

## The Fog of Time Means We're Everywhere

“ὄβριμι’ Ἔρωσ, πόσος ἐσσί, πόση σέθεν ἄπλετος ἀλκή, [. . .] ἔθνεα λυγρὰ καμόντων, οἱ Λήθησ μὲν ἄφουσαν ὑπὸ  
στόμα νηπαθὲς ὕδωρ καὶ φύγον ἄλγεα πάντα, σὲ δ’ εἰσέτι πεφρόκασι.”

—Oppian of *Aramea*, the *Cynegetica*

**July 13, 1932**

Do they know that the drinks are stronger now that they're illegal? I shake my glass, tinkling the ice within as I remember the clatter of bone dice in a soldier's cup. That was the last time the drinks were this strong, I think. I approve.

The ceiling in this basement speakeasy drips cement-gray water, heavy and slow with termite eggs, quick with gravity's lust. Muffled by distance, cement, and San Francisco's omnipresent fog, the bustle and noise of the street corner flowing around the facade that holds our door filters in beneath the music. A three-way intersection, of course, where one street meets two. I couldn't drink the time as constant as the fog away anywhere else. One road goes up the hill while the other continues along the valley. There's not a lot of light here, probably less than there really should be. Scattered lamps clutch the song playing from the wind-up gramophone in its unassuming wooden chest in the corner beneath their stained shades. It's a Bessie Jackson tune, quiet as if it fears to interrupt the clandestine happenings here.

I think the drink may be the only strong thing in the place. Too bad, really.

The door to the street opens up above the small, makeshift staircase. I don't really notice, or care. A slight chill sweeps across my paper-thin skin as the heat of the speakeasy rushes to escape, only to grapple with the night's cold. My bones freeze, lacking that youthful layer of insulating fat.

Mark Twain might not have said it, but it's easy to believe that he spent his coldest winter in a San Francisco summer. My slumped shoulders release my head to rest on the cigarette-scarred wood of the bar. The comforting smell of mold is stronger here, the varnish a failed armor against the constant moisture.

Conversation rumbles all around, each table a host to its own small cabal, the shadows at the edge of the lamplight swallowing their prattle, making a meal of it with a side of chuckles and a garnish of moans. Their hands rest atop the rims of their glasses, shielding the hooch from ceiling water formed of condensed fog. All of the tables sit before me, so that everyone in the speakeasy has a good view of the wall just a foot or two behind my back. High up that wall, a foot or two beneath the windows, is a red light, unassuming and small. If the coppers ever come calling, the lookouts on the streets will press a button and the light will glow a warning through the thick cigarette smoke, triggering a rush to the back door as the patrons panic and try to save themselves.

We all have friends who've been arrested, sent to jail if the courts consider them to have a choice in their deviancy and to the sanatorium if they face the much worse fate of being considered to not have such a thing. The sanatorium peddles cures to us, for us. Many here in this speakeasy have looked up such friends, pestered orderlies behind innumerable desks until they found a disappeared acquaintance. The stories they tell of memories shredded by the lobotomist's pick or electrodes on the temples have earned many a sympathy drink slid slickly across the bar by a bartender who refused their money. And they earned that red light glance after anxious glance.

Whispers occasionally mix with the thick clouds of smoke, whispers about *me*. I am the only one who chooses to sit at the short side of the bar. No one can understand why I sit here with my back to the light. They love to while away the nights inventing rumors to explain it. Everyone here is discreet enough to do so in such a way that I can't hear what they're saying — details, anyway. Occasional explosions of other conversations echo against cement walls that once rang with jazz and

the rustle of dancing shoes. One such questions the decrepitude in which we find ourselves. “I hear the Italians got themselves a fancy speakeasy upon Stockton. Opened three years ago. Much better than this dump.”

I flop the hand holding my tumbler in his direction, a sloppily half-hearted attempt at indicating I have a witty retort ready. He doesn’t notice, but I slur anyway, “Back in my day, we gave eagles our treasures to steal and march for. Now hatchlings cry out for food they can’t hunt themselves.” None of them respond, of course. No one ever has a reply or even an acknowledgement that the drunk old B.D. has spoken.

Not long thereafter, a creaking sound lets me know that I have a neighbor beneath that always-watched red light. A lilting voice interrupts my silent drinking. “It’s smoky down here.”

If I wait them out, maybe they’ll go away. Nope. “You can barely tell the difference between out there and in here, huh?”

“I wouldn’t know,” I reply. “I’ve been down here . . . a long time.”

With that strange sense that operates where you have neither eye nor ear nor tongue nor nose to sense, I feel that the person behind me has laid her head on the bar to match mine. Her voice is pleasant, with a hint of roughness that tells me she has yelled slightly more than is, strictly speaking, healthy in her lifetime. “Oh. Well, it’s foggy out there, really foggy. Like a heavy rain, but worse ‘cause it doesn’t fall like rain would. Just hangs there, heavy and close and choking.”

I get the sense that my drunken throat has made an inarticulate sound of noncommitment, but it doesn’t seem to serve well as a deterrent.

“I heard it was foggy like this when the explorers sailed up the coast. I guess old maps don’t have the Bay on them, like maybe the ocean didn’t want them to see it and spawned the fog to hide it away.”

Great effort heaves my head up to turn and look at the short woman, black hair above a broad face with deep-set Mediterranean eyes. She looks so very modern in her wide-legged woolen trousers, like that actress I've heard the Uranians around here gab about. What's her name? Katherine something? High-waisted, these brown pants provide an eye-pleasing foundation for the red button-down blouse scattered with white polka dots above, the two points of its collar mirroring her ears. A pink bow tie, also polka-dotted though they are smaller, helps the puffed sleeves give her the narrow-waisted silhouette so sought-after these days. The woman in front of me has large ears and more cheek than cheekbone. Cute, and a little masculine. "Knowledge is more powerful when occulted."

She smiles. That's weird. Usually, my utterances are treated as burdensome puzzles to be picked at and solved, broken apart like an eggshell in search of a yolk of wisdom. Or just ignored. Almost always, just ignored, a counterbalance conserving the amount of attention in the room, making up for the constant attention given to that inert thing above my head. This young woman's grin seems to say that she thinks I spoke plain, or if not plain, that my words are to be savored in a marinade of their own inscrutable juices, worked by a mental mouth until it enlightens the tongue rather than torn apart like a child on Christmas.

Don't get me wrong; it's not like she's sitting there with a loopy broad smile making her look stupid. It's just a smile, even a small one, but so expressive. I glance at the windows tucked discreetly up by the ceiling. Ground level from the sidewalk, of course. "That must be why the drips are so bad tonight, rain from the raftered heavens, wet chill slipping past our defenses."

She nods at my empty glass. "Speaking of liquids, pip, let me buy you a drink?" I nod as I snort at the idea that someone as young as she could be so attracted to me as to call me "pip". She flags down the bartender and continues, "The name's Butch."

“I don’t think I have a name anymore. Used to perform as Harem Katie, the Old Thrice-Greatest Bitch, back when Billy Swann was throwing balls, though. You should hold your hand over that, Butch, protect it.”

Butch lifts her head in obedient response to my raised finger. Her elbow slides a short distance across the bar surface while she examines the ceiling before finally coming to a conclusion. “Oh, it’s just water, like you said. From the fog outside. Ain’t gonna hurt me anymore in my drink than it did when I was walking here.”

“Τοιαύτην ἀγροικίαν ἐξελέγχων αὐτός ἐστιν ἄγροικος.” He who finds fault with ill-breeding like this is ill-bred himself. “I take it you’ve never been here before, then?”

“You know, it’s the strangest thing. I remember this place, remember it warm and full of laughter, but I can’t for the life of me remember anything about it! Can you believe that? What sort of place is this, anyway?”

Suddenly possessed of an ecstatic fervor many years alien to me, I reach over and grab her hand, shoving it into the umbrellic position of everyone else’s. I hold it there even after taking a sip from the whiskey she’d bought me. The glass rings dully as I slam it down. My eyes catch hers in a small puddle’s reflection atop the bar. Fog intruding upon the rafters above fallen to collect here in front of us or hooch spilled and wasted across the surface that served it, it is impossible to tell. Mine, grey, the smooth uninflected color of a moving picture, search her dark brown ones. The puddle makes a surprisingly good mirror; I can even see the unlit warning reflected in turn by those richly-colored pupils. “You brought someone here.”

Two men on the long side of the bar hear me, visibly tensing their muscles as they turn to look over their shoulders and my head to check that red light behind me. Its dark inactivity doesn’t seem to reassure them of their safety. That’s the danger of these things: invaluable in an emergency, they only spook those they would keep safe when there is none to be found.

“I did, yeah,” is the response I get, nonchalant, light, as if I am merely continuing our flirtation.

“Not as much as they will,” I say, a moment before hearing the remark to which I am responding.

“You know what I think the heterosexuals of think when they see us? Death.” It’s not the same conversation as the ethnic hatred from earlier. A table on the opposite side of the speakeasy has picked up the volume this time. Full of pompous students more in love with the novelty of their ideas than those ideas’ connection to context, it is playing host to yet another philosophical competition. “Not like fruits are gonna kill them or anything, but because we demean the very idea of immortality. They all think they can kill death with those weapons between their legs. Invented whole ritual traditions around the idea, in fact, as if having kids means they won’t weaken, sicken, and die. But of course they’re going to, and seeing those of us who copulate just cuz it’s fun, with no ulterior motive of immortality? Well, the heterosexuals just can’t deal with it, I think, and that’s why they arrest and beat and, ironically, kill us.”

Butch doesn’t seem to have noticed my oracular aside. “My doctor from the hospital.” The cold sweat on the side of her glass gets caught in the goosebumps hair it inspires on my forearm as she puts her young hand on my wrinkled arm. I can feel my pulse speeding as the quick blood of her palm warms my own. “I like the way your skin feels, delicate and crepey. Makes me think of vulnerability as a refined, elegant virtue, even despite your ink.” Her fingers stroke my tattoo as if they can feel the image and not just the hills and valleys age has etched into me. “You a doctor, too?”

This spurs me to finally turn to fully face Butch, incidentally hiding the staff with its wings and snakes from her sight. “Naw, it’s older than that. Got it to remind me of my favorite theft.”

“Theft’s against the law,” she replies, shock and awe in her voice.

“So’s sodomy. And alcohol.”

“Yeah, saw the coppers bring lotsa sodomites into the hospital while I was there to get treated.”

“What were you there for?”

“Y’know, it’s the weirdest thing. I can’t remember.”

I stare at this woman with her short curls. This makes no sense, and I let silence stretch between us as I try to figure it out. Hooch has made my head heavy. I plop it, prop it, on one hand as I examine Butch. My forearm ~ not the one so recently under discussion, of course ~ isn’t enough to arrest the motion, however, and I find my eyes uplifted. Drips lazily stroll down those ceiling windows, appearing from nowhere, as behind them the congealed, grey fog crowds right up against the glass. There’s something like a pressure that can be seen. The fog wants in, will press its way in until the glass shatters and our shelter is gone.

Before any questions can rumble forth from my throat, she turns and flags down the man who, no doubt, came in with her. The smoke floating throughout the speakeasy ripples ominously, as if a predator was passing by beneath the surface of a cigarette-born ocean. My questions die down as it parts to reveal him, chilled by a growing realization. There is a wateriness to his pale blue eyes, a little too much drool peeking out on his thin lips. Straight blonde hair swoops across his forehead in a staid, boring style. Suddenly I know why Butch can’t remember why she was in hospital. He reaches for my handshake with a self-assured laziness, and introduces himself with a whispery voice, almost hypnotic.

“Dr. Cleon Lajati. Nice to meet you.” There’s no mark of recognition marring that perfect face of his. He has no clue who I am. Knowledge is most powerful when occulted.