

Toti O'Brien

OPIUM

Those barges, flat, entirely covered — their sails a thick, tight, opaque wicker net — sliding snakelike among ships, quiet, furtive, through the chaos of Far-Eastern harbors. Those junks weren't named, say the scholars, after Latin *junc* — meaning reed — though they are made of it head to toe. They are built out of *junc*, espousing the plant's very nature — smooth flexibility, sinuous capacity of bending, twisting, curling away.

Junc, a semiaquatic plant thriving on river banks (by the Tiber, for instance, or the Nile) also gave a cheap kind of rope, later become synonym of garbage, then of drugs.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Europeans who could afford traveling crowded Asian harbors, seeking pleasures they couldn't purchase at home. Visitors sneaked inside barges at night like barges sneaked onto the waters, fooling custom officers, eluding control — and they found Baudelaire's artificial paradises.

You imagine the twilight. Bearded gentlemen, not in pristine attire, roughened by the journey. Girls in silk sarongs, silk kimonos. Shades and lanterns made of rice paper, always burned somewhere. Mounds of cushions, once shiny, now the color of dusk. A few blankets and shawls. Alcohol in china cups. Coffee tables, small, chipped, overloaded. Painted fans and the pungency of sweat. Pipes, hookahs, and bongs. No ashtrays, but a bowl of terracotta in a corner. Clouds of smoke. Music after midnight, very soft, on a long flat string instrument.

Patrons slumber and snore in turns. They creep out at the break of dawn. In the streets the air is damp, though the day will be burning hot. What do patrons do during daytime? Some go about their business. Import-export. Transactions. Some, a few, learn the language, write poetry or paint.

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In the nineteen-eighties Japan went through a major financial growth. Young executives worked all week long like madmen. They were informatics samurais, business kamikazes. When they left the office on Friday, before getting on public transportation (great for painlessly shuttling them to their luxury suburbs) they stopped at a select club. In small groups, still discussing work-related topics, perhaps.

No, they didn't drive home in their million-dollar cars. Traffic in Tokyo is obnoxious, especially on Friday nights. They went to the club and drank themselves to their knees. They still managed boarding a Metro, where they typically passed out. The fad lasted a bit, made the news, got people to wonder.

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Cannaiola is a wine produced in Italy, in a small town by a lake. *Canna* means reed. You see them, when you step out of the *trattoria*, glass in

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hand—mysterious and tangled, moved by the lightest breeze, like grass, hair, fingers waving goodbye. You see them—the reeds.

Maybe the wine is so named because vineyards are also on the shore, side by side with the lacustrine vegetation. But the locals always giggle when uncorking a flask, because *canna* means joint as well, and this wine gives a special kind of elation. Light. Aerial. Quite dreamy. Intense nonetheless. Tourists leave town with a good supply of *Cannaiola*. On return they know what they are looking for. Locals laugh, lift an eyebrow with cognizant airs. Tourists come back for *Cannaiola*, of course.

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I wander if my great-great-grandfather—when he traded goods with East Asia—routinely visited those junks. I wonder what traveled in those ships of his, under the ambiguous label of spice. If he journeyed to the Oriental regions, like many, to be indeed disoriented, in a way that couldn't be locally achieved. Not with liquor, not in his hometown. Somewhere far, remote, separated—in the land of the rising sun.

Disoriented. How cool can it be? How miserable, how narrow is life without the occasional spin.

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Teaching dance to particularly excited, restless students, I always knew I had an ace up my sleeve. I only needed for them to form a long line, then follow a leader spinning in and out of a circle. The line got fully wrapped, then unraveled faster and faster, getting all delightfully dizzy. Peaceful, satisfied. A processional spiral—the most ancient dance ritual. Trance ritual.

If instead I was stuck with a bunch of tired hyperactive kids, on a rainy day, I brought them to the laundrette. While I did my washing they had fun in front of the driers, watching clothes slowly and endlessly revolve. Disorienting themselves.

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I remember sniffing white-out at my clerical job, in my twenties, while I watched the roofline by the window, pondering about evasion devices.

And the highs with glue while installing carpets, lining ceilings or furniture with myriads of shells, decorating a zillion opera costumes with gold-leaf in the company of other workers, of course. First, all quiet, head down, grumpy. Wishing only to get done, get paid, get out and get home. Then a joke or two. Silly jokes but they sounded hysterical. The soft giggling. The airiness. The flight.

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Kora and I got high on cigars once, while acting. The script said we'd meet in the restrooms after a working day, wash our hands, gossip about the boss, have a smoke. We rehearsed a couple of times before the shooting started. A few takes, but—the director said—the scene looked better and better. Let's go on girls, you're great—he yelled at some point—this scene will get an Oscar, I swear. Once more, dudettes.

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The two of us were kind of free-falling, truly having a blast. Making outrageous jokes at the boss' expense, saying what first came to mind, which happened to be funnier and funnier. After our eleventh cigar (the prop guy kept handling fresh ones) we got a dull headache. Not sure we could drive home immediately. We sat on a bench and kept laughing. We proceeded with the story of our lives, then our intimate secrets, having—we believed—the greatest time ever. How could we forget those cigars? They were genuine, just one of too many.

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Alterations. In the movie, Kora and I played two *petites-mains* in a turn-of-the-century workshop—low-paid seamstresses making alterations.

It means changing shape. Literally, become another. We get thirsty for that kind of trick, do we. We, meaning all. Hard as we try to acquire identity—nail it down, seal it with neat stickers like status, profession, career—we also crave for losing it. Blur it, at least open the seams, give some slack, get air, take a break.

We have a longing for escape. We starve for porous borders, in-between spots where egos flex their rigidity, blend their contours. Disoriented on a covered barge, slightly, incessantly rocking like a womb in amniotic water—same twilight, same muffled noise—not yet differentiate, lulled by a constant pulse. What is it? Are these waves? Our own heart? Someone else's? Shush, honey. It doesn't matter.