

## Praise for *The Aversive Clause*:

“B.C. Edwards’s debut collection is a menagerie of possible and impossible worlds united by desire and the search for the answer to that most basic of questions: who am I? It was Chekhov who said that “The role of the artist is to ask questions, not answer them,” and even as *The Aversive Clause* reminds us that there’s more than one way to ask the same question, it shows us that sometimes the question is the answer, for as long as the asking lasts.”

– Dale Peck, author of *Martin and John*,  
*Now It’s Time to Say Goodbye*, and *The Garden of Lost and Found*

“Edwards is somehow both irreverent and heartfelt, funny and sweetly earnest. The stories in *The Aversive Clause* are the work of a gifted and playful storyteller.”

– Seth Fried, author of *The Great Frustration*

“*The Aversive Clause* is hilarious, absurd, frank, somehow honest, somewhat blasphemous, and wildly original. I’ve never read stories like these, but I’ve always wanted stories like these. B.C. Edwards is both a wordsmith and a riot; the exact kind of riot we need.”

– Justin Torres, author of *We the Animals*

“Edwards is a writer possessed of a quicksilver anarchic imagination and I recommend his fiction highly to all and sundry.”

– Patrick McGrath, author of *Trauma*, *Asylum* and *Spider*

# The Aversive Clause

*stories*

by B.C. Edwards



Black Lawrence Press  
New York

## *Acknowledgments*

Grateful appreciation is made to the publications in which the following stories—sometimes in other versions—first appeared:

“Stop. Turn.” was published in *Purgatory* in 2006

“Spots” and “Eugene and the News” were each published in *Pax Americana* in 2007

“My Recipe for the Best Tuna Salad in the World” was published in *Red Line Blues* in 2011

“Evitative” was published in *Hobart* in 2010

“Bigger than All these Buildings” was published in *Another Chicago Magazine* in 2012

“Sweetness” was published in the anthology *Zombiality: A Queer Bent on the Undead* (Library of the Living Dead) in 2010

“The City of God is Your Town America... If You Make an Effort” was written for the Spo’Bart literary remix project, and is an adaptation of James DiGiovanni’s “When God Came Back, I Became Alone” published in *Spork* in 2009

## *Contents*

Tumblers.....	10
Bigger Than All These Buildings.....	14
The City of God Is Your Town, America...If You Make an Effort!.....	27
Aggie with the Hat On.....	33
My Recipe for the Best Tuna Salad in the World.....	49
Goldfish.....	52
The Invasion of the Hittites.....	62
Spots.....	84
Sweetness.....	89
Doppelgangers Local 525.....	98
Stop. Turn.....	113
Eugene and the News.....	116
Still Here / Help.....	126
Illfit.....	132
The Providence of Angels.....	142
Looking Through Transparent Things.....	151
Evitative.....	164

*For Lawless, Mirov, Kravitz and Roche.*

# Tumblers

When he arrived, the man driving had two bottles of vodka in his lap. He passed the half-empty one back to us, twisted the top off the fresh, eyed our tangerine lycra singlets and asked us what we were supposed to be.

“Tumblers,” my hulking Czech, Johan said. “What are you?”

“A driver,” the driver said, then he burst into tears and skidded the car away from the curb.

At the time we were studying in Moscow. Studying to be acrobats, Johan and I. We were part of a troupe of actors and tumblers, but the rest of the troupe was rather dull and boring and didn't like cocaine like we did so that's the last I'll say about them.

This, of course, was after the fall of the curtain, but before the advent of the Euro. The Russian oil business was just getting underway and we had been asked to perform a routine at a lavish costume party in honor of a newly minted tycoon.

Come dressed as tumblers the phone had said, for that is what you shall be. The man dressed as our driver said there was a great hall right in the middle of the black woods that stretched outside of Moscow. A hall and endless rooms, he said, and rivers of liquor and an army of girls and the finest everything and we all agreed this would be quite a party.

He wasn't always a driver, the man dressed as our driver said. Just this afternoon he was dressed as a man discovering his wife sleeping with another man on a fainting couch. And the vodka and the tears were there to help him reconcile his myriad personae. We doubled back and back again on roads that Johan I couldn't see. At some point Johan vomited out the window while the man dressed as our driver sobbed loudly into his steering wheel. My wife, he said. My wife.

We three finished our respective bottles and grew thirsty for more and then sang Russian ballads and arrived finally and quite late at the enormous mansion of the oil tycoon. There was a long tail of cars, each with a driver waiting and dressed exactly like the man dressed as our driver was dressed.

We were the tumblers we told everyone. But being so late we'd missed our opportunity to tumble. So we weren't really tumblers at all, just two men at a costume party clad in lycra singlets the color of a tangerine.

To accompany his recently bought oil field, the host was dressed as the Russians imagined American Cowboys would dress, a ten gallon hat and an Armani suit with crocodile skin boots. The tycoon was a short man, slow and round. And when he spoke the words fell out of his mouth like he drooled them. And Johan would pull me aside for lines of cocaine and mention how short he was. Short as he is rich, Johan said, as though it was something that people said a lot.

The grand hall, dusty and old and largely unfurnished had been decorated only with white Christmas lights stuck on the very rapid flash phase and so the party was somewhat strobed and everyone seemed to move as if on puppet strings.

And the music was Sheena Easton.

The other attendees wore their costumes well. The woman dressed as the tycoon's wife eyed the woman dressed as the tycoon's mistress with brilliant distaste. While the tycoon's best friend, dressed exactly like the tycoon, followed him around the grand hall repeating everything he said and laughing too loud at his jokes, none of which I understood, because they were all in Russian.

There was lots of liquor as promised, but only the shadows of girls. We did all the cocaine and then quickly lost each other chasing these mirages.

I found a thin thing folded over a martini at the bar which was really just a lowboy moved to the middle of the room with a man dressed as a bartender standing behind it pretending to pour cocktails. The girl—the pile of sticks attending the party dressed as a Russian teenager—stared across the lowboy at me, which was a city of bottles. I fell, entranced by her gaze and busied myself trying to win her attention with the little Russian I knew. My mental Russian dictionary at the time being comprised only of the words "Please. Food. Wine. Cocaine. Toilet. Sorry. Thank You." And it is interesting

to note how often I would use those words in exactly that order and manage to have quite a night of it.

But "Cocaine," I said. And "Please," I said.

And nothing from the girl.

And "Tumblers," I said in English in case she was curious what I was supposed to be. But nothing from the girl.

Then, like a window had been left open, from across the room, cutting through Sheena Easton's greatest, Johan's enormous voice, beet-fed and full of drugs. "You're no cowboy," he bellowed.

The tycoon and he were chest to chest, and they were surrounded by the tycoon's men all attending dressed as bodyguards.

"You're no cowboy," Johan said again and also poked at the tycoon for clarity, so we would all know to whom he referred.

And then, to prove he was right, Johan made to knock the hat of the tycoon's head. But, in addition to being right, he was also very drunk and didn't judge the distance properly and instead of knocking the hat, he clocked the tycoon under his jaw and sent the short and round man back and onto the ground where he rolled slightly from side to side, the strobing lights casting each moment as if on film.

From the floor of his grand hallway, the tycoon pointed and screamed "Kill them," with no irony and no hyperbole, "kill all the tumblers." And the forest deep outside of Moscow suddenly felt very black and very deep.

I dashed across the room to Johan and pulled him as quickly as I could to the doors that lead on to a patio. I shut Johan out and returned to the tycoon who was being picked up and dusted off by the men dressed as bodyguards. "Please," I begged with them. "Sorry... Please... Sorry..."

The tycoon, standing now, seemed more stunned than angry. After a few more pleases and sorries one of the bodyguards mumbled what must have been a joke and we all chuckled. "Tumblers." I said, in case they were curious.

And then "No Cowboy," sounded through the room and we turned, all the party a single head. There was Johan banging on the French doors like he might in a movie if there was ever a movie about acrobats.

"No Cowboy." And again, stretching longer. "Cooooowbooooooy."

And before the tycoon Armani cowboy could order our deaths again, I rushed to the high-boy-bar where the girl had folded all the way around

and was curled against the hard, stained wood and I grabbed four bottles of tequila off the top and I tumbled across the room, although not as gracefully as I'd liked. The men-come-bodyguards pushing and grabbing, their hands slipping off the singlet as I went until I reached the French doors and pushed my friend around the unlit garden path to the front of the mansion where the long tail of cars sat like some black millipede. And I threw three bottles in a passenger seat and yelled to the driver "Three bottles of Patron to the city..." adding "Please," in Russian. The man dressed as a driver who might have been the same man from before smiled and pulled away from the house while Johan and I opened the fourth bottle and toasted the wheezing bodyguards as they chased us down the driveway.

And as we drove, Johan fluttered his eyes a bit as he might if he'd just emerged from a deep drunken blackout, the sort where everything that comes before it seems like a dream and then fades away instantly and then he asked where we were.

"A cab," I said.

"And where are we going?"

"Moscow," I said.

"And where have we been?" Johan said.

And I said "I'm not sure," because things like memory require more than one person to sustain them, and Johan wasn't holding up his end of the deal. And so at once I didn't know if I'd really been to a poorly-costumed masquerade in an unfurnished hall cast in stuttering white Christmas lights. Or, as seemed more likely, spent the evening high with a good friend, drinking liquor in a car, both of us clad ludicrously in orange lycra and occasionally vomiting out the windows leaving long sinews of mucus all through the deep black forests that stretch outside of Moscow.