

It's really not the same

by lisa rosenblatt

It wasn't the same as taking a course with Ginsberg. Everyone knew Ginsberg. Nick Cave, too, everyone knew him. Waiting lists were full months in advance for those classes, everyone sent in resumes and writing samples, praying, begging to be included. Lish was just an extra, sort of a sideshow here. I'd applied last minute and he was all that was left. His steely eyes flashed, shot flares marking the gate to another realm. About ten others were already there when I walked in.

It isn't as though I knew or cared who he was when I signed up. I didn't know much of anything that late summer. It was one of those random periods when a lot happens by chance, random necessity. I walked in and he was there: tall, gangly even, with a constant forward motion of purpose. There was no soft greeting, no, "Hi, my name is Gordon Lish, who are you, this is what we're going to do this week." He began by telling us that he had had sex in a closet, or maybe it was in a bookstore, I can't remember exactly. We all had to stand up, obediently, and say our deepest darkest secret. The first student stood up and said in faltering English, "My mother died when I was five." Lish spat back "boring," "crap, you didn't DO that." No one said much of anything to stir his interest. I wanted to shock him, say something that would get melt into the brightness of those eyes, and I must have said something, everyone had to, but he wasn't really impressed. Was I really taking the whole thing seriously? The selling my soul, the secret to unravel? My mind was still half lost in the few months I'd just spent with my bike and tent cycling up the coast of Maine and Atlantic Canada I had just gotten back and managed to find a perch in the semi-permanent life I had here in Vienna, trying to hold on, waiting for something to grab hold. By the second hour Lish did. He most certainly did.

Third hour and he still hadn't noticed me. He drew a chart and explained the word "chthonic" and traced a spiral. I strained with every ounce of my wilderness-crazed self to catch his eye. He was

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lecturing, berating us, insulting us, and we were down to six people in the room, including Lish. One woman, shoulders rounded, everything turned inward in a shy poet's pose, painfully spit back at him that he had no right to call her fears petty. Lish grinned. He grunted. He told us that the only reason he was doing this insane gig in Vienna, teaching at this Schule für Dichtung, this ridiculously esoteric school of poetry for a pittance of what he normally earned was because it got him away from New York City, and away from his wife's slow death, her wasting away strapped to a special, medical bed in their apartment. He had to clean her, care for her, and she was withering away before his eyes; mute, impenetrable, unable to control her bodily functions and he didn't have to say anything else. By the next hour there were only four of us in the room, and we adjusted ourselves uncomfortably in our seats and began to work.

