CHAPTER 6

Sugar Man's Sweet Kiss: The Artist Formerly, and Now Again, Known as Rodriguez*

‘Imaginations Working Overtime’

Imagine a shy man dressed in black, guitar slung over his shoulder, walking the meanest streets of one of the meanest cities in the United States. Imagine this man making his way to a waterside bar of questionable repute. Let us, for accuracy’s sake, call it ‘The Sewer’. He performs for a pittance, his audience a routinised, if motley, crew of down-on-their-luck, up-on-their-illusions, out-with-conventionality types. They sit in crumpled shirts, spinning tall tales and ‘drinking the detergents/that cannot remove their hurts’.¹

Imagine this man, hailed by a select few as a poet of the people, a prophet in unpropitious times, singing of what he has lived:

The inner city birthed me
The local pusher nursed me
Cousins make it in the street
They marry every trick they meet.

Imagine this man, his wallet picked by his handlers (perhaps unbeknownst to him), growing troubled as his heart becomes little more than ‘a crooked hotel full of rumours’:

A dime, a dollar, they’re all the same
When a man comes to bust your game
The turnkey comes, his face a grin
Locks the cell, I’m in again.

* ‘A Life Beyond Imagination: The Artist Formerly, and Again, Known as Rodriguez’, Against the Current, 162 (2013), 31–35, 44. Published here in an adapted form as ‘Sugar Man’s Sweet Kiss: The Artist Formerly, and Now Again, Known as Rodriguez’.

¹ All lyrics in this chapter are from the Searching for Sugar Man soundtrack (2012, Sony Legacy), and Cold Fact (2008, Light in the Attic Records). Quotes are from the film Searching for Sugar Man (2012, Sony Pictures).
Then imagine a night like any other, as 'the local diddy-bop pimp comes in'. He slides, limp-postured, into the crowd,

Next to a girl that has never been chased
The bartender wipes a smile off his face
The delegates cross the floor,
Curtsy and promenade through the doors.
And slowly the evening begins.

Yet again, this man puts on a show, his back to barstools and tavern tables slimy with spilled beer, littered with soggy coasters and ashtrays piled high with the discards of the day. Amidst the dull din of countless unrelated and often incoherent conversations, his eyes shielded by trademark ebony sunglasses, this man's soft voice slices seamlessly through the smoke and mirrors and haze of just another eleven-pm gig:

Yeah, every night it's the same old thing
Getting high, getting drunk, getting horny
At the Inn-Between, again.

Having completed what he regarded as his final soliloquy, this man then supposedly raises a gun to his head, pulls the lethal trigger, and ends it all. Or, arguably even more grotesquely, calmly drenches himself with gasoline, lights a match, holds it to his shirt cuff, and burns to death on what has passed for his stage.

But thanks for your time,
Then you can thank me for mine,
And after that, forget it.

Imagine, as memory of this man fades in his homeland and even his neighbourhood (‘So I set sail in a teardrop and escaped beneath the doorsill’), the bar where he died long torn down, that he becomes, astonishingly, a figure of legend halfway around the world. In a place where he had never walked, myths of his dramatic demise circulate freely, wildly innocent of any connection to his truths. The man’s bootlegged music echoes in the ears of youthful rebels, his haunting lyrics seared into the consciousness of a generation. ‘We made love to your music’, says an apostle in awe, ‘we made war to your music’. Imagine this man being able to converse with this kind of reverence, to look back on such an unbelievable turn of events, asking