



Collection NINE

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Preface:

The April Reader is a monthly publication of poetry, prose, and other user-submitted content. Initially conceived as a successor publication to the now-defunct Zine Writers Guild, The April Reader aims to become a hub of online writing and content. Operating under the belief that the rise of the internet has allowed the written word to regain parity with mass-media and television, The April Reader hopes to serve as a launching point for the future writers of this generation.

Updates:

Let's not fool ourselves: editing for TAR is involving work. It takes dedication not everyone is willing nor able to provide. Long-time editor, Nipplelesshorse has been removed from the TAR project due to other, more pressing obligations. The three editors who worked on this issue felt the crunch of a limited staff, and have agreed that this vacancy ought to be filled. We're looking for a dedicated editor who'd be chiefly concerned with advertising and getting The April Reader known. If you feel up to the task, please submit a your formal bid to theaprilreader@gmail.com letting us know of your interest in the 'zine, along with any ideas you have for its betterment and propagation.

Our website, www.theaprilreader.org, now features a comments section for every issue we produce—including this one. We've done this to facilitate expression and critique of TAR's content, and TAR itself. We greatly value the ideas and opinions of our readers, and we know the writers would also like as much feedback as possible.

Work continues to be done on both the website and the issues to try and make them more reader-friendly and welcoming. It will take some time to provide the best possible TAR, but measures are being made. The editors are committed to this end, and we stand faithfully beside our mission statement, “to inspire the members of the next generation of artists.”

Our IRC Channel:

Server: irc.freenode.net

Room: #TAR

Our Distribution Page:

www.theaprilreader.org

Submit your writing, comments, and whatever else to:

theaprilreader@gmail.com

FICTION

Volunteer Opportunities

-Andrew Mendelson

Brad's head swayed from side to side as he descended the stairs. Skim milk seemed like the healthier alternative to a sugary glass of orange juice but he had read somewhere that the OJ might alleviate his hangover more efficiently.

"Morning," his mom said grabbing her purse and a breakfast bar.

"Ugh."

"Too much fun last night?"

"Yeah."

He settled for mixing the skim and OJ together. In his pursuit of peak physical condition he had had much stranger and nastier shakes.

"Do you have class today?"

"No."

"Are you leading worship tonight?"

"Nope."

"But I thought—"

"Mom, you know I'm not a big fan of human contact before noon."

"Well then why are you up before noon, sunshine?"

“Volunteer stuff.”

“Oh, right...”

Not that he *had* to volunteer, of course. There just happened to be a surprising amount of graduates of his program who had done well with a few signatures showing that they were productive members of society.

He made his way back up the stairs into his room. The intense glow of his laptop struck his unadjusted eyes. After a few seconds of squinting, the fuzziness subsided and he scanned the various status updates of his 3,017 contacts on Facebook. One girl in particular posted an upbeat Mother Theresa quote. The girl had an obscure form of cancer slowly eating her away despite her constant, chipper attitude. Her purple shade of eye shadow perfectly matched her shirt in a way that struck Brad as more calculated and precise than fashionable. And, of course, the conspicuous flare only made her baldness more noticeable. Still, watching the daily inverse relationship of her health and cheerfulness fascinated him.

“Maybe Jesus is trying to drop you hints about your vanity,” Brad typed in response to a picture of her beaming with the words ‘Bald is Beautiful!!!’ written in a Comic Sans font. He erased his thought and settled on commenting with “You’re looking great!!! Everything happens for a REASON!” He knew he could expect a reciprocal comment posted on one of his 239 profile pictures and yawned with satisfaction at the easiness of karmic love and friendship.

Having checked the cancer girl’s status, he proceeded to his emails. There was a message from the youth minister:

Brad,

It has been a blast worshipping and spreading the Message of Christ to high schoolers with you! Your talented bass playing has really tied the band together. I signed your paper with the logged hours of your Service, but I was wondering if you would like to continue to Serve with us? God has given you great talents and an even greater Heart. We’d love to have you become a part of our family so let me know!!!

*Your Brother in Christ,
Stephen*

Brad slurped down his horrible drink and did his best to reply with the excessive friendliness and arbitrary capitalizations of Contemporary-Christian Grammar.

Steve,

Worshipping with you has been a truly incredible Experience. It is so important for people to feel Closeness with God today. A good friend of mine is battling cancer and with His help she manages to smile as beautifully as ever and continues to have Hope. I will always be a servant of God and Hope, but He has let me know that for now I should focus on my first year of college. As for next year, who knows!? He works in Mysterious Ways and everything happens for a Reason.

*Your Fellow Servant and Messenger of the Love of the Son and
Father,
Brad*

It was a shame to be leaving the youth ministry, which Brad felt had a fantastic business model. Every weekend, the band which was composed of himself and other attractive college students would serenade the horny insecure teenagers with lyrics that promised better days. Each service included

cliché mantras and feel good vibes allowing the customers to graph their hopes and desires onto Stephen's holy jive. Even the Tough Stuff services concerning suicide, drugs and divorce featured cherry-picked cases of teens that had made it through okay. The anomalous teens told their stories via professional, reality-TV styled interviews which suggested that their pain *always* brought forth spiritual growth instead of a lifelong limp.

Stephen's sister often sang with the band. Brad had determined that sex was unlikely with her—to an extent. Like any bureaucracy, Christianity had its moral ambiguities where opportunity awarded go-getters and he often considered her definition of virginity while gazing at her ass each time she belted out worship tunes at the front of the stage.

The cancer girl posted a compliment on one of his shirtless pictures. (It had been taken on the beach so it was, like, totally spontaneous and not vain or anything...)

Brad grabbed his keys and phone off of his tattered copy of *Atlas Shrugged*. Outside, everything was miserable. The snow was melting slowly and fusing with mud to form the brown landscape of March in the suburb. Random patches of grass pierced through the sludge here and there but Brad found them to be more awkward than promising of summer.

He drove five over the speed limit out of habit and reminded himself that there was no need to hurry. A car in front of him drove slowly enough to make him tap his brakes. There was a green light one street ahead. He swerved around the car and stomped the gas. The light ahead turned red fifty yards before he could make it. The other car pulled up beside him. It was a soccer mom. She stared straight ahead. Her obliviousness to the situation was far more infuriating than any middle-finger, smirk or head-shaking could have been.

The inside of Brad's car was vacuumed and free of trash except for an old cup made of recycled paper and filled with organic coffee. He had one sip of the cold coffee before rolling down his window and tossing it into the street.

It was nearly eight when Brad arrived. A large sign read "Everwood Care Facility.com". The ".com" was added on in a slightly lighter shade of green than the original letters. The visitors' lot had a one dollar fee. He parked in the employee lot while mentally preparing a speech about how he was a volunteer/employee if anyone gave him shit.

Inside there was a fairly attractive brunette at the nurse's station talking on the phone. When Brad approached the desk and smiled she glanced up only for a second before looking back down at a stack of papers. A minute went by, but he figured she would be off the phone in a moment so he might as well wait. A minute turned into three minutes but at that point she was bound to wrap it up any second and it would look ridiculous for him to sit back down only to get right back up again. He settled on taking out his cellphone and nonchalantly toggling through menus to make it look like he was texting.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes. I was just wondering," Brad said taking care not to look up from his phone until he said 'wondering', "if you could help me get a hold of Nurse Julie?"

"She's pretty busy right now. Is there anything I could help you with in particular?"

"Well, I spoke to her about volunteering a few days ago."

“Are you Brad?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, here’s your temporary volunteer tag that you need to keep visible at all times. Julie should be down the center hall, here.”

She pointed to the hall behind her. There were two more long hallways all lined with patient rooms to the east and west.

“Thank you,” Brad said as he clipped the badge to his snug, pink polo.

“No problem. Just check down the halls. She moves around a lot.”

Subdued shades of blue and beige colored the walls and carpet. Brad noticed that even the rooms were carpeted and cringed with terror at the thought of the microscopic cesspools lurking within the deceptively innocuous fabric. Above each door was a room number and a call-light. At least half the call-lights seemed to be on and they were all accompanied by a high-pitched ringing that reminded Brad of the tinnitus he often had after some of the particularly loud sets at the youth ministry gigs.

After reaching the end of the central hallway, Brad came to a curved section that met the other two halls and led to the cafeteria and an exercise/physical therapy center. A door near him swung open so fast that he had to jump back.

“Oh God, I’m sorry! I didn’t see ya there.”

There was a middle aged women wearing maroon scrubs with a crucifix around her neck. She spoke fast, gestured fast and gave

Brad the impression that she was busier than he had been in months.

“That’s okay. I’m just trying to find Nurse Julie.”

“She’s actually on lunch right now.”

“Gotcha. I’m Brad. I’m volunteering today and I just wanted to touch base with her.”

“Great! I’m Charlene. If you want, I can get you started right now.”

“Oh...ok.”

“Follow me please.”

Charlene walked so fast that Brad felt as if he were almost jogging as he followed her. He noted her white running shoes.

“Okay, so this is the linen room. If you’ll just grab one of those blue pads, a bed sheet, a top sheet, two blankets, three towels, five washcloths, an adult brief and one of those yellow basins. Er, up more. Left. Keep goin’. There ya go. Super.”

Brad had to fight the urge not to wipe his forehead with one of the fresh towels.

“Anything else?”

“That’ll do it for now. We’re just gonna go right across the hall here.”

In the brief moment they crossed back through the hall,

Brad noticed a flash of maroon in his peripheral vision that vanished into one of the rooms. Some of the lights above the doors that had previously been lit were off, but had been replaced by others rapidly enough that half the hall was still lit and filled with migraine-inducing rings.

In the room, there was a curtain between the two occupied beds, which each had a TV on across to the other wall. It almost seemed like a hotel except for the side rails on the bed and the smell. The odor emitted from under the covers of a massive, black old man nearest to the door.

“Hey, Mr. Freeman. My friend Brad and I are going to get you all cleaned up here in just a minute.”

“Yep,” said Mr. Freeman.

“Go ahead and set the blankets right on this chair here, Brad.”

“Okay. Uh, Charlene...” his voice was drowned out as Charlene turned on the faucet in the bathroom to full blast and filled the basin.

“Charlene,” he said a bit louder. “Are you sure I shouldn’t wait for Nurse Julie or anything?”

“That’s okay,” she said as she set the basin on the hospital table next to the bed. “Usually I walk a volunteer or a student through one or two baths and then let them go on their own.”

She raised the bed up to her waist. Brad swallowed.

“Ok Mr. Freeman, we’re gonna get started now.”

Brad tried to force a smile.

“You can just sort of hand me stuff and help me move him around,” she said.

“Okay.”

Charlene folded the blanket down to Mr. Freeman’s waist and unbuttoned the buttons of his gown. Brad suddenly found the local news story on TV about a fourth grade art show to be extremely engaging and comforting. He thought about what kind of paintings the kids would display and wondered if any of them were into Francis Bacon. He wanted his mind focused on anything except what was about to happen.

“Okay Brad, can you go ahead and throw this gown in the basket behind you there? Right side. Other right. There ya go.”

Brad attempted to put on latex gloves, but the slight perspiration of his hands made it impossible and he wondered about how many pairs Charlene had put on before she was able to effortlessly slide her hands in.

The old man yawned. Charlene folded the washcloth into a square mitt and rubbed gently along his brown eyes. She wiped his bald head, his cheeks and carefully folded each ear forward to wash behind them.

“Brad, could you hand me that towel, please? How’s that, Mr. Freeman?”

“Yep.”

“That feel good?”

“Good.”

She moved down to his chest, washing each fold of skin around his armpits and sagging chest. She took her time on the larger crevices and went in deep with the washcloth over her index finger. Brad handed her a new washcloth and rinsed the old one.

“So how long are you going to be with us today?”

“I got most of my volunteer work done at a local church, but I have to go to at least two places. I’ll probably put in about six hours here today and then I’ll be set.”

“What’s your major?”

“Business.”

“Oh, ok. I’m working on getting my nursing degree and then hopefully becoming a nurse practitioner.”

Charlene tore the tape off the old man’s diaper. Brad nearly fainted when she peeled the front off.

“Mr. Freeman, we’re gonna roll you onto your side now, okay?”

“Yep.”

“Go ahead and get on the other side there. I’m gonna pull him up with the pad toward me. You can go ahead and push on his thigh and shoulder. Be careful whenever you do that. Lots of residents have bad knees or sore shoulders due to cardiac issues. Ready? One, two, *three*.”

Brad could feel that Charlene had taken on most of the

weight in one swift pull. She could have easily done it without him, despite how skinny she was. The fact that Brad could curl 40-pound dumbbells suddenly seemed embarrassing. It was as though his biceps were filled with nothing but air.

“Good job, Brad. Okay Mr. Freeman, hold on to this rail for me please.”

“Yep.”

The old man’s ass faced Brad. His massive, fecal-coated, testicles were smushed between the cellulite of his thighs. Brad willed his eyes not to look directly at the horror, but his nose and peripheral vision would not spare him.

Charlene continued to wipe every inch of skin and carried on as if she were making a casserole.

“Go ahead and see if you can pull out his brief, please. Just be careful not to pull too hard and shear his skin.”

Still taking the utmost caution in what he stared at, Brad tugged the diaper. It slid out gradually and he paid careful attention to how hard he pulled in fear that it might snap loose and splatter soft, hot shit onto his face. Charlene lifted the old man’s left buttock enough for him to pull it out. He dropped it in the wastebasket and wiped the sweat off his forehead.

“You’re doing real good, Mr. Freeman. Brad and I will quit bugging you in a few minutes and let you be. Sound like a plan?”

“Yep.”

“We’re just about done. See if you can tuck the old sheet

underneath Mr. Freeman and start putting the fresh linens on. Also, place the new brief in the center of the bed so that it's right where it needs to be when we roll him onto his back."

Fitted sheets had never been Brad's specialty. The corners always became untucked and he typically asked his mom to handle it. As he tried desperately to stretch the sheet from one corner to the other, he became even more drenched with sweat.

"I think you've got it the wrong way...yeah. Other corner, honey. That's better. See? You got it."

When Brad glanced at the wind-up alarm clock on the desk, a familiar feeling of dread surfaced; it was the same feeling he got on the treadmill when he thought of his exhaustion and how much longer and further he'd have to run.

Charlene removed the old sheets and rolled the old man onto his back. She made sure the diaper wasn't too snug and taped it. Brad was still fumbling with the pillow case after she had finished making the bed and disposed of the used sheets.

"Jeez, you're fast."

"Years of practice, kiddo. This was actually my last bed-bath for the morning. Now I'm scheduled to get six residents showered. Did you want to keep shadowing me? Or you can look at the schedule and see if there are any bed-baths left."

"Um...not to mess up the protocol here or anything, but is there anything else I could help you guys with?"

She looked at him as if he had farted.

"I mean, I don't know—can I get them water or something?"

"Okay...I guess. Just be sure to check with the signs on the doors showing whether or not they can have fluids orally."

"No problem."

"Honestly though, breakfast started at seven-thirty. What would really be great is if you could just visit with them. We're kind of short-staffed unfortunately and we don't get the time we would like to really connect. Some of them don't even have visitors and it can get pretty lonely."

"Well I'd be glad to help out that way."

"Wonderful—especially since you're so young and handsome. Brad, presence is huge. I'm a very spiritual person and, for me, developing presence is the most important part of what I do. To not just be next to someone, but to really *be there* with them."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"..."

"Joke! Joke."

Charlene's look switched from shock to red-faced laughter and she cackled so loudly that she made Brad flinch and then stare in horrified fascination.

"You're a good kid. Let me know if you need help with anything."

Brad just stood there for a moment after Charlene scurried off. It seemed like any moment he would be asked to

leave because he was some kind of impostor. He noticed the old man staring at him.

“Can I do anything else for you, Mr. Freeman?”

“Nope.”

“So where did you grow up?”

“Yep.”

“Uh, do you like this facility? The staff sure seems nice.”

The old man stared at him for a second longer before looking at the TV as though he had forgotten Brad was there.

Back in the hallway, Brad pressed himself against the wall to let pass two nurses wheeling residents. It struck him as ironic that a place filled with such slow, barely-moving elderly people could feel like a frantic game of Frogger.

Another room had a TV on across from an empty bed. He looked for something to clean—anything that would allow him to look busy and not have to clean a resident. An anxious sounding voice came from the other side of the curtain dividing the room. There were no actual words, just frightened muttering. Brad sighed and walked over. An old man with a patch on his right eye lay there breathing in quick, shallow bursts.

“Where am I?” he asked.

“You’re at the Everwood Care Facility.”

“What street?”

“Baker.”

“Could you turn the light on? I can’t see good.”

“The lights are on.” Brad noticed a birthday card on the dresser for ‘Don’. “You have a patch on your right eye, Mr. Don. Are you feeling confused?”

“I’m *very* confused.”

Great, Brad thought. I’ve confused him.

“You’ve got a birthday card here, Mr. Don.”

He handed him the card. With his good eye, Don squinted at it in deep concentration for a full minute without saying anything. Brad started to worry that he had confused him even more. What if he was reprimanded by Nurse Julie for confusing a resident? He would have to quickly find another location for his obligatory volunteer work so he could have his papers in order within the deadline, which was just two days away...

“Oh,” said Don.

He stopped squinting and seemed to relax as if he had just remembered something reassuring.

“Can I get you some water?”

“Okay. Thank you, sir.”

There were no cups in the personal bathroom. The two bars at the side of the toilet struck Brad as horribly depressing. Then he remembered that in a place like this, half the people

simply shat in their beds anyway and a toilet, even with safety rails, wasn't an option anymore. He left the room to continue his search for cups.

Back in the hall, he spotted Nurse Julie at the nursing station who waved to him and he walked over.

“Hey Brad.”

“Hi Julie.”

“So, how's it going?”

“Great! I really like it here. A lot.”

“Glad to hear that. I've got your papers signed already, so you don't have to hunt me down when you're ready to go.”

Brad had to force himself not to smile.

“Thanks.”

“What have you been up to so far?”

“Well, I talked a little with Charlene and she mentioned being a good listener and—”

“Presence.”

“Yeah.”

“How to be fully present with another person could fill an entire bookshelf with textbooks, Brad. The staff and I are always trying to improve when it comes to presence.”

“That's why I'm here too.” Forcing those words reminded him of trying to eat raw, unseasoned vegetables.

“I'm glad to hear you say that. There's a woman in room three-forty-two that doesn't get visitors. I think you could definitely cheer her up.”

Brad folded the paper and shoved it into the back pocket of his jeans. Now that it had been signed-off, there would no problem leaving earlier—maybe an hour earlier. Or two. Or he could visit the lady in room 342, exit the room just as Nurse Julie was nearby (and could see that he had visited,) and then leave. It wasn't as if he had anything particularly useful to offer such old people. Another bed-bath was out of the question. And it wasn't as though he owed these people anything. If they weren't in the nursing home, they would probably just shuffle into voting booths to support legislation that would fuck his entire generation over.

Room 342 was at the end of the hall. Another sigh escaped him as he gripped the door handle. Only one more, he thought. One more and then no more.

Inside the room he noticed that the bed nearest to him had a colorful duvet and a plethora of pictures and cards on the dresser. The other bed had the standard hospital linens and there was nothing but an old magazine on the dresser. It seemed as though the room was unoccupied for a moment (much to his relief,) but then he noticed that there was a woman in the plain bed who was so small that her body could barely be seen while underneath the covers. Her eyes were closed and her mouth hung open.

As bad as the smells had been, something about seeing the woman lying there in her standard-facility bed seemed far

worse. He took a step back to the door and saw her eyes open. They seemed to stare *through* the ceiling rather than *at* it, before closing again. His shirt had small stains around the pits which he worried were becoming more visible. To be as quiet as possible, he tried to breathe evenly, but it backfired and he gasped to catch his breath.

“Can you help me, daddy?”

The old woman’s eyes were still closed as she spoke in a slow, whimpering voice. Brad’s own voice cracked when he tried to respond.

“Are you okay?”

“No, daddy.”

“My name is Brad. What’s your name?”

Her eyelids peeled opened slowly. She couldn’t seem to turn her head so she looked at him from the corner of her eyes.

“June. Can you help me, please?”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m scared.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“Getting hurt.”

He looked away and noticed a cat on the cover of her magazine.

“Do you like cats?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“What’s your favorite kind of cat?”

“The kind that meows.”

He tried to smile.

“That’s a good kind of cat, June.”

“Can you help me now?”

“I don’t know.” (She continued to stare.) “Sometimes when I’m stressed out, I like to tense my body for five seconds and then relax. Do you wanna try that?”

“I can’t do that.”

“Do you want some water?”

“You can’t help me.”

Brad could think of nothing to say. He took his keys out of his pocket and walked to the door. June’s trembling voice followed him.

“Doctor?”

Nurse Julie was nowhere to be seen in the hallway. He walked as quickly as he could for the exit. The pretty brunette from earlier noticed him.

“Bye,” she said, smiling.

Brad looked at her, but he was panting too fast to say anything and kept walking.

“Are you okay?” he heard her say as he opened the door to the parking lot.

It was oddly warm for March and, when he got into his car, the trapped heat inside made him roll down the windows. He pulled out fast without bothering to check behind him. When he made it to the street he was stopped at the first light and he looked back at the building. Some of the windows had children’s paintings and little stuffed animals displayed, others didn’t. In the silence he heard a slight ringing in his ears. He frantically plugged his iPod in and turned the volume up to its max as he ran the red light.

* * *

A Storm Surrounds Us

-Damean Graves

It's ten minutes to ten and it's raining, and I'm driving grandma's p.o.s. Buick through this storm, and I feel the weather in my joints and in my bones, and my mood seems a reflection of this storm. My younger cousin Tyler—most everyone calls him Sticky—sits passenger. And above us dark clouds come together, attacking and embracing each other, and it goes almost unseen until streaks of lightning outline the beauty. It's awesome and frightening.

I haven't seen a storm like this in Meridian before; that is, I haven't seen the kind of storm where the sky is all lit up with these branching bolts of electric power that strike and flow throughout the angry clouds, and where the wind makes the falling rain slant and sting, and where it just rains and rains. And we just drive and drive.

Sticky turned eighteen today. So I'm taking him to the Arctic Station to get a milkshake. It's a nice thing to do for the kid, and maybe, if he wants, I'll buy a cheap pack of cloves for him to try out and a pack of Pall Malls for myself.

I tell Sticky to turn up the music. It's a song we both like.

He moves the volume knob clockwise. The bass attacks me at first, then it gets easier to deal with. It's an entertaining song. The rapper goes on about getting money from his hoes and how every Sunday he begs God to forgive them. And then he asks God for more profit and so on.

The music is smooth like a love song. It gets to the chorus.

*A pimp's gotta get his money
A ho's gotta give,
God's gonna watch over me
Jesus gotta forgive,
And we do it all again, amen.*

I laugh every time I hear this. It seems they're all a little bit in the wrong. Even God. I tell Sticky to turn it down because we've gotten closer to the Arctic Station—also the bass is loud and I can't think straight.

He does so and then asks, “You ever seen fucking lightning shooting out all over like that?”

“Not here.”

“Where?”

“Oklahoma, Texas, every other state I've lived in besides this one.”

“Man this shit is cool, but it freaks me out.”

“It's not even bad compared to some other storms I've been in.”

“Fires, though; it's summer and it'll get hella blazing when they scorch the earth up.”

“Wish I could get blazed,” I mutter to myself.

And suddenly, the rain has stopped or moved along. Yet the wind still carries trash and leaves and dust throughout the streets. We pull up to the Arctic Station parking lot. The white and the aqua neon signs are off, and I look at my Timex wristwatch and notice that

we've got a few minutes until closing. Sticky says to go through the drive thru anyway. I do so.

We pull up and there's this static noise and then a somewhat static voice coming from the ordering box.

“Sorry we're closed,” a cute voice tells us.

“But it's like still a few minutes to ten!” yells Sticky.

“Sorry.”

I talk this time, “It's my brother's birthday though. Could you just make him a milkshake please. If it's not too much trouble? I could pay double. That'd be a nice tip.”

Silence. I think about driving up to the window and knocking on the glass and hoping for a response when. . .

“Okay fine I'll make one. What would you like?”

“Just chocolate,” Sticky informs her.

“Make it a small,” I quickly say before telling her thank you.

We pull forward and there's this cute girl behind the window. She looks familiar. Or maybe it's just me wanting her to be familiar.

“She's not bad huh.”

“I'd give her a seven maybe. Or a six.”

“Sticky you're shallow, she's hot.”

“Ask her out then.”

I roll down the window, pay her, take the shake, and consider becoming more familiar with her. There's a moment of awkward silence. I drive off.

“Pussy.”

“The hell was I going to say to her?”

“I would have closed the deal. I would have been just fine.”

“Sure.”

“Oh, and thanks for this tasty milkshake cuz.”

“Anytime.”

We continue driving. There's something else I've wanted to do tonight. It's a surprise.

Sticky used to get bullied pretty bad his sophomore year. This kid Jake would gather his friends and Sticky would have to fight one of them, or two of them, or all of them. Usually, Jake went in to take Sticky on personally. The kids would encircle Sticky and taunt him as Jake beat the crap out of him.

Those kids used to tell him that if he told anyone they'd kill him. Sticky kept quiet and fought harder each week. Finally we found out. My aunt called the cops and has home schooled him ever since.

So we're going to pay Jake a visit.

We're speeding along now. We're going home, and I'm smiling and imagining things.

Sticky and I waited outside Jake's house and we waited for the right moment, and when he came out we assault the little creep's new black Mustang with baseball bats. And I watched the windshield breaking and the glass spiderwebbing and eventually collapsing. And then the lights. And next the car doors. And Jake was horrified. And. . .

But, that's just a daydream. It's just a lie I tell myself to comfort myself. But, I'm still not comfortable.

So now we're speeding along and going home, and we're smoking—it's a “victory smoke,” as my cousin calls it. I'm finished with my Pall Mall so I throw it out the window. Sticky's clove (all I can see is a spark really) seems to be quickly disappearing in his hands.

“That was fun we should do it again,” Sticky says as he throws his clove to the road and rolls up his window.

“Next year we will.”

“Do you think he'll ever know we did it?”

“He's just stupid, I think. But it's just marker and eggs. That asshole probably thinks it's his friends.”

“Next year maybe we should get some teepee. Maybe fuck up his trees a little too. You know.”

I agree and we continue to drive. We eventually get home.

Getting home late has always been a problem. Grandma stays up waiting for us. Sometimes she wakes up Brenda, and when my aunt is woken up there's hell to pay. And yes, this time Grandma woke up Brenda. And Brenda gives us hell as usual. And I know we deserve it. I know it but I still fight her over it. She always says I give her these evil looks and that I should get my own place. I agree with her about getting my own place. It'd be better than staying here. I'd miss Sticky though. But not enough to want to get a place with him. He can be a pain.

After we get away from Brenda and get into our room, Sticky speaks to me, "Sometimes she's such a bitch."

"Yea I guess."

"Al?"

"Yea."

". . .If I die."

"What?"

"If I die, tell my mother. . ."

"Okay, tell her what?"

"Tell her. . . I fucking hated her."

We both laugh for a few minutes. He makes croaking dead sounds. I tell him I'll do just that.

Brenda isn't that bad though. Sticky can be a real pain. And I shouldn't have stayed out so late. Grandma worries and that's okay. My aunt works hard and needs her sleep. Sticky and I work

sometimes at night, but not as often as her. She also has to get up early. Truth be told both Sticky and I can be a pain. I don't tell him this, but I think it.

"I'm going to play something," I tell him.

"I'm going to play with myself," he smirks and tells me.

I play some game with zombies in it. Pornography plays on my cousins laptop behind me. I know he's just watching. I hope so anyway.

"Al, check this shit out."

I pause the game and go over. He's paused the porn on this fat chick's face.

"What's up."

"You want to see Homer Simpson?"

"Sure, I guess."

He pushes play, and the camera slowly goes away from her face and shows her body. She's getting fucked reverse cowgirl. Her fatness grosses me out a little. He pauses and points to her body. And then I see it. Homer fucking Simpson. Jesus. "Maybe I should tell him to grow up." This thought goes through my mind as Sticky laughs and laughs. Instead, I just go over to the controller and start playing my game again.

Time passes this way, slowly. Intermittently, Tyler gets me to watch some "interesting" porn (midget porn, horse porn, parrot porn, etc.) After losing to another zombie horde, I finally decide to go to bed.

Hours pass, and I wake up to the sound of my cousin cussing up a storm. It's five-twenty something. He's making more noise than he knows. Those God damned Turtle Beaches. I tell him to shut up, but it's no use. It's never any use.

I try to go back to sleep.

And then there's a thud. Shit. Brenda has woken up. I know she's probably heard him throughout the night. I know what will happen next. (She'll walk in.) She walks in. (She'll start yelling at Sticky.) She starts to yell at Sticky. (He'll yell right back at her.) He yells right back. (They'll both want me to pick a side, and they'll fight over loyalties.) No. The last part is different this time.

“Alex. You need to tell Tyler to keep quiet. You need to lead by example. You need to get him to either work more or move out. Will you ever do something?”

“What the hell am I supposed to do?”

“I just told you. I'm not going to listen to this night after night after night.”

“Then buy some earplugs.”

“This is my house, my rules, I'm not buying earplugs because you two were being loud.”

“Don't blame Al, he had nothing to do with this. I was loud.”

“And Alex if you look at me like you did last night. I swear one more time—”

“Mom, don't be such a bitch.”

Silence.

“Get out. Both of you. Now.”

Again silence. And I know I should say something. Anything. But I don't. And I feel like less of a role model than I have ever felt before. Lead by example. If I do and say nothing maybe it's like I'm not even here. I decide to break the silence, to fix this, to—

She leaves.

But, I feel like less of a role model now than I have ever felt before. Lead by example. If I do nothing maybe it's like I'm not even there.

“Fuck her,” Sticky says. “Let's get the hell out of here.”

“And go?”

“We'll go to my friend's house. . . Amy.”

“Okay.”

After calling Amy (she sounded less than excited about all this,) Sticky packs up his essentials in a backpack. I do the same.

“We'll get the rest later Al.”

“Okay.”

We head out of the room and into the living room. There we see Brenda crying. Tyler just looks at her and tells

her he's never coming back. And then he leaves. I wait for a second. Brenda looks up and speaks to me. Her voice is unsteady. Her eyes dart around a little too much. Everything seems surreal. Maybe I'm just tired.

“I pray for you two. Every night before I go to sleep.”

I really don't care, but I don't push anything. I feel like she's wasting her time.

“I pray you'll be happy Alex.”

I am happy.

“I know you're not very happy here. You're just, there, sometimes—it seems like. I pray that you'll watch over Tyler and be there for him. Help him make good decisions.”

I can't help him though. He has to want it and he has to do it himself.

“You can lead him. I can't. He looks up to you.”

There's not much to look up to.

“I know this has been a terrible year for you, but. . . I know what happened to my sister and your father has changed you. I know you are a good person. I know everything will be better. Someday you'll be happy. Find what makes you happy, but please don't go.”

I pause there for a second. I don't want to go that badly. In the end, though, I leave. As I go, she bows her head and sobs. And I feel sorry for her and sorry I didn't say anything.

We walk along a road for what feels like a few miles. The morning is cold and there's a storm in the distance, beyond it the sun is shining and the storm shines as well. I've thought about things as we've walked. Maybe she was right. Maybe I need to get Sticky to come back. Maybe I need to stop this. Maybe that'll make me happy.

I stop as we are walking next to a field. And I look out at the field.

“Are these Idaho potatoes?” I ask Sticky.

“No. It's corn, you dipshit.”

“Oh. Yea.”

And I look out at the corn field. The crops are shining in this broken sun light. The heat will come later. And I think about the workers who will pick the corn for harvest. The heat and their sweat (constantly being wiped away) may affect their vision. Maybe they will pick an unripe corn husk. (Would it be sweeter? Would it be much worse?) Maybe they will pass by a perfect one. Maybe they wont. Maybe they just use a machine to gather it all up; that seems right I think.

And something strikes me as sad about all this. And I imagine children being picked just like crops. Adults doing the picking. Some of the kids are ready. Some aren't. Others are deemed not good enough. Never good enough. Maybe a machine would do the job better. And would I just watch this from a distance, too young to do the work and yet too old to grow in the field? And the sun just shines. Indifferent. A cold sun on a hot day.

And then I realize I don't know shit about corn or crops

or kids. And I don't care about that now. I'm not here to raise Tyler. But, if he looks up to me I might as well be someone worth looking up to. The sadness passes. I think about what we are doing. I think about how I just left without saying anything. I left without saying what I wanted to say. And that's what I care about now.

“Why the fuck are you staring at that shit for?”

“Tyler you cuss too much.”

Silence.

“I'm sorry Tyler, but I got to go back. And man you really do cuss a lot.”

“Why though? I mean, why go back?”

“I'm going to tell your mom I'm sorry. Sorry for all the looks. Sorry for just leaving like that.”

“She kicked us out though.”

“She was just mad. She just wants some respect. I'm going to go back. You don't have to. But I do.”

I start heading back, and I'm sure that in a few seconds Tyler will follow along.

* * *

Buried in Water

-Ian M. Gibson

It started as a job interview. She came with clutched purse and fresh CV, he with clean suit and polished briefcase. She was just a girl, a freshman in college eager to enter the business world through that temporary but ever-fascinating concept of “internship”. He was just a business man, an individual defined by the hands he shook and the wealth he possessed.

They sat at Café Younnes in Hamra, a small table between them. He leaned back in his chair, confident in the posture of a man out to make a deal and knowing that he would end-up with the better part of the bargain. She crossed her legs tightly and placed her hands in her lap, almost as if she wished to scrunch into the polite meekness she felt. Sipping at a cup of French press (hers) and a small Turkish coffee (his), they went over the points of her experience and the position in question. It was a setting neither formal nor intimate, but one that bore the emotional hints and cues of each.

“Major?” he asked.

“Economics.”

“Ah. Interesting.”

A look of worry flashed in her eyes. “Is it?”

“Yes. But don't worry – it's interesting in a good way,” he said with a small smile and a scribbled note. She smiled as well and sipped politely at her drink. They continued in this way for a good hour or so, his questions pertinent but flirtatious and her answers on-topic and accepting. By the time their

coffee had gone cold and the sun had fallen behind the buildings, they had come to know one another but only in the way an artist knows an image before he paints it. She had struggled to grasp what his witty words and slight physical cues meant, and by now she knew that this man was, yes, most certainly, hitting on her. And he, with his carefully wandering eyes and subtly insinuating questions, had determined that this girl, because she was a decade-and-a-half younger and more innocent than a springtime ewe, was worth pursuing.

When it came time for them to part, they, not by choice but by convention, lingered for just a moment more than necessary. He looked into her face, fresh and eager but unique in its determined individuality, and showed that smoldering smile of his.

“Listen, you’re not right for the position.”

“I’m not?” she asked timidly.

“It’s beneath someone as smart and pretty as you.” He paused, letting his underhanded compliment take effect. “Let’s go to dinner sometime.”

In that instant, her smile could not contain the pleasant joy at what she had thought would come.

“I’d like that.”

“Then I’ll call you. We’ll have dinner.” And then he left, his walk casual but manly in that he knew she was watching him leave. And she was, her books clutched to her chest and her eyes wide and staring at the beautiful man who had just walked into her life.

She busied herself with studies. Textbooks and practice quizzes, homework assignments and suggested readings—she

embraced them with the fervor of a student who knew that success in life was determined by arithmetic transcripts and printed lambskins. And yet, amidst the dull paragraphs on gross national product and the tangential calculations of supply curves per annum demand, she felt her heart pull in a different direction. For the first time in her rigorous by-the-book existence, she desired something that was not calculable in terms of occupation or academia. She felt herself swell with the idea of something intangible, something more emotional than physical. This man that she had met had done something to her that she could not, try as she might, understand.

There had been boys before, brief flings and trysts, but all of a silly grammar school nature. She had known the awkward looks of school dances, the hallway hand-holding of weeklong relationships, the brief and fluttering intensity of classroom crushes. She had been a child filled with questions and curiosity just like all the others. But this was different. Something of a different nature entirely, and she could feel that even if she could not grasp its complexities.

He called a week later—long enough from their first meeting to make her antsy and nervous but not for her to forget or lose hope.

“I promised you dinner,” he said.

“Yes,” she replied.

“How does tomorrow night sound?”

She cradled the phone with both hands, her ear pressed hard against it. There was a moment of silent glee before she responded.

“That sounds great.”

“Good. Tomorrow night it is. Wear something...beautiful.”

Beautiful. She spent hours going through her clothes, trying on different outfits and twirling in front of a large mirror. With each piece of clothing, she tried to see herself as she hoped he would see her, as a young woman that was vibrant and giddy and brilliant and stunning. She was nervous that no matter how much she pre-planned the evening in her head, that regardless of how many topics of conversation she had practiced beforehand, she would still somehow be unprepared and he, consequently, put-off. This was a night that had to be perfect and it was up to her to make it so.

She was there fifteen minutes early, as she had intended. The last time she had seen him, he was walking away from her into the crowd of bustling Hamra Street. Now, she thought, he will be coming towards me.

He arrived thirty minutes later in a luxury car two years out of date. The passenger window was down and he stopped, simply stopped, right in the middle of the street just to beckon her aboard. They drove through Beirut, he navigating traffic and she studying every detail of his car for potential significance.

“Where do you want to go?”

She hesitated a moment. “I don’t know.”

“Wherever you want to go,” he said with a practiced smile, “we’ll go there.”

And there they went. To restaurants and bars, to souks and museums, to wherever she wanted to go. They would meet like this once every week or so, just two people having a good time in Beirut.

But that was, in a way, the difficulty with their relationship—what was their relationship? Meeting and talking often meant they were friends, but their conversation and posture pointed towards something more. He wanted more, but she was... unsure.

Yes, he was handsome. Yes, he was successful. Yes, he acted like a proper gentleman and treated her as ladylike as she wanted. He was, in many ways, the perfect man that she had constructed in her mind. But she was just a girl, a young woman that knew that what he wanted and what was good for her were two separate things entirely.

They dawdled on that murky line between friends and lovers. They would go on what could best be described as loveless dates, excursions that offered perfect opportunities for intimacy that never evolved.

During a tram ride in Hraissa, they sat side-by-side with the sides of their hands touching. She wanted to move those extra few centimeters, to gently place her palm in his, but she didn’t.

On a couch in De Prague, the music and ambience of the bar proved too loud for casual conversation. He leaned in to whisper in her ear and, for just a moment, she had wanted to lean in too so that she could softly touch his lips with hers.

While watching a movie at his place, she grew tired and yawned. Her head listed towards him and his shoulder and his chest and his lap, but she had moved to a more comfortable pillow instead.

As a man with a heart more than three decades old, he could sense these moments and the romantic implications of them. Were he a younger man (or with a wilier girl) he would have been the one to make the move, to force the complications of the situation. But with his age and experience came a wisdom

that was far more potent than any action taken. He knew that when it came to a young budding woman as headstrong and innocent as she, she would have to be the one to make things clear.

Their situation came to a decisive point nearly nine months from their first meeting. She had been out with friends when he texted her, out of the blue and late at night, asking if she wanted to come over. She wavered at first, knowing the implications of such a late-night rendezvous.

“For what exactly?” she replied.

“A movie.”

“It’s kind of late...”

“You can stay the night if you want.”

Odd, she thought. That could mean a friendly sleepover or a more intimate stay. Her friends told her it was likely the latter, that she was not the type of girl to accept such a promiscuous invitation. But she could not picture him as the type of man to hold such base motives. She resolved to herself that his intentions were nothing but honorable as that was the only sort of man she involved herself with. She arrived just after midnight with pajamas in her purse and a hesitant but optimistic smile on her face. He was the perfect friend, with popcorn already cooked and blankets spread on the couch. They watched *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (a favorite of hers) and snuggled close to one another in the warm glow of the television. She was quiet, hardly focusing on the movie but rather on the complexity of the situation at hand. At first, she steeled herself against any possible advances of his. She was determined to remain a chaste and upright woman.

But then, amidst the combination of ice cream and Audrey

Hepburn, her thoughts began to change. She saw the ease with which Holly Golightly took to the arms of an attractive, more mature man and began to wonder what she would do in the same situation. Her analytical mind approached the problem with the tools of societal convention and universal ethics, but they construed an answer too strong and unfeeling. Instead, she imagined the emotions one feels in love, the effect a passionate romance has on the heart and soul. And so she reached the determination that she, a young woman with an aching loneliness, would take to the affections of an older but respectable (and certainly handsome) gentleman. She kissed him and he kissed back and the night was both long and over much too quickly.

And so they dated, officially now, as young girlfriend and fashionably mature boyfriend. He bought her presents and took her to fancy places, showering her with the wealth and charm that he knew would please any girl he wanted. And she accepted them eagerly, seeing them not as thinly-veiled attempts at fulfilling long overdue lust but rather as the chivalrous acts of an affectionate gentleman. Their relationship was slow and halting due to two specific reasons: the first was his admittedly packed schedule, one that allowed time for a date only twice or thrice a month. Even the base essential of communication was hampered, her texts and calls answered, if at all, with significant delay. Though she could never pry from him exactly what he was doing or where he was at such-and-such a time, she chalked it up as one of the consequences of living a life as adult and serious as his was. The second reason was that she, though now surrendered to the whims of her heart and the steady advances of his, was still cautious. Though she was not experienced *per se* in the meandering rooms and twisting hallways of romantic love, she knew well enough that to move too fast was surely the wrong thing to do. Instead she was coy, granting kisses long before caresses and sticking to a

well-defined timetable of allowable physical intimacy. This girl, though young and unknowing, was not one to fall for the lecherous advances of the rougher sex.

While she bid her body to stay, she let her heart take flight. She let her emotions run unbounded and fast towards the image she held of him. He was pedestaled in her eyes, a man who could not be questioned because his morals were of the strongest persuasion—that of courtly love. She saw him as the suitor she had dreamed of and waited for since the first buds of love had blossomed within her. Here was the man she would, with the greatest joy possible, one day marry and bear children to.

“I love you,” she whispered one day, her head resting gently on his chest.

“Hmm?”

“I love you,” she said again, more loudly and with confidence. He looked down at her, his eyes searching in hers for something unnamable. There was a heavy moment between them, her ears straining for the words his lips could not make. He kissed her, hard but lovingly, and she took that as the answer she wanted.

They spent a year like this, their relationship progressing steadily but slowly. And yet, for all their dates and kisses, she felt as if she was still just a little girl looking in on his life through a dark and dirty window. No matter how close she got to him, he still remained, to a small but certain extent, a stranger. She tried not to blame him, for the fault could not lie with the man she loved. This led her to a natural conclusion, the only one she could let her mind make: he was tiring of her. How could she, a polite little college student, possibly keep hold of the heart of a man as great as he? She knew she had to do something particular, something that would convince him of how important her presence was, something that

would make it impossible for him not to love her as surely and indubitably as she loved him.

And so she gave herself to him one cold and rainy night in the middle of winter’s doldrums. He took her eagerly, wantonly, embracing her with the passion of a man plagued, for far too long, by thirst. This was the point past which she could no longer consider herself innocent or young. The society she lived in placed a taboo upon the highest level of intimacy—a fact that told her she was a woman now, emotionally and physically. She wasn’t quite sure what that meant. In some ways she could feel the differences that love had given her, the aspects in which their relationship had changed her. But, then again, she still felt much the same as she had before, as a girl who was sure of her place in the world but knew that meant little in actuality.

They were lovers now, and with it came a clash of his desired regularity and obedience with her fledgling uncertainty and clumsiness. He was patient at first, understanding of her situation and somewhat overjoyed at her submission. But at times his frustration would show and he would act rashly, violently. It was never at her directly but always near her and about her. She tried to understand this change of attitude. She thought that he would be happy now that she had given herself to him fully, wholly, and she sought to improve his image of her any way she could. And yet his actions showed otherwise.

She was one month late. He wouldn’t answer her calls or texts no matter how clearly she explained the situation. She wondered why he was doing this, why he would ignore her when she needed him the most. Is this how you treat someone you love? Tears were the only answer to the questions that plagued her mind. Her course of action was uncertain and the man it concerned the most was, by choice, nowhere in sight.

When her miscarriage came, she greeted it with a heavy but happy heart, flushing away the problem of her unborn child like a peeled grape.

It was only then that he appeared again. He had no excuse for his absence, but only gratitude for her having taken care of the unpleasant situation. This, she could not deny, was simply unforgivable. She yelled at him and beat upon his chest with balled fists, telling him that never again would he hold her. But he grabbed her tight and whispered into her ear and she wilted against him in submission.

She hated him then, but her love was still stronger. Even though she knew that he did not love her and that she was simply a young-enough girl for him, she could not stay away. And so they slowly worked themselves back into the haphazard pace of their relationship, one of a strong man that pulled and a fresh pretty girl that came.

As a means of escape, she would fantasize of their future together. They would marry in the Bekaa, both families supportive and celebratory and dancing the debkeh until dawn. A lavish sea-view apartment in Verdun would be their happy home, both husband and wife working high-powered careers of importance. Until, of course, she became pregnant with the first of their two children, Ghady and Farah, and raised them as the gorgeous homemaker with the loving, perfect husband. And they would grow old together, bound tight by love until they capped their long and fulfilling life with a simultaneous (and therefore romantic) death.

But no matter how elaborate her fantasies, they could not change the reality of the situation. The errors of the image she held of him were too apparent now to be ignored or patched. And he had grown tired of her, now that he had gotten all that he had wanted. She was no longer an innocent lamb in his eyes but rather a nagging

nuisance.

“Please, stay,” she begged late one night as he rustled from the bed.

“What?”

“Stay with me and hold me—you never do.”

He stopped, and turned, his face contorted with disgust. “I don’t need this.” He spat it out and she cowered in the sheets. “I can have sex with someone that doesn’t complain, you know that?”

And then he left, leaving her alone to cry herself to sleep on the bed from which he had run. He wasn’t there in the morning and only answered her frantic calls with a single text:

“I am not at home—let yourself out.”

But she knew he was sleeping in the spare bedroom, only a few meters away but across a chasm of emotional distance. She gathered her things and left with the small amount of dignity she could muster.

From then on, he would neither respond to her attempts to contact him nor provide any outreaches of his own. At first she consoled herself with the belief that it was just a fight. Yes, they had had those before, but never one so serious, one which ended with her glimpsing beyond his finely formed facade. But as the days after turned into weeks after, she began to see that this was his way of stepping away from her. It was over. She tried to refute it, to tell herself that he would call her at any moment now and stop her tears from falling. All she could do was grieve over what she had lost, over the man to whom she had given her heart but would not return it.

Depression became her solace and she grew to embrace its smothering darkness. She came to know that simply walking by his building would be enough to send her into the horrible comfort of heartache. That to keep on her desk the only flower he ever gave her, long wilted but still beautiful, would save her from forgetting the emotions she felt when with him. And that in the moment just before sleep, when the room begins to slide and her brain slurs and she knows the quiet comfiness of slumber approaches like a muffled shadow, is when she best remembers the tangible specifics. She can smell his hair, her nose gently tickled by it. She can feel his rough skin unrolling beneath a gentle fingertip. She can count the rhythm of his breaths with her body nestled so close in his. And she can kiss, ever so gently and lovingly, the slight wrinkles of his brow. In that moment, her memories of him are so vivid that she forgets the pain of sleeping alone. And then, only then, does she sleep.

* * *

Moira

-Joshua Cross

It seems the sun no longer shines these days, our bright glowing star has overstayed its welcome in this little universe and burnt out. The nights drawl on forever, and nature slowly withers in this unending darkness. Supplies of food are dwindling and those in power have a tight grip on the throat of humanity. Who are these people? They dress uniformly and advocate a new god called Moira, cultists for the lack of a nicer word. They call this great tragedy 'The Emergence,' the supposed rising of their apparent god, no doubt.

Rising from my makeshift shelter, I was assailed by darkness. I had constructed it last night, or at least the time I thought was last night. Until recently, I was taking shelter in Potsdam, Germany, a place that has been scarcely occupied by cultists until now. The cult expands like a parasite, seeking monopoly over all. People are afraid and so become initiates, or as I like to call them, puppets. They are currently based in Berlin, and campfire stories have told of a huge abyss opening up in the centre of the city. These tales coupled with the soon to be lack of safety anywhere pushes me to venture out. I've been travelling alone, setting up camp off the roads and praying nobody notices. Cannibalism isn't uncommon; desperation, lack of food and a strong sense of survival have toppled morality nicely.

More of these campfire tales say that nobody who ventures out has returned sane. Many simply don't come back at all. These mad returnees ramble about the earth, singing songs to Them and to an unfathomable evil, something so awe inspiring that to speak of it would be too painful to bear. When questioned about where this thing came from the doomsayers often look toward the stars and tremble. One went as far as to

say it was brought down from the heavens to bring the long overdue rapture into realisation. Fools' tales if I had ever heard any. But even if I were to perish or be driven insane, I can't escape the intrigue. I have to find out what sent these men mad.

I am tired after a long day's walk and I need to find a place to rest a few hours. Not far now, one more day at most. Coming through a thick group of dead trees I spotted a rundown farm house, two stories tall. My immediate goal was to reach it safely—most people would just rob you blind if you were lucky. A quick check of the immediate surroundings showed no signs of activity and the house looked deserted. I unslung and loaded my rifle, double-checked my surroundings and ran. Even the earth was becoming unfriendly in these black times, I thought, when pain surged up my feet as the hard earth struck me through my worn soles.

Inside the house, I rested. The paint on the walls was peeling badly and the odour of death lingered. Anyone's presence would simply have to be dealt with. I locked the door behind me and proceeded to check the bottom floor for any signs of life. The fridge hung wide open, its stench of mould assaulting me, the mould devoured any remnants of food. It was safe to say nobody actively inhabited this place. I was relieved but did not allow myself to relax. One piece of bread was definitely not a source of information to rely on.

I locked all doors on the bottom floor and moved back to the stairwell. As I ascended a groan clawed at my ears, it was if the weathered wood was crying out to me, begging to be burnt so that it might escape the cruel earth's malice. With any luck I could find a room that offered a suitable vantage upon the open land in front of the house. After shortly reviewing the above rooms for an escape route, I settled by the window in an old bedroom and ate the last of my rations.

A loud thud woke me; someone had forced the downstairs door open and I overheard whoever it was conversing.

“It looks like another one has wandered in...” It was a female voice.

“It certainly seems that way, this would be a lot easier with three of us.”

“Quiet, we do it quickly, no bloodshed like last time.”

Pushing my back to the wall, I readied myself for confrontation. I aimed my rifle, ready to take out whoever walked through the doorway.

The stairs began their painful groaning again, they were close now. I saw a flutter of red robes as the phantasmal cultists wisped into the room. I fired, but my reaction was too slow, they had appeared much faster than expected. Surrounded, any resistance now would end up as suicide. I bent down to rest my gun on the floor and was met with a boot to the head. Slipping out consciousness, I caught a glimpse of a star-shaped insignia on the cultists' robes.

I came to my senses, unarmed and unguarded, in a dark room. Granite walls encased me and the only exit was through a thin arch. I ventured out into a long hallway and again there was only a single route to follow. The hall expanded into a cavern of gargantuan proportion, and as I closed in on this, it almost seemed as if the walls were humming to me. At the foot of the cavern, I was finally able to identify the sound: it was a cult's insane chant, atonal and arrhythmic, like some sort of avant-garde masterpiece. Nausea gripped me as I emerged into the subterranean cave. The floor became a steep depression

and I couldn't help but accelerate as I stumbled towards the cult.

Wading through the ranks of deranged cultists, they were completely absorbed in their mad chant. Nearing the centre, I almost collapsed out of total awe. So this was the Great Moira, this writhing monolith of the stars, globular and masked in tentacles, sucking the life out of the earth around it. The chant slowed and my nausea subsided. From the sea of red, a single cultist in a white robe turned to me, presumably a leader. He grinned as I was raised towards the rapidly opening fissure on the nightmarish Moira. In the split second before I was devoured, a wave of realisation came over me. I knew exactly what the Great Moira was...an egg.

* * *

Altar Boy and the "New" Church

-Rick Fowler

I became an obedient altar boy in the early part of the sixties. My first attendance as an altar boy was in Latin by a priest who seemed to act, rather than serve, the mass. This parish head would quickly get through the ritual and then retire to the sacristy without much fanfare or dialogue with my 'patent' wielding partner or me. Within a year of serving my inaugural mass, there had been an upheaval during Vatican II, and within a very short time I was now on the altar and doing far less than I had originally been trained to do and listening to the priest bless us in English. "What an outrage", many in the religious sect would soon be declaring. "It's sacrilegious!" my own grandparents declared. "Imagine saying a mass in English. What if people understand everything the priest is saying?" Indeed, it seems to me now, what would we Catholics have done without "Mea culpa, Mea culpa, Mea Maxamea Culpa" to recite before receiving the 'body and blood'?

I was only eight years old, but I knew something was about to shake up the moral fiber of the Catholic tradition of mass for the lost sheep. Yet, even with this new renaissance filtering down through the myriad of dioceses, those who wielded the power in my Catholic community remained steadfast that those who sought heaven still needed to fear God. As a student in a Catholic school, I was expected to attend mass more than just on Sundays. I also needed one religious class per day to understand why God did love me and why the Bible was the living truth. However, I was not expected to question any aspect of these teachings. Nevertheless, one afternoon I asked Sister Margaret how the Virgin Mary could conceive a child without the proper method of delivery. I was told it was just another of God's miracles and not to question "Our Father's goodness!" Enough said about that subject, in

other words.

I remember as a high school sophomore sitting in Father Tom's religious education class. On this day, it was only for boys, because it was 'sex talk' day. He purposefully and patiently approached the manner of fornication and premarital sex with all the proper nuances. When the subject of masturbation was on the table, he buffeted the claims of, "you will grow hair on your palms," and, "it will make you go blind," with honest though nervous rhetoric about how God would not keep you out of heaven for such a venial sin, but individual pleasures were still a sin and that we might have to wait in Purgatory before we enter heaven. A hand went up. "Father, isn't Purgatory just a made up place so it will keep us in line? I mean, is Purgatory like Customs at the airports and we need to get strip-searched before we enter?" The response back was something to the effect that, "young man, if you think that this is a laughing matter—think again. I would expect to hear you repent in the confessional for your almost blasphemous remarks."

For reasons unknown to us, Father Tom was replaced by a younger, hipper friar two weeks later. Though he too referenced all the proper biblical entries, he sought questions from his rebellious audience. Yet we were still dismayed as to how controlled he seemed to be from the church. However, within three years, this Savior Of Souls would be married to a young lady who graduated the same year from the high school to which the young former priest had been assigned—mine

Now this embarrassment was truly fodder for the rebellious fold. Needless to say, what remained of my spiritualistic venue was replaced by scorn, satire and a new system of beliefs: that is, had we been duped by our religious leaders for these many years with a pervasive and perpetual theory that, in actuality, had no merit?

Looking back, I never realized how much power the Catholic

Church had on my family, my school, my demeanor. My questions were seldom answered with look-you-in-the-eye answers. That was not (and still isn't) going to happen: heaven forbid any attempt to adjust the rote lifestyle of hundreds of years of practice by obedient but powerful religious figures who remain dangerously steadfast in their biblical bailiwicks.

* * *

I Must Be Dreaming

-TerraByte

He saw it all in his sleep. He would tell me over and over. I'd just drink my tea or close my eyes and let him go on.

It begins with him struggling in a soupy, muddy sinkhole somewhere in a prairie field at night. And everywhere, the storm. Lightning and thunder fill the sky up then empty it, and the rain scratches at his face, freezing.

He struggles to the lip of the sinkhole, slipping in the mud around it, and his body splays out in this wide, painful arc. I'd close my eyes and picture it and feel sorry for him.

He slowly comes to his feet, all around him the storm. Grime on his strong face, really cursing it all, and he shouted, right in my house, as if the storm was in there: "*Poshel na khui, suka, blyad!*" Swears, dear.

From the empty sky, out leaps a slash of brilliant white, and he's collapsed into the sinkhole, and his body is just a smoldering husk. He says he knows he's dead as the sinkhole swallows him up. He sees it from an outsider's perspective.

Every night. It would about break my heart. But what could I say?

He would cry before bed. I refused to hold him like a baby; the Sven I married would never have that.

Oh, yes. Barrel-chested and strong. All bloody workhorses or intellectuals in Russia, and guess which camp Sven held the flag for. Proud, you know—*retevi, velekolopni*—it's in his blood. You know

how the Inuit have thirteen words for snow? Russian has fifteen for pride.

His family farmed through the Communist rule. The Terror. He needed to pitch in—they needed to eat—and even though he was only six, Sven was expected to take care of his newborn brother, Christopher, sometimes for days at a time, as the rest of the family left the farm for town. It gave him mettle. About the only thing on earth that could have killed him would have been that bolt, sent straight from *Boh*.

It always depresses me to think of it. I loved Sven, you understand.

Christopher wore glasses and knew about wine, and always held a spirit untarnished by responsibility or optimism. A true and Russian intellect. He was the youngest of his family. Proud, but in another way, different from his brother—*nadmenii*. Aloof, haughty. He spoke of books he had read and the flow of his thick Russian accent drained to a trickle during his studies in Canada.

Sadness, in their culture, reaches almost as far as pride. There are, I believe, twelve words for sadness in Russian. Christopher was *hrustni*—you know, melancholy.

I met Christopher the first night I met Sven: everyone gathered at the town hall for the newcomers. We fashion communities like that, it's important in the prairies. You never know when knowing a neighbour will save your life; the winters are awful, gray stretches. Christopher and I never spoke then, or saw each other again, until mine and Sven's wedding. But he slouched against the bar and watched the Russian dancers, as if he'd rather be somewhere else than his own brother's wedding.

It was two years later when Sven's dreams drove me to ask for Christopher's advice.

He didn't seem surprised to see me, and I was soon in his warm living room in the glow of his fireplace with a short glass of port he had picked out. He seemed unconcerned about Sven. I don't think we spoke for long.

Sven had went to Terraceville and—are you familiar with a wonderful little song, “Baby, It's Cold Outside” by Frank Loesser and Lynn Garland? Christopher put that on as we sat on his carpet in front of the fire. It was the sweetest port I had ever tasted.

The night after Sven died, we didn't talk much, we only drank port in front of his fire. His warm home, his wine, everything felt suddenly foreign. Staring into the fire, he asked me: “Do you think, in death, one sees all?”

I said I don't know.

“Sven knows.”

We stayed up for an hour longer, staring at the fire.

I woke in the middle of the night to the sound of Christopher screaming. I rubbed his auburn hair. He woke up and told me that he had a nightmare.

I needed to eat. I couldn't take care of the farm—couldn't live on it by myself—and so he would come there, or I would go there. He brought me food, you understand. Nobody ever thought anything of it. He was Sven's brother.

Everything in my body hummed when I answered his call. I had a feeling like I was falling backwards, into darkness.

So I told him I was busy. It was New Year's Eve, after all.

On New Year's Eve, I always dressed in my best white dress. I went to the pub. But then Christopher walked in. He wanted to take me somewhere. We left together in his car.

He told me about his nightmare. I really did worry for him.

In his dream, him and I speed through the country on a dirt road. There's that beautiful song, “Baby, it's cold outside.” It's snowing. Christopher and I approach Macaney, the narrow timber truss bridge. There's a semi rounding the corner on the other side. He speeds up. He flicks the windshield wipers off. I watch snowflakes pile up like white ash. He's showing me his dreams and I look out my window to the snow-capped trees speeding by and close my eyes.

* * *

Elegy for an Emperor

-Thomas Beaver

The room is stifling hot. Behind me a full orchestra is performing Chopin's *Grand Valse Brilliante*. My mind wanders back to a painting in the lobby. An emperor robed in red and gold, crowning himself before God and country...

Dancers cover the floor before me like so many painted mannequins; one in particular keeps trying to catch my eye. She's wearing a pastel-colored formal dress and her faux-blonde hair is in an elaborate up-do. She doesn't interest me. Nor does her fat miser-husband of a dance partner, nor the sweaty, nervous conductor behind me, nor even does the brilliant Chopin. My mind is a thousand miles and a few years away.

-
Our new catamaran cuts across the choppy, turbulent waters of the Narragansett. It's freezing outside, and there's a frost-bitten wind buffeting the two of us. I'd much preferred to have spent your birthday at some five-star in Providence, but you love to sail. And to me the warmth of your hand in mine justifies a day of algid, uncomfortable wetness.

You're standing now at the prow with one hand on the rail and the other clutching the silk scarf I bought for you in Selçuk. It's struggling to break free, flapping out behind you like the standard of a charging flag bearer. Your nose is chafed and raw from the cold, but there's a playful fire crackling behind your eyes.

-
"Pardonnez-moi monsieur; voulez-vous danser?" The blonde is smiling at me. Over the elegant curve of her neckline I can see the miser, flustered and frustrated, waddling toward the open bar. Perhaps he is not her husband. I don the most superficial of grins with a very American-sounding "mais ouais" and lead her out onto the floor.

She's got artificially tiny pores and her nose has been fixed. Her perfume is cheap and gaudy, full of sin. Everything about her belies a jaded and sickly soul, of the sort so common amongst the fashionable and bourgeois.

-
You never had that look, not while I knew you. Haufmann told me he saw you two weeks ago in D.C. and you looked broken. I didn't believe him. If ever there was a human being who triumphed in her spirit it was you. How else could you revive a tired old anachronism like me?

-
The tart in the pastel-colored dress is telling me about her job. I swirl the stirrer about in my vodka tonic and give the concoction a taste. They didn't add a double shot like I asked, I notice with a frown. The bar tender must have misunderstood me. Perhaps my French is not so good anymore. The tart's pouty, painted lips move rapidly and unintelligibly. Over her left shoulder bottles of liquor adorn the varnished mahogany. There's something disconcerting there. The gaudy labels form a bleak contrast with the earthy, natural wood, as does a train cutting through an otherwise beautiful landscape, or a steel Bauhaus monstrosity emerging from the ground like an unnatural growth.

Baudelaire came face to face with modernity a hundred and fifty years ago and despaired. What would he do if he found himself transported to this very moment in time? Would he look at the bottles with their flashy manufactured labels, see the men and women wearing half-hearted smiles and talking of nothing and everything, and stride out of the room full of fury and disgust? And when he opened the door to the street and stepped outside, when he was faced with the lights and advertisements of the Champs-Élysées, what then? How can a poetic and "*trop chrétien*" soul cope with the horror of a world

forged in postmodernism and relativism, cast in materialism and immediacy?

The blond looks irritated. “Quoi, Cherie? J’admiraais les bouteilles,” I say as I hold her gaze. She giggles and returns my more-than-friendly stare. The irritation must have been an act. “You speak French zo well,” she manages in an almost cute drawl. “Et toi aussi,” and I wink. She giggles again.

You’ve got my copy of The Judgment on your lap. There are runny mascara stains marring your pretty face and a bottle lies by your limp hand. Why don’t I go to you? Why do I stand and do nothing? I watched as you leapt over the railing into the churning water of your past. I let you drown in it.

The worn leather of the Arab’s taxi is sticking uncomfortably to my leg. Paris is far too hot in the summer. Multicolored lights streak past and bathe the tart’s face in a shower of opalescence. Her eyes are sparkling falsely. She speaks a few times and I ignore her.

I’m trudging toward the breakers in a trance.

I can hear myself giving directions to the Arab. “Non, tournez à gauche, et après...”

A rip tide is dragging me by the heels across the floor of a silent sea, out to the unknown depths of madness. I’m whirling through an empty void and clutching at my throat. I can’t breathe. I’m opening and closing my eyes, as if to banish the delirium, but I can’t for the life of me stop myself.

In the hotel elevator she puts my hand over her breast and kisses me.

Your laughter is echoing from wall to wall in my mind. There’s dementia in your look. I need to escape, but I don’t want to. I want to

hold you in a melancholy embrace beneath the waves. I want to be shackled to the bottom of the ocean with you for eternity, while your sickening laughter fills my lungs.

I flip her over, onto her back. The sheets are slick with sweat. Over the bed David’s emperor points forward from the saddle of a rearing steed. Behind him artillery is unlimbered, and the Old Guard trudges toward the Alps.

Blucher’s Prussians are arriving en masse. William of Orange bolsters your lines. You’ve won.

“I’m sorry!” I scream with unchecked terror, pushing the woman away and rolling over onto my back. “God, convict me!” I shout to the One who emanates perfection, lingering somewhere beyond that low ceiling. She scrambles out of bed, clutching the sheets about her to hide her nakedness. She finally has nothing to say. “Mon Dieu, please! Let me wither in peace...”

Somewhere in the distance a door opens and closes. I’m sobbing on the damp mattress. Into the soiled fabric I breathe a muffled “Joséphine...” as an image springs unbidden to my mind—a catamaran bearing an amorous, mutually-enthralled couple, wrapped in the heavy heat of some tropical paradise, as the setting sun, casting a long and languorous shadow behind the happy two, forms the centerpiece for a heart-stopping crépuscule.

* * *

POETRY

Immune Blues

-Damean Graves

This love train tried
to stop before the crash,
but no matter how we'd ride
it always ended in a smash.

—Anxious panic.

We plagued our love pains
with lovely pained plans.

And we began
to lose interest,

And when did we end this?

Forgot when we quit this.

Was it I that quit us?

Or you?

And that couldn't have been all we knew. . .

And when did

forget-me-nots become fuck you?

I recall I wrote some letters,

heaven never sent,

through sanguine eyes,

marked with ink stained cries.

And that's how it went.

And why now do I see everything
in shadowed hues?

And now, how I hope for something,
that may break through.

Just some light. . .

Have overcast skies

darkened out our better times?

Or am I hoping for something in nothing

when in the end I know
there was nothing at all.

And I've lost myself to childish rhymes.
Devolved into this love dead neophyte.
Writing poetry just to feel like I'm alive.
Now only living for my lonesome life.
Make a note it's the only way to live
if you want to stay alone.

And when did I give
you up to ink and pin,
and pretty words on petty pages
—A grey on grey syringe?
With all those
fluid filled immune blues.

And time had passed
strange for us
Well, strange for me.
Other people went and came,
watching,
—so jealous,
never knowing what lay beneath.
What we had
may have only been
skin deep.
And they'd be there watching,
staying for the coffee,
leaving when we served the tea.
And when did summer fall into winter?
And had we always been this frigid?
Have I?
It doesn't make a difference.

What we had made me
what I have become,
color blinded.
Can't pretend I fight it.
Maybe I like it.
Colors grey in my
indifferent eyes.
And you ask,
“You know how long it's been?”
But I roll over,
knowing you're not there
and it was only me asking
and questioning
and thinking.

Closing my eyes now
strangling, settling sleep
and it's so close,
yet we are so far away,
and dreams will come soon.
And I wonder,
“Have I always been,
calling curses the cause,
when it might have been
me all along?”

twelve ounce with an extra shot of Pseudophedrine

-JD Ferguson

We met only once, at the Citgo station on State Street,
Where the man with the mustache sold me cigarettes,
And where your debt card declined for your dollar-five coffee.

I watched you dig through your purse, looking for something
With dilated pupils, something else to pay with, something that we all knew
Wasn't there. The line behind you grew and my heart rate quickened.

You looked beautiful. Your hair straightened and draped around your
Pale face. You wore the scabs on your neck and forehead stylish,
Like red, dry accessories to your skinny jeans and black boots.

I bought you your coffee, expecting your world to change.
What kindness, I thought, a stranger had shown you.
What chivalry, and sheer, unabated love I must have for tragedy.

I knew what you were. I could almost smell the amphetamines
On your breath after your "Thank you, I really needed the coffee today."
But I wanted it regardless. You, I thought, could change.

I wanted to find your parents and hear what they thought of your
New life. I wanted to tell them what I did for you, that me, a stranger, showed you
Unconditional kindness. I wanted to tell them that I saved you.

I dreamt about you, that on the Capital steps we met.
I dreamt that I held you in my arms and whispered that everything was going to be ok.
I dreamt that I knew what it was like to be inside of Hell.

You told me that beneath your skin ran veins of fire, flowing with
Lipids and proteins meticulously crafted to march a victory parade
With balloons and trumpets that only broadcast at Thanksgiving

As I ran my hands over your scars and sores, flames began to dance from your
Eyes. Your skin wrapped itself tighter until it split and tore and from your
Exposed shoulder blades, you grew wings.

I wonder now if you ever dreamt about me. If you thought about my naive,
Inviting arms, waiting and aching to hold and protect, to steal you away
From darkness.

Night

-Man and Echo

I heard the coal-train's broken roar.
I saw it pass the crooked spire,
the garage roofs, the pubs and bars
long into dusk and night.

I saw the birches' pale forms
half-gone in orange lamplight,
and likewise hid the stars,
that ancient fading ground,
from this firmament of cars.

When dawn rolls out as freezer-fog,
aglow in sulphur lamps,
I'd rather train-song woke me first,
and the crying birds be shooed;
where birds will flap and shriek
when their nests are chopped to wood,
machines move on with dignity
when their parts are done and used.
Was nature any good?
Or does my mind build garage roofs
where a crooked spire stood?

Woolf

-Man and Echo

I

On those sandstone steps,
where Woolf once sat and cried,
we talked down bottomless wells
into the night,

II

And his wordwater gurgled forth, all erratic and strange;
minerals of memory and imagination mixed,
earth and thought, into a flavour too rich to taste in full.
"It's a wood cabin," he said and rocked.

I said "What's a wood cabin?" but he just rocked
on the steps of the sandstone mansion,
the dark innards of his well trying to reveal
themselves all at once.
"What's a wood cabin, Andrew?"

III

He rocked.

"I just remember it."

Untitled

-Michael Stanley

The dull and unlettered mind silence does suit
Those with penchant for specious sophism, too
Yet in whose thought ideas have not found root
They with brazen didacticisms ensue
Oh, the foolishness we shall accrue!
Less amusing than pernicious, yea
How shall we these knots begin to undo?
We must at first commit to change our way;
Too often people speak before they've aught to say.

I Wish on a Wrinkle

-Paulo Tiongson

The youth is dilute,

faded, marsh green thin water-

misted sweat as a spray painted mask;

on the face sour-grimmed with black lips.

The mouth's far corners, now twitched down

as bent paper edges on books unread,

the crease forms to melt his brow-

It's closing now, this ghostly town.

i gcogar

-Rory O'Connor

The river Boyne flows in its still and reverential silence by the
lit bank of a Celtic summer morning.

Its path sternly separating the vivaciousness of a glorious green
meadow from the thick treeline of deciduous sentinels.

Tips of tamed grass and furbelow flora offer their dew, dazzling
in the light of their rising lord.

Light sears the grateful audience and shews this shrine; or
aperture to a vast and deceptive forest of pathetic
emotion to memories long forgotten and lost by man.

In its infinite deathly consensus the sprites and tales continue
existing relentless; while whispering wraiths wander
wreathed altars to Pan; encased in regal vines reserving
the ethereal law of the land.

Watchers in the Rahan wood conceal their ancient lore under
the brindle sea of low leaf litter bearing memories of
fauns and frabjous fables seldom spoken by those who
listened late to the ululations of unknown spectres
singing of solemn virtues never visited.

The ophidian aegis curls, caresses and camouflages the mystery
contained, conserving it for those pre-ordained kings
and queens of unfeigned, unreigned and abstained;
lands.

Afterword

Seven stories and seven poems.

Although this has been one of the most internationally diverse issues yet, and despite the promising nature of the content, the editors have opted out of awarding TAR's prize for literary excellence for this issue. We were gently surprised by all the submissions made within the past month, but ultimately felt that we should withhold awarding one of the submissions over the others. This should not be a discouraging thing for our contributors; foregoing a prize winner does not mean we aren't serious about rewarding remarkable works; we're dead serious about that. We encourage all who write for TAR (and also those who are considering writing for TAR) to strive for excellence. TAR itself endures and learns through critique, and our writers should be no different.

There are definite moments of greatness within this issue, so we know our writers and readers have it in them. Hone your talents, bolster your confidences, and write. We're in it with you and for you, so work hard on your submissions and we'll work hard to get it out there.

Credits & Information

Submit your writing, comments, and whatever else to:
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Website: <http://theaprilreader.org>

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Prole !XDERDXUpqQ

Wildweasal !FvTu.n1ohA

Special Thanks to the Anonymous artist who designed our logo, our Authors, and everyone who took the time to download TAR

And now for an informative word from Wildweasal on copyright:

Copyright law in the United States states that when you write or create any work, you as the creator of this work, possess ownership of this work at the time of its creation. When you submit something to The April Reader, you still retain the copyright to the work, and you still own what you have submitted. By emailing your work to TAR you are simply giving TAR permission to host this work on our Internet server. There is never a point in time at which TAR becomes the owner of your work and you will always own the work that you have submitted.

See you next issue,

-TAR