighborhood on the verge of a sudden gentrification. He was wrong.

The house reflected his obsession with Japanese culture. It looked Japanese. It had a wood façade, and was surrounded by sliding glass panels. There were meditation rooms and samurai swords on the walls. It looked like it had been airlifted into the ghetto from Osaka or Tokyo. You couldn't see any of this from the street, because the house was surrounded by an imposing brick wall, covering all but the roof. It was like the house was a high-risk prisoner, locked away from the general population for its own safety.

After they moved into the guesthouse, Nicole's mom left them alone. She seemed quiet and anxious most of the time, ghosting around the two of them silently. The guesthouse was small, and contained a kitchen, a computer, a bathroom and a bed. The first thing they did was smoke some crack. Nicole was showering. Carl opened the door a fraction and watched her. They had met at an East Hollywood bar two years prior. Back then she had been extremely pretty, slim: a cute blonde California punk rock girl. Now she had lost too many pounds, and her blonde hair had almost all grown out, and she had tried to dye it red, but it came out a kind of dirty shit-brown color. She was bad at shooting up and she had chewed up a lot of the flesh on her arms. Nicole would tell him that she didn't mind looking like this, though. "It's a relief. I don't feel that I have any expectations to live up to. I can just be me now. I don't have to be, you know, *Nicole*. I can be me."

Watching her, her hair slicked back tight against her skull, the dimensions of her face altered, the fat and the innocence eaten away from her cheeks, the eyes bigger, the skull more pronounced, like another face was trying to force its way through the shell of the old one, the breasts smaller with hunger and neglect, and the scabs, bruises, lumps and red raw injection marks which traced the backs of her hands, her arms, even her hips and her legs, Carl started to wonder about fucking her again. It had been a long, long time since they had done that. Carl's usual explanation for their newfound celibacy was the state of their bed. When a bed is filthy, burned with cigarette holes, piled high with unwashed clothes, stained with blood and wine and malt liquor, the last thing you want to do on it is get naked. Even after they were evicted, each successive motel bed had transformed with baffling speed into a similar picture of dysfunction. Now there was a new bed, just made by Nicole's mother, with flesh linens on it. Maybe now he could have her, while the cocaine was in his blood and he fleetingly felt like the thing between his legs was more than just extra weight to be carried around.

But instead of having sex with her, he looked at her naked body one last time and then ran to the fresh, clean bed, threw off his jeans and underwear, and masturbated furiously. It seemed quicker, easier, and fraught with less potential anxieties. Carl did not like anxiety. The thought of the aftermath – the two of them, naked and sweaty in the Los Angeles afternoon murk, making small talk, smelling each other, it was simply too much. After a few moments he realized he could not come, and that Nicole would surely be out of the shower soon, so he dressed again, stuffed his still hard penis back into his pants, and smoked a cigarette.

Over the next few days several things happened. They walked around the neighborhood and found three connections for crack, and began playing them off against each other for giving drugs on credit. Nicole's mother came to have a serious talk with them about how they were ruining their lives, and by the time she left, Nicole had managed to borrow 100 dollars off of her, supposedly so they could pay to get on a methadone program. Carl was pissing one morning, and he noticed that there was blood in his urine. One of Nicole's molars rotted so badly that a chunk broke off when she was eating a Skor bar. One evening Carl stole a scooter - one of those

stupid things that you have to pedal manually - and while he was pedaling away from the yard where he found it, a gang of black kids hanging out on the corner noticed him and yelled, "Hey nice SCOOTER!"

Carl didn't say anything. He kept pedaling it, trying to get back to the guesthouse, hoping that it might raise a couple of dollars in the pawnshop. But when he heard feet pounding the road he turned and looked, and the kids were chasing him in up the street. They were gaining on him too. They were screaming "GIVE ME THAT SCOOTER, MOTHERFUCKER!" and Carl started furiously pedaling as fast as he could. He hit a hole in the road and flipped off the scooter, flying through the air, and landing in a heap three feet from the scooter, which looked rather sad, twisted up, its front wheel still spinning in a futile way. Carl stood unsteadily, felt hot blood dripping down his forearms, and fled the kids, cutting through a back alley to escape a beating. He thought he recognized one of them as the black bastard who had sold him a piece of soap instead of crack when they had first arrived in the neighborhood.

On the fourth day, it was Sunday. Nicole's mom and step dad were gone for the day. Nicole let herself into the house and took 80 dollars from the safe. Nicole took 40 and went downtown to score dope. Carl hit the streets of ghost town with the rest to find crack. It was 10am and the streets were empty. Carl found himself wandering, shell-shocked, like the survivor of a nuclear holocaust. Things he noticed lying in and around the streets of ghost town: used tampon (one), broken glass, used condoms (several), dead leaves, bloody underwear (one pair, female) and something that he thought was a dead rat but which turned out to be a weave.

Carl was by a church. Inside he could hear people singing. As he loitered, scanning the streets for a likely face, an old white woman emerged from the church carrying several heavy coats in her arms. There was no doubt that this woman was a crack user. She just had that look that all crack users get over time, as if they are all eventually turning into the same little old lady. The crack head spotted Carl and walked across the parking lot to speak to him. She was sweating profusely.

"Are you looking for someone?" she asked.

"Yes," Carl answered, "I am."

"Are you trying to score rocks?" she said, squinting and looking at him closely.

Even though Carl had seen plenty of elderly crack fiends, something about them still did not compute with him. He could not understand the idea of being an old crack head. Old junkies were something different altogether, but old crack heads were a strange proposition. He started to doubt the evidence of his own eyes. Maybe she wasn't a crack head! Maybe she was going to call for help if he answered in the affirmative. Startled, Carl started to stutter.

"Wuh-wuh-wuh-wuh!" the old lady imitated, "Well goddamnit spit it out! You looking to score or not? You sure as shit ain't here to pray! Here... hold these..." She shoved the coats into Carl's hand. "How much money do you have?" she demanded.

"Like, 40 bucks."

"OK give it to me."

"What?"

"Gimmie the 40. I'm meeting Ray-Ray over here –" she motioned towards an alley running off of Rose Avenue. "If we pool our money we can get a bundle. Then we'll split it up, and we're both happy."

"Erm... OK?" Carl said, confused.

"Come on, come on!" she insisted, "Give me the 40! We can't keep him waiting!"

Carl found his footing again. The old bitch was trying to fast-talk him. "I ain't giving you my money! I don't know you, bitch!"

The old lady looked at him, mockingly. "Why you gotta go talking to me like a nigger? What are you, a Polack or a wop or something? You don't look like a nigger to me. Why you talking like that?"

"Sorry," Carl conceded, genuinely confused now.

"Walk with me."

They walked away from the church.

"I'll just go meet Ray-Ray with you," Carl suggested, although he was still not happy with the idea of then having to split a package of drugs with this old woman. The dealer could be in cahoots with her. This whole deal reeked of a con.

"Ray – Ray don't deal with people he don't know."

"Then introduce me!"

The old lady tutted, and they walked into the alleyway.

They found Ray-Ray lurking by a dumpster smoking one of those tiny little cigars that only the extremely poor or the extremely old seem to smoke. Ray-Ray looked to be both. He was skeletal, black, wearing a neat black suit and a fedora despite the 80-degree heat. Tufts of grey hair poked out from under the hat. As they approached he spat on the ground, looked at Carl and then demanded: "Who's this honky?"

"I'm Carl."

Ray-Ray grabbed the woman by the arm. "Bitch, I tole you not to be bringing people I don't know along with you! What the fuck is wrong wit' you?"

"He wouldn't wait where I told him to wait! He doesn't trust me!"

Ray-Ray sucked his teeth. Then he said: "OK quickly, let's do this. What you want?"

Holding the coats with one hand Carl rummaged in his pocket and pulled out the 40 dollars. He handed it over. The old woman did the same. Ray-Ray pocketed the money and spat out a pretty healthy looking rock. When Carl saw it he started to think that maybe this hadn't been such a bad idea after all. When split in two, it still represented more than what he was getting for his money from the other goons who operated in this neighborhood. Ray-Ray passed the rock on to the old lady, and split down the alleyway. Before he did it, he glared at Carl and her and said: "Now go on then! *Git!*"

They walked back the way they came from. As they exited the alleyway and started to cross the road, Carl was asking her where they could go to break up the rock, when he heard distant yelling. He turned towards the noise, and saw a group of well-dressed young men walking out from the church, yelling and pointing at the both of them. At first Carl had the idea they were yelling at someone just behind them. He looked, but there was no one there. He looked back at the men, and they were practically on top of him.

"There he is!" they were screaming, "That son of a bitch has the coats!"

"But-!" Carl started to yell.

As he did so he realized that the old lady had vanished in the confusion, and Carl was being grabbed from all sides, the coats pulled from his arms. The man who seemed to be the leader of the mob punched Carl in the mouth, knocking him to the floor. Carl tasted the hot copper of his own blood. After he fell to the ground, a couple of the others, possessed by the sudden bravado of numbers started kicking him and yelling "Motherfucking crackhead!" and Carl just lay there, grunting a little with each kick, until they left him and went back to tell their women folk how they had subdued the drug fiend who'd tried to rip off their Sunday coats.

Carl lay there for a while. There was something comforting about the feel of the tar underneath him, the taste of blood in his mouth, the sounds of sirens below and helicopters overhead. He knew that as soon as he stood, he would be re-engaging with the day, confronted with the reality that he had no money, no crack, and that Nicole would be pissed. Maybe she would not even feel obligated to share her dope with him. This whole string of events had been all down to utter carelessness on Carl's part; even he had to admit that.

Sometimes Carl imagined that his soul was a large clear balloon filled with black water. When he was high enough, he imagined it frozen solid, dripping with icy particles. He imagined that his soul wore sunglasses, like that iconic image of Eldridge Cleaver wearing his black leather jacket, arctic and inscrutable.

In time Carl would quit, would become re-addicted, and quit again. Nicole would eventually join a Christian commune and shave her head. They would split without a goodbye, something involving a bad drug deal over a particularly long, remorseless summer, only to meet again, four years after the men had beaten him and left him on the Venice sidewalk, at an AA meeting in Culver City. Nicole had put on weight, and allowed her hair to return to brown, and had removed all of her piercings. Carl had allowed his hair to grow and had a new tattoo on his forearm that read "Everything Is Broken." They swapped small talk over instant coffee, and the conversation was forced and stilted, as if they had never really met before this moment. Each glanced over the other's shoulder, looking for the easy escape of a less familiar face. Both of them would relapse within the year.

Nicole commented to Carl: "The heart is a small, amputated thing. Lonely and scared." Carl had nodded silently, unsure of the correct response.

Neither of them would ever really find true happiness, only extreme moments of elation interspersed with many, many years of boredom, sadness, and fear. Drunk on rum, playing chutes and ladders with his three-year-old daughter. Listening to Johnny Thunders. Awash with broken transistors. Time travel and memory. Enough, enough. Carl never learned to drive.

Lying there, on the sidewalk of Venice beach, bleeding and content, Carl was of course unaware of all that life had in store for him. He was for once, truly, unbreakably in the moment. Overhead the seagulls whirled and called. The sky seemed impossibly blue.

An Honest Day's Work



This is a new poem about an off-the-books job I took when I first moved to New York.

An Honest Day's Work

on a roof in Brooklyn
 the wind is trying to blast us over the edge
 breaking us on ice covered rocks and debris
 below. I am working with a drunk German
 chewing on garlic gloves
 to disguise the smell of stale booze
 and a kid missing 3 fingers, all of us
 trying to put a wrought iron fence around the perimeter

"first we gotta break off the ice"
 and the trick is to smash it
 with hammers or our boots
 and try not to get blown
 off the building by this gusting arctic wind:

suddenly the wind catches me
 and the ice sends me dancing backwards

for a moment I feel my center of gravity shift
 and I am about to fall gracefully over the edge

the kid grabs my arm
 wrenches me back
 says "you stupid bastard!"
 "I toldja to be careful"

it is January in New York
 and the air is 20 below zero

and my hands and face
are burning cold agony

all of this for 10 dollars
an hour. This is what I came
to America for. The cold,
10 dollars an hour, and a kid
missing three fingers
holding my life in his gimp hands

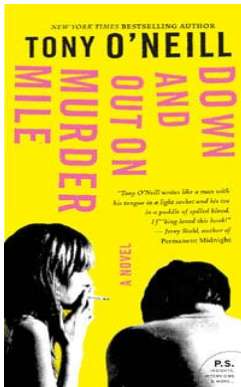
"how d'you lose your fingers?"

"lost one doing a job like this" he smiles
"crushed it beneath a lump hammer.
"Lost the other two letting off an m-80"

and I think shit, O'Neill
your fancy words are no use here:
all of the crazy things you have pulled
and the closest you have ever come to dying
has happened today - while trying to do
an honest day's work

I think
there is a lesson in there
somewhere

Tony O'Neill's Top Ten Videos



I've selected my Top Ten favourite youtube videos. You can watch them on the live site at beatthedust.com. The Top Ten is listed below along with a stand-out line from the lyrics.

1: SONNY BOY WILLIAMSON - Your Funeral and My Trial

"I'm beggin' you baby, cut out that off the wall jive / If you can't treat me no better, it gotta be your funeral and my trial..."

2: THE BIRTHDAY PARTY - Junkyard

"There's junk in honeys sack again!"

3: TOM WAITS - Heart attack and Vine

"This stuff'll probably kill ya / let's do another line"

4: HOWLING WOLF - Backdoor Man

"Well the men don't know / but the little girls understand"

5: JOHNNY THUNDERS - In Cold Blood

"I probably forgot more / than you'll ever need"

6: CREEDENCE CLEARWATER REVIVAL - Born On The Bayou

"My father said 'son, don't let the man get you / and do what he did to me'"

7: JOHN LENNON - Cold Turkey

"I wish I was a baby / I wish I was dead"

8: SUICIDE - Ghost Rider

"America / America / Is Killing Its Youth"

9: MC5 - Kick Out The Jams

"Kick out the jams, motherfuckers!"

10: JOHN SINCLAIR AND THE WHITE PANTHER PARTY

"You won't have a free world, you won't have a free culture, until people can fuck wherever they want to and whoever they want to."