

The New York Times
Opinionator

JANUARY 12, 2013, 3:10 PM

Someone's Knocking at My Door

By [LÁSZLÓ KRASZNAHORKAI](#)

The editors of Anxiety recently asked the Hungarian novelist Laszlo Krasznahorkai to contribute to the series. Below, in the author's words, is "a lyrical essay about the terrible meeting between boorishness and aggressiveness," a meditation on a type of violent person who produces in him "the deepest personal anxiety." It was translated by George Szirtes from the Hungarian.

I've been living in complete silence for months, I might say for years, with just the usual dull sounds you hear at the outskirts of town, the occasional echo of steps in the corridor and, further off, in the stairwell, someone dragging a sack, a carpet, a package, or a corpse, God knows what, along the ground; or the sound of the elevator as it slows, stops, opens, then closes and starts to rise or descend. Every so often a dog barks briefly, someone laughs or shouts. But everything dies away, soon lost in the constant low-level murmur of the street outside. That is what complete silence is like round here.

There are of course times I put on a Zelenka mass or listen to one of Schiff's "Wohltemperiertes Klavier" interpretations, or take out Spoon, Karen Dalton or Vic Chesnutt, but after a few bars I turn it off so it may be quiet again, because I want to be ready and I don't want anything disturbing going on when he arrives and finds me.

To be honest I wouldn't have been surprised if he hadn't knocked but beat at the door, or simply kicked the door in, but now that I hear the knocking, it's clear there is no difference between his knocking and beating or kicking the door in, I mean really no difference, the point being that I am dead certain it is him, who else; he of whom I knew, and have always known would come.

The most tragic figure in history is the one in whom two terrible conditions meet. The two conditions that meet and combine in him are bottomless idiocy and unbounded aggression. Someone - a self-exiled Hungarian writer in San Diego - once said that this kind of person inevitably crawls from the gutter during one of those historical lulls. I don't agree, there is never a sufficiently long lull in history. If he did ever live in one of those filthy historical sewer systems, he has been at liberty for many a long year now, for decades, ready to raise flags, discover kindred spirits, move about in groups and organize secret meetings. He is rarely alone but is always to be found in one of those indeterminate military uniforms, his ideas nonsensical or non-existent, since these are simply obligatory

forms of hatred, hatred being his *raison d'être*, his guiding principle, a hatred whose object is usually only hinted at, though hatred never lacks an object, an object being very much the point and I should know since I am that object.

Say I am sitting in a bar and he steps in. I can *immediately* see that he has *immediately* singled me out. My eyes are light blue, I am thin and don't stand straight, that's all. I have no idea how this tells him, makes him so certain that I am the one but there's no denying he has an instinct for picking us out, picking out the weak - I say weak because weakness, I suspect, is the thing in me that irritates him - so he stands beside me, and everyone near us feels the tension, and both he and I know what must follow. It doesn't in fact matter where I am, whether I'm at a railway station where he picks me out in the waiting room, or in a store I happen to be shopping in, our eyes will lock and then it's too late, too late for me that is, to look away, because I always know what is coming and am simply incapable of making an escape. I know it would be in vain.

If he could find the words to articulate his hatred he would say he is defending himself, that he feels threatened, by me as it happens, though I wouldn't hurt a fly. He goes to the gym, does martial arts, and trains day and night so that after a while his body is, as they say, pure muscle, nothing spare, his skin merely an ornament to his physique, no superfluous hair, eyes, nose or ears, needing nothing but this pure muscle, because he had better be prepared, as the others tell him, I mean the pack he goes to the gym with, to shoot with, and to train with, prepared because the enemy is all but invisible. The enemy can be named and is everywhere, but as soon as you put your hand out to grab him - at least in his own experience - the enemy slips through those pure-muscle fingers, wriggles free, slips away and pretty soon disappears so there's nothing left in the pure muscle fist and he has to start all over again, searching, fencing him in, and pounding him with his fist again and again.

When asked to give his name he prefers to remain silent because even if he has a name as such he doesn't really have one because he has no need of one; he is entirely subsumed in his function, his hatred, the hatred that should be his proper name, that is if he has to have a name, though what he loves best is having no name, anonymity being his natural condition, his desire to become of sufficient weight to kill, to deliver a fatal blow, a single terminal blow that has accurately located its object.

He dreams a lot. But not of that single blow, rather that, should he find the person he is looking for, he might grind him between his fingers and make mincemeat of him, not the way the slaughterhouse man deals with the pig in the abattoir, that is to say quickly, but the way the butcher deals with his meat, with a certain languorous pleasure, so the enemy should feel, really feel what he himself had suffered down there in that dark, filthy labyrinth of tunnels until he emerged to crush this, his object. Most of his dreams end like this: he keeps punching the face which by now is a bloody pulp, but he keeps hitting it,

beating and beating it, unable to stop, and he wakes in a cold sweat, his mouth dry, his knuckles so painful it might not have been a dream at all.

In other respects he sleeps perfectly well. His life is disciplined, he rises at a fixed time each morning, and goes to bed at a fixed time at night, they having told him this was the right way to live, because living like this is living like the sun. He rises with the sun and lies down with it, his routine follows nature, which is why he sleeps so well - it's only dreams that are the problem, that he can't cope with, most often that dream of punching a face, the face he is looking to punch in real life too, it's just that it leaves him with a dry mouth and aching knuckles.

He loves it when he catches one. He stands in front of him and draws himself up to his full height to show how big he is compared to the other man, the image of brute force facing up to an asthmatic weakling, the storm meeting the dew, and it is wonderful to know you represent overpowering strength while the other is a repulsive, squirming zilch.

But he doesn't catch him, and that is what he finds so incomprehensible. Everything is right, all the circumstances, he has done the search, has identified the quarry, the chase is on, he has him cornered, and there he is himself with his hate and power - and he, the guy he is supposed to crush and mince, and what is more, slowly, not like the slaughterhouse-man but like the butcher - that man still manages to slip from the iron fist, sneak off, vanish into thin air. So it is not just hatred working in him, but anger too, like a killer shark pursuing a water-butterfly: the power too big, the prey too small.

Now the full force of his hatred is turned against weakness; it is no longer his enemy he pursues but the weakness in himself; he recognizes weakness as his real enemy and from now on senses the weakness in everything, no longer just in his enemy, but in literally everything, so he feels obliged to chop the head off a flower, to split the skull of a stray dog, of a destitute Roma kid, a destitute black kid, a destitute yellow kid. After a while whenever he thinks of his enemy it is his weakness he sees, the weakness that infuriates him, that screws with his head, and he can't understand how it can be possible for him to destroy the flower, the stray dog, the yellow kid, the black kid, and the Roma kid, but how weakness itself escapes him, simply escapes him; he doesn't know which way to grip them, which way to crush them.

He is often overcome by a desire to wreak havoc. So he starts breaking things, tearing things apart, it doesn't matter where, it could be in a McDonald's, it may be at a birthday party, at a porn movie, it doesn't matter where, when this mood takes hold of him he can't control himself, it takes only a moment and he's at it, breaking everything, wrecking anything in reach. Then he is stopped, or not stopped, he's arrested by the cops or he's not arrested by the cops, it makes not a whit of difference, he eventually calms down and is thinking of just one thing, that he can't find the thing he hates most, and it screws with his head. But in any case they don't understand him.

It's not true that he doesn't like entertainment, nor does he despise culture. He likes 50 Cent and National Rock, country music and heavy metal when the guitars scream and the singer always hits the right note of killer euphoria and gets the death cry right, and he particularly likes physical culture in the gym, because the body has its own culture, just look at the Ancient Greeks.

They tell him it's foreigners to blame, foreigners who sneak in to occupy your patch and take up all the breathing space, and he believes it, won't quarrel with it, but he doesn't really understand why they waste so much time puzzling over it since everyone knows the score, it's the weak and the fussy, they're the fly in the ointment, and once they are done there'll be order at last, back to nature pure and simple, and that's like - he thinks, providing he can briefly gather his thoughts - like cleaning up a polluted environment, as necessary as that, no other way to put it, the best and neatest way to sum it up when with his mates, like being the ultimate environmentalist. But most of the time he doesn't feel like joking. He's not the type.

No one ever writes about him, they never mention him. Because he's not the one they write about, he thinks, and quite right too. Those are either criminals or weirdos, and he isn't either of those, he really has no name, no father, no grandfather, and no past, because his past is just a kind of mourning within the past, and he is utterly lost in that past, everything being like that, like stepping into a wave just as it withdraws; one moment your footstep is there, the next moment vanished for ever. And it's just the same with him, because he isn't really of the present, he doesn't belong to the present moment, has no place here, no place in time nor, come to think of it, in space either, for see, who can tell where he belongs? Texas perhaps? Hungary? The Danube Delta in Romania? South Africa?! Syria?! Oslo?! Then where? He's not to be located either here or there, because, strange as it sounds, there is no single point on earth he could claim to be his home -he is pretty well everywhere. Of course there's no name, no past, nothing, just muscle pumped up with hatred. But while there's any weakness left on this wretch of an Earth, his kind will persist.

Yes, it's the weak who invite violence who are the problem.

And this kind of weakness has nothing, absolutely nothing to do with his own weakness, and let's not call it weakness, let's call it sensitivity, in other words his sensitivity is the result of the infinite exploitation that constitutes his sense of being, that is his being! No one has said of his kind, and therefore neither has he, that anyone desires to be nameless, placeless and timeless, nor has he or his kind ever desired such a thing, nor that he should spend the whole day at the gym, not for a moment did he want it, nor did he have any desire, as his understanding matured, to become a muscle-bound colossus kept alive on a diet of sheer hate, whoever cared about such things, and now he should be citing the Ancient Greeks to explain why he is really like he is, why he is what he is, why he feels so

strongly about the weak since no one cared a whit about them, really no one, no one at all, they dumped on them in the past and are dumping on them now and that's how it will go on, although, if we are talking about the weak, it's a no-brainer to point out that the fundamental aspect of his universally undesired, unnamed, rootless, forced-into-the-shadows being is his own weakness, or more precisely his sensitivity, because it is not the weak that are weak, it is him! and he is quite willing to carve this fact out with his jackknife and pour lead into anyone's ear about it because the true situation is that throughout all of history it was him and his kind who have been the real losers every time, not those irritating vermin he is absolutely justified in hating since he, who knows more about real weakness than anyone else, is brave enough to say this to anyone at any time, because he may be a mass of terrible muscle, he may be a giant, an ultra, a super and a champ, at the sight of whom all those irritating pretenders to weakness tremble?, but he is the truly weak and truly sensitive, the true outcast, the one doomed to remain so throughout history and he will confess that there are times he almost cracks when left alone in filthy lodgings where he remembers - because it has tended to happen so recently - that he couldn't properly follow the way of the sun and lies there unable to sleep and he finds himself thinking of it, of his own weakness, his own sensitivity, his own vulnerability and the thought that he should do something about all this, that he should, in other words, sweep away those who would supplant him and cheat him of his role, meaning those filthy little maggots who use weakness as a mask, sweep away those whining pretenders to weakness, those parasites, and settle with them for once and for all, which means he has to track them down, search them out again, but do it properly this time, with a clear agenda, in full view, to discover where they are hiding, so that the truly weak and the truly sensitive might finally emerge into the sunlight, find their rightful place, and earn a name that fits them; to track down and discover behind which filthy dark door, on which filthy dark floor of which shabby tenement block they are cowering, looking to exploit someone who will not be exploited - him, that is - since tracking down and discovering is child's play for him, so he'll draw himself up to his full height, set out and find them, just like that, within seconds, in a pub, at a movie, or at a train station, and can already see the six-story block with its ramshackle fire escape, its crumbling entrance and crumbling stairwell and he doesn't take the elevator but chooses to go by the stairs, and no sooner there he has found it, and silently slips past doors until he gets to the number 6 displayed on one of them, and it takes no special skill, he can tell by the smell because they stink so much, so he'd find them even among thousands, so there's just this figure whose turn has come, and he can practically hear him cowering behind the door, practically hear him breathing and he won't spare him, since it's this sort of person who has ruined everything, and whose place will now be taken by genuine losers who shouldn't spare them, but should beat their heads in because that's all they deserve, subhuman as they are, like rodents, and rodents are vermin.

The strange thing is he gets to this point and his strength leaves him. He stands there a

moment and is almost helpless. He'd love to kick the door in but he can't even move his hands. He is a colossus, a super, a champ - and is astonished to find himself helpless. This won't last, he tells himself, it's just for a moment. And he really feels life welling up inside him again. It's like he is waking to a new awareness of his musculature. A moment or two and he won't even remember this brief technical problem.

He stands in front of No. 6 and sees himself as he says to himself: I had to do something. I must defend myself. I simply have to get to him. Because I won't give up without a fight. I set out to find him. I searched for him and found him. I tracked down the block where he was lying in wait, I saw the entrance, I have climbed the stairs to his floor. I know which apartment it is. This one. And this is his door. No. 6.

I raise my hand - I could beat at the door.

But for him it's enough that I knock.

László Krasznahorkai is a Hungarian novelist. He is the author of five novels - including "War & War," "The Melancholy of Resistance" and "Satantango," which have been published in English by New Directions.