

WILLIAM HUHN

THE PAGADDER

Walking ahead of us, Tarsi wore a petite daypack between her shoulder blades. At my side her drunk boyfriend, Gil, trod under his burden of an encased acoustic guitar. And my fiddle, too, was safely stowed away, the case handle forgotten in my grip. The night was long. We'd played on a walk street for three hours with few breaks. All that song had roused my spirit and left me wanting more, but as soon as Antwerp Centraal came into view, I yearned to be softly ensconced in my passage back to Brussels.

Since the couple rented a “ghetto” (Gil's word) apartment hard by the station, it was no trouble for them to escort me here. The trouble, in fact, would be all mine. *De treinen* back to my sublet—in what a travel guide called the “City of Beer”—stopped running after midnight. I'd missed the last by minutes. A final look through the clouded Plexiglas at the timetable brought no phantom engine blazing down the tracks to my rescue.

I partly blamed Tarsi for my predicament. She'd stopped on the way to buy *frites*, slowing us down just enough to foredoom my getaway, as if by design. Setting the belled end of my fiddle case on the marble floor, I took a slow, calming breath. It didn't work. I was still trapped here. Everyone around me had somewhere to go. I still didn't. The hour-long cab ride “home” would run some five times my share of our night's earnings, but I lacked choices.

“Guess I'll have to get a cab,” I told my friends.

I had savings enough. Besides, my third of the pot was more than I deserved for that night's performance. Easy money's easily spent. Not that I hadn't played well: For two musicians who'd never met before today or, as it were, yesterday, Gil and I had formed a solid duo on the street-music scene that October evening, a folk-rock and Old-Time act, with the occasional digression. Our harmonies and instrumentals had borne fall fruit, if at times rather raucously. Although I'd had to carry him on many of the numbers, his playing could show heart. His take on Satchmo's version of “Ochi Chyornya,” a song I put some clever Russian violin strokes on top of, was downright inspired. Tarsi had seemed quite enamored of her beau when he played that one!

Her looks accounted for the lion's share of our tips.

“No thinking of taxi. You stay at us,” she said—in English, her third language. We'd spoken her second, French, much of the night. She spoke

neither great, but understood all.

We musicians played mere music, no matter how good. Tarsi played herself: a wildly fetching Portuguese immigrant with jet-black orbs, pert features, and face bones worth writing stateside about. Her only job was to pin on a smile and hold the paper cup out to passersby. Seeing her there, no one could resist putting something in, not even the ladies. With Tarsi as our silent player, we were a daunting trio.

“She’s right, dude. You’re like totally crashing at our pad”—California Gil, as anyone could hear, was no native of Belgium, either. He and Tarsi had that in common. I never got her full history, but Gil was an ex-angel-dust addict who’d fled to Antwerp to escape his demons. Now he just drank.

The two had been living here together about a year, though they couldn’t be said to have settled here. They were neither Sinjoren, a local name for ancestral native-born Antwerpers, nor Pagadderkes, those born in the city, but whose parents were not. I’d learned these words in the library while reading about Antwerp. I always liked to read up on the cities I fiddled in. Gil and Tarsi seemed out of place here, like me, but also like people who would never belong in any set location, no matter how long they lived anywhere.

“Yeah, no,” I said. “Much appreciated, but I should get back”—or find a hotel, I was thinking, though places in these parts cost more than the longest cab ride, and the classier ones wouldn’t suffer the likes of a vagrant fiddle player (the giveaway: no other luggage) even on his best night, which this wasn’t. I’d speak French and flash my American passport, but every bed would be taken, especially those that weren’t.

We walked under the great arches that led to and from the streets. On our reaching the cobbled edge of the station mall, Gil said, “Bill, dude, what’s the hang-up? We got your back!”

“It’s nice of you guys, Gil, but I do have an early day tomorrow.”

Tarsi was probably pinch-rolling the gold cross she wore on a chain, a tic of hers I’d noted to remember for someday . . . “No, Beal,” she said. “Your home is ours. We have plenty extra space with baby in hospital. Why we live if not to make welcome to our friend?”

I couldn’t think of why.

Soon we’d walked well beyond the shadows of the station lights, and all the while, as throughout the whole night so far, our trio of spent downcasts was accompanied by a fourth presence, not with us in spirit

exactly, but more than in the uneasy quiet of our late amble. We were a kind of secret quartet and had been from the first notes we'd played together.

The heart defect of the one-month-old had already required surgeries. The flesh-and-blood child had yet to see the streets outside his medical ward, not once in all his baby days. Naturally his condition weighed heaviest on Tarsi, yet she beamed whenever speaking of him, her motherly love peeking through. But I, too, worried about the infant. Though still slightly peeved at Tarsi about the *frites*, I was glad to know her son would have the joy she took in him on his side, if little else.

Our traipse had carried us far afield of anywhere I'd have considered "near the station." I'd hardly eaten since an eel sandwich at noontide. No shops loomed, let alone an open one. Only I was looking for them. The fries had done the trick for Tarsi. As for Gil, he was an active alcoholic. They don't eat.

I wasn't yet resigned to holing up at their place. With the neighborhoods growing seedier, sheer inertia kept me schooling with the couple. A new office building we'd passed back when still station-bound kept rearing into mind. Somewhere back along these endless autumn-gray narrows, I'd noticed it rising next door to an indelible landmark: a mini-cathedral, the cornice above the giant doors a brightly floodlit carving of the twelve apostles. I could circle back and sleep on that construction site, happily on my own again. Maybe the *frites* stand would still be open. With the weather so pleasant, hot junk food and a bed of tarps would do me just fine. Hopelessness wouldn't feel so bad if it were mine alone.

Gil and Tarsi, meanwhile, were whispering—just loud enough to mask a ballooning tension, which I dared not prick with my tendered goodbye. I played the nonchalant and was trailing to give them space, while wondering if Gil's dust habit hadn't damaged his chromosomes and been the hidden cause of the baby's bad heart. Gil whined something I couldn't make out, but it brought Tarsi to a stop. "You don't leave a woman wait in the bar!"—never truer words shouted.

I had forgiven the guy for being a former duster, a half-hearted guitarist, a lush, and for something rude and hapless about him that to this day escapes naming; however, I could not forgive him for winning Tarsi's affections, or, frankly, for making her wait in a bar.

"Guys and gals," I said, catching up to them. "Hey, I think I might just go ahead and check into a hotel."

Gil's fingers combed back his unwashed San Diegan do. "Awesome, Tarse!" he said, "Bill's bailing. Later, dude!"

Fucking Christ, I thought, just say you're sorry.

"So is okay to let a woman wait for you in the bar?" In her kitteny eyes glimmered a plea that I not leave her.

"It was like ten fucking minutes! Give it a rest!"

I backed into the road to watch from a safer distance.

"Bill, c'mon, dude, hang!" Gil called after me.

"I don't care if ten seconds. You don't treat like this a woman—not Tarsila," she said, pointing to herself. "Stop with the cursing words." Gil didn't know French or Flemish, and certainly no Portuguese, but he spoke the foulest language of anybody in Europe. It was the first time my ears had tasted her full name. If she were mine, I'd have been calling her "Tarsila" often, "Tarse" never.

Luckily, just then a clattering lorry nearly ran me down, its horn sounding like a Canada goose, its driver chiding me out the window in trucker Flemish. The excitement brought Gil to quit while he was behind and me back to the side of the road. And when Tarsi began forward again, somehow her gait conferred on us permission to follow. But she also wanted us to. Just before she turned her face away, I saw a flash of fear that we, or at least Gil, might not always decide to go with her.

We'd come about a mile from the station by now, its promise wholly fading into the maudlin hour. I tried to fathom why I was here—and going where? Tarsi was taken, and Gil no match for my talent, nor hers, her who believed the guitarist was not only better than he was, but also the more important component of their street act. She was mistaken on both counts. I'd have been worthy of her talents.

I'd learned a hundred songs and tunes since beginning my own loner's tour of Europe and was in the best practice ever. Still, the "life of music" that I'd dreamt of was turning out to be the life of a semi-homeless drifter. The wisdom of abandoning New York and my good-paying job felt irreparably flawed, the Kingdom of Belgium like the last place anyone sane would've chosen to flee to.

America used recycled glass for asphalt filler to repave roads. Back home I'd admired the beauty of a fresh dark roadbed sparkling beneath car lights. When a pair of high beams swept across Gil and Tarsi's street, the rainbowed surface also shimmered—but from the play of light on the shards of shattered liquor bottles and windshields, not from the iridescence of smartly recycled glass. I doubted their street had ever been repaved in its life.

They lived in a fourth-floor walk-up across from a deserted factory running the length of the block. Faded stripes clung to a lopsided barber

pole in front of one of two commercial spaces occupying the ground floor of their building. A streetlamp we stood near had survived, and through a broken picture window, only partly boarded up anymore, I could see that salvagers had torn the chairs out by the roots, leaving gaping craters.

Gil unlocked the unmarked space next door to the salon.

“Will I need to present my passport to the concierge?”

“There ain’t no cong-see-arge, Bill,” Gil said. “This is the ghetto. You should meet the slimeballs who own the joint, total freakin’ lowlifes. We should sue their asses.”

“I was kidding.”

“Dude, what the hell you talking about? So was I. Just hang here with Tarse a fuck sec, can you do that for me? I gotta turn on the stair lights. Bastards put ‘em on a timer.”

“Are you looking for apartment to rent?” Tarsi asked, looking mystified.

Gil stepped down onto a stripped floor and, after three or four hesitant strides, struck a match. It revealed milk crates, scattered fast-food cartons and, deeper in, hanging wires, beer bottles, stacks of tiles, and hardened caulk tubes—the refuse of an abandoned effort to renovate. He disappeared somewhere into the dark at the back.

While Tarsi smoked a cigarillo, I used the moment to practice my French on her. She told me she wanted to bring her son up to speak both Portuguese and English, and also hoped Gil would learn her native tongue, but before I could ask if she thought *Gealber* would be a good father, she winked, tossed away her little cigar end, and waved for me to follow her in.

Because the windows in this space were tightly boarded up, after she deadbolted out the light, just a few thin strands got through from outside. The night enclosed us. Her fingers felt for mine. The thought of feeling, next, the touch of her smoky lips thrilled and frightened, but Tarsi was all business. She didn’t need a flame. I expected a nail in my foot or to trip on a crate, but her soft grasp whispered me along. Once when she swerved, we collided, her warmth all against me—“Sorry, we turn to this way.” Except for then, our journey was a glide.

After leading us down a brief blind passage at the rear of the dusty space, she let go of my hand and opened the door to a dimly lighted stairwell. The slapdash bed in the unfinished office building was calling my name nonstop by now, but I dutifully climbed, following her up to the fourth story, then down a hallway. Then we were outside the living filth that their unnumbered door hid—until Gil opened it.

Before letting us in, he first had to kill Tarsi's apology ("Sorry. It's not normal so much mess for us") by saying, "But it's what happens when you're forced to play the fucking subways seven days a week. Everything goes to shit."

"It's fine," I said, mustering my composure while scanning for signs of the baby's someday homecoming: a high chair, a plastic nipple, maybe some onesies . . . Nothing, just a cockroach taking a Sunday stroll along the edge of a puddle below the kitchenette sink, where the flooring had gone rot black.

If the baby existed and could live out its little infancy here, I could handle it for a night. Except I no longer fully believed in the baby. Come to think of it, if he had a name, even Tarsi never used it. Maybe he was a lie conjured to gin up sympathy, the hero of a tale spun for anyone who'd listen. Tarsi crunched the roach underfoot and spread newspaper to soak up the water.

A grease-stained clock above an old two-burner electric read five to one, like The Doors' song ("Five to one, one in five, nobody here gets out alive . . ."). It felt later, but it must have always felt later in here, too late—by decades, by generations of addicts, drink, abuse, grime, and hellish luck. The clock was the only thing right in the room.

The smell: a cocktail of fermenting socks, stale sex-sweat, tire rubber, trash-bag runoff, and a mystery odor that sat right on the bone. Tarsi opened the window. "You have ears, Geal? The most important thing was to let come in fresh air."

If they really had a sickly newborn, his hospital plight seemed tame by contrast. Stuck with IVs, stitched up belly button to neckline, at least he lay on laundered sheets. A nutritious drip flowed into his bloodstream.

Said Gil, "Chick wanted me to tidy up for you, Bill, like you give a crap."

I couldn't safely meet the anguish in Tarsi's gaze, so I looked down and gently set my fiddle case alongside a partition that, partly dividing the studio, strove to create the illusion of two rooms. The window was in the sleeping half, the bathroom down the hall.

On returning, I found Gil seated at a card table over an aluminum pan of chicken leftovers. He ate after all. But first, recalling his upbringing, he gestured at a seat and nudged the gooey feast forward an inch—"These are great cold."

"Thank you, no," I said, winning a smile from Tarsi. She turned on

the faucet and the fluorescent tubes above the sink. This time the roaches ran, darting for shadow. Her deft paring knife caught one, though (“*Morre!*” she murmured, if I heard right). No steam rose from the water she washed dishes with, her sponge dabbing a fat bar of industrial-grade soap.

Gil was too preoccupied by eating to bust me swooping on his woman, not that he’d have minded. Addicts have one love. Besides, I couldn’t help it. She looked cleaner than all else in view, her blouse a pinkish purple, her bottom uncannily slim under skinny jeans. She didn’t look like she’d had a baby.

Either or both of them, I noticed, had moved a folding metal chair, heavily laden with clothes, to clear a sleeping spot for me on the linoleum next to their sheetless mattress. I made myself uncomfortable on the metal of another chair across from Gil, who was now busy forking unwarmed string beans into his maw—“Gotta get them veggies”—directly from the can.

After toweling her hands dry, Tarsi returned the chicken parts, uncovered, to a squat fridge, then disappeared into the bed area. Hearing a door squeak and “Don’t worry. We have extra blankets,” I called out a thank-you. Since Gil kept eating, I went and peered around the end of the partition to see if Tarsi needed my help. She refused—“You are guest!” Having already laid down a tripled-up blanket for me to sleep on, she unfolded and flung out another for my covers.

“Please don’t, Geal,” Tarsi said, looking past me. “You have drank enough for whole week!”—Gil had pulled a bottle of red down from a cabinet.

Despite my better judgement, when returning to the table, I faintly nodded my ascent to joining him for a glass. Europe’s cheapest wines could rate, and once mine was in front of me, having found it drinkable, I relaxed for the first time since missing my train. Till a knock on the door startled me back to the confines of the squalor.

“That’s one of her moron Portuguese friends!” Gil said, after Tarsi (“I come back”) stepped out to visit with same. “This neighborhood’s all Portuguese. This ghetto cruise. It blows. I don’t have one fucking friend in this whole city.”

“I’m your friend,” I said.

“Yeah? You’re my buddy?”

“At least for as long as I’m in Belgium I am.”

“And not after?”

“I said ‘at least.’”

“Even if I had friends, I couldn’t get away from Tarsi,” he said, “not for a minute,” his eyes filmy but sharp, his young face an old pale. Bugs might bleed me in my sleep, but they weren’t why I dreaded staying here. Like a man condemned, Gil looked at the clock. He had both no time left and nothing but time, and I wasn’t, even for a night, wanting to accompany any man to his death. Nor woman neither. He topped off our plastic glasses.

“She freaks at anything,” he said. “You heard.”

“You know what might be nice for you, Gil?”

“Do tell.”

“A trip to the library. Go for two hours now and then. I go to the Bibliothèque royale in Brussels pretty much every day. There’s a peace in libraries that, like, seeps into your soul.”

“She’d think I’m out fucking someone else!” He drank, his pallor glowing. “I swear,” he said, “she won’t let me out of her crosshairs.” A moist patina collecting on his brow, he looked to me for answers no one had.

“Just say you need some time to reflect, dude. A library’s like a church, except everyone leaves you alone. You can lose yourself in a book or—who cares!—just stare out the window.”

“Reflect? Is that a joke? She keeps tabs on me like I’m her goddam whore. Trusts me like my left nut! I’d be surprised she isn’t listening from over her friend’s right now.”

He’s a coward, I thought, but his disturbed eyes said differently, the pupils large, the whites ablaze with defiance.

“I could leave,” he said. “That’s the simplest solution to all this crap.”

“You *could*.”

“I’m thinking about it.”

Still his burning eyes.

“What about the kid?”

“She’s got two more in goddam Lisbon!” he said, standing. I believed in the baby again. My being here was the lie, but that rarest of lies, the kind I could get out of.

From beyond the partition, I heard, “Kids are the story of this fucking chick’s life.” He came back with his glazed black beat-up Aria guitar. The brand stuck in mind because it made me think of Ariel, the spirit who served Prospero in *The Tempest*.

“Looks like they’re the story of your life, too, Gil, at this juncture.” I thought he ought to hear this said aloud.

“Not as much as hers they’re not.” He absently strummed, plucked,

and turned the tuning keys.

"Try the library," I said. "I'm sure there's several in Antwerp. It'll help you think better."

"I wrote a play once." He gazed at me.

"I'm serious, dude," I said. "You need to think things through. You can't just leave. You wrote a play?"

"I am gonna fucking leave."

So was I—in about thirty seconds.

"Who takes care of the other kids?"

"I forget. Her grandparents or someone."

He kept fiddling with his guitar. When satisfied, he chopped off some buzzy C or G cords as a test. I put down the half-cup left of my wine.

"Gil, it took two to get her pregnant, just saying."

"Dude, what are you talking about? She set me up!"

"Nothing," I said. "I've got to get going anyway."

I stood.

"What the hell, dude? You said you needed a crash pad."

The unfinished offices looked like the St. Regis from here. A dry sheet of plywood, and I'd be Lord of the Castle.

"Don't worry about it, but thanks."

"Fuck, then where you gonna crash?"

Not in this hole. "Don't take it personal, Gil, but it's just too cramped in here for me. But thanks for the offer!"

"How could you not even finish your wine?"—a question that haunts alcoholics, even the recovered ones. But I still didn't fault him for his addictions. I applauded his having given up angel dust. There was a strength there that would help him win on other fronts if he could harness it. Boarding a plane to make a better life elsewhere was a hopeful start.

I doubted Belgians kept Rottweilers on their building sites to dissuade the likes of thieves or fiddlers. I could slip out at dawn before the workers showed up. Or, hell, I'd stay till they woke me! A certain beauty comes from being shooed off a construction site after a few hours of drunken sleep. Only, I wasn't drunk, and tomorrow was Sunday—*today* was Sunday. Unlike us Americans, the good Belgian workers wouldn't slave on Sundays. They'd probably be at church or playing with their children. I could sleep till my eyes opened.

"Do what you want, dude," Gil said. "If you ain't feeling it, you ain't feeling it. Whatever." With the sixth sense God gives boozers, he was on to me. I retrieved my violin from alongside the partition and thanked

him for the wine.

By the door before leaving, I had an unimpeded view of the closet. It had been left open just enough for me to see inside it part of a wheeled bassinet and some small folded clothes on a shelf. Clipped to a wee hanger hung a pair of pale-blue pajamas covered with little fishes. I remember thinking those would be fun for the baby to sleep in. Having no plans to see Gil or come to this town again, I looked at him for the last time and, after the ritual handshake, left.

Besides the echo of his shutting the door at my back, like a man sealing himself up in a vault, the hallway was stone quiet. I felt freer already as I walked, free to go to any city and to all the great libraries of Europe. Knowing what I now knew, I pattered down the flights of stairs feeling relieved not to have had to wish poor Tarsi good night. At bottom, after negotiating the obscure corridor behind the abandoned store, I returned through a door at the back of that dark space.

The renovation work was still unfinished. The threads of light coming through the boarded-up front windows were all I had to guide me, but without upsetting a bottle cap, I dashed like an Apache warrior through the woods at night, seeing almost nothing yet always knowing where my foot fell. The final door I opened closed like a clear-cut case of a crime—deeper than any I would ever commit—like kidnapping a wounded baby who would otherwise have no chance. Neither I nor anybody has much of a chance, but he had less than any of us. As for the fiddler, having made a clean escape, I found my reprieve in the sweet night air of autumn, the season of forgiving.

the author of his own international project, Brest-Print-Triennial. International exhibitions and competitions under his leadership gather more than three hundred artists from fifty countries. He has over one hundred exhibitions in sixteen countries.

About “Chicken God” (front cover) and “Dangerous Games” (back cover), Alexander writes, “‘Dangerous games’ says that people with immense responsibility and tremendous dedication should engage in art. They should devote their lives to the chosen path completely. This is a very difficult and dangerous path. ‘Chicken God’ tells about a dream that will remain just a dream if nothing is done to realize it.”

James Grinwis is the author of *The City from Nome* (National Poetry Review Press) and *Exhibit of Forking Paths* (Coffee House), both of which were published in 2011. He co-founded Bateau Press in 2006. Recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Arcturus*, *Bennington Review*, *Ghost Proposal*, *Hotel Amerika*, and *Poetry Northwest*.

About his poem in this issue, James writes, “I started on this poem reflecting on a kind of mild panic. I am going for a controlled panic here. Nature, which should be extremely panicked but goes about its daily business as any bear would in whatever situation it finds itself in, enters as a kind of balance to the panic. In the midst of panic, the fight-or-flight response takes hold; but there is the idea that a poem will emerge and make things smooth again, provide a grounded-ness. This is sometimes how it goes for me. ‘Bear Fruit’ (both in the literal sense and the figurative) seems to have emerged as a counterbalance, a balancing event.”

William Huhn is a chemist by vocation and lives in Westchester County, New York, with his wife and their baby son. His narrative essays have been twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize and cited six times as a “Notable Essay” in *The Best American Essays* series, most recently in 2018 (“Grave Ivy,” *Flint Hills Review* #22). Huhn’s poetry has been featured in the *The Carolina Quarterly* and can be found on the popular website *Verse Daily*.

About his essay “The Pagadder,” William writes, “It took a decade and finally the birth of my son, Dashiell, for this story to tell me—for my heart to be open to—what it was really about. Neither lead character, nor I certainly, was the star. The narrative wasn’t some faux-friendly account of impoverished lives. The innocent who never made it onto the stage, whom I never saw, whose survival remains unknown as I write these words—whom I wasn’t always sure existed—that nameless child, how

could this story have ever been about anyone or anything else? How the child's future, itself now the past, turned out? A question without answer."

Mark Jacobs has published more than 130 stories in magazines including *The Atlantic*, *Playboy*, *The Baffler*, *The Iowa Review*, and *The Hudson Review*. His five books include *A Handful of Kings* (Simon and Schuster, 2004) and *Stone Cowboy* (Soho Press, 1997). His website can be found at www.markjacobsauthor.com.

About his story in this issue, Mark writes, "'Tree of Death' is one of an interconnected series of stories, intended for a collection, in which a minor character in one story becomes the protagonist of another one. Maury Myer in 'Tree of Death' has a bit part in 'Stockpiling Twinkies,' published in *The Meadow*. Edna, who makes a cameo in 'Tree of Death,' becomes the principal character in 'Approximate.' The challenge is making each story stand on its own as the stories spread out in time and location. *Swimming to the Island* is the collection's working title."

Jess E. Jelsma is a doctoral student in creative writing at the University of Cincinnati. She holds an MFA in prose from the University of Alabama, where she was awarded the Don Hendrie Jr. Memorial Fiction Prize in 2016. Her most recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Arkansas International*, *Catapult*, *CRAFT*, *Flyway*, *The Normal School*, *The Southern Review*, and *Quarterly West*. She can be found online at jessejelsma.com or @jessejelsma.

About her essay in this issue, Jess writes, "As the daughter of two chemical engineers, I grew up in a very science-minded household. My mother was pushed out of the profession when she became pregnant with my younger brother, and my dad transferred from the Ethyl Corporation to a branch of DuPont located in Mobile, Alabama. Every year, I attended the huge production that was DuPont's Take Your Daughter to Work Day, and I was convinced that I too would become a pioneering engineer. It was only later, when I went into the sciences myself, that I began to think back on my time at DuPont and see it as less as of an empowering experience than an indoctrination of sorts, one built on faulty promises and flawed logic."

Caitlin Johnson holds an MFA from Lesley University. Her poems have appeared in *Foliage Oak*, *Melancholy Hyperbole*, *Vagina: The Zine*, *Visceral Uterus*, and many other outlets. She is the author of two chapbooks and a full-length collection. She lives in Michigan.