The Prairie Light Review

Volume 30 | Number 2 Article 23

4-1-2010

Hors D'âge

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Recommended Citation

Dziedzic, Peter (2010) "Hors D'âge," *The Prairie Light Review*: Vol. 30: No. 2, Article 23. Available at: http://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol30/iss2/23

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Dziedzic: Hors D'âge

Hors D'âge

Peter Dziedzic

Very often, I'll equate them to cattle, bearing a stark numbness of life, embodying some primordial madness entombed in modernity. There's a couple that comes in several days a week, often on an idle Tuesday and rainy Thursday, and their masking laughter blares over the dim chatter and soft Sinatra piped through the speakers overhead. He'll often order scotch. She'll often order tequila. Sometimes, I'll just see her come in with running mascara and tedious bags under her eyes. She'll keep to herself, she'll drink and she'll sometimes laugh, herself filling that indefinite silence or stationing that unbarred prison. When the hours have weaned away into the dense winter night, she'll slip me a twenty and, without eye contact, make her way for a cab on some distant corner. I'll stock the bar and wipe down the tables before I close for the night, making my way down Fifth to the apartment, listening to the awing silence of the city, wondering where the souls have stirred to. I've tried to get all of the booze out of the house by now, though; it's not an easy task. Water goes down the drain smooth, but scotch, it'll crawl as slow as sludge. Wine goes down heavy, but the smell lingers like death. Whiskey will whisper as you pour it down smooth, and it fades with the night. Brandy will stick to the aluminum siding, and you'll have to scrape it off with your fingertips. Then you get the urge to break an oath and lick your fingers clean. But you don't. You sit and watch it go down as you watch the years and mistakes tumble with it, equally as slow and equally as lingering. Then there's that one bottle left, that one bottle of Hors D'âge cognac you know you'll have to empty at some point, but you keep it in the case. You say you're keeping it as a token of the past, and you say you're leaving it as a test, but you know that it's the past asking for a mere thread of lifeline. And you can't help but offer it to them, to tantalize your morality, to justify your mistakes, to give into some nameless shove that calls to you from the dark recesses of the mind. I'll stare at the bottle several times during the night, drawing my attention away from the television or the newspaper, and any assortment of thought will come to mind, but all I remember is her. Her face tinged red by the snow and her breath a misty dust destined for oblivion. And then the broken glass, and the blood, and the hanging winter air, and then I find myself mewling for sleep as dawn creeps above the concrete horizon. The days have gone like this.



She'll sit in the corner, reading a French novel of some sort. I'm not sure if it's a translation or in the mother tongue, but she has the air of a French woman. Her vague poise. Her supple skin. Her heavy lips. She's a smoker, and she'll fill her ashtray by the end of the night. The smoke escapes her slowly, her mouth and nostrils a cistern for that holy incense of obscurity. She'll sit there for hours with that lone novel and a sweating glass of cognac. I wonder if it's fate, and then I think otherwise. I'll return to work. The couple returns, drowning the room with their faux laughter. The ice machine breaks. I'll fix it, returning to find

the girl gone, a now-nameless face amidst the winter corridors and indifferent crowds. Then I'll wonder if she's a phantom, a ghost not from the past, but a future-borne seraphim. The man stumbles off with the woman, leaving a fifty and half-drunken glass of scotch. Sometimes I smell it, and I often remember how much I hated myself back then, but other times, I'll bring the glass to my lips and, slowly, grace my tongue with the liquid. I dare not swallow. I only taste. I entertain whatever lingers and swirls beyond these draping intentions and scattered nights. I pour it, check the ice machine, lock up, and walk the solitary trail once more.



I have dreams about that night. It was our three-year. I had bought the ring with a loan from my father, an omen ignored. The nights were getting colder and colder, and she would start the Christmas decorating. We usually went out to pick our own tree, but she switched to a plastic one this year. She was a beautiful woman, without a French air, but with that Scandinavian swagger. But that wasn't what won me over. It was her smile, a smile that pierced through bad tempers and decrepit judgments. I came home and drank myself into a stupor, as I had done for months. She often took my abuse, but one night, as cold and desolate as hell, I went too far. It is amazing how an unaffectionate meeting of skin and a few drops of blood can alter one's life. It was a haze, a fog, a demon dance and a witch hunt for all time. I had not even my name to console me the next morning. I had only the memory of her haunting smile, fleeting now, as fleeting as her breath and touch. She had left, and all that remained was that damned tree and that ring. I rid myself of both, a baptismal purging, a consolation of renewal, a drunken pursuit of definition. And yet, that Hors D'âge sits defiantly behind a stale frame of glass, questioning, laughing, and I know not why it sits so proudly. Still, I can only be thankful that we did not end up like the patron couple, passing nights overshadowed by Sinatra.



Months pass, and I never work up the courage to ask her name. She hasn't finished the novel, and as I peer from the corner of my eye, attending to that slurring couple, she'll not turn a page, as if she's frozen in a silk romance from a distant year. Her stone-frozen slender limbs glint from the dim bar lights, her lips freeze in an eternal kiss of life. And yet, she has not finished the book or the cognac. She'll leave the glass half-full and a crisp twenty, but she won't leave her name. She starts coming in with a friend, an equally slender creature, not so much bearing a French air, but an Italian zest, and she reflects an equally dense disposition, an obscure reference to some distant longing, a light in some distorted mirror of remembrance. She comes in with her friend for a month, still reading the same novel, still leaving the same glass of cognac to oblivion and my temptation. I decide that I will ask her name tomorrow.

I bring the bottle to the edge of the sink, the thread tense against the fringes of multi-faceted longing. A longing for love, for finality, for dominance, for redemption. But I find that pouring the cognac will bring none of this. I find no savior in these precious drops. I would watch the seething liquid race down the Dziedzic: Hors D'âge

pipes, but the hollowness would still remain, the memories would still persist, the girl would still elude, and the wife would still be nothing more than a wisp of memory. I return the Hors D'âge to the case, and think about those smoke-graced lips and that unfinished novel.



The friend tells me of the woman's fate. She had left town, an appointment or client calling her from a distant elsewhere, her air lingering over the horizons, a mist evaporating into eternity. The friend would not elaborate, and I would not ask for such a discourse, but it was both damning and sobering, releasing and enslaving. I found the friend read the same novel, a Clèzio piece, and filled the ashtray with the same cheap cigarettes, but unlike the French woman, she finished her cognac in a generous gulp. Perhaps it was the Italian in her. I walked her to the bar and talked her into twilight. The couple had not found their way in that night, and closing early, I walked her down the winter corridors. She gives me her name, and I hold it dear for the ensuing years. I bought the rings with my own funds, avoiding a folly bred of one part superstition and one part renewed dignity. The bottle will sneer silently in the case every so often, perhaps in a fit of mourning. It had emptied into both of our livers on a long-distant Christmas Eve. The bottle remains empty in the case, as a token of the past, as an acknowledgement of the thread that runs through men's lives. My own thread wears, but lingers throughout the years, and sews my destiny to both demons and angels.