

PILVAX

Issue Six Summer 2009

Billy O'Callaghan was born in Cork, Ireland, in 1974. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in such publications as *Absinthe: New European Writing*, *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Elysian Fields Quarterly*, *Southword*, and *Versal*. A 2009 Pushcart Prize nominee, he has won the George A. Birmingham Award, the Molly Keane Short Story Award, and the Lunch Hour Stories Prize. A collection of his short stories, entitled *In Exile*, was published by Mercier Press (Ireland) in the summer of 2008.

A Blue Note

by Billy O'Callaghan

Some years ago, I found myself in a room downtown watching him shoot up. I can't say with any degree of certainty whether or not it was his first time doing it, because even though we were as close as two people could ever be, we tried hard not to live in one another's pockets too much, but I remember that he did show an amount of innocence where the needle was concerned, how he scratched a soft white line up the inner flesh of his forearm but seemed to freeze when he reached the bluish lump of vein just where he opened his elbow. It may have been his first time tasting the smackshot or it may be he was simply afraid of the needle, just as a great many junkies tend to that tenuous balance between terror and addiction. Someone else had to do the honors that day, or that night, because days and nights seemed very much like two halves of the same trick back then, and there were always windows painted black and some bare lightbulb burning 80 white-hot watts, a peeling glare that just as much as the drugs and all the rest added to the sense of unreality of that time.

He was destined for something more, everyone could see it. I had always seen it, and told him so as often as he needed. It was Coltrane all over again, all those self-destructive musical prayers, except that this was no derivatation, no mimicry. This was taking up a saxophone and blowing until nothing else mattered because there was nothing else, no ends and no beginnings, just the melodies that he scraped from the air, godly things already, and then turned them from the perfectly mediocre to the ridiculously sublime. People had already begun to call him Jake by then, all that new crowd that had filtered in, hungry on the promise of the best kinds of highs. Jake Renshaw, because it was agreed that was a name to carry more weight than Jackie. He didn't understand it and neither did I, but he became two people just around then, and the old him, the real him, increasingly became a face for only me to see. Apart from his minutes on the stage, he was an actor playing a role.

I remember how he shot up on the living room floor that day or night, a girl who seemed just then like she was all that and more helping the needle on when his flesh or

his fingers flinched in last resistance. She had the kind of smile that was at once dirty and hungry, a bedtime smile made sour by her flashing eyes and leering teeth. Everyone wanted some of it, and she was ready to give. I remember, vaguely, that there had been more than enough to go round. He lay there gasping while the needle jogged in time to his racing pulse, hanging from his vein like a starving leech. After it had fixed him up he'd lean back against the seat cushions of the couch, close his eyes and clench his teeth in a manic, agonized way, a skeletal gag that would come to mark him after he'd lost all that weight and after enough bad living had begun to rot away not just his lips but his cheeks as well. Back then though, the lows were still off in the distance. We all knew of them but no one quite believed. They were stories for a campfire, and we told ourselves that we were different, that we could handle it. We believed that money made all the difference.

More of Billy O'Callaghan's stories can be found in ISSUE 6 of PILVAX, locally available in Budapest.