



A LITERARY JOURNAL
JUNE ISSUE

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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
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A WORD FROM THE EDITORS

Several good pieces marks this month's issue. *"Rifle in the sky"* recreates the tone of a post-war rural society. Pushed into self-reliance despite his age, the protagonist believably fend for himself. Effective use of foreshadowing and consistent prose stability make this our choice of this month's TAR award.

"The last woman" is a strange piece, dark and with vivid moments of detailed pornography. The author seems to have been inspired by the aesthetics of H.R. Giger. The moody and dehumanizing tone succeeds in that respect. The illustration done by bantha_fodder piece fleshes out the imagery even further.

"Tenerife" is a less graphic piece, dealing with the pangs of a broken relationship where the focal point of the story deals with shared loss.

C.P.D's submission *"The Elderly"* has gone through many revisions before being published. It is a testament to the high

work ethic of the author. Some might feel that the rapidly changing narrative is a confusing, but the twist pays off.

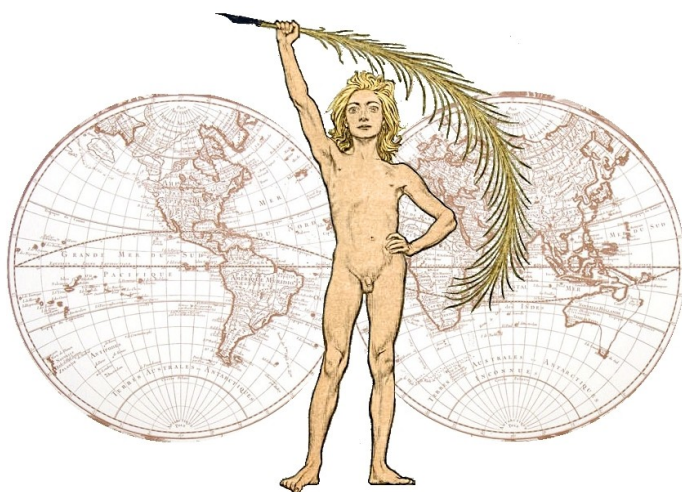
It is easy to misunderstand *Ian Hall's "Camping tents"*. The most critical details of the plot go unsaid, so pay attention.

In the poetry section you'll find two returning writers. Both *Maja Topic* and *Kushal Poddar* have won TAR's poetry award before. Hopefully you'll also like the poem *"Skin"*. It's a light-hearted yet tragic tale of a man and his first encounter with the other sex.

Updates:

- * New editor: Dmitriy Shakhran. A veteran writer, he is the right man for this job.
- * Work on the new homepage continues.
- * Collection of work for the TAR anthology is coming along
- * Illustrator bantha_fodder is back.

Regards, TAR Staff



FICTION

A RIFLE IN THE SKY

by Anonymous
TAR Award Winner

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not
want.*

*He maketh me to lie down in green
pastures,
he leadeth me beside the still waters.*

*He restoreth my soul,
he leadeth me in the paths of
righteousness for his name's sake.*

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of
the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for
thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff
they comfort me.*

*Thou preparest a table before me in the
presence of mine enemies,
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup
runneth over.*

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life and I will dwell in
the house of the Lord for ever.*

– Psalm 23

I spit in the dirt and watch the ants squirm. I am god atop a lonely tree stump. I set my book down beside me and become David again. The air is cool up here on the hill, even though it's still August. I take a deep breath and look towards the house. It looks ugly in the distance. A brown spot stuck among the green pastures. I've lived in that house my entire life but I can't remember a time when it was home. I spit in the dirt again and an ant struggles to escape the flood. I almost feel bad for him but ants don't feel anything, not like us. I turn around and look at Pa's rifle leaning against the stump. The words "David.R.Gower" are scratched into the stock. I take it in my arms and look down the sight. I feel like the weight of the world is in my arms. I aim at the brown speck.

Bang. I mouth the words.

I lower the gun and stare at the house. I spit again. To my left there's a dirt road that'll take me into town, but I'm not going there today. Ma wants me back home before dinner. I look to my right out towards the rolling hills. I've thought about walking out there, I'd take some food and Pa's old book and rifle. I could sleep under a tree or something. I'd keep walking until I found another place, somewhere where nobody knew me. I'd find a nice girl and ask her to marry me. We'd live in a home out in the country, not like the house I'm in now, no. We'd have kids and I'd teach them how to do things, like how to shoot. I'd teach them how to read and once they were ready, I'd give them Pa's bible. I'd tell them it was their grandfathers and how special it was. But I wouldn't really do any of that, not without taking Matt. A crow caws and I spit again. I look up at the blue sky, waiting for something to happen. I raise the rifle into the air towards the clouds. I take aim down the sight and hold my breath. The summer wind brushes my face.

Bang. I shield my eyes from the sun and look to the sky. Nothing.

*How long wilt thou forget me, o Lord?
For ever? – Psalm 13*

I search the sky for a response and then I hear a hollering in the distance. I look to the brown speck. I swing the rifle strap around my shoulder and put the old bible in my back pocket. I spit and start walking, through the pastures back towards the brown house.

I stop just short of the door. Cracks and lines run up and down the side of the building. The brown paneling is rotted in some places. I take the rifle and place it under the stairs leading up to the house. I make sure the bible is tucked into my back pocket where it can't be seen and walk towards the booming voice beckoning from within.

"You've just won...a brand new car!" Wild cheers erupt from the television set. My brothers' claps sound insignificant over the voice of an excited Bob Barker.

"Hey Matty." I open the fridge.

"Hey Dave, I just won a car."

"Neat, buddy." There's a box of expired eggs and some cans of noodles in the fridge. "What was the yelling for?"

"That's how he decides who gets in, whoever he hears the loudest."

"Who's that?"

"Bob Barker!" Matt points an excited finger at the TV. I push a bottle of wine to the side.

"Hey Dave? You think I'm gonna drive one day?"

"One day buddy." The audience cheers again, they hang on Bob's every word.

"Ma said I'm too stupid to drive." Bob Barker raises his arms in the air and the audience goes ballistic.

"Ma says a lot of things." I grab a half empty glass of milk and close the refrigerator.

I walk into my bedroom and hear the audience scream for their commercial Jesus one last time.

Children are a gift from the lord; they are a reward from him. Children born to a young man are like sharp arrows in a warriors hands. How happy is the man whose quiver is full of them!
– Psalm 127

I lay on my bed with the bible in my hands. I open the cover and trace my fingers gently along the words written on the inside, *David.R.Gower*. I flip through the pages until I get to the Psalms. I like those the best because if you read them right, they're kinda like songs. My Pa wrote words on some of the pages to. He left this to me, before he walked out. I hear a loud creak as the front door opens.

"Hey Ma." Matt's small voice echoes throughout the house. There's no response. I hear the sound of the refrigerator opening.

"There's no food in this god damn house." I place the bible under my bed, sliding it all the way into the back.

"Where's your brother?"

"Right here Ma." I walk out of my room and into the kitchen.

"You feed him?" She opens a bottle of wine and gestures towards Matt.

"You told me to be home for dinner tonight, I thought you were cooking or something."

Matt cheers at the TV and Ma throws a cork towards the garbage, she misses.

"Stop that, you look like an idiot." Matt goes quiet and turns off the TV. He gets up and walks to our room.

"What's wrong with that kid?" Ma shakes her head and pours herself a glass.

"He's young ma, he don't know any better." I open the fridge.

"You knew better." I grab a can of noodles and pour it into a big bowl before putting it in the microwave.

Ma takes a drink. "I need you to go buy some things tomorrow."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, something we can eat."

"Get me another bottle of wine too."

"I'm only thirteen Ma."

She laughs. "Oh right...you know, I forget that sometimes."

I grab the bowl from the microwave and two forks before heading back towards the bedroom. "Me too."

Defend the poor and fatherless, do justice to the afflicted and needy.
– Psalm 82

I wake up in the middle of the night and a figure stands over me.

"David?" I rub my eyes and sit up.

"David...I did it again." There are tears in Matt's eyes. "I'm sorry Dave, don't tell Ma."

Please, Dave.”

“I’m not telling Ma anything Matt.” I climb out of bed and walk over to his side of the room.

“I’m sorry Dave, I didn’t mean to, I’m sorry.” Deep sobs shake Matt’s small frame.

“Matt, it’s okay. Change into some different pants and sleep in my bed.”

“I’m sorry. Please don’t tell Ma, Dave, please.”

I scoop the wet sheets up and start walking out of the room. Matt climbs into my bed.

“Don’t tell Ma Dave. I’m sorry.”

“Go to sleep Matty, don’t worry about it.”

I open the front door and a small creak rings through the house. Ma’s passed out in her room so I don’t think she hears it. I hope she doesn’t. I walk around the house to the hose and sprawl the wet sheets on the ground. Quietly I turn the small knob and let the water run over them. I look up at the stars searching for purpose in them. Millions of seemingly small dots paint a picture in the night and the world feels a little more artificial in their dull glow . The water splashes quietly on the ground and for a moment I think I can hear something off in the distance. Something away from all this. I keep my head focused up above, if there is a reason for anything I’m going to find it up there. I can hear the beating of my heart. It steadily gains speed as if to tell me to stop now. I continue to stare, I want something to happen, I need it to. The night air burns at my skin but I can’t go

inside yet. The silence makes me want to scream and a million tiny lights mock me as I watch.

*When I look at the night sky and see
the work of your fingers – the moon
and the stars that you have set in place
– what are mortals that you should
think of us, mere humans that you
should care for us? – Psalm 8*

A scream comes from inside the house. I drop the hose and water splashes my bare legs. I run through the front door when I hear the first words.

“Ma, ma I’m sorry! I’m sorry Ma.” Matt cries loudly now.

I hear a crashing noise and Ma yells something I can’t hear.

“Mama, please.”

I’m through the bedroom door when I see her hand strike just below his shoulder.

“Ma, Jesus, leave him alone!”

She turns to me with one hand still gripped tightly around Matt’s arm. He sobs.

“You stay out of this, I’ve told him a hundred times.”

“Ma, he’s a kid!” I try to hide the contortions in my face as I choke back angry tears.

“He’s a stupid brat.” She raises another arm and I lunge forward to catch it. She sees my movement and pushes me to floor. This makes Matt cry louder. My knee stings with pain. “Get out of here David,

this ain't your business.”

I crawl out of the room like some pathetic ant and only pick myself up when I get to the living room. I collapse into the stained couch and the smell of wine makes me want to vomit. Ma screams something at Matt and he responds with more cries. I push my face into couch as my tears soak the pillow. We all cry in unison and a brown house in the country becomes the only orchestra to the beautiful night sky.

*All together they become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one. –
Psalm 14*

I wake up to a crashing sound coming from Matt's room. I quickly slide off the couch and over to the bedroom. Matt is struggling to pick up a dresser that's been tipped on its side. I grab it and help him place it upright. We don't speak to each other as I help him clean the room. Everything has been thrown about, the few books that we have, one or two toys and a bunch of clothes. We work in silence until Matt finally speaks. “Where's my sheets?”

“Shit.” I run out the door to the side of the house and find what looks like a small pond.

“Shit.” I tip toe my way through the water and turn off the hose.

The entire side of our house is flooded. I'm glad the floor is elevated. I grab a stick and fish through the water until I snag something heavy. I pull up hard and can see the outline of a white blob rising. I manage to pull it in and I grab the soaking sheets in one arm. They're a little dirty but I hang

them on the line out front anyways and walk back inside.

“Did you get 'em?”

“Yup.”

“Where are they?” Matt looks at me like I'm about to do a magic trick.

“Outside drying, I left the hose on all night.”

“Really?” Matt rushes to window and look outside.

“Cool!”

“I'm gonna go into town, alright? I need to buy food and stuff.”

Matt turns from the window almost instantly “Can I come?”

“No, not today buddy. I've gotta a lot of stuff to do and I can't be watching you.” I can see the fear in his eyes.

“Matt, I promise you'll be fine okay? Matt rubs the bruise under his shirt.

“I swear I'll be back later. Alright?” Matt looks away and nods. I grab a bag from under the sink and some money from the jar Ma leaves in the kitchen. She won't be awake for another few hours. Matt sits on the living room floor quietly as I wave to him and walk out the door.

It's late afternoon when I finally reach town. There's a few people walking around but it's quiet. A few bells ring as people walk in and out of the stores. I make my way down the street and towards the grocery store. The walls are bright white and it takes a moment for my eyes to

readjust to the lights. I walk through the aisles and spend a lot of time looking at all the things I know we can't have. I eventually grab a jar of peanut butter, some bread and two cans of noodles. I take it up to the cashier and place it on the counter. I start to fish through my pocket for all the change when he gives me a look.

"You here with your parents, son?"

"No Sir."

He scratches the white hairs on his chin. "What's a boy your age doing buying groceries?"

"To eat Sir." I place a crumpled bill and a handful of change onto the counter. The man gives me another confused look before ringing through my items and taking the money. He hands me back a few coins and I place the food in my bag.

"Thank you Sir."

"Run off to your parents now son."

I walk back into the street and sit on a bench. I look through the bag and start questioning if I got the right things. Last time I went shopping Ma said I didn't get real food, said I might as well have bought dirt. I'm focused on the bag when I hear laughing. I look around to make sure nobody is looking at me. I can't see where it's coming from but I hear it again. There's another giggle and then a small shush. I look ahead of me and see shadows in the alley. I cross the street and slowly walk into the darkness. There's about four other kids a little younger than me standing in a circle and giggling. I set down the grocery bag

and walk closer.

"Hey, somebodies coming!" One of the kids starts to walk away really fast.

"It's just some guy, don't be such a baby." Another boy grabs the scared one and pulls him back.

"What are you doing?" I walk even closer, I'm a part of the circle now. Everyone stares at their feet, I look down and see it.

"How long you figure it's been here?" One kid picks his nose.

"I don't know, I'd say at least a day or two."

A dead cat is sprawled across the pavement. The eyes are open and I swear they stare at me.

"Hey watch this." The leader of the group makes a sucking nose and then lets spit fall from his mouth. It lands on the face of cat. Giggles erupt from the circle.

"Aw, gross!" says the nose picker.

The cat stares into my eyes and I get a sick feeling in my stomach. Soon another boy joins in. The group of boys giggle and spit in unison.

I feel dirty. I want to be out of the alley but something makes me stay, like something is begging me to.

"Hey...maybe we should just leave it alone." My stomach tightens.

The leader spits and then looks at me. "We don't even know you!" He spits again. The other boys say "Yeah".

The cats eyes beg me for reprieve but I

offer none. I can't bear it anymore and I manage to turn away. I quickly walk out of the alley and back into the light.

*For thou art not a God that hath
pleasure in wickedness,
never shall evil dwell with thee
– Psalm 5*

I walk down the dirt road quickly. The sky is a vibrant orange by now. My stomach still aches and I feel small and insignificant. I want to be as far away from that place as possible. I walk for twenty minutes when suddenly I get another sinking feeling in my stomach. I turn around and run back towards the town as quick as I can. "Shit, shit." My lungs hurt and the cool air stings my throat, but panic takes over and I keep running. I make it back to town and resist the urge to collapse on a bench. I'm exhausted but fear and guilt keep me running. I make it back to the alley and see the bag laying where I left it. A wave of relief washes over me. I walk towards it and look inside. The peanut butter is gone but everything else is still there. I grab the bag and sit on the bench across the street once more to catch my breath. The stores are starting to close up now and I see the man from the grocery store place a key in the big glass door. I look away but he spots me from down the street.

"What are you doing out here son?"

I take deep breaths, still exhausted from running.

"Where's your father?" He sounds concerned.

I look around the empty town and up

towards the sky. Wispy clouds look like smoke and dance against the burning orange. "I'm not quite sure Sir."

The man makes a noise like he's sad and starts to walk closer "Well, why don't we go over to the sheriffs and we can call him?"

"No Sir, I'll be alright, honest." I quickly get up off the bench and walk away. He starts to talk again but I'm already on the dirt road heading back to the house. I walk in silence and watch the fire in the sky turn to darkness.

I'm not far from the house when I notice a car is parked nearby. Ma don't drive so it means she's got someone over again. She probably met him at the liquor store the other night. I walk up the stairs and into the house with the grocery bag in hand. I hear loud laughing from inside.

"So I told him, he could kiss my ass!" Ma laughs loudly and like she's full of life. Sometimes I can see a little bit of something in her, something she lost a while ago. She's drunk. Matt sits in the living room watching TV.

"Ma, I'm home."

The man turns and looks at me, I see annoyance in his eyes.

"Where you been all day?" She walks over and grabs the bag out of my hands. "You didn't get me my wine?"

"Ma, I'm only thirteen." The man and her laugh, he places a hand on her back and she gives him a smile like everything's alright.

I walk into the kitchen to where Ma sat the bag down. "Hey Matt, come get

something to eat.”

Matt gets up and quickly moves towards me. He's half way there when he slips on the floor. He reaches out to save himself and grabs the man's jacket sleeve. There's a small thud as Matt hits the ground followed by a loud crash as a beer bottle falls and shatters.

“What in the hell!” The man looks furious, there's beer all over his pants.

“God dammit Matthew!” Ma looks to Matt on the ground, he has a cut on his face and he's crying loudly.

“My pants are completely ruined,” The man looks at Matthew on the ground and raises an arm, “You little shit.”

I run across the room and throw my body against the side of the man. He loses his balance and falls, cutting his hand on a piece of glass.

“David!” My Ma is yelling loudly now, she's a bright red.

The man slowly gets up and looks at both of us on the ground. I'm beside Matt, trying to look at his face. Matt clenches his eyes shut and cries.

“Ed, I'm sorry they're-” Ma looks like she might cry.

“This house is fucking crazy.” The man storms out the front door and slams it shut behind him. I hear the sound of an engine start.

“Ed, wait!” Ma runs out the front door. I sit Matt up and follow her.

“Ed, call me!” Ma stands at the bottom of

the steps waving towards the car. Ed sticks his cut hand out the window and raises a single finger.

Ma stares in horror as the car drives away. I'm standing in the doorway breathing heavily. I look down and notice my hand is bleeding as well.

“You did this...” Ma looks at me with hate. “You ungrateful little-”

“Ma, he was going to-” She grabs me and throws me down the stairs. My shoulder hits the ground hard and I yelp in pain. Ma starts walking towards me when Matt screams from inside. She turns towards the house and a fresh look of anger washes over her face. She walks inside and slams the door behind her. I lay in the dirt and listen to Matt cry. He's trying to talk but he's too worked up and can't get the words out. Ma's screaming at him. I want to go inside but it'll only make her more angry. She'll take it out on Matt. I slowly pick myself up and walk to the porch. I reach an arm underneath and grab my Pa's rifle. I turn away from the house and start walking into the pasture towards my hill.

*I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills,
from whence cometh my help. My help
cometh from the Lord. – Psalm 121*

I reach the stump and collapse onto it. I let my tears decorate the old wood. My head rests in my hands and deep sobs shake my entire body.

Why? My lips form the word but no sound comes out.

I look to the stars and try again. “Why?” I

make a small croak of sound. The night air surrounds me and I begin to shiver. I look to the hills stretching outwards and back to the sky again. I grab the rifle that lays beside me and my shoulder aches from the weight. I carefully raise it towards the sky. The stars look down upon me and I feel the weight of the world on me once again. The tiny little lights wait in anticipation and the beating of my heart drums a desperate song. I look one last time for meaning up above before closing my eyes and holding my breath.

Bang.

My ears ring loudly. I look at the smoking rifle and towards the sky. I suddenly hear a dull thud and then a low gurgle somewhere in front of me. I let the rifle slip from my fingers and hit the ground. I walk towards the noise and stop a few meters in front of the stump. A bird lays twitching in the grass. Crimson decorates the front of its chest and its head moves slowly from side to side. I watch with tears still in my eyes. After what seems like only a moment, the bird stops moving. It's dead. The stars watch on in silence and my tired eyes move from the brown spot in the distance to the fallen bird in the grass. I walk to the stump and grab my rifle. I look to the sky and at the dead bird once more. For the first time in my life I know what I need to do. A brown house glows with light in the distance and I start walking back as something beautiful dies lonely in the hills that night.

I open the door and hear an audience cheer in the background. The TV is still on.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...

I walk to our bedroom. Matt is passed out in my bed. The sheets are bloody from his face.

I will fear no evil for thou art with me...

There's an empty wine bottle laying on the floor of the hallway. My grip tightens around the rifle.

thy rod and thy staff they comfort me...

I stand in front of her door and slowly push it open.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies...

I take a step towards the bed.

thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over...

She is laying face down with a glass loosely hanging in her hands.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life...

I raise the rifle to my shoulder.

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

I take a deep breath and aim through wet eyes.

Bang.

THE LAST WOMAN

by Raul Martin

The air in the old bar is so acrid, you can taste it on your tongue when you leave your mouth open too long, as though caustic bacteria are landing on it and multiplying. That is why no one talks when they sip their drinks. They converse only with the barman when they are ordering the next one. Then it's back to their seats with wrinkled faces and dark eyes.

The front door has been boarded shut for as long as we can remember. No one can recall why. We just sit and wait, drinking polluted alcohol and hoping that one day we can sleep. It has been a while since we've slept. All we have is the smell of wet wood, and that cloudy puddle that leaks in from below the door. Ever since the darkness came, none of us can close our eyes and dream. Instead, we just float around – tired and disorientated – as though we are in one.

I do not remember the time before the

darkness. Some claim we once ventured outside, slept and dreamt regularly, and had families. Despite numerous attempts by the older men to explain what a family is, I can never picture it. That was back when we used to talk. The closest I have to memories are relics like my wallet and a book of matches.

I am the youngest here. The closest person to my age is a man that looks to be ten years my senior, with a yellowed top lip, who always sits at the bar. I do not know his name. No one knows each other's names.

There is a clomp from the room above and everyone flinches: a high heel against wood. Then another. We trace the path of the shoes as they make their way across the floor and begin to descend the old stairs. She is awake. She is the only one unaffected by the darkness, at least not in the same way as the rest of us. She enjoys this dark

time. Stroking her hair and parading around on her long legs. We watch the stairs as her footsteps grow closer. Some of the old men playing cards huddle closer together. Their game has been going on for weeks.

She comes into sight and a shudder runs up my body. Today she is wearing black suspenders and a tiny top over her yellowed skin. Her fingernails are long and milky. The nozzle of her gasmask hangs between her withered breasts. Behind the eyeholes she scans over us greedily. There are around thirty of us left – thirty tired, depressed men. She makes her way slowly towards us, barely staying upright on her heels. She drags a finger across someone's back seductively as she passes. He shudders and chokes on his filthy pint, sending foam down his chin and across the table. She lifts another's beret from his eyes, revealing a cracked forehead.

She stops in front of me like before – like the time she inspected me for ten minutes before settling on someone else. I felt no sympathy for the man being led upstairs, even though I knew he would not return. This is the routine we go through once a year.

Her hoarse breathing stutters as she inspects me again. My heart stops. My lungs refuse to inflate. I look up at her like a lost child. Or a puppy about to be trampled. Her breathing quickens: a rasp of delight from her throat.

“How old are you now, boy? Sixteen.”

“Sixteen? Hm. When did you turn?”

“Three days ago.”

“Fresh meat.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Hm. Well, come on now.”

She leads me by the hand. Her fingers are long and peeling dry skin. I reluctantly follow as she approaches the stairs. My heart is racing now, my lungs in overdrive. The cold liquid in my stomach splashes up the fleshy walls with every step I take. I feel like I am going to vomit as I ascend into the darkness. We make our way across a sticky corridor until we come to a single door which she opens and beckons me towards. I feel like running, but where would I go? I sag as I enter the room. The door closes behind me.

There must be thousands of candles around her bed – towers of them, a layer of wax. She slinks over them onto her filthy mattress. A great pile of shoes leans against one of the furthest walls. On another wall is a great splintered wound the size and shape of a manhole. I cannot see far into its darkness.

She is already naked, aside from her gas mask, the nozzle still hanging between her breasts like an obscure phallic toy. Her legs are spread and her vulva is pale and glaucous. I feel both nauseous and aroused. She is the first woman I have seen naked with my own eyes and she is offering herself to me. I go to her, my body on autopilot. That night I am able to sleep for a few hours, and I experience my first

dream.

She uses me for weeks. It is fantastic at first, but I feel as though I am not in control of my own body. The long hours are exhausting. She has the sex drive of an adolescent: the sex drive I should have and might have, had I a proper diet and if the air I breathed was clean. Every time I make love to her, I feel she is trying to swallow me whole, and her eyes never leave mine as though monitoring me.

Soon the lust I have for her fades and the situation is less appealing. Her body reeks of mould and her breath of dead things. Her arms are insect-like and the undersides are bruised purple. Her breathing grows hoarse as she approaches orgasm like an asthmatic having a violent attack. Sometimes I wish she would have an attack and die so I can rest. It seems like I am attempting to satisfy her over ten times a day. She awakens me when I am trying to sleep and when I am ill. If I deny her she becomes increasingly violent until I concede.

This steadily takes its toll until my ribs protrude from my chest and my eyeballs almost hang from my skull. It is as though every time I ejaculate I am losing a part of me for good, as though I am being drained from the end of my penis. Cynthia's sex drive seems to have died down. I hope this is not because of my appearance, or that she longs for something else. Now she just gazes at the wall, disinterested. We have not had sex all day. I paw at her leg for attention. My arm is frighteningly thin. She ignores my touch. I wonder if she even felt

that. I am beginning to suspect a few more sexual encounters could cost my life. Everything seems to have changed.

It's getting harder to even move now. Each breath I draw seems to take more effort, as though the flesh of my lungs tightens with every breath. I managed to convince Cynthia to let me make love to her earlier, but after five minutes I had to stop. I thought I was going to die. I could see the resentment through the eyeholes of her mask. It scared me more than anything before. That and seeing her glancing at the hole in the wall. I want her to help me. I want her to hold me and tell me everything is alright.

"Do you still love me?"

"What?"

"I said do you still love me?"

"Hush, boy."

"You don't do you?"

"Of course I do. Now be quiet, it's late."

"Sorry."

I am unable to sleep again despite the fact that I am no longer being constantly bothered for sex. When I do manage to drift off it is rarely for longer than a minute. All I see when I close my eyes is dark shapes pulsating and throbbing and oozing juices. Bodies bent in postures that shouldn't be possible. Frightening wails that I do not have the words to describe. For a moment, when I awaken, I am always thankful to have escaped such horrors. Then I realize that I have simply awoken from one nightmare to succumb to

another. I try to nuzzle into Cynthia, to feel her embrace, but she growls and kicks out with insect-like legs, and I am left cold and lonely. When I ask if she loves me she does not bother to reply.

I have just awoken in the night to find her staring at me with cold eyes, and I know that it is over. She hauls my pathetic body over her shoulder, as though disposing of garbage. Weakly, I try to fight, but my muscles are paper thin. After a moment I sigh quietly and give in. It is easier this way. Slowly, I am taken to the hole in the wall. My arm is cut open as I am sent through, but there isn't much left to bleed out. I watch sadly as the room disappears and I tumble through the air into the darkness for what seems like an eternity. I feel nothing as I crumple hard

into the floor through what feels like branches of wood, sending pieces clattering.

For a while I carry on living in the darkness, broken and paralyzed and commiserable. The sound of dribbling water and the scrabbling of insects is all I have for company. My sense of smell has diminished, but there is still the vague essence of decay.

Eventually I hear it – the cries of passion from above, the unmistakable rhythm of sex – and I know a year must have passed since I was chosen. My love turns to jealousy, which warps into hate, and in turn becomes sadness.

Finally, there is nothing.



TENERIFE

by Dan Peacock

The two of them regarded their empty plates in silence. He looked up at her, twirling the straw in his glass. The half-melted ice cubes clinked together like a bunch of keys.

“You fancy a dessert?” he asked.

She looked back at him. “Huh?”

“I said, do you fancy a dessert?”

“Oh. No. I’m okay.” She shifted the fork on her plate so it was parallel to the knife. “Do you want one?”

He went to pluck a menu from the little stand on the table, but thought better of it and brought his hand back to heel. “No. I’m okay too.”

Her mouth smiled and she sat back in her chair, staring at him.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

“Something’s wrong.”

“No, it’s not.”

“There is. You’re using that tone of voice again.”

“What tone of voice?” she said.

He lowered his voice a couple of decibels. “The pissed-off tone.”

“Of course I’m pissed off. You’re badgering me about being pissed off when I’m fine.”

A pause.

“So you are pissed off?”

She gave him a look. He averted his gaze to see a young waiter with a teenage mustache approaching the table.

“Everything okay for you?” the waiter recited.

“Yes,” he said. “The meal was lovely.”

“Yes,” she echoed. “The meal was.”

The waiter started to collect their empty glasses and plates, balancing everything on one arm.

“You didn’t want dessert, did you?”

She was smoothing out a crease in her scarf. “No.”

“Right. Can I, uh, can I have the bill, please?” he said to the waiter.

The waiter went to get it. The plates and cutlery in his arms clinked together as he

walked away.

“So – you settling in okay?” he said.

“Fine, yeah. Andy’s coming over to help me paint the living room tomorrow.”

“Andy?”

“He’s a friend from work.”

A short silence.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she said.

“Like what?”

“You know what.”

The bill came and the two of them stared at it, suddenly grateful of the chance to break eye contact.

“What happened?” he said.

“I think the bill just came.”

“No, I mean what happened?”

“Oh.” She was silent for a minute. “You invited me, if you think this was a bad idea then – .”

“No,” he said. “Don’t go.”

She put her bag back on the floor. “So are we going to sit here exchanging awkward silences or are you going to walk me to my car?”

“I wanted to talk for a while,” he said.

“About what?”

“Just – stuff. Talking. Like people do.”

She shook her head. “We’ve got nothing to talk about anymore.”

“Okay,” he said. ‘Okay. Let me pay the bill and I’ll walk you to your car.’ He

fumbled in his wallet from his jacket, laying a thin wad of notes on the little silver platter that cradled the bill.

“Is that – is that Tenerife?” she asked.

He frowned. “What?”

“Tenerife. The photo.”

He glanced down and saw the photo poking out of his wallet from behind a thin plastic pane. Two children stood beside a pool. One, a girl of about five or six, was wearing inflatable armbands and a bathing suit. The other, a boy, a few years older than the girl, was wearing cargo shorts and a t-shirt. Despite the low quality of the picture, it was easy to tell that his clothes were soaked through. He was grinning and the little girl was laughing.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, Tenerife. ’09, was it?”

“Yeah,” she said. “2009.” She smiled and her eyes smiled with her. “Was it me taking the picture, or was it...”

“It was me. You were out of action, remember? That sprained ankle?”

“Oh, yeah...” Her eyes were locked on the photo.

“I think you were just out of the shot.”

She blinked and looked back up at him.

He put the wallet away in his pocket and put his jacket on, rising from the chair.

“Shall we?” he offered. As they left the restaurant, he felt an urge to slip his hand into hers. How easy it would be to lace his fingers through hers, and feel them close

around his. How easy it would be.

No, he thought. It wouldn't.

The waiter came and collected the notes he'd left on the table. Within minutes their table was wiped clean and prepared, ready for another couple to take their place.

The car park was almost empty.

She held out her key and the car unlocked with a click-click, flashing its lights. For a second he was reminded of a wizard casting a spell. Or a witch. Her little hatchback squatted under a pool of dirty orange light from the lamppost opposite. The other cars were just shapes in the darkness: wet silhouettes.

"Goodbye, Mark," she said. Formal. Cold.

"See you, Kate."

Before she could turn away he leaned in for a hug. She stiffened and for a second he was sure he'd misjudged. Made a mistake. Then her arms slowly slipped around him and clung to the back of his jacket.

The two of them stayed like that for a while. It seemed longer than it was.

"Don't blame yourself," he said to her. "Please."

She pulled her arms out from around him. "I don't."

By the time he gathered his thoughts, the car was gone, two luminous red glow-blobs of tail-light skating round the corner.

He slid his hands into his pockets and

began to walk. It was raining. He looked down as his shoes dipped into puddles, watching his feet crashing down on reflections of city lights smashed into gaping ripples.

He walked past the local bar, regarding the doorway as he approached. The Lion's Arms blazed in heavy red-gold letters above a narrow doorway. Perhaps there would be someone inside he knew. Perhaps there wouldn't. Either way, he thought, it would be so easy to sink back with a cold drink and forget the night had ever happened.

The smokers standing outside followed him with their eyes as he passed. They were shielding their cigarettes from the rain with their hands.

Further now, he went past the old hospital. They were tearing it down. Monstrous steel demolition machines slept in silent crowds around the building's edge, dreaming of destruction. The workers were gone for the night. The rubble was quiet. Behind the heaps of mortar and plaster, he could see the huge new hospital building, stocky towers of glass and metal, blocking out the moonlight. A beautiful architectural design. He hated it.

The bus stop stood on a street corner in front of the newsagents. Under the flickering light he could see the faded lettering of the bus timetable and a half-empty bottle of some plastic cider dribbling onto the kerb. He reached the bench and sat down, feeling the layer of rainwater on the seat seeping into the bottom of his jeans. It was cold.

He dug his hands into his pockets and tucked his neck down into his shoulders, his breath misting up in front of him. He blew out a plume of fog, seeing how far he could make it go before it melted into the air. He couldn't get it very far.

He slipped his wallet out of his pocket. The holiday photo stared back at him. Tenerife 2009. Suddenly he was struck by how distant the photo seemed – aged, even. It was taken with a camera that he had sold a long time ago. It was taken in a hotel that no longer existed – knocked down to make way for the new hotel: a sleek modern design that allowed the owners to charge twice as much. The airline that had flown the four of them over there had gone bust. Not to mention...

Suddenly he heard footsteps approaching and looked down as the man passed. The bus would be here soon. It had to be.

The footsteps stopped. "Mark?" said a voice.

He looked up at the man in recognition. "Oh. Hey, Dave."

"You alright, pal?" Dave came and flopped down onto the seat next to him.

"Surviving. You?"

"Not bad, mate, not bad." Dave scratched his chin. "What you doing round my neck o' the woods?"

Mark sat back in the seat, casting a furtive glance up the street to confirm the bus wasn't coming. "Just on my way home. Had a few drinks at The Ristorante..." he glanced at the bus stop sign.

"The Ristorante? Fuckin' hell, mate. Gimme a Domino's anyway," Dave grinned. "You go with Gary and the lads from work?"

"No," he said. "Kate."

"Oh." Dave frowned. "How'd it –."

"Not well, mate. Not well."

"She still shook up about what happened to –?"

"I'm still shook up, Dave." He slid his hands back into his pockets.

Dave was silent for a moment. "Sorry, mate." He looked around. "You should come out with us. It ain't the same without you."

Mark noticed a cigarette burn on the sleeve of Dave's coat. "I don't know."

"C'mon. Help take your mind off things."

Mark glanced down at the little photo in his hands. "I'm okay."

Dave opened his mouth to speak, and a low buzz started to come from his coat pocket. He pulled his phone out and glanced at the screen.

"The missus" he said. "See y' around, yeah?" He gave a little nod of recognition and then he was gone. His voice faded away. His footsteps became quieter. Soon the noises had been swallowed by the rain.

Mark sat at the bus stop for a few minutes, breathing mist into the night. All of a sudden, he stood up and began walking. He knew where he was going. Not home. Not tonight.

The houses thinned. Bushes sprang up alongside the path. The buildings fell back further from the road. The bus he'd been waiting for slid past him and turned down a side-street. He walked on through the rain. Past their old house.

He came into the cemetery and saw a lone figure standing beside the grave. It was dark and all he could see was silhouettes.

“Kate?”

The figure turned. For a second the moonlight glinted from her eyes, and she turned away. He went to join her.

For a moment the two of them said nothing, simply gazing at the headstones, feeling the flattened grass under their feet. Somewhere, a raven called out into the night. Another answered it.

In the dark he felt her fingers slip into his, and felt afraid.

THE ELDERLY

by C.P.D

The old woman is in the back seat of a car. She feels around with small and bony hands for something to hold. She watches the blur of passing pedestrians. She imagines what they must look like. There is a man with an impressive jaw. There is a thin and beautiful girl clinging to his arm. She would follow him anywhere - so into the horizon they plunge, lost to the old woman whose eyes follow them in the rear-view mirror, their relation just a memory, then that fades too.

A hand touches her shoulder and she finds a young man sitting next to her. John is etched in his face, in his indifferent eyes and tough chin and for a moment she is fifty years younger.

“John.”

“We’re on our way to see him right now,” the young man says.

They stare at each other for a moment. He looks away. The day outside is clear. Heavy traffic brings them to a halt. She relaxes her hands then feels around with them again. She asks where they are going. The driver turns to face her. It is her son.

“To the nursing home,” he says. “To see Dad. We’ve spoken about this a few times before, Mum. They think he might die tonight.”

The old woman finds herself in a foyer. The air is musty and sterile. Her memory of what came before is too murky to trust.

She sees her son standing at reception. It looks like he is smiling but she can’t be sure.

A young man sits next to her. She studies him. He sees her doing this. Before he can look away she says, her smile coy, “If only I were a young girl again.”

“Thanks, Grandma.”

Her eyes widen and her face goes red. He laughs. When she looks at him again he is absorbed by his mobile phone.

Her son returns after speaking to the receptionist. “Did you need to go?”

The young man replies he does not and they help the old woman up and lead her to the elevator. As they ascend the father grins. “Apparently,” he says, mainly to his son, “Grandpa hit an old lady last week.” he goes on: “It’s nothing serious – she’s perfectly fine.” He shakes his head. “Just wouldn’t leave him alone.”

He pushes a floor button repeatedly, muttering, and eventually the elevator resumes its ascent.

John was once a boxer. She remembers this because he would drink heavily after

each fight. He would want to fight after he drank, too. There was just the two of them living in their house out in the country. One evening she had asked him to retire and he had thrown a beer bottle at her. She was admitted to hospital for a fortnight – which, her son reminds her, is how much longer she must wait to join John there in the nursing home.

“The beds,” he says, “are currently full.”

Two weeks. The old woman puts her hand on the railing, breathing heavily. She asks if she will be staying with John. The other two exchange a glance.

“It’s ridiculous that they haven’t made room for you, considering the state you’re in,” the son replies, softly taking hold of her wrist.

“You just want me out of the house.” She pulls away from him.

He looks hurt. “It’s not that at all. You’ll be happier here. Just look at how Dad’s changed after being admitted – they’ve pacified him a little, at least. The incident with the old lady was a one-off.” He smiles and takes hold of her wrist. “We hope.”

Soon what was said is forgotten and she daydreams that she is somewhere else. Once more the elevator pauses. John’s room must be high up, she thinks. An implacable guilt pesters her. She tries to infer its source from the faces of those around her but they are obscure in the weak, fluorescent light.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

“What? It’s not your fault.”

The elevator jerks back into motion. The old woman looks at her son. His smile seems impartial and contrived.

“It’s a docile environment,” he says, placid. “John will always be nearby.”

She stumbles back and reaches blindly behind her for support. The dim light flickers. A young man who she does not recognize is there with them. The intermittent light elucidates him as prognathous and strong with the frame of a fighter.

The elevator again comes to a halt and the door opens. The old woman’s son leads her out. They pause for a moment; the young man needs to leave, has to be elsewhere.

To the old woman’s dismay her son joins him.

“The floor orderly will take you from here,” he says.

The door closes. They are gone. A long hallway stretching into darkness lies ahead and from its unseen end reality seems to rush back to her. From within a man appears and beckons her over.

“There’s not long to go,” he says. He turns around and disappears. The old woman follows.

John is sleeping fetal underneath white sheets. His wife sits on the bed with him, resting her hand on his emaciated chest. His ribs are separated by deep valleys. She is reminded of the roadkill flecking the country roads, sometimes the same fox

every day for a month, its flesh eviscerated and dangling in the breeze, the carcass half-sunk into the dirt.

The orderly pulls her hand back and holds it. "Please do not touch the elderly."

At the sight of his tall and youthful figure she is amiable and silent. In his other hand he holds a glass vase from which black lilies sprout and loom. She watches him move it to the table to the right of John's bedhead.

Her eyes drift to her husband. He looks like a child, she thinks. Not at all like the man she married. She moves her hand up her leg and rests it on her hip bone, then continues up her stomach – all of the bones so brittle and weak that they hurt at the slightest touch.

Inside her mind, errant thoughts search for their ends but find those of others instead; signals spark and disintegrate without a trace. She is motionless – until the correct pieces of a message converge and hang on. Death is coming. John will be there waiting – will he be angry that she is late and hit her?

The thought crumbles but its bones remain. She wonders where her family is.

The orderly coerces her to a seat by the bed's footboard. He walks over to the great wall-window at the far end of the room. His silhouette is rendered many more fold than his figure by the setting sun, its head encompassing the other two entirely. He looks up at a clock on the wall.

"You will have to find your way back down alone," he says, "I've countless others

to attend to. Do you remember the way alright?"

The old woman does not listen. Her eyes are listless on her husband.

The orderly sighs and sits down. An alarm sounds from a machine by John's bed. The old woman yelps with fright and falls back on her chair. The orderly cries out and says he will get help and runs from the room.

When she awakens the white canvas of a roof greets her, calm and empty.

"Great to see you're okay! I summoned the paramedics as fast as I could. Is everything working?" The orderly's beaming face appears above her.

Her attempts to move are thwarted by a debilitating pain. She closes her eyes. She hears the orderly walk away.

He is whistling. "While you were unconscious we found you a free bed. Your family has been notified and will bring your things on their first visit. Are you uncomfortable? Would you like me to move you?"

She groans through inseparable lips as he manipulates a lever at the base of the bed and she is rotated onto her side.

"Good!"

He leaves. She is unable to call after him. The window in place of a wall at the far end of the room is slightly ajar. The petals of the black lilies in the vase beside her flutter in the wind.

UGLY GIRLS

by Mason Shed

I

I read that Nietzsche had an unhealthy amount of introspection, and it led to his madness. I'm fascinated with the tale of how he broke down, and I love to tell the story to anyone who'll listen. He was in Turin, abandoned by his good friends and angry at the cruelty of others. He trudged about the streets for days, asking himself questions about life, its meaning, and how humans and – specifically – he fit into all of it. Making his way through the crowded Italian town, he found himself in a market square, coursing with the life of the country. In the square, off to the side near an alleyway, stood a horse. Its back was overloaded and overworked by the peasants of the market. Meanwhile, Nietzsche kept to himself, his head buried deeply into his aged and weathered palms.

Time passed – two officers walked through the square and, upon noticing the horse, declared that it blocked the way and ordered it to be moved. The owners, frightful of the forcefulness of the Italian police, had no choice but to agree. The horse was weighed down heavily and moved at a tortoise's pace. One official, becoming more frustrated with its speed, struck the horse violently on its side. It whined frighteningly, catching Nietzsche in

thought. He paused for a moment, casting a weathered glare at the transpiring cruelty. His heart cracked in the instant he witnessed the beast being beaten in the streets. It was struck again, with the officers yelling at the merchants to get the damned thing moving. He despondently watched from the side, just on a bench across the marketplace. At the final blow, the horse collapsed. Nietzsche rushed to its side, breaking the officers away from the battered thing. He wept into its coat as it lay in the streets of Turin, broken and shattered along with his mind. The officers had to forcibly remove him from the body, dragging him away from the one thing in life that made him understand what was important in his world.

II

I know that I have a problem. I recognize this fact. Please, let me divulge to you what transpired.

For a long time, it was difficult for me to spend time with old friends: the people who I've known my entire life and have watched grow up alongside me. I wasn't past them; I put myself in a different place. Feeling girded to the same pedantic conversations over mundane topics every

day, I – there’s no other way to put this – abandoned them. I wanted to talk politics or philosophy, but they had more earthly interests. Which is fine, but it wasn’t what I wanted anymore. This led to me completely severing my ties with all of them.

One day, I finally snapped in the heat and haze of a summer afternoon, and, like some strung out addict, I fiendishly craved human interaction in any capacity.

We met eyes on the train tracks. I was walking one day, alone, balancing on the rails, navigating through the thick brush. They were above where the rest of the road was laid, placed on the top of a saw back. The foliage around the base had to be cut back as it was encroaching upon the track. It was hard to really make out anything around me – the trees drooped heavily overhead, blocking most of the view of the sky; all the bushes slithered and tangled themselves near the base. I trudged to get up past the hill, and, needing some time to think, paced the track. When coming around a sharp bend, I saw another person. She wobbled her way down the other direction, head locked down and focusing on her balance, never quite looking upward until we were near. As I got closer and closer, I realized she was quite beautiful. Her head hung a mop of short bleached blonde hair and pair of sunken blue eyes. She didn’t wear eye shadow at all, she later told me. It looked as if she had taken a hit to both of her sockets – they were so purple. She was small, no more than 5’5”, or just past my stomach. She wore a long white shirt that draped down her torso with

a design for a local gas station on the front. Along with blue short cutoffs, she wore distinct black-and-white-polka-dot-bikini bottoms.

In all of my staring and analyzing, she realized that she was not alone in her balancing act. When we got to double-our-arms-length she looked up and smiled sheepishly. “Kind of a strange place to meet one another isn’t it?” she piped. I agreed. I wasn’t expecting to find anyone up here except for the trains that ran past. But we passed each other, without another word, moving along in our respective directions. And as the distance between us grew further, I felt like I was missing something. I turned around and started after her.

I caught up with her a few minutes later – before I could reach her she turned around, picking up the slapping and cruching of my flip-flops on the scattered gravel. She kept on walking along the rail, carefully sauntering and swaggering. I asked her what she was doing up here. “Oh, nothing, I was walking home from the pool. I normally head up and down this hill, but I’ve never walked its length.” I told her I came up here pretty often: a lie. The hot iron on the railroad baked the blistering summer air and melted our plastic shoes. I was jealous of her access to a pool. We talked for a few minutes. She was from the neighborhood set on the west of the tracks, and I lived in the one on the east.

We walked together for more time than I intended. It was lucky that we actually held a lot in common. She would attend college after summer, down at a local school in the

city. I hadn't entirely decided whether to go or not yet, and that date was coming close. "I'm in the choir at my school. They say I'm pretty good too, so I'm going to audition for the college of music once I get there", she told me. "I've been singing for a long time, I started in elementary school. Back then our major thing was singing Christmas carols to old-folks-homes, but now we have big concerts down at the Metro. You know, last concert we had, I got to sing my own solo. It was a recreation that my music director did of Carmen. Instead of it being set in Seville, he set it in space, with cowboys – weird, right? I don't think the audience cared for that portion. It's like, who are you setting this up for? The only people coming to see opera nowadays seem to be either old or rich folks who probably won't get the humor. Maybe they did. Shoot, I don't know." We talked like this for a long time, balancing on both sides of the tracks. At one point I felt her tipping over, and grabbed her arm before she fell. I asked if she was alright, and she laughed at my seriousness – we continued down further. We walked like this for a few hours, talking and laughing, taking care to turn around to retrace our footsteps.

She was actually the first person I met who had a similar interest towards books. She was ravenous, she told me, she devoured novels as soon as she got them, and her favorite writer was Shakespeare (something that you don't hear often from young people). We reminisced about reading his plays for the first time and about how they changed our perspective of the era.

We talked about movies; her Father was part owner of the local Cineplex, where she worked part-time – she was able to see everything on opening night, something I was truly jealous of. She was an interesting girl, and I had yet to meet someone quite like her. There was a certain air about her, a confidence that I found magnetic.

When it became late, as the sun dipped into the horizon, we decided to part ways. After all the traversing we had done and the entire road we covered, we weren't too far from where we began. "So will I catch you some other time?" she asked, "maybe at school?" I told her I would think about it, giving her something to look forward to. When I turned to leave, she continued down the other side, escaping into the slip of verdant brush and disappearing into the night's cover. My body, walking home, felt achy and sore. My skin was taut and burnt by the sun, which I hadn't noticed. But it became all too relevant when I made it to my garage and looked in the mirror.

That was the first time I met her, walking down those tracks, and I would meet her twice more.

III

The next day I resolved to check back at the same train tracks to try and run into her again. I made my way through the stamped out ticky-tacky houses and freshly laid asphalt, tumbling near the enormous steamroller paving down new roads and making way for new construction. The goliath trembled and trounced down the

black road, flattening and solidifying the freshly-spewed tar for the residents. The city planned to turn the suburbs into something grand: a sovereign and autonomous nation within the throngs of an American Jungle. We would get a grocer, library, gas station, bank, post office – all within our tiny quartered off subdivision.

I made my way through the thick vines and prickling bushes, ascending the hill to the train tracks. I looked down both ways, but she was nowhere to be seen. I was a little beat that she hadn't yet thought of me, yet she still ran through my mind. I turned to make my way down one direction of the tracks, kicking a pile of gravel and scattering it all around the thick iron bars. Humid air throttled my breath. It was like living in a perpetually sweltering vat of syrup that thickened every motion and sent the sweat spilling out of your skull and underarms. I traveled further down, balancing myself on the pads of my feet between the twin beams that ran down for hundreds of miles. Each strip of steel was bolted down with a mighty spike that was engrossed in the dirt and rock around it. I wondered at the kind of strength it must have taken to drive that thing through the earth.

The fat just below my eyes tingled in the raging sunlight. I hopped off to walk more in the shade of the trees.

From some distance I could hear a rumbling: first some quiet and small vibrations, which grew into a loud and

thundering crash. I turned my head around to find myself in the presence of the oncoming train. It sped past, blurring by, blaring a whistle that severed the air around me. I stood there and watched as it shot across the tracks.

After it passed, leaving behind a trail of thin black smoke and the smell of copper, I turned to make my way down the path again. I saw her for the second time. She was in the same shirt as the day before, but this time in just her bathing suit, no cutoffs. On her head she had large oval-shaped sunglasses and a plastic straw sunhat. Looking up from her ascent she cracked open a smile. "Were you looking for me?" she asked devilishly. I told her I was just passing through, and I might've liked to see her again. Her body, looking more bare and honest in the swim suit, appeared different to my eyes. A once-thin-belly protruded more over her bikini bottom, and her recently delicate arms were skin lashed to bone. She removed her sunglasses, revealing the rest of her face, which hadn't changed much, save for a few glimpses of scarring across her right cheek and the distance between her eyes being a little too close. Her nose seemed offset as well, like it wasn't symmetrical. Her face wasn't symmetrical. She hung her glasses at the top of her shirt as we stood face-to-face on the train tracks for, really, the first time. I told her I was just making my way down the path, as we did the day before. She asked if I would like to come back to her neighborhood. With her.

I looked up. The sun was still draped high in the atmosphere where titanic clouds

slinked lazily, fluttering near the light like fluffy white moths. I told her “sure.”

We walked down the other half of the hill, through the bushes and vernal tree limbs, past the tall baked sun grasses, through the stumpy puddles of mud; we made our way into her territory. Most of the dialogue between us lent itself to her side, she told me about the books she was reading at the time and about how they were quite thought-provoking for her. She was reading a popular-and-pulpy fantasy collection that told the tale of a young boy’s coming to terms with his place in the world. “You don’t think less of me for reading something like that, right? I know it’s cheesy but I love light-reads, it’s a good palette cleanser for when I’m in between Shakespeare plays. You can’t read heavy-literature all the time”, she gabbed, “and you’ll just get weighed down with all these dark thoughts and ideas – most of literature is pretty cavernous, y’know? I know that sounds bad but you get what I’m saying.” I lied and said that I did, brushing it off as thoughtless and harmless banter between friends.

We trudged through the molasses-enveloped weather until we finally reached her home. It was similar to my own – the same basic construction: black-shingled roof, white paneled siding, and a short-cut-and-compact lawn in which we sat. The house was a duplex, so her immediate neighbors glared at us lounging on the grass. The muggy air hung a sense of an imminent downpour – the clouds overhead were swollen, ready to be lanced and drained. We sat on the green grass, passing

the time by sharing some of our favorite books. “Have you read ‘A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man’? I absolutely love Oscar Wilde, his style is so interesting, there’s really no other way to describe it. He’s able to fit so much into his novels.” She prattled on and on. I asked her if she enjoyed ‘Madame Bovary’. “Oh, yes” she stuttered, “I loved it, the author (his name escapes me right now) was really able to capture the main character’s struggle. I mean he went through so much and for the author to create so much strife for him throughout the novel shows why he’s such a strong character. I really adore that book”. We kept talking; talking about life, talking about guys, talking about girls. We must have sat together for hours. Though it felt interrogatory. I was the only one asking the questions, and getting excited yet forced responses. The language she used was doused in coquetry: the way words like “darling” rolled out of her post-adolescent-mouth, plopping into to my lap like sweet pieces of candied word vomit – those sickeningly sweet phrases – made my cheeks hurt.

We ended the day by walking back to the edge of the train tracks, where both lines sat. In my mind, I would’ve liked to see her again, at that moment. I wasn’t quite sure why; I was still attracted to her. Her looks made her seem like she had a certain air about her, or something she hid from me that I needed to uncover. With quick goodbyes, we headed to our halves of the world, unsure of what to do at that point. There was a certain expectation she must have held, that I might have asked for her

number, or if I could take her out to eat sometime. But I held that in reserve for the time being. I wasn't quite sure of whether or not everything was going over well.

IV

I didn't see her for some time after that as a downpour erupted and raged for almost three days. Instead of wandering through the rain and looking for her home again past the floodplains, I chose to spend my time thinking about what transpired. Sitting near the big picture window of my home, plotting what do next, I wondered what I should do about our situation, which was, admittedly, strange to my own concept of what a relationship should be. Should I be more forward with her? More direct? Am I just using her to fill a void? Do I even feel anything about her? I was unsure whether or not she knew my intentions, or even approved of them. Over time I lost the capacity to make accurate judgments about the actions of others. She hadn't made any direct comments at that point, so I speculated that everything would be alright.

After the three days, once the rain cleared and had dried up in the marshes, I climbed out of my house and went towards the train tracks. Around the neighborhood, streets worms writhed in gutters – some bloated with so much water they looked ready to burst. The sky still clung to a temperamental gray, forecasting a continued episode of rain. The air had returned to its grimy and disgusting mood, enveloping the valley.

It didn't cross my mind what I was doing at that moment. I would have preferred not to see her – to give myself some more time to think; it made sense, in my head, that we should take a break from spending so much time together. Or did I need to see her again – to reconcile something between us? It might have been what triggered all of it when I found myself straddling the train tracks. I should not have been surprised to hear her voice. After making my way through the brush and climbing the mound – it felt like second nature at this point – I walked down the path that was cut in search of solitary thought. At this place, I could think a bit more clearly; it was farther removed from the suffocating and claustrophobic feelings the suburban homes exuded. I wasn't quite sure what I was doing – whether or not the decisions I were making were, in fact, the right ones. And whether they were my own decisions or simply what was expected of me. Was my brain making my mind do something it didn't want to? I might've been conscious of that at the time, but I still moved forward.

I was not prepared for the ghoul that was presented before me. Her normally forgivable features had been perverted into something far more grotesque. An elongated nose crooked over a cracked-tooth smile. The sunken blue marbles shifted into the echoing caverns just below a bundle of coarse straw that scratched across her broiled face. And she came lurching towards me in a terrifying manner, her snapping torso turned and the lower half dragged the animated figure in my

direction, giving off a screech as she called out my name.

A chunk of choked vomit churned in my stomach and rose in my throat as her wail pierced my ears. She was worse than ugly. Her body morphed into something inhuman.

The smell of rotting meat emanated from her mouth and the nonsensical babbling became worse and worse as she got nearer and nearer. My stomach churned and fought to keep from ejecting itself onto the blacktop. There was only one thing that I could do, but as I turned to run her infectious arm reached out and grabbed my own with deadlock grip. And I was stuck in her sickening grasp until she chose to let go.

She dragged me with her, despite my protests and best attempts to escape. We stepped through the wooden barrier into the sweltering heat and sickening smell of the bubbling tar on the freshly paved roads. The wretched fetor clung to every molecule of air – the hot stench of the pitch moved in and out of my nostrils, and with every subsequent breath my body felt heavier – I was suffocating. We passed the same houses as we did before, we walked across the lawns and into her home and through to her backyard. Enclosed by a redwood fence, we were alone against the big tree in the corner. The fragmented sunbeams cutting through the dehydrated leaves stabbed at my burnt cheeks as I edged myself further away from the savage rambling before me. On and on, she talked. I couldn't help but inch myself towards a

possible exit. The latch to the fence was open, and my only chance of escape appeared. It turned to me and its guttural voice uttered, "You think I'm pretty, right?" I stammered, unable to find the words to describe it. And for some time I sat and listened to it talk. A wave of dredge washed over me as time passed. I counted every second that creaked by, the slow movements of my watch making me feel as if I was trapped in some sick vacuum. But a lull in the conversation arose. At the pause in the monologue, I attempted to say something, to break free from my polite prison – a way out of this horrible mess. Then she turned to me, and we faced each other. "You're such a good listener – it doesn't help that you're cute, either." Oh god. I painstakingly rolled my eyes, and hers quivered in their black sockets. She grabbed the back of my head. She got closer, pushing her mouth closer and nearer to mine. Her acrid-breath burned against my nose-hairs, and her fetid lips snapped in anticipation. I ground my teeth into my jaw. In my mind the only option was flight. She pursued me with my back pressed against the tree.

When I first met her I was scratching an itch, but I scratched until I bled. I ripped and I tore into my own mind until everything was a pulpy and twisted mess. It was so fucking hot out. I couldn't breathe anymore. The wind rushed past me as I ran, the sticky, sickening smell of asphalt pressing against my lungs like a large weight. When I finally made it over to the train tracks, I stopped to take a breath. Black spots stung my fleeting vision. At one

point I was standing and in another I toppled over onto the tracks, the hot metal charring the flesh of my face. In the distance I could feel the rumblings of another train. For a good minute I sat there, panting and tired on the warmth of the gravel, ready to let it overtake me. Finally, I stood up from my position, watching as the great train rolled past. The roaring intensity shook the ground and shattered the stagnant air. I stood there until it passed, my eyes locked onto the train cars whirling by me. What was she before? After the last one passed, I continued to stand, looking out on the neighborhood I had just fled. I wondered what happened, where things went wrong, and what she turned into. I made my way down that hill, for the last time, peering through the thickness of the wood as the rain began to fall. The sky was bloated and fat, and the lightning crackled and tore across the sky; it was a bad day to try and pave a road. All the men working on the

pavement simultaneously looked up and cursed the rain for ruining their last few days of real work. The black puddles from asphalt-runoff filled the potholes in the road. Making my way back through the neighborhood, I thrust my hands into my pockets and hunched over. The rain continued to fall – it was the last time I ever saw her at home. I never understood why it all happened, though. I decided to go to school that fall. I would see her from time to time, hanging outside her dorm or heading to class.

She looked plain and normal again, her plainness exemplified by her drab outfits and frumpy looks. Her appearance was framed in my mind, though I avoided speaking to her and she did the same. On the handful of occasions where we passed each other on the stairs, I would look up and smile, remaining friendly, but whenever she cast her glare at me, the smell of petroleum and meat filled my lungs.

CAMPING TENTS

by Ian Hall

There was only silence, albeit a different kind of silence. The sounds of the forest could be considered an awful din, but the most natural kind of din. The chirping of birds flying overhead, small critters shuffling through bushes, and the roar of the nearby river all contributed to the serene and natural silence of the forest. Clay was taking in this silence that he had never experienced. The artificial silence of the suburbs that he was so used to was simply no match.

A blasphemous shot barreled out, just as Clay began to feel acceptance of this never before experienced nature. The shot echoed through the forest, which, if anything, only contributed to the solitude of the forest. Clay heard a belch, followed shortly by a cheer of victory. Jim, his father, stepped up off of the fallen and decomposed log he had previously been sitting on. He crushed a beer can in his hand, and tossed it aimlessly to the side.

“Hot damn, boy. Now that’s have you fire a gun. Better reel in ma’ prize, ‘fore the flies get to it. Know what I mean, boy?” Clay couldn’t think of an acceptable response, so he chose to remain quiet. Jim gave no attention to his son’s silence, and chuckled to himself as he hopped along forward to retrieve his kill. Clay stayed put.

Jim descended into the brush as Clay

looked on ahead into the forest. He tried to retrieve the euphoric silence that he had so quickly lost, but he felt the entire balance of the forest had been thrown off by his father’s actions.

“Fuck!” Jim bellowed from several meters away. Clay’s rage towards his father only built up during those moments, as if his father was only contributing more to the unpleasant nature he had already created. Jim walked out of the brush, with a streak of blood on the sleeve of his flannel jacket. He gave no attention to Clay, and picked up his belongs from the ground. He slung his rifle over his back and started to walk in the opposite direction.

“We’re going now, Clay.” Jim did not turn around to speak to his son, but rather continued walking. Clay got up with a pout, and started to follow behind his father. He felt his entire day had been ruined by his stumbling father, as usual. Apathetic to whatever his father had found in the brush, he indifferently followed his father. As Clay walked, he felt he heard a whimper from behind him, and a pathetic whispering plea for help, but he paid no attention.

They drove home without a word, silent as ever. Jim only stared ahead, eyes on the road as a light rain began to fall. Clay had taken out his moleskin notebook to record the events of the day.

SWEET NOTHINGS

by Alex Hawkins

From: Jared, 10:21 PM

Msg: "Hey, I saw you tonight."

Corey was on the couch, feet propped up on the top of his coffee table, arms sprawled motionless in the same position that he'd been in since he'd gotten home. He tried to push away the unnerving feeling that Jared's text had given him, getting up to stretch his stiff muscles. He fumbled clumsily inside his jacket, trying to fish out the pack of Lucky Strikes in his pocket. He'd never smoked in his own house before. In fact, Corey had not had a cigarette in months. Jared had been adamant about him quitting. "If we're still going to be friends, you're gonna need to cut that shit out, Corey" Jared said, in his coarse, intense voice. That was Jared's favorite line. Corey called it his mantra. He was usually chastising Corey about his flaws and bad habits, but, as Jared would claim, it was just his way of showing his 'brotherly love'.

After Corey's hands had encountered an unusual metal lighter and a tin of Altoids that he didn't remember buying, he realized mid-search that this wasn't his jacket, and these weren't even his cigarettes. Huh, must have taken Danny's jacket instead. As he continued searching, he found that he had at least grabbed his phone before leaving. As Corey gave it some thought, he started to notice more. It had a different smell; sweet, with a hint of mangoes and cologne.

Corey took a long, deep drag as he lit the cigarette. Immediately, he began to cough. He could only handle so much of Jared's earnest persistence before he had reluctantly given in.

"Alright Jer, I'll quit, but only because we're friends," he said finally, much to Jared's surprise. Corey could remember it like it was only moments ago. He, Corey, and some of their friends were all seated around their favorite table at the back of

the local Applebee's, where they had a regular late-night dinner after they had all gotten off work for the evening. "Come on Corey, none of that faggy 'Jer' stuff," he had said, giving Corey a friendly punch on the arm. "It's either 'Jared' or 'hey asshole!'" That one really had gotten the whole group laughing hard. Even Corey forced a smile and a few awkward chuckles.

Corey took another drag, finishing the cigarette. That was almost a year ago, can't believe it's been so long, he thought. With effort, he finally willed his body to move, against the protest of his sleeping limbs. He walked out through the sliding glass door onto the small

wooden deck which overlooked the lower part of the hill that his house sat on. The air was cool, but it was the kind of cool that made Corey think of pensive autumn evenings, with a coolness that hinted at something else coming. The storm of winter. Storm. He sat down slowly in his favorite chair, pointed out towards the scraggly trees that enclosed the edges of his backyard.

As he started to enjoy the slow evening breeze, he closed his eyes, thinking about the grill near the edge of the deck. It had been Jared's during college, but he had let Corey have it when he bought another one. It made him think about high school, and all those years they had been roommates in college. He smiled, remembering the time they spent together with friends out on the tiny porch with Jared's grill. They shared an apartment, and after only a few months, they had become well-known to everyone

in the apartment complex of the college town as 'the best damn cooks' around. Jared usually did the grilling, though.

Their weekly parties made four years pass by quickly, and in a blur. When they graduated they ended up staying in the same city, with Jared taking a well-paid position in a start-up brokerage firm downtown, and Corey commuting daily to a graphic design company from his small house in the older part of the city. It was his housewarming gift to Corey. "There you go buddy, use it enough, maybe you'll be as good as the master," he had said with a laugh.

As Corey opened his eyes again, he realized that it was already morning. The moon was still shining in the sky, but it would soon be overtaken by the growing light from the east. I'm freezing. Maybe I should light up that last Lucky. He paused. Hmm, after coffee. He stepped back inside, continually pushing last night's crisis on the periphery of his mind. While Corey was putting the beans in the grinder, he heard the smooth rumbling of Jared's BMW coming into the driveway.

No.

The fear that hadn't totally abated came back in full force as he put away the coffee hastily and headed straight towards the front door. Corey turned the handle and opened it, revealing Jared's tall frame standing hesitantly in front of the doorstep.

"...Are you going to come in?" Corey asked, breaking the silence. A slight nod. "Sure," he replied plainly.

Corey led Jared into the kitchen where they both sat down, Jared facing the sliding window overlooking the backyard, Corey sitting angled at the head of the table towards Jared. Jared had interlaced his fingers and was nervously moving them to some internal rhythm. His angular features were glistening with a sheen of sweat, and he was dressed in athletic shorts, despite the coolness of the morning. He must have been lifting.

He broke the silence again. "Good workout this morning?"

Snapped out of his thoughts, Jared looked up. "Oh... yeah, I was on the elliptical." He moved his right leg out for under the table, letting Corey see it wrapped in an Ace Bandage. "Messed it up at the gym after work yesterday."

"Ouch," Corey winced, trying to sound sympathetic.

Another few seconds of silence went by, just long enough to make Corey feel more uncomfortable.

"Yeah, but it's only swollen, it should heal up in a week or so. And I mean, the elliptical isn't that bad." He paused again, looking at Corey. His hands stopped moving. "It gave me some time to think."

"That's good." Corey wasn't meeting his gaze, but he could feel it. He waited for Jared to make the next move. Say what you're here to say.

"You get my text last night?" Jared asked. He finally looked at Jared.

"Yeah," he said in an attempt to sound

cool and collected. His fidgeting leg betrayed any sense of calm that he tried to muster. Jared looked straight in Corey's eyes.

"So... who was your friend?" "Danny."

"Danny. Like 'Daniel'?"

Corey waited a few beats to respond. This is going to take some finesse.

"Yeah."

"Anyway, I saw you and... Danny, over at Senor Rojas." His face remained inscrutable. "Yeah, they've got some amazing steak fajitas." Christ, that was stupid. Focus. "So what

brought you all the way over to Senor Rojas? I didn't notice you there," Corey asked. He tried to stare at the spot between Jared's eyes, so he could look at him without feeling very vulnerable.

"Well, I wasn't there. Yesterday was me and Vanessa's six month anniversary, so I took her to that little Irish place across the street." He shifted slightly in his chair and rested his chin on his hand, still staring at Corey.

Good, a distraction. "That was really nice of you. How is she doing? I haven't seen her in a while." Corey asked, trying to feign interest.

"Pretty good. Work keeps her kind of busy." "I know the feeling."

There was a short lapse in the conversation, allowing Corey to adjust himself. He relaxed slightly, as if to show Jared that he was totally unmoved by the

shift of their discussion. He had time to study Jared, who had excused himself momentarily to check his phone. Corey could see the change in his face; the rough features that usually wore a smile were contorted in the grimace that he only wore when he was thinking. Jared finally looked up, then to Corey, then to a painting on the wall.

“So when did you and Danny meet?” he asked.

Keep playing the game. “About a year ago, I think.”

Jared looked even more troubled. “A year ago. You never introduced him to me.”

“He and I don’t see each other very often,” Corey lied, “He is only in town every few months, so we go get a few beers or something when he comes around, nothing special.”

“Okay.” Jared then gave Corey a quizzical look. He was never skilled at keeping his feelings from showing on his face. “It is weird though,” he continued. “I mean, for once-in-a- while friends, you two seemed pretty close.” Jared was giving Corey a stern glare. “Especially the part when you walked out holding hands and kissing each other goodbye.”

So that’s what he saw.

“Jared--”

Jared stood up suddenly, pushing his chair out which threatened to tip over. “Goddamn it, Corey!” he half-said, half-yelled. His neck bulged with tension, and he looked like he was going to break

something. Corey’s hand found the metal lighter in Danny’s jacket pocket, and he clenched his fist around it in preparation for a fight. “When were you gonna tell me that you’re a f--”

“A ‘fucking faggot’?” Corey offered defiantly. He was standing up too, with clenched fists, looking back at Jared. The two stared at each other in a stalemate. Jared’s heavy breathing moved his chest up and down like storm waves, each swelling up and crashing with power. Corey was trembling slightly. “Why the fuck did you even bother to come over?” he roared, knocking over one of the kitchen chairs with an uncontrolled swipe. It skidded and clattered loudly onto the floor. “You already saw it with your own eyes-- what do you want, a Pride parade and some goddamned streamers?”

Jared’s eyes flashed for a moment, and then Corey couldn’t tell what he was thinking. Then Jared turned away, swinging on his coat. “I don’t have time to deal with this, man.”

Corey advanced. “You come here unannounced at ten in the morning on a Saturday to... what, exactly?” Corey said, lessening his intensity. “I really don’t understand you, Jer. If it is so earth-shatteringly difficult for you to accept this, why did you even come over?” His words had no effect. “Jared.”

Jared’s back was still facing Corey, motionless. His hands were held away from his sides, tense and hesitant.

“Why,” he responded, barely audible.

Corey couldn't tell if it was a question or a statement. Then, he finally turned around to face him.

"Why?" he repeated. Corey's hand released the lighter, but he still felt the indentation in his flesh from where he had been gripping it in anticipation. Jared stood solid and immobile.

"Jared... there isn't anything to explain."

Ten seconds passed; Corey involuntarily counted each one, because in the silence of the house he could hear the clock ticking them off in the other room.

"I have to go." Jared said. Corey thought for a moment. "Ok."

"See you later."

"All right, see you."

With a cursory wave, Jared was out the front door, in his car, and out of the driveway before Corey had time to think. Jared sped to the stop sign at the end of the street, then took off around the corner.

Corey went back to the kitchen where freshly ground beans sat next to an unfilled mug. He picked up the mug, turning it around in his hands as he examined it. Corey threw it at the dining room wall. Turquoise shards fanned out onto the floor, and the drywall was left with a slight hole. He pulled out the last cigarette, taking time to breathe in the subtle, intriguing odor that permeated the fabric of Danny's jacket before tossing it gently onto one of the dining room chairs.

As he lit the last cigarette on the deck with difficulty, Corey was relatively calm

for all that had happened in the past hour. The strong easterly wind was tousling the clouds above, and he watched them as they moved. "It looks like rain today." He inhaled deeply and watched how his own clouds of smoke were whisked away. Midway through the cigarette, he flicked it into the wind, letting it fly over the fence into an adjacent yard, and went to get his phone from the jacket. I should call Danny. Drops of rain were beginning to splash on the deck. I need to call Danny. Corey found his phone and went straight for the loveseat, sprawling on his back comfortably. He scrolled quickly through the recent calls till he found the right name.

One ring. Two. Three. "Hello?"

Hearing that voice was all it took for Corey to forget the past twelve hours; he was a teenage boy with a huge crush. Corey closed his eyes to let everything else fade except the image of Danny in his mind. He replied softly.

"Hey."

"What's up, babe?"

"A lot of stuff," Corey sighed. "I'll tell you about it later."

"All right. Remind me to bug you incessantly until you talk," Danny replied with a warm tone.

"Okay."

The other line was silent for a few moments. "What's up... really? You sure you're okay?"

Corey shifted, curling his arms close to his chest and letting the phone rest between

the couch and his ear. “I... yeah. I’m fine now. I just had to hear you again.”

“Tell you what. I get off work at three today. I’ll come over and you can hear me all you want, in person,” Danny said. “No wait, I’ve got an even better idea, I’ll hear you while you tell me what you’re thinking about.”

Corey could almost feel Danny’s face press warmly against his own, somewhere on the other end of the phone call.

“Yeah, that does sound like a good idea.”

“Thought so. Okay, I have to go, I’ll see you in a few, babe.” “All right.”

Corey stopped for a moment, as his argument with Jared started to creep back into his mind. “Hey,” Danny said, interrupting his thoughts.

“What?” “Love you.” Corey smiled.

“I love you too.”

TEA

by Chandra

The familiar craving for a cup of something warm. You need -- It is a cold night outside. You are inside, though, and it's not cold inside, but you are cold inside. It's very late (early?) and you're tired. --something to keep you going. Coffee? No. It makes you jittery. You want to focus and, for some reason, it makes you too focused. When something catches your eye, you turn your head and don't move until the original goal flirts with and then nags at your subconscious, like an impermanent girlfriend. You don't like when you're nagged at and you probably won't go back to what you were doing before because of it. Hot chocolate? Too sweet. You are young, but you've grown too old for it. You tell others you're not a sweet tooth, but honestly, you just don't see what others see in what you used to see as a child.

Tea.

Let's go. Now that you have a goal, you finally get off your ass and go for it. It's a nice break from what you weren't doing. It's not easy what you do. You're a student. You don't know what you want; you only know what wise (wo)men suggest might help you find what you want. You trust their direction enough to stick through it. Until you find the jewel of your eye,

though, you're half of a treasure map with no territory.

It makes me sad to see you like this. Upstairs, you have what seems to be a goal, but eh, it takes work and you're still unsure of what work is. Tea is easy and immediately rewarding. I know every time you go back to revise your thoughts on paper, your goal shifts some... Eh, it takes work. You need tea.

Before you fill the kettle with water, you lay your cup with two spoons of sugar and a teabag inside by the stove top. Your mother usually puts the water in a cup and microwaves it, but you find something comfortable about using the kettle, like your mother used to when you were young. The water boils slowly as you sing strange songs to yourself. You're already impatient twenty seconds before the kettle begins to sputter. You don't want it to boil. You only want warmth. Water falls into the cup, Half-and-Half soon follows. With a spoon, you squeeze the tea out of the teabag into the strange mixture you've made of watered-down sweet ingredients. Your method is efficient and only takes three minutes of thoughtless effort. Yet, for some reason, you always ask your mother to do it for you whenever she's around. She won't

be around in a few months. She's asleep now. You miss her already. You've already moved on though and don't talk to her much.

The "tea" is complete and you run-hop to get back up the stairs and then briskly walk to your cave-room. You're in a hurry to go back to doing nothing. As you put the tea on the desk and trust-fall into your chair,

you have the urge to write about something, you don't know what, but you feel as though you have some new understanding of your life. The minute you open Word on Distracto-Pad, our minds and times meld and hold. Now, you are me.

It's strange how quickly I change. I think I need another cup of tea.



POETRY

The Waterfall
by Maja Topic

Poetry award winner

my cocoon
is the only instrument i play
i sway
to the sound of its
warmth,
and motion sickness
leads the way
to what i can't see
is inside

a crater
gaping
crusted
swings languid in orbit
soothing for the mountain climber,
the shameless explorer, admirer.
man of peak.
man of price.
they are torn apart,
repulsive forces
imprisoned by rigid borders.
irrevocable fences, their faces gleam
illuminated eyelids ensnare visuals
under a brief swoon, a severed trajectory
a wholly muted paradise
tranquility; closed-off
suppressed by possession
by formal consideration

the dull remnants of a thump
(once calm now in shreds)
ring from inside a chimney.
viscous, lascivious wolf faces
snarl and growl
expanding, undulating
out of consequential smoke

a fresh corpse flung to ash,
reconstitution.
he provokes a drift of dust to lightly rise;
enshrouding him, the dust swirls
a transient case.
armour for the perpetually shifting perspective.
for the wounded dependents,
inbred orphans,
all of us
there is a crumble.
an off-shoot goose-bump filtered down to grain under a stethoscope.
there is nothing wrong, you know you are dying even when examination
forcibly missiles itself to your periphery. a blind spot infected by rust
and age. touch is unwelcome as the skin is raised tender. smell
disintegrates. taste follows suit with an additional foam; the inside of a
mouth pumped up down up down until
a searing split
eruptive inverse recline leak emerges from an inconceivably absurd
cesspool of original magnetic forces.
they are welded; sticky and delicious until deemed inedible.
derelict and obsolete, abandoned thieves
now independent
now free
strain to conceal their madness behind a deceptive grace
in shackles marching tambourines

are the esteemed men
stupefied by their abuse of the concept
detachment
theirs is a trained apathy. domesticated indifference.

even rainbows fail to bemuse them.
consider rainbows
rainbows are amazing.
a deflective curve
a smile carved out of a blue
perfect
smooth and gliding with a still inertia
floating above all
lacking definitive length
the gatekeeper.
a master in conveniently observable strips.
harmony contrasted by filigreed precision,
for exhibition,
for understanding
rejection and manipulation,
grief, renewal, a constantly vanishing gray.
detanglement of cotton.
higher and sweeter than even a bruised cheek.
her arm has been crushed under the weight of her own skin
in remorse, she claws at those cheeks
silk in tatters
what a shame

perspiring with indignation and defeat
she snaps the cord
her spine protruding from a moon-lit lake.
wilting.
a lily in the lung, she is carried away down-stream,

over the horizon there is an abyss.
she falls and mourns her bones no more,
frail pores shrinking to be engulfed by sickening glare,
reflection at terminal speed.
no change, just indefinite rolling.
unwinding
unfurling
recoiling
sleep.

she is found on a shore; eyes glazed and vacant, hypnotised by eternity.
an embedded bliss awaits the drowning.
they are frozen and take substantially longer to die than most deaths.
in a haze we are transfixed, even repulsed
by drainage.
loss of colour, grinding to an irreversible halt.
we are repulsed by our own fascination with the immovable.

why does memory evolve with such sporadic fluidity, when what we
really encounter is the rigid puppetry of limp fractions?
tangible, yet brittle. the pulverized remains of an ancient outer core.
thin,
pregnant with water
and unmistakably hideous.

matter is an implosion.
a flower under molten-pelting tempest.
matter says what the eye has not the voice to say.
it does what the eye can.
here we are conjoined.

no-one mourns her a final reprieve, an exacting summation of her
essence in epitaph. if in the beginning was the word, each deserves to
choose his end in virtue of succession.

sometimes the air is a noose
sometimes the reckoning is so cold the tongue swells up and brandishes
you disabled.
sometimes we kiss.
all of the time it's disgustingly beautiful, the only instincts we are not
ashamed of sharing with another.
this is relief.
the only relief.
a chamber where the echo lulls;
a bottomless void elapses with passion.
mother.
father.
greed.
this is love.
to rob yourself of space, pressed up against another set of ideals. a
twitching, breathing compromise for what fantasy is too selfish to
reveal interactively.
sinking wormhole

i retreat.

black holes caged in glass dream of angels that exude a sedative
fragrance, layered wings of bright cellophane give outline to an
otherwise crystalline descent.

thunder strikes

a rift emerges

and creaks as it expands.

no hinges.

merely an indefinite swing.

two raptures leaking into one another

colliding and spraying outward with a spin.

Alarm clocks
by *Chris Heather*

Bouncing

off walls, alleys and corridors,
covering all in a split second
it flits and beckons,

“It’s a brand new day,
what have you to say?”

Tinted red from opposing bricks,
wedging itself under eyelids,
it paints the castles east to west,
this coat will stick.

“I refresh your world, now drink!”

Slowly we react as one,
the opening act’s rhythm begun,
women and men with daughters and sons
sounding off in hearty unison,

“Please your lord an hour more,
the wind is cold and our beds are warm
was it bleary eyes you were searching for?”

so now we pray to alarm clocks.

Skin
by Anon

Inside him raced his pounding heart; before him loomed the door.
Sweaty palms took the handle, turned; he entered the old store.
The shopkeep's eyes burned pinpoint holes into his aching back;
his own downcast, he shuffled onwards towards the women's racks.
Drifting through the sea of gowns, he saw it hanging there:
the silken dress with summer hues, the dress he shouldn't wear.
He glanced back quickly to the shopkeep, who seemed occupied,
then, breathing fast, he raised his coat and shoved the dress inside.
"A gift for mom," he'd lied before to women who would ask,
then left it there. "Next time," he'd think, and it had come at last.
The shopkeep sighed and rolled his eyes; the boy strolled out the door
with silken dress. His prize possessed, he would return no more.
The bus was full, but turbulence could not derail his thoughts.
The dress was his to wear at last, and he had not been caught.
Stumbling off the bus, an anxious sprint grew from his walk.
Reaching his house, his fingers shook and fumbled with the lock.
A quick "hello" to mom and dad, then to his room he fled.
Locking the door, he took the dress and spread it on his bed.
The vibrant pinks and blues and greens invited him to touch.
He held it tight in trembling hands, his cheeks began to flush.
Slipping it on, he turned to face his closet with a grin;
the skeleton smiled back and said, "You look good in my skin."

Émigré
by *Kushal Poddar*

Imagine being an immigrant single cell
under his microscope, on the cold slide,
hard pressed,
each breathing raise the memory of an immaculate labor.

Wishful
by *Kushal Poddar*

You have a nice sky, house.
Mind, if I pop my legs
over your fence
and dip my feet in the blue?

Let the birds nibble away
the toe whites.

Ropeway Logics
by Kushal Poddar

The ropeway,
you say something
about the importance of feeling lost,
of watching our destination as those morning mountains,
slack fog they wear keeps opening every time they yawn.

I watch the innocent thighs of the valleys.
The disturbing thoughts arrive,
the mallards moving south wherefrom we came.
There, I point my finger but not saying, there we left our sense of being lost.

INFORMATION

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