

# *Jerusalem, Sleep* (or Soundtrack to My First Tattoo)

Michael Potter

The needles jack hammering into my forearm caught the vibrations from the metal vibrating the windows and the walls of the subterranean tattoo shop and made it feel like the current from the power lines out on the street were feeding directly into my veins. When the tiny woman with the staples in her face at the front desk heard the word "scar," she assumed that I wanted to cover it up, but I told her, "No, I want to use it as emphasis." To which she raised a perforated eyebrow and her set of very tiny shoulders. The guy who worked on me was covered in ink, himself. I caught fragments of words and flash on his thighs through the holes in his 501s. I didn't say too much at first, because I didn't want to distract him and, also, because I can be shit at small talk. Before he started, though, he had walked me through some basic anatomy and/or physiology as a preamble to the fact that he was going to change the angle of the design I'd brought to him between my elbow and wrist. I told him that I would defer to both his expertise and to his outside perspective. When the tattoo gun finally plugged into the compressed air and slow bass line all around us, I hit something like a trance, which surprised me given my experience with needles (spinal taps and an assortment of stitches as a child and never-ending dentistry as an adult). When the guy said, "You can talk, you know," I thought *fuck*. "People usually tell me why they're getting what they're getting." I, on the other hand, was hoping to get in-and-out without any of this (as I do at the barber). "I was in an orphanage," I say, suddenly back in therapy, "for the first few years of my life." And it goes on from there for a while, both of us having to repeat things over the crunch and hardcore grind of whatever has been blaring out of the speakers. I tell him that when I was very young, or very "short" (as I sometimes phrase it), I was running around with the fat Italian kid down the street from the foster stranger who plucked me out of the orphanage like a shelter animal. My new friend's name was Nino and the two of us were always together after school, but we were often fighting, too. I remember punching him a few times and he bit me once so hard (on the opposite arm) in his backyard (next to tomatoes caged in towers of green wire) that I thought, at first, that he might spit out a chunk of flesh when he finally let go. (But I digressed, giving much too much attention to my fat former friend.) I told the guy (who also had some monosyllabic male name), my captive audience, that I got this particular scar running down a muddy alley a few doors up from Nino's house while being chased by a massive (to my abridged younger self) German Shepherd. What I didn't know about that sloppy escape route was that it concealed old bricks, arranged haphazardly just beneath the surface. Long story short, I tripped on one of those bricks and slid, hands outstretched for a few feet as I got trampled by my pursuer, tearing myself up in the process before sinking into a full stop, suddenly alone and bleeding. The dirge rushed into the space between us (the progress so heavy and the incomprehensible lyrics so guttural that I could feel the reverb in my balls) as he worked his way through the French phrase that I'd slipped him without explanation: *Je Maintiendrai*, "I will maintain" or "I will endure," from the coat of arms of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Then I gave him a version of a deeper explanation, that I had no idea that I had Dutch heritage while I was growing up, before I hacked my way



SLEEP - JERUSALEM

Sleep

*Jerusalem*

02/1999

Rise Above/Music  
Cartel

back to my own identity (literally), having been brought up "Irish." That I was labeling myself now, declaring (in writing) that I was fucking Dutch so that there would be no question when it came time to throw my body into the ground. (My other forearm will attest to my Norwegian heritage in similar fashion.) I left him to his work, thinking to myself that the soundtrack to my first tattoo was something by Dimmu Borgir, but I was wrong. "Jerusalem" is both a single track, and a full album, in six parts by domestic stoner/doom metal outfit, Sleep, that was released in 1999 (and then re-released with a different title a few years later after some static with one or more record labels). *Decibel Magazine* inducted the album into its hall of fame of "extreme metal masterpieces" and a critic from *The New York Times* raved that the album was "like a Mark Rothko painting hitting you over the head with a bag of hammers." Which is to say that it was the perfect sonic accompaniment to the other reason for this ink: That I had just narrowly escaped significant jail time for assault when my man (of fifteen years) revealed himself to have been The Devil from day one. (No "alleged" necessary here, I've got the scars from his teeth on my knuckles to remind me every day of that narrow escape, but that's another song, or another album, of the blackest metal Scandinavia has yet to conjure.)