



MARCH ISSUE /
COLLECTION twelve

TAR

12

A LITERARY REVIEW JOURNAL

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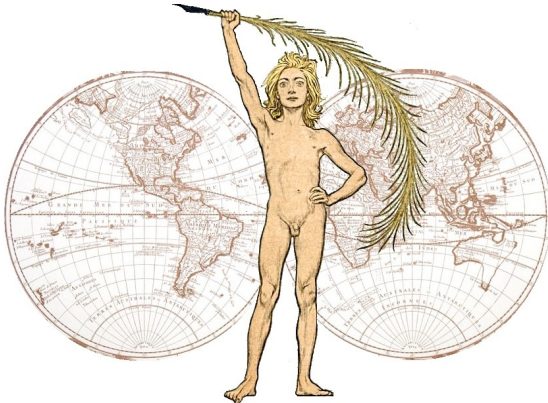
PREFACE

The April Reader is a monthly publication of poetry, prose, and user-submitted content. It was conceived as a successor 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

Our IRC Channel:
Server: irc.freenode.net Room: #TAR

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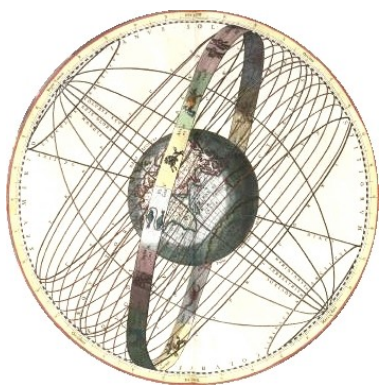
EDITORIAL

Prole, founding figure of The April Reader, has decided to leave our literary journal as of this issue. His impressive abilities of endurance and inspiration as an editor and colleague lead us to believe that he will succeed with whatever project he will be taking up next. The current editors thank him for a short but inspiring time of working together on this sparkling piece of internet excellence, The April Reader!

Starting with this issue, we're introducing a poetry prize of \$10, as a symbolic gesture of heartfelt recognition that we hope to make less symbolic and more substantial in the future. Directly related to this issue is a new element on our website, theaprilreader.org: the "Donate" button. Responding to readers' suggestions, we have decided that everything donated through that button will flow into a writers' prize fund (not in Nigeria), which, in turn, will augment the sums we can pay to winning authors.

We're particularly thankful to Maja-Lisa Kehlet Hansen (joodlz.deviantart.com, kehlet.tumblr.com) from Denmark for providing this issue's cover artwork. A notice for writers: The April Reader is much in need of essays, in order to continue an intellectual tradition that started already with the first issue of TAR. Send us your latest thoughts, the best of your texts - and please, don't hesitate!

TAR Editorial Staff.



FICTION

ROMANS 16:18

by *Anonymous*

We set out to get to the church half an hour early, but it's almost one by the time we do. Mary sits in the passenger seat smoking one of her cheap hand-rolled cigarettes that shed tobacco all over the place. It's late November and she doesn't like the cold, so we wait for the line of people to start shuffling down into the basement before we get out of the car.

Mary complains about being hungry. I don't feel hungry, though I haven't eaten anything she hasn't. We got there early enough that the line's not so bad. In front of us, there is a friend of Mary's brother who she talks to for a minute, to be polite. In front of him is a family trying on the donated clothes. The father puts on a Hawaiian shirt and another shirt over that, followed by a brown suit jacket. His skinny chicken of a kid says, "Yeah, now you look like you have a job!" and everyone laughs a little, even me and Mary.

The father and the wife or girlfriend talk about how the jacket would be great for an upcoming court appearance, and she folds it into her bag as he takes the clothes off. They're just getting him into a plus-size blue and white polka dot dress when the guy in charge comes out of the kitchen to tell us the menu and when seconds will be available. No one really quiets down while he's talking. He tries to start the prayer and one of the coal throated women barks for everyone to shut up. Most of us bow our heads

and a few say the words.

When it's over, Mary looks from the family and the man in the polka dot dress to me and says, "How disrespectful." I say it's not a big deal and we don't talk again until we're at the front of the line, picking up our plates. She's examining hers real close, picking at the dirty spots. I tell her to stop it and we get out food, being very polite and gracious. We sit down just in front of the serving station. Mary goes to get our drinks like she always does. I start eating my green beans and I feel self-conscious about putting my elbow on the table. I don't look up from my plate until Mary and I are almost finished eating. She eats a bit faster than me on account of being so much hungrier. An elderly couple sits down—the woman beside me, and her husband across from her.

They say at the same time that the food is good today. There is a pause and she asks him, "What was that, honey?" And he—I see him from the corner of my eye—draws up a lot of air into himself and says it a bit louder this time. She agrees with him and we all eat in silence for a little while longer. Mary finishes before me and says she'd like to have dessert because she is still hungry, and she asks me if I want any pecan pie. I say no.

While she's gone, the elderly man tells his wife he feels sick again, and she makes a cooing sound as he excuses himself to throw up. Mary comes back with a piece of pie for me anyway.

I eat some of it but leave most of it for her. The elderly man comes back with a nice pumpkin spice muffin for his wife and a piece of blueberry pie for himself. After being sick, he smells like

old cottage cheese. His wife calls him Alphonse when she thanks him for the muffin and asks him if he's all right now. I tell Mary I'll wait for her in the car. She stays for a little while longer to get seconds and a few more desserts, because she is still hungry.

THE STONE IN THE FIELD

by Eastlern

Winner of the TAR award

A farmer was tilling his field before planting corn when his tractor jerked to a stop. The farmer, grumbling, shut off the engine and walked round the machine to look at the tiller. It was tilted to one side and bent round a tooth that was caught by something under the the soil. He removed the tiller, knelt to see where the tooth had been stuck, and started to dig with his hands. A few inches under the surface was the tip of a stone which he guessed was not so large that it couldn't be loosened and removed with a shovel.

He scooped out the dirt concealing the rock and piled it up round the hole he had made. Soon it was clear that the rock was larger than he'd thought, so he found a shovel and began heaving clods of dark soil out of the ground. The girth of the rock continued to grow as he continued to remove the soil.

When he was too tired to dig anymore, he heard the dinner bell ringing and realized he'd spent the whole afternoon digging up the rock. He threw the shovel into the pile of soil that now

threatened to fall back in the hole and he went in the house to eat.

In the evening he scribbled ideas for removing the rock and was so wrapped up in his schemes that he fell asleep at the table. He couldn't remember the last time he'd encountered a problem that was so fun to worry over.

The following day he consulted a friend with the rockiest patch in the county, to ask what method he'd use to remove the rock. "Well," his friend said, sucking his teeth and snapping the straps of his overalls. "The ground I'm on doesn't have one large rock so much as it has lots of small ones. You can't till an inch without hitting something but you can sure as heck go through it. I never found a rock I couldn't drive through but let's have a look and we'll see what I recommend."

They went to the rock in the field and the farmer's friend circled its hole and said, "Hmm." He rubbed his chin and said, "That is in fact the largest rock I ever seen. It's not late yet though and I'll bet if we used my equipment we could have it dug out before dark." The farmer agreed and offered to pay for the trouble. His friend refused: "I'm curious enough to do it myself." They dug until evening, piling the dirt onto a new larger mound. They revealed several feet more of the rock on each side. "You better talk to someone who specializes in this sort of thing," was the final advice.

A landscaper came to the field in the morning, to survey the rock and see what could be done. He sounded the depth of the rock using long boring poles before scratching his head and saying, "I don't think there's much I could do. It's too large for

me to know how to move. You might have to break it to pieces to start. I know a firm that does demolition and I'll bet they could split this rock without any trouble."

By then the farmer was worried he might miss the chance to plant. After counting what little savings he had, he decided he could neither pay for the removal, nor wait to plant any longer. He told this to the firm's manager, who was so impressed by the farmer's rock that he thought of a way he could help. "We can help with the expense," the manager told the farmer. "There's a quarry nearby that can take the pieces of rock we remove. That will help offset the cost of the project." The farmer was satisfied but told him he couldn't delay planting and determined a section of field where the manager's firm could work. The farmer gave him authority over that part of the field while he tilled in the space that remained.

News of the rock spread quickly and curious neighbors appeared at the site to watch the firm's people at work. They pounded the rock there for days, with harder and harder bits and increasingly powerful tools. One morning, the farmer's wife bounced out of bed, shaken by boring machines. The farmer burst into the manager's office and demanded he find less destructive methods. The manager grumbled and concluded the farmer should seek scientific means, as the rock was too large to split and too hard to bore for explosives. Then his men packed up equipment and tore up the field in their wake.

Some time later, the farmer was fertilizing the part of his field he'd managed to plant when a boy flagged him down to tell him his college had heard of the rock. "I've determined it's an unnatural type," the student said with some awe. "The

department would love to help find a sensible means for its removal.” The farmer, who had already resigned the loss of the field near the rock, told the student he could have the whole site to himself, as long as he planned to remove it.

The student, with some of his peers and a professor, built tents round the hole containing the rock. For days they revealed deeper and wider expanses of stone using spades and stiff brushes. They lunched quietly under their tents and discussed the joy of their find.

The farmer, who was used to the noise of construction, was relieved by their nature and hardly noticed their presence. The summer wore on and he cared for his corn and took pictures with people from neighboring states. They’d come to see the mysterious rock that defied all attempts at removal.

The crowd, which had previously stayed at the edge of the farm, soon spilled into the yard, occasionally surprising the farmer at home when he found visitors chatting at dinner. His wife was too kind to deny a place to a stranger and took pity on all who would come.

A new rule was soon instituted: visitors were to be confined to the yard. The farmer’s wife reacted by laying sheets on the chicken crates inside the shed and hanging drapes on the windows, which were warped by decades of weather. She even convinced him to bring in a stove so the guests would be warm after sundown.

With the throng came a priest who asked for permission to erect a tent of his own near the growing site of the hole. The tents that belonged to the students were by then grouped on one

side because the site had grown so large. “There is plenty of room,” the priest argued. “And we are so small.” He pinched two fingers for emphasis. The farmer consented with hardly a thought, wanting only to prepare for the harvest.

The priest brought hundreds of his closest supporters, who raised a brilliant white tent in short time. They held worship the day it was staked and every morning that followed. Each service presented a new metaphor, always about the great rock. The whole congregation was moved to tears daily by the rock's silent resistance to all understanding.

In only a few weeks, the county grocer was overwhelmed, exhausted by hours of neighborly chats and the unending stream of hungry people. He began closing the store before noon and hired a guard to remove stubborn shoppers who couldn't be convinced to get out. Visitors began to pick ears of unripe corn from the field and when he heard about this, the farmer asked the students and churchgoers to keep watch day and night. When he couldn't convince them to take leave of the rock, he opened a stand where the visitors happily paid outrageous prices for bushels of immature corn.

With the harvest in motion and the corn almost gone, the farmer was worried that the people might stage an invasion to rummage his home for some food. He voiced his concerns to the farmers he knew and, fearing the danger themselves, they made up a plan to break up the crowd and be rid of the pilgrims.

In one dozen tractors, raising their plows, they threatened to crush and bury the tents if the grounds weren't deserted by sundown. The visitors pleaded by telling the farmer the rock was

a treasure that belonged to the people at large. “Its importance is greater than that of any claim to its ownership,” one woman said as she hung rope from the trees for her laundry.

Cries came from the students, who turned up their noses and chained themselves to their tents. They claimed that the rock was essential to the causes of natural science. “It would be shameful,” one said, “for the farmer to stop us, just as we’re on the verge of a breakthrough.” His classmates agreed as they lounged in the yard and recorded the shapes of the clouds.

The priest threatened the farmer with divine retribution. To him, the rock embodied a thing of eternal significance. Denying his followers access would be, the priest claimed, like denying the farmer's connection to the almighty power that placed the great rock in his field. His followers, meanwhile, were too busy crunching their corn to witness this impassioned speech.

Tensions increased till the farmer, shivering on his rumbling seat, saw the edge of the sun slip past the horizon and put his puttering machine into gear. The eyes of the farmers who idled beside him were secretly desperate to avoid any violence. The farmer, who had reservations himself, found an answer as he leered at the source of the trouble.

With a chug and a grind, he turned away from the tents and lurched slowly around the shaking but resolute people. His companions followed nervously at first but were emboldened by the farmer's intent. When he reached the pile of dirt that lay near the edge of the hole, he lowered the plow of his tractor and with a mechanical growl and a dark plume of smoke, pushed several tons of soil past the desperate eyes of the people, back in

the hole where it came from.

He waited for some kind of reaction but the people were too shocked to act. They stared at each other with shared disbelief. The other tractors then joined, forcing the soil back into the hole and burying the markers, measuring sticks, and idols the people had placed. In just a few moments they managed to shrink the enormous rock to a tiny grey stone.

For a moment, nobody spoke. Then, the priest cursed the farmer and his followers wailed. The students pounded their fists on the tractors and the people who'd come began to grow hungry and leave. When those who remained had regained their calm, the farmer stepped down from his tractor and helped them bring down the tents.

By morning there was nobody left and the farmer's companions returned to their homes. The farmer alone walked the rows of his field, gathering garbage and surveying the damage the people had caused. In the debris he found one thing he decided to keep: the photo of a boy at a long picnic table, enjoying the season's only ripe ear of corn.

When the time came to plant again, the farmer barricaded his home and got the county to close down the one road that led to the farm. He staked out a space round the rock that was three by three feet and tilled the rows of his field. When he got to the space containing the rock, he simply went around it. At market that year, the neighbors agreed that he had produced the sweetest corn in the county.

LOVE'S DROWSINESS STILL LASTS

by Elli Wallis

You're not going to knock me out and take the car are you?"

"Not if you don't rape and murder me."

A couple seconds of The Fugs. Hain scratches his stubbled throat.

"You don't mind if I smoke?"

"No sir."

"Get in."

The kid opens the door and closes it before his seat can moan. Hain throws his arm out the window to signal his merging with the open road and flashes the kid a dusk of a smile. "So, you got a name, kid?"

"Rimbaud." Hain laughs.

“Sommes-nous assez de damnés, flo.”

The kid stares out his window.

“Look at you; you’re what, seventeen?” A little more nothing. Hain scratches, then skips to the next track.

“Figures. Arty Rimbaud himself gets in my Civic and I go and offend him.”

“Sorry.”

“Nothing to apologize for. Not your fault I’m literate.” He signals again, this time to pass a lone lumbering truck.

“Though, je suis sûr que you don’t speak français, am I right?”

“You from here?”

“New York. I teach at Cornell. Taught.”

“I thought professors were well-off.”

“This car’s been a faithful companion for twenty years kid. Could you change the CD, they’re in the glove box.”

“To what?”

“I don’t care.”

Arty thumbs through the cases then exchanges discs silently.

Hain fingers an empty pack of smokes, then sighs. “Gorgeous evening.” The sun is a sinking point of flame straight ahead.

Arty nods. He picks up the plush owl from its nestle in the corner of the windshield.

“What’s your subject?”

“Political science.”

“Sounds awful.”

“There’s a reason I’m on a highway with clothes in my trunk and nothing to look at but barns and corn.” He laughs. “I’ve never liked corn.”

“Me either.”

“Is that why you’re running from it?”

“No.”

“Girl troubles?”

Arty puts the owl back.

“Boy troubles?”

“I’m not gay.”

“Could have fooled me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Hey, I don’t judge. Maybe you have your Pauly somewhere.”

“I hope not.”

Hain laughs again. They sit silent and listen as the sun dies before them. After only a few moments of glowing darkness a spark appears on the humped horizon. It grows then splits into headlights as it passes. He glances at Arty’s nodding head and quietens Floyd. They crest the hump and a handful of buildings spring up, a beaconsed Stillman Service Station at their front. He cruises down into the lot and parks beside the sole pump.

“You want anything?”

A snore. He gets out of the car and walks to the station. A commanding bleat stops him a foot from the door. He looks around. The buzz of neon, a distant hoot, stillness. He enters the station. The bell rings sleepily; past one of two small, hardy laurels flanking the door, he can see the attendant dreaming on his desk.

Sympathy and ceiling-to-floor shelves entice him and he wanders to the far aisle. He finds it lined with potted trees and shrubs, each economical but robust to the point of growing back into empty shelves. Stooping to pass under the odd wayward branch, he walks through them. The muzak is familiar, almost like a bound and muffled 60’s ballad, but not. He emerges from the brush to face an assortment of candy and chocolate. Reese’s Pieces and Smarties and he moves on. The next three aisles are barren, while the candy stops and gives way to refrigerated dairy. An old man is still, staring into the fridge a few aisles away. Hain watches him not move.

“You okay?” He moves closer. “Sir, are you okay?”

“What’s that?”

“You’re staring at goat yogurt, I’m just making sure you’re okay.”

“Staring.” A dry leaf laugh. He turns and walks right up to Hain, cane sprawling before him. It knocks Hain’s foot and he stops. His left eye is milky; Hain stares into the black of the other socket.

“So you’re okay?”

“A beauty eh? Does it bother you?”

“No.”

“I know it does. I used to see the looks, before the other abandoned me.”

“Farming accident?”

“Speak up.”

“You lost it in a farming accident?”

“No, no, it was far from here and these hicks. A beauty done by the beautiful; my wife, oh how she was beautiful, a daughter of the sun who lights the world. We were happy and beautiful in our own little world; our grove of walnuts and willows, our polished stone home with no neighbours nor strangers nor callers but our pigs in their sties. We lived, we loved, she weaving, I shucking, we making love in the kitchen, cooking bacon on the fire. We fed on each other as we did the vegetable garden; dirty and bare to the sun. It was wonderful and wonderfully quiet, till the day of the whore from the wood.

“She wandered in while I was shovelling slop. I watched her stumble from the trees, torn and filthy, I watched her fall to the grass, I watched blood trickle from her shoulder into the earth. Eternities passed while I jumped the pen and ran to hold her in my arms. She was not there, so I carried her to the house, driven fast by the faint beat of her chest. My wife screamed when she saw us but I left her to her questioning while I laid the girl in our tub, removed her dying clothes and drew steaming water over her perky pale body. I washed her, I cleaned her, I dressed her wound and I carried her soft sleeping body to our bed. My wife

damned her, certain she was some lost soul from the city, the streets, the crystal dens and strange hells. She damned me too for caring, and locked herself in the attic, alone with her loom, alone to talk to God.

“I did not talk to God, just as I did not sleep. For six days and six nights I cared for the girl, not hearing the sullen hymns that seeped down through the walls, but only the stirring, shallow breath. I kept her warm, I sponged her, I carefully poured water past her sleeping tongue; but by the seventh day, it was for naught. I fell asleep watching her sleep, and once I awoke, her breath had stopped. I wept, then. I wept winged weepings that took flight and stormed hopelessly around our room, our new morgue.

“It was then that my wife came down, a hot, gorged smile on her lips and a long forgotten revolver in her hand. Ranting about penance, mercy and righteous vengeance, she promised to rid me of my tainted sight, to cleanse my mind of imagined soullessness. She fired lovingly and her selfless bullet pierced my eye. She screamed joyfully as I ran, jubilant of my salvation, expectant of an embrace. I ran out without looking back nor looking forward, running through the woods on the heat of my fiery eye.

“I think that God appreciates silence, because I made it to a stretch of highway before collapsing in sleep. I woke up in an ambulance, alive, with his blinding eye looking down on me.” He clears his throat. “That is how I lost my eye.”

“Jesus. *Drôle de ménage.*”

“Jesus has helped me survive. Even down here in this strange, flat heaven.”

“There’s a hill just outside.”

“What?” The man brings his cane down on Hain’s foot.

“Fuck!”

“Who are you to say that?”

Hain hobbles around and away from the man.

“Nobody, you crazy old fuck.”

“Well fuck you too, Nobody.”

Hain slowly makes it to the service desk. The attendant is standing up now, if dazedly.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.” Hain puts the packages on the desk and fishes a twenty from his jeans. “A pack of Pall Malls too, please.” The attendant rings it up and gives Hain the wrong change. Hain takes his stuff and makes the bell chirp and the invisible goat bleat. Arty watches him walk to the car. Hain throws him the Reese’s Pieces after opening the door.

“What took you so long?”

“You were asleep.”

“But I’m not.”

Hain opens his pack and brings a cigarette to his mouth.

“I am allergic to peanuts though.”

Hain passes his Smarties, grabs his lighter from the cup-holder and lights up. He smokes while Arty fiddles with his package. He

starts the car and turns up the volume when A Saucerful of Secrets begins.

“Where do you want to go again?”

“Anywhere.”

Hain pulls out onto the road without signalling and drives into the night.

Before long, Arty falls asleep again. The album ends and begins anew. Hain finishes his smoke and throws it out the window. No cars pass. The sky begins to glow. They slow and stop.

“My wife will wait.”

Arty hums something in his sleep. With a burning patience, Hain does a u-turn and drives back east. The handful of buildings and the service station are visible under the rosy fingers of dawn.

Arty wakes up and mumbles something.

“What?”

“I said, where are we going.”

Before Hain can say anything there’s a grey flash and thunk on the windshield that leaves a reddened smash.

“The fuck was that?”

Without answering, Hain stops the car and gets out. He walks back and stares down at the twisted owl, its wine-dark blood pooling on the asphalt.

THE CURSE OF MEDUSA

by Jan Wieszorek

Bold shafts of testosterone flashed from fist to gut. The boy was unburied, and his silver coffin was in sight at the base of the church steps when it broke out. From around the corner the loudest shouts ever—accusing, defending, and witnessing. A woman cried and yelled. Two men dragged her away, down the block, where she fell on her knees, no longer able to move or understand.

No English or Spanish. Not of a language. Such were the sounds. The voices of rage and unknowing have always had their own speech.

The men held each other in tight brutality. Chest pounding and the pull of hands wrenched the mourning factions, one from the other. Someone thought Paul Jay shouldn't have been there, like it was his fault for the boy's death. And that's how it ended at the funeral mass for the boy in the silver coffin.

Injustice and thug defiance permeated the room. But here we are, in the minutes before. In a church, large and sunny, with as many greens, blues, and reds as you can imagine shining through the January windows. Conversely, the mourners wore black—

black suits and ties, black coats, and the darkest faces.

The nineteen-year-old boy should not have been there. But gang members flashed their signs in the early a.m., and one of them trained a gun on the boy. The shot blasted the rear window of the car, entered his head, and put him in the silver coffin. I stood there in shock like I had been pushed into the middle of it all. But I was down the block, across the street, and over by the school. Nowhere near the trauma of fists, but from my distance I was right there in the fight, and had no language to tell you. Mouths agape, eyes downcast, brows creased to accent the confusion. Teeth stained from coffee and hair tangled upon itself in a setting for horror.

The brother was a bearded mess. His hair was alive and it squirmed. He tried to hold back and stuck in short breaths at the microphone. Like something was wrong with his breathing function. Like someone punched him, or he fell on a flight of stairs and it hit him in the solar plexus. He breathed and tried to breathe.

Try this yourself: Attempt a breath, and know in that breath that it is impossible for you to breathe. As hard as you try, the breath fails you, and it fails to arrive in time to save you. You stab at what had been easy, but now is impossible. That's what it felt like for the mourners in that church. Like they had been turned to stone. Everyone tried to breathe, but just couldn't. Maybe like the boy had tried to live, but couldn't because he happened to be in the wrong neighborhood.

But the neighborhood where it all happened was filthy. You'd walk down the street and notice how dirty the sidewalk was,

with posters and tape bits on windows and smudges on the glass. In its day the buildings were respectable and office-like. Not today. More like social service agencies that cater to special needs and can't keep up with the foot traffic.

I ran into Tom in real estate and he said he hated walking these streets. Koreans and Somalis. Maybe gang members who were already successful and ordinary families who were trying to make a go of it.

Some refugees from Africa learned how to speak English at the nearby aid society in the neighborhood. These women would sit on their long gowns right on the sidewalk. They would plop themselves right where they stood, except they didn't stand but sat. Right on the curb. They did what they were told to do. They took their children to the library and tried to write the English alphabet, their heart wasn't in it.

One shy woman in a gold gown wrote with a pencil and bent her head low. Her eyes spoke for her, and she had the corners of her lids bent down and the rigid lines on her face rested on the horizontal. She did speak a word or two at the end of my time with her. I have never seen a face turn as bright in a moment's reflection. All of the hours she spent in the attempt to write were put aside. She had taken her first step of courage, and used an English word, spoken, to do it. Proud and smiling while sitting on the curb and letting the bus dust and exhaust dirty her new word. The friends applauded and laughed like they had just witnessed a class act in the theatre.

And these were the same people who resided in the neighborhood of the killing.

This boy who died in that neighborhood was all about humor, too, right? He was the one who always had a laugh, who made others smile. He was the mischievous one in the classroom. He would rather goof around than do any group work. He meant no harm. He was the fun guy and the laugh man taken from us.

We find balance between the misery that won't go away and the hugs that we fear will. It takes sorting out.

He couldn't sort out this drive-up window, though, huh? He was in the Toyota Echo with Paul Jay, and the pizza place didn't deliver at 1:45 a.m. It was closed. They were both hungry on a Friday night. They got into their Toyota and drove over to the drive up to get some food. Out of the blue this medusa face walks between the windows—between the drive up and the car.

She was white and scary as hell, a perfect bitch. Paul Jay said so, and she was proud to agree. She was delighted that he picked right up on that. Her friends sat on the curb, just like the Somali ladies, and grinned, afraid to do anything more.

The boy thought back to the first time he had seen such a face. It was in Florence that the boy saw the Medusa face for the first time, with the hair of squirming snakes. He nearly knocked her over—the circular Medusa portrait on an ancient shield—in the Caravaggio Room at The Uffizi. One or two steps back and he plowed into her sitting there on a stand. Only he and Paul Jay were in the small gallery filled with Caravaggio masterpieces. For a few precious moments it was the boy and Paul Jay, and Medusa all together in a gallery's hush.

She rested in a field of black and floated as a daydream, or a nightmare. The image moved forth from out of the pitch, and she

scared him. Not only by her looks but also by his ill treatment of her. If he had backed up one more step and had put some real force into it, Caravaggio's artistry would have fallen on a marble floor. He would have been famous. He would have made the newspapers for destroying the priceless Caravaggio. Perhaps. But he did rock her. His shoulder tapped her into life. What was dark and sleeping had become awakened. Now he had done it. He brought her into his existence, and it would come to no good.

Of course, nothing happened, thank God. Nothing happened right then, of course. The guard was nowhere to be seen; no alarm sounded. Nothing shattered; no life was taken and no creativity destroyed. The ancient shield was intact, but the image was now awake in his life. Once brought to life, when would it enter his psyche and wound him? Did the museum's Peeping Tom catch him in the act? He wondered if he was on camera. There was a camera at the drive-up window, though.

"No," he said and shook his head at her, cranking up the window, because it is possible to die in the early a.m. in Chicago, in that neighborhood.

"You mean you're not even going to buy something for me to eat?" she said.

"No."

"Even if I give you the money?" she asked again. It was no question that drooled from her mouth—only insistence.

She turned the entire situation around on its head. He was the hard ass for not ordering her French fries from his car window to the window of the dark little man off the kitchen by the cash register. She was even willing to give him the money so he didn't

have to pay. She turned it all around. It was his fault. It was no longer a matter of being safe, but of him being uncharitable. Miss Medusa couldn't order at the drive up. She would have had to be inside a car to do that. But he wasn't about to go back on his no. She backed off and his young blood pressure raced. He grabbed his change and drove off. Two blocks later his breathing was back to normal. Paul Jay knew what had happened, though. "We didn't get the food," he said. It was the food Paul Jay and he had ordered that was forgotten in the midst of a Medusa in his face.

The boy drove around the block and pulled into the same drive in. She was still there, laughing her writhing head off when she saw them. He grabbed the bag from the window man. He had the bag in his hand this time, and he left with it. Someone else could get her freaking fries.

She knew she had won, even with no food in her big mouth. After the exchange with Medusa, he and Paul Jay drove into the neighborhood to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. That's where they met the gang that flashed their signs and shot through the back window, leaving the boy dead and putting him in a silver coffin. Signs that flashed in the quiet night of the quick or the dead.

Those signs are like faces that get you down. The faces at a funeral home, for example. Take a look at those faces, the friends of the boy. Like they were saying to you, "Who the hell are you? What right do you have to be here? You aren't nineteen. You aren't a friend. You never were. So why are you here now? Did you know the family? Not like we knew them. We never saw you before." Like a Medusa face with snarling snakes telling me to

leave.

The mourners entered the darkness and looked at the eyes of this she-devil Medusa. Couldn't they find a way to keep their own hatred out of it? Shouldn't they have tried to be civil in the presence of the dead? Did their own vulgarity have to show itself before the boy was even buried?

"That's the way it sometimes happens at a time like this," one of the mourners said. "Sometimes the worst comes out in people."

He wasn't the worst of persons, this boy. This was the boy who was a laugh riot. The one who had a shorts contest in the dead of winter and won as he stood in the snow. Standing in their boxers, he had to be the victor. How he would have opened his mouth and then barred his teeth, letting the snakes of his shaved head stand out black against the winter white. He was a white face and remains one. White in his innocence and white in his death. Hot white. The boy will be remembered. Against that, Medusa's curse doesn't have much of a chance of winning out in the long run.

Postscript: This boy did make the papers after all. The AP news-wire listed him as the first Chicagooan dead in the New Year.

THE HEAT AND THE DARK

by Nicholas Cocklin

Amie and Kaitlin walked barefoot on the grass between the footpath and the road, where there was just enough room to walk side-by-side. Every few minutes they were bathed in, then blinded by, the headlights of a late-night straggler on the way home.

“I don't think I'm going to those gatherings anymore,” said Kaitlin, “it's stopped being fun.”

“Never really was. I don't know why we went.”

“Got to go somewhere.”

Amie shrugged in the dark, only half-visible to Kaitlin.

It was almost unbearably hot, the girls sticking to the grass to avoid the radiating hot-plates of the road and the concrete path, still searing at midnight from a full day of freakish heat. The radio had spoken of exhausted firefighters all over the state, but there wasn't a spark within 50 kilometers of their small satellite town.

“It feels like we were out so long. The night's not even half-way through,” said Amie, checking the time on her phone.

“It was too long. I never really think of how long the night actually is. We just sleep through it.”

“Time is just what you remember.”

“Yeah,” Kaitlin murmured, turning it over in her mind. The two girls kept walking, the passing cars growing more sparse with every minute. Before long they stepped off the main road to cut through the unbuilt estate, a skeleton of roads and driveways leading to nothing but high weeds and piles of dirt.

“I'm scared,” whispered Kaitlin. She was blond and willowy and half a foot taller than her red-headed friend.

“We come through here all the time,” said Amie, instinctively whispering to match her friend.

“It looks like a ghost town that hasn't been built yet, at night.”

“Hold my hand.”

The girls lifted their bare brown feet high to avoid dandelions and tufts of grass, the link their hands made stretching and slackening as they maneuvered, leading each other.

“I was never afraid of the dark,” said Amie, “I used to wander off when I was little and go to the darkest places I could find. I'd end up under the house or in the thick bushes in the neighbor's garden. It stopped when my parents found me in a dumpster though, it took them hours. They were furious.”

“That's disgusting.”

“I don't know if the dumpster was dirty, maybe it was new or

clean or something. I just remember that it was dark.”

“The dark scares me, right down to my stomach. I don't know why, that kind of primal fear I guess.”

“That lizards and lobsters and cows feel, on the way to —”

“I don't want to think about it.”

Amie paused mid-step. “Me neither.”

Meeting the series of puddles which counted as a creek, they turned and followed the dry bank, single file but still hand-in-hand, which would lead them directly to their road. At their road they would part and sneak back into their respective houses and fall asleep no more than a hundred meters from each other. They stepped softly and skillfully by the creek, remembering every dip and root and rabbit hole by heart despite the near-perfect dark. The moon was high but no more than a sliver of silver against the sky.

“If you're scared of the dark,” Amie asked at last, “what do you see when you close your eyes?”

“Nothing?”

“Yeah, but what sort of nothing?”

“What?”

Amie took a moment. “I mean, is it like a huge empty space or a wall right in front of your eyes? Is it dark?”

Kaitlin tugged on Amie's hand to slow down while she thought.

“Um. Kind of a wall. But closer than right in front of my eyes. It's like it skips my eyes altogether, like it's right in my head. It's

more than dark.”

They kept walking, a lone streetlight illuminating the intersection where the creek slid under the road, steadily approaching the cold light from the heat of the dark.

“I want to show you something,” said Amie. “You have to trust me though.”

“I do.”

“Okay.”

Instead of walking up the embankment from the creek and into the light, Amie led Kaitlin by the hand into the dry creek-bed until they stood at the mouth of the meter-and-a-half high pipe that, when there was water, allowed the creek to bypass the road.

“Oh god, no way,” hissed Kaitlin urgently.

“It's fine, I promise. I'll walk ahead. Don't let go, please.”

Amie felt Kaitlin tremble as they began, hunched into the pitch black. The pipe curved so that at its midpoint neither end was visible. Kaitlin took small, hesitant steps. Amie brushed a few cobwebs out of her hair but said nothing. They could feel the cool damp concrete on their bare soles.

“Here,” said Amie, stopping halfway.

“I can't see anything.”

“Exactly.”

The girls crouched with their backs curved to fit the pipe's rounded sides. Their breath, Amie's deep and slow and Kaitlin's

sparse and shallow, was the closest thing to sound.

“It's dark,” said Amie.

“I can see that.”

“Yeah, but it's just as dark as having your eyes closed, except different.”

“Yeah.”

They were both still whispering.

“When I say, close your eyes.”

Kaitlin took a sharp breath. “Okay,” she replied unevenly.

“Okay?”

“Okay,” steadier.

“Don't worry. Face me,” whispered Amie.

“You'll close yours too?”

“Yeah, I will too.”

“Hold my other hand too.”

Kaitlin breathed out slowly. “Okay. Ready.”

“Alright. Three, two, one.”

ME MAM

by Barrie Darke

I reckon, thinking back, me mam knew she would never be thin, even though she talked about it happening one day. All the clothes you couldn't wear, she would say. She had a total horror of being fat, but she could just about put up with being big. Every day she used to exercise, except for Wednesdays and Sundays—that way it was like having two weekends, she said. She would wear this old football top and shorts, (we didn't know which team it was, one from Scotland,) and make room on the floor of the flat. It didn't matter if she'd been out till late the night before and was all achy and knackered. I'd help her move the couch around and tie her hair back with an elastic band.

'Howay, kidda,' she'd say, swinging her arms to warm up, 'let's get a move on.'

She'd start off with stretching exercises, which I did as well, then some press-ups – she could do one-arm press-ups, which I definitely couldn't – then some sit-ups and some squat thrusts. She would press her back against the wall and sit against it like on an imaginary chair. She would sweat in her face, get it all sparkly like the frost on paths that looks like it's hovering above the paths, if you know what I mean. When she saw I was looking at that, she'd grin and go, 'Gettin a sweat on, am Ah?' It was one of those grins, if you didn't grin back you must've been half-dead

or something. She'd keep on going for a long time after I had to give up, tired out.

Then she'd sit on the floor next to iz, against the couch, never on it, getting her breath back for a bit, before she'd get up again and do stuff with these clanking old dumb-bells she'd had from before I was born. I could just about pick one of them up with both hands, but then I would have this disgusting oily smell on me fingers all the rest of the day and it wasn't worth it. But she was like a machine or something, a robot off Doctor Who, nothing could stop her once she got going. She spent her whole life counting up to 50, it seemed like to me. Above her head, arms out like wings, non-stop straightforward curls – the world could end and she wouldn't notice. Some people going past outside might have a look in through the window, and you could tell they thought a woman doing this must be off her rocker. Didn't bother her one bit.

I'd sit watching her, and I thought she was great. Working as hard as that, being that good at something – I just thought it was excellent. She'd sweat the worst then, making damp patches like a tree on the back of the football top. Then, when she was finished she'd sit back down next to iz again, though not too close in a jokey way because of the stink.

'It's murder keepin in condition, Josie,' she'd say, putting her head back and closing her eyes and breathing hard. 'Ah'm nee bairn any more, that's for sure.' After a while she'd have a shower and get changed. Most women thought about their weight, but not like she had to. She wouldn't let herself get heavy like some of the others. Heavy was the enemy of strong, she said.

I remember once, when we went to a bout in Manchester, Kerri, this younger lass, went past us where we were at the tables outside, going through to the bar for a lemonade or something, swinging her bag with her stuff in it, really tall and big but still with a woman's shape. Me mam hadn't had hardly anything to eat all day, and she was tired-looking, and a bit dazed-looking as well. She sat watching this Kerri with a funny look on her face, watched her all the way into the bar. I went, 'What's the matter, mam?' thinking Kerri must've given her a dirty look or flicked her the V's or something. Me mam just said, 'Oh, bugger it,' then went in to get changed.

It might've been all right, really, if we'd stayed on in Liverpool and she'd kept up with the bouts there and in Manchester. The bouts were fairly easy, there wasn't a huge amount of competition. 'These lasses are a bit lazy,' she said. 'They gan on the drink too much as well when they've got money, and they're not as good at all that as us Geordie lasses are, Josie. That's what does it. The wrong kind of late nights. By the time most of them've worked that oot, it's far too late.'

There was a pub in way out in Manchester, the Fisherman, that I liked the best. It had great old-fashioned pictures on the wall. But me mam said it was a right pain, getting there and back to Liverpool all the time. She never liked a train ride after a bout.

I was mental for seeing the other lasses as well, I have to admit. When they came out to the ring, through the crowds, slapping their hands away and shouting and bawling back at them with the best insults you've ever heard—there wasn't a bloke in the place who would last two seconds against them. The

other lasses all knew iz, and I would get glasses of coke and packets of crisps and a good seat to see what was going on when it was me mam's bout. The referees always looked tiny next to the lasses, and they were always baldy as well, and just generally funny-looking little men. Even the ring looked great, before they got in it, the mud all smooth and shining in the lights. Then, when they started, it was fascinating, the technical stuff which I knew a little bit about, the holds that worked on which lasses and the ones that didn't. The throws were the best, though—the brainbuster, the atomic drop, the backbreaker. I was sure they used to do it so the mud splatters were aimed at certain men, the ones shouting the stupidest things. Anyway, I couldn't get enough of it, me.

But me mam said once, just out of the shower, still in her towel, 'These lasses aren't wrestlers, Josie. They'd eat them up and spit the bones oot in London.' This was when she'd just won a bout against Lorna, a really scary lass with the hardest face ever. Me mam beat her in five minutes, got her with the full nelson bulldog, left her face down in the clartz trying to heave herself up.

It wasn't long after absolutely killing Lorna like that that we left Liverpool. Me mam and this lass Holly, and this other lass I didn't know the name of but who was big and sweaty even in normal clothes on a cool day, were arguing about something in a café in the Dingle. They were keeping their voices down, but I could tell it was the two of them against her. Eventually me mam stopped saying anything, just sat there and looked at Holly while them two kept making their mouths go. The big sweaty cow one was always talking over the top of Holly.

‘Go and get iz the Mirror, will y’, Josie?’ me mam asked, handing over the coppers without looking away from Holly.

So I went off up the road and got the paper, then went back. I was going to keep out the way this time, and me mam was looking down now, stirring her spoon in her tea and not even drinking it, with Holly and the sweaty cow standing up and shaking their heads at her. I had to go over, though, and me mam just pretended they weren’t even there and said, ‘Y’ fancy an iced finger, Josie?’ Holly looked right down at her, and she said, pronouncing every word, ‘You, dozy, bitch.’ Then they went out, knocking the tables as they went.

Me mam sat there and tried giving iz a smile, but she’d gone all pale and looked like she might spew up everywhere. I was the same, to be honest, and a bit scared as well since I wasn’t used to things like that going on outside the ring. I didn’t know how anyone could get away with talking to her like that. She opened the paper, looked at the TV pages for a bit, then said, ‘There’s aal sorts of things y’ have to put up with in life, Josie.’ Three days later, it was ta-ra Liverpool. She sold all the stuff in the flat to the other lasses and anyone who wanted it. We just had our suitcases and her weights.

We got to London quite late in the night, and got straight on the tube and all that. It was filthy dirty, that was the thing that got me. I expected London to be shining all the way through, but it definitely wasn’t. It was massive as well, even just the bits of it we saw, so that it must’ve been impossible to just get straight to somewhere from somewhere like you could in Liverpool. I knew it would be crowded like stupid, but I didn’t expect everything would be moving so fast. You don’t know where you’re going,

but you have to rush forward anyway. Sometimes you would look round and think, God, they should just tear this up and start again. But I soon got used to it, so much that soon nowhere else could be the same—you'd always think you were missing out by not being there, even if when you got there you just stayed in and watched the telly. I didn't get to know it that well at first. We went into the main city part of it a couple of times a week. Me mam knew her way around a bit, knew a few of the lasses there. But it was always strange, to me, that somewhere as big as London didn't have a pub as good as the Fisherman had been.

Anyway, we ended up living in Bethnal Green, in Tower Hamlets, which was where a few of the lasses lived. It was in a tower block, 15 storeys, not the 3 storey one we'd been in in Liverpool. We were on the 11th floor, and the first night I could hardly sleep for looking out at the lights and the headlights of cars going somewhere even in the middle of the night. In the day you could see patches of green, woods and stuff, but there was no point even trying to find them outside on the ground. It was still a fantastic place to live, though, it has to be said. I soon got in with a few other kids, and we used to roam the streets, be gone for hours, doing a bit of shoplifting, playing Knocky Nine Doors (which they called Knock Down Ginger, which made iz wet meself). This old white-haired bloke with big teeth, looked like a rabbit or something, came after us once, chased us into the road and nearly got run over himself. It was a good laugh in Bethnal Green, it really was. I even started picking up the accent and the rhyming slang. I was taking the mickey a bit, but I really liked it all the same.

The minute we got to Bethnal Green, me mam asked some of

the lasses, and phoned up some of the ones in Liverpool, to see if they could put in a good word for her on the circuit. She was a bit up a height, waiting to see if she would get any bouts. She used to meet up with the other lasses, some she knew from the old days in Newcastle and Scotland, in cafés and pubs round Tower Hamlets. When you train in the morning and have the bouts at night, there's no end of time for sitting round. She didn't drink much, though, not like some of the younger ones—she could make one drink last for hours. Mostly they just gabbed on, talked about this and that wrestler, what the crowds were like in these places. It was busy, but it kind of wasn't as friendly as Liverpool had been.

Eventually she started getting bouts, but we had to go to places like Hackney and Barking for them, or across the river to Wandsworth and Southwark, in these rubbish little pubs where the ring sometimes was just a massive paddling pool and some of the lasses would probably try the vaginal claw, which is illegal. Everyone thought me mam was very canny, though. She made friends easy and bought drinks for the lasses, but us Geordies are generally more generous, as she said. She took iz to see some bouts in the bigger places, which meant I couldn't play with the lasses in the street, but that was all right. I still loved to see the bouts, and you saw some great ones down there, some great attacks like lariat takedown and the standing moonsault. The ideas you could pick up from what they did, it was amazing.

Once, we went to Southwark to see one, a big night, a few big bouts on. A couple of lasses meant to be really good in there as well. It wasn't a pub, it was a hall, that's how popular it was. The ring was much bigger, the mud much deeper and shinier. I'd

never seen anything like the lasses parading round, getting ready, warming up. The way they walked, not like usual women, but not like men either—like people think. Big women can move really daintily when they want to—I bet they would be good dancers in the disco. Some of them were even pretty, they made you tingle inside a bit. Needless to say, it was packed out by the blokes, all drinking and smoking and super-serious expressions. Blokes take sport much more seriously than even the most serious women do, it's just something in them, I reckon. They looked like they were scared they'd miss a second of any bout, their eyes darting round the place. It stank of beer and tabs and probably armpits as well. Me mam had a quick look round, then we went over to where the lasses' changing rooms were. This skinny bloke on the door nodded and we went in. The lasses were all getting their leotards on and doing last-minute exercises. It smelt of talcum powder, and you could feel the blokes on the other side of the wall wanting to look in but they couldn't.

Me mam went and sat beside this lass called Gina Gardner, who was in one of the first bouts. She was brushing her hair. 'Anyone special in the neet?' me mam asked her, not being quiet or anything.

'One or two,' Gina nodded, her voice being a bit lower.

'Whereabouts?' me mam said, sliding along the bench a bit closer.

'Front row, left side as you go in,' she said. 'Blue suit. Let me know ow you get on.'

They joked on about stuff in normal voices for a bit, and Gina said, 'Don't take my word for it,' laughing, then me and me mam

went back in the main hall. The bouts soon started, with another bald little funny man of a referee, but I could see me mam wasn't taking that much notice of them. That was a shame, they were really good.

Gina's bout was an early one and it was finished quite quickly. She won it dead easy, I would say, didn't have to try too hard. The camel clutches came really easily, the chin locks, then towards the end she got an ankle lock going, and swung her lass around, trailing her hair through the mud and whipping it off into the blokes, which they seemed to like, I don't know.

There was another couple of bouts, some fairly good stuff in them like the Argentine leglock, and then Gina came and found us in the crowd, stood watching with us. Her hair was still wet and she was still out of breath a bit, but she looked happy and giddy that she'd done well. Me mam and her nodded to each other but didn't say anything—the kind of not saying anything that means something's still being said all the same. In a bit, me mam nudged iz on the shoulder. 'Stay with Gina a minute, aal reet?' she said. 'Ah'll not be long.' I nodded, hardly looking away from the ring where the main bout was getting ready to start. This was between two lasses called Star and Kirby. Star was meant to win this, (she won nearly everything at the minute,) but she got off to a really bad start, got caught in the neck scissors and couldn't get out of it, which should be fairly easy to do early on, when you're not tired. After that, if I'm honest, she let herself get absolutely hoyed all over the place. Kirby barely had to bother with anything out of the ordinary, just basic facelocks for ages. Eventually Star got her eye in and started coming out with some forearm drops that made you know why

she had a good reputation, and there was a great stinger splash that I thought would have to make Kirby submit, but none of it was enough, it turned out. She was maybe too tired by now, Star, to get the kind of throws working as well as they can. Eventually Kirby had her down in what I thought was the Indian deathlock, (and when I asked Gina she said it was,) and Star had to submit.

I was a bit shaky after seeing Star get hammered like that, which wasn't meant to happen. I was a bit wobbly over it, and Gina grabbed onto iz in the crush as everyone made their way out. I didn't know where me mam was. I was kind of annoyed that we'd come all that way and she'd missed something like that—Star, losing on an Indian deathlock. But then again, I looked forward to being able to tell her what had happened.

We waited outside for ages, and she came along after a while, from a different entrance to the one we'd come out of. She was smiling, but not in a smiling way, if you know what I mean. She only gave iz a quick look, was mostly looking at Gina, wide-eyed, nodding a little. 'It was a smashin bout, mam,' I said. 'Star tried a stinger splash, but Kirby wouldn't let her get a look-in.' She just nodded, like she wasn't listening all the way up.

We hung around a bit, but I could've done with getting back home all of a sudden. Everything, looking around, was a bit much. Too many pissed and shouting blokes around, too much going on. Usually people would have a second think when there was a kid around, but not that night. I started to think badly of it, that world, and I started to think badly of Gina as well, for knowing her way round it better than anyone.

Me mam got iz a present after that, a Blondie album, and she had more ‘readies’ for getting stuff for around the flat and going out to the pictures more often. We kept going back to Southwark quite a lot. Once or twice she would go on her own, and once or twice she brought a couple of the lasses and some blokes back with her when I was in bed, not letting on I wasn’t asleep, though I soon was asleep, I suppose. Everything was busy, wherever we went, whatever day it was. London was one big spivvy market compared with everywhere else. Soho and all that. People with trays full of jumping toys and punk hairdo wigs and sunglasses that folded up into a little pouch with a zip on it. There was a bloke selling postcards with dirty pictures on them. I saw one of them, a bloke lying on a bed with his old man all long up his body.

All sorts used to go by. Blokes trying to talk to me mam. She used to take the piss a bit and they’d all laugh and tickle iz under the chin and go on their way. Once, in a café in Maida Vale, there was a woman from Newcastle and her son about my age, having some fish n’ chips on the next table. I couldn’t stop looking over, he was so nice-looking, you should’ve seen him. After a bit, I smiled at him and he smiled back, and that was the end of that, really. I looked out for them every day for ages, wherever we went, and had daydreams where I asked his mam if he could come with iz to one of the bouts, but the thing was, I never set eyes on them again. Never mind, it probably would’ve been a bad idea anyway—I thought the best way to ask the mam was to say, ‘Do you and your son like the mud-wrestling?’ She would’ve thought I was trying to sell them tickets or something.

We’d sit around in Southwark a lot of the time, outside the

pubs. Me mam was drinking a bit then, proper drinking, with the whisky. She wasn't really getting any bouts herself then. She was starting to get...I wouldn't go so far as to say fat, but she was definitely getting bigger. The weights stayed where they were, under the bed. Plus, she didn't knock around with the lasses in Bethnal Green that much anymore. She would still go to the bouts of an evening, and she'd be all right, but mostly she was better once she'd got a whisky inside her.

She'd be flicking through the Mirror and she'd go, 'So where's ya boyfriend got tee, Josie?' I knew I shouldn't've told her about him, just knew it. I got a big beamer, but at the same time I was enjoying it. It made me belly all warm and ripply. 'Keep an eye oot, Josie,' she said. 'He'll be back, him.'

She'd ask iz about stuff and laughed at all the daft things I said. I could talk off the top of me head in funny ways that had her howling. Then she'd take over, on about the time she'd been doing bouts in Glasgow, or in Leeds after me dad buggered off. They were wild, some of those fights, all the illegal stuff that went on in those days. I'm telling you, I could've listened to her reading the phone book, me, especially when she was sipping the whisky there. She'd start talking about being a lass in Newcastle, running around the bomb sites, and what it'd been like there before it all went downhill. She'd say, 'When w've got a few quid in w' pockets, w'll head back up there and y' can start school again properly.'

'What's the point of gannin to school there when it's aal doonhill?' I'd ask her. 'That's not the same,' she'd say, and she'd finish off her drink and we'd get the tube back to Bethnal Green.

One day in the West End she bought herself a new leotard, this very snazzy, zebra pattern thing. Then she made an appointment and had her hair cut and blow-dried in a new, shorter way. She asked iz what I thought of the name ‘Ivy’ to wrestle under. I thought it was superb, and it looked like some other people did as well, since she started getting offers to go back to the bouts then. All at once she kept out of the way of Southwark and packed in the whisky and got back to the morning exercise routines. When she put her new leotard on, with her pretty hairstyle, and made all the wrestler poses, she looked champion.

God, I thought the world of her, me. The very first bout she had as Ivy—she won it. It was a tough one, you have to say, it took her a while to get going since she hadn’t wrestled for so long, and there were times when it looked like she’d never get the moves as smooth as they used to be. But she managed to win with a crippler crossface, and when she came out of the shower, all wrapped up in her towel, smiling and red-cheeked, I was dead proud—it was like it was the first bout she’d ever won. Even in the old days of Liverpool, winning was just one of those lucky things to her, like the bus coming as soon as you get to the stop. But now some of the excellentness was back. You could feel it bubbling in your chest.

The second bout was on a rainy night over in Redbridge. It was a decent-sized hall, pretty crowded. Gina Gardner and some of the lasses came, and I watched it with them, up on me seat shouting for Ivy. There was a bit of bother at the start, some drunk bloke trying to climb into the ring for a laugh, but the referee (bald) and the bouncers (bald as well) sharp carried him out. I could see me mam outside the ring, in her leotard, just

waiting, calm as anything. Then they got in. The other lass was called Lulu, a bit bigger and older and nowhere near as good-looking. They started, Lulu getting in a few forearm smashes that didn't make any difference to me mam at all. Me mam used the cobra clutch quite early, just to say, 'be careful, missus.' I was so giddy I could hardly stand to watch, but at the same time I didn't want to miss a second of it. The leotard was soon covered, and the new hair a mess, but you could still see traces of the pattern and her face was still pretty. At times they were hardly moving, like in an arm-wrestle, they were so even. Then me mam got in with a keylock and got her down, but Lulu was able to flip her off. I kept shouting 'Ivy! Ivy!' bouncing up and down. Then there was a flying cross armbar that didn't really work as well as it did sometimes, and Lulu managed to get me mam up in a really simple chokeslam and smashed her down. She must've slipped though, Lulu, in all the clartz, cos the angle of the smash was a bit wrong and me mam came down not quite flat at the top, and then she was lying there on her back, one arm halfway up but coming down to rest on her belly quite softly. Lulu moved around her all carefully, like she was expecting me mam to flip herself up and get her in a deathlock or something, but then the referee was crouching down beside her and the crowd started to change the way they were being noisy. I ran down to the ring, but it was packed with blokes, and one of the bouncers grabbed iz and stopped iz getting any closer.

Me mam was dead when they brought her out of the ring and put her on one of the benches. Someone was crouching down, feeling her wrist and resting his ear against her chest—his ear and hair on that side were all muddy when he stood up again. They carried the bench into the changing room and I walked in

with it, crying me eyes out, and where she didn't have any mud on her face I could see how pale she was. I looked but she wasn't there anymore, there was just nothing. God though, I loved her so much I thought it would make me heart vanish.

Then some blokes came in and one squeezed me shoulder and then went and looked at me mam. He shook his head once and put a big towel over her. The other bloke was telling someone to call an ambulance. And I couldn't stop meself crying, crying and like choking, and Gina came in and sat beside iz. She wrapped her arm round iz and goes, 'Cam on, Josie, ol gel. Get up an less go outside an wait for the ol ambulance, eh?'

We went outside and I was trying to stop bubbling. Gina wiped me face with her tissue, and we went and stood at the fence, near the way out. The crowd was all moving that way. A couple of blokes stopped next to us while we were just waiting for them all to get away. One of these blokes was rolling a tab, and he said, 'There you go. Missus Butler got it in the end, no doubt about it.'

The other bloke shrugged. 'Couldn't give a shit, the slut. Got what she deserved, if you ask me.'

'You're not wrong there,' the other bloke went. He lit his roll-up and spat a flake of baccy out.

Gina looked over to see if I'd heard, and I had, so she said, 'Don't you listen to those arseholes, Josie. Your ol ma was a lovely gel.'

But I don't know. It's like once they get going they'll take everything a lass's got.



POETRY

Window Recovery

by *Ben Nardolilli*

There was a crash, a brief
Disappearance of the window,
The poor tabs,
They never had a chance.

Now there is the option
To restore my last session,
To bring back
My previous browsing.

I remember the good old days,
A simpler time,
And click on the positive option,
Everything returns to normal.

No revolution of links
To look at,
I wonder if my explorer
Thinks I am becoming a reactionary.

Memory

by *Kushal Poddar*

You remember the road
better than your company.
The wet surface ferries the memory.
The raindrops rust the knotted spots
on an ever elongating ribbon.

Unrequited dualism

by *Maja Topic (Winner of Poetry award)*

inflated vertigo
pervades my restless sheets.
tension haunts my patience; stalks the hallways i've adorned
with prospects only golden
when dormant and alone. i grieve
for the future; leave the present unattended
to be enveloped by a flickering
uncertainty, comprised

of vacant desires;
consecrated amidst fumes

we crafted vapid smoke to strangle
the angel of pure temptation; that as animals we slandered
when our cradle was cave

a storm caught in a halo
to be devoured by.
a holographic castle; supported
in flimsy wings

they crumble weak from adoration. each time
the splintered foam; of the insipid ocean reaches
for the stubborn wind.

with a compromising whisper
faith appears to us as hope; concrete
a shallow reserve to distract us
as if multitudes could shield

a unique spark from ashes
flames from gaping oblivion

headed for the end quality
passion costumed as heat

although
the situation i have conjured
out of a
salient demise,
that of absolute delusion,
that of intangible allure;
has endowed my circulation
with honey, warm and bursting
like dew when ripe for motion
rises-
a smile
evaporating to a scattered fog
across-
a dreary landscape,
as it unwinds; extends beyond
a grain of sand
ever-melting
mired to a weeping mist
exuding sombre tones that seep through
the fences of exposed ribs

a vapid bubble not yet formed
collapses
fleshless in its scorn

deformed bones and hollow places
are where sacred intimations
pre-destined to be stored, moan
our friction is to fall
exhilarated.
vexation a static vault

enveloped by a shattered staircase
tender and ashamed
our footsteps sink
to be swept underneath bridges
where to venture would be to mean
resignation to a shadow

pure oscillation in a gap

Passing by a Churchyard

by T. S. Ash

*“Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old time is still a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles today,
Tomorrow will be dying.” – Herrick 1648*

Passing by a churchyard on a spring day,
The feeble sun had coaxed the grass to life once more
After bearing the weight of white winter,
And now I could see the outlines of little mounds-

Petunias, daffodils, roses- wreaths reverently offered
To the graves. They had lain there through winter and now
The buds had crumbled, withered, rotted all away:
Smiling flowers crushed slowly by the grip of time.

And I thought, so too must the faithful be
Who now rest peacefully near the Lord's house,
Waiting for Him to wake them again.
So too were they beautiful once, and full of life.

Now to dust they return, as the saying goes.

And I, young, stood there watching them sleep.

Being myself awake, and remembering the old adage,

I went to gather rosebuds.

INFORMATION

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