

# The Art of the Literary Fake (with Violin)

*On knowing a fake when you see one*

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*This sentence is a fake.*

*This sentence is the original.*

*This sentence is an animal, not a series of words.*

**Czech writer Michal Ajvaz's short story "Quintus Erectus"<sup>1</sup>**

provides an instructional metaphor with regard to literary fakes, a form with which readers and reviewers have a long yet uneasy history. "Quintus Erectus" describes a capybara-like South American mammal that, when it stands on its hindquarters, "presses its hands closely to the body, turns its head to the attacker and remains motionless ... two vertical strips of dark hair ... evoke an impression of human hands with fingers," while coloration on the head "depicts the human face." At a distance of three meters "we can easily mistake the animal for a man; from a distance of five meters the animal is indistinguishable from a man." In the story, this unsettling illusion creates a feeling of wrongness and nausea in many observers. Are they seeing an animal or a human being? Is the text itself really a story or is it a disturbing something other, pretending to be a story?

The story of Quintus Erectus in some ways mimics the reaction in certain quarters to the literary fake—a piece of fiction that pretends in some way to be true. Is it fact or fiction? Is it good fun or something more disturbing? By operating under the auspices of traditionally nonfictional modes to tell its story, the literary fake chooses to bring the reader to suspension of disbelief through means that include extreme guile—and, in cases where the reader recognizes the trick, continues to amuse, entertain, and say something interesting about

<sup>1</sup> Michal Ajvaz, "Quintus Erectus," Weirdfictionreview.com, Nov. 15, 2011, available at [weirdfictionreview.com/2011/11/quintus-erectus-by-michal-ajvaz/](http://weirdfictionreview.com/2011/11/quintus-erectus-by-michal-ajvaz/)

the human condition regardless. As such, it destabilizes our view of reality, which can be uncomfortable, sometimes unforgiveable, especially if we think someone is laughing at us. We don't always appreciate things that look like other things, even if there's a purpose to the mimicry; perhaps this is a vestige of an ancient evolutionary trait that allowed us to discern between the harmless and the harmful.

Nor do some readers, apparently, like to think they are being made to believe something false against their will. Fakes are especially divisive at two essential moments in time: when they slip past the reader's defenses and when the reader discovers the deception. Whether this latter point occurs soon after picking up the book or halfway through it, a literary fake eventually forces the reader to decide whether to be sympathetic or hostile toward the fakery.

Fakes may also be viewed with suspicion as artificial constructs, identified as stories in which the skeleton appears to exist outside of the body, a Quintus Erectus turned inside out. Fiction is meant to be an uninterrupted dream or movie for the reader, we are often told, and those struts and supporting walls should always be inside the house of the narrative; only in nonfiction do we expect to see the architecture.

The irony of this view of fakes as an unnatural form is that most examples are forged by that most liberated state of mind: ecstatic imaginative play, poured into the constraint and thus given shape and structure. However, and here irony piles up upon irony, imaginative play—and, in some cases, results that exist purely as an offering on the altar of Play—creates another issue. Play isn't academically rigorous, can't be easily quantified, and suggests a border that criticism cannot cross. The Quintus Erectus that lies peacefully in the morgue, awaiting dissection, suddenly slips through our fingers when we produce the scalpel, and then reappears, grinning at us mysteriously from a chair across the room. It's as if a mischievous but highly intelligent ghost haunts the text. To speak of a ghost directly, and especially an unpredictable ghost, is to be seen as childish or superstitious, even though we are all childish and superstitious.

The challenge that fakes pose to critics as well as readers is that they're both formally rigorous *and* Quintus Erectus *piñatas*, filled with the amorphously absurd. At the intersection of these contradictions, you often find a reviewer who decides that a literary fake is both too obvious and too unfocused. Such an analysis may see only the Quintus Erectus's mimicry, rather than its essential nature when not standing on its hind legs. Yet as K.K. Ruthven writes in *Faking Literature*,<sup>2</sup> fakes are worth studying "because they display even more clearly than the counterfactual assemblages that we call literary works that 'disruptive and capricious power' of the imagination which Edgar Wind calls 'anarchic'" (3, 4). Further, "they display a carnivalesque irreverence toward the sanctity of various conventions designed to limit what is permissible in literary production" (4). Forgeries and fakes are at odds with "people and institutions devoted to the idea of order, of certainty, of canon, [who] are seeking a kind of analogue of scientific fact about books that we can categorize, catalogue, analyze" (2). Fakes, then, can be a form of guerilla warfare against the establishment, acting out against the artificiality and sheer bureaucratic impulse that animates much of modern book culture. Naturally, then, a fake can "disturb the guardians of literary studies, book-reviewing, and the literary awards system" (2).

Fakes may mimic order, but they don't support it.

**I first became aware of the idea of fakes and forgeries through** the works of Jorge Luis Borges and Vladimir Nabokov, among others, before moving on to the artificial constructs of Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* much later. Another interesting hybrid is *Magic Prague* by Angelo Maria Ripellino, which attempts to reach a greater psychological understanding of that city by incorporating half-scenes with Kafka and literary characters created by Czech writers; in the book, history and fiction are in some ways indistinguishable and yet

<sup>2</sup> K.K. Ruthven, *Faking Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

support each other beautifully. These texts represent Quintus Erectus merely sitting or half-standing. My first encounter with a full-fledged fake was in reading the now out-of-print *Birds of the Central Plateau*, by biologist E.B. Morton,<sup>3</sup> which purports to be a jovial guidebook to the birds one might find in Mongolia but is really, by book's end, a devastating analysis of the collapse of both a marriage and an expedition, inspired by the author's career-ending adventures a decade earlier. "There is nothing more inspirational and yet depressing to a person in turmoil than the croaking call of the Eurasian black vulture," (225) Morton writes, and she might be right, but it's hardly ornithologically appropriate.

Such works have inspired my own fakes, including the scientific monograph "King Squid" (from *City of Saints & Madmen*) and *Dr. Thackery T. Lamshead's Pocket Guide to Eccentric and Discredited Diseases*. My most infamous fake is the "The Florida Freshwater Squid,"<sup>4</sup> an article posted at Fantastic Metropolis that detailed an imaginary squid and accompanying festival in Sebring, Florida, which led to a BBC wildlife show producer contacting me about "showing us around the lake and seeing the squid."<sup>5</sup> Such full-on fakes colonize the world in such a way that it may be hard to untangle them from reality.

But even the "half-fakes" of my youth share characteristics with the standing Quintus Erectus. Nabokov's sense of play and engagement with the world led him to create doppelgangers of himself. He had poetry printed in one émigré journal, but sent letters to the editor under the pseudonym of Sirin castigating his own poetry. Sirin then submitted poetry to these same journals, and Nabokov, under

<sup>3</sup> E.B. Morton, *Birds of the Central Plateau* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> Jeff VanderMeer, "The Florida Freshwater Squid," Fantasticmetropolis.com, December 18, 2001, available at [www.fantasticmetropolis.com/i/squid/full/](http://www.fantasticmetropolis.com/i/squid/full/).

<sup>5</sup> Email to Jeff VanderMeer, May 17, 2008.

his own name, responded in kind. Is there any real purpose to such play except to perpetuate a sense of the absurd, and also to point out the pointlessness of the rituals of the literary world? In “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” Borges famously posited a copy of Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* that was identical to the original, severely complicating the idea of originality and blurring the line between the literary experiment, or literary flirtation with fakery, and the actual literary fake. W.G. Sebald’s *Vertigo*, like most of his “novels,” mixes dreamlike encounters with elements of real travelogue supported by photographs and other images that provide a nonfictional framework. The photographs help to create and sustain the mood much as they do in a literary fake; imagine, for example, if the photos in *Vertigo* were replaced by images of Mexican wrestlers, LOLcats, and slices of blueberry pie. Sebald doesn’t intend to trick the reader at the macro level; from the back cover, we know that we’re encountering fiction with nonfictional elements. But at the micro level of the paragraph and sentence, there’s a kind of blurring that, if we interrogated it, we would identify as trickery, over and over again—even as it reaches for some deeper truth.

It is within this overall context that I want to examine *An Incomplete History of the Art of Funerary Violin*,<sup>6</sup> by “Rohan Kriwaczek,” a true literary fake—one, furthermore, that reflects considerable thought about the subject and the form while also demonstrating those aspects of absurdity and high-level imaginative play that must be present for such a work to be successful. It is full-on Quintus Erec-tus. The author clearly knows the order by which one hooks a reader and makes ironclad the case for the reality of the reading. Some readers will identify a fake immediately because their brains are wired in much the same way as the book’s wiring. But *Funerary Violin* will take the majority of readers deep into the interior before the light begins to dawn (unless, of course, you’re reading this essay). The main

<sup>6</sup> Rohan Kriwaczek, *An Incomplete History of The Art of Funerary Violin* (New York: Overlook Press, 2006).

reason for the book's success, beyond the skill of the execution, is the selection of a subject—the violin—that is very familiar in a general way but also obscure in its details to most people. This provides “Kriwaczek” a creative space within which to work unencumbered by reader knowledge, and helps distinguish the book from lesser attempts, whose much more esoteric subject matter or narrower scope restricts the possible effects. (These lesser efforts are Quintus Erectus turned into a pathetic naked mole rat or a brittle praying mantis.) Examining the evidence by which *Funerary Violin* achieves its effects allows not just for discussion of the book, but also a way to discuss literary fakes in general.

For example, sequencing makes a huge difference in literary fakes, which must not only establish the details of the real world in relation to the context of the fakery, but simultaneously develop two opposite strategies: a defensive posture (sometimes even a siege mentality) that requires it to disguise its fictional nature, and also an offensive position (battle order, lines of attack) that requires it to convince the reader in proactive fashion of its veracity. (Quintus Erectus in most cases must rise to its hind legs by degrees, so that we can see the process of it standing erect, while the puppet master disguises the actual transformation from beast to human being.) Another element related to imaginative play—one that shows how applying a military metaphor eventually breaks down—enters into the plans only when the reader has already been surrounded: that is, to see how many absurdities can be stacked in such an order and with such an emphasis as to seem un-absurd.

It's no coincidence that the reader of *The Art of the Funerary Violin* is first confronted by a list of the illustrations found within the book. This list serves as the vanguard: a series of probing feints encrypted with their own bona fides. History automatically accretes around the central lie in descriptions like “copy of a detail from a 1725 confectioner advertisement,” which provides both cover and context. “Cover of the Erroneous Dirge of George Babcoote, 1697,” “Portrait thought to be of George Babcoote,” and “Gallery of Violin

Paintings, possibly used by Funerary Violinists” (vii–ix) also introduce the kind of teasing uncertainty that reinforces the fake. History is hardly ever certain, so why should a fake be any more perfect? Introducing hesitation is key to a fake’s success. Into that space where the mind pauses to reach a conclusion, the fake rushes in with all available troops, quickly building fortifications so it can hold onto its hard-won territory.

But a story worth telling, one that lifts a fake above its fakery, should have a leader, a general. One popular approach is similar to a device found in nineteenth-century fiction: to include an introductory tale, or frame, that evokes personal investment in the subject matter. *The Art of Funerary Violin* provides just such a story through its foreword, in which “Rohan Kriwaczek” reveals details of his own life. The details must support the lie, but also venture beyond the core context of the lie, while the mere presence of a guide in the form of creator-as-narrator conveys authority.

A compelling entry point into the personal is a tale that includes evidence of life’s usual banal disappointments, because these tales are so common in real life. “Kriwaczek,” conjuring up the Kriwaczek in the foreword—he’s wearing the cured skin of a *Quintus Erectus*—uses this approach masterfully. A promising musician, Kriwaczek’s lofty goals out of college are soon supplanted by more modest ones: “My mind was filled with delusional dreams of becoming a concert soloist ... [but] for a number of years I floundered on the shoreline of popular success” (xi). This recognition of mediocrity comes properly tinged with the equivalent of the bitter inner lining of a walnut shell: “endlessly surprised by the astonishing ignorance (as I saw it then) of the critics and audiences alike” (xi). Like all of us, he must “embrace the actuality” of his existence (xi).

In this setup, the fake reveals just a glimmering hint of itself. Forewords can include personal information, but in reading this particular foreword, I was struck by how little there was to distinguish aspects of it from the fictional tale of a man, down on his luck and adrift, who is overtaken by an odd obsession seen as a rescuing ship.

In those scenarios, such a person might come under an evil influence, or encounter a supernatural presence, or experience existential angst in his search for validation and eventually experience some revelation, external or internal. Our narrator, however, stumbles upon an organization so neglected it has become—by accident rather than conspiracy or effort—secret.

But is such an approach in a foreword that mimics the fictional truly a minor tell, or is it much more common in nonfiction than we might suppose? Just how separate are nonfiction and fiction? In reading *The Art of the Funerary Violin's* foreword, I was reminded of the nonfiction book *Penguins: Their Ways and Their Biology*, by George Cuthbert.<sup>7</sup> That book's foreword is full of astonishing personal revelations, and its chapters shot through with the author's frustrations and passions. For example: "The average penguin researcher is a drunk or a charlatan, or some mix of both that cannot be found on the chart of human evolution. These people often attach themselves to perfectly functional zoology and ecology departments in the United States like leeches and cannot be dislodged, or dissuaded from their ridiculous assertions ... creating difficulties for those of us doing the real work in the field" (ii). Or: "I was drawn to the South American penguin because of its distinctive attitude reminiscent of the attitude of peoples in Argentina and Chile ... which suggests a kind of cross-cultural pollination over time with the human populations, with which I have lived and worked for almost four decades" (iv). Or statements such as

the evolution among a particular subspecies ... of a specialized foot hook suited to navigating across certain kinds of coastal rock croppings is lazily ascribed by such incompetent researchers as H.M. Smith as solely the result of their isolation. Yet Smith and those he has decided

<sup>7</sup> George Cuthbert, *Penguins: Their Ways and Biology* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961).

to call his colleagues fail to take into consideration at least three other factors. (54)

In many ways, *Penguins: Their Ways and Their Biology* is more about the author, and the scores he wants to settle, than about penguins. (And what about this author? Isn't he a fake as presented within the book, seeing him only in three-quarters penguin profile and knowing nothing else about him but those eccentricities he allows to spill out seemingly without voluntary intent, but because he has to?)

C.W. Hart Jr.'s infamous *A Dictionary of Non-Scientific Names of Freshwater Crayfishes (Astacoidea and Parastacoidea), Including Other Words and Phrases Incorporating Crayfish Names*<sup>8</sup> is another example of cross-pollination. The introduction cites Douglas Adams and Macbeth, with the author comparing himself to "a zoologist deep in a swamp inhabited by alien beings such as ethnobiologists, linguists, and no doubt other things" (1). As the introduction progresses, it becomes clear that even though what follows is definitely true, it is nonfiction devoted to the fictions that human beings have created around crayfish and the naming of crayfish. Of course, this applies to any general dictionary to some extent, but it is more nakedly laid bare when one encounters "wonderous words" such as "crawdaddy, crow pappy, koura, mudbug, yabbie, shawgashee, and koongooloo." Even the author admits that "one would be hard-pressed to find such poetic creations in latter day fabrications" (3). In referring to fabricated names, he notes that "to call a word 'common' that has been invented by an individual or committee and published in an obscure journal might charitably be called exaggeration. If taken seriously, it begs for

<sup>8</sup> C.W. Hart Jr., *A Dictionary of Non-Scientific Names of Freshwater Crayfishes (Astacoidea and Parastacoidea), Including Other Words and Phrases Incorporating Crayfish Names* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).

a redefinition of the word ‘common.’” One might append a note to this observation that such a dictionary helps elucidate the concept of general versus specialized knowledge as it applies to the literary fake: I, as a layperson, would have no real idea if Hart faked or embellished any of his entries, as the field of crayfish study is about as popular as the study of lichens, which has perhaps 250 to 300 researchers worldwide.

In many cases, then, a nonfiction book is almost as filled with the subjective, as animated and sustained by elements other than facts, as a novel. (And here Quintus Erectus largely passes the baton on to a many-named, somewhat smug crayfish and a metafictional penguin enraged at its misrepresentation but also mesmerized by the author Cuthbert’s eccentricities.) This is probably because, on some level, most interesting texts can be said to enter the world thanks to some repetitive act of obsession, even if the obsession’s details don’t match up perfectly with the subject matter. *Penguins* is rendered a fake, or a kind of incomplete mimic, because its obsession with peripherals makes it turn away from its subject and toward the author’s own life, which at times imposes its own pattern on the text. *A Dictionary of Non-Scientific Names* represents a kind of lesser and greater lunacy. The author isn’t truly eccentric, but the subject matter reveals a talent for the fictional, for storytelling. Perhaps creating fakes comes naturally to us, on some level.

By contrast, fakes meant truly as fakes tend to be more disciplined than real nonfiction because most readers expect rationality from their nonfiction, even if we can’t actually depend on it. The fake thus mimics something fake: an idea of nonfiction that doesn’t always exist on the page, an objectivity that even varying versions of the same period of history tell us is false. Read the historian Gibbons and the Byzantine Empire was a decadent, pathetic shadow of the Roman Empire; read John Julius Norwich and it was a vibrant, canny success—and similar details accrete to different conclusions. A parallel can be made to dialogue in fiction. Novelists don’t generally convey what might be said like transcripts of actual conversation;

they almost always provide a stylized version that approximates reality, and the reader has come to expect this convention.

The narrator's tale in the foreword of *The Art of the Funerary Violin* asks us to partake of the lie by requiring us to identify to some extent with a protagonist, the guide who is about to show us wonders, and in both fiction and nonfiction, we want to be convinced by that guide. So we're made to sympathize with Kriwaczek as he sets his sights lower, specializes, and begins to "market my concerts as the Saddest Music in the World." (xii). The reader may at this point, through the classic magician's misdirection, be much more focused on Kriwaczek's situation than on the art of the funerary violin.

A modicum of success ensues for Kriwaczek—your protagonist should be misunderstood rather than just a loser—and one of his concerts leads to his initiation into the Guild of Funerary Violinists, a key component of this particular fake. While the individual's personal tale is the beckoning finger leading the reader into the text, involvement with Something Greater Than Oneself lends a wider significance. Organizations, societies, groups of any kind are especially useful in this context. They also provide the exquisite raw material of eccentric characters and repositories of knowledge that can then be attributed to said organization—*voilà!*—without requiring further citation. Citations become closed vessels rendered airtight by the authority of the faked organization. They also provide endless opportunities for the absurd, as anyone who has ever visited a long-established group of any kind can attest. In stories about fakes, like Michael Moorcock's "The Society of Unprofessional Beggars"<sup>9</sup> or Joyce Carol Oates's "The Doppelganger's Doppelganger,"<sup>10</sup> the authors are on record as having fictionalized the stranger experiences from their separate writer groups, Moorcock's being a New Wave writers' meeting in London and Oates's, as described in

<sup>9</sup> Michael Moorcock, "The Society of Unprofessional Beggars," *The Savoy Book of Indulgence* (Manchester, England: Savoy Press, 1974).

<sup>10</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, "The Doppelganger's Doppelganger," *The Kenyon Review*, new series, vol. 20, no. 1 (Winter 1998).

*The Kenyon Review*, being “a lesser form of Bloomsbury, in the 1960s, in upstate New York, on a hippy commune” (123).

It’s important that any fake organization be interesting, but not too interesting. Flamboyance, especially near the start, raises suspicion: Quintus Erectus decked out in a cloak of sequins and peacock feathers becomes a traveling burlesque sideshow soon burned to the ground by angry villagers. In the case of *The Art of Funerary Violin*, one would hardly expect flamboyance anyway. The Guild is comprised of a drab, “dreary collection of fellows,” who tend a “disorganized, neglected archive” (xii). The Guild was “never a secret society,” but through a pattern of both persecution and indifference had become “highly secretive” (xiii). Naturally, Kriwaczek becomes the guild’s secretary, and having found his niche, sets about making it his nest—nominating new members while “slowly eliminating members of the old guard” (xiii). Persecution and indifference are two of the more persuasive forces in the real world and in our most paranoid insecurities; they often appear in fakes, and their intertwining here lays the groundwork for multiple opportunities to lie extravagantly later in the book.

Having established the reality of the narrator’s personal story and framed the context around an organization, a fake must also provide a broader context, usually with some perspective that puts down deep roots in the bedrock of existing history. Unless the faker is truly committed and skilled, he or she usually begins to flounder here, and the reader begins to discern the difference between a fake and a joke. If a faker can push through successfully in this area of detail, he will have created the foundation upon which to build ever more interesting effects.

Rohan Kriwaczek, clearly no novice, has a firm sense of his responsibility as a faker. Thus, the reader learns that the guild was founded in 1586 and popularized both by the royal courts and its presence among commoners in villages. A series of additional “facts” follow, creating a seemingly unbroken chain of evidence. Some of these facts are not just inspired but also hilarious. In the 1770s, as

the idea of funerary violin becomes ever more codified, Herr Hieronymus Gratchenfleiss makes it a “composed form of music,” “evolving pieces to depict the panic of death, the seductive qualities of death, the dizzy confusion of death, and so forth” (3). The 1810s bring with them the “appearance of popular funerary duels amongst Funerary Violinists”:

the soon to be deceased would leave a fragment of melody with his will, and two Funerary Violinists would improvise in turn ... each trying to draw more tragedy from it ... the winner being the artist who drew the most tears from the assembled crowd. (3)

Here, Kriwaczek has decided to preface plunging into the waters of the absurd by first testing them with a perilous dipped toe. The best creators of this kind of literature, fully invested in pulling off a fake, must by definition see how close to the edge they can push the conceit before the whole *tromp l'oeil* warps and disintegrates, falling from the cliff into the seas below while the eccentric penguin researcher watches, laughing. Without this tension, eliciting a sense of risk from those members of the audience who understand the high-wire act on display, a fake can seem lethargic, low-stakes, and even boring or dry.

More to the point, however, the world we live in is filled with such absurdities as dueling death musicians, and if the fake is to mirror the real world convincingly, then it must reflect the complexity and irrationality of reality ... while trying to pull back at just the point when the reader’s disbelief in real life begins.

Just how absurd is the real world? Here are some “facts.”

- The Visigoths created cloaks out of field mouse pelts, with the most important chiefs having the cloaks woven out of the most pelts.
- The term “going to hell in a hand basket” comes from Charlemagne’s efforts to subjugate pagan German chieftains

amid suspicions that his lieutenants weren't being forceful enough. He therefore demanded that he be brought the right hands of those who refused to submit, and his lieutenants brought these pagan hands to him in baskets.

- After the withdrawal of foreign powers from Venice, Venetians replaced the portraits of their real leaders from the occupation with faked portraits of imaginary leaders, complete with faked histories, to render invisible the fact that they had once been conquered.
- In ancient Byzantium, a dispute between two rival theater groups over esoteric matters of stage business once sparked a civil war.

Which of these facts are actually true? Which are lies? Perhaps they are all true, perhaps they are all lies, but on the face of it, without referring to a search engine, can you tell the difference? Probably not, because the operational reality of fact is, in fact, permeated with the seemingly ridiculous. A fact is not on its face something rational or scientific that can be pinned down like a butterfly (although it can be pinned down like a Nabokovian butterfly). A fact often reflects all the teeming irrationality and insanity and, yes, imaginative play the world has to offer because the human mind is an odd and truly various organ. That scientists have recently determined that they can't precisely differentiate centers of logic and emotion in the brain comes as no surprise. How else to explain this entry in the crayfish dictionary, for one of the simplest terms, "shrimp"?

**Shrimp** "(A) crevice, first a spron frey, then a shrimp, then a sprawn, and when it is large then called a crevice." ASTACIDAE [U.K.] Randle Holme (ca. 1688), quoted by Phipson, 1883:435. [I was unable to find this quotation in Holme.]

"One of the courses was whole crevisses in a rich sauce.... The guest of honor ... muttered ... 'What do I do now?' ... [B]ecause I had struggled

before with the same somewhat overrated delicacy ... I winked at him and said, 'Watch me.' I picked up a shrimp between my left thumb and forefinger." [France: Dijon] Fisher, 1943 (1954): 430 (*Noble and Enough*); and:

"The season for shrimps is short, and Madame Mossu paid well for all the boys and old men could find in their hundred icy streams." [Switzerland: Chatel St Denis] Fisher, 1943 (1954):506 (*I Remember Three Restaurants*); and

"A light curry of shrimps or crayfish tails." [Unspecified locality] Fisher, 1943 (1954):708 (*W is for Wanton*).

Fisher's apparent lack of attention to her crayfish/shrimp food-stuffs is puzzling, considering she is (was) an important figure in gastronomy. In the first reference she speaks of *ecrevisses* and shrimps as if they are the same animal; in the second she is undoubtedly speaking of crayfishes that live in the streams of Switzerland; in the third she paradoxically distinguishes between shrimps and crayfishes. I suppose, like so many people, she just didn't care. See also *crawfish*, *crayfish*, and *ecrevisse*. (69–70)

If ever one needed evidence that story exists all around us, everywhere, and is inhibited only by the limitations of the imaginations that must give it expression, this entry provides that evidence. It contains all the elements needed to inspire and create fiction: possible settings, characters, historical context, subject matter, theme; even an authorial voice slightly contemptuous of the main character.

This real entry also exhibits one of the best characteristics of a good fake: As it keeps pushing out to the edge and receding back into the more banal, a good fake also keeps "cooking," creating its own mythology as a constant byproduct of its churning engines of invention. Such mythology usually requires personalities like heroes and villains. In *Funerary Violin*, Kriwaczek chronicles the Great Funerary Purges (1833), originating in orders from the papacy in Rome and carried out by European governments. Conveniently, and yet

also in line with real historical accounts of papal doings, “books went missing from libraries” (4) as a result of “apparently unconnected burglaries” (4). Anonymous pamphlets are circulated that condemn Funerary Violin as “the music of the devil,” and, the author asserts, as a result, the Funerary Violin tradition suffers “wholesale destruction,” along with “subsequent removal of any references to it” (4). A once important thing with a long history is rendered obscure and irrelevant, wiped out by conspiracy. Later, in a section entitled “The Subtle Art of the Funeral March,” Kriwaczek elaborates on these general references in relating the fates of two visionaries named Sudbury and Dubuisson, in the process engaging in rhetorical flourishes that, had they appeared earlier, would have seemed forced and overwrought:

It is society’s eternal tragedy that those who aspire to greatness and reach their goal must necessarily be brought down by those they stand above. How many times have the grandest achievements of man been destroyed by a jealous and aggressive multitude? How many temples have been torn to the ground by hordes of unbelieving soldiers in search of plunder? How many visionaries were cast into the blackness of obscurity in the interest of politics and power?... How much has been lost again and again?... It is the very nature of man to build too high and be destroyed! It is the very nature of man to see a thing of beauty and leave it broken and dead, that none thereafter might possess that which seems unattainable. (16)

The fragility illuminated by these words strikes me hardest, and resonates the most; there’s precious little archness to the passage, precious little winking. We like to think of institutions and traditions as exactly what those words connote: unending lineage, dependability, anchors of the world, mental landmarks that help create order out of chaos. But in truth, the world is in much greater flux than we would like to admit. Further, when a tradition is snuffed out in such a way as the art of the funerary violin, it evokes a sense of unfairness.

This is a natural emotion if we possess empathy for other people, but, also, few of us truly enjoy change. We don't want to have to embrace what change tells us about our reality in general, and thus, when we feel an emotion of regret and agitation upon reading about the fake extinguishing of a fake tradition, we are also expressing our selfish belief in the comfort of inertia. We don't want our signposts, our landmarks, changed, because then we suffer mental turmoil and have to redraw our maps.

And yet, I have a whole book full of crayfish names that ultimately supports the idea of a somewhat illogical world that is constantly shifting and changing and killing off that which exists, not out of any impulse of malice or evolution, but purely through chance, fate, and perhaps a typographical error in a scientist's notebook. This name that is unsubstantiated in origin and yet supplants that name; this name gone because so is the language that birthed it; this other name that was not meant at first to describe a crayfish, but came to it through a series of obscure and mistake-riddled events.

**But once a fake has set out the history of the focus of its** fakery, what is left? The thing itself: Music and Death. It is here that *The Art of the Funerary Violin* outdoes itself, because a fake can often get away with offering the full context but bypass The Thing Entire. A fake can, by nibbling away at the edges and offering secondary accounts, and *alluding to*, dispense with the central subject entirely, so that the reader sees that subject through its absence, the outline created by the building up of all around it. This technique, also seen in more conventional fictional structures (see the work of Karen Joy Fowler), can work for a fake, but usually provides less satisfaction because it is less truthful about the lie.

The introduction to *The Art of the Funerary Violin* at a certain point pulls free of historical detail, from the potential disbelief of purges and duels, to focus on the emotive core of the music itself. In doing so, it offers a descriptive reality for the music as detailed as any character study found in a novel. In addition to noting "two

strains of Funerary Violin music,” ceremonial and cathartic or spiritual, the book puts forward a strong case for the importance of music in making sense of death—in reaching for an understanding that cannot be put into words. As Kriwaczek relates, “at times of Catholic suppression Funerary Violinists would slip in musical references to the banned liturgy to highlight the spiritual essence of their performance” (5). Surviving accounts convey “the intense directness of their playing: how it seems to reach into the very hearts of those who are present” (5).

This observation leads to an examination of the Funerary Violinist’s role “not from a practical but from an emotional perspective, for though manners and ideologies may have changed considerably over the years, emotions are unchanging, death remains death, and man’s concern with it is unerring” (5). From there, we are told of the deep grief the violinist must convey and transform into a thing of beauty, to console the family and friends of the deceased in their “heightened emotional state”: “This moment is crucial, and if misjudged can lead to disaster” (5). The goal is a “deep and plaintive calm,” achieved by simplicity. “Any hint of flashiness, even the slightest breath of ego, will destroy the spell” (5). The same could be said about a fake, to be honest. The quote leads us back to a prior observation about narrow versus broad subject matter, and how this affects the quality of a literary fake. The truth is that almost any examination of violin music and the theme of death would affect us emotionally, whether eliciting pathos or bathos. The artificial construct is irrelevant at that point in the narrative of the fake; all that matters is whether the analysis and conclusions read as true outside of the world of the fake.

The barb of snark in these sections of *Funerary Violin* is maintained only as a tiny sliver, aimed at all that is not funerary music, reflecting the viewpoint of the penguin researcher or the man hiding in an underground bunker full of concertos, for whom the sky above is an abomination filled with the sounds of less disciplined music:

“Had [funerary violin music] survived until today, who knows how it would have reflected our current disowning of death?... But then perhaps a spiritless age deserves a spiritless death. It is not for me to judge” (5).

That last line is crucial. Kriwaczek is just the observer who may have his own tale to tell, but only so much as it pertains to the subject. His long nights blowing off steam at raves, dancing to techno music in rebellion against his funerary music obsession, are irrelevant. His long addiction to morphine, which lends the music further context while he lies in bed listening to the few recordings—also unimportant. His romance with his assistant in the guild archives is alluded to only in a handful of near-prurient sentences and a dying fall of corresponding subtext. Just enough to give us the edges of a life beyond the music—to give us that hazy glimpse of sky—but not enough for us to, say, call into question the objectivity of a penguin researcher. (The truth, too, is that I have extended to Kriwaczek certain dignities and respect that another essayist might have withheld. I have treated Kriwaczek as if in some guise he were a real person, the true author of *The Art of the Funerary Violin*, when it is doubtful that the true author and the construct share the same name. “K” may be the conduit for an army, a chorus, an oligarchy of voices. The narcissism of authorship is unimportant to a literary fake; the obliteration of self is part of the point.)

All of the above has spooled out, for the most part, within a few short pages of foreword and introduction, emphasizing the other quality of a good fake: compression, even when the narrative does not seem particularly concise (a ramble may in fact be a rescue expedition or an undercover mission). In the attention to detail, and the ability to pick out the interesting facts and present them to the reader in compelling prose, the creator of a fake expresses in its purest form the goal of most nonfiction writers. In working with fiction to create fact, there is an infinite amount of material at one’s disposal, bounded only by the imagination. Reality for the faker is a

false constraint. How many nonfiction writers, in reaching the core of their books, no matter how much eccentricity surrounds that core, have wished that they could just make something up?

Perhaps there is some alternate literary reality in which *The Art of the Funerary Violin* exists as a true and poignant history of a forgotten musical form.

**How, then, do we read a fake like *The Art of the Funerary Violin*?**

The question is relevant because while mired in the guts of such a book the reader may come to a better appreciation of the value of compartments usually taken for granted—like chapters. As a fake proceeds, there is always tension between fidelity to the concept and readability. In lesser fakes, the author gives in to the impulse to pander, breaks formation, abandons the game, and provides more conventional fictional elements. But in the best fakes, the formation is never broken, and the tell never completely appears; it hovers somewhere just beyond the reader’s grasp. Most fakes of any length thus are meant to be sampled, then sampled again. They contain the lesson of how to read them by the form they take. Would you read a crazy penguin researcher like you would an upright animal mimic or a “short lobster” dictionary? Would you react to them in exactly the same way?

A fake glossary is not telling you to read it like a magazine article. A fake medical guide is not telling you to read it like a mystery novel. Material never meant to stand up to prolonged reading *will not stand up to prolonged reading* (Quintus Erectus grows tired) or, rather, the reader cannot stand up to it because the natural byproduct of certain aspects of a fake is boredom. A precise fake might even require the generation of a certain amount of boredom, the same kind that creeps over a reader while reading too much of a medical textbook—although it is true that the reader ultimately produces the boredom, not the book, and levels will vary from person to person.

Without the lubricant of some amount of boredom, which satisfies our expectation of extended exposure to particular forms of writing, can literary fakes fully convince?

Along with an enervating and ironic understanding of the uses of boredom, the creator of a good fake realizes that, for some, the fake will never be good enough or it always will be too good. The writer who engages in such a task must therefore understand that the task is, to some extent, impossible: the perfect fake is also the most imperfect. If a faker loses his or her nerve and loses fidelity—trumps allegiance to form and deception and, in a sense, discards the disguise—the reader (or reviewer) may cry foul, recognizing the structural deviation, even though if the book had maintained fidelity, stayed undercover, that, too, would have been a cause for criticism.

Of course, trying to do the impossible is extremely liberating. You cannot succeed, so in a perverse way, you cannot truly fail.

**After the introduction, *The Art of the Funerary Violin* opens up** onto ingenious chapters focused on individuals, early traditions, and conspiracies. Everything is presented in its place and by degrees, so that acclimation in this case—like a deep-sea diver not getting the bends or a frog in a hot pot boiling slowly so it doesn't think to jump out—manifests as the continuation of belief. Even those who at some point stop believing may keep reading, fascinated with the high-wire act, and with the individual acts of humor, inspiration, and insight that populate each sentence, each paragraph, each set piece. Where will it fail? Who will fall?

This is where the fake becomes a majestic, full-on folly, and we recognize that the author is committed, and possibly just a little bit insane, because the same obsession and single-minded commitment detailed in Kriwaczek's foreword appears throughout the book. (The author of *Penguins* would approve.) Someone might, on a whim, giddy with the heady high of imaginative play, write a foreword to a

fake history, but who in their right mind would devote a portion of their lives to writing, at length, a forgery encompassing, for example, “Paganini, the Vatican, and Rumors of Demonic Associations” (115)? Unless, of course, there were something working behind the scenes of the fake, some impulse, some attempt at communication that mimicked the machinations of a haunted house—a place that provides shelter, but in its unexpected sounds, slamming doors, and apparitions, becomes a repository of something greater than the functional.

To secure the foundations, “A Brief Summary of Early Funeral Music” further deepens the historical context while providing a reason for the funerary violin not becoming common knowledge, feeding our own paranoia and certainty that much more exists in the world than we can possibly know, like mouse pelts used for the cloaks of Visigoths.

Funerary Violinists were, by their very nature, solitary musicians and, traditionally, were kept secret from the circus of court and church musicians whose more plebeian role was to entertain the wealthy and inspire fault ... [this led to] Funerary Violinists being generally ostracized by other professional musicians of the day, seen as a separate culture unto themselves and, ultimately, becoming victims of the same historical snobbery that left folk music unacknowledged as of any social or artistic relevance. (11)

Later chapters also place the nonreal beside the real, but with a different emphasis. Some, like “Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart,” which suggests that the famous composer moonlighted as a funerary violinist to pay the bills, serve as grace notes or bon mots. Others flesh out ideas from the introduction, like a chapter entitled “Pierre Dubuisson: Grand Master of the Funerary Duel” (77). But in others, under the pretense of nonfiction, Kriwaczek uses a variety of devices and techniques more common to fiction to create portraits of people or

situations that support his central thesis. Devotion to this enterprise also distinguishes the true fake from the mere joke.

The most notable fiction tradition touched upon is, perhaps unsurprisingly, the Gothic. The chapter “Herr Hieronymous Gratchenfleiss” invokes full moons, demonic pacts, and unholy unions in its depiction of possibly the greatest funerary violinist. In a true work of fiction the discovery of the Hildesheim Trunk at the chapter’s end would put some implied or explicit supernatural twist on the story. In the context of *The Art of the Funerary Violin*, however, this very traditional Gothic plot device simply sheds new light on the violinist’s compositions. Another chapter, “Charles Sudbury,” references William Beckford, who built at least two Gothic monstrosities: Font-hill Abbey and the novel *Vathek* (81). Sudbury, portrayed as the dark genius of funerary violin, even carries on a correspondence with Beckford. The model for this chapter appears to be Poe, including “The House of Usher,” because Sudbury is clearly disturbed. A Baptist minister writes in 1811 that “there is something cold and evil in his eyes, like the look of a man who has walked with Death and now, no longer sees the beauty of life.... Woe betide any who get in his way, for at them he hisses like a Devil” (79). The reader is also treated to enthusiastic accounts of Sudbury’s continued mental decline and morbid fascination with the accoutrements of death. Kriwaczek even includes poetry from Sudbury, with such lines as “Where no light shines, no single spark / Remains: where flesh is doomed to rot to nought / And worms feast upon his sensuous limbs?” (89).

The nod to Gothic literature reaches its crescendo in the chapter “Father Elias Passmore Jarvis,” which includes excerpts from the priest’s testament that we are invited to read only “with great caution, if not scepticism” (120). In the account, Father Jarvis describes being ordered to confiscate funerary violin artifacts as part of a purge and, in the process, encountering “a red mist” (123) and then “a mysterious figure” with “pointed ears, large glowing eyes, and a large pointed nose” (124). The further discovery of the score to

a funerary violin composition, written in blood on the wall of a foggy alleyway, is presented as a lie added by the priest to justify his initial mission.

Supporting these stories is a vital additional element running through the book: visuals, which are the greatest friend and the greatest enemy of the faker. Text can tell whatever lie it likes and be granted the luxurious illusion of authority for at least some period of time, whether it lasts a paragraph or a hundred pages. Images, however, are immediately judged, and although a skillful caption may lead a reader to the conclusion the faker desires, a mistake in execution can ruin the effect forever.

*The Art of the Funerary Violin* is exceedingly clever in its use of visuals. In the macabre yet hilarious painting entitled “A Dutch Funeral,” Kriwaczek presents the absence of visual evidence—there’s no violinist in the picture—as evidence of marginalization; in the process, every relevant image from the period lacking evidence becomes an accomplice to Kriwaczek’s argument (6). The absurdity of the approach reaches almost Monty Python heights, but it is deadly serious, because in the real world, people and groups are rendered invisible all the time. It is also brilliant because it requires no doctoring at all, nothing that might destroy the illusion of authenticity.

Similarly, a faked eighteenth-century advertisement (18) looks naked compared to what you could conjure up from that period, but the plainness works in the advertisement’s favor. Documents supposedly from the real world that support the fake lend gravitas, though perhaps not as much as they once did, given the popularity of fiction-fictions like *Griffin & Sabine* and the ease with which one can create them on a computer these days. The key in our image-insane world seems to be not to overemphasize, not to go overboard, so that the image becomes a glint, and not a wink, from the past.

Portraits of relevant personages also appear in *The Art of the Funerary Violin*. In all of them, that communal, universal look of seriousness stamps “authentic” on the book’s pages. That ridiculous

yet sly story about a violin player and his favorite cat? The over-involved imbroglia of a four-way love affair involving a funerary violinist, the patron who would not die, a maid, and a young lord? The portraits give them an official stamp of approval. “Found violin” pictures serve the same purpose; these are portraits of the main subject, after all, and within reason, the more of them can be included, the better. (The ease of finding such images online convinces one that a fake about funerary violins is much easier to support this way than a fake about, say, funerary refrigerators.)

The Dutch Funeral and the portraits in a sense merge on page 76, wherein the author has included a photograph of a funeral procession for violinist Jacques Dubaïsson (1937) followed by a photograph of Dubaïsson in an open coffin (!). The corpse has the same serious expression as the living people depicted in the portraits, perhaps in part because, as the text notes, “no violinist was present, nor was any music played” (75). The progression from general funeral to specific coffin presages a later visual that will build on the idea of “specific coffin.” Indeed the author eventually doubles down, providing a photograph of important funerary violinist Charles Sudbury’s vine-be-deviled catafalque from two different angles—showing neither words nor other clues as to whether someone named Sudbury is indeed entombed within.

The portraits also double, freed from the subjectivity of paint only to be imprisoned in pixels, culminating on page 112 in the extraordinarily serious photograph of two heavily bearded official mourners, called “Mutes,” dressed in what appear to be suit-robos with long sashes wound across one shoulder and hats the shape of the sharp nibs of calligraphy pens on their heads, each carrying a standard of some sort that has been shrouded in a thick cloth. The effect, if flipped to upon first buying the book, is as if someone had photographed two Greek Orthodox monks about to go on holiday. The caption on this particular photograph reads: “Matthew Connisten (on the right) photographed in 1885 in his official capacity as 1st Mute. The

strain of his eighteen years as President of the Guild is clearly evident in his shrunken frame. Meticulous and secretive by nature, he found here at least, one cannot help but think, his ideal profession.” Had we been presented with these two outlandish characters on page one, we might have looked askance. But here, on page 112, they engage our sympathies.

Seriousness serving at the behest of the unserious eventually gives up and tilts toward the hilarious. One Quintus Erectus is disturbing, two even more so, but a hundred staring at you solemnly moves toward mirth. Ten crayfish names are interesting; ten thousand are a testament to human ingenuity and folly. There is insanity in numbers, as anyone conscripted into a mob knows. It is the corollary to Gabriel García Márquez’s famous dictum about magical realism: One hummingbird flying from a person’s mouth might be questioned, but one hundred? The objection becomes irrelevant in the face of legion. By the time the reader flips to “A Brief Tribute to the Many Silent Heroes” (145), a full gallery of funerary violin luminaries, the effect may indeed be a troubled silence—confronted with the sheer amount of history destroyed by purge or indifference, the number of people excised from the public record. Or it may be the point at which the reader begins to laugh, too. One can never tell with a fake. I found myself oddly moved, and perhaps this emotion came from knowing that although the fakes might be obscure, the real people in those photographs are just as invisible and unknown to me. Using real images for fake purposes can create this effect—they carry an emotional context, a whisper of real lives, and a mystery lives in that idea that could spark an entire other essay.

Not long after the appearance of the gallery, following the appendices, Kriwaczek ends with the most audacious of all his tactics and strategies, the narrative devices and wormholing stories: The Book of Scores, “being a selection of the surviving scores so far discovered” (163). These scores—I mean actual sheet music—correspond to many of the creators referenced in the book, and range

from “The Long Uncertainty of Death” to “The Dizzy Flight of Death,” from Gratchenfleiss to a funerary suite from Charles Sudbury. The suite is ingenious, including sections entitled “Dream,” “Panic,” and “Flight.” The descriptions have a somber and genuine quality that tells the reader that this is a joke, this is not a joke: “Now that all is done and as it should be, we may weep without reserve” (165). The scores go on for pages and pages, daring the reader to refute them, and most readers won’t want to; they will want those scores to be real, and the sentiment behind them to be real as well. As in Nabokov’s short story “The Leonardo,”<sup>11</sup> about both an artist and a counterfeiter, and written when Nabokov was faking himself out in literary journals, “the objects that are being summoned assemble, draw near ... overcome not only the distance of space but that of time” (354).

A coffin is about to be placed in the ground near a church. It is raining. A funerary violinist plays beside the gravesite, next to the priest. We mourners stand around the gravesite in our Sunday best—the reader, Quintus Erectus, the penguin scientist and his rock penguin friend, the crayfish researcher, Borges, Cervantes, and the creators of *The Art of Funerary Violin*. Slowly, fact and fiction join hands as we all listen to the funerary violinist’s music and remember not just the dead, but the power of music.

Who is in the coffin, you ask? Who can say?

\* \* \*

<sup>11</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Knopf, 1995).

**Throughout this essay, I have engaged in my own forgeries, as well as my own fakes. Did you notice? Did that knowledge or lack of knowledge make any difference, really, in appreciating the book discussed, or my arguments? The fact is, we're always being fooled. We're always being lied to in ways both benign and sinister. Everything is, on some level, a fake. I'm a fake. You're a fake, too. Quintus Erectus is a fake. The penguin researcher is a fake, a persona worn like clothes for a particular narrative. A book that sets out to be a fake may just be a little more honest about our essential situation. Of course, the question then becomes: Is there even a book entitled *An Incomplete History of the Art of the Funerary Violin*?**

Alas, the objects I had assembled wander away.... The house draws in its little balconies one by one, then turns, and floats away. Everything floats away. Harmony and meaning vanish. The world irks me again with its variegated void.

—Vladimir Nabokov, “The Leonardo”

