

Gary J. Shipley

LOVE IN THE CREEK

Decay gliding through the rotting apartment;
Shadows on yellow wallpaper.

~Georg Trakl, *Amen*

Molech presses button 3 on an intercom panel and waits.

“Hello? Charles?”

“Who is it?” says Charles plangently.

“It’s me.”

“What about Coco?”

“I’ve just come from there.”

“Alright, I’m coming down.”

Charles trundles down the stairs and pops his bulbous, fuzzy clown head around the door. He then shuts the door to take off the chain and opens it again, all the while remaining hidden behind it. He glances out at the street as if expecting to see something hideous, and then, the moment Molech is safely inside, slams the door shut behind him. Charles is shaking his head to and fro like a mad dog wrestling the dying breath from a rabbit. This can only be interpreted as a prelude to a distinctly lengthy and frenetic explanation, an explanation poisoned with nerves and loneliness.

The top two thirds of the hallway walls are a filthy sludge brown, the bottom third black, decaying and peeling to reveal a bleached-out red. The white paintwork on the split and warped doors and banisters is brittle and heavily chipped, revealing old colours: ill greens and rusty beiges. The light switches, splattered with cracked paint, are those round, bulbous, tit-like things invariably seized up with time. The floors are bare, cold and clattering. The thick newel posts look as if rats or hungry men with small teeth have been nibbling away at their edges.

Once inside the stuffy confines of his flat, Charles tells Molech to take a seat. Charles remains on his feet pacing around the room, sweat roll



ing down his forehead into his glazed, frogspawn eyes – he looks to be shot full of Metrazol and bad dreams. He smiles knowingly to himself, as if aware of just how ridiculously agitated he looks. He offers Molech some coffee and scurries off to his squalid and thoroughly outmoded kitchen to boil the kettle.

A whirring noise is coming from behind the mould-bespeckled curtains. Molech is tempted to investigate but, unable to find a clear path to the window, gives up on the idea.

The flat is teeming with musty old books, scrunched up packets of Benson and Hedges, empty bottles of blended whisky, a cityscape of stacked audio cassettes, and piles of typing paper nursing a plague of indecipherable words. Molech glances over at an open book that is lying beside him on the sofa. Underlined in blue biro is a passage about a German playwright by the name of Ernst Barlach, who, according to the book, didn't begin to write plays until he was over forty years old. (If Molech had flicked through the rest of the section on German writers he would have found Arthur Schnitzler's name highlighted with a now faded circle of pencil lead, who didn't start his writing career until he was nigh on thirty, and Hermann Broch's name underlined in black biro, who didn't publish his first book until the age of 45...) Charles has given himself a few more months before the hope runs out. But then he is always on the lookout for someone older, and will no doubt find him if he hasn't already. The problem with Charles's slothful existence as an aspiring writer is that although the years to make it were fast diminishing, the days were too long to create any urgency in their passing.

(Outside Pavilionstone, in the not too distant past, almost everyone you'd meet would claim to be a practitioner of the arts. It was as if all of a sudden people had woken up with this craven urge for creativity – the flatulence of unsanctified distress – the need to make their mark, to leave something meaningful behind now that they weren't going anywhere. They wrote poems, short stories and novels, painted pictures, sculpted, strove to reinvent art for the new world, made documentaries, films, anything that might distract themselves from survival: a world full of scared dabblers and dilettantes. "We all do art and literature now; creativity is the new TV," they'd say. And like TV, a vast majority of it was shameless, unadulterated shit.

Charles is pretty much the only person in Pavilionstone willing to squander his time on creative impulses; the rest are too busy cooking up ways of getting out, of being worthy, of living forever or obliterating the concern. Charles doesn't want to live forever; he just doesn't want to die before fulfilling his literary potential. If his novel turns out to be the best novel ever written, then he need not fear death anyway; his immortality will be secure.)

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He didn't have time for writing catchfires, no time for *Hanz* or even the shortest spell of precautionary nom-de-plumes. Italo Calvino once said, "It would always be better not to have written one's first book." Charles believed himself justified in ignoring this statement, given the logically implied book vacuum, and the fact that the smug little eyetie had himself been one of the most prolific authors around; never trust a man who refuses to take his own advice.

The bible lays open on the sofa – always a bad sign.

On the floor by the TV there is a copy of Wallace Steven's *The Palm at the End of the Mind*.

Above the spot where Charles habitually sits and writes are two scraps of paper pinned to the wall. One of which reads:

There is no greater solitude than the ~~samurai's~~ ^{writer's}
Unless perhaps it be that of the tiger in the jungle
~~"The Book of Bushido"~~ Charles Schaefer



There is no irony intended in this; Charles is deadly serious. He has isolated himself from the distractions of others ("distracted from distraction by distraction") for much of his adult life in his quest for literary greatness. And with success yet to come, he is in no position to be flippant. Paul Auster