

AMSTERDAM too . . . AMST

. . . barry jay kaplan . . . barry jay kaplan . . .

WHY I LIKE IT: Guest Editor SALVATORE DIFALCO writes... *Lately, I find I am drawn to and appreciative of stories that I suspect would never make it out of an MFA workshop intact, or that would never appear in the more vaunted academic literary journals — name any one of them — or that would hurl the custodians of political correctness into gagging paroxysms. And not for lack of talent. Talent has nothing to do with it. Barry Jay Kaplan's "Amsterdam Too" is one of these stories. Three words describe it most succinctly: dark, troubled, and compelling. "Raymond thinks he knows where he's going but really he's as lost as he's ever been," it begins and deliciously doesn't let up from this conceit.*

While the premise seems strange — a man called Raymond hires a private dick to find Vivian, a porn star with whom he's obsessed, but finds her brother Homer instead — the insistence of the narrative and hypnotic quality of the prose (made hypnotic by the insistence) give the story an irresistible pull despite the impossibility of anticipating its outcome. A relatively straightforward beginning leads to a more frantic and perhaps pathological conclusion — always satisfying.

Noirish, disturbed, at turns absurd and even ridiculous, "Amsterdam Too" works as a story because despite the seemingly gritty offhandedness of much of it, Kaplan — who has clearly studied the prose masters — can fashion sentences that sing. "Raymond leans back against the headboard, lets out a deep peaceful sigh, feeling that his body, as he exhales, has gained in weight even as he feels lighter. He sinks deeper into the mattress, closer to the core of the earth. He is closer to the core of the earth. Oh yeah."

WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... *Barry Jay Kaplan's, "Amsterdam Too," is a dream that floats on madness.*

This story walks a line between the surreal and gritty realism, drug induced insanity and a carefully mastered crime, a forlorn love story and a violent act, and I am here to reassure you that Kaplan's story is well worth reading.

As the reader follows Raymond through the streets, deciding what is real and what is not becomes less important than the objective at hand.

What are these characters doing? Where are they going? Why am I asking you?

Look, I'll be straightforward with you. I do not know if Raymond is in another country to kill a hooker, is there to replace his wife (whom he may or may not have already murdered), or if he is even in Amsterdam (but it seems like he is given the travel narration).

What I do know is that Raymond walks a journey that we all face, every day, put, under a microscope...

What do you do when you're depressed? What do you do you're lost? What do you do when you've put yourself in the position that you've fucked everything up and knew you did it to yourself? Well, you do what Raymond has done.

Wander and take a lot of ecstasy – a fine solution by my judgement to be honest.

Kaplan creates a world of which we can only reference – i.e. I've never been to Amsterdam but it may as well be set there. What he does well is to treat you, dear reader, as a fellow follower. There is enough ambiguity and angst to make Raymond real, and there is enough depth and craft to make Kaplan fun to read:

“He wants to close his eyes and make it rewind because now he sees that a small child is clinging to the flaming woman! I'm not responsible! he shouts and turns away from the window.

Vivian says, without looking up: “I'm getting lonely, Raymond!”

If you have ever watched a German film or love the 1920s, then you will know a Vivian.

Here we are. “Amsterdam Too” is a lovely little bit of violence and psychosis. “When you walk in a dream, but you know you're not dreaming, signore,” excuse me, but that could be “Amsterdam Too.”

Nicely done, Barry.

QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language)...

Raymond leans back against the headboard, lets out a deep peaceful sigh, feeling that his body, as he exhales, has gained in weight even as he feels lighter. He sinks deeper into the mattress, closer to the core of the earth.

Raymond wonders, wonders how the name seemed to ooze into his head like a cracked raw egg dripping on his skull and who the hell is he and come to think of it where the hell am I, Raymond thinks. The man, Homer, the man Homer sits in the vinyl chair on the other side of the small room, his bare feet propped up on one of the beds.

Vivian says, without looking up: *I'm getting lonely, Raymond!*

And Homer responds: *We better pay attention. He might quiz us later.* And they both laugh. Homer points his trigger finger at Viv: *Whatcha reading, sweets?*

It's about some guy.

Yeah?

A post-dystopian minimalist likes to set off fire bombs in non residential sections of Antwerp.

What about him?

Nothing. He ideates in a non-sequential idiom.

Ya can't win fer losin'.

Amsterdam Too

By Barry Jay Kaplan

Raymond thinks he knows where he's going but really he's as lost as he's ever been, right now just following the boy he thinks said his name was Homer and this Homer seems to understand what Raymond wants, seems to be confident he can supply Raymond with what is required, seems to have the route clear in his mind and a picture of the goal razor sharp. Raymond recalls that at some point he had decided to believe what he was told; he had no experience with this sort of psychosocial maneuvering, but blind trust, he saw, was his only option.

"I had a wife once," he hears himself say, keeping pace with Homer along a cobbled street that narrows as they walk so that his right shoulder and then his left brush the stucco walls of the buildings on either side of him.

Homer turns his head slightly—he is a step or two ahead of Raymond—and smiles. "You did?" he says, as if the notion is both comical and believable. "A wife?"

“Does that surprise you?” Raymond says, adopting an aggressive tone because he doesn’t think he should be believed so quickly. “What do you think? Can you picture me as a husband? Can you imagine me as someone who comes home every night? Do I seem like the kind of man who might know how to have responsibilities, who’d be there, who’d listen, who’d say the appropriate thing, who’d nod his head and go ‘Yes dear?’ Do I? Do I seem like I could be that man?”

“I’m no judge,” Homer says, shrugging again, and Raymond wonders what kind of man you’d have to be not to get even the faintest thrill of *schadenfreude* at hearing another man’s confessions.

“I wasn’t a good husband,” he continues. “I was there. I ate my meals and kept a straight face. I pretended to be interested but I would look at her and think: who is she? What am I doing here? Do I have the right address? This can’t be what I’ve made of my life. The chair and the ottoman. The reading lamp. My books.” They are edging sideways along the narrowest part of the alley and suddenly burst out of it onto a street that is brilliantly lit, crowded with tourists just like me, Raymond thinks, but thinks: no one’s just like me. “I wasn’t a good lover. I came to sex too late. I didn’t know how to follow my instincts. I suppressed them instead. And when the time came, there was no access. I could only bear to think about what I already knew. I could only satisfy myself. I didn’t know anything about how to satisfy a wife. I paid no attention to what she wanted. I don’t know what she wanted. I thought: I know

what I want. But I didn't even know that." He took a deep breath. "Are we almost there?"

"Sure."

"Maybe I should've murdered her. There was certainly the smell of blood in the room. Maybe that's what she was getting at." This compelling new idea is derailed by careless, hophead, sharp-elbowed tourists fighting for space. He understands none of the languages he hears. Where am I, exactly, he wonders but he's given himself over to this search, to these confederates, and can only follow Homer, follow him until he leads him to the place he wants to be.

"I edited anthologies of modern poets, did you know that?"

"Sounds..."

"I didn't like my job. I did it. I did it. I went in and I did it but I never...leant myself to the work. I never...I never..."

"It's not much longer..."

But Raymond is lost in reverie. "If I had a sharp instrument...if I could slit...if I could burrow my way inside...if I could...if I could...know someone... know how her heart felt in my hands. I would be tender. I know how to be tender. I've saved up for it." This thought, zeroing in on some new understanding of love, thrills and exhausts him. He puts out his hand and grips Homer's shoulder. "I'm very tired."

Homer gives him the high sign and a weird, one-sided grin. "We're there."

Raymond leans back against the headboard, lets out a deep peaceful sigh, feeling that his body, as he exhales, has gained in weight even as he feels lighter. He sinks deeper into the mattress, closer to the core of the earth. He is closer to the core of the earth. Oh yeah. He is half afraid to inhale now, half afraid that he will rise when he wants to sink but hey a guy's gotta breathe, he thinks, laughing at the uncharacteristic way he is thinking—that pink tab he let dissolve on his tongue, he guesses, has created temporary mutations in linearity—and finally inhales as if the very act itself was a fiendishly offbeat and original idea. The inhalation brings with it—this innocent, self-satisfied inhalation—the sour stench of...where is he?...seems sorta like a motel room that's not part of a chain, not modern, without television, telephone, coffee maker, without paper on the toilet seat, without special soaps and stationery and key cards, without a telephone directory or a bible but complete with unassailably practical, purposeful decor: a bright orange vinyl armchair, a pair of twin beds with pilled acrylic blankets, and wine-colored wall-to-wall worn thin as paper under the footsteps of a parade of tourists who've lost everything more than once. Concrete has come exposed under the frayed carpet and in turn has crumbled beneath the constant moist exudation of coolant from the a.c. Raymond watches the rubble begin to stir as an army of spider ants crawls out from under the bed to march across the carpet and into a man's discarded left boot which someone in the room, someone where?, someone...has kicked off and which now lay on its side in a corner of the room under the curtains

that filter the flickering light from *de Bananenbar*—what?—that stands between *privenhuizen*—huh?—number 18 and the very busy *Warmoesstraat*—where?— they came in from. Raymond reaches for another pink tab and lets it dissolve on his tongue. Shoo-gah!

I seen that, herr dude.

He sees a man—Homer is it?—Raymond wonders, wonders how the name seemed to ooze into his head like a cracked raw egg dripping on his skull and who the hell is he and come to think of it where the hell am I, Raymond thinks. The man, Homer, the man Homer sits in the vinyl chair on the other side of the small room, his bare feet propped up on one of the beds. He blows smoke rings even though Raymond has twice now he recalls, recited air pollution stats. Homer's lazy defense: vice is its own reward, and though Raymond knows about the ultimate destruction of the future—but how do I know? What is it, if I know it? And where the hell am I, anyway— moral adjudication was of no interest to Homer. He puffs rings in huge silent whoos through obscenely ovalled lips. Vivian is stretched out on the other bed, silently moving hers to the prose of *Stern*.

Vivian, Raymond thinks. Vivian. Her I know. She I know is the the the the...GIRL...that's it. The one in the window. Someone had drawn directions on top of page sixteen of *Amsterdam A to Z* but that only led him to Homer; Vivian was an untold as yet, unpaid for a certain number of steps/streets/ hours away. Fraulein Von Schnitzlebrummer. Raymond laughs at the thought but no... She's the one in the window. The one mitt der boots and...der

shmirk...the smile, yeah. Oh yeah, right. I'm walking down the...the...

What's it called? he asks.

The man—Homer was it?—lifts his glance from whatever it is he is rolling between his fingers. *Vass ist?*

What?

Homer glances at Schnitzlebrummer and winks. Raymond's not so far gone he doesn't take that in. *Keska la deer?* Homer says.

The street. Raymond finds another word on his lips. *Der strasse.* Who are all those people? What language do they speak?

Men stomping by on the *Rosseburrt*, smacking their lips, rubbing their bellies, batting their eyes, grinding their teeth, dropping their coins, clearing their sinuses, slapping their thighs, gulping schnapps and bashing the bottles on the cobblestones to amp up their nerve to knock on any window are the ambient track to the silence in the room and the silence, the protection, the privacy it affords, this silence, this silence is part of the satisfaction Raymond feels, the satisfaction of a being outside the voluminous stream of humanity rumbling from space to space outside, while inside he is teetering on the precipice with at long last Vivian at his side.

Vivian. Vivian.

Huh?

The blaring screech of a skid, the bounce, the bop and the sudden crunch of a crash. The silence before the scream and then the scream.

Raymond jumps off the bed and runs barefoot to the window while

Homer looks at his cigarette as if it was the smoldering ash itself that has exploded and maybe inside his head it has while Vivian does not look up from her magazine. Raymond presses his cheek to the glass. To the left, up the street, something is on fire. Another explosion straight ahead and more fire illuminates his face, he can feel the heat.

Homer sings: *Uh uh uh uh uh oooooh Ra-ay-mond...*

An obese woman wearing only a garter belt and bustier is rushing out of the darkness towards him, framed by fire, her hair in flames.

Homer grabs Vivian's toe and shakes it: *Should we be taking notes?*

Leggo my toe!

Raymond is still at the window, observing the carnage as if his fantasy adventure had inadvertently strayed into carnage territory. He wants to apologize. He wants to close his eyes and make it rewind because now he sees that a small child is clinging to the flaming woman! *I'm not responsible!* he shouts and turns away from the window.

Vivian says, without looking up: *I'm getting lonely, Raymond!*

And Homer responds: *We better pay attention. He might quiz us later.* And they both laugh. Homer points his trigger finger at Viv: *Whatcha reading, sweets?*

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Nothing. He ideates in a non-sequential idiom.

Ya can't win fer losin'. Homer flicks his cigarette at the wall in disgust. *All these people doing all these things and getting written up,* he mutters to himself.

Raymond doesn't understand their language. Isn't this America? When he looks at Vivian he can't help but think that she *is* America, everything that America offers, everything America's great at: blond and brave, action without consequence, freedom from understanding. All he can think of is the V. And the V knows she is being looked at and likes it; she looks at Raymond over her bare shoulder in a pose she's seen a million times in Homer's collection of pulp-zine cover art stored in a self-lock concrete bin in the eighth district, and puffs up her lips in a mock pout. Homer leans sideways in his chair to tug at Raymond's sleeve.

Raymond!

Huh?

Focus! Homer says

Raymond slumps against the wall wearing a slack-jawed, lopsided smile that recalls all those nights in front of the television watching Vivian and her oeuvre on dvd. He palms himself off the wall, stumbling to the bed where Vivian is waiting. For me, he thinks, for me, and he is as thrilled at the success of his mission as if it already had been accomplished, as if getting to this point, simply having engineered his arrival, was the thing that would most satisfy; but that's the thing he's most afraid of too: that there is nowhere else to

go, that here is where he is and though Vivian is only arms' length, hands' length—*I'm touching her!*—his imagination still has one more effect in store.

But what???

Homer, observant, says: *First the impulse, then the guilty silence and the thundering heart and then the narration of external verities. Oh man oh man, he is going the limit.*

Raymond's shoulders ache. He looks at Homer, then at Vivian, then back, then back again, trying to catch them in some collusive dramaturgy. His eyes finally lock on Viv's.

Is Homer going to watch?

Vivian stretches voluptuously. *He can.*

Raymond trails his fingertips along the wall, feeling every lump and seam and tear, feeling that if he doesn't hold on, if there isn't this connection to something as solid and permanent as a wall his face will crack open. He edges closer to the bed. *Ohmygodohmygodohmygod.* It was about to begin.

I'll leave the two of you alone.

Raymond is sorry to see Homer close the door behind him because there is nothing now to stop him. His own sense of decorum, of guilt and consequence has been blurred, by drugs and inchoate desire, to the point of inaccessibility. He might do anything. His hands are twitching. He's afraid. He's not sure what he's going to do to her.

Vivian shifts a bit to the side to make room for him. And as Raymond lowers himself to lie beside her, her only consolation is that Homer is but a

blood-curdling scream away.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This story is part of maybe a novel about Raymond, a man living a very constricted life, married, sexually not fully alive. His only release is watching the porn films of Vivian, upon whom he had an active crush. He decides he must act now or forever hold his piece. He hires a detective to find Vivian. The detective finds Homer, Vivian's brother, then Homer takes him to Vivian, which is where Amsterdam Too gets going. The part that comes before this is narrated in a straightforward way. As the narrative goes on the style becomes emotional, frantic, even hysterical. The search for what Raymond envisions as his sexual salvation, Vivian, takes him away from everything he has ever known. He is out on a limb, scared, excited. He has left everything he knows. The world is in danger. He doesn't know where he is but he knows something is very...um... not. He is trying to loosen himself up and the prose expresses that.*

As a man of this world, I do not live at the edge but I like to write with the idea of going very far. I have written about murderers and psychopaths and people with an assortment of manias than drive them. As a reader my tastes seesaw between twee English lady writers who construct perfect sentences—Anita Brookner, Penelope Fitzgerald—and American outliers—Donald Barthelme, William Burroughs, Stephen Dixon—with a little transparent tough dialogue I learned from film noir.

AUTHOR BIO: My short stories have appeared in Descant, Bryant Literary Review, Central Park, Appearances, Talking River, Kerouac Review, Northern New England Review, Upstreet, Brink, Amarillo Bay, Perigee, Apple Valley Review, Drum, Brink, New Haven Review, Club Plum, Blue Mountain Review, Fleas on a Dog and others and have three times been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. One of my stories was selected as one of five Best Stories on the Net Anthology and nominated for the Million Writers Award. I am the author of three historical novels Black Orchid (with Nicholas Meyer), and Biscayne (Simon and Shuster) both selections of the Literary Guild and That Wilder Woman (Bantam Books). With co-author Rosemarie Tichler, I have written and edited the interview books Actors at Work and The Playwright at Work. I have an MFA from the Iowa Writers Workshop where I was research assistant to Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. I am currently working on a novel about the Jews who fled Germany in 1938 and found safety in Shanghai.

As a playwright I have won the Whitfield Cooke Best Play Award from New Dramatists and a grant from New York State Council on the Arts for my history play, Blood and Water. Landscape of Desire is published by Smith and Krause and was the American representative to the 25th Australian National Playwriting Conference. My musical biography of Rock Hudson, Rock and Roy (music by Stephen Weinstock), was developed at New Dramatists with grants from the Frederick Loewe Foundation and the Cameron Mackintosh Foundation and had workshop productions at New Dramatists in New York and at the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre, both directed by Simon Callow. The musical Step Aside had workshops at the York Theatre in New York, and at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Like Love (music by Lewis Flinn) won a DramaLeague New Directors/New Works Project Prize and premiered at the New York Musical Theatre Festival

GUEST EDITOR'S BIO: Difalco lives in Toronto at the moment. He is the author of the story collections, *Black Rabbit* (Anvil Press) and *The Mountie At Niagara Falls* (Anvil Press). His story **Young Man Among Roses** appears in this issue (fiction).