BOOK EXTRACT

My uncle the Muslim atheist

Hanif Kureishi's films, like his childhood memories, are populated by complex characters who hold eastern and western values simultaneously. This, he says, is what fundamentalists can't deal with

Extracted from *Dreaming and Scheming* by Hanif Kureishi, published this month by Faber and Faber at £8.99.

TO me, writing for film is no different to writing for any other form. It is the telling of stories, only on celluloid. However, you are writing for a director and then for actors. Economy is usually the point; one objective of film-writing is to make it as quick and light as possible. You can't put in whatever you fancy in the hope that a leisured reader might follow you for a while, as you might in a novel. In that sense, films are more like short stories. The restrictions of the form are almost poetic, though most poems are not read aloud in cineplexes. Film is a broad art, which is its virtue.

Nevertheless, it didn't occur to any of us involved in My Son the Fanatic, for instance, that it would be either lucrative or of much interest to the general public. The film was almost a legacy of the 1960s and 1970s, when one of the purposes of the BBC was to make cussed and usually provincial dramas about contemporary issues like homelessness, class and the Labour party.

I had been aware since the early 1980s, when I visited Pakistan for the first time, that extreme Islam (or "fundamentalism" - Islam as a political ideology) was filling a space where Marxism and capitalism had failed to take hold. To me, this kind of Islam resembled neo-fascism or even Nazism: an equality of oppression for the masses with a necessary enemy - in this case "the west" - helping to keep everything in place. When I was researching The Black Album and My Son the Fanatic, a young fundamentalist I met did compare his "movement" to the IRA, to Hitler and to the Bolsheviks. I guess he had in mind the idea that small groups of highly motivated people could make a powerful political impact.

This pre-Freudian puritanical ideology certainly provided meaning and authority for the helpless and dispossessed. As importantly, it worked too for those in the west who identified with them; for those who felt guilty at having left their "brothers" behind in the third world. How many immigrant families are there who haven't done that? Most of my family, for instance, have long since fled to Canada, Germany, the US and Britain; but some members refused to go. There can't have been a single middle-class family in Pakistan who didn't always have a bank account in the first world "just in case". Those left behind are usually the poor, uneducated, weak, old and furious.

Fundamentalist Islam is an ideology that began to flourish in a conspicuous age of plenty in the west, and in a time of media expansion. Everyone could see, via satellite and video, not only how wealthy the west was, but how sexualised it had become. (All "sex and secularity over there, yaar", as I heard it put.) This was particularly shocking for countries that were still feudal. If you were in any sense a third worlder, you could either envy western ideals and aspire to them, or you could envy and reject them. Either way, you could only make a life in relation to them. The new Islam is as recent as postmodernism.

Until recently I had forgotten Saeed Jaffrey's fruity line in My Beautiful Laundrette: "Our country has been sodomised by religion, it is beginning to interfere with the making of money." Jaffrey's lordly laundrette owner, Nasser, was contrasted with Hussein, the desiccated character played by Roshan Seth, for whom fraternity is represented by rational socialism rather than Islam, the sort of hopeful socialism he might have learned at the LSE in London in the 1940s. It is a socialism that would have no hope of finding a base in either 1980s Britain, or in Pakistan.

What they, Omar and even his lover Johnny have in common is the desire to be rich. Not only that: what they also want, which is one of the west's other projects, is to flaunt and demonstrate to others their wealth and prosperity. They want to show off. This will, of course, induce violent envy in some of the poor and dispossessed, and may even encourage their desire to kill the rich.

One of my favourite uncles, a disillusioned Marxist and a template for the character played by Shashi Kapoor in Sammy and Rosie Get Laid, had by the mid-1980s become a supporter of Reagan and Thatcher. Every morning we'd knock around Karachi, going from office to office, where he had friends, to be given tea. No one ever seemed too busy to talk. My uncle claimed that economic freedom was Pakistan's only hope. If this surprised me, it was because I didn't grasp what intellectuals and liberals in the third world were up against. There was a mass of people for whom alternative political ideologies either had no meaning or were tainted with colonialism, particularly when Islamic grassroots organisation was made so simple through the mosques. For my uncle the only possible contrast to revolutionary puritanism had to be acquisition; liberalism smuggled in via materialism. So if Islam represented a new puritanism, progress would be corruption, through the encouragement of desire. But it was probably too late for this already; US materialism, and the dependence and quasi-imperialism that accompanied it, was resented and despised.

In Karachi there were few books written, films made or theatre productions mounted. If it seemed dull to me, still I had never lived in a country where social collapse and murder were everyday possibilities. At least there was serious talk. My uncle's house, a version of which appears in My Beautiful Laundrette, was a good place to discuss politics and books, and read the papers and watch films. In the 1980s American businessmen used to come by. My uncle claimed they all said they were in "tractors". They worked for the CIA; they were tolerated if not patronised, not unlike the old-style British colonialists the Pakistani men still remembered. No one thought the "tractor men" had any idea what was really going on, because they didn't understand the force of Islam. But the Karachi middle class had some idea, and they were worried. They were obsessed with their "status". Were

Hanif Kureishi

they wealthy, powerful leaders of the country, or were they a complacent, parasitic class - oddballs, western but not Pakistani - about to become irrelevant in the coming chaos of disintegration?

A few years later, in 1989, the fatwa against Salman Rushdie was announced and although I saw my family in London, I didn't return to Karachi. I was told by the embassy that my safety "could not be guaranteed". Not long after, when I was writing The Black Album, a fundamentalist acquaintance told me that killing Rushdie had become irrelevant. The point was that this was "the first time the community has worked together. It won't be the last. We know our strength now."

I have often been asked how it's possible for someone like me to carry two quite different world-views within, of Islam and the west; not, of course, that I do. Once my uncle said to me with some suspicion: "You're not a Christian, are you?" "No," I said. "I'm an atheist." "So am I," he replied. "But I am still Muslim." "A Muslim atheist?" I said. "It sounds odd." He said: "Not as odd as being nothing, an unbeliever."

Like a lot of queries put to writers, this question about how to put different things together is a representative one. We all have built-in and contrasting attitudes, represented by the different sexes of our parents, each of whom would have a different background and psychic history. Parents always disagree about which ideals they believe their children should pursue. A child is a cocktail of its parent's desires. Being a child at all involves resolving, or synthesising, at least two different worlds, outlooks and positions.

If it becomes too difficult to hold disparate material within, if this feels too "mad" or becomes a "clash", one way of coping would be to reject one entirely, perhaps by forgetting it. Another way is to be at war with it internally, trying to evacuate it, but never succeeding, an attempt Farid makes in My Son the Fanatic. All he does is constantly reinstate an electric tension between differences - differences that his father can bear and even enjoy, as he listens to Louis Armstrong and speaks Urdu. My father, who had similar tastes to the character played by Om Puri, never lived in Pakistan. But like a lot of middle-class Indians, he was educated by both mullahs and nuns, and developed an aversion to both. He came to love Nat King Cole and Louis Armstrong, the music of black American former slaves. It is this kind of complexity that the fundamentalist has to reject.

Like the racist, the fundamentalist works only with fantasy. For instance, there are those who like to consider the west to be only materialistic and the east only religious. The fundamentalist's idea of the west, like the racist's idea of his victim, is immune to argument or contact with reality. (Every self-confessed fundamentalist I have met was anti-Semitic.) This fantasy of the Other is always sexual, too. The west is recreated as a godless orgiastic stew of immoral copulation. If the black person has been demonised by the white, in turn the white is now being demonised by the militant Muslim. These fighting couples can't leave one another alone.

These disassociations are eternal human strategies and they are banal. What a fiction-writer can do is show the historical forms they take at different times: how they are lived out day by day by particular individuals. And if we cannot prevent individuals believing whatever they like about others - putting their fantasies into them - we can at least prevent these prejudices becoming institutionalised or an acceptable part of the culture.

A few days after the September 11 attack on the World Trade Centre, a film director friend said to me: "What do we do now? There's no point to us. It's all politics and survival. How do the artists go on?" I didn't know what to say; it had to be thought about.

Islamic fundamentalism is a mixture of slogans and resentment; it works well as a system of authority that constrains desire, but it strangles this source of human life too. But of course in the Islamic states, as in the west, there are plenty of dissenters and quibblers, and those hungry for mental and political freedom. These essential debates can only take place within a culture; they are what a culture is, and they demonstrate how culture opposes the domination of either materialism or puritanism. If both racism and fundamentalism are diminishers of life - reducing others to abstractions - the effort of culture must be to keep others alive by describing and celebrating their intricacy, by seeing that this is not only of value but a necessity.

INTERVIEW

John Tusa meets Gilbert and George

It's 35 years now since Gilbert, from the Italian Dolomites, and George, from Devon, met at St Martin's art school in London. At the time, the idea that two men should become their own sculpture seemed just one of those post-art school jokes, but Gilbert and George are still recognisably the artists who became famous with the Singing Sculpture of 1969, when the two men, in their trademark suits, their hands and faces in bronzed makeup, mimed and danced their way through Flanagan and Allen's Underneath the Arches. They then moved on to "postal sculptures" (postcards), written sculptures, and then, in the early 1970s, large photo pieces. They are now best known for their use of explicit sexual and defecatory imagery, but their work has a far broader range: death and hope and life and fear. And they divide the critics. Are they "jokers, storytellers with a cool, nearly pathological desire for exhibitionism", as one put it, or should they be read differently? "The art of Gilbert and George," according to another, "is a method of making everything mean what it usually does, only with grander, more vivid force."

My first question when we met recently was: How have you managed it for so long?

Gilbert: Because we never ask that question ourselves. And we had this amazing determination when we started in '69 that we wanted to be artists. I was from the Dolomites and couldn't speak English very well, and George was from Devon, and he showed me London and we wanted to be artists together. It was an amazing vision for us. And we never lost it.

George: Being war babies was an enormous thing for us. I remember as a child that everything was broken, families were broken, people were injured, many were dead. Houses were filled with damaged furniture. You knew one thing and one thing only - that things would get better. Our generation really believed in that, that you had to get up and sort everything out.

Did your colleagues think that you were serious?

George: Oh, at St Martin's we were taken very seriously - almost as a threat, really, because the style of art that was current was formalistic art. It was to do with colour, shape, form, weight, and you discussed art in those terms. You never discussed feeling, meanings, sex, race, religion, money. And we thought that was wrong, because if you took those sculptures out of the building into the street, they wouldn't address the issues that were inside all the people on the street. They wouldn't even identify them as art.

When we left St Martin's, there were four or five modern art galleries in the world. And all of them specialised in minimal abstract art and conceptual art. The bad things in art then were emotion, sentiment, feeling, sexuality - all those were still taboo.

Gilbert: We felt we were always on the outside in those galleries, never in the centre. The centre was a blank canvas, or a circle or line, and we were what they call the randy outside. We are in the centre now.

George: We had our first show in Düsseldorf. We had an extremely successful opening, a big night of partying. Then we went into the gallery in the morning and the lady was just finishing cleaning away the bottles and things, and the director of the gallery was sitting there looking very grumpy and depressed. We said, "Hangover?" No, no, no, he didn't have a hangover. We said, "What's the matter?" And he said, "Oh, the cleaning lady, she likes your exhibition." It's a very, very 70s story.

You have lived in Spitalfields, the Bangladeshi immigrant area of London's East End, since the 1960s. What attracted you?

George: At the time we moved in it wasn't Bangladeshi - it was the Jewish quarter. Then it became Somali for a while; for a year and a half a lot of Somali people moved in with beautiful filed teeth. And then it became Maltese, briefly. Opposite our house on Fournier Street there was a Maltese cafe where we had beautiful food, I remember - extraordinary.

Gilbert: It was like a ghetto district and very romantic in some funny way. The first time I went to the East End I thought it was extraordinary. It felt like moving into a book, a 19th-century book, all these yellow lights, these old-fashioned houses. It was like magic.

And now?

George: It's very interesting. For 15 years the journalists used to say, "Now that you're successful artists, why don't you move to a nicer part of London?" And now they say, "Oh, it's become so trendy. Isn't it time you moved on?" So they always wanted us to leave.

How did the Singing Sculpture evolve?

Gilbert: We were alone with nothing to do, and we wanted to be artists, but we'd just left St Martin's and nobody would touch us.

George: We went to every single gallery in London, even the ones we'd never heard of, just so we could say that we'd been to every gallery. We presented an idea of our intentions as artists, and said, "You know, we'd like to offer an exhibition," and they all said no, and we felt enormously proud. We thought, we really are doing something amazing, we're doing the right thing: everybody says no.

We went to the Tate and said we would like to present a living sculpture called A Christmas Piece. We said we'd already organised with the RSPCA to borrow animals and we would re-create the birth of Jesus in the entrance to the Tate. We would stand there as two living figures. It didn't occur to us that maybe it wasn't quite right: we would be Mary and Joseph, in a way, and there wouldn't have been a baby, but there would be the animals. And of course, again, they turned it down.

But then we had two enormous strokes of luck. There was a travelling exhibition called When Attitude Becomes Form, and whenever it arrived in a city the local curator was invited to add local artists to that exhibition. When it reached the ICA in London, the selector, whom we knew, didn't select us and we were horrified and felt completely miserable about it, and we felt the only thing to do was be a living sculpture at the opening. So we went to the opening and stood there with these multicoloured bronze heads and hands in the middle of the exhibition, completely still for the whole evening, and it stole the show. During that evening a young man came up to us and said, "I am Konrad Fischer. You do something with me in Düsseldorf, uh?" And that was the most famous art dealer in the world at that time.

Gilbert: We were trying to go towards the music world as well, the pop world. We went to the Marquee [nightclub] and did one evening there. We were not sure if we were going towards music or art. It could have gone either way.

You are going to show all your works with all the "objectionable four-letter words" in them at the Serpentine gallery in a few months.

George: That's very exciting: in June we will be showing for the first time ever the whole 26 Dirty Words pictures. They were never shown together. They're 25 years old, it's Her Majesty's Golden Jubilee - it's the Dirty Words Silver Jubilee.

But do you really think that people need to be liberated from our fears about four-letter words?

George: We do, we do.

You think you need to feel liberated, or the audience does?

Gilbert: Oh yes.

George: We don't think that we're free and we're helping the audience; we feel that together with the viewer we're doing it, we're walking down life's road hand in hand with the viewer. We don't know exactly what we do when we make a picture - it's only when it's finished and it starts to be exhibited that we begin to feel what we were actually trying to say in that picture.

Where do you pick up your references? Where do you get your raw material?

George: We don't feel that we're showing life or reflecting life in that way. We like to think that we're forming our tomorrows, that we're making pictures that don't exist in reality, that maybe tomorrow will be a little bit more like our pictures than it would otherwise.

Gilbert: And we feel we're getting them all around us. We always say, you can get our subjects 100m away from our house, even all these religious feelings that we feel we have to liberate ourselves from. Personally I've felt I always had to liberate myself from being a Catholic man. Up and down Brick Lane you see this amazing confrontation between east and west, the Muslims and the Christians, on every lamppost, stickers day and night. This battle of religions - for us it's very exciting.

George: Sometimes you have the call to prayer at the same time as bell practice at the other end of the street. That's extraordinary.

You represent your own bodies a great deal in your work, but you've

Gilbert and George

also talked about humiliating yourselves. What do you mean by that, and why is it necessary?

Gilbert: I think we started that a long time ago because . . . in '69 when we did Gilbert the Shit and George the Cunt, it was the first time that we confronted our public and humiliated ourselves. And we realised that there is enormous freedom in that. Nobody is able to attack you after that.

George: I think it gives us an amazing contact with the general public, because the general public knows that many artists are very superior towards the viewer.

Do you think that you fall into the trap of personality by having made yourselves the subject of your art?

George: We think that most people think of our pictures in terms of their own life and experience, and they think that we're in the picture as the people speaking to them, like every letter they receive will be signed by the person who wrote that letter. I think that's how people see it.

Gilbert: I don't think we are personalities.

Oh, come on.

Gilbert: No, I don't think so. I think we are, what you call, like some crazy living sculptures.

Will the art of Gilbert and George die when the first of you dies?

George: No, I think if we fell under a bus today the pictures would live on. I'm sure of that.

But will the artist Gilbert and George die when the first of you dies?

George: We always cross the road together, so maybe ... [he laughs] we have to be careful.

BOOK REVIEW

East meets West

Conceived in a monsoon and sent from India to Africa via England, Hari Kunzru keeps the central character of The Impressionist at arm's length, writes Adam Mars-Jones

The Impressionist
Hari Kunzru
Hamish Hamilton £12.99, pp482

THERE are bags of talent to be found in Hari Kunzru's rather hyped first novel, but they're compact in size and oddly distributed through the book. Perhaps packets of talent would be a more accurate description, packets or pockets, emptied out selectively over favoured minor characters, withheld from the hero.

Kunzru gives his central character a magical-realist flourish of a conception, the wordless coupling, in a deserted dacoits' cave during the first, furious monsoon of 1903, of a spoiled Indian girl and a half-drowned British forestry expert. After that, he's pretty much on his own, trying to piece together a life from the fragments he's been given. He is called Pran Nath at birth, becomes Jonathan Bridgeman and ends the book with no name.

The crucial part of his make-up is a fair skin that lets him pass as white as long as he learns the right lessons (length of shirt-sleeve, nuance of accent). 'Stitch a personality together. Calico arms. Wooden head. A hat and a set of overheard opinions. How perfectly impossible it is to grow a good lawn in India. The positive moral effects of team sports. The unspeakable vileness of Mr Gandhi, and the lack of hygiene of just about everything. Lay them out one by one, like playing patience.'

The structure of the book is episodic, but since the hero is largely at the mercy of events the result is like a picaresque without a picaro, the necessary catalytic rogue. Pran Nath is the mildest sort of opportunist; when he eventually acquires a privileged identity, it isn't as a result of some Talented Mr Ripley-style machinations. He simply steps into a vacancy unexpectedly arisen.

The figure of what used to be called the half-breed in a society that demands clarity of categories has tragic potential (as in Thomas Keneally's The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith) but here the theme is played out more ambiguously. Almost the first thing we are told about Pran Nath is that 'the pearl faculty, the faculty which secretes selfhood round some initial grain' atrophies in him. It's as if being conceived in a flood has disqualified him from solid status.

But if the hero of The Impressionist is hollow despite all his various efforts at assimilation, it isn't because he is a copy, but because he is copying people who are hollow already. In its own way, this is a comfortable irony, now that we take it for granted that identity is as much performance as essence, liquid in the first place.

An epigraph from Kim is an efficient way of serving notice that Raj-bashing as such is not part of the book's agenda. The Empire, indifferent though it is to the discontents of its subjects, concerns itself with a broader agenda than power, with irrigation and the rational distribution of agricultural resources, while the Nawab of Fatehpur, where Pran Nath arrives as a teenager, worries only about the throne passing to his Europeanised brother unless he can produce an heir.

The tone of the Fatehpur section is uneasily farcical, more influenced by the Carry On films than Kipling, and much the weakest part of the book. At one stage, two separate plots to manipulate the Crown's representative, the absurd Major Privett-Clampe, by having boys seduce him and then blackmailing him with photographs, converge on a tiger hunt, a Tom Sharpe setpiece of diarrhoea and drunken gunfire.

Only a little later, Kunzru hits his stride, when Pran Nath arrives in Bombay and is taken in by a Scottish missionary and his estranged wife. It's in Bombay, named Robert by the Macfarlanes but known on the Falkland Road as 'Pretty Bobby', that he learns to exploit the ambiguity of his looks.

Whether or not he's a different person, this section could be a different book. In particular, the 20 pages devoted to the Macfarlanes' back story, describing how such an ill-assorted couple came to Bombay, sets a standard of sympathy and insight which Kunzru is hard put to sustain.

Roughly two-thirds of the way through the book, Robert becomes Jonathan and travels to England ('the mystic Occident! Land of wool and cabbage and lecherous round-eyed girls!') to be educated. Part of what he studies, naturally, is Britain itself, where even London pigeons, 'fat and grey and rat-like though they are, appear to be coursing with something imperial and rare, some pigeon-essence that powers their strut and their pompous inquisitiveness'. He picks up academic subjects and moderate social skills, but other things also: a hysterical conventionality, anti-Semitism.

Throughout the book, Hari Kunzru has pursued an odd strategy of alternately arousing sympathy for his hero and quashing it. He will fill the reader in on things that Pran Nath/ Robert/ Jonathan can't know, but seems dim for not noticing, like the fact that Professor Chapel the anthropologist is actually an obsessive-compulsive who only does fieldwork when his accumulated tics make Oxford unbearable. Towards the end of the book, this strategy reaches its own odd climax. Jonathan agrees to accompany Professor Chapel on an expedition to Fotseland, though his motive is entirely to do with the professor's lovely, capricious daughter, Astarte.

The Africa where the book ends represents for Jonathan the return of everything he has repressed. As in Paul Bowles's The Sheltering Sky, Africa is an emptiness that shows up the emptiness of those who come to experience it. Hari Kunzru has taken the trouble to invent a plausible way of life for the Fotse people, based on a labyrinthine exchange culture.

But he has also signalled in advance that the whole thing is an elaborate spoof of the stock market. The resemblance of the name Fotse to a well-known index of trading performance is confirmed by the mention of two others: '...the substance of a major song cycle... is the enumeration of the canny transactions through which Lifi wins the hand of the sky-princess Neshdaqa by leveraging a minuscule holding in her uncle's favourite speckled heifer.'

It's hard to share Jonathan's sufferings in 1920s Fotseland, knowing that he's safely enclosed in a joke that won't even make sense for another 70 years.

BOOK EXTRACT

Weaving memories in Bollywood shades

Slipping in and out of love and obsession, Ali roams West Hollywood's gay nightclubs looking for The One. All the while, his life tangles with his memories of a tempestuous childhood in post-colonial Kenya, his emotionally abusive lovers, and the Hindi cinema icons singing in his head. An excerpt from Ode to Lata was featured in the anthology Contours of the Heart: South Asians Map North America (Rutgers), which received the 18th Annual American Book Award of the Before Columbus Foundation. Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla is also co-founder of the South Asian AIDS outreach programme for the Asian Pacific AIDS Intervention Team. A native of Kenya and Indian by heritage, Dhalla has lived in Los Angeles since 1987. This is Dhalla's first novel.

Extracts from Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla's first novel *Ode to Lata*

The snake

There are only two things in life worth living for. Passion. And truth. Passion came to me in plenty, but the truth it seems, eludes me still.

I'm driving down the Los Angeles snake, this creature upon whose curvature our lives have been unwittingly trapped, trudging along at twenty miles per hour in a sea of cars. It's 7:59 and I'm afraid that I will miss the first half of Melrose Place. That is all that concerns me at this moment. That my auxiliary family of vixens, faithless men and a token gay man, will move on and deprive me of the vicarious pleasure of their lives, leaving me mired in my own.

The night before had been the search for the bed of yet another stranger to wake in; the morning the start of another mechanically meaningless day and my insatiable hunger for Richard.

Immaculate conception

Whenever she had the choice, my mother preferred taking the train over the arduous six-hour bus ride, or even the elite hour-long commuter flight from Mombasa to the capital city of Nairobi.

The East Africa Railway, engineered by the British in 1896 and largely built by immigrant Indians, was responsible for the exodus that brought my ancestors to Kenya. It represents, even now, the romanticism of colonialism-a different type of mechanical snake, one which undulated through the verdant land its creators once tried, albeit in vain, to tame. As the seductive plains opened like thighs, Africa enveloped us in her limbs. Years from then, in another corner of the world, even a faint smell, a flash of sight, a distant sound, would send a chill of nostalgia up some part of my body, and for a split second, standing in a crowded mall or in the elevator of some skyscraper, I felt as if I was back there; that it had somehow, miraculously, projected itself onto my realm.

I had found freedom in geography only to be forever captured in the memories of the home I left behind. In my dreams, I still ride the railway; listen to all the sounds and senses that are Kenya: the Swahili songs from the village women clad in colorful and light cotton batiks, delicately balancing baskets of fruits and vegetables on their heads; the urchins and villagers who kept pace with the train, awaiting the arrival of fresh customers at stations to buy their hardboiled eggs, biscuits and roasted maize pressed with lemons and chilies; at dawn, the animals of the land responding to our exhilaration with pure indifference; and upon arrival, the chaotic sounds of reunions, departures and coolies competing to ferry our luggage to the car. And always that smell, that distinct perfume of Kenya, a smell of salt as the breeze came off the ocean, of food cooking on wood fires and mingling with diesel smoke, of the sweat of hard labor everywhere.

As we chugged along on such a journey, my mother could always be counted on to tell me two things. That it was on such a ride one balmy evening, albeit in the reverse direction, that I had been conceived, a story which increased in detail and waned in credibility.

Rescued

When night falls upon Santa Monica Boulevard, a modest stretch of its cadaver begins to take on a shadowy kind of life. Away from the heart of West Holly wood-that couple of miles on either side of the street littered with the mercantilism of bars and clubs, the glaring chrome and glass veneers of gyms, and late night purveyors of pulp and video erotica-awakes another world. A world which, to the keen eye or a trained observer, simmers with life as early as dusk. But it's only when darkness finally cloaks its pavements and bus benches and buildings that it actually starts to surge and ripple, that the boulevard becomes a visible procession of sexual trade. Young boys and men stake their corners night after night as I do my banker's desk each morning. They pose in a variety of dissimulations. The lurid, unbroken stare of calculated lust to deliver a promise of unforgettable pleasures into the cars that patrol by. Or the oblivious and bored stance of those who are aware that even sullen disinterest has its following. The cars loop around the dimly lit blocks, around rows of structures shunned from coruscation and unintended for any other purpose in the night, sleeping schools and office buildings and not-so-trendy pizzerias. It seems as if all the setting that's required for the thriving of this enterprise is just a little bit of darkness and the obscurity it promises. The drivers stealthily, and when more experienced, errantly search out those they will not acknowledge by day. Here they will find a menagerie of sexual creatures to expiate them from the churning in their bellies. Here they will find the seemingly virgin in all his tenderness; the jaded man who looks as if he's had a fight with his wife and hasn't returned home to even shave his stubble; and the homme fatale who, by the nature of his handsome looks, is fated to leave for other loves and lands. Mingled among them sometimes, and at other time sin packs of their own, one will also find the transgendered. They all come here, to this stretch of the boulevard, exiled from the contrived respectability of a few blocks to the west to skulk and prey under the cover of night.

Sometimes, in a car, huddled with my group of friends on that ill-timed search for an ATM machine or a nutritional catastrophe at Del Taco at two in the morning, we traverse this area of the boulevard. And there has never, since that one night, been a single time that I haven't looked out of the car and onto that stretch with at least a decibel of anticipation.