

*a literary
journal.*

TAR

MAY ISSUE

14



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THE APRIL EDITORIAL



The April Reader is a monthly publication of poetry and prose operating under the belief that the rise of the internet has allowed the written word to regain parity with mass-media and television

We hope to serve as a launching point for future writers of this generation.

HOME PAGE: WWW.THEAPRILREADER.ORG
YOUR WRITING TO: THEAPRILREADER@GMAIL.COM

A WORD FROM THE EDITORS

Our efforts to improve the magazine are seemingly successful. With the grace of luck and the cooperation of our authors, TAR appears to have turned dissolution into rise. The content of Issue 14 stands solidly, perhaps in a position far better than for many months prior. Website views have spiked dramatically, and submission counts are on the rise. This could only have been accomplished with the support of others, and for this increase we have solely to thank our readers.

Should there be any doubts to these claims, one need only to read the winning submission and this month's TAR award winner Andrew Mendelson. Some may recognize him as having written for TAR in the past, but *Better than Pictures* proves to be better to everything else submitted by him to date. With this piece we can clearly trace his improvement as a writer. Congratulations Andrew, you clearly deserve the TAR award.

Things of note:

TAR welcomes Jack McGrath to the organization as a new proofreader

TAR founder Prole returns as editor

Preparations are being made for the TAR Year 1 anthology, we have enlisted the aid of several talented illustrators on this matter. Authors will be contacted selectively throughout the next month(s) with more information on this matter

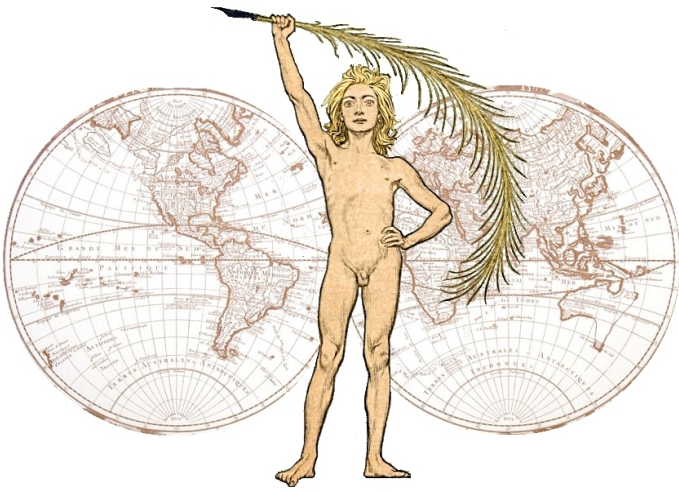
A web editor has been contacted who now works in conjunction with the site owner Wildweasel to build a new site.

A double-column format has been added.

We are as always looking for good essays.

Interested on making a cover or illustrating a story? Contact us.

Regards, TAR Staff



FICTION

BETTER THAN PICTURES

By Andrew Mendelson
TAR Award Winner

It was the white birch bark on the cedar tree that confused Benny.

“Why are you peeling the bark off that tree?” his father had once asked him. “How would you like it if someone pulled off your skin?”

Benny knew his father wouldn’t be home from work for a few more minutes and he couldn’t help himself. There were daddy-long-legs and other tiny monsters inside. Still, when he peeled the cedar bark away and found the birch underneath, a sense of dread rose in his stomach.

“Do I have to work tonight?” Ben wondered.

In a panic, Benny quickly covered the birch bark with his little hands. There would be no work that night. There couldn’t be. The only place waiting for him was Bywood Elementary School where Mrs. Snyder would scold him for breaking the tip of his pencil just so he could avoid his arithmetic and disrupt the class with the noisy pencil sharpener.

“Benny, I know all the first grade tricks,” Mrs. Snyder would say.

When Benny removed his hands he saw that the birch bark was gone and smiled to himself. As he smiled, he felt a new tooth coming in with his tongue and made a mental note to check under his pillow for money that he would spend on an action figure when his mom took him to the dollar store.

“Ben,” a stern voice said.

“No! Benny.”

“Come on, Ben,” said John. “Your shift starts at eight, right?”

“*Joooh-nee!* You’re ruining it!”

“Come on, man...”

Ben opened his eyes. The tree was birch. It was in a neat square of grass next to the parking lot for the small apartments. He came down from the tree, disorientated at having greatly overestimated its height, and looked around in a daze.

“You were really far into it,” John said

watching him closely.

The rain came in light sprinkles and rendered the pavement a shade of grey slightly darker than the evening sky.

“Yeah...you could have let me enjoy it for a few more minutes.”

“I still don’t feel anything,” Ben said as they got off the bus. Their apartment complex was still a few blocks away.

John almost replied, but resisted. He clenched his jaw.

“I was thinking of asking Bernice to move me to stock with you. I can’t stand the customers, man,” said Ben.

“You could try it, but I doubt she will.”

“...y’know, you’ve been pretty negative lately.”

John shrugged and continued to stare straight ahead as they walked.

“Maybe this stuff is the real deal,” Ben said as he examined the little white bottle with the words ‘Oneiricil’ on it. “There have been some amazing stories about it posted on Erowid. It wasn’t easy for Frank to get this stuff. The FDA won’t approve it and the government labels it Schedule-I, just like they do with any other substance that makes people think. Come on, man. This is to the mind what landing on the moon was to science.”

“Except the moon was somewhere new. This stuff, allegedly, takes you back. That’s regression.”

“But what if we could see mom and dad again?”

John stopped walking and turned to Ben.

“Not gonna happen—unless you wanna see if there’s anything left to scrape off of I-75. A drug won’t change that.”

They started walking again. John went at a slightly faster pace and Ben kept up. Neither of them said anything else, but John noticed his older brother glancing over at him with a certain look. It was the same look he always got when he spoke too harshly and they had tacitly agreed long ago that he had to apologize for going too far when Ben made that face.

“Maybe it’s best to forget about some things,” John said. “We can make better memories, right? But that’ll only happen if we stay focused and don’t end up homeless. If you buy stuff like this again, it’s gonna be impossible to pay the rent on time. And personally, I’d like to at least consider *college*.”

Ben stopped giving his look and became quiet again. John wondered which of them were taller. They hadn’t compared their height in years, but John suspected that he was a hair or two above Ben. They were both skinny, however, and John thought that this in addition to their brown-eyed, brown-hair combos made them appear rather bland and forgettable.

When they approached the apartment complex, John glanced over to see if Ben was still giving him the look. Instead, Ben had a glossy-eyed expression and started to focus intently on a birch tree in the parking

lot.

“Ben?”

John looked around as Ben climbed the tree. If someone complained that they were acting stoned in the parking lot it could give them another headache that they didn't need. Ben started giggling and peeling bark off the tree.

John hung up the phone and looked around their tiny apartment. There were pizza boxes stacked on top of each other and a garbage can full of various fast food wrappers. The place was a dump, but this didn't seem to faze Ben as he sat on his couch, also bed, completely absorbed in his book. It was an old children's book called *Hamster Huey and the Big Kablooie* that they both read constantly as kids. John was surprised that Ben had held on to the tattered old book.

“I called in sick for you.” No response. “You're one infraction away from getting fired.”

Ben ignored him again. John snatched the book away.

“Johnny!” Benny cried in a high-pitched voice. “Give it back! I'll tell!”

“Jesus,” John said handing it back. “That shit really works for you.”

Ben blinked and looked around in a daze.

“Dude,” he said. “I remembered...”

He remembered, and when he looked up he was in the gym. There were book shelves set up and Benny was with his second grade

class for the book fair. When he looked down at his little hands he saw that all his fingertips were coated in dried glue. He went to work peeling them off and it gave him a wonderful catharsis like when he picked his nose. When he was done peeling, he pretended that he had just peeled his skin like a snake and as he looked closely at the glue peelings he could see the intricate spirals of his fingerprints.

Yet, beneath all of the wonder, there was something wrong. It was as if everything Benny saw was made of cardboard and might suddenly blow away if he tried to take in all of his surroundings at once. He walked out to the hallway to try and escape his growing sense of terror.

The first thing he noticed in the hall was the janitor's closet. It occurred to Ben that he couldn't recall what it looked like inside. He opened the door and gasped. There was complete emptiness apart from the fat janitor who seemed to be standing on nothing. The only light in the closet came from out in the hall. The janitor had a completely blank expression and didn't seem to notice Benny. Despite his fear, he was tempted to reach inside and see if there was really nothing more than empty black space that the janitor was somehow standing or floating in.

A tall man suddenly walked up the hall and closed the door.

“I don't think you want to look in there,” the tall man said. “You don't have the memories to fill the space in there.”

The tall man smiled. He wore bifocals

and had thick grey hair.

“Why don’t you go back in the gym, Benny? I think you’ll like it better in there.”

Benny nodded. The tall man held the door open for him. When he got back inside he saw that there was an assembly going on. On the stage was a zoologist holding a starfish. The starfish fascinated Benny and he wondered how an animal without eyes could eat.

“When you shook me,” Ben said. “The gym just disappeared all at once. I was actually dizzy for a second.”

John contemplated what Ben had told him. He was mostly curious about the tall man.

“How much Oneiricil did you take, Ben?”

“I took three or four when we were on the bus, I think.”

“And your book set off that experience?”

“Yeah. I just started reading and at first it was a vivid memory, but then I was really there.”

“Hold on a second. I wanna try something.”

John went into the bedroom and retrieved their laptop. He moved a stack of pizza boxes off the coffee table in the living room and began to type and search. After a few minutes, he found a website of *Tiny Toon Adventures* episodes. The first video he clicked had poor audio and video quality so he changed it. Ben immediately protested.

“No, wait. It’s like a VHS tape. Go back

to that one.”

For the next three hours they sat on the couch watching old episodes of *Freakazoid* and *Animaniacs* in the worst quality that John could find. Each time a video ended, Ben would look around in a disoriented way as if he had suddenly been woken up from sleep walking. The joy and laughter he got from the videos was more than either of them had experienced in the last few years combined. John briefly considered taking the Oneiricil, but it seemed like one of them should stay grounded in the present.

It was hard for John to watch the serene expression on his brother’s face leave as each cartoon ended.

“Ben,” he said. “I have to work early tomorrow, so I’m gonna go to bed soon. I’ll put on a movie for you and then you should go to bed too.”

“Ok, Johnny.”

After a minute of searching, he found *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Benny squeaked with joy.

“Good night, Ben.”

“‘night, mommy.”

For a moment, John stood there watching Ben and wondered if his brother was visiting him in any of his memories.

Sitting at the end of his bed, John looked down at the blue pill in his hand. It didn’t seem too dangerous. Ben had simply sat around acting spaced out and he had taken

four. The book and the cartoons seemed to function as a trigger for him.

John set the pill on the dresser and opened his drawer. Tucked underneath his clothes was a brown paper bag. Inside there was a plastic bag containing a stack of pictures. He knew it would be hard to go through them all and instead he took only the top picture on the stack out. It was a picture of his father giving him a piggyback ride on Christmas. He took a deep breath and cleared his throat.

There's no way, John thought. It'll never work. It can't and it shouldn't.

He put the picture away and then he thought of Ben calling him "Mommy" when he wished him goodnight.

"Goddammit."

The pill didn't go down easy as John swallowed it dry. A sense of panic hit him when he felt it going down his throat. There was no going back. He would have to face whatever his mind showed him. To try and diminish the fear, he rolled onto his back in bed and closed his eyes. His thoughts eventually went back to the picture and he wondered what year it was taken in and what his life had been like then.

It'll probably hit soon, John thought. Will it gradually creep up or come in a rush all at once to teleport everything away?

"I don't know," he said.

"Why not?" Mrs. Wapner asked him.

He was at a table with three other classmates working on a Lewis and Clark

presentation.

"I didn't get a chance to read it," John replied. "I had to help Youssef. He can't read fast enough and I think we'd be done quicker without him."

Mrs. Wapner flinched.

"What!?" she screeched.

The room suddenly went still as everyone in the class turned to Johnny, including Christy Berlander—the redhead that gave him goosebumps whenever she looked back at him.

"That is completely uncalled for—and to say it right in front of him!"

John stood up.

"No," he said. "I already did this once."

The class and Mrs. Wapner continued to stare at him, but nobody moved or said a word. One of the walls of the classroom was missing. It was sunny outside. John looked down at his third grade social studies textbook and opened it out of curiosity. All of the pages were blank.

When he walked out of the classroom through the missing wall, he saw his father approaching him in the school parking lot walking his yellow Huffy bike.

"Do you wanna go for a ride, Johnny?"

"I'm sorry, dad. It isn't working for me."

His father stared back with a neutral expression. It was the same hollow look that Mrs. Wapner and his third grade classmates were giving him.

"Can you say anything new, dad?"

Anything that you've never said before?"

There was no response. John thought for a moment and recalled the conversation.

"Can we go to the park, dad?"

"Of course!" his father said and smiled. "How did your triangle project go today?"

Johnny nearly replied, but stopped. John remembered the conversation perfectly and was nearly sucked in. He would say that it went okay when it didn't because he was worried his father would be angry at him if he told the truth. Even when he had had the conversation at age seven, a part of Johnny had known that his father would still take him to the park if he was honest about doing poorly on the project.

His father's face went blank again when he refused to relive the memory. He started to walk to the park and looked back at the strange ghost of his father standing alone.

"It's weird seeing them like that, isn't it?" the tall man said. "I'm Doctor Carl Mayerson, by the way."

Dr. Mayerson held out his hand and John reluctantly shook it.

"You created Oneiricil," John said.

"That's right. Unfortunately, I know what it's like to lose your parents, John. My mother had Alzheimer's. Near the end, she called me 'daddy' as she was slowly waking up each morning. That's when she seemed the most peaceful, I think. Did you know, as the brain deteriorates, it's the earlier long-term memories that survive? As if they're the most important ones and the brain knows it. Sorry—I don't mean to

ramble."

"Oneiricil is just for recalling old memories?" John asked.

"Not just for recalling—reliving. But as you can see," Dr. Mayerson said gesturing toward the apparition of John's father, "It can only do so much if you resist it."

"But it's only right to resist it. My parents are gone. That's not my dad."

"It could be, if you want him to be."

"No, it can't."

"Why did you take the Oneiricil, John?"

Before he could answer, Dr. Mayerson continued.

"I'm not here to make these decisions for you. Oneiricil is simply there to give you the choice about how you want to see things."

John looked back at the image of his father and Dr. Mayerson was gone as abruptly as he had appeared.

With a great deal of concentration, he remembered what it was like when his father walked with him and the ghost started to walk beside him. As they walked, John felt a great flood of memories with his father rushing through him. He gently pushed the memories away and only focused on what it was like to walk with his father—nothing more. The blank expression stayed on its face.

"I know you're not really my dad," John said. "But whatever you are, you're much more vivid than a picture. I'll give you that at least."

When they arrived at the park, John looked at the woods where he had spent hours playing with Benny in summers past. He observed the trees more closely and realized that there were only a few unique forms and they were repeatedly copied and turned at different angles to create the illusion of different trees.

“Come on...you,” John said.

They walked along a trail through the cloned trees.

“I can’t talk about you and mom with Ben. Sometimes I break down and look through some old pictures. Every time I do, a part of me shuts out what happened and for a fraction of a second I know I’m gonna see you both again...but we’re just gonna do something like eating cheeseburgers or watching a sitcom or some other mundane thing we used to do, because for that moment I’m convinced that you and mom never stopped being there.”

Feeling his lips start to quiver, John turned to his father.

“Daddy,” said Johnny.

His father picked him up and squeezed.

There was a thud outside his room that brought John back. He sat upright and listened, but then there was only silence. When he opened the door he saw Ben lying on the floor. There was just enough light from the glowing laptop screen to see the empty Oneiricil bottle and the drool oozing from Ben’s slack jaw.

Mommy tickled Benny’s footsies. The blankets were like a hug. There were bright, dancing kitties in a merry-go-round, but it was too high to touch. Now mommy put her lips on his tummy and blew—*brrrrphffft*. An explosion of giggles. Then there were hands and mommy went away. “BOO!” Mommy was back.

And then another one—*brrrrphffft*. More tickles came and his tummy shook up and down with them. Kicking his footsies did no good and he squealed with delight. Then the tickles became hard and went up. The *brrrrphffft* was in his mouth now. He didn’t like it there. The tickling faded away and then there was pressing. The hot air was in his mouth again. The compressions were coming evenly. There was more stale air being shot into his lungs and then the rhythmic pumping on his sternum continued. He tried to ignore what was happening and instead focus on his mother’s voice as it rapidly faded:

You are my Sunshine

My only Sunshine

You make me happy

When skies are grey

You’ll never know, dear

How much I love you

Please don’t take

My Sunshine away

For Eric.

MAMALUJO

by Jim Meirose

They're in a plain room with no windows and one door. Wide eyed Luke sits red faced at a chrome legged table. Matthew stands over him. Now Mark comes at him also.

Tell me, says Mark, leaning on the table, face thrust at Luke. What's it like to be you? To be so special? Tell me. Tell me now!

Luke says meekly I don't know—there's nothing special about me.

Mark points to Matthew.

He told you so too, says Mark. There is something special about you. We both believe it.

Is there? says Luke—what?

Oh, says Matthew—you won't believe it anyway—you're so stubborn.

Matthew casts a disgusted look to the side and steps away.

Mark gazes at Luke. All at once John comes in the room. He points at Luke. His hand trembles as he shouts.

You're full of pride at being paid so many compliments! I can see it in your face. This

is wrong—come back to Christ, come back to Christ—

Matthew waves John away.

Quiet! he snaps.

John leaves the room scowling. Matthew steps up to Luke.

You know what Luke? he says.

What?

If you were a woman I'd die to have sex with you.

So would I, said Mark—so would I.

Luke's eyebrows rise, his face reddens. He sits a minute looking down, then looks up.

You're right, he says in a trembling voice. I am special. You know why?

Why? Tell us why—

Here's why.

With that, he pulls out a black revolver and plugs Matthew and Mark. John rushes in and is stunned at what he is seeing. Luke sits in a mist of gunpowder smell and eyes his bloody handiwork. Then he rises, shoves the gun into his belt, pushes John roughly aside and bolts from the room.

TWO-TON PAPERWEIGHT

by Patrick Malone

The party had rendered Jake Roberts inebriate and reeking of vomit. He was lying face down in a dumpster, attempting to determine whether or not he was too drunk to escape its walls. After remaining motionless for a few moments, he decided he should focus his energy on locating an exit. A few seconds of wild flailing confirmed his prior notion that such a task was nearly impossible under the thick haze of intoxication, so he groped for his pocket, produced a pack of cigarettes, lit one and rolled over to face the stars.

Jake had been abandoned in a dumpster at his own social gathering. However, his reason for being dumped in such an unsavory location was perfectly reasonable. He had struck someone at the party across the face in a fit of drunken rage (something about them changing the presets on his Ferrari's radio during a joy ride) and after receiving a few blows himself, was subsequently transported to the dumpster by two larger gentlemen.

The din of the party was now barely audible in the distance. The gathering had been financed, like everything else in Jake's

life, by his late uncle, Big Jimbo. Most of his extended family loathed Jake (and this fact was corroborated by the falling chandelier which nearly killed him during the reading of Big Jimbo's will), but Big Jimbo, adored by the family solely for his money and power, seemed to see something in the man.

"Jack," Big Jimbo would always say after smoking his sixth pack of the day, "Don't let these jok'as get to ya. People ain't good f'a nothin'. They'll hold ya back." Then he'd purchase Jake a new car or hand him a check for a hefty sum of cash.

The only other person in the world who seemed to have a soft spot for Jake was a lover of his by the name of Anabella. A rumor had circulated for quite some time in the Roberts family that Jake was planning to marry her. The story was told in a variety of manners, sometimes involving submarines or Jake ingesting hallucinogenic mushrooms, but the constants were always someone overhearing Jake reading aloud the words he formed on his computer while composing a letter illustrating his romantic

intentions.

But Jake's life changed when, contrary to what the surgeon general had predicted, Big Jimbo met his maker at the hands of a cocaine junkie in a Wal-Mart parking lot. Even in death he was able to spoil Jake, and accordingly left him his Malibu beach house and the entire fortune he had obtained from his invention of the spearmint flavored toothpick.

Directly following his acquisition of the enormous fortune, Jake decided to celebrate with a scorpion bowl at the local Chinese restaurant. After an evening of discussing with the restaurant's manager how his year's animal, the snake, on the menu's Zodiac chart didn't reflect his personality in the slightest, he struck Anabella, under the pretense that she was attempting to waste his "hard earned money" after she found a staple in her rice. A lengthy court hearing followed. Jake was sentenced to six months of anger management classes with a pencil-necked kindergarten teacher who explained several times, in great detail, the psychological benefits of taking an hour out of one's day to pet an invisible cat by the name of the Rum Tum Tugger. Anabella, despite expressing even to Jake that she wanted to forgive him, decided to abandon her Bluebeard of a boyfriend after conferring with her mother, a ninety-year old Californian with an affinity for medical marijuana who would address Jake using only eloquently composed strings of four-letter profanities.

This event took a significant toll on his

mental health, and he retreated into the security of his new Malibu manor. Once Jake finished his six months in Invisible Cat Stroking 101, the only people who laid eyes on the reclusive billionaire for three years were deliverymen. He passed the time by stomaching expensive wine like Kool-Aid. But his mother, determined Jake find some acquaintances, decided to plan a party at the mansion behind his back. And where was he now? Lying bacchanalian in a dumpster, soon to be tried once more for assault.

Jake lit another cigarette after his first one had burned out. Shackled by his own intoxication, he decided his only option was to wait until morning, and briefly chuckled at the idea of someone with his amount of wealth spending the night in a dumpster. After a few more drags on his cigarette, he fell asleep with the smoldering butt in his mouth.

It was about six in the morning when the waste receptacle erupted in a violent series of tremors. Confused as to what was going on, Jake forced himself to his hands and knees and stumbled, half asleep and completely hungover, across the dumpster. Before Jake could reach the edge, the dumpster abruptly tipped. A sudden landslide of waste products caused the garbage, which he had spent the night sleeping on top of, to end up covering him entirely. A few faint lines of sunlight danced through spaces in the waste, but the area was soon plunged into darkness by the sudden slamming of a door. Somewhere behind him, an engine roared to life and the vessel was set in motion. He attempted

to cry out, only to have a viscous fluid trickle into his mouth and set him gagging. The fear of this occurring again kept him quiet for the rest of the ride, even with the garbage truck's door opening and closing repeatedly.

After about thirty minutes, Jake found himself caught in another stampede of filth and approximately five feet deep in a pile of trash. The muffled staccato of heavy machinery could be heard somewhere nearby, so Jake's assumption was that he had been deposited at the city dump. He didn't scream, figuring that in his mid-twenties he was perfectly able of climbing out from under a few feet of garbage. When the truck's engine faded off into the distance and Jake could be certain there was no danger of it backing over him, he began to wriggle about. The initial struggle proved to be quite tiresome, and he became aware that he had severely underestimated the difficulty of climbing out from under two-hundred pounds of trash.

When his stamina had been replenished by a momentary period of rest, Jake began to fight again, using dense objects which lay nearby to drag himself through the sea of waste. He had progressed about a foot when a sharp sensation traveled through his hungover head due to the loud sound of some sort of machine engaging thirty feet above his head. He winced, swore, and clamped down his forefinger and thumb on the bridge of his nose. Of course, a headache proved to be the least of his problems when a mangled, two ton chunk of metal came crashing through the garbage above him. He screamed,

forgetting the reason he had remained quiet the entire truck ride, and gagged again as his mouth filled with a substance he now recognized as a milkshake which had been sitting in a freezer for two years. A collection of symbols came within a foot of his face, and an immense amount of weight was added to his gut. Had he been able to, he would have curled up into a ball and braced himself for the embrace of death. But he found himself wholly incapable of movement, and began to thrash his head like Joe Bonham when he came to conclusion that the collision had paralyzed him from the neck down. However, this idea was soon refuted by movement in his various digits and appendages.

The balmy realization that Jake was neither paralyzed nor dead, but merely trapped, flowed over him. His panic subsided and his exceedingly tense muscles relaxed. Under this condition, he was able to focus his attention on the varied assortment of symbols which he had come face to face with. Judging by the font of the symbols and the material upon which they were printed, they were apparently the text of a license plate. He decided, after considering the amount of effort it would take to turn his head, that he had no option but to read what he now recognized as letter and numbers. At that point he quite nearly had an aneurysm. He was looking at the shredded remains of his Ferrari. He determined that some drunken idiot at the party had crashed it, and plans were conceived to extract revenge upon the vandal.

Jake began to squirm again, but immediately stopped moving once he realized that the Ferrari had forced itself down even harder on his body. Evidently, with each disturbance in the garbage pile Jake created, the car's weight would come down on him significantly harder. He screamed, but the sound was drowned out by the machinery. A mental battle against the instinct to move began. The warrior remained as still as possible in his frenzied state, now wildly pivoting his head and feeling around for something that could help him. When his search returned no results, he fell still.

Here was Jake Roberts, the world's youngest billionaire, about to die under his own Ferrari in the city dump. He just laid there for a bit, taking shallow breaths and attempting to devise a plan to escape. More than anything, he craved a drink. Squirming a bit more, he attempted to reach for the pocket which contained his flask, only to feel the weight of the car pressing down harder. He gave up on satisfying his urge, and began to grope, more carefully this time, in the dim light for something, anything, that could potentially save his life. He found destroyed speakers, shattered flat-screen televisions, shredded leather furniture, and various other formerly expensive items which someone in Malibu had once prized. He discovered a leather ottoman which was approximately his own size and shape, about two feet from him. He frantically yanked on the only object which could potentially save his life and, realizing that dragging something his own mass through

a dense blob of waste would be a nearly impossible undertaking, released it and fell still.

Jake stared at the unreachable ottoman for a few moments and glimpsed a grotesque little louse squirming in one of the leather's many tears. The fact which he had been denying for so long finally wormed its way into his mind: nothing here could help him. He was doomed to die. It was almost funny; the fate which he had fought in the frenzied fashion of an animal caught in a trap seemed almost soothing when there was nothing left to do but face it. The artificial heartbeat of the dump's clanging machinery had become an almost pacifying din. The chunk of metal which he had prized so much at one time had never looked so beautiful. He felt safe under it. Nobody could hurt him under his Ferrari.

Then, in what Jake had assumed to be isolation, a voice rang out. "Well, well, if it ain' ol' Jack." Jake caught a whiff of alcohol and burning tobacco to his left and turned his head in that direction. And there, completely tangible, lay all three-hundred pounds of chain-smoking, binge drinking Big Jimbo. Unable to speak, Jake weakly nodded at his uncle. "Ya know Jack, I'm proud a' ya. Don't let the rest a' these jokers get to ya. People ain't good fa nothin'. They'll hold ya back."

Jake found himself in agreement with Big Jimbo's glorious teachings. It was almost funny, Jake thought, how both him and his beloved uncle would meet their maker under the wheels of a car. But the similarities between their deaths would not

end there. The potent image of Big Jimbo's wake, empty save for Jake and an extremely pretentious undertaker, slithered onto the silver screen of his mind's eye. And the screen erupted in flames, scorched away to reveal the horrible truth that had been hidden behind it: Jake would die alone. Once more he groped wildly for his flask, and screamed at the top of his lungs when he couldn't reach it. Horrible revelations swarmed into his mind. He had spent his life alone. He recalled the way his nerves had screamed for the touch of another human during his three year period of isolation, only to have their protests drowned away with expensive Merlot. So then and there, Jake, sober as he had ever been, decided that he would not die alone under a two-ton paperweight. He felt an immense power bubble up from deep within, and erupt from his lips with a primal cry, "Anabella!"

He began to flail and crawl and scream with no fear of milkshake dripping into his mouth. He wriggled as the car's weight

began to increase on his abdomen. He fought with the heroism of Giles Corey under the enormous mass which threatened to push him into death at any moment. He began to push himself backwards under the car, and found that the weight on his stomach was partially relieved. So he pushed deeper and deeper into the garbage, until he noted that the car had become caught in the trash and there was an inch of space between him and it. He drew upon the last of his strength, and forced himself from the decaying pile of waste and worms into the outside world. He emerged from the garbage like a snake slithering from its old skin, triumphant, and leaped to his feet. Basking in the sun, he cried out to the and began to stagger towards several dump workers who had come to investigate what they took to be a mental patient playing William Wallace in the garbage. Jake threw his arms around the first worker who reached him in a tight embrace, and broke down sobbing. The sun had never looked so beautiful.

GEORGE LUCAS PRESENTS:

A CHEMICAL IMBALANCE

by J.D. Ferguson

I couldn't sleep.

My face felt tight, strained. I realized I had a pimple, a big one.

I kept thinking to myself, "I want to die," every time I turned my pillow over.

I was already awake when my alarm went off.

I felt like Inspector Finch in *V for Vendetta* where he stays up all night sitting in his chair, drinking bourbon, waiting for the sun to rise on the day 'V' blows up the Parliament building. He realizes he forgot to sleep when his alarm goes off. He's so pissed off at the world, at the government, at his own inner struggle that he didn't even sleep. He just waited and thought about his life. I did the same thing, but instead of helping Natalie Portman, I had to make myself coffee and go to work as manager of a movie theater selling tickets to *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace 3D*. In a way, I guess I was helping Natalie Portman.

I wore a tie and put gel in my hair. People respect people who wear ties and put gel in their hair. My employees respected me. Everyone respected me but the customers.

The movie theater attracts all members of society. The movie theater is like the gas station in modern Native American poetry. Everyone needs gas. Everyone needs to pay seven dollars for popcorn. The price of gas and the price for seeing a movie are the two most discussed prices of shit people buy. Fat people come to see movies, Asians come to see movies, and the three black people in my town come to see movies. Even children and their frantic mothers come to see movies, happy people come to see movies, old people who hate everything come to see movies. Customers at a movie theater are fucking terrible because they are a reflection of the world. Native American poets use the gas station for the same reason.

It was busy, I wasn't feeling confident. I

had a big, red pimple on my cheek and a black man yelled at me because I wouldn't give him his money back for The Vow. His pregnant wife bought the tickets. He didn't want to go. I felt that he was anxious about being a man and watching The Vow. He had black tattoos on his fingers.

I told him, "No, you can't get your money back, we're sold out. I turned people away, it's not fair to give you your money back. It says right there on the ticket, 'No Refunds.' Even the 'R' is capitalized you fuck. That means we're serious. We mean fucking business."

He took down my name and said, "going to get you fired."

An employee came to me and said someone threw up in the bathroom. I was staring at the clock, trying to keep the left side of my face with the pimple turned away. No one respects someone with bad skin. I kept asking myself, "Why do I have a pimple on my cheek?" and I couldn't find an answer.

"Go clean it up," I told her.

"It smells really bad," she said.

"What does it smell like?"

"Like Orange Dreamsicle and sausage."

"Clean it up and spray some air freshener. The 'Cool Linen Breeze' stuff."

Four Asian guys came in to see Star Wars. They were all wearing puffy North Face vests and black-rimmed glasses. They didn't understand that the movie was in 3D and that they had to wear 3D glasses. I had to explain that the 3D glasses went over

their actual glasses. I felt like if I was a good person, if I was worldly and understood humans, that I would speak their language, be able to explain to them the 3D process, explain to them that I don't always have a gigantic red, horrifying, greasy growth on my face.

I wanted to hang myself from the lobby's high ceiling using the black cord holding up the Sherlock Holmes 2 banner. I wanted to die 30 feet off the ground, between the Prometheus and Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter posters. I wanted people to take cellphone pictures of my body, like I might be part of a viral campaign for the new Neil Blomkamp movie. I wanted people to mention me on Twitter and Facebook and make Youtube videos speculating why a 200 pound body was strung from the rafters. I wanted people to get in an online fight about how stupid they think Michael Bay is, as if it might have some relation to the pimple on my face.

At the end of the night, after my employees finished cleaning up the popcorn and butter grease from the counters, one of them told me she thought she saw more vomit in one of the theaters. I told them to go home, that I'd take care of it. I thought if I cleaned up the puke for them, that they would forget about how horrible my face looked.

By cleaning up the puke I would regain my employees respect.

The vomit was all over the rose-printed carpet. I had no idea how to clean it up. I mixed some disinfectant soap and water and used a mop to scrub the carpet.

I kept thinking to myself, “People think that God created this world.

“People think God created an animal that pukes on carpets.”

“People think that God created a situation in which I would have to clean up another animal's half-digested food that came out of their mouth.”

“People think that God created this awful fucking smell.”

I sat next to the projector that had just finished playing the credits for Star Wars. Everyone was gone. I was alone in a movie theater, looking at my phone, reading CNN's mobile website, waiting the ten minutes it takes for the bulb to cool down so I could leave.

I read a story about Michael Archuleta, a death row inmate who requested to die by firing squad. Archuleta killed Gordon Ray Church, a homosexual who Archuleta had sex with. Archuleta and his friend abducted Church and drove 80 miles with him in their trunk. Then they sodomized him with a tire iron, puncturing his liver, killing him.

Archuleta will be killed when four anonymous sharpshooters, picked by the state of Utah, will stand behind a wall with four openings. One of the sharpshooters will have a real bullet while the other three will have blanks. So that none of the shooters will know if it was their bullet that kills the prisoner. Archuleta will sit in a chair, his hands behind his back, blindfolded, with a target sitting in his lap. The sharpshooters will then aim at the target and kill Archuleta.

I thought, “That would make a good movie,” and then thought that Hollywood would probably make it into a found footage movie.

A producer would come up with the idea that the footage would only be able to play backwards because the story wouldn't be strong enough without a twist.

So the audience will see Archuleta's story backwards and think that he is a super hero who sends bullets back at his shooters and escapes from prison to save a homosexual man from dying by pulling a tire iron out of his anus. Then they have sex and fall in love.

At the end the twist would be revealed and the camera will pan out and the audience will realize they were watching a found footage movie and Michael Douglas will be watching the footage because he is a detective and will say something memorable to get the audience involved, like, “Hope no one ever watches this” or “For my eyes only.”

I then thought about what the last hour and a half of my life would look like if it were played backwards. Darth Maul would fly out of a tunnel in two pieces and reassemble at the top. Darth Maul would fight with Obi-Won and resurrect Liam Neeson with his light saber. I would put my phone in my pocket, walk down some steps, look like I was painting vomit on a carpet with a mop, sit in a chair, and create a cigarette by blowing smoke from my mouth. And my pimple would be there the whole time.

PARABELLE

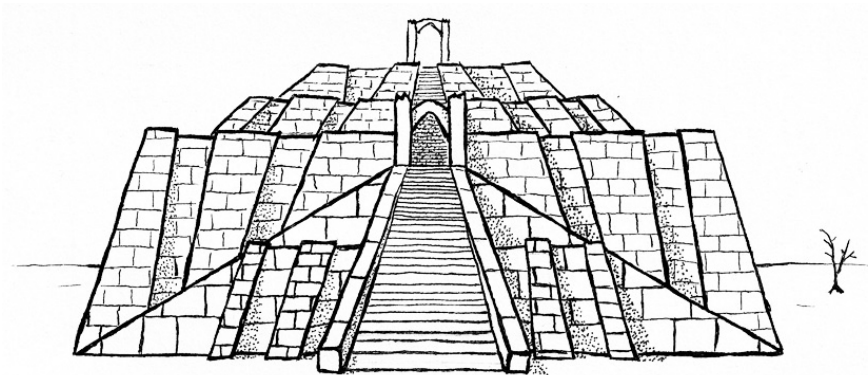
by A.S.A.

Two brothers lived in the yellow desert, Ashvar and Ur.

As the first day began to close, they prayed for the knowledge to shield themselves from the cold night. Ashvar, he prayed to Sister Moon for knowledge to build his house from sand. Ur, he prayed to Brother Sun for knowledge to build his house of rock.

Brother Sun and Sister Moon, they answered the prayers.

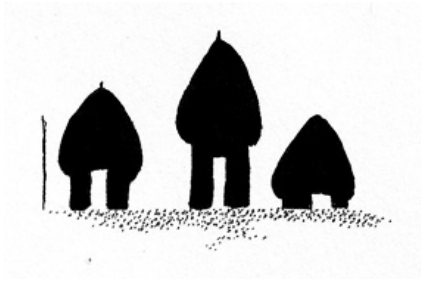
Crafty Ur, he built his house from rock. Every night for a week he slept there, out of the cold, and it did not fall down.



Ashvar, he built his house from sand. Every night for a week he slept there, out of the cold, and every morning it fell down.

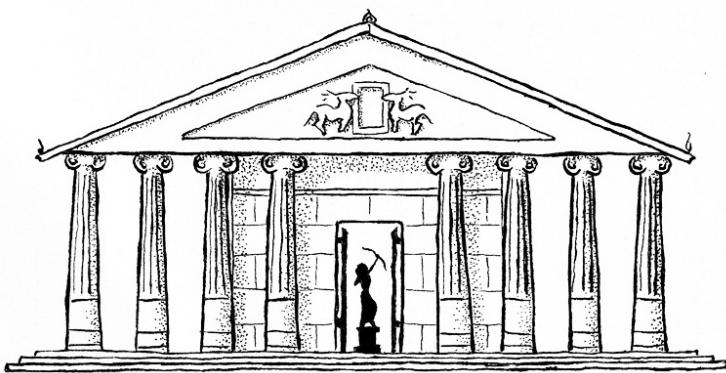
"Stupid Ashvar!" says Ur,

"His house is so bad! Every day he must rebuild it, so crude!"



The week ended, and the next morning both the house of sand and the house of rock fell down.

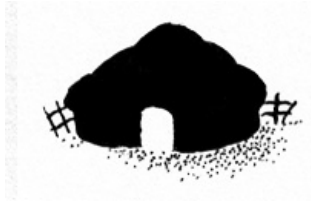
Crafty Ur, he laughed, picked up the broken rock, and that day built a new house of stone.



Ashvar, he built his house from sand. Every night for a week he slept there, out of the cold, and every morning it fell down.

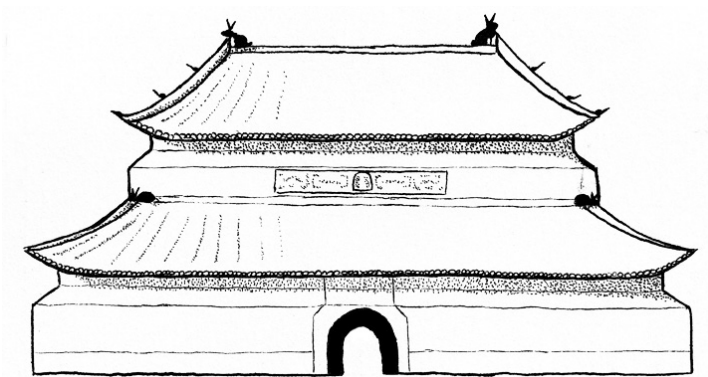
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The week ended, and the next morning both the house of sand and the house of stone fell down.

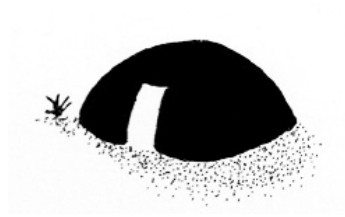
Crafty Ur, he laughed, picked up the broken stone and that day built himself a new house of pebbles.



Ashvar, he built his house from sand. Every night for a week he slept in it, out of the cold, and every morning it fell down.

"Stupid Ashvar!" says Ur,

"His house is so bad! Every day he must rebuild it, so crude!"



Yet the week ended, and that morning, both the house of sand and the house of pebbles fell down.

Crafty Ashvar, he built his house from sand. Every night he slept in it, out of the cold, and every morning it fell down.

Ur had no more rock, no more stone, no more pebbles. Too proud to ask Ashvar's help, that night he died alone out in the cold.

To this day, Ashvar still builds his house from the yellow sand every morning, and every afternoon he spend hunting and singing songs to Brother Sun and Sister Moon.

TRAIN OF HARMON

By Ryan Mann

I. New York Summers

Beginning where we began, naked and sticky with sweat on our couch, nothing but animals without air conditioning yet happy nonetheless. It was a New York City summer and the streets were resplendent with the stark, alien calm that only concrete in the sun creates. Together we watched out the window as one creature, pleased with the urban wasteland we had inherited.

My hands wrapped pleasantly around her body and her own hung in the air above my head, fingers twirling and wrapping themselves in hair I didn't have. This was a game we played, a way of testing our psychic bond, seeing if we could feel the imaginary tugs of our partner on our phantom appendages, wincing and sighing at the imagined touch of the other.

That was how we were in those days. In front of us then TV blared, fizzed, and popped with occult transmissions of commercialism. Men and women strutted aggressively through sexual kabuki for our benefit. There, on the sweat and sex soaked

platform of our sofa we existed for a moment in a paradise to shame a sultan.

Then we heard the stomping.

It happened quickly, one moment in perfect synchronous harmony, the next she pulled away from me, ripping more accurately. And I was reaching after her, slowly, too slow. She rushed to the window shamelessly, still naked, and looked around for the source before crying out to me and pointing while I still peeled myself from the sofa, groggy with surprise.

"Pirates!" she shouted.

"Oh?" I asked, feigning mild interest. "What kind?"

"Land pirates!" she continued, too aggravated for detail or eloquence. "On a train!"

"Ah. Almost special."

I condescended but it was true. In the old days of New York City, people said there had been many trains, above and below ground, in the ancient tunnels that now

house the dark-minded rag men and their big eyed wives. Back when people had things to do and places to be, as the books say. But in the hard times, most trains were melted to build the star-shaped Migrators. Our ancestors had been cautious and careful people, trained by a dozen generations of shortage. It was unlikely that they would have left even one wheel behind, let alone a whole train. But that had made it all the more famous— the Train of Harmon.

In the days of the Migration the train would already have been a relic. Magnetic levitation had been invented and it was only a matter of time before all travel revolved around it. Harmon's contraption would still run on the strange, pandering railroads that snaked through the hills and mountains while laying low in the plains. Near the end of its career the steel rails, now plausible as streets of gold, were stripped away and replaced by especially hardened black plastics for economy's sake. These were the industrial traces that gave Harmon and his train their first name, as the literal "death on black rails".

In the beginning he stuck to the rails on a yearly circuit to what remained of the North American continents most valuable economic centers. But Harmon had larger ambition than that. He desired to turn his tribe into a horde, to live eternally in the nightmares of others. So he expanded his operation. He and his crew hunted the giant chitins of the mid-east and constructed miles of new train cars from them which they set on wheels of carved plastic and steelwood. To these they

invited recruits, young men and women seeking a life beyond the poverty of the Southern waste towns. When their numbers swelled into the many thousands, they rigged up their greatest and most infamous accomplishment; a strange and ingenious set of legs, built from anything and everything at hand. The result was a motley collection of mechanical monstrosities, often utterly incongruous in origin but universally consistent in their angular, alien shapes. They were tools of terror, insectile appendages that would emerge from the rusted undercarriage of the train to claw the heart of the land and it was on these that the train trampled across the broken ruins of Queens Boulevard outside our apartment.

I watched all this from over her shoulder, two steps behind her and standing still. To move any further towards her then would be foolish; I could sense how tense she was. Helgi, for all her seeming apathy, really did care about things, small and meaningless, that were ignored by everyone but her, like the plight of the rag men or the things children ate. When the pineapple crabs first scuttled into the city and took up nesting in the old skyscrapers, preying on the damned pigeons to their hearts content my friends and I, we thanked the universe for ridding us of the inbred avian holdovers. She went and built them a coop on the roof. That was the difference between her and I; she rejected the modern empiricism for sentimentality. She saw purpose where I could only see irrelevance and maybe she was right, but for me the world did not exist beyond her and I.

The train thundered around in the distance, approaching slowly. It was circling around the cratered surface of the Boulevard like a giant metal centipede, frontward segments shining brightly in the sun. Harmon's crew was strapped to seemingly every external surface they could find, marking their annual visit to the city by putting bullets into everything they could find. A burst of stray fire somehow caught the neighbor, watching with the many of us from our balconies, in the abdomen. Helgi gasped as it entered the side of his body with the subtle deadliness of a calculated vector and out the other end with bloody dispatch. He fell, gurgling, and she retreated into my arms without the comfortable pleasantries of earlier.

I took some pleasure in the feel of warm tears on my shoulder.

The pirates skipped our block that night, so I wanted to celebrate. She disagreed and looked sad. I left her there, tinged with a bittersweet feeling, and gathered some of our friends to drink on the roof where we watched the city burn. A burning building in full swing is a magnificent show, all the excitement of a hundred firework displays and the incendiary grandeur of a dozen bonfires. The beauty of a disaster, I tried to tell her, is that it has all the drama, comedy, and tragedy of a play yet engages all the senses. How often do you smell the collective destruction of a life or taste the failure of a heroic act in the air?

She cursed and threw a cushion at me when I said that to her long ago, angry but not angry enough to fight me with

something substantial. I still remember how the sex we had that night was tinged with perfect spite. But this later night, for the first time, she felt different, like she had just realized I wasn't a man at all but a salamander in man's clothing, cold and slimy to the touch.

II. *The Party*

For a few hours everything was typical. We drank of the latest and strangest concoctions, draining an enormous glass bottle of meat liquor that made us all reek for a good long time. We spoke of the latest continental shifts and the multiplying creatures on the old Long Island growing and living in forests of impenetrable steelwood. We drunkenly shoved a fellow tenant's goat off the roof and into the street below. And when all the booze was gone and our topics exhausted, we sat in lawnchairs and watched the ashes settle into a grey snow around us. It was then that one of my companions raised the issue of his girlfriend, whom he had recently become estranged from after a fight regarding their preferences in TV programming.

It struck me that he seemed unfazed by this change, casually inserting it into the relaxed silence. It was like a legal announcement, an emotionless and official relinquishing of the person who had been his partner in all things which unsettled me. For such a small thing to divide two people seemed strange but as I played it out in my head, I could see how it could fragment the fragile bonds of a relationship. All the

tectonic rifts in the world began with a small crack, a structural weakness in the crust that would shatter under pressure. I began to think of Helgi and the way she had looked at me earlier.

The pleasure of the night was dimmed and I began to complain ceaselessly to my companions about this new phenomenon on her part, growing away from me. I felt lonely and strangely unpleasant, like there was something living in my chest that wanted to punch its way out through my throat and throttle someone. My friends, all happily enjoying the moment, frowned on my behavior and I soon found myself as uncomfortable around them as they had become around me. So I left, increasingly heavy and drunk, believing that I had somehow been cursed by her. Couldn't she see what she was doing by rejecting my invitation? It would be the first of many wedges driven between us and then she would steal herself away, to some other man.

And I would be abandoned.

Suddenly I wanted her dead, dissected and pinned up on the wall like one of those insects in an old book. I rumbled down the stairs to our apartment and flopped through the door only to find it empty with the lights off. I searched high and low with no luck and began strangely to feel better inside, the odd feeling in my chest replaced by one of euphoric lightness. I knew that I really would kill her, that her prospective murder was the fuel of this sensation. I took the heavy club we kept by the bed, carved from the limb of some giant saurian.

It had been sharpened and spiked by Dakotans for the exclusive purpose of killing the she-boars, a factoid I found satisfying. I also took my gun, a deceptively small piece of plastic and metal that rested organically in my hand, and put it in my pocket.

I did not know where I was going but left anyway.

III. *The City*

Two lights lit the streets that night. One was the moon, full and silvery despite its enormous fracture. The other was the spreading inferno of the city. Everywhere you looked, it seemed someone was sullenly wandering the city, broken faces illuminated by the same gleeful scourge that had taken their homes and families from them. Their misfortune brought me happiness and I reveled in pitying them for lacking the opportunity I had, to punish the one who had offended me. I was grinning and, perhaps it was the drink, but I felt smugly lopsided, like a hunchback on spring break.

I passed the local school (burning), the new city hall (burnt), and the doddering old Chrysler Building (burning yet again). Wandering blindly for a time I finally decided on a plan to follow the fires that seemed more recent and vivid, hoping counter-intuitively, that she would be drawn to the heart of the flames. I was following, not precisely my instincts, but feelings in places other than my mind. Not my heart, it was too pure for that, but the

feeling was nearby. It was pumping me full of war for some sort of grand showdown, a confrontation between me and her that would prove who was right and end this little spat and reunite us perfectly, just as we had been before.

The heat became increasingly intense and my sweat was causing an undue amount of ash to stick to my face and clothes. It invaded every crevice and pore and I became a sooty ghost raving through the streets about the sparks in his eyes as backdrafts blew apart windows far above, raining glass on the world below. Weeping, bloody, and choking on ash, I slowly carved my way to where I thought she was. But I knew my hopes were dashed when I heard that rumbling sound. The head of the train crept like a grotesque animal around the corner of a block a dozen streets down and I knew I was spotted, that it would be coming for me, a ghastly predator for suitably hideous prey.

I pulled my gun and fired six shots. There were eleven bullets in the magazine and I felt the seventh projectile click into place, firm and virile, prepared to deal death in a clean and fair way that I suddenly decided I wasn't able to. I put it away for the moment and hefted the club from the pile of debris I had thrown it into on spotting the train. Confidence swept over me anew and I stood my ground to do battle with the charging beast, intent on crushing its steel skull like the head of one of the boars the Dakotans despised. The machine apparently detected this and sped into a strange and wild manoeuvre of aggression, seemingly swaying from side to side as it

swerved around the obstacles of the collapsing city.

IV. *Sanguine Warmth*

And then it was gone, around a corner just before it came within reach. The great length of the machine continued to rumble past, but I knew beyond a doubt that I would never reach her now. All it left me in its passing was a dream.

The train continued to bear down on me, roaring mechanically. I saw him, not in the cockpit but hanging out the side in a glorious red uniform with a woman in hand, so beautiful and sad that I knew it had to be her and I suddenly fell in love again and decided I only had to kill him. I cursed him madly, unfeelingly, there were not words enough for the base criminal that would take the sole joy from a man's life and leave him with only his anger. He met my gaze, hurtling down on me in his behemoth, and knew both what I desired and that I could not have it. There was sadness in those eyes that frustrated me, like he had searched and found me inferior. Then he shot me in the knee.

In the midst of blinding agony I reached for my own gun and he punched a second hole right through my wrist. The train pulled up just short of where I lay curtailing the confrontation I had been hoping for. I spat more curses while bleeding into the ash as he dismounted with elegance, holding her as she stepped down in turn. He led her to my broken form and instructed her calmly to kiss my brow one

last time before they departed for good. But when she bent down in the ash I spat in her eye. As she recoiled, I realized that that act of hate was more deliriously fulfilling than anything I had felt all my time with her. I laughed and laughed and laughed until I felt his eyes upon me once again.

The sudden awareness startled me and I regained my composure. I felt a strange fear as I stared into those eyes, blue like mine, but older than either of us. I saw something darker and graver, something I realized I had seen in her eyes before, an expression of deep internal burden. But as I watched they lightened ever so slightly and he mockingly bid me adieu and disappeared into the smoldering boroughs with her. Her smile was the last thing I saw of them as they pranced into the dark.

After they were gone I laid in the sanguine warmth of my blood to watch the buildings fall down.

V. Sojourn Concluded

As I slept, my body moved unconsciously. I came to in front of an retro-future styled Irish bar, titled the Sissy McGunty. The sign and the inside of the bar, visible through tiny window slits, were lit by bright white fluorescents that sliced through the crimson and grey around me. An open sign shone in the window. I passed from hell through the gate.

The inside was spacious and empty save for me and the bartender. All around me was cleanliness; smooth white walls had been buffed to a mirror shine and harsh

lighting that left nothing to the imagination. Behind the bar was a typical distilling apparatus, various glass tubes and containers designed for the accelerated evaporation of alcohol and subsequent percolation into a variety of drinks. Still suffering from my earlier session with the meat liquor, I ordered shots of vodka and tequila to cleanse my palette. It worked; I drank quickly and ordered more, set on erasing this night from memory once and for all.

The more I drank the more I became aware of a black and red smudge in the far corner of the bar. The more I consumed, the more defined the smudge became until I could at last discern that I was looking at a man. Further drinking revealed the blue glimmer in his eye. Maybe I should have killed him there. But I didn't. Instead I sat across from him.

On the whole, my impression was that he was disheveled. His garb was truly red, but it had been made dark by years of use. There were holes in everything, the worst about the size of my fist, and they revealed a thick layer of chitinous armor under which led me to suspect that he was small. He drank a thick brown sludge of narcotics and interspersed his drinking with swallows of something else from a dented canteen around his neck. There were no weapons at his side.

Eventually he noticed me and spoke.

"I don't know you?" he asked.

"No," I replied, "Not really".

"But," he said, "I recognize you. Are we

acquainted fictionally?”

His voice was a low wheeze. There was considerable slurring.

“Yes,” I said quietly, “We met a little while ago.”

He laughed.

“It’s really strange, you know, to live in dreams. But that’s where I feel best these days. What did I look like? Healthy?”

“You looked like a young Richthofen.”

“That’s good. I can tell, just by looking into your eyes. I live a little behind them now.”

“Someday they won’t remember me” he continued, “But for now it is a form of brief immortality.”

I nodded and changed the subject.

“What do you know of love?” I asked.

He did not reply, but stared at me once more until something clicked behind his eyes and I felt just a little bit more alive. His slurring vanished.

“A long time ago, I thought knew everything of love. I knew it as what the ancients called “Agni” the fire that consumes joyously. It enveloped me just like it enveloped you, in an ecstatic inferno. I felt perfect and complete. Then I was nearly extinguished, just as you have been, and I learned that there are only two ways to keep the flames alive. Consume or be consumed.”

“There is no third way?”

“No. We are all food or eaters of food.

Even the fasting man is eaten by hunger.”

“Where did you learn this?”

He laughed and took a big drink of sludge.

“It’s not important,” he said, and suddenly the slurring was back.

“What was she like?” he asked.

At that point something broke inside me. I told him about Helgi, beginning with the way her name chimed on the tongue. He sat stoically and absorbed all I could conjure to describe her. I told him about how she curled her feet in her sleep, how she liked her tea and her adoration for tulips. He learned about our body games and falling asleep to documentaries about sanitation. And when were done and he knew even about her chronic mispronunciation of French, he spoke again.

“She sounds lovely.”

“She is” I admitted, “I will probably never see anyone like her again.”

“Maybe.” he said, and unbuttoned his ragged cloak. “What are your plans?”

“I don’t know. I feel hollow.”

He laid the cloak across my lap.

“Wear this to the ruins of the old Colosseum. You’ll find my train there and several thousand young men and women like you.”

“But not like you?”

“No, not anymore.”

I understood.

“You can find her in an odd cafe in Manhattan,” I said, “Where they make coffee from the feces of stray rodents and smoke a weed that smells like raspberries. She’ll be there if you wait.”

Harmon nodded and we both reclined in silence to signal for the arrival of the bill. I paid for both of us, then left wordlessly.

And when I stepped outside I breathed in deep and saw a lone pineapple crab scuttle towards me, a refugee from the fires of

change. In it I detected a kindred soul, so I took pity and crushed it beneath my foot. As its legs snapped and its carapace cracked it gave off a pleasing tropical scent that mingled with the burnt night air and somewhere above the ancient satellites drifted and looked down on me through the clouds of smoke as I smiled back.

One day they would fall from orbit after a thousand years of watching.

And I knew I would live longer—suspended in brief immortality until another might consume me at last.

A WARM PLACE

SEGAMI'S DESCENT INTO MADNESS

by Gary M.

With the hot sun overhead, her delicate fingers went to work. The chalk in her hand glided across the stone before her, slowly but surely bringing forth the outline of a little bird, wings out as if it were soaring. Her shoulder-length blue hair gave a slight gleam in the broad daylight, contrasting the pale blue, almost white dress that fell from her young, thin figure. This was her favourite pastime. Birds were her favourite animal. She loved sitting out under the warm embrace of the new day, drawing birds on the ground for hours around the big fountain that graced the center of the quiet little town. As her petite hand reached out to stroke in the lines of another bird, shadow stretched over the stone before her. She looked up slowly to see three familiar faces. They were the young faces of three boys who lived in this town with her. She didn't like them. They made fun of her, and would step on her drawings. Today would be no different, and she didn't even know their names.

A voice burst into her ears.

"Hey Segami, you drawing those stupid fucking birds again?"

He turned to his two friends, a grin playing across his pale face.

"She's such a weirdo, yeah? No friends, and all she does is draw this crap day after day. I thought we showed her last time that this fountain is our territory."

Segami was shy, and she never could really explain to these kids that the fountain belonged to the town, and not to three people. She couldn't understand why they would always pick on her, and break her chalk, and step on her drawings, and swear at her. She only wanted to draw on her birds and the cobblestone around the fountain held the chalk best. Her parents had told her that when boys were mean to a girl, it probably meant they liked her. But she wasn't sure. These kids were very mean. She looked up, her green and blue eyes taking in the three figures standing over her. She wasn't sure, but these kids were a little bigger than her, so she assumed they were older. Slowly, she offered them a smile. She figured if she was nice, they would be too. A foot came down hard on her hand, breaking the chalk and hurting fiercely. Segami gave a loud yelp, and began to stand up, tears gleaming in her eyes. The three others gave a smile.

"She was down on her knees in front of you, and smiling, Verbichard. Remember what Emily told us about what a girl wants

to do when she is kneeling?"

The boy in the middle, apparently Verbichard took a step forward. He reached out and struck Segami across the face.

"I remember, and I wouldn't let a freak like her do something like that. I would rather Emily do it. This stupid bitch would probably draw a bird on me or something."

The strike had brought Segami down to one knee. She let the tears flow freely, desperately trying to rub the salty liquids from her discoloured eyes. She was afraid now, she wanted to be able to see, but everything was blurry from the tears, and she couldn't stop crying. Her hand and her face hurt. Why were they so mean to her? What had she done? Was it the way she dressed? Was it her heterochromia? Was it her blue hair? She had never been mean to them once.

She felt a hand grab her arm, hard.

"Haha, you made her cry. Look at her, she's gotta be like thirteen or something, and she still cries like a little baby. Why the fuck do you live here, Segami? You give the rest of the town a bad name. We don't want cry-babies in Revori."

The town was small, the town square was tiny. When she had been drawing earlier, there had been nobody about. She was afraid now, and wanted to run back home. She was worried that these boys would hurt her, and there was no one around to help stop it.

"You know, she's kinda cute, actually."

She heard one of the boys say. It was the one holding onto her arm.

"What if we pretended she was Emily or something? She was making that stuff sound like it would feel good, and I don't know, no one will find out if we're quick."

Another voice joined in.

"She'll tell her parents or something."

"Have you ever heard her talk? Maybe she can't tell her parents."

"If she does, we know where she lives. Its a small town."

"Yeah, and if she does say something, we'll kill her."

"No, we can't kill her, that makes us murderers. We'll just break her arms or something."

Segami cried out before a hand clamped over her mouth, whilst another pulled her head back. She flailed wildly, desperately trying to break away, but as a second boy gripped her legs and held her down, she was simply draining her energy. She closed her eyes tightly, screaming against the boy's hand as tears poured down her face. She was shaking all over, her chest was heaving and she was exhausted, but still she struggled. Then, somebody hit her in the head with something hard. She cried out against the hand over her next, trying to break the struggle with the very last of her strength, but it was too much. Exhaustion set in and she was barely able to move. She kept her eyes closed as she could hear the boys talking.

"She's pretty strong if it takes two of us,

Verbichard. She's kinda not moving now, so I don't know if that rock knocked her out, but hurry up and get this over with. I don't want anybody to hear or see us doing this."

"Neither do I, but take your hand off her mouth. If she makes a noise or tries to struggle, hit her with the rock again."

"Alright, alright."

Segami felt the hand removed. She was desperate, and her heart felt as if it would explode in her chest, but she had exerted herself so badly trying to get away, her body just wouldn't move. Raising her arms was like trying to lift a gigantic boulder. She suddenly felt something enter her throat, something weird.

She gagged and pulled her head back, before she was hit again with the rock. She opened her eyes, but there was blood all over her face, and she couldn't see. She tried to scream out, but then she was hit again. After a few minutes, they were finished. She lay there, chest heaving, blood and tears and vomit running down the front of her body. She stared up at the sky, as the three boys stood over her, triumphant grins playing across their faces. She could barely make out a voice.

"Get the fuck out of here, and when your parents ask, tell them you fell down on a rock or something, or we'll come after you, and kill you."

"Don't joke like that."

"I'm fucking serious. If she rats on us, she's dead."

Segami lay there for what felt like forever. Her head and her back hurt. There was a screaming burning sensation all over her forehead. She was disgusted as she struggled to limp back home. When she burst through the door of her parent's pink-hued house, it was evident nobody was home yet. She didn't care, she collapsed in the doorway to the bathroom, vomiting all over herself again. She crawled across the floor, screaming in rage and agony at the power that had been exerted over her. She saw her reflection in the mirror. Her short blue hair was a tangled, bloody mess. Glistening crimson ran down her face.

The front of her pale dress was soaked in blood and vomit. Her eyes were wide and wild, and that was what scared her the most. She look like a wild animal. With a scream of rage, she slammed her fist into the mirror, shattering it whole and cutting her already stinging hand all over. She wheeled back, collapsing in and corner and gripping the sides of her head, screaming wildly to relieve the pent-up rage and hate, and agony and fear. She slammed her bloodied hand against the door until she felt the wood begin to give way beneath her fist. She imagined the door as those three boys, and continued to strike and scream at it. When she opened her eyes again, the door was covered in blood, and there were misshapen dents all over the corner of it where she had been striking it wildly.

She clutched her throat as she tried to scream in rage once again, but she had worn herself out. the cry burst out as a raspy gasp instead, and Segami collapsed on the cold floor, shaking uncontrollably.

She felt filthy. She felt as if somebody had torn out her eyes and eaten them before her. She dug her fingers deep into her blood-soaked blue hair, clawing at the sides of her head. She felt as if she were buried alive and was desperately digging herself out of the dirt. She had no idea how much time had passed. It was dark outside. It was dark in the house. Her parents and her brothers and sisters were out of town for the night. The town was so small and isolated, they had done this many times before, usually Segami would stay back because she would cry whenever they tried to take her out of Revori. Every day she wanted to draw birds in the stone, but they had taken that away from her. She picked up a shard of glass from the broken mirror, dragging it across her face.

It cut deep, it burned. The crimson fluids calmed her down. It reminded her of the feathers of a bird she had seen once outside of her room upstairs. She took the blood on her fingertips, staring deep into it. It was peaceful, it felt good. Tears flowed down her face. She could never leave the house again, never play with her chalk or sit under the warm sun. What was the point?

She dragged herself downstairs to the kitchen, her blood and vomit soaked dress feeling heavy against her petite frame. When she reached the knife drawer, she pulled it open. Her bleeding, burning hand wrapped tightly around the wooden frame of the knife her mother would use to cut up the plants and vegetables she enjoyed as a snack around noon every day. The blade was barely visible in the light darkness. She didn't know how to light the candles

around the house, she didn't care. As she pressed the edge of the knife against her throat, she closed her eyes once more. Tears flowed down her young face as she nearly made the decision to drag the blade over her neck, undoubtedly ending her short life. But as the blade nearly penetrated her skin, the faces of those three boys flared back into her mind. They were unclear, almost as if somebody had taken charcoal and scraped it across a floor, making a poor attempt to draw the faces of three monsters. She screamed in rage, hurling the blade at the floor. It broke upon impact, snapping the blade in half. She collapsed on the floor, crying hysterically until she fell asleep in a pool of dried blood and vomit.

A pale warmth flooded across her face, nearly burning her cheek. A pair of blue and green eyes slowly peeled open to reveal the makings of a new day. Sunlight crept through the window at the edge of the kitchen. The room smelled horrible, like death and throw up, and salt. Segami pulled herself up, her body trembling. She knew what she had to do. She reached into the drawer and withdrew another knife before heading upstairs and changing into a light blue dress. She entered the bathroom, ignoring the dried blood and vomit all over the room, before rinsing the fluids from her face and hair. She would have looked into the mirror if it hadn't been broken. She gripped the knife in one hand and walked downstairs before pulling open the door and making her way outside. As was custom, nobody else was out this morning. It was early and the sun was just coming up

over the mountains on the horizon. The mountains that marked the entrance to Dh'alazar, which was another country Segami had never been to.

Her parents and her brother and three sisters would be back this morning, probably in a few hours. She made her way to the town square, near that big fountain. The blood was gone, her drawings her gone.

Her chalk was gone. She fell to her knees as she began to cry once more. The sheer emotional pressure was too much. She sat there for three hours, staring at the floor, waiting and waiting. When they came out, like they always did, they would get what they deserved.

"Hey, here she is again! Damn, what do we have to do to make her stop coming here!? I don't get it, do we have to break her fingers or kill her or something?"

She waited and waited, staring at the floor, watching the boy's shadows as they approached. It felt like tiny shards of glass were being churned around inside her head. She slowly stared up, bringing herself up to two feet, standing before the three. The knife was hidden in the fold of her dress. She was nearly their height, she noticed. She stared blankly at them, tears running down her face. Verbichard, the boy in the middle stepped forward, putting his face near hers as a grin played across his visage.

"Gonna stand up to us or something this time?"

This time, she was. She gave out a shriek,

her features contorting with rage as she brought the knife up.

She felt the blade pass through the boy's neck, tearing through the muscle and tissue before getting stuck in the bone above his jaw. As he opened his mouth to cry, Segami could see the glistening blade.

Blood burst out onto her face, but she didn't let go of the knife. She gripped hard and tore it out, barely keeping a hold on the handle as the weapon ripped the boy's lowered jaw opening up exiting his skull.

His eyes rolled back into their sockets, as he fell over, convulsing rapidly on the floor. The other two were stunned long enough for Segami to make another strike. She lashed out at the boy on the left, plunging the knife into his chest, again and again as he began to fall backwards. The other boy took off, but Segami didn't care. She wanted these two gone. She threw herself atop the boy she had just stabbed, ramming the knife into his chest over and over. He cried hysterically, tears and mucus pouring down his face as he screamed for his mommy. But she didn't let up, when she began to tire, she began stabbing him in the face. It was difficult, because the blade kept getting stuck in the bone, and she would have to pull hard to get it free. She cried too, as she stabbed this child. All the negative emotions that had built up in her entire life flowed as freely as the blood churning from the monsters she was killing. She stabbed and stabbed, the knife so covered in blood it was nearly impossible to hold onto any longer. She stood up, sure the second boy was down forever. He lay at

her feet, twitching. She had stabbed in the face so much, he didn't have eyes. He barely looked human. He couldn't possibly be alive much longer. The other boy was still shaking. She had stabbed him good, and she didn't want the blade to get any wetter, or she wouldn't be able to hold it. She hugging the knife against her soaked dress, trying to find a dry spot so she could keep ahold of the weapon for the boy who had destroyed her.

When she had the handle as dry as it would get at this point, she took off in a stride. Her heart was beating even harder than it was yesterday, as she sought to find and bestow punishment upon this last monster. She found him, on his knees, hands clamped over his ears, eyes closed tight, crying hysterically and saying he wanted to wake up.

"This is a dream. This is a nightmare. This isn't really happening."

She walked over to him, wiping the tears from her eyes with one hand before plunging the knife into his face. It pierced his eye socket, sinking deep and lodging itself into his brain, or something very soft.

She suspected the knife had been caught in bone again, because as she went to pull the knife out, it would budge. But the boy had stopped moving, and slumped limply against her as she tried to remove the knife. She had penetrated his brain. It was over, they had gotten what they deserved.

She collapsed onto her knees, giving a scream of rage and clutching her burning chest as she cried wildly, wrapping herself

up into a fetal position. She wished none of this had ever happened. She wish she could go back and draw birds in the stone, and then go home and eat lettuce and tomatoes and carrots that her mother would cut up with the knife she had broken last night. She should have killed herself there. Her life was over. She had nothing. She couldn't go back home. She would never see anybody she loved ever again. The reality and weight of what she had done sank down upon her, fueling the tears and wretched agony that coursed through her chest and brain. In moments, all she could think of was the colour red. It everywhere. On her hands, her face, on her dress, on the knife, on the bodies, on the floor. She found solace in the sanguine sheen, an inner peace, a comfort zone. She took up the blood from the knife and smeared it across her face, her tears washing the crimson down like a flood.

She stood and made her way back home, her brain feeling as if sand was running across it. Everything was fuzzy. It was like horrid screeching scribble-scrabble had covered everything. Like claws were ripping her brain apart. She felt her knife sink into someone, and screaming. She screamed too, clawing at the fuzzy scribbles eating away at her. She was sinking and sinking and sinking. Her knife plunged into someone else, and another, and another.

A piercing screech echoed through her head, in tandem with the swirling scribble-scrabble clawing at her brain.

Red, red everywhere. On her hands, on her face, on her dress, on the walls, on the

floor, on her brother, on her sister, on the knife, on her brain, in her eyes. She re-lived the killing of those three boys one more time, her blade falling from her hand and landing before the blank, dead stare of her eldest sister.

She was asleep, Segami told herself. Off to a pretty place where birds fly. They were all asleep.

Everyone was asleep. Everyone should be asleep. She turned and walked out her door, she didn't want her life to end. She wanted to be able to sit under the warm sun and draw birds again. She would find another place, a place without hurt.

That was the first of many times Segami would kill. As she collapsed into her madness and hallucinogenic abuse further, her mind would eat itself alive. She transformed from a shy, quiet and polite

girl into an over-energetic, child-like lunatic, gleefully slicing through people as her hallucinogen-poisoned mind was attacked by swirling masses of colours. Over the years, she aged physically, but not mentally. Although intelligent, the sheer emotional collapse she went through that day destroyed what would have been a nice quiet girl. Unpredictable to the extreme, Segami would never again be able to establish any sort of relationship with anybody she wasn't attracted to from the very start. Her mind was distorted and her thoughts were simply hyperactive illusions and misperceptions of the reality around her. But, even after her spiral into madness, there is still a scared little girl trapped deep down inside, and Segami isn't incurable.

With enough compassion and calmness, she could eventually slowly revert back to a person.

PORTRAIT OF A MOUNTAIN

by Dom Ford

Frost from his beard dripped onto the fire and sizzled—he'd grown weary of the howling wind and the crunching of snow. By the warmth of the fire, the backpacker was briefly reminded of home with its long grass and endless meadows. Nostalgia crept up on him. He shook his head and tried to forget the past.

Earlier that day he had chanced upon and killed a rabbit for its meat, which he now grabbed from his pack. Desperate not to lose any meat, he suspended the rabbit over the fire and carefully jabbed the frozen carcass with a knife, testing its hardness as the fire fought the ice. Lost in thought, the backpacker fixed his eyes on the spoils.

Finally it was ready to eat.

As his teeth sunk into the juicy meat he felt a tang of pity for the rabbit, but quickly brushed the thought away.

'This is how nature works—how it always has worked,' he thought.

Hunger refusing to be sated, the backpacker looked at the rest of his food longingly, but decided that saving it would

be the wisest option. It would be needed tomorrow.

He left the comforting fire and clambered into the tent as it swayed in the wind. The woolly sleeping bag inside enticed him to sleep.

He dreamt of home, of the willow tree by the stream through the woods behind his house. His childhood self playfully ran through the shimmering stream, and he jumped to grab a leaf from the overhanging willow branches. Scott—a boy from school and just about the only person who liked him—appeared from behind another tree, making him jump. They laughed and chased each other until Scott splashed him with water from the stream.

'Look!' Scott exclaimed, arms stretching towards a rabbit he had just noticed.

'Chase it!' the backpacker's childhood self replied.

The two boys made it fifty metres across the meadow before realizing the rabbit could easily outrun them, and gave up not long after.

As they turned, a grey blanket swept over the sky casting a large shadow over the sun-kissed field, and sure enough, rain fell. Beginning as a light shower, it picked up with increasing intensity until becoming a torrent of swirling water and it wasn't long before it had the appearance of an all-encompassing waterfall. Scott attempted to flee with the child backpacker close behind. The once welcoming, glistening stream bulged into a sluggish monster that forbade the boys' path back to the house. Their only option was to charge across the meadow and climb the farmer's fence, using his barn for shelter. Climbing that fence was a serious offence, but this was an emergency. Half way across the meadow they found that the ground had become an impenetrable expanse of water and mud and they were slowed to a snail's pace. Suddenly, a hole stretched out below Scott and he clung on in vain for dear life before being swallowed by the Earth. The young backpacker could feel himself being sucked in, and began to cry with fear and panic.

Jerking upright, the backpacker took a sharp breath inward before his nerves settled.

Dazed, he took a sip of water and lay in his sleeping bag eating the last remnants of bread until the sun rose once again to illuminate the landscape. The mountains looked beautiful in the sunrise; they rejoiced in the morning. There was glory in it. They had proved time and time again that they were the victors in nature. He sighed and packed away the shelter and continued, once again, to walk with quiet determination. The terrain streamed by

endlessly as though every hundred metres he appeared back where he started and his eyes flitted in desperate search of something vaguely interesting.

Eventually, his eyes found what they were looking for: A nearby mound of snow shook with movement. The backpacker took a step towards to investigate. A small lump of fur popped out and two black beady eyes appeared, looking at the backpacker with curiosity and a strange lack of fear. Upon closer inspection, the rabbit still did not move, and in the creature's dark eyes the man gazed at his own reflection. His hair long and greasy — as was his beard — and his clothes were tatty and creased. Sweat stained the armpits and his hands were rough, shadows of the smooth dexterous hands his former self had possessed.

The rabbit blinked and stared with intense curiosity at this rugged traveler who had stumbled upon his resting place. The backpacker stared back.

He slowly reached for his knife but suddenly felt empathy. The rabbit had done nothing wrong, and had probably never seen a person in its life. The untarnished white fur looked soft and clean as if it had seen no trouble. He held out a hand towards the rabbit and carefully moved towards it. Deciding that it was safe, the rabbit brushed its face against the hand, again and again. The backpacker wanted to freeze time in this moment and never leave. But he knew he had to continue upwards.

The side of the mountain taunted him as he trudged onward. Mist surrounded the

area as a storm picked up, restricting the view. More than once he nearly lost his footing on the side of a slope. Snow continued to fall, creating the surreal illusion that there was nothing but white, as if the backpacker were walking inside of a blank canvas awaiting its artist.

He felt like an intruder.

When his legs could no longer bear the strain and the pure bright white of the snow had turned to a shade of grey as the sun withdrew, he decided it was time to pitch the tent. Retreating behind a rocky outcrop he set up camp. Once again in his sleeping bag, relishing in the warmth it provided, he contemplated his meeting with the rabbit.

‘I miss the rabbit,’ he said out loud. ‘The only contact I have had with a living creature and already I miss him... More than I miss home.’

His voice sounded strange and weak. He doubted that the rabbit would even care for what he said, if it could even understand. He got up and made a fire in preparation for food. Reaching into his pack he discovered that there was little left. A part of him was furious that he didn’t kill the rabbit, but there was no way he could have. Those innocent, beady eyes had pleaded to him.

‘What’s done is done, focus on what you have,’ he thought.

With the meat on the fire, minutes passed in an instant and it wasn’t long before he was tearing the warm flesh.

A strange silence, which had driven away the tumult of the previous day, surrounded the campsite when he awoke. The backpacker’s eyes adjusted to the morning light as he wiped dribble off of his frosty beard. Once again reflecting on the encounter with the rabbit, he found heart convincing his mind that leaving it was the right thing to do. Up here, in an environment alien to him, he realized that humanity had no precedence over the inhabitants. It was not his right to abuse nature’s land for his base hunger.

Bracing himself for the wind, he unfurled the tent’s entrance. Silence greeted him and drew him into a welcoming yet sinister embrace. He crawled out of the tent and strolled over to the edge of the plateau. The fog had lifted and the white canvas of the previous day was filled with intricate detail. Grey rocks could be seen protruding from the lower sections of the mountain, and the deep green of the forests could be made out further below.

He remained in stasis for a while, captivated by the view, revealed like the unveiling of a centuries-old portrait.

A hint of movement in the corner of his eye flung him out of fixation. He jerked his head and saw a ball of white rush past in a flurry of snow.

The rabbit had returned.

The backpacker followed the creature, eyes widening and body half-frozen, who now changed his moral outlook. As the rabbit disappeared out of view, behind the

mound on the other side of the tent, he scurried quickly over to where the rabbit had run.

Behind the mound followed a steep hill. Exhaustion crept over the backpacker's body, and he could not make sense of his mind. The thoughts seemed unclear — tainted somehow. He was reduced to a crawl as he clutched at the white, uneven ground. His eyes were blurred and he was unsure if the encompassing silence wasn't just deafness. The snow became more pure as he approached the top of the steep climb, and the rabbit continued to bounce along calmly. The sheer cold began to invade the skin of his coarse hands, but he was too focused on the guide to notice.

He did not notice when the critter stopped, and his hand feebly reached for snow but instead grabbed its fur, thrusting him into consciousness. The rabbit turned around. Two eyes of the purest black imaginable stared inquisitively at the

backpacker. They did not judge nor fear. They simply watched as he tried in vain to decipher this enigma. A twitch came across the rabbit's face and it dashed away like a bullet down the mountainside.

Looking around, a feeling of crushing loneliness came over him. A light breeze picked up and his thick hair flapped across his face. The icy chill finally made its presence known, and a bitter coldness augmented the loneliness.

He looked around and noticed: here ended the ascent. He had reached his summit.

He did not feel a joy of victory or glory, or the pride of achievement; just a serene calm. All other thoughts faded; even curiosity for the rabbit disappeared.

His face froze somewhere between a frown and a smile and he lay down, eyes fixed on nothing.



POETRY

Manic Episode
by J. R. Morden

Look at how he flies,
with what hilarity
he leaps
from fire hydrants

and how he calls down
the mighty Orion
to be his servant. Look at how

he hurls
a helicopter into the north
with only the urgency

of his fist.

Oh, look ye and see
for here is
a lunatic mind, a fringe
element.

Here is one
who cannot succumb

to reality,

for reality

cannot find him.

The Symphony of Cats
by Steve Klepetar

The sword of God has turned
to wood. Unsteady as newborn foals,
condemned men rise, wobble
into new lives, their hearts torn by miracle.
A symphony of cats screeches
in moonlight, bats rise
and circle, feed
on insects humming in humid air.
All the graves open slowly, in small
torrents of earth. The dead
rise, brushing dirt from their sheets
and clothes.
They look around, bewildered,
laugh and take each other by the hands.
They search each others' faces, looking
for signs, for the figures
of loss and return.
Soon they begin to dance, swaying to music
of wind and dust and baleful cats spewing
lust from fence tops, leaping and fighting as if nothing
wonderful were taking place, as if the wars
of cats alone mattered in all the vast and brilliant night.

Unfortunately
by NaCl

i'm gonna live to see bill cosby die,
the days gonna be dark and the populace awry. unfortunately
i'm gonna be there the day bill cosby dies

they won't give me a chance to hold the casket, neither,
because i'll marry a young, white racist
and it wouldn't've been in my fore mind to forgive her.
cosby woulda shared his desserts, a scoop, a scoop,
but old mr. cosby all curses now,
he'll finally fly the huxtable coop.

my wife'll burn crosses,
and i'll stroll down to the office
while that cunt says the darnedest things.

My Hometown
by Charles Willis

My hometown
is a graveyard
for dreams,

a retirement
home for the
baby boomers.

My hometown is
a bingo parlor filled
with coughing skeletons,

a barnacle
on the underbelly
of a Super Wal-Mart.

My hometown is
a prison for ambition
and the grave of hope,

the tomb of prosperity,
and a mausoleum
for broken promises.

My hometown is
where everything
goes to die,

an elephant graveyard
for the American
Dream.

Fireflies Flew In The Fields
by Bill Alton

Evening, under old oaks,
fireflies flew in the field
next to the pond
with pollywogs
and lily leaves scattered
in clumps throughout.
They danced,
through cat tails,
and vanished
with the silent sweep of bat wings.

I caught crappie and perch
with bailing twine and a stick.
A simple rig
but it brought out the romance of the act,
of self-reliance,
of sitting on a log
and bringing in a meal
from the mossy brown water.

Up to the house, when the sun threw out
a thin red line, flashed white sometimes
from tin silos, fireflies flew
in the yard out over the ditch
along the hard dirt road
with the mosquitoes and horse flies. We sat
in the porch swing with supper done,
smoked cigarettes and drank sweet tea,
waited for the weight of the day to pass
enough to let us curl
under a simple sheet and sleep,
box fans moving the fat air.

INFORMATION

Submit your writing, comments, and whatever else to: theaprilreader@gmail.com

Editors:

Jonah Z.

Peter Olofsson

Martin Lohrer

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The photographer Benjamin Vnuk for a wonderful cover.

Jack McGrath

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

COMMENTS

To encourage debate we've decided to release small comments about the submissions. Hopefully you will appreciate our effort and give us your own opinion in return.

Comments on Prose by Editors Jonah Z. and Peter Olofsson :

Better than Pictures, Andrew Mendelson

Peter: Mendelson makes a stunning comeback: Two brothers halted to a fullstop in their mundane suburbia existence, haunted by, and in pursuit of a once shimmering past. A pursuit that inevitably ends with tragedy. A classic tale, made modern, about mankind's consistent tendency to overreach.

Do we rather relive our glory days in a never ending loop, like an episode of novelty tv-drama, instead of making the actual effort to achieve? Mendelson has managed to contain this tale in its essence with the two brothers symbolizing different philosophies.

The story is typical of Mendelson with his unique twists and language. The narrative is experimental and refreshing, as demonstrated in the confused opening. Better Than Pictures bears traits of a Vonnegut novel but manages to stake out its own path.

The last paragraph is perhaps some of the best stuff submitted to TAR so far.

Jonah: I've already talked about this in the editorial at the beginning, so I'll be short here. Excellent dialogue, nice idea, and an all-around winner. I feel guilty for Mendelson, an award twice in a period so soon, but there is no denying his writing is up to snuff. This guy is starting to turn into something of a Josef K. for TAR: He always delivers.

Andrew is a Medical Technology student from Michigan. He has written previous stories for TAR including Andy Kaufman Syndrome and Cordyceps, which won the TAR Award for Literary Excellence. He hopes to someday conquer his procrastination long enough so that he can write a novel.

Mamalujo, Jim Meirose

Peter: Albeit the imagery is lacking, but Jim Meirose squeezes out quite a lot with few words (302 to be exact). There are many lessons to be learned here. Mamalujo is a textbook example on how to write flash fiction. Get in. Get out. And perhaps kill someone while you're at it.

Jonah: I wasn't fond of this piece. If the decision had been up to me, I would have cut it. The author introduces a slew of nondescript characters in a matter of seconds, makes a

beeline towards rapid plot development, and then ends the piece just as quickly. It felt like this was something which would have been better served as creepypasta.jpg. As it stands currently, the thing is a literal skeleton. Not horrible, but really could have been bulked up.

Jim Meiroses work has appeared in numerous literary magazines including Alaska Quarterly Review, New Orleans Review, south Carolina Review, and Witness. He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize multiple times, he has also been nominated for the Shirley Jackson Award, and have been short-listed for the O Henry Awards.

Two-ton Paperweight, Patrick Malone

Peter: Two-ton paperweight starts off slow with a typical late night brawl but quickly unfolds into a neat story. Malone has a way with words and a language that is both serene and calming. There is a good mix of short, medium and long sentences.

It is evident that he has put a lot of thought into his writing with some genuinely funny moments. Such as the one where the character realizes he is being crushed by his own Ferrari (a symbol for his old lifestyle I guess). It made me laugh.

The format is rather text heavy consisting almost only of big paragraph blocks which can make the reading monotonous. The lack of dialogue isn't helping either, but I guess that's rather hard to fix when your character is imprisoned in a dumpster.

But Malones imagery and great plot forgives any shortcomings in that area.

Jonah: It most is difficult to criticize a well-rounded story. Two-ton Paperweight was one of the earliest TAR stories I looked over, and at the time I felt it was likely going to be the monthly award winner. The writing is vivid, action interesting, and the characters memorable. Worth noting is how the author manages to transition seamlessly between retrospection and action. The only critical word I can say about this piece is the ending feels abrupt.

A Chemical Imbalance, J.D. Ferguson

Peter: A first person narrative about the life of a suicidal movie theater manager obsessing over a pimple? Sounds dull, but J.D. Ferguson makes it interesting with a story shock full of modern context that twists and turns. The story have some flaws usually associated with inexperienced authors writing first person narratives —the repetitiveness of of “I”. It can become quite tedious to read a full paragraph of sentences like “I did that. I felt this”. But it is forgivable and most likely a childhood disease on Fergusons part that he'll overcome later on.

Anyone who've read Slaughterhouse-5 will recognize the trick employed in the end. It's a nice touch that ties the story together and squeezes the last puss from that annoying zit.

Prole: Absolutely terrific, I loved every second of this piece. In my mind, this was a

strong contender for the TAR award this month. The various anecdotes that comprise the piece are excellent, the transition between them fluid. The real climax is when the manager considers suicide, a perfect combination of black melancholy and marketing buzzwords.

Normally I don't go for this kind of thing, but the commercial references really worked to build the mood. Best of all, the work wasn't predictable. The only reason why this didn't become the winner is that, despite the entertainment value of an eternal pimple, the piece just didn't seem to be going anywhere. You've got real talent Ferguson, I sure as hell hope I'm right in thinking you're T. Lin.

Parabelle, A.S.A.

Peter: A good old folkstory in TAR? I couldn't believe it when this story hit our in-box. Attached with it was six cute illustrations and a moral message I feel that some of our readers should take to heart—vanity will be our downfall. A light breeze to mix things up.

Jonah: Another piece I have mixed feelings for. I wanted to love this piece, and certainly I loved the premise and how the author included pictures. But in the end, it was pretty repetitive and lacked the cleverness often shown in traditional fables. Could be better.

Train of Harmon, Ryan Mann

Peter: A cheesy New York love story, or a grand and (yes, im totally going there) epic sci-fi set in an uncertain future on a post-apocalyptic American continent.

Surprise, lets have both.

The opening is an ingenious twist leading us to believe we'll be served a cosy dinner for two, meanwhile the author quickly throws those dishes crashing into the wall and comes up with something entirely different —tasting more like burnt toast and scrambled eggs.

The dialogue may have its flaws being some what blunt but I feel it is excused by the grim setting. Ryan Mann breathes life into a fascinating world with vivid but sometimes purple imagery. Take note on how he works with scenes. Manns story travels between set points. An apartment, a rooftop party, the burning city and the train leading us to the climactic meeting with Harmon in a... smoky bar? Goddamit Ryan!

In the end Train of Harmon comes out as a very fun read.

Jonah: I have mixed feelings about this piece. It feels both mechanically lifeless and compelling for the same reason. Many characters act in ways that make them seem oddly disconnected or disorted from human activity. Part of this has to do with the environment - something both critical to the story and yet never really fleshed out - but a good deal simply has to do with the author's writing style. There had been an earlier version of this story sent to us which ended on a different note, and while the revisions certainly make the story more complete I'm not sure if I like them or dislike them. An interesting piece, but I

feel the writing could have been more engaging. It stands at the margin for me.

A Warm Place, Gary M.

Peter: Can fan fiction ever be good? I believe so. A Warm Place is rather violent tale of rape and the subsequent revenge. Gary M tells his story with the narrator as bystander enabling him to delve deeper into the feelings of the main character without it becoming cliché. Perhaps it is in my nature to loathe Manga and Anime, but this story just didn't do it for me, however the quality of the writing made rethink my initial impression.

Jonah: The decision to include this story was a divisive one for TAR. Not only does it include depiction of rape, it fell into the category of "Nippon fanfiction" as well. Needless to say, it took quite a bit of compromise to get this published. In the end however, I feel the excellent quality of the writing speaks for itself. Besides, we have no precedent for how anime-stylized work will be received. The piece starts a tad generic, but moves quickly into a routine of repeated shock tactics that keeps the whole thing running. Segami is raped, harms herself in loathing, and then finally kills in response: An excellent example of dramatic buildup even through periods of lull. The ending seems to suggest that the piece is part of a larger work, something of a pity since it would stand stronger without mentioning this. In any case, well-written and I'm glad we decided to include it.

Portrait of Mountain, Dom Ford

Peter: Portrait of a mountain is a some what existential piece by Dom Ford. He seems to be asking some rather big questions about mans double-edged relationship with nature. One can wonder if he reached to far. The story doesn't quite tie together in all corners but there is something to be said about the way Ford has constructed his story. Who is the mysterious 'Backpacker'? Why did he embark on this journey? What is the relationship with the rabbit trying to say? I am sure these are questions the authors left out on purpose for the reader to wonder about.

Fords imagery is somewhat of a hit and miss. Sometimes he succeeds with giving us the feel of a cumbersome journey. Other times he tries to hard or just to little. But there is no doubt that Dom Ford, given time with his writing, will become quite a story teller.

Jonah: What is it with TAR and rabbit philosophy pieces? I have recollections of an earlier TAR piece that was similarly themed and also involved rabbits. Portrait of a mountain was something I would have cut this issue, if only because we had superior content lined up that ultimately had to be pushed back to issue 15. It isn't a terrible piece, but sure could have used some work. The author has this tendency to make cumbersome blocks of generalities that suck the soul out of readers like myself. The dream sequence, for instance, feels like granite. As for content, I felt that the story was really just retreading over things that had already been done. Perhaps it is a personal thing, but the "question" of the

rabbit being killed felt like pious irrelevancy. Not terrible, but kind of stale and certainly predictable.

PS: Jonah thinks adding comments is a recipe for disaster

DS: Peter thinks Jonah is coming off as overly cautious.

Comments on Poetry by Editor Martin Lohrer:

This month, lyrical escapism marks the beginning of the poetry section, with *J. R. Morden's "Manic Episode"* featuring the powers of imagination in an outright cinematic experience. Or are these just the imaginary powers of a classical loser/anti-hero gone Transformers? A question that the poem never fully resolves, perhaps leaving us to contemplate on social judgment and rehabilitation, or to take to the streets ourselves to send away some cars with the gravity gun.

According to *Steve Klepetar's* carnevalesque piece "*The Symphony of Cats*", it is impossible for us to determine whether, at a time of human resurrection, the concerns of an anti-world of 'baleful cats' aren't perhaps more important than that resurrection after all. A strong grotesque imagery of cats suggests so, and the strangely felicitous conclusion implies a hitherto unresolved state of debate on humandom and catdom sharing the same natural world.

Inexplicably so, "*unfortunately*" by poet *NaCl* explores the deeper connection between wives of questionable views and seemingly violent demeanor, Bill Cosby, and an idea of fate closely tied to strong colloquialisms and abundant orality. Within the boundaries of a meek morality, you don't know when to laugh and when to choke - such is the carelessly popular elitism of a poem that puts "populace" and "awry" in the same sentence. Probably written by a misanthropic assistant professor whose favorite Roman emperor is Caligula, so watch out.

Taking up the loser/winner-dichotomy that "*Manic Episode*" started, the Marxist qualities of *Charles Willis' "My Hometown"* harshly evoke a post-apocalyptic world of drooling social dinosaurs (of the kind that invented drugs in the Sixties). Reading it, the acerbic poetics of this text will hardly leave anybody untouched. A general day of judgment, after which the empowerment of the youth is the only choice. And please, don't hesitate to smash the cars at night, kids.

What does remain? With ex-asylum inmate *Bill Alton's "Fireflies Flew In the Fields"*, we can but admire the lyrical qualities of an astounding 'thing' that does not represent nature, but seems to 'be' nature in itself, as a text, as a poem. Mastering the poetic language does indeed make the natural landscapes less boring. Pure music. That's what I will text to my next date! Best intelligence test ever.