Can there really exist a world in such close proximity to our own, one that seethes with such strange life, one that was possibly here before our own city and yet we know absolutely nothing about it?

So asks the unnamed narrator in Michael Ajvaz’s thin novel, *The Other City*, as he begins his absurd adventure with a chance encounter in a dusty antiquarian. On a forgotten bookshelf he chances across a “dark-purple velvet” tome with pages covered in an indecipherable arabesque script that the narrator determines is “not of this world.” The moment he purchases the otherworldly book he is pulled sideways into a world occupied by the shadowy alleyways and dark bedroom corners of his city. This world is the “other” Prague, a city at once familiar and alien, prosaic and impossible, logically-governed and magically-fevered. *The Other City* proposes that we are a “forgotten colony” of this other world or that this other city is the “primordial dance of which our world is but a trace,” yet the only certainty present in the novel is that the more the narrator darts between worlds, the more definitively the center of this other city lies beyond reach. As the narrator jumps headlong into this dizzying, absurdist, cover-to-cover mystery, he encounters emerald streetcars that disappear passengers, cross-world interspaces that exist between apartments, fantastic priests and fanatic lecturers descended from deep sea creatures, steamer ships lost in city streets, towers on the Charles Bridge occupied by barns and dive bars, and a flopping land shark that, after losing a bout of fisticuffs with our absurd hero, impales itself upon the cross of St. Nicholas’s Church. Each of these encounters shows us (and the narrator) that there is more to the design of our world than we have initially perceived, or as Ajvaz writes:

> It is precisely when we are looking through glass that we stop dividing reality into center and periphery, and we start to feel a yearning to know the menacing and enticing shapes that loom indistinctly on the border: what appears to be idle gazing behind the glass is actually the beginning of a journey into another world.

Ajvaz’s prose is crafted and lean, but his dialogue has the curious effect of being cast upon the page as if through a dirty projector, modeling everyone’s anxieties and fears in monstrous relief. William S. Burroughs claimed that language was a virus, and *The Other City* evokes this notion through pages-long paragraphs of fevered dialogue and description that resemble transcribed nightmares (curiously so, considering that the “primordial tongue” of this other city is said to be silence). Burroughs’s viral language is visited again when the narrator discovers that his purple-spined book has begun to infect the other, normal books on his bookshelf, slowly taking over their pages with its own language. It is only via these moments of viral crossover that our indefatigable narrator realizes the interpenetration and interconnectedness of the two worlds. “Out of the corner of our eye,” Ajvaz writes, “we can always glimpse another world, without realizing it. We are walking all the time along the edge of a virgin forest.” In this Venn Diagram of the familiar and the other—this cross-section of absurd worlds—we come to see that the only boundary that exists between them is one taxidermied out
of fear and anxiety. And that, in reality, the relationship that exists is like the one between a healthy newborn babe and its conjoined, malformed twin, normal and gnarled fingers twined, faces pressed together as if they were simply looking into a funhouse mirror.