

Bacon of the Year

13

TAR

Sir TAR,
Viscount of
St. Internets
and Nevis

13



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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.

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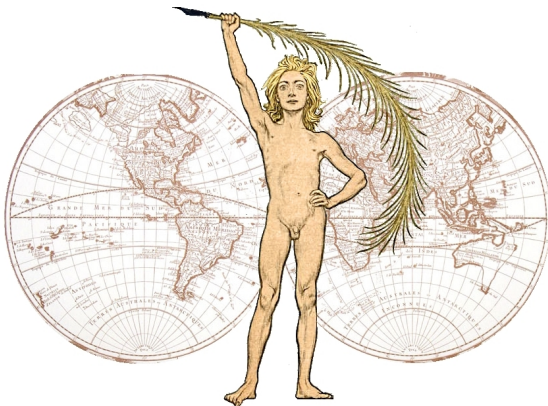
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EDITORIAL

PAGE 1.

It's been twelve months since that first issue of The April Reader was disseminated through the neural literary pathways of the internet. We've made it to the magical milestone of one year - thanks to a heroic community of enthusiasts and haters, but most of all our kind writers. We have been showered with the only real currency of the web: attention. Providing a channel for literary hyperspace and creativity to seep through the net - this is what drives us, and what we pledge to do in the second year of TAR's existence as well.

We seek new editors. In order to expand and enhance, we need a talented web editor who would work on our social network reach as well as a better website. That's essentially marketing and web design. Social freaks and literary designers, lurk out and apply at theaprilreader@gmail.com! We need you. Applications as literary editor are also encouraged.

PAGE 2.

Starting with this issue, TAR is adopting a closer cooperation approach with the authors. That means we now give every text the chance of living up to its potential, of which you see the results in this issue.

Also, we welcome the readers' interest in resuming the essay tradition of earlier TAR issues, with Jack McGrath's "The Reader is a Dying Breed" as the first episode of hopefully a longer series. Again, submit your essays to us! We want to encourage a debate culture that extends from our issues through the image boards right up to our social network pages.

Speaking of social things: if you like TAR, spread the word! We're going to be more active on Twitter, Facebook and Google+. Connect with us, and you can start by answering this question: what would you like to see in the future on The April Reader? We'll be glad to hear your thoughts.

TAR EDITORIAL STAFF



THE READER IS A DYING BREED

An Essay by Jack McGrath

Pop culture has turned its back on books and literature. As a culture, we've exchanged Dickens for Mike "The Situation" and the Brontës for the Kardashians. Who are we to blame for this travesty? The media? A lack of education?

No and no.

The guilt lies on the readers themselves. See, the “readers” of our culture, those who are heavily into deep and award-winning literature and look down upon anyone who isn’t, have made the assumption that one must not settle for simply reading, but that we must read something worthwhile and a “classic”. We ask questions like “Why read something as easy as Harry Potter when you could read Moby Dick?” and then we are shocked when the overall population gives up on reading.

I once counted myself to the judgmental and arrogant readers. I blasted “fluffy” books and instead suggested “great” literature like *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. My intentions were pure; I hoped to encourage people to be more like me and struggle through two hundred year old books instead of those silly modern and unenlightened books gracing the shelves on Barnes & Noble’s. My friends’ response to my snobbery was mostly positive, mainly because my message was an echo of what their seventh grade English teachers had told them, and so it must be true.

I had thought of reading as a chore, or at best an exhaustive exercise. I thought of it as something that had to be done in order to achieve something greater. After reading the excellent *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction*, my mindset completely changed.

Reading should never be seen as a chore or a duty; it

should be seen as something pleasurable. What makes “pleasurable” reading is different for everyone. Some might find Harry Potter and The Hunger Games to be the pinnacle of literature, and good on them.

No one should be made to feel inferior because of his or her taste in books. If someone were to find Mark Twain intolerable, he should be able to read whatever else he likes and not feel any guilt because of it.

In the end, if high and mighty academics don’t have the same taste as you, don’t lose sleep over it. Opinions will always be different and the subjectivity of literature just adds to the deepness of it. Perhaps people wouldn’t be as turned off to reading if we were to stop acting like it can only be a serious intellectual undertaking and can never be a pleasurable pastime.

I believe that literature is deep and wide enough to be both.

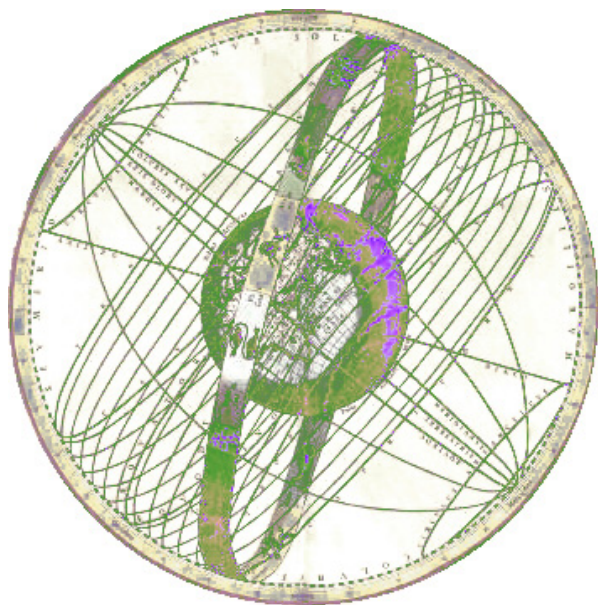
One might raise the objection that the themes and features of a “classic” book are deeper and more insightful than those found in a teen romance featuring vampires. This is undoubtedly true. However, we cannot expect the average person to switch from watching “Toddlers in Tiaras” to reading the unabridged works of Milton. Baby steps, like in most other fields, are the key to true appreciation of literature. It is my hope that the reading of vampire novels will increase an appetite for books and that

it will lead the reader to the “classics.” So these new readers may one day be inclined to grasp and appreciate the incredible story telling of Dostoevsky, or they may stay blissfully stuck in the land of poorly written vampire novels. Either case is acceptable and should be encouraged. Can one truly support the argument that trudging through and not understanding a completely uninteresting, centuries old novel is better than having a great time reading a modern thriller?

The act of reading is meant to be fruitful, thought provoking, and, above all, enjoyable. We shouldn't let anyone pressure us to read what we don't truly enjoy, and we shouldn't put any pressure on others to change their reading habits to conform to ours. Reading is subjective; it is different for everyone, and that is the beauty of it.

To borrow from Henley; I am the master of what I read: I am the captain of my library card.

Editors note: The picture is totally stolen of the internet.



FICTION

SACCHARIN

by One Cee

It's impossible to get used to things moving beneath your skin. There's always the panic-induced thought that something alive is nesting itself in there, even though I'm aware it was just Ade and the neural jack's self-cleaning device. She took a step back and the heat from the soldering iron dissipated from my throat.

"Okay, stand up for a second, I can't do this last bit from this angle," said Ade.

I got up from the chair, momentarily forgetting how to use my legs, and almost fell on top of my workdesk. Ade caught me before I did and severed all the connections from the computer to the back of my neck. I'd been awake for fifty odd hours already. My naked feet planted themselves on top of a carpet made of crumbs and interlocking cables and I leaned forward to let her work.

A fever rose behind my pharynx, the soldering iron again, but that was the last connection she had to make. She clicked shut my neural jack's cap and her elbow stopped burrowing itself into my back. A pat in the shoulder let me know that I could sit down. She didn't let go as I moved.

"Is it good?" I asked.

Reaching back to feel my nape I found the hanging wires. The touch of my fingers pulled lightly on the chords which in turn pulled on my spinal cord. My stomach rose.

"It's as perfect a hardware job as I've ever done. Wouldn't want to leave you a veg. Just don't pull on them."

"Right."

"If you manage to sell this, you should get your fossil jack replaced. And buy me a house on the shore."

"Never."

"That's the problem with you theory wankers. You don't properly recognize experimentalists. You should be grateful, who else would have stuck their tools in your disgusting hole for free?"

"The way you phrase things, Ade, people will misunderstand. You're being taped."

"I am?"

"Yeah, from like six different angles."

"You should tell people these things. Are they always on? God, do you tell the women you bring over that they're being taped?"

"Don't worry, you look pretty today. It's just for the stream. Footage from the first successful homebrew

program executed within a neural jack might be useful to have if it works."

"Right, right. So, what's the test gonna be like? Are you going to make your left leg jump up or what?" She asked, still behind me.

"Nah. The test application should just tickle my pleasure center. That's actually what I wanted to do in the first place, you know? A direct pipeline to happiness."

"Sounds like you. Maybe we should call a doctor, just in case?"

"Why?"

"In case something goes wrong."

"It won't."

"What--"

"It fucking won't, OK? Do you think I'm that stupid?" The way my head turned tensed up the cables. I mentally noted never to do that again.

"Alright. Calm down."

She'd sat on my bed on my bed while I wasn't looking. I swiveled my chair to face her. Adelle wasn't pretty or graceful—she had an unremarkable oval face, unkempt dread hair, and a tendency to glance rather than look—but the way she played with hot soldering irons was charming. The corners from most of my pillowcases were

littered with burn holes from when she lived here.

"I've done it before, you know. In the lab. With proper equipment, with voltage control. The first prototype blew out my sight for half a day. It's fine now. Totally, perfectly safe. I wrote it."

"I could try it for you. My neural jack is newer, who knows what the quality of the firmware in--"

"No."

"You're like a five year-old."

"You can't," I said, rubbing my nose. "The test program is mapped to my brain. You use this with the same addresses I'm using and you'll fuck up your speech center or blow up your heart. No way to tell. I don't want you to hurt yourself on my account. You'll get a chance, people will figure out how to map out their own connectome in no time once I release it."

"What do you mean, 'release it'? You mean for free?"

"Yeah."

She stared into my eyes and spoke carefully.

"What are you, an idiot? You know how much money that could bring us? You could get a software security consulting job in like a second just for the firmware workaround. If you filed for the neural mapper's patent now you'd be set for life, Will. Don't be a sucker."

"Us?"

"You, then. You like living in this dump?"

"It's not bad. I got everything I need. There's a well-stocked vending machine in the lobby."

"You ambitionless fuck."

"It's surprising how many people have called me that."

"Who did you tell about this?"

"I posted about the stream on some neuroinformatics communities on the net."

"Great. Amateurs."

"Talking about amateurs, how's your boyfriend, Ade? You still going out with your no-name chess player?"

"Oh, give him some slack," she said, leaning back into my bed. "He's won some tournaments. And yes, I am still going out with him and his name is Jay."

"How could you like someone who has a single letter for a name?"

"He's sweet! It's like having a puppy for a boyfriend."

"A filthy rich puppy?"

"It's mostly the sweetness, okay? Plus, he's the only guy I've dated who can beat me at chess. Huge turn on."

"I could beat you at chess."

"Oh, Willy, no, no, you couldn't."

"Whatever. I'm going to start the stream, OK? Don't interrupt."

A couple of lines popped up on my left terminal, which I overlaid onto my left eye so as not to clutter the screen. I held my breath for a second the moment I started the neural heads-up-display, which is when a hardware issue would have crashed the system and my brain with it. Nothing happened. I picked up my worn-down yellow legal-pad, twelve full pages of my barely legible scribble. I hated the white ones.

I took a sip from a soda can, opened maybe thirty hours ago. The notes were only an overview: a line-by-line would've taken a month. I'd posted the link to a tarball with everything they needed to compile the source code. My version was already compiled and waiting for me to execute it, imaginatively named test5.out.

My fingers reached for the last shortcut. I was live.

The combination of the up-arrow key and the enter key became a dispenser of pure bursts of pleasure beamed directly into my brain. test5.out worked perfectly. The first execution was glacial slow. Pleasure slowly dripped from the top of my head to my spine, downwards into my joints, my elbows, knees; my fingers and toes unconsciously and

almost imperceptibly contracting. The wave disappeared in my feet, leaving a tingling in the tip of my toes. An orgasm was only an approximation. A fraction of the voltage used to light up the address. The sweet address of 48 65 64 6F
6E.

The crash hit hard. I never realized that the distance between ecstasy and nothingness was so large. The second wave came and went much faster than the first, although when reviewing the logs the time between each execution of the prototype was about the same. My hands acted alone by the third execution. My muscles tensed and hardened. My toes tried to meet my shins every so often. I felt sand fill my joints.

Each execution required me to exert a much greater amount of effort just to get my ring finger to press the up arrow button and my middle finger to press the enter key. From then onwards life, the cameras, and Ade shifted to the background. Everything that existed were the shortening bursts. Bright pleasure. And the excruciating misery in between.

"Most... ses of... tonemia... within twentyf... although del... coma... trem... tral nerv--" All I heard during the following hours while falling in and out of consciousness.

The smells were unplaceable. I wasn't at home anymore. The mattress was different from mine and the air didn't

smell of stale smoke and burnt plastic. There were some intermittent sounds: carts being moved around, softly walking feet, loud breathing. The meaning of a regular background bip became apparent: a heart-rate monitor. Maybe the doctors could help me get my eyelids back to work.

Then I heard her voice coming from my right.

"Thank god you're here."

A second voice replied from across the room.

"I came as soon as I could. We saw everything on the feeds," said Jay, from the other side of the room. "They're saying he died of hyperserotonemia while streaming about some homebrew software for his neural jack."

"He's not dead yet, but, they—the doctors said he wasn't going to make it. They said his organs were shutting down and that was it."

"Ade, I'm sorry. I don't know what to say."

"They said he damaged his central nervous system."

She paused. I assumed she was looking at me, but she might as well have been checking her phone. My suspicions of being turned into an anhedonic vegetable confirmed I reflexively tried, but failed, to shout 'fuck'.

"Don't think about that right now," he said.

"What am I supposed to think about, then? The

insurance company just called to give me a lengthy explanation on how they're not liable due to tampering and failing to adhere to his neural jack's end-user agreement."

"That's harsh." I heard him sit down. "Can he afford to be here? I could, maybe--"

"There's been eight suits with consulting and offers for the patent in here already. I'm not worried about the bill."

"Wait, tampering, isn't that illegal? Did you do that?"

"The manufacturers could sue me for breaching a license, but they went bankrupt some time ago."

"You really shouldn't be the one worrying about these things, where's his next of kin, shouldn't he be here?"

"I am."

"What? What do you mean?"

"I hold his power of attorney."

"How come?"

"When we were dating we thought it prudent to, you know, set things straight legally. We didn't de-set them when we broke up. Sorry. Does it make you uncomfortable?"

"No, well, not really. Yes, it does. A little."

"I should have told you. I just never had it on my mind until now. He doesn't have anyone else, Jay, I felt

responsible. Come here. I'm glad you came.”

"Ade," he whispered, after a while.

"Yeah?"

"Did it work, I mean, the thing he was testing? Before it fried him?"

"Apparently."

"And how much did they offer for the patent?"

Knowing Ade, she found the comment distasteful. "He's right there," she might have chided me if I'd been the one who'd said it. To him, she said nothing, but the thought was already in motion.

Several seconds later, she asked him:

"You think he could have beaten you at chess?"

CUE

By T. S. Ash

He pushed the quarters into the slot, and with the turn of a knob the pool balls appeared with a sound like slightly muffled rolling thunder. The cues were the kind that spent more time against the wall than in skilled hands. David liked to think he had some skill. Last week he had sunk four balls in a row playing against the off-the-boat Indian guy who smelled like stale beer and curry.

Last week was also the first time he had seen the girl of his dreams—at least, the alcohol and the dim light of the bar made her seem like the most beautiful creature on God’s green Earth. His opponent—a heavysset man with a Harley bandana—greased the edge of the table with his gut as he leaned over to line up a shot. David glanced over at the bar. He didn’t even believe in God, and there was nothing green in Ohio during winter, but she was beautiful...

She was there again tonight—and for a brief moment her green eyes made contact with his, and he felt his mouth go dry and his tongue swell up. Her black bangs flirted with

her long eyelashes, and her lipstick-red mouth encircled the thin straw of her gin and tonic.

Crack!

The snap of the break brought his attention back to the table, and David reluctantly turned his back on the girl. Had she been looking at him the whole time? Was she as interested in him as he was in her?

It had been a good break, scattering the balls about the table, but nothing had gone in. He lined up a shot on the 1-ball. Steady...steady...thrust! and the streak of orange was swallowed up by the corner pocket. He was solids.

His opponent scratched his unshaven chin and let out a sharp whistle. "Good'un!"

David took another sip of cheap beer. It tasted sour and he tried not to make a face as he swallowed. On his next shot, he caught another glance from the girl at the bar. Those eyes of hers were as bright as emeralds to him. The butterflies in his stomach took flight and caused him to miss. He stepped aside to grant the table to the fat hillbilly who was probably saying something, but over the loud music and the sound of his own thoughts, David couldn't even hear him.

He could only hear the sound of his heart beating out a cadence like a kick-drum. He was going to do it—he was going to talk to that girl. He would walk over and order

her a drink. Or maybe he should just sit down and introduce himself, strike up a conversation? Should he try a pick-up line? He hadn't done this sort of thing for a long time. He wasn't even sure he could. After the way his ex had treated him, could he even open himself up to someone that way again? But that was four years ago.

His opponent exclaimed some sort of redneck phrase with a whoop and a holler, and downed the rest of his seventh beer before taking his next shot. David just nodded and smiled. He couldn't care less about the game, just now.

Nearby was the door. He could just leave. If he waited long enough, maybe she would leave. She was looking right at him again. This time her red lips broadened to frame a pearly white smile.

“Shit, son, I'm gon' clear this table! Wawch this one, now. Wawchit!”

David set his cue aside and took his first step towards the girl.

Crack!

“Whooooee!”

A BAD WOMAN IS WORSE THAN DEATH

By Craig Davis

Winner of the Prose Award

Juby had been sent by God, or Satan, nobody knew which. He brought the Apocalypse to town with him in his black Studebaker station wagon, painted with exhortations and Scripture verses: “Repent!” “The Lord Cometh!” and “Rev. 22:20,” – as if someone on the road might look up Scripture while driving. Through an old bullhorn mounted on the roof, Juby broadcast prophecies, one hand on the wheel, one hand with the microphone. Strapped to the car’s side just above the windows, a long sword glinted in the sunlight, complete with tassel that trailed in Juby’s wake.

“The day of the Lord is at hand!” he screamed from the sidewalk in Skullbone. “Sinners! You better get right with God, ’cause hell awaits!” He made a wide gesture in the general direction of Rev. Fletcher. “The mighty jaws of hell await to swallow you up into its fiery, burnin’ gullet! You got a sin problem, folks – the heart burns with sin! Repent, you sinners, an’ turn to the Lord God Almighty for mercy!”

Nobody in town really cared much for Juby. His

righteous haranguing even got on the nerves of the ladies of First Church, though many of them would stand among his audience nodding occasional agreement. But it was the sword that really got him in trouble, and when the town council decided to confiscate it as a dangerous weapon, he was obliged to attend a hearing, and plead to get it back. There in front of the council building, Poncey and Juby's paths crossed.

“Repent! Repent! Seek mercy from the Lord, or He will deliver justice!” Juby crowed at the crowd. The council members had received his petition to regain his public hazard, then quickly exited, climbing into their pickup trucks with the shotguns in the racks. “He’s coming! He is coming! Will you be ready? Or will He catch you in your sin, drowning in your sinful ways! The fiery tongues of hell await! Satan’s licking and smacking his lips, waiting to taste your hatred, and your greed, and your lust! The lust of tender flesh is hell’s snare!”

Juby threw his index finger at Poncey. “Elijah! Many were the women in the land! Unto only one was Elijah sent, a foreign woman!”

The spring sun had just begun to warm the land after months of cold and damp, and Poncey had things on his mind more important than deciphering a madman. Dr. Luray had hired him to clean leaves out of his gutters, and Poncey hoped to get a look at his daughter, Jazzy. Jazzy

spent that winter away at the Lurays' condo on the Gulf coast, and she'd just returned. The idea of Jazzy in a bikini was more than Poncey could take, and he wanted to give her ample opportunity to say how much she'd missed him all winter. Poncey left the town square and headed toward the Lurays' split-level.

Jazzy would be eager to see him, he thought, but he'd play it cool and let her stew about it awhile before acknowledging her. He pulled his bicycle up to the garage and found the ladder Dr. Luray said would be there. His scheme was to begin with the porch roof, knowing that Jazzy's bedroom window overlooked it. He would work on that gutter as long as it took for her to go to her room and look out the window.

Luck smiled upon Poncey. The lithe shadow moving across the curtains testified that Jazzy was in her room when he arrived. He made the requisite amount of clunking around with the ladder, the best he could do to get her attention short of ringing the doorbell. Standing waist high over the gutter, Poncey craned his neck to see into the window, jerked his attention back to work when he thought he saw movement, then craned his neck again. The shadow sashayed delicately, and a light went out. He shook his head, sure that Jazzy had left and taken his hopes with her, and went back to his work. So he was surprised to hear the window rising, and he looked up to catch Jazzy's big eyes gazing at him. She smiled brightly and motioned him

closer.

Poncey cleared his throat, climbed the last few rungs of the ladder and stepped onto the roof. Jazzy's eyes never moved off him, and her cheeks beamed at the corners of her smile. Poncey walked gingerly toward her window, and she produced an open bottle of motor oil. Poncey's balance wavered slightly, and Jazzy poured the oil out under his feet, her face aglow. After a very short dance, he tumbled off the roof and out of her sight. He landed face first in the Lurays' lush bed of hyacinths and daffodils, which added a sweet bouquet to the fragrance of manure. Poncey lay there in a state of shocked contemplation. Jazzy sure was making it hard.

"That pretty much figures," Mack MacLenoly noted when Poncey told him. "Women – there just ain't never any tellin' what's in their heads. Can't ever guess, 'specially the pretty ones. An' the bad ones – whoo! A bad woman is worse than death itself."

"Oh, what do you know about it?" Poncey scowled.

"Nothin'."

Poncey decided the time had come to give up on Jazzy, or at least teach her to stop taking him for granted. He'd already spent a few days trying to convince himself of this and hadn't made any real progress when the big news hit town. Between engagements in Memphis and Nashville, the Southland Sirens were squeezing in a performance at

Skullbone Music Park. Molly and Milly Ellis, sisters, and Blaze Bloom had become one of the hottest country acts going, a trio of multi-talented musicians and singers. Their fans filled every stadium they booked, so scheduling the little outdoor amphitheater at Skullbone came as a surprise to everyone. Their publicist cunningly focused on the girls' down-home roots, the salt-of-the-earth values that fed their bond with the fans. No doubt the planned stopover in tiny Skullbone proved the sincerity of that good ol', country-folk kinship.

Still, Poncey gave them no thought. Indeed, what with the commotion caused by Juby and now the Southland Sirens, he found any kind of thinking difficult. While the rest of the town was atwitter about the upcoming concert, Poncey sought a way to overcome Jazzy. Any idea or event that did not bring him to this end would be treated as nothing more than a petty distraction. Only by chance did he find himself back in the town square when the parade honoring the arrival of the Southland Sirens dragged through.

Skullbone was not the most sophisticated place; town officials were not about to let an excuse for a parade to slip by.

In fact, at first the crowd milling along the street didn't even catch Poncey's eye. While traipsing down the sidewalk deep in obsession, he accidentally waded into the

thoroughly engrossed mob. He did not believe anything existed in Skullbone that deserved such attention, except his own concerns, and indeed the first thing he saw – a collection of ragtag boys – seemed to confirm his opinion. Are these people crazy? he wondered as he watched the little ragamuffin group, split between a few walking backwards and others miming an exaggerated march.

Following the boys was a man Poncey thought he recognized but couldn't place, picking his teeth with a jack knife, strolling along like this was his daily constitutional. Nobody else seemed to be paying him any mind; he threw a wink in Poncey's direction. Poncey thought maybe the fellow was just leaving town, and good riddance, and nearly turned to leave himself.

Then he caught sight of Kent Dekker, and he knew something was up. Kent grew up a favorite in town because of his athletic talents, and he parlayed that into a kind of jugheaded charm. Right out of school Kent had volunteered for the Army, and had immediately gone off to war and gotten his leg blown off. Now here he was, walking along on a prosthesis that looked like a ski from outer space, holding an American flag as big as he was, high on a long pike. Some things never change, Poncey thought, knowing that if town officials put Kent in front of a thing, they thought it was important.

Behind him came Juby in his station wagon, still missing

the sword. The crowd yelled insults and ridicule at him, and since Poncey thought he probably had broken into line, he joined in. Juby's loud speaker blared in full throat, so he couldn't hear the abuse anyway. "Repent! The claws of hell reach out to you! Repent, and turn from the lusts of your eyes!"

Trailing behind the car came the high school band's drum majorette, marching by with her dippy-doodle walk in the shortest skirt possible. Fascinated, Poncey couldn't understand why she was in long sleeves and practically nothing else. She pranced along, unaware that she'd been separated from her band by two carloads of tourists, just passing through town and mistakenly turning into the parade route. They made the best of it, rolling down their windows to wave at admirers until the opportunity finally arose to return to their trip.

After the leaderless band passed, Poncey could see Ronnie and Donnie Galloway ambling down the street. Each one wore a sandwich board saying "Eat at The Diner," as though any single person in Skullbone still had never heard of the place. Rev. Fletcher followed, waving good naturedly and giving the church's stamp of approval to the concert, in case anyone was wondering. Sam Ranger came next, dressed like a chandelier. He sat upon one of his grand champion Tennessee Walkers, the third nag he'd taken to the Walking Horse title; today she was decked out just like him, wearing more silver bling than a hip hop act.

Behind her marched Lisa Whistle, after a fashion, representing The Literary Society of Bath and Aquitaine, her nose buried deep inside a book to show her contempt for the parade and its purpose. She'd been forced to participate, as president of The Society, and considered the whole event a farce celebrating unaccomplished and unworthy women, tools of a male-dominated society. Only some suffering artist truly merited such recognition, some bleeding genius acquainted with the night, a true poet, she thought, so she publicly demonstrated her disdain for this display. Unfortunately, she didn't fully appreciate that she was walking behind a horse, and planted her foot directly in one of the filly's contributions.

Ringin in his arrival with an oversized bell, T.C. Smith, the school principal, passed by Poncey next, decked out in full Dickensian regalia. West Tennessee has its share of Civil War re-enactors, but Mr. Smith was the only school re-enactor there or possibly anywhere else, and he loved to dress as Dickens' Mr. Bumble. Mr. Bancroft of the credit union followed, his eyes strangely focused beyond the people lining the street. Poncey could tell he was admiring his image in the storefront windows as he passed; he caught Mr. Bancroft's eye in his reflection from across the street and smiled. Mr. Bancroft turned red, huffed and cleared his throat as he jerked his coat taut by the bottom and turned his stare straight forward. This amused Mr. Ryan, walking along with him as one of Skullbone's many business titans,

and he chuckled as he polished his pocket watch. He held it to his ear to make sure it not only looked like it was running, but sounded like it too.

A slight breach of protocol occurred next as Otis Bender, who in a different age would have been called the town drunk, fell off the curb and stumbled into the parade. Otis had never been particularly lucky, and his fortunes were not changing now; as he struggled to regather himself, he tumbled directly into Constable Crapo's hands. Crapo looked like a bug with pincers as he struggled to get handcuffs on Otis' wrists, who evasively waved his arms over his head in a jurisprudant game of keep-away. Constable Crapo finally collared this desperate character, but the larger goal of getting him out of sight failed, since the jailhouse was at the end of the parade route anyway. So together they marched away, the crowd cheering, Constable Crapo acknowledging the accolades for the both of them.

Mavis Davis followed after in her waitress uniform, holding up a serving tray with a sign reading "Come see me at The Diner," for those who had missed Ronnie and Donnie earlier. All the leading financial minds of greater metro Skullbone giddily joined with her to display their support for the community, and remind the community to come by and spend a buck.

A dog wandered onto the street, holding its snout high into the air then low upon the ground, trying to find its

way. Its eyes were swollen and clouded, beset by glaucoma, and it crouched nervously as noises of the parade erupted all around. The mayor approached along the route, strutting with his head pitched backwards. The dog crossed into the middle of the parade, then back toward the curb, then out again. The mayor swung his cane jauntily, nothing more than an ornament. The dog found something interesting on the pavement, and gave it the full attention of its nose. The mayor's stride caught the poor beast fully under its ribcage, and the mutt flipped upon its back, legs kicking in the air, as the mayor rolled over it like an acrobat. The army of shopkeepers rushed to His Honor's aid, and Poncey whooped in approval. The blind dog skulked to safety in solitude.

Winding down Skullbone's celebration of itself were a couple of men stripped to the waist, pantomiming a bare-knuckle boxing match. These skullboners heralded the root of the fame, if not notoriety, of the town's earliest days, and put in mind Skullbone's other foundational tradition, the playing of music. The crowd could feel the electric presence of its honored guests, the Southland Sirens. A tractor crept closer, belching diesel smoke and anticipation, gingerly pulling a cotton wagon. Poncey could not help himself, but joined the townsfolk on his toes to catch a glimpse of the legendary singers. But what he saw instead was his friend Mack, on the far side of the street with his back to the festivities, deep in conversation with a busy-

looking man. Poncey knew every person Mack knew, and this man was not one of them. The stranger handed Mack an envelope and patted him on the shoulder, then slipped away, trailing mystery behind him.

The cotton wagon moved in and blocked Poncey's view, and the lovely Southland Sirens within arrested his attention. Two brunettes and a blonde, Poncey did not know which one was who, but skin-tight costumes attested to their fine qualities, and his interest spiked. They broke into a song, something about trains and prison and heartbreak, the blonde taking the lead. She looked at Poncey – directly at him – her golden mane lifted wistfully by the breeze, framing a face bronze with the sun, her pure white eyes and teeth gleaming like stars, a gaze blue like the sky, clear and crisp, her features smooth and soft and warm, and she sang deep into the essence of his very being. He glanced away embarrassed, but she would not let go. His eyes returned to hers, and they made a pact across the distance, a bond that nobody else could ever understand. At that very moment, Poncey fell in love.

The song ended, and one of the girls – not the goddess – yelled, “See ya’ll tonight!” and the wagon inched away. Poncey stood stunned as the crowd dissipated, until a hand clapped him on the shoulder, and he awoke from his enchantment.

“Hey, lookit what I got!” Mack exulted.

“What’s that?” Poncey stared at the envelope.

“Back stage pass! The Southland Sirens’ concert manager just gave it to me!”

“A pass? How’d you get that?”

“Won it offa the radio – called in an’ won it. I never been lucky before!”

“You get to meet them?”

“After the show, I’m goin’ back stage an’ meet ’em all!”

“I didn’t know ’bout that!” Poncey sputtered. “It’s not fair! I didn’t know about it!”

“You should pay more ’tention!” Mack advised.

The two drifted away from the scene, Poncey slain and forlorn. “You should share that with me,” he muttered.

“How’m I gonna share it? Give you half, so only my legs can get in? That’s stupid!”

“Then you should give it to me. It’s not fair, ’cause I didn’t know about it!” Poncey laid on the guilt every way he could think of, but Mack would not be moved. Poncey did not leave off his grouching until Mack reached home and escaped.

The sun spent not a thought on the great approaching event nor on Poncey’s poetic angst, and began its descent in its own good time. Meanwhile, a huge audience gathered at

the amphitheater on the outskirts of town. A dusky sky set the tone for what promised to be a night of expectation and discovery. Poncey and Mack arrived early to pick a spot on the grass, and Poncey made sure they'd be sitting within direct eyesight of the performers. As darkness claimed the day, lights surrounding the park glowed to life, and mosquitoes swarmed around a feast of victims. A vernal tingle filled Poncey, and colored spotlights swung across the stage as if scanning a coastline, searching for the warmth of hearth and home that every far-flung man longs for. The folks began a slow, impatient clapping that spread across the lawn, joined by a swelling chorus of spring peepers, and a few shrewd fans blew air horns. Poncey fidgeted, and the envelope stuck out of Mack's back pocket.

“Get on with it! Sow-thlan' Sigh-rens!” he chanted.

The spotlights went dark, casting each person into utter blindness, raising every other sense to heights they'd never known, and the band struck up a sudden excited rhythm.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” said the loudspeaker.

The spotlights flashed back on, and there on stage stood the work of art, Poncey's own Aphrodite, massaging her violin with single-minded passion. Her body heaved with the intensity of her playing, her eyes blazing an ardent pledge with her fingers, like a welder's torch, as they caressed cries of ecstasy from her instrument. The bow stroked vigorously, bragging no end to its stamina, drawing

through the strings and back again, coaxing from them more than they knew of themselves, and its joyful songs coupled in harmony with the guitar and mandolin. She bent into her playing, passion driven by the tempo and tones themselves.

“She’s amazing,” Poncey said in a trance. He felt like he’d been nailed to the ground. “She’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. She’s – beyond description.”

“Yeah, they’re great,” Mack offered.

Dressed in deep blue jeans and form-fitting blouses barely able to tame their breasts, the girls switched instruments to go into their second number. Brunette No. 1 said something about Skullbone and the next song, but Poncey was too enthralled to hear. His eyes fastened to those of his love, spiritually trying to mesmerize her attention, but she never looked his way. His heart broke in two, and each half beat yet all the more ardently.

Brunette No. 2 took her turn singing lead, and Poncey’s yellow-haired dream took up the guitar. She focused her attention on her band mate, turning her back to the audience. At first disappointed, Poncey soon grew to appreciate the new perspective on his love and her rolling, silken motion, kneading the pounding beat as she strummed along. His gratification swirled together with a growing frustration.

“How much you want for that pass?” he croaked at

Mack. "I'll pay you for it! I've got to have that pass!"

"Are you kiddin'? I'm not givin' this up to nobody."

"You don't care 'bout anyone but yourself! Don't be such a selfish pig!"

"I ain't selfish. I won it, an' I deserve it. It ain't for sale to no-body."

Poncey growled under his breath, and his chest fluttered, like he was about to go into palpitations.

The concert progressed, and at length the band began to slow down the energy: The muse sat at the piano, facing directly toward Poncey's place in the crowd. A sedate intro followed, all lights fading to darkness except one upon her angelic face, and the strains of a heartfelt ballad arose. Her hair glistened, highlighting the deep tan of her skin, bringing out the chill blue of her eyes, and finally she drank in Poncey with her gaze. She etched her crooning words upon his heart, every note woven in his ears like a binding fabric. Poncey forgot where he was and floated into a world of clouds and fluff, unable to feel the ground, a suspended existence where time swept away and each present second lasted forever. And then it was over.

"You want sumptin' to eat?"

Poncey heard the applause. What had happened?

"I'm goin' to the concessions – you want anything?"

Mack repeated.

“Uh, no,” Poncey said. “Er, yeah, sure, get me a sweet tea.” He fished out a five-dollar bill and handed it to Mack. “Keep the change.”

“No kiddin’?” Mack said as he turned to leave. “Be back.”

Poncey pulled the envelope from Mack’s pocket.

Relocating next to the stage, Poncey could see the mysterious man from the parade standing in the wings, keeping one eye on the performers and one on his watch. This town deserved one encore, then he’d set the roadies to work tearing down the equipment. The Southland Sirens waved and left the stage to a swelling thunder of applause, like waves crashing against massive rocks, and the man sent them back on. Poncey’s love cast a glance at him before bouncing back into position. The song was a rousing anthem to hedonism, to celebration that ran through the night and into the morning, and to starving bodies slaked with satisfaction. The girls glowed with sweat and enthusiasm as they blew kisses and skipped offstage with benedictions of “Peace on Earth!” and “God bless!”

“What a bumpkin-burg!” a brunette gurgled as she squeezed water from a bottle into her ready mouth.

Poncey sidled up to the man and timidly produced his backstage pass.

“How’d you get this? Where’s that other fella?” he asked.

“He couldn’t make it,” Poncey said. “He gave it to me.”

“I don’t know,” the man considered him carefully. “The other guy checked out. But I ain’t got time to get background on you. You some kinda freak?”

“I’m all right,” Poncey gushed. “Mack’s my best friend – the other guy. Ask anyone.”

“Well. I’m gonna have security keep an eye on you.”

“This the big winner?” the same brunette asked. “Hey there, big fella, you’re a big ol’ hoss, aren’t you?”

“I guess.” Poncey didn’t know what to say, and suddenly he felt fatter.

“You come with me,” she said with a wink to her manager, pulling Poncey by the hand. “We can handle him. Come meet the girls.”

A swirl of activity enveloped Poncey, and he was led through a milling labyrinth of stars, crew members and hangers-on. Without knowing how, he found himself backed up to a heavy curtain, faced down by the three stunning women.

“You are a big one,” said the second brunette. “You that big all over?”

“Huh?” Poncey managed.

“What’s your name, sugar?” the blonde said, touching his arm.

“Puh – .”

“What?” she laughed.

“Poncey. Poncey Muldoon.”

“Well, what say we get out of here, Puh. We’ve got a motel room out by the highway, just long enough to wind down while the guys pack the buses. Wanna come out and help us relax?”

“Well – .” He looked around aimlessly.

“Please?” Poncey’s one true love said. “Wouldn’t you like to party with me?”

The room was on the second floor of the Drive Inn, a standard room but with a balcony overlooking the pool. The clerk had brought in an extra-large ice chest, full to the top, along with a few sandwiches and a cart stocked with every alcoholic drink Poncey could think of, and some he couldn’t. He sat down on the edge of a bed.

“I like mine straight up,” said the blonde. “How about you?”

“Yeah, sure,” he said, and took the glass.

“What’s your name again?” one asked. “Lance Boy?”

“Poncey. Poncey Muldoon,” he said.

“Let me get a look at you, Lance Boy. Just what made you get so big?”

“I eat a lot. I played football in high school – I led the team in sacks one year.” Poncey tried to make himself taller, though he was sitting.

“Oo, high school football,” said a brunette.

“Not the track team? I wanted to hear about your lance. Lance Boy,” said the blonde.

“Have a sandwich, Lance Boy. And I’ll freshen up your drink.”

Poncey took back his glass, and noticed the three watching him expectantly. He took a hard breath and slammed the drink down.

“Now you’re talking!” said the other brunette. “I knew you had it in you. Hand me back that glass.”

“I wanted to tell you shumthin’,” he said to the blonde.

“What? You can tell me anything.” She sat next to him on the bed and leaned her cleavage in close. “But after you tell me that, I’m going to ask you to tell me something else, Lance Boy.”

“What?”

“Oh, no, you first. You started this.” Her coy teeth bit at her lower lip.

“Well,” he gulped. “Maybe later.”

“Here, have another drink,” she suggested. “That’ll help

you sort your thoughts. Someone turn on some music. I wanna dance.”

A computer was hooked up to speakers, and the curvaceous blonde began a slow sway to the melody. The song was not the kind the band played, more of a sensuous jazz. Try as he might, Poncey's brain would not let him concentrate on the dancing girl.

“You okay, honey?” a brunette asked as she took his glass. “You’re not fading out on us, are you? You still feeling perky?”

“Is the Catholic Pope?” he replied as he took it back.

“You don’t look so good, not bushy-tailed like you were before,” she continued in his ear. “What can we do to perk you back up?”

The song had changed into a hard-pounding rockabilly throwback. The blonde ground her hips as Poncey tried to focus. “I tell you what,” she told him. “I’m getting’ a tad warm in here,” and she pulled open a blouse button.

“Whoo boy.”

“I think you found something,” said a brunette, scrutinizing Poncey. “You found just what he needs.”

“Hey, you can’t out-fool me,” Poncey said. “You’re tryin’ to drunk me.”

“Oh, no, Lance Boy.”

“ ’Course not.”

“Well, shumthin’s happ’nin’,” he said.

“And I think I know what it is!” said the blonde, straddling Poncey’s knees, setting her hands on her hips and thrusting her shoulders back. “The question is, what are we gonna do ’bout it?”

Poncey’s head whirled about on his neck. All he could see was the goddess’ blouse, a blue plaid that matched her eyes. But how could her eyes be plaid, he thought. It didn't look good on her. In fact, nothing about her looked particularly good anymore. Not even the ceiling looked very good.

“I don’t feel so great,” he mumbled.

“You don’t look so great, either,” she smiled matter-of-factly.

Poncey started with a chill, his eyes opening to a confused darkness. Little sparkles of light faded in and out of focus as he tried to blink awake. He lay stretched out on a chaise longue under the sky, his arms stretched out to each side. His hands waved through the air limply, landing on his chest, and discovering that he had no shirt. His eyes became clearer, and he realized he was on the motel room’s balcony, but when he tried to lift his head, a violent pounding erupted and he had to give up. As he lay there groaning, his hands told him he had no pants, either. They recognized the feel of terry cloth, just below his waist, and

he pulled a washcloth with the motel logo up to his eyes. Pinned to the cloth was a blurry note: “Sorry, but we thought a towel would be overkill.”

Poncey lurched to his side, and saw through the sliding glass door that the room was dark and abandoned. He rolled off the chair in a crouch, screwed up all his fortitude and crawled to the door, only to find it securely locked. This isn't supposed to be locked, he thought, that's just dangerous, and he considered for a second jumping through the glass bodily. Wondering what time it was, he scanned the view of the pool and saw nobody about. Hooking one leg over the balcony's iron fence, he drew a deep breath and tumbled over into a bed of hoochie coochie, snapdragons and Venus flytraps.

The darkness had that queer quality, more early than late, as if it knew that it soon would burn away. Three miles from town, Poncey had no choice but to start walking and hope to beat the sunrise. He headed out onto the road, nervously keeping an eye over his shoulder in case somebody approached. His skin pimpled with the cold of an early spring night, and he clutched his washcloth for dear life.

Onward he trudged, until he spotted a couple of dim lights bouncing along the road ahead of him. He cautiously skittered into the bramble along the highway, but it gave him poor cover and little desire to embrace it. Peering into

the horizon, he knew the lights were a car coming nearer, and he ducked low as he could. The moon did not illuminate the vehicle, but its light did gleam off a long, thin object. Black as the night itself, Juby was coming, complete with sword – the one person crazy enough not to think Poncey was crazy. He felt Juby’s eyes staring.

“John, what has happened to your camel’s hair? Cast off with the comforts of the world!” Juby yelled out his window. Town officials had returned his sword with strict orders to take it and himself out of Skullbone for good. “I’ve shaken the dust of this town off my feet! Will you join me?”

“No, I’ve got to get home!” Poncey said from the underbrush. “Will you give me a ride?”

“I’ve escaped the city, like Sodom and Gomorrah! They refuse to repent! Do not look back, like that woman of Lot!”

“I’ve got to go home! I’m about to die out here! Please give me a ride!”

“Well, John, we all have a calling to fulfill. All right – get in, but I must be gone before morning! They cannot find me there!”

Poncey climbed in, and Juby eyed him carefully as he turned the car around. “Women can be a fountain of temptation, John, but seldom will they slake your throat.

No wisdom in losing your head over one.”

Poncey shuffled quietly into the Diner and slid onto his usual stool. Mack, hanging around the edges of a nearby conversation, looked up and blurted, “Hey, I been waitin’ for you. What happened to you last night?”

Poncey didn’t look at him. “Nothin’.” He had spent the night with international celebrities, and he could never speak a word about it. His mouth felt like it was carpeted.

“I couldn’t find you anywheres. I lost my pass somewheres, an’ you coulda helped me look for it. I didn’t get to meet them girls at all – I never get any breaks! An’ I was totin’ aroun’ your cup of swee’ tea ever’where. Where’d you go?”

Poncey didn’t respond. Thank God that’s over with, was his only thought.

Mack settled in beside him. “Yeah, my pass must’ve dropped outa my pocket somewheres – dad blame it! I looked ever’where for that thing! Guess I had no right to it after all.”

Poncey wheeled around on the stool to leave. Jazzy sat with some friends in a booth across the aisle. Mavis had set each table with red roses from the garden out back, standing in water glasses, and Jazzy tickled the fleshy petals with her fingertips. She cast her big eyes and a smile

Poncey's way.

Poncey hesitated, and sat slumped like a ragdoll.

Nothing good can come of this, he thought as he heaved himself to his feet and walked toward her. But at least it's the poison I'm used to.



POETRY

Kings 1:1-4

*Winner of the TAR Award
by !!fcpOe302SRa*

The face of Love is grizzled,
with a misleading bitterness about the mouth
and stony cheeks where eyes cool safely from all fires;
and the nose is sharp like all fine noses,
and the ears are soft, skin only -
no cartilage, no character -

but cumbersome in Passion's silent drawing room,
where Love dwells always with silent guests
(and a loud dog named Prolonging
wailing outside).

Itching Walls

by L.R.R.

Heads like this don't rest well.
Though their bodies may lie,
syrup-heavy and still,
cocooned in crepe-paper sheets.

No, heads like this are best
not buoyed upon bloated sacks
of lax fluff and dull air,
weighted, warm and waiting.

Not when dry light is spilt
Across damp carpet within
A crumbling hive which
Hums, tuneless, through the tepid night.

Untitled #1

by Metonymically Meta-anonymous in Chicago

A Hopelessly Curious Man once met
a Perfectly Impenetrable
Woman. As they passed, the man said to her
(thinking himself rather clever), “How
do you do?” To which the Perfectly
Impenetrable Woman replied, “Like this.”
And she sat upon the ground and smiled.
“I don’t believe I quite understand,” said he.
“Let me show you again,” said the Perfectly
Impenetrable Woman.
She stood, and then sat, and then smiled. “What? I am
hopelessly lost.” said the man.

The Gods, seeing this, shamefaced and lacking
better options, turned them into poplars.

Untitled #1

by Murtaza Shah

Of all the purposes of awareness,
the most extensive one must be
a pervasive lust for fairness
for my idea of me.

might as well be my resume

by *NaCl*

try harder,

faggot try harder, faggot try

harder faggot tryharderfaggot;

i can spend a whole five years doing nothin,

i can spend a whole five years liability cut thin,

i can spend a whole five years spitting blood stains,

i can spend a whole five years burning lampshades,

i can spend a whole five years analyzing myspace,

i can spend a whole five years with a smirk on my face,

i can spend a whole five years lying,

i can spend a whole five years not dying,

i can go a whole five years without trying

harder faggot.

INFORMATION

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