

# **CITY OF INSOMNIA**

**BY VICTOR D. INFANTE**

City of Insomnia

Victor D. Infante

---

Write Bloody Publishing ©2008

1<sup>st</sup> printing.

Printed in NASHVILLE TN USA

City of Insomnia Copyright 2008. All Rights Reserved. Published by Write Bloody Publishing. Printed in Tennessee, USA. No part of this book may be used or performed without written consent from the author, if living, except for critical articles or reviews.

Cover Designed by dsn crz, Nate Warkentin

Interior Layout by Lea C. Deschenes

Edited by Saadia Byram and Derrick Brown



# City of Insomnia

|   |    |
|---|----|
| 15 Ways to Leave Your Labyrinth .....                     | 7  |
| An American Love Song.....                                | 9  |
| That Left Turn At Albuquerque .....                       | 11 |
| Speaking to Pittsburgh.....                               | 12 |
| Character Study in Minor Arcana.....                      | 14 |
| Karen's First Murder, Age 12 .....                        | 15 |
| Play One More for My Radio Sweetheart.....                | 16 |
| Elsewhere.....  | 18 |
| Andy Kaufman and Superman's Phone booth.....              | 19 |
| Benediction for Ordinary Days .....                       | 22 |
| Season of the Bitch.....                                  | 23 |
| God's Country.....  | 25 |
| When Superman Was Resurrected .....                       | 26 |
| Waiting For The End of The World .....                    | 27 |
| This Autumn Beginning (for Robert Challman).....          | 28 |
| Enoch .....   | 30 |
| Orange County, 1906.....                                  | 32 |
| Warhol Days.....  | 34 |
| Alexandria.....   | 38 |
| There is No Word for 'Fear of Culture' .....              | 39 |
| To Vortigern (An Open Letter).....                        | 41 |
| Another American July .....                               | 43 |
| Elizabeth speaks .....                                    | 45 |
| Theseus, in Correspondence.....                           | 46 |
| Dear Theseus, A Reply.....                                | 47 |
| iTunes kicks up Matthew's song for Kathleen Hietala ..... | 49 |
| Undressing Virginia Dare.....                             | 51 |
| Haunted .....   | 52 |
| January.....  | 54 |
| Aretha in Static (In-Between Days Suite) .....            | 55 |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| View from the Sandcastle's Turret .....        | 58 |
| Every Day is a Miracle .....                   | 59 |
| Fragment.....                                  | 61 |
| Gunfighter Nation (For Richard Kappemeir)..... | 62 |
| New Year's Day.....                            | 65 |
| Sacrifices to the Sea .....                    | 66 |
| The Drive Has Been Too Long.....               | 67 |
| Unfinished Business.....                       | 68 |
| Koan.....                                      | 71 |
| Cancer .....                                   | 72 |
| That Was Then.....                             | 79 |
| Protocol for Gazing at the Moon .....          | 80 |
| Less Cool Since I Quit Smoking.....            | 81 |
| My Father's Grave, July 5th, 1997 .....        | 83 |
| Acknowledgements:.....                         | 87 |
| About the Author .....                         | 88 |

Dedicated to my parents, Paul and Virginia Infante.

And to Lea. Always.

# 15 Ways to Leave Your Labyrinth

Coat your tongue with nitroglycerin. Speak softly.

Book a vacation online. Request paper tickets. When the mailman arrives, follow him home.

Challenge the minotaur to Texas hold 'em, but be careful. It cheats in the final hand. Above all else, don't lose.

Converse with houseplants. Trust when they whisper directions to the exits. Trust they are willing to wilt for your happiness.

Take scissors to the Bible. Re-arrange phrases until they form a map.

Shrink small and befriend the ants. Their catacombs are just another maze, but the pay is better.

Offer the minotaur a gold ring. It fears commitment and will run.

The whole bread crumb thing's played out, and string's a mug's game. Spray perfume at the threshold when you enter. You'll remember freedom's scent.

Surrender to childhood memories of striking matches and singed hair.

Redecorate. A fresh coat of paint makes an old labyrinth brand new, and the dust mites have conquered the sofa anyway.

Turn to television as religion.

Lie to your journal, creating an alternate universe where you stumble casually upon the exit. Write with enough conviction and it will become the truth.

Come to an accord with the minotaur, but remain wistful and aloof at quiet moments. Don't return its calls right away. It will long to see you smile and offer to show you the sky.

Chip small slices off the walls and swallow them. Soon, you, too, will become stone.

Remain motionless. The walls around you will become dust.  
Eventually.

# An American Love Song

Somewhere, a man who voted for last year's Pilate  
is choking down sobs between sips of good American beer.

Johnny Cash is playing on the jukebox.

*I shot a man in Reno/Just to watch him die*  
streams between the electric crackle of static.

We find love stories in soot-stained hands,  
gaze straggled out from the stars to the mire.  
Shiny gems of souls locked in prison vaults,  
the twittering madness lashed against steel bars.

Unwanted men falling, falling, this is ballet.  
One punch releases demons, one moment's peace  
in the thunderclap of imploding bone.

Some cannot survive love's passing:  
their bodies stitched with it like sutures, hands  
always open, voices raised in praise to God  
for rough-hewn men whose coarsened labors  
keep machine gears grinding.

The cement beneath our feet is always unraveling.

We find grace in the strangest places,  
Eyes. Black coffee. Love stories.  
Soft hands draw us in from undertow.  
Embraces, the promise of storms subsiding.

This is *always* a love story:

One hand clasped tight in desperation,  
the other extended outward, like a gift.

This world is rain that pounds like jackhammers,  
heads bowed down against the torrent.

The beer is warming. Soon it will be little more  
than carbonation and bitter aftertaste.

# That Left Turn At Albuquerque

Sing me a hymn of Travelport showers and carburetor-coated omelets; tabletop jukeboxes, Waylon Jennings for a nickel; vending machine pocket knives; communion of coffee, black as Tupac and twice as welcome when the cauldron bubbles over at 3 a.m. and there is nothing left to do but drive.

It's not the destination, it's the requiem for how cities fall away with the red shift of accents with each new gas station, the rising frequency of Tabasco bottles at diner booths with each westbound highway exit; singing at the stars so long your throat is grenade-fragmented, drowning out the receding wails of all the naked emperors and their naked empires, state lines and incidental bubblegum pop between yourself and brewing blizzards.

Asphalt and motion can warm you while the tires screech new catechisms, Gnosticism of automatic transmission and combustion engines, church of machines to deliver you to an innuendo, a whispering, a flickering light bulb of freedom.

# Speaking to Pittsburgh

## *1. Where my father died*

This is what the city says to me: Closed doors  
remain so, though I've gardened keys now  
for decades; The Earth sprouts no metal to fit  
long-rusted locks, gives no transcription  
for maps and language barriers, absent legends  
in the corner of the map folded in your jacket pocket.

My grandfather, my uncle – they say nothing:  
They are strangers to me, though I bear both  
men's names, the same burden of night.

I wouldn't know them on a half-empty bus to Mohegan Sun,  
though sometimes I sense them shuffle in the dark –  
key to any game: Know what you're willing to lose,

and I'm out of key with this song – forgot the lyrics,  
life lived in fragments of melody and poker chips,  
gambling song against small gain,  
tune I am willing to lose.

And you? How do you bear this weight  
and waiting? This song will not curl on my lips,  
voice cracking. But if it comes, it will shatter steel.

*2. To the man who killed him*

When I am honest, I know that it is not the city that killed my father,  
it was a man with a gun, second-degree murder, “non pre-meditated  
killing” –

and yes, I am acquainted with the way violence spreads like spilled beer,  
seeps into the foundation of buildings if left untended, rots floorboards;

and yes, I’ve sipped coffee with men whose hands are powder-burn scarred,  
uncleansable stains soaked into their skin –

do not mistake me for an accountant of sins,

keeping ledgers of unpayable debts. There is

no bureaucracy to balance this splotching of red ink – no grace

of prison or confessional; even knowledge of your name seems blasphemy.

*3. Talking to myself*

What’s been forged in this kiln, this city of insomnia?

No answer from the darkness, just the burbling

of molten metal underneath my ribs, waiting to be tempered.

# Character Study in Minor Arcana

She wakes with a headful of knives;  
he balances cups on an upturned palm,  
and what is between them  
is blindfolds, backbeat and morning.

In this place where bottles lay emptied  
she clutches small funerals for the darkness  
to her chest, pulls daylight to her lips,  
curses the sun.

Last night, she juggled coins and vanished  
into Reggaeton rhythms – sharp raps  
lacerating the whiskey fog –  
transformed herself into a sword,

emptied glasses bringing  
serpents and jewels –

kissed boys,  
spilled drinks,  
cool metal  
on warm skin.

She was never here at all.

## Karen's First Murder, Age 12

I talk around it, but remembering that day is like waking from the dream of trees – where I'm small and nimble, disappearing into the smell of cypress, orange aftertaste on a stranger's lips.

Those trees are razed now, replaced by discount stores and family dining, apartments packing families so close they can feel each other breathe in the night – conserving space to build. What trees are left merely garnish for highway dividers, call them ghost groves, strange remnants of something I only half-believe existed.

Memory and I? Not so close. Each time I reconstruct the dream there are new details – sometimes I am held aloft by ham-hock hands gripped tight around my waist, and I am laughing, or screaming, or devolving to a cloud of salt that blots out the sun then settles to Earth, until nothing can grow that's not carved from concrete – I look upon this gridlock traffic and call it beautiful.

Other things are clear: The champagne-cork pop of the stun gun, the way the cow teetered and fell in a cloud of dirt. Schoolgirls aghast as the teacher reminded them they could turn away. How most didn't.

The cow's death was a small thing – quick slice of a knife across its throat, blood seeping into the ground, its eyes staring vacantly at nothing in particular, its body twitching until it transformed into a product, something to be consumed.

That was something I could understand.

# Play One More for My Radio Sweetheart

- 10) I knew about snapped bass strings and the boy in Long Beach, knew you'd stripped yourself of even your name, but I wasn't alarmed until I'd heard she'd rescued your cats.
- 9) It's always been split lips and sheathed knives between us, but you were there when the bitch threw rocks at her windows, when the boogeyman slammed fists against her door at 3 a.m., and for that, I'm grateful.
- 8) Your wedding photos chill me – I search the crowd shots to find my own face lost amid the smiling friends in ill-fitting tuxedos, like some specter of me was there to dance with you.
- 7) You laid the guitar in the closet and it disappeared entirely, but sometimes you can hear familiar chords echoing through the house's rafters, each song a funeral dirge.
- 6) The radio bears no songs of you and me and what we've lost to the needle; when the world condenses to the back seat of a station wagon, no food for days, the body propelled by small snakes slithering in your veins. *No more.*
- 5) No exorcism for ghosts that walk like the living, that telephone desperate and starving from gas station parking lots, begging change for reheated burritos, building a mausoleum of Styrofoam wrappers.

- 4) The boy's no good for you, will chip away at you until you are something less, a bauble to be placed on a shelf.
- 3) She is gone, and her absence rattles like the wind through an empty garage, the whistle of air kissing emptied glass bottles. It haunts you at night when your eyes snap open, disturbed from sleep by a song your fingers still recall how to play.
- 2) I miss hearing you sing.
- 1) I should have been there.

# Elsewhere

... and this is the line of the cage, where the sand meets oil-slick  
tipped waves and this is what looms in the tin-can tide: my priests  
have golden skin and snap-crackle electroshock eyes. My feet arc  
electricity as they pace the cage, the cage, the cage is shifting sand  
beneath the weight of history; reality-television screams echoing  
into nights that cast no stars. My shackles are oil derricks.

Sing the body radioactive, these jealous, clay-molded gods: shape them  
in my image, caress with scalpeled fingertips. All dead within me  
now. Repackaged for the shifting demographics, Amen. All dead  
within me now, this fragile cathedral – tawdry Christmas lights.

I blink in half-lives, whisper in smallpox.

No name for this looking-glass sideways glance, eternity of garbled  
syntax and programmer jargon, cross and sickle and Amex card  
– call it worship in the smelting of nickels, all dead, all dead, all  
song notes converging at one zenith.

