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Nightshades in "Exterieur Quai"

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Alexander T. Englert is from Colorado and is a current senior. In a three item list, he summarizes his Gettysburg College experience as follows (in no particular order): friends, philosophy, and lost innocence.

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The pinball popping mixes with the boiling coffee to keep me awake at 4:15 AM in the Exterieur Quai of Paris, France. We missed the train by two minutes. It was Shu-Hsin's fault, but I didn't tell her that. We both just looked at the cold, metal tracks. The station began to shut down and we began wandering.

Luggage is on the booth seat across from me. My backpack is a pillow for Shu-Hsin. My jacket covers her legs. She sleeps peacefully. I like looking over at her. The way her chest moves reminds me of a swishing tail—how strange a comparison. But that's it, a swishing tail and my eyes follow.

The flavor of the “pommes” (french fries) and coffee pale to the characters inside this “Nighthawks” scene. Men sit with nursed drinks. Their excuses against a lonely night of people-less and pinball-less wandering.

The man sitting at the table nearest us sits bent over his coffee as if frozen mid-snip. The coffee mug is empty and his heavy breaths (and occasional mutterings) are all that proclaim that his heart still beats.

Every five minutes a bulldog makes a round of the diner sitting area. The nails of its paws tick. They are given harmony by the clapping of the blue porcelain mugs behind the bar. Its fur is brown, about the same as the dusty tiles underfoot.

Its sagging-skinned face mirrors the customers’ faces. Weary eyes, yet hopefully seeking. The mood, however, is one of general surrender. Beg enough to receive a treat, then take your time with it as though it were a plate with creamy Brie and sliced slabs of baguette.

On the wall is a stuffed bull’s head. The hammers of the pinball machine pound on. Chatter continues, though the voices seem to belong to no one. Voices need souls. Here there are none to be found. Only fading shadows lift their glasses and their cigarettes to lips in this diner. The false cheeriness supplied by radio station tunes paint over the bulldog-faced fact: the people here, in the heart of Paris, at 4:30 AM, are missing their own identities. Each is a rusty anchor, forgotten in the depths to acquire polychete worm colonies and crustacean hordes, while the ship of their soul is blown unmanned on the windy, choppy surfaces—that is to say with their hair tugged in a wintry wind. In the depths, however, where the walls press in and are black, the surface is not only far but is also a fantasy, a myth. They ask: “What was that dream I once had? It came to me when I slept. Sleepings that are long since past.”

Pinball pops and cheap beer are now the cold leftovers of reality, which offer the same solace of a meager meal before having to conquer a mountain during an icy drizzle.

The bulldog takes another loop. With a slow and tired determination, it hops into a restaurant booth, and mounts the tabletop with a clicking bound. It rests its chin over the side.

Meanwhile, during all of this ruckus, while the music, pinball machine, clanking porcelain, loud-drunken outbursts and bulldog’s looping, a man has been visiting the bathroom like it was the only source of oxygen in the room. Count to thirty—he passes—enters the bathroom—count to twenty—he emerges and walks back to his roll-top stool at the bar. A minute later, he comes strolling past again. Short hair, oily complexion, white socks that look gray. Through the holes, his ankles look like turkey meat; cold pink and plucked of all feathers. His strangeness maintains my attention. The coffee speaks, yet my head fights to
The cook has emerged from the back. The dog is his. He claps his hands together. Pinball.

"Poh-pu-pah-pup-pah!"
The hands clap again. The dog stares at him under its brow with the consistency of jelly. Shu-Hsin stirs in the booth across from me and rubs her red cheek on my backpack.

Again: "Poh-pih, poh-quay-pah-pah!"
The dog lumbers off the tabletop. The cook’s oven-red face fades. Sitting with a cigarette, he collapses into the booth. After his cigarette, he snoozes while his dog returns to walking its route.

Waiting for the train. Inside the train, the world will be clean, efficient, and new smelling. The French trains are nice. Shu-Hsin and I will leave. The rest will remain. When morning arrives, they will begin again to wander, that is to say, do what they do best. On the wall, the bull head stares down like an angry god on his disappointing creations.

The man with the turkey meat ankles walks into the bathroom and pounces out a second later.

Sleeping men with no beds to entice them away. No luring, voluptuous women stand guard over the home’s hearth for these people. Back in the Exterieur Quai, outside the silvery skin of their dreams, they doodle beds on their napkins with stubby pencils. The dog clicks by and lets me pet it.

“I can see clearly now the rain is gone,” pounds out of the speakers.

My coffee cup is empty.

The pinball machine is abandoned and the silence lets the mood rise in the air. I am a nighthawk surviving for the train to carry me back to Heidelberg. My wings await. Unfortunately, for my companions here, they are only nightshadows. Only in the warmth and light of this diner, away from gutters, alleys, and the night sky, are they able to stick out for a moment, faded as a three-week old bruise.

The sun rises. They are swept away. The city shakes itself. The dust-collector’s dust then falls away from these Cursed-blessed and their sore wings stretch. Under a pedestrian’s gaze, they beg, open palms, play broken instruments, they, the Cursed-blessed, are the unseen shadows. A few catch the butterflies of human pity or “kindness,” they then wait until they can find themselves once more in the pinball clacking light. Shadows in a neighborhood of shadows. My wings call me. Ignoring their beating flaps only makes them ache.

Empty shadows; the rusty anchors; the ones who fight the night-sickness of sleep to fight away the day-sickness of loneliness. And they do it all in a blinding world of mean birds of prey.

Blame what you will and wait to die. Such is another voice lost in the bustle of the streets of Paris.

Shu-Hsin awakes and we leave after gathering our luggage. I am tempted to grab for her hand, to kiss her pale lips, and feel all her warmth on my chest, but the bull’s head is glaring and the bulldog is lurking around the corner. The cook waves a hand. The patches of white stubble glow in morning light. Air—fresh air! The train stations hops and buzzes with non-shadows. They have set-meanings and goals—they are the driven people with families that they don’t deserve.

Blame what you will and wait to die. Such is another voice lost in the bustle of the streets of Paris.