



ISSUES



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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.*

**HOMEPAGE: [WWW.THEAPRILREADER.ORG](http://WWW.THEAPRILREADER.ORG)  
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## A WORD FROM THE EDITORS

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Another month, another TAR – this one's your literary fix for summer. Our prose is a celebration for the season. *Easler's Sin Vacuum* is a reminder that nothing can beat a snuff film. *Hurley's Shut Up Sauce* and *McVey's A Brothel Tale* bring the familiarity of a youthful past from opposite ends of the globe. *Scheer's Everything's Amateur* echoes the insanity of a heat wave, while *Arthur's A Common Fertility Ritual* sheds new light on the heat of sex.

The poetry is a getaway from July's toils. *Not Only That Fewer Men Know* is a cure for the plagues of requited love and happiness; *Rooftop's* brilliant imagery is a release from the dull nature of the natural; and *Untitled* is a nice reprise from the motion of life.

We are sure you'll enjoy what these authors put forth.

A final note: A possible PDF error might mess up the look of the magazine. If this problem arises, change your PDF reader.

Some community-related initiatives, that we think deserve recognition, have sprung up these recent months:

**Pulp!:** A source of comics with cool stories. <https://premierpulp.wordpress.com/>

**Nocturnes Magazine:** A blend of fiction and visuals infused with Japanese culture

<http://www.nocturnesmagazine.com/>

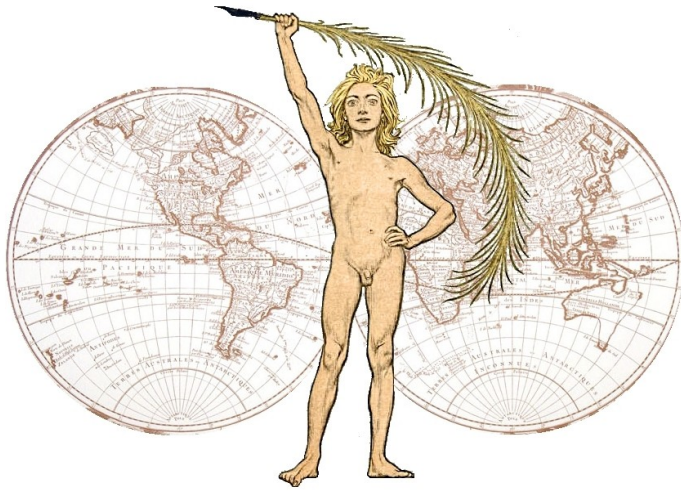
**4chan /lit/:** A writer's forum, Scribophile. <http://www.scribophile.com/groups/lit/>

**420chan /lit/:** Started a book reading circle "starting with the book *Ulysses*"

<http://www.goodreads.com/group/show/71957-420chan-book-club>

Lastly, our new homepage is nearly finished, and will be deployed with the next release of TAR.

*Regards, TAR Staff*



FICTION

# SIN

# VACUUM

*by Nick Easler*  
*TAR Award Winner*

When I was five, my brother held a lit firecracker in his clenched fist. In the movies what happens next is his hand pops like confetti and he's left staring at a spurting stump while I run around picking his fingers out of the grass. Mom's got both hands on either side of her face and she's yelling, "Argh!" Later, in the hospital after he's stitched back together, he thanks me for giving him a hand and we all laugh.

What really happens is I run inside screaming and my brother rolls on the ground moaning with his hand in his lap until mom can control her shaking enough to call an ambulance. She leaves me with the neighbor lady whose husband never comes out of the house and he smells like Ben Gay. Then the lady offers me some cherry Koolaid and I throw up on their carpet.

A little while after my brother blew his fingers off, dad moved out. But before he

left, he gave me a Nintendo and I started this ritual where I'd come home from school, eat a sandwich while my mom tried to talk to me, and play video games until I fell asleep in front of the TV. Sometimes I dreamed I was chasing Super Mario down pipes and over plants with teeth in their mouths but no matter how loud I yelled he never let me catch up.

I never outgrew video games, even after I got an offer of a baseball scholarship at a community college near our house. My mom yelled at me for a week straight because I told her I was going to work in Redmond instead.

Nintendo gave me a nice tour and so did a few other smaller companies. Some of them let you drink free cans of soda all day. None of them was hiring. During one of the tours, someone took a picture of me and put my face on a digital terrorist and I enjoyed it so much he introduced me to a guy named Carl Henner. Carl ran a fly-by-

night studio out of a closet in Chinatown. He offered me a part-time job taking pictures of people and that's how I got to LA.

I shared a studio with a faggot who waited tables at Chili's. I secretly hated him but he got us good pot so I stayed there even after he ruined my microwave cooking a burrito in some tin foil.

I took some pictures of him making out with his boyfriend one night and showed some people at work the next day. They were into artsy shit and I thought it would get me a date with a girl who did flyers for the studio sometimes. She didn't like them but when Carl saw them, he gave me this lecture about how the great artists started as provocateurs. Then he made me go to a bar mitzvah. It was boring and the food sucked.

Carl had me do more work besides taking pictures after that, like I'd get coffee for the people who made shitty action movies in the woods at Carl's dad's house. Sometimes the directors wanted me to listen to them go on about their "craft" and I'd hold their sandwiches and sodas while they told me their shitty filmmaking theories. Like this one guy had all his bad guys' left eyes twitch while the hero scooped spaghetti out their guts with a plastic bayonet because he said he read it in Dostoevsky.

There was this one scene in a movie about an evil general where the good guy's daughter was tied up with a rope around her neck. The rope was looped over the branch of a tree and attached to this goat that would pull when its handler said,

"Ham ham." The good guy tries to cut the noose and the bad guy shoots off his arm. Then the little girl gets mad at the evil general and she swears revenge at him. I told the guy directing that she wouldn't do that though because she'd probably fall down bawling and choke herself out on the rope.

"That's not this little girl. She's very brave," he said. His name was Mitch. He didn't look at me when he talked to me.

"She would at least scream though and she's not even crying."

He gave me a look like I asked him to wipe my ass for me. "How is she supposed to throw a grenade if she's throwing a tantrum?"

"She doesn't pick up the grenade because she's swinging her arms around, reaching for her dad." I figured I was in for a dime so I added, "And then she pisses her bed for six months."

"Who the fuck are you?"

Carl told me I couldn't go to the woods anymore after that, but that was okay because he had something better for me to do. He got us cigars and take out one day so we could smoke and eat burgers in his office. He was chewing a greasy red burger that oozed out his lips while he talked. "Just between you and me, I think Mitch is an asshole. But he does everything under-budget and on-time so I'd be remiss if I didn't hire him every time we're doing one of these expensive dramas." He flicked

something from his finger and wiped his hands on his pants. "I forget your name."

"Mark," I said.

"Mark. Did you ever think you might want to be a director?"

I cleared my throat. "No."

He started rummaging through the drawers on his desk. I wasn't hungry anymore so I dumped the rest of my food in a paper sack he kept by his desk. The sack was full of ketchup packets and soda bottles. In a minute he said, "Ah," and he pulled out a box of cigars.

I took one he offered and put it in my mouth and leaned over his desk so he could light it. "You have to cut it first," he said. He cut the cigar for me and lit it and gave it back.

"Mark, let me tell you a little something about me that not a lot of people know." He lit his own cigar and puffed it and blew little lopsided smoke rings to the side. "I'm a person who believes a person ought to be free to live how he likes."

"Okay." I took a big toke on the cigar and bent over coughing.

"Don't inhale it, Mark." He looked at me with his lip curled up and waited for me to cough it out. Then he sat back in his chair and went on. "There's a certain poetry to life, Mark. Because life is like improvisational poetry. That's how I'd put it. And every man is entitled to say what he wants. Because his life is his poem. It's a democratic imperative, really." He leaned back in his chair with his hands behind his

head and he stared at something on the ceiling. All I could see up there was a water mark and a couple pencils.

I didn't want him to get all pissy about me coughing again, so I just sat there holding my cigar where the smoke wouldn't get in my nose and I tried not to ash on his desk.

"Here's the thing, though, Mark." He sat forward and put both hands on the desk like he's revealing his plan to sink California. "Only the poet knows when the right time is to end a poem. You know, some people say you should keep making it as long as you can still write. But he should be allowed to end it whenever he wants."

I tried to say "yeah," because we just finished a twelve-hour shoot and I wanted to go home. But I just ended up coughing when I tried to talk. So I nodded and wiped tears from my eyes instead. Carl gave me his drink and I started coughing again and I about spat Coke all over his desk.

Then he smiled and rocked back and forth in his chair while he told me that the year before, he saw a girl named Anna on a Facebook ad for mail-order brides and he gave her two hundred dollars and a work visa to move to L.A. and do a short film. He said he knew she'd accept because all mail-order brides are either gold diggers or whores. And she also didn't speak English very well so he figured she'd feel pretty much at home here.

He showed me the film they made. It was all grainy and most of it was in Russian, so I couldn't figure out what exactly was going

on. But the gist was that Anna is an astronaut who finds a colony of Elvis impersonators on Mars. She ends up in prison for some reason and in the last scene she gets crucified in front of a claymation chorus of Punch and Judy's reading the Yellow Pages.

Carl said she did some other films after that and even developed a cult following among middle-aged rich guys from Silicon Valley. Carl was getting these guys to invest hundreds of thousands of dollars in his shitty action movies by showing them Anna's artsy pornos. It was going well till one day he found her in the bathroom crying because she swallowed a whole bottle of his Viagra thinking it would kill her. It just made her get sick on the floor.

He couldn't talk her into doing any more films after that and he was getting tired of being on suicide watch for her all the time. So he had an "existential epiphany" that gave him this idea for a project where she commits suicide on camera. Like either using a knife or a gun or something, although probably not a gun because the real ones are hard to get in LA, despite what you might have seen on TV.

"Someone ought to at least tape the thing, so, you know, it's not a completely pointless act of violence," he told me. "I'd do it myself but my legal situation is already complicated enough." He lifted his leg and rolled the pant leg up so I could see his ankle bracelet. I sat back and he waved his arms at me. "It's not a big deal. Uncle Sam and I just have some disagreement about how much I earned last year."

He explained that since he couldn't afford to lose any of his directors, he wanted me to be the one to tape Anna killing herself. Then he'd give me enough money to shack up in Belize until the whole thing blew over. "All you have to do is point and shoot," he said.

I told Carl he was a crazy asshole and I about left the room but he gave me a hundred bucks just to promise I'd meet Anna later in the week. He told me there wasn't any obligation but I should at least meet her and give it some thought.

I wasn't actually considering going through with it but I thought it would be a good thing to try and talk her out of it, so I said, "Okay."

When I picked her up, Anna was holding one hand in the air like she was flagging a taxi or something, so I pulled up beside her and told her, "It's ten bucks a mile for the first ten." She was wearing a Hello Kitty shirt with a hole in the back and one of those stupid fishing hats you see on ska bands from the '90s. I asked her if she knew where we were going. She looked confused so I got the door for her and we rode in silence to this French-sounding place where the waiters have PhDs.

I'm pretty sure she didn't want to go because she didn't say anything the whole way to the restaurant. I even told her the story about the time my brother picked up a live grenade somebody dropped on accident when he was training for the National Guard. He threw it away and saved four people from getting blown up. But he lost all the fingers on his right hand



when it exploded in the air. The whole time I'm telling her this, she didn't even look at me.

When we got to the restaurant, they wouldn't let us in on account of Anna's clothes, even after I told the guy at the front desk I would tip them good. He said something French while we were leaving and a guy near him laughed so I walked back in and told him he was a cocksucker and I didn't wanna eat anywhere they keep frogs anyway. He had a couple big waiters push us out of the entrance after that.

I told Anna to go wait in the car. Then I went around the back of the restaurant until I found a window where I could see some people eating through it. I dropped my pants right there and started pissing on the window. I got a good stream going and pretty soon the people inside turned to see what was going on. But they turned away real quick, like they were instantly ashamed for seeing piss streaming down the window beside them.

I finished up and started back toward the car and found Anna watching me from the edge of the building. She had one hand over her mouth and her eyes were real big. "I would've used the bathroom if they'd let me inside," I said.

We moved the car so the restaurant people wouldn't find us and we started walking uptown. I got us some booze from a party store and some fries off a Sikh with a pushcart. When we got to a park where they have these lights and a fountain, Anna said the first thing I ever heard her say. "Nature is not a place to visit. It is home."

"Is that Russian?"

"No." She gave me this annoyed look and said, "I am not Russian. I am from Ukraine."

"Is it Ukrainian?"

Then she pointed at some trees with a sign out front and I said, "Oh. It's just an advertisement." We sat at a bench near the fountain.

She started eating the fries but I wasn't about to let her stop talking now that she'd said something. So I asked her where she grew up and if she liked California. She ignored my questions until I shared enough of the booze with her that she started getting tipsy. Then she looked down and mumbled, "You don't have to do this."

"Do what?"

"Carl told me to have a good time with you." She was staring at the ground.

"Aren't we?"

She turned to me with her eyes half-closed and wiped her hair out of her face. "You don't have to buy things for me. Acting nice. Let's go to Carl's and fuck so you will leave and I can watch Wheels of Fortune."

I stared at her for a minute until she pulled the bottle from me and turned away. Then I said, "Can we just talk?"

She told me her dad had been in prison since she was a kid and her mom was a stenographer who wanted Anna to join the convent until she found out she couldn't have kids anymore. So she decided she

didn't believe in God anymore. She died a few years later while Anna was in a special school.

Anna studied theater till the money ran out and she met some people who got her a job masturbating for people on the internet. That turned into personal shows that eventually turned to sex. When she laid it all out like that, the progression seemed logical enough that I was just nodding along by the time she described the mixtures of household cleaners you can drink to induce a miscarriage.

When I mentioned Carl, she wrinkled up her nose and said he was the worst thing that happened. "I was Ophelia in University. Now I am Sin Vacuum," she said.

"You could be Juliet," I said. She just shook her head.

We were watching the fountain and I didn't want her to go home without mentioning the reason I was taking her out, so I kicked at the cement and said, "Carl wants me to help you." I looked at her but she didn't react except to pull her hat down with both hands. So I said, "Do you really want to do it?"

She pulled her legs to her chest and hid her face in her lap. "You seem like a nice girl to me," I said but that's all, because I saw her little body start to shake in spasms and I know when's the right time to shut up.

Next day I ate lunch with one of the guys who used to work in the woods with me. He told me about this job he got at a special effects place, where he spent a whole week making some Italian B-Lister look like a burn victim.

"Bennie's in this hospital bed four hours a day. Because he's got like thirty pages where he's recovering from this fire at an orphanage. And he's smoking in bed between every scene. Now that's pretty funny, watching a burn victim smoke a cigarette." He stuck out his tongue and pulled the tomatoes off his veggie sandwich. "But a week into it, this makeup artist knocks the cigarette out of his hand. And the fucking bed goes fwoom, flames up like this, and Bennie jumps, like, six feet in the air. Next day, his double files a grievance with the union because Bennie's not supposed to be doing his own stunts."

"Bullshit," I said.

"Well, I made up that last part but the rest of it really happened. No shit."

There were a couple homeless guys on the ground across the food court who were arguing over a garbage bag. "I wonder what my mom is up to," I said.

"You ever see her?"

"Last time was Christmas a couple years ago. She lives upstate and I don't have a car, so I just figure I'll call her every now and then instead. But I haven't for a while cause she'll just start asking questions about what I do and I don't think she'd be okay with it."

Trey scraped his hands together to get the crumbs off and he said, "What's wrong with what you do? You get credits at the end of movies. You're fucking famous."

I flipped him off and he laughed. I said, "Carl's got me doing weird stuff now, like he's getting me into his art house stuff and I'm not sure I wanna do it for any money."

"Do you have to learn German?"

The homeless guys were arguing loud enough that people nearby started to move.

"You ever do any of that stuff when you were workin for him?" I said. "Like, really weird gore."

Trey picked something from his teeth and said, "He wanted me to skin a rat this one time. He thought it would just run around without any fur on. But I told him it would just die before he could film it and I didn't want to get scratched to shit trying."

"Did you do it?"

"No, of course not. I got a feeder mouse from the pet store and shaved it bald. Then I used a makeup kit to make it look bloody."

I said, "Did it look real?"

"We got sued by an animal rights group."

In a minute, a big asshole in blue came over to the homeless guys with his fat meaty hands on his hips. The homeless guys didn't even acknowledge him. They just started talking to themselves and limped away in opposite directions. They left the garbage bag on the ground where they found it.

Next day I called Anna and told her to get high and put on some shoes so we could go to the zoo. She said she didn't have anything because Carl locked away all the drugs in the house and I told her I'd be over in a few minutes.

She was living in a bungalow with all the sharp objects removed. The house belonged to one of Carl's friends, who Anna said kept the place for tax purposes. She said the guy or some guy he hired, maybe, came out sometimes to pick up the mail and check on the place. He went in and out of the house without knocking, so Anna never left her room without being decent. She showed me the can of mace she kept in her sweatshirt, which she wore every day because the A/C was up all the time and there was some kind of lock on the thermostat so she couldn't turn it up.

We were sitting on the floor watching a TV show about dogs who solve mysteries when I asked her, "Why don't you get your own place?"

"I have no money."

"You do those films though."

She shook her head.

"You might be an immigrant but you're not a slave," I said. "I bet there's tons of weirdos out there who would mortgage their house to watch you get crucified."

She frowned at me. "Mr. Henner does not pay me."

"What?"

"He tells me, 'You are living rent free and I am investing in your career.'"

I said, "That's not really legal here, you know."

"Nothing is legal here."

I watched her stare at the TV and I realized for probably the first time that she was comfortable. Her hair was falling out from under her hat and I couldn't help myself from reaching out and touching it. But she looked at me with these big eyes and pulled her hair away and said, "Please, no."

I leaned in to kiss her then but she crossed her arms and turned her head and said, "No fucking."

She moved to a big-armed recliner and sat with her legs pulled up tight. "Did I even ask?" I said. "I never asked that. Jesus."

The show ended and by then I was shivering from the cold so I asked Anna where the thermostat was.

She wouldn't talk to me, so I wandered around and found it by the stairs. It wouldn't let me change the settings on account of the lock so I wrapped some ice in a washcloth from the kitchen and set it on top of the thermostat. Anna was still watching TV when I got back but I think she was starting to loosen up from the pot because she was smiling at a chewing gum commercial.

She looked at me with a finger in her mouth and said, "Did you fix it?"

"I don't know." I sat on the couch and pulled a blanket on myself. "You should quit working for him."

"Then where will I go?"

"You'll go where everybody goes. To work at a grocery store or you flip burgers. I bet there's lots of places here that you could work because you know more than one language."

She laughed at me. "You idiot, I can not sell food and stay in this country."

"Why not?"

"You think I can get a visa from Ronnell McDonnell." She giggled.

I didn't feel like arguing so I lay down with the blanket on me and watched Anna flip through the channels.

I must have fallen asleep because I woke up with a headache and I was sweating.

"Why is it so hot?" I said. Anna didn't answer so I rubbed my eyes and looked over to make sure she was there. She was still watching TV but a different program and she'd already pulled off her sweatshirt. She had a tank top on that was open in the back and I could see fat blue bruises on her shoulders and sides.

"Where the hell did you get those?"

She looked at me and then she twisted around and looked behind her. "What?"

I got up and moved to her chair and she squirmed away. "Relax," I said. "What are these?" I pointed to her back.

She rolled her eyes at me. "I fall down the stairs."

"Do you even know what that means?"

"What that means? It means I am in a

scene in a film where I fall down the stairs.” I gave her a look and she lowered her head at me and said, “In a film.”

“What’s it about?”

She waved me away and said, “It’s about I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Why?”

“Why do you give to shit?” I started laughing and she squinted at me in a way that just made me laugh harder. She said, “It’s a movie. Why is that funny?”

“I give two shits,” I said. “You mean I give two shits.” She scrunched up her face and turned back to the TV.

“It is a stupid movie,” she said.

“No, seriously. I want to know.” She threw a pillow at me and I guess I managed to hold a straight face long enough to convince her I was serious. Because she turned in the chair and put one arm around the back so she could look at me.

“The movie is called Sin Vacuum,” she said. “I play nun who goes down on people. And when they cum in my mouth a little bit of their memories goes inside me and they forget the memories. So she sucks off all world leaders and it makes the world peaceful.”

“Whoa,” I said. “Is it real?”

“No, there is no such thing as nun who sucks cock of world leaders.” She started giggling again.

“No, I want to know if you go down on people.”

“I knew I shouldn’t tell you.” She raised an eyebrow at me. “Why you give two shits?”

She grinned like that cat in the cartoon about Alice and I got an idea that made my head start to buzz. “I know how we can get some money,” I said.

Anna’s suicide was on a Thursday night because it was the only night Trey’s grandmother would sit in front of the TV long enough for him to come over and do the effects. He was sitting on Anna’s floor with latex strips laid out beside him while Anna lay on the bed. She had her sleeves rolled up so Trey could match the color of the strips to her skin using some makeup he got from the drug store. “Will it hurt?” she asked.

Trey was working with both hands and a bottle of pink junk in his mouth but he managed to say, “Not if you cut the right part.”

I was pretty nervous so I started telling them about the time my brother and I were working on his first car and I dropped a battery on his hand and cut off all his fingers. Trey started laughing and I said, “What?”

“You tell that fucking story all the time,” Trey said. “It always starts out different but in the end your brother always ends up with his fingers blown up, or chopped off, or ate by the dog.”

“Fuck you, I don’t.” I brought a bottle of bourbon for Anna but I think I must have drank some of it myself because I remember swinging it at him right then so



he would get wet.

“Stop it. You’re gonna ruin the god damn grafts.”

“He tells me same story,” Anna said. “About boy with grenade.”

I started yelling at Anna. “What difference does it make why he has no fingers? That’s how it is. What’s the difference to you?” She cringed and turned away.

“It’s the way you tell it,” Trey said. “It’s just gotta be consistent or people don’t believe you.”

“Well, his fingers are gone and what does it matter why? It didn’t make any fucking sense then and I don’t see why it should now.”

“Okay, man, whatever.”

“Nobody gives a fuck unless they care about the story, so I change it so they’ll care about it.”

“Come on, man. Just focus, would ya?”

He looked at me until I said, “Okay,” and then he tossed me a roll of plastic tubing.

“See if you can cut that to about twenty-four inches.”

About an hour later, Trey squeezed himself between the wall of the bathroom and one of those old bathtubs with feet on it so he’d be out of the shot when Anna pretended to kill herself. He was holding a pump that would push red syrup through plastic tubes covered by latex that ran down her arms and ended at each of her wrists. Anna was sitting in the tub in her

bra and panties and she was shivering so bad I gave her swigs of bourbon to keep her warm.

When Trey was settled, Anna made this stuttering sigh and wiped her eyes. Then she snorted and said, “Take it off.” I looked at her and she frowned at me and pulled at one of her bra cups with her thumb. “I can’t reach,” she said.

I unclasped her bra and about tore out the plastic tubes taped to her arm before I realized it wouldn’t come off with the straps intact. “I have to cut it.”

“Hurry up,” Trey said and I cut off the bra with a razor he brought. Then I put the razor in Anna’s hand.

When I got behind the camera everything looked perfect, with the moon in the window and Anna sobbing in the bathtub in profile. Everything else was invisible.

“It’s recording,” I said. Anna stared at me, shaking with tears streaming down her face, and I said, “Go ahead, Anna.”

“Icarus, my son, don’t do what I have done,” she said. “Your mother, unsung, soars to her doom. Instead. Stay at Earth. Meet a nice girl.” She whimpered. “Eat steak. Fuck freely.” Then she shook her head at me. “Please. I decided no.”

At this point I was getting pissed because we just spent two hours making effects and moving all the lamps in the house to the bathroom. But the crying started to get to me so I had to promise myself in ten minutes I’d give her a towel and she could cry on my shoulder as long as she wanted.

We only had to do it once. “Almost done, Anna.”

She faced forward again and her mascara was running down her face in little streams that looked perfect. She said the last line in a hurry: “It is our nature to mistake pleasures and relief from pain. So much for me that greatest pleasure is eternal release from continual tortures of living.” Then she slit her wrist and screamed. First thought I had when she did it was that it looked really fake.

Then I heard Trey say, “Shit! I forgot to pump.”

Anna was moaning and staring at her spurting wrist and I knocked the camera to the floor as I grabbed a towel and rushed to the bathtub to stop the bleeding. “Fuck fuck fuck!” was all I could say and Trey got up and slipped a couple times on the linoleum on his way out to the hall.

I live in a duplex now, down the road from a museum in Modesto where they have wax figures of Bella Lugosi and Vincent Price and a bunch of people nobody ever heard of. When I give tours I

like to make up stories about the actors the wax people are based on, like I knew them somehow. Most people on the tour just nod along because those actors could have done all the things I said they did. Nobody ever heard of them anyway.

The best story I tell is about the time Boris Karloff stabbed Lucille Lund by accident because he got a real knife instead of a rubber one. He cut her wrist so bad she couldn’t hold cups of coffee with that hand anymore but she didn’t die. She got married to a guy who owns some haircut places and now they live in San Diego. I tell people the guy who screwed up the rubber knife thing never worked on films again. But I guess he gets paid by the hour to teach film technique at a vocational school.

Sometimes I can’t help thinking about the studio I had back then and the big TV my roommate’s boyfriend left us when he joined the peace corps. And how I’ll never get to take pictures again because Carl put my name in the credits of the most notorious five-minute slasher film in history: “Anna’s Big Adventure.”

I wish I never met her.

# SHUT UP SAUCE

*by Katherine Blaine Hurley*

It's the Shut Up Sauce that does it.

It's the heat from six different kinds of peppers, four of them smuggled in from Mexico, I've heard. I sit here every night and I watch them, truckers passing through, big men looking to pick up a little barbecue on the way to Los Angeles or the opposite direction toward Baton Rouge. Once I talked to a man towing to Houston, Texas, who wanted his face to melt clean off he said. It didn't that I saw, but I didn't see him once he drove out of the parking lot.

They're all the same though, these tasters of the sauce. Think they can handle it. They sit down, drop their guts, relax their thick limbs, and they order: the pulled pork, the slow-cook ribs, the chicken wings.

"And put a little Shut Up Sauce on it," they tell Mindy.

And Mindy—she's the night waitress, always wears a shirt that used to be white no matter how brown the stains—Mindy tells them, "Are you sure, honey? It's real hot."

There's no man in the world I ever heard say, "Oh, hot, is it? Well I don't want to upset my stomach. Just give me a mild then." No man, I know.

So she brings out the meat covered in Shut Up Sauce, and it's the most beautiful color. You got the earthy black-tone rubs and the Sedona reds and the sweet dripping Kentucky muds, though Kentucky's no place I've ever seen, just an expression I heard. Tucson mud maybe, Nogales on a bad day. All barbecue sauce is the prettiest brown, but Shut Up Sauce is something special, like if a rainbow was done all in red. Every little bit of wine talk and champagne snobbery I've heard, I've found a reason to

say something nicer about this barbecue sauce. People talking plums and barnyards and cherry flavors, oak— I don't know what's oak about a wine— but I've seen and tasted and smelled it in this sweet, sticky, hot-as-hell meat champagne.

Mindy, she brought the Shut Up Sauce on a full rack of ribs to this one table, put it down real nice in front of one of these big, big trucker dudes. He had a huge gut that kept pushing the table away from him and then he'd have to readjust and pull it back. And despite that and one rolling eye, he had culture in him, too, you could tell. He took his Rattlers off and put it on the table when he could catch it again.

And Mindy said to him when she's got them in her hands, "Here you go, honey, Your Ribs," like that, like it was capital, like a proper name, "Mr. Rib," or something, "Mr. Rib and the Sauce."

Mindy's got respect for barbecue, especially the Shut Up kind. Everybody, even the lowliest Mexican line cook, they know what's good about finger-licking, stain-your-good-pants-forever-you-drop-that-on-your-lap sauce. They make the Shut Up Sauce in Big Pot in the back. I've heard how many wooden spoons it's melted down to nubs, fingers too if they'd leave them. One cook, he kept stirring until he was standing there, holding a toothpick in his hand, and this guy, a real hard worker, he said he kept trying to use it, poking at bubbles and shit. That's the kind of work ethic you want making your sauce.

And the nice man eating it, that big cultured man with the rolling eye, he

thanked Mindy and I thought, now there's a good guy. I watched him separate that first rib, pull it apart like a soaked paper towel wrapped around a stick. I saw him get his other hand in on it careful like he was stealing a diamond from a sleeping old woman's ear. And when he brought that rib to his teeth, his pointer fingers and thumbs were real focused, like his other fingers were just watching them, holding their breath. That's how I've seen lots of people eat Shut Up Sauce, real cautious like, like their whole body's nervous for their mouth. Even his bad eye went focused. He took a big bite, chewed, and you could see satisfaction running like a drunk two-year-old all over his face.

But that look of happy twitching? That was just for a second, because then, real slowly, he put the rib down on his plate. His eye went to rolling again, to water glass to plate, to water to plate, and then his good eye went on an adventure, too. It rolled right at me, paused for a twitch and then turned like a slot machine number right back into his face. You'd have thought the man was having an epiphany from Jesus Christ himself. It looked like those moments I think about in the bible right before you figure God came in that burning bush, or stood in front of Mary as an angel preparing to bang her. Whatever the miracle, that he was destroying something, saving somebody, impregnating, whatever, you know those mortal men and women in the bible were thinking, for just that first second when he appears: "Now what the fuck is this?"

That was this guy's face. And everybody

DOWN  
HOME  
DINER

DOWN  
HOME  
DINER



in there that was looking at him, it wasn't just me by the time he started sweating like his skin was draining spaghetti in the sink. He knew he was done like a three-legged chair at Weight Watchers meeting.

"What? Fuck! What? Fuck!" he kept yelling. That's the same as being speechless, basically, waving his hand at Mindy as he put his mouth against his forearm and screamed real loud into it. He muffled it like a woman I used to sleep with that I liked very much. That was a confusing thought to me, but that's what Shut Up Sauce does. It makes all equal in the eyes of God. Men aren't men when they have Shut Up Sauce in their mouths. Big men are like little babies. Little boys aren't even allowed to try.

And like from burned up mouths like that, Shut Up Sauce got famous for being the hottest thing around, and I watched this place grow from a little truck stop diner where I cleaned the bathroom stalls for money to a big truck stop "restaurant" where they have a service of Mexican women come in to clean them and I'm out of a job. But Shut Up Sauce, it keeps thriving and Mindy, she's still here doing nightshifts and some mornings now. She's a part of "Americana," this TV crew man said, just before the Sleepy Hole Diner turned to the Sleepy Hole *Bar and Grill*. Mindy waits on me, sometimes for free since I don't have no money anymore. I was thinking of doing something real awful to myself the other Tuesday but came down here for a pulled pork sandwich instead. I had Mindy put a little Shut Up Sauce on it, but I don't think she did, just asked them in

the back for cayenne pepper I think, because I could eat the whole thing and my eyes didn't roll around or anything like that. I was real hungry so I was glad she did that.

There was a contest here two weeks ago, the Wednesday before last Wednesday when I decided to maybe lift some weights instead of doing bad stuff to myself, go and get my plumber's license, do something productive like that. I haven't yet, either the weights or the plumbing. I've just been sitting here with Mindy, drinking the coffee she pours me even when I don't look up or ask her for nothing more than to sit. She talks to me and smiles. I get a lot of pie here, the old slices I think that if I weren't here, they'd be throwing out. When there's only new pie, Mindy will get me a cookie like the ones they give the kids for free for just sitting down and eating without throwing too many crayons on the ground. Those are pretty gross but I eat them, just like the kids do.

The owner, he worries about me. Mindy told me. Not my health but that I'll make his new fancier restaurant look sad, some dirty old farmhand who used to clean toilets, slouching around his shiny wood lunch counter. All I ever wanted was a dignified profession, fix the toilets instead of clean them off, but no one'd ever apprentice me with the reputation I have.

It was back when I was cleaning horse stalls instead of people's shit. I was even skinnier than I am now. More hair. I did something with a girl, but it was an accident. She was real young, I know. I was

probably 20 years older than she was, standing around in her little pink sweatpants and she was real pretty. She kept hanging around the stables, asking me to teach her to ride, and I wasn't supposed to touch her, but I wasn't supposed to touch the horses too much neither, and I figured as long as I was doing one, I might as well do both. So I taught her to ride, you know, and her dad came in and beat me up real good, which is why I notice wonky eyes and faces that look moved around like part of them slid. I know what it feels like to get them made that way. I know it might not make a lot of sense to people who lived different lives, but sometimes pain like a butter knife hurts a lot worse than pain like a steak knife.

There was a contest, that's what I'm trying to tell you, a contest on TV because Shut Up Sauce got so famous. Cameras came in, and people from California and other people from not here came, and that girl, the one I taught to ride, she came. She wanted to compete. She's a big girl now, a real big girl. She's as old now probably as I was when I worked those stables. Same straight black hair though and I recognized her and I know she recognized me. I could see it in her face. It was like that biblical moment I was talking about. I could see it right across her brown eyes and fat bottom lip: "Now what the fuck is this?" She was looking at me, looking straight through to the back of my eyeballs, right through to my brain and I couldn't keep her out of there. It was like I was her biblical moment and I wasn't proud of it. I felt sick, like the Angel Gabriel must have felt sick when he

had to have sex with the Mother of Jesus Christ. Some men might think that's hot, but not me. Back then, like Gabriel did probably, I just felt like God had given me a duty and it was a real terrible one that felt real good. And then she was here, 20-some years later, eating a dozen chicken wings with Shut Up Sauce on them to win free Dr. Pepper for a year. They were doing some sponsoring and Mindy let me have a lot of soda for free that day and some of the little sample things the diner had gotten from the good people of Dr. Pepper and company. Mindy even sneaked me a t-shirt. "The Doctor Is In," it says, and I wear it just about every day.

My girl, she won the contest. She ate all them wings, her eyes focused on the wall behind everyone's heads, somewhere around the big painting of a cartoon pig eating barbecue the manager made Mindy put up. I watched from my normal counter stool behind a man with a TV camera, who kept squatting down and then standing up just as I thought she'd look at me. One man in the contest, even bigger than she is, fell out of his chair onto the floor when he was only on his eleventh wing. A normal-sized girl in a tight little pink Dr. Pepper t-shirt held up my girl's hand. My girl's fingers and face were covered with sauce when they gave the news, some of that black hair stuck to her cheek.

"The new winner of the First Annual Shut Up Sauce Eating Contest..." they said, and then they said her name and some people booed.

But there were other people that were

clapping and that must have felt nice for her. And once the TV people had given her a towel and put a lot of extra spotlamps on her, nobody booed. Then she got her trophy and her certificate for Dr. Pepper and her picture taken next to a real pretty blond woman who held a sign that said just like my t-shirt says. Then the camera people hustled out.

I thought maybe my girl she'd talk to me as she was leaving, a real big time winner that knew me and I knew her. My stool's the closest to the door. I knew she'd have to pass. All kinds of losers walked by me with sauce on their mouths grumbling about her to their wives or girlfriends or other big fellows on their way out. I heard a lot of trucks starting up in the parking lot and some hollering outside as the diner doors swung open and shut and open again. I watched my girl, her certificate under her arm and in her hand, an official Dr. Pepper cup. Real tight, over her other shirt, she'd stretched out a "You Shut Up, Sauce!" t-shirt across her boobs. The name of the restaurant looked real pulled out, 3-D-like on her chest. I got nervous. Usually I don't like to admit that, but my legs were bouncing a good bit. She was by herself all the way across the dining room and then she was closer and she was closer, and she was right there at the far end of the counter. I opened my mouth as she kept coming. I wanted to tell her all the times I had dreamed of her at night, all the times I smelled her hair and felt that stable hay and could hear her saying the things she said that day to make me want to act the Angel Gabriel, and touch her hair...

Right in front of me, she opened her mouth, too, and I heard a little gurgling of nervousness in there just like in mine. And she was real close, right in my eyes, and I could smell her skin and the sauce mingling in one sweet smell. And then she pulled back her mouth, them pretty lips— and she spit right in my eye.

It hit about the place her father beat me and slid my face, the spit warm on my temple and burning in my eyeball. All them peppers in Shut Up Sauce stinging like shit. I cried at the counter as she walked out. I heard the door slam shut. I yelled for Mindy and the soda hose to shoot at my face.

The owner hasn't let me back to eat in the daytime since that TV day, but Mindy, she still lets me sit here at night. I used to get annoyed every time she asked me, "What'd you do to that girl to make her spit in your face?" It's better now that she's stopped.

"Are you sure, honey? It's real hot," Mindy said tonight to the guy next to me, two empty counter stools between us, then next to me, I mean of course. I knew soon she'd slip me some pie maybe, could be a cookie. Then I'd go use the bathroom, really mess up the place for the morning girlitas.

She finished with the guy, turned her back to us, slapped the ticket down on cook's window. She sighed a real long time looking through the opening, and then turned to me.

"You want some pecan, honey?"

# A COMMON FER

by A.S Arthur

*Let Visnu prepare the womb; let Tvastr shape the forms...*

Many-Limbed Sarasvati, bless me with your bountiful fecundity. A promethean task, call it anthrogeny, a careful crafting at which I have some practiced skill. First, I slip his skin between my fingers – it is new and clean, in places creased. Smooth out the wrinkles with my thumb and forefingers. It must not tear. A pinch of entrails, enough to be firm, yet apportioned evenly to avoid unsightly bulges. They say the brain, pale, soft and spongy, is a filter for the fullness of reality. Place it in the tip of the body; pinch the skin closed; check it once more for swellings and lumps; then seal him together with my spittle. In this the offering is prepared.

*Let Prajapati shed the seed; let Dhatr place the embryo in you...*

Many-limbed Saraswati-Ichneumonidae, I burn this effigy in your honour. Placing her ovipositor in my mouth, I ignite the offering – this queer little bundle of twigs – speak her name, purse my lips, and suck. I feel her blessings billowing into my mouth, past my pharynx and larynx, down the trachea: each inhalation an invocation. A thin coating of black, sticky uterine wall – with each breath the endometrium thickens. She leaves me breathless and wanting more. The smell of her sex, her heat, clings to me for hours after; you will know what I have done,

should you smell my stained fingers. In this the way is paved.

*Place the embryo, Sinvali; place the embryo, Sarasvati. Let the twin Asvins, the lotus-garlanded gods, place the embryo in you...*

Many-limbed Mahakali-Ichneumonidae, place your child in my breast. It requires only one cell in her spell – a biological fountain from which life reproduces and springs unbridled and unbound. From formless clay to formless flesh. A protean, parasitic child, gestating amongst my innards. He grows silently, never kicks. Truly prodigious progeny, he may grow full teeth and hair before he ever leaves the womb. In this the seed is planted.

*With golden kindling woods the Asvins churn out fire. We invoke that embryo for you to bring forth in the tenth month...*

Many-limbed Mahakali, bless me with your bountiful foetidity. Would Prometheus have continued in his pursuit of creativity if he was prescient of the punishment? Indirect as it was, this shapeless gift of shapeless gods too will result in the loss of organs; I am not without some foresight. Mine, as I am mortal, will not regenerate. The caesarean may not be fatal, but the effigy is me, a slow yellowing and burning out – the formaldehyde will ensure it. In this the ritual is complete.

# TILITY RITUAL





# A BROTHEL TALE

*by Euan McVey*

Ahmed was an unobtrusive, soft-spoken fellow, pacific-souled with perfect half-moon nails and a shy, childish smile. His words were always quiet, ever tender, and hopelessly beautiful. A poet with restless hands, he studied architecture. Though he was young, perhaps a few years to thirty, one knew he'd lose half his hair by the year's end, errant strands already thin and alopecic on his oversized pate. Thick lips, almost feminine, belied the striking effect of his proud, prominent nose. The first night I met him we shared intimate secrets on the rooftop of the hostel, things I could not bear to share with friends at home but found no difficulty sharing now, passionately, with this soft-spoken poet. We confessed earnestly and deeply to our private sins and desires, asked one another if we could still stand as men for harboring such dark secrets, reassured one another of our humanity. Self-respect held intact and shame held at bay, we laughed at our own insecurity and muttered, "Ah! Such is life . . ." with private, relieved smiles. Such

is the effect of rooftops and whiskey and a friendly stranger's ear. The liquor finished, the last cigarette smoked, we sighed personal sighs and stared at the sky, illuminated by vast urbanity. After a period, Ahmed told me the story of how he (almost) lost his virginity: He was twenty and woefully inexperienced with women irrespective of any filial inurements. His brother, elder by three years and only marginally more experienced, evinced his frustration regularly, being the common target of jibes and jeers from his friends, all proper Lotharios if their boasts were to be believed. Their father a scholar and mother a pious housewife, the brothers had grown up in a tastefully stable, appropriately conservative household. As a child Ahmed was trained for several years as a singer, though when he'd had enough of his elder brother's meanspirited taunts he quit his lessons altogether. His brother, rather otiose, was instructed in Arabic by an Imam, though beaten often for delinquency in his studies. It was, in short, a rather

normal upbringing for a well-to-do urban family in Dhaka. There was a sister, too, younger to them both and thus removed, but my new friend didn't say much about her beyond that she existed. The shallow extent of Ahmed's interactions with girls his age consisted primarily of furtive, shameful glances exchanged with the students of the all-girls instructional directly across the road from his own school. His brother's aforementioned friends were generally of a rougher ilk and hence had tasted those sinful fruits so out of reach for the two young men.

Thus it was on one propitious night that Ahmed's brother and his brother's friends all agreed to patronize a brothel at the edge of the city. Ahmed, being the shy, tender, pacific and young man that he was, was not keen on attending but after proper wheedling and several rather rough imprecations regarding his sexuality he assented to join. Inwardly, but impossible to admit to the others, he was excited to be brought along.

The brothel they chose was at once notorious and well-respected depending on the circles you had an ear to. A marginally functional neon sign, as befit the institution, illuminated the street below in crimson flickers, and in those moments one might spot a dozen feral fices scrounging or fighting or mating in the trash that lay in the gutters. His brother's friends approached the brothel with sloppy grins and a familiar swagger, though it seemed in that moment affected and unearned.

A pimp greeted them at the door and bade them to store their sandals in neat cubbies, most of which were full. They shuffled barefoot after the pimp into an antechamber, crammed themselves onto a small, dingy couch which, Ahmed recalled to me, smelled sharply of cigarette smoke. He hadn't yet started smoking then and found the odor intolerable. The pimp collected payment and left the room to summon the matron who would summon the girls. None of them spoke while they waited, though a few sniggered conspiratorially.

After a time that felt much longer than it likely was, the prostitutes were ushered into the room, followed by their pimp. They stood rather undecorously, Ahmed thought. Languidly. The pimp gesticulated. He opened and closed his mouth and sounds came out but Ahmed wasn't listening. He couldn't look any of the women in the face, but his aesthetic evaluations were all rather negative. Unfairly so, he told me, in retrospect. Nerves. He saw a girl that reminded him of his sister. His sister's age, his sister's hair. His brother's friends had already made their selections from the panoply, and then his brother made his, and then they all stared at Ahmed; the boys, the pimp, the women. He jerked his arm and pointed at one of them without looking.

In a small room now, unadorned except for a mattress on the floor, Ahmed glanced at the woman before him. In the glare of the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling she looked older than she had in the dark anteroom before. Practiced and

professionally she pulled off her tank top and presented him with a condom. Ahmed began to panic. Swirling imagos drowned him in anxiety. He thought of his father and of his paternal shame. He thought of his mother and of her maternal shame. He thought of his brother: fraternal shame, and of his brother's friends. Each shame unique, harrowing in its own way. They must be doing it now, he thought. Lost in anxious reverie, he was shocked when the prostitute pulled his pants down like a schoolboy prankster. His cheeks burned but his dark skin hid the blush. She glanced at his crotch and made an expression which Ahmed couldn't parse. Only barely tumid. More shame. What would my father think? She knelt down and attempted to excite him manually. Fruitless effort.

"I can't do this," he murmured, more to himself than to her. Then, louder, "Stop. Stop! Get off of me!"

"What's the matter? You're not gay, are you?"

He thought about his brother and his friends who were sure to greet him with jeers and taunts when he met them outside. He would never be able to live this down. They would torture him. He recalled his brother's leering face, the awful mocking contortions it would make, silently, from behind his well-meaning but decidedly clueless singing teacher, lampooning him unseen and unpunished by any adults while Ahmed took instruction. He was young, then, and sensitive, and would cry alone in

his room after every lesson. Such injustice. But it would be worse tonight, to face that same face, scrunched and smiling with obscene and offensive mirth. His brother's friends would be relentless, he knew. Merciless, perverse derision. He'd get a reputation. People would think he was gay. His family would find out. His mother. He thought of her heart-corroding grief. Probably already wondering where her sons were, being out so late. His poor mother.

He pulled up his pants and exited the room quickly. Behind him the woman shrugged, paid all the same. On his face, an expression of abject guilt, horror at his own manifold weakness, arrant humiliation. He thought briefly of the reprieve of death right then and there, to be struck dead instantly through some merciful act of Allah, but remembered where he was and how shameful it would be for his corpse to be found in such a place, in that brothel. His poor, poor mother. Resigned to this fate of eternal, infinite humiliation, he entered into the hallway cautiously. And there, before him, was his brother, lugubrious visage identical to his with the selfsame rictus, a kindred, not mocking, mirror of that evening's momentous trial. He'd backed out with even more haste than Ahmed. My friend ended the tale with a little chuckle, swiftly aborted, and in silence we sat on the roof and pondered about the universe and Allah's mercy and shame and the mysteries of life. We shared a bit of weed and watched the sun come up.

# EVERYTHING'S AMATEUR

*by Sean Scheer*

She was a green-eyed succubus, warm with skin radiant and porcelain. Orange light had been shattering the floor. Blinds broken and smudged with dust lay crumpled on the window ledge, like an omen of a soft, mad tempest. Her desperation clung to her sockets with dark purple bags, descending like a slope from white, chiseled eyes. The green hair of an indecisive girl flopped thin, frail whiskers on a sheet-white canvas face.

“Can't you see you've become that pathetic fanboy?” she said. She took an American Spirit and lit it out of habit more than any nicotine lust. Skimming the perimeter walls, she studied with a keen, almost vicious eye and the smug, condescending grin of a girl drifting like whim's last-minute refugee. Strewn across the apartment were the embers of that mad, brazen fire back in college. That ephemeral beauty they transfixed on like historians and replayed in the vast, somber decay of night when words were offensive, and guilt shimmering. That spring, 3 years ago, when they wore delusion like a silk bathrobe and pranced on carpeted rooms in separate dorms with discount liquor and

professional friends. Humidity: an overbearing guest, burning their inhibitions with the fog in early morning ecstasy.

“Sarah, you start this daily. Is film just a wart on the ass of culture? Is craft just the afterbirth?” he said. His darkened, brown flesh glimmered in the orange-red beams coyly grasping his skin. Thin, tone frame hung a blackened collar shirt in its embrace; jet black knots grasped his shoulders. He felt the compulsive need to record the conversation, arrest the words before they were bloated cadavers in time. His failing memory contained the endless abandoned scripts, film reels, matinee tickets for a food budget, the bastard-alcoholic friends, the thousand enveloping hangovers on slick, barren floors, and Sarah's subtle, vindictive scorn he once termed endearing.

They sprawled on Sarah's dead granny's Paisley couch covered in the ash of American Spirits and the 70's. The place was some nondescript, quasi-barren apartment in a crusted, glass building nestled in the business district. Just a converted, price-gouged office building, worthless as the detritus lining the neon

green halls. Just another hasty apartment move from every neighbor fucking in the AM ...That's all New York was, fucking and the crying, shit-stained product of fucking. It'll make a Monk out of you for a minute's peace. The rank cycle of mumbling, nubile, awkward, and abandoned flesh he forgot about after the 8th Irish Car Bomb was the only refuge from her wrath. The rank cycle of sneaking inside from the noxious gas of fog brewing in the midnight breeze. The smell of whiskey, pills, and poor, drunken girls staining his soul and liver while Sarah passed out on the table— cigarette still lit.

“Stanley Kubrick's dead, James. Film's dead. Why direct and jump in with these plastic Hollywood Pyros?” she said. Her hands shaking, she lit another cigarette and stared into the window. She shifted back to the room with her scrapped stories and purple papers encompassing the floor.

“And Guillermo del Toro's a hack?” he said. He saw no reason to be some mutant beast and deny that any other director could ever make a good film. It was a limited and unimaginative scope of thought. Any film school drop-out would appreciate the obstinate glory in only claiming Kubrick, however. Too many bastards love the explosion orgy of flame on screen. The Kubrick kerfuffle showed them that vile, virulent abyss between a failed writer and a failed director. One bludgeoned the head of aesthetics for luck, and the other whispered incantations of prose to coalesce in the mind. It spawned a wedge; a monolithic chasm. That wedge ran deep into the relationship and the abscesses of apathy and bitter rage oozed

over their waking lives, like Mt. St. Helen's imploding in the skull. The wedge of a fluke relationship snug in its infancy from alcohol's fleeting novelty. The wedge of abject poverty: a conflagration in the conscious mind and limbs, plucking and catapulting dreams and nubile nightmares from the fertile soil to her sudden, sodden, ash-ridden grave. It will be soon, James thought.

He recalled endless lectures and films blurring their amateur glory on white-washed walls. His unconscious plagiarism of Jim Morrison's film clips with its wanton disregard for decency. Masturbation, suicide, and Hitler were merely an appetizer in a disjointed, avant-garde pastiche of craft-less moving pictures.

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“Everything's amateur”, she said stumbling into his class one evening with his last-minute film failure exhibiting its contrived, anti-climactic glory. Her heartless tactics of censure in perpetual refinement and James was the whipping post —her own incompetence scarring all around her like shit-ridden shrapnel. She'd taken to booze like it was an exotic, liquid cure; a catchall to numb and blur the festering images of her father's wet, peeling skin dallying around the aquarium's tank, slurped up like an entrée by killer whales. Her psychiatrist jarred the phone daily from ceaseless skipped sessions and sent reminders and purple colored letters begging for her to show with the same fury and determination as some twisted, boring PSA. She smelled like cheap rum and

broken heels. A real girl of the world, or at least the Caribbean slums.

In tow was her eccentric brother, Pabst, with a frail head smothered in black, crusted blood. The recent funeral for their father still clung to the contents of his skull. His burgeoning psychotic tendencies screeching into fourth gear, he scored a job working the grave shift at the city's oldest morgue. His employers, the Meisner's, were half-deaf, and blind enough, that he cut up the carcasses and arranged them in lewd, divine positions on the festering termite floor. Mr. Schneider would spoon with Mr. Pablo and he'd blare Mambo through antique, stolen speakers. Mr. Meisner is too damn deaf to rock that JVC, Pabst had thought.

"You drunken Wildebeest", James said. He looked like Urban Outfitters exploded his closet with a pipe bomb. And Pabst chuckled and smeared Mr. Kreisner's fresh, wet coat on his eyelids— standard war paint in the Pabst species. Sarah ignored James and crawled down the endless rows of the auditorium to Professor Kratz.

The auditorium was blacker than a smoker's lung and at the southernmost tip of campus. A gnarled, unshapely being devoid of symmetry or semblance of planned glory. It was the film school building. That supplementary reject only added from an accidental budget and a surplus of freaks groveling. A roof as filthy, decrepit and perverse as the professors...And missing as many bricks.

"You're not the only schmuck in the room, I assure you", she whispered in his

cracked, bended ear. She winked to James and blacked out on the portable projector, splintering the Particle board table like Free Willy nursing Bacardi 151.

"I'll give an 8 for the landing", Pabst said. Standard operating procedure on that first Tuesday in March.

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"Just a bump of this and you'll evade the glare of moon", she said, white-nosed and shaky, like some rabbit just trapped and caged against a metal pillar.

Sarah was thin, pale and fragile. Her collected, rejected works blanketed the wood floor and a color Television sang its siren song of babbling skulls in the adjacent room. The wood creaked like a Yeti awoken from its coma. A layer of dust so thick it ringed of years; the months piling on in surface, cracks, and crevices.

"You've changed. You're that sketch of a failed writer, strung out and fiending. Jesus Christ, man. You're locked up here all day, wasting away and pounding out pounds of disjointed narrative with no publisher, poems, or point in this sad dash to some finish", he said.

James lingered in this tomb of misused, misbegotten creativity for reasons unknown. He'd seen the disarray. The spiraling. The capsizing ego bombarded like lightning cracking open the night; electrifying its juice and mystery to a warm, black brew that goes down fast and smooth, but tastes of death and smoldering ash. He'd eked out survival on mean streets of menial labor; some back-breaking work

of rushed, systematic dishwashing and the unutterable silence and stares draped down along his back and face. They sullied his worth to mere slave labor and his Sarah -the fiancé- gobbled up speed, hash, coke, and booze like vitamins for the elderly with pretenses of the Great American Novel and freedom for the artist. His eyes were stained and darkened, years burrowing into his skin like cockroaches and dreams of screens, budgets, and scripts faded with the breath of years. The urge of fleeing to the west coast burned and gnawed as a fever.

“It helps me write! If you’d put pen, paper, and ink together, just this once, you’d see what I mean”, Sarah said. She was half naked and drenched in sweat sweet as music. The purple paper and mail was stacked so high, you could hear it hum with urgency. Her ribs were like knobs and her frilled white bra and panties were loose, yet clung to her frame. The bones of her feet were zigzagged and jetted out. And the once almost iridescent green hair had decayed to a somber shade of black; dirt, ink, and grime in its fresh, finished coat of sweat.

He could taste the desperation in her bones; it was bitter, yet bland. And her excuses were smothered to a palatable gel of shit. The shift from her rejection letters to social reject flashed in his mind like a smooth, cruel, taunting transformation that reeked of misfortune and misstep.

He meandered to the couch, slow and sluggish as if stripped of purpose and birthing an overwhelming exhaustion. They’d survived for three months with the

soft, mad light of a standing, pink, antique lamp and a television jammed between channels and set to silent, but still humming with a piercing buzz like a swarm of locust. Sarah typed her scrawling, babbling prose by candlelight on an ill-tempered Clark Nova. The keys finally stuck. It rambled on and garbled the sentence like mush masticated with teeth. And the pin finally dropped. And the domino, revved and beaten, kicked into line that event chain.

“You’re worthless! You fucking bastard!” she said, snatching butane from the floor and dousing the unsuspecting beast in flammable rot. She twitched and lit an American Spirit. Her last lucky. A long, crooked drag for nicotine and the venomous exhale smote the room.

James, in spastic horror, froze. The million crooked needles piercing the tips of his fingers, and skull, and his mind rolled back and reset like a cuckoo clock wrapped snug in the pits of hell. He bolted out, smashing the door to jagged splinters and glided down the stairs like a raven pumped its wings to earth freefalling.

And the ash fell...

The Clark Nova bubbled and belched its dirge; and the slew of purple rose up like a typhoon of kindle, caressing the wood with flame, heat, and vile temperament. The room was a sloven pit of open booze, which roared to a brazen Molotov cocktail; and rage oozed like Mt. St. Helen and shimmered. The gasps for air and mercy began to strike the frigid midnight air. Darkness eroded in the skyscraping fire pit.

And it stood fumbling and swaying like the Olympic torch of NYC.

James' feet skid on the sidewalk and the wail of trucks, citizens, and death deafened him with their sorrow. He tripped into the vindictive arms of law and his face was struck blunt and smothered in the officer's chest. Turgid with the blue uniform blues and fleeing the scene.

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It's grinding through gears of my mind like some rusted, ancient machine, drier than a Nun between the legs. Flickering, stark chasm of my eyes bewildered and wandering; and flashing like an esoteric language for the criminally insane. The rising, screeching burnout between the

skull and ears and eyelashes slowly lifting like a mystical prayer or half-mad trance, knotting, burrowing, plunging into my brain like a Vice and my eyes bulge with forced, gentle pressure. The fixed trial of arson and murder blare in my mind. Death row, steel, and viscous, piss-stained water. This fucking chemical cocktail to lacerate the droning thought loop and seep through my skull with the warmth of flaming locust. It starts in my spine, tingling with uncanny precision and hovers on my scalp; a thousand brittle syringes coyly dragging that sterilized edge. And Sarah's still there, raping my thoughts like a scarring presence: a specter from the tomb. They need to hurry the injection so Pabst can adorn his livid walls.





POETRY

*Not only that fewer men may know  
by !!fcpOe302SRa*

Not only that fewer men may know

(I have fashioned a body from the earth and sea  
to tempt and feed a craving man.

I have sent this man crawling out  
from the corners of her lips -  
out from the black squall of her mouth,  
from the crush of her thousand diamond teeth -  
onto the immaculate sands  
choking on mud and sorrow.)

but that I may know less and less reason have to know.

*The Shut-In's Love Poem*

*by Chad Davis*

I want to move somewhere cold  
where in the silhouette of street lamps  
I'd see the warmth leave her lips,  
'Cause where I come from  
I know it doesn't exist.

And if it's the place I think it is  
she wears a band-aid like a wedding band  
and leaves it covered under  
thick sleeves and checkered gloves  
until it slips off in the tub.

I tried to get there once  
but I couldn't find the stop.  
The subway map is a tangle  
of crayon colored lines  
that I scribbled as a child.

So now I walk these parks in Winter.  
It's cold here but it never snows  
and I saw a mess blown from the west's salted breath;  
Boldly, I plucked something from her hair.  
I thought it was a cherry blossom.

*Rooftop*

*by Tom Costello*

Hands dusted of peach pits,  
Gravel, and feathered things  
Which perch in souls,

Tiptoes clutching the ledge,  
Rawboned, everything within us  
Groping for the courage to leap.

Pulses jagged. Vertigo.  
A fraying tidbit of time—  
All we ever wanted was to fall.

You examined the sprawl below,  
The wrinkled visage of landscape and fractal cities,  
Watched people pursue the horizon  
And declared the world flat.

I remember looking at my toes for a long time.

You didn't laugh when I asked you,  
But you didn't say yes.

We walked back home.

*Untitled*

*by T.D.*

the fungus growing heavy on the tree  
has lived so long, I cannot say  
where the fungus joins the pale tree

the grey boats creaking on the leaden sea  
have slept so long, in fog so deep  
I cannot tell the grey boats from the sea

*Of the Lost Paradise*

*by Anonymous*

In the sprawling city-garden of a very white wooden house  
(in a dream somewhere) I am naked.

There is a sidewalk between the road and the field  
of tall (dream-tall) stalks of a flowering kind-  
heavy with fruit and looming shadily,  
their labors rotting in their arms.

The sun is setting. Cars are passing.  
And I do not mind being naked for once.  
For once I feel as though I could pass  
into that grove of my brothers and vanish among them;  
I feel I could spread as water through the soil and be at home;

As though I will walk toward and through that great,  
white wooden house with leisure  
and walk farther still,  
having found nothing and no one to hold me there

(though I may have searched each room  
and wept true tears on the white stairs  
and cried plainly for there to be something.)

I feel as though I may walk forever  
and never somehow return to where I started,  
or remember anything.  
I think of the empty and warm head I could have.

But my hand calls out weakly, reminding me  
that if there is nothing in the house  
I will not brush my cheeks and go again outside  
to walk and be filled with an eternal contentment.

If there is nothing in the house  
then there alone (for how long,  
I wonder) I will stay.

## *Creationist*

*by Jon Bolduc*

For someone  
who touches with hands gentle, you  
brush in  
soft touches that reverse the flow  
and paint symphonies in colours.  
Walls of music and walls of creation,  
rock me to sleep, o'sound-  
Sweeping humans tried to jump the gap; but realized  
rain still pours even if immortals skip over puddles and  
walk in rubber boots;  
so someone like you had to take  
a million in your palm and talk some sense,  
shed something to them.  
Like in the fertile canvass of gentle palms, so many  
of your walls are painted; so many rocked to sleep  
by your sound, o' the sound it is  
and o' the sound that echoes-

For someone who counts stars  
nestled in the sky, pooled together like twicks of flight,  
you reunite yourself when forced apart.

In families of burning gas, you find comfort and  
learn to count colour, painting the universe by numbers.



*The Theoretician's Escort*

*by Doug Wilson*

In the frost-flavored nights  
when you would whisper 'darling'  
and play my teeth like piano keys  
I would sit,  
counting drunk hairs  
and putting our heartbeats  
into alphabetical order.

I've never loved you  
the way he said God loved you  
the way soft beds loved you  
the way the oceans loved you -  
my heart pumps only blood  
while yours heaves quick spirals of gravity  
onto all of our trembling surfaces.

No, we mustn't let our heads swim —  
my love is a smooth mathematics  
incontrovertible  
from creamy poetry or noble logic,  
the universal law for which the evidence grows  
each  
time  
I count  
another rolling hair.

# INFORMATION

Submit your writing, comments, and whatever else to: [theaprilreader@gmail.com](mailto:theaprilreader@gmail.com)

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