



THE APRIL READER Issue 23



Preface: What is TAR?

The April Reader (TAR) is a monthly online publication of poetry, prose, essays, and other user-submitted content. With its origins in 4chan's literature imageboard, TAR now aims to distribute the work of its contributing authors to a wide variety of audiences and communities. Ideologically, TAR hopes aid developing authors in becoming a voice for their generation. Practically, TAR aims to link its authors to a wide variety of readers, giving the former a chance at receiving critical feedback from many perspectives, and the latter a good set of reads.

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In This Issue:

FICTION

5

T. C. Jones
The Night is Young

9

Vanessa Bronson
Eternal Love, Eternal Loss

15

Tom Sheehan
Charnley and Leonard the Blind
Man

19

The Fresh Keeper of the Light
If You're Reading This; It's For You

23

Augustin Lopez
Lonely Together

*“The shallow end is for the
girls
They're taught to stand and
dive and twist”*

– Jellyfish

*“I thought, perhaps this is what
heaven must be, the four of us
suspended on the roof for
eternity free of the doldrums of
our impending adulthood.”*

– The Night is
Young

POETRY

31

Marylyn Tan
Curator wanted
&
stilts

33

Paul Olexa
Title

34

R. C. Betritt
Trunk road

35

Harry Cross
Jellyfish

36

based poetry
i haven't said anything in a while



FICTION

The Night is Young

By T. C. Jones

The bartender at the Calypso poured the Gin and Tonics right up to the edge of the tumbler glass without measuring. It was like doubling your money. After last call, Anthony paid for our tab with a crisp fifty and told the bartender to keep the change. He had a reputation as an easy spender, and when he wasn't blowing his paychecks playing craps at the Wheeling Island Casino he was picking up our tabs at the Calypso.

We jumped out onto gray, ragged Atwood Street and stumbled over the curb as we walked toward Anthony's Pontiac parked near the corner. Straight ahead the heart of Pittsburgh's Oakland neighborhood shined: the neon outline of Joe Mamma's Italian eatery glowed, and the red caution lights from the helipad atop Presbyterian Hospital on Cardiac Hill pulsed silently.

"Girls! Girls! Girls!" Mack hollered as he slid into the backseat. "Cruise around Anthony. Let's find some girls!" There was self-indulgence written in his liquor swollen eyes and a mischievous, sleepless smile on his face. He was full of mad schemes; when I first met Mack during freshman year I realized he wanted women and more women, he wanted camaraderie and plenty of beer, he wanted to watch the college football game on the television no matter the teams competing, and he wanted everything else a carefree young man wants but, at the same time, I knew he wanted something else, something bigger than all this, something which he wasn't quite ready for.

Anthony, completely amenable and ready to do whatever Mack asked of him, bucked his car away from the curb, turned his black sedan onto brightly lit Forbes Avenue and we hurled forward through the raucous, beery atmospheres of house parties near the college campus. The aroma of his overdosed cologne caught the air from the open window and overwhelmed

us.

"You smell like the damn perfume aisle at Macy's," Mack said.

I laughed and Anthony acted like he didn't hear him.

"Seriously, cut back on the cologne," Mack coughed dramatically and clutched at his neck as if he were choking.

"It's my scent. Girls tell me it smells good," Anthony countered.

"Maybe you shouldn't take advice from hookers."

I laughed like a madman. Laughed so hard it made my insides hurt.

We waited at a stoplight and watched a crowd of drunken undergrads cluster around a box of Antoon's Pizza. They were huddled on the crumbling cement steps under an amber porch light of a row house apartment stuffing their faces like maniacal wolves.

An ambulance shrieked through the intersection. "Probably another freshman with alcohol poisoning," I said. Strung out on our own self-righteousness, and being a few years removed from college we looked at undergrads with a certain degree of scorn, like somehow they were beneath us intellectually even though we still drank just as much, partook in asinine activities, and acted just as haphazardly.

The light flashed from red to green. We accelerated and the tires gave a little scream around the corner. Like prophecy, under a weak yellow halo of streetlight, stood Jasmine Aneesh, the legendary Lebanese beauty and two female

companions. She was legendary in the sense that she was a legend among us, that she'd been involved with almost all of my friends at one point during the last five years.

"Well shit, look who it is," Mack called out. His body hung from the car window, voice thick with inebriation. "Get your butts in here, we'll take you home."

Jasmine and her friend Amie squeezed into the back with Mack while a little Korean beauty named Tracy hopped on my lap in the front. She was drunk—they all were drunk—and they giggled and bounced about with ethanol glee. Tracy kissed me on my mouth with such sudden fury that I hardly had the time to return it. Her lustrous black hair tumbled over the side of her round, unblemished face and smelled of a mixture of Tequila, menthol, and sweat.

Mack ran his hand up and down Jasmine's bare olive thigh, uncovered by the way her white dress lifted to nearly her hips, perfect skin in the muted light. The white dress and the way the brilliant darkness of her ebony hair was pulled through a red ribbon headband gave her the look of a beautiful daughter to an ancient Persian sultan.

"What you girls been up to tonight?" Mack asked, his voice slurred.

"Drinking," they answered.

"No shit," he said sarcastically. "Who would guess that three classy girls were out drinking?"

"Look who's talking," Jasmine slapped at Mack's face playfully. "You boys drink more than anyone I know."

"We learned from you," I said from the front, a statement which was quickly followed by a whack to the back of my head.

Anthony drove too fast down Bigelow Boulevard, ignored a STOP sign, made a left, whipped around the corner and almost ran off the road as he looked back at honey-haired Amie

with his smoky blue city eyes. She was young, ballerina thin and beautiful. She described in detail how she broke two full glasses of beer at Hemingway's Pub earlier. "And they didn't even kick me out. Can you believe that? It's cause Jasmine used to screw around with the bouncer. We flirt with him a bit and get away with anything."

I didn't care much for Amie. Though we always smiled at each other like we were good friends, our occasional conversations, when they occurred, were awkward and distrustful. Amie held the royal flush of opportunity, rank, and family and represented everything for which I had unrelenting scorn. The checks her Daddy sent monthly which she bragged about; the job she had waiting for her back home in Harrisburg which she did nothing to deserve except be born to a powerful state politician; her superior airs, her callousness, the sense of fastidious entitlement, and the way her nose turned up at people she didn't like, which was just about everyone. Sometimes when I got drunk I wondered how much trouble I'd get in, how many lawsuits would be flung my way filed by the state's best lawyers, if I just reached out and slapped her face the next time her nose wrinkled up in disgust.

Anthony turned on the radio. The chords of a Third Eye Blind song hummed from the speakers and everyone in the back joined in singing. *The sky was gold, it was rose, I was taking sips of it through my nose, and I wish I could get back there, some place back there.....* It reminded me of the awkward junior high dances in the dusty cinderblock school gym (we were not yet too jaded to enjoy this kind of event without a six-pack of beers) where the boys pawed inelegantly at the young girl's hips, their skinny arms fully extended in order to maintain maximum separation. The coolest boys, the ones I admired, snuck grabs of their girls' asses as they danced, but I was always too nervous to try something that bold.

The Pontiac made a right on Center, only signaling for a turn midway through it, and nearly sideswiped a Mancini's Bakery delivery truck idling along the curb. On the east side of the street were century old Victorians turned frat houses—grimy Greek party palaces with empty

kegs and dirty sofas that breathed urine on the porches. There was a rumor that during freshmen year Jasmine had lost her virginity on one of those sofas to a scrawny frat boy with a scraggly beard who sold what passed as good weed for Pittsburgh's standards.

We parked in front of Jasmine's tan brick high-rise apartment building; the tires skidded emitting a high pitched screech. "Come on up boysss!" Jasmine wailed emphatically into the night sending a raspy prolonged hiss through a thin long tunnel of breath and pulled us out of the car and up to the front door. "This night is still young." For Jasmine the night was always young; never old until the morning sun peaked in the East. Mack stood out in the street and took an enormous piss. The boys laughed, the girls giggled, and I took up a rock and tried to hit his ass with it. It missed and he zipped up, threw it back, then we all rushed inside like madmen.

We sat in the living room on a worn secondhand sofa as a rerun of the Jerry Springer Show hummed in the background. It fascinated me what a couple thousand bucks and half an hour of trash stardom could make people do. Willingly be a public spectacle, their sick twisted lives, nasty family love triangles, men tricked by their secret transvestite lovers, all of this exposed for us middle-class voyeurs so that when we examined our own lives we could feel pretty damn good about them.

Jasmine tossed us silver and blue cans of beer from the refrigerator. "Drink up boyssss, night is still young." Jasmine repeated herself in her cuttingly nasal voice, like if Minnie Mouse had smoked for fifty years. She had voluptuous breasts and wore low cut shirts to flaunt the smooth caramel sun-tan on their tops. Never once had we seen them bare, and I wondered what it would be like to press my face in them, between them. Even when she took someone to a dark back room at a party she'd keep her shirt on. Those sacred fleshy globes tantalized us, gave her power, and she knew it.

"What's this, Jas? Busch pounders? Seriously? I see you are still classy as ever," I prodded.

"Shut up and drink. When did you get picky about a beer?"

I shrugged and drained the can's contents into my stomach. To my right Tracy's head bobbed forward, and too post-drunk tired to keep her eyes open any longer, curled up like a kitten ensconced into the elbow of the sofa and snored softly, mascara smeared beneath her long black lashes and lipstick kissed away.

"She's hammered," Jasmine said, as if that was all the explanation we might require.

Amie fumbled about in the bathroom, banged cabinet doors and splashed water around. She exited in only her underwear, black with pink polka dots, squealed and blushed furiously when she saw us staring at her delicate tanned film star figure then scurried off into her bedroom with a slam of the door.

"There ya go Anthony," said Jasmine, an angelic smirk on her face. She knew of his new obsession. Anthony became infatuated with every new woman he met. "You almost saw her naked."

He'd only met Amie once before, at the Calypso during Karaoke night a couple months ago. She sang a particularly off-key version of Alanis Morissette's "You Oughta Know" which impressed Anthony enough that he'd had been asking Jasmine about her ever since.

We drank our beers as Mack, filled with alcoholic courage, fondled Jasmine beneath a blanket pulled up to their necks beside me. It was the suspicious straight, reddened faces that gave them away. Jasmine's translucent amber eyes, like two pints of lager held up in dim light, sparked with physical delight. "Oh Mack," I thought. "You lady loving fool. One day all this womanizing will get you in trouble."

"Let's go smoke on the roof," offered Jasmine after some time passed.

"The roof? How bout we just smoke here," I complained.

“No, no. Let’s go to the roof. It’s a perfect night.”

“Alright,” I answered in a mindless follow-through and nodded in concession. We followed her out the back screen door, ascended a rusty, narrow, fire escape with peeling sulfur-colored paint, and out to the flat, spacious, tar-and-tin apartment rooftop. She casually lit a joint and we passed it under a spectacular panorama of June stars blazing bright against the black velvet of infinity above.

Anthony stood pigeon-toed on the edge of the building, arms akimbo, staring out with uncertainty at the flickering yellow lights of East Liberty. It had an immortal look to it, the way the string of distant streetlights seemed to go on forever toward the mournful Allegheny River somewhere out over the horizon. There is something strangely heartbreaking looking out at a city past midnight; melancholy and beautiful like you are the only man left alive gazing out at an abandoned world. He just stood there, stoned, under the immense Pittsburgh skies, looking with a kind of lonely solemnity feeling the grip of sentiment and time. Everything was hushed in far-crying stillness, save for the occasional rumble of a passing car engine on Craig Street, the endless hum of electricity from the power lines below, the faint howl of a train whistle as it chugged toward New Kensington far upriver, and the cadence of the easterly wind that swished the broad maple leaves. Mack stood grasping Jasmine’s hips from behind, fingers digging into her belly.

High and happy I imagined we could live on forever and I thought, perhaps this is what heaven must be, the four of us suspended on the roof for eternity free of the doldrums of our impending adulthood. I closed my eyes and awash in overwhelming nostalgia thought of the times during college when Jasmine danced on the table during house-parties; how she’d sometimes pull me up to dance with her and I’d steal a kiss and how special I felt when she turned her attention my way. This nostalgia was choking me; I’d taken it as a false blanket of security which now twisted around my neck. But I didn’t dare toss it aside, couldn’t fathom moving forward without the comfort it provided. To let it go was im-

mensely foreboding, an admittance that our time as oversized adolescents, careless and reckless, had come and past.

Time ebbed and its very concept eluded me when Mack and Jasmine retreated to her bedroom downstairs to make it. And Anthony, silent Anthony with the angel of loneliness traveling on his shoulder, disappeared like an apparition into the night. I, left by my lonesome, sat with my legs hanging over the edge of the building, pretending this ephemeral summer would never end, fall never arrive, and that we’d always be happy together here in Pittsburgh. I intended to sit there, alone on the roof, wondering what I was trying to get out of life, pondering why nights like these happen all too infrequently, until the first golden shafts unfolded on the horizon.

Suddenly, everything, the entire sky, it all looked dangerous. The stars, the moon, the halogen street lamps, they all seemed like blinding interrogation lights asking: “Boy, what do you want in life?”

“THE NIGHT IS YOUNG!” I bel-
lowed into the dying blackness then
listened to my voice evaporate into fast
fading youth.

Eternal Love, Eternal Loss

By Vanessa Bronson

Gwen's eyes swirl with phantasms of emerald, and amber as she watches the snow fall at night upon her city. The view of the Brooklyn Bridge lay linear to her Williamsburg apartment, and the humming of the adjacent traffic, human and mobile, play symphony with the beating of her heart and the inflation of her breath.

Here she is. Young, and swift of dreams in New York. The destination that had been locked within her heart for so many years. It's December 18, 2012 and she has been here now for three months. The days are slowly marching toward Christmas day. A jovial time for some, a tumultuous and hardening time for others. Gwen always delighted in this seasons celebrations, including this day; her birthday. But today, as she looks upon her kingdom of freedom, a levee of emotion breaks, and she cries deep, deep tears of sorrow and loss. The pang crushes in her heart like a crestfallen wave of the pacific. Here she is, twenty-four years old, exiled in the land of her dreams, but abandoned from the love of her life.

How unabashedly she and Jonah loved each other. How uninhibited they once were in the depths of their honesty. She never knew a feeling such as that. She never knew it existed. Now, the love they created, the memories, the ideals and dreams, are burning in a place so far away from both of them. They fantasized and rhapsodized about a life together for they believed at the moment their love was created, they could not exist as sole human beings. They could only exist as one, and they would travel through time together, to the ends of the earth, through all dreams and prospective conquests, they would be one. Forever.

Their cathedral of love crumbled upon their differences, which thus led to dissipated energies. Different interests which traveled the

roads to different ideals. Jonah, nine years Gwen's senior, lived and craved and simple life on the beaches of California where they began one wondrous summer. He hailed from the suburban and cold terrain of the mid-west, and settled in beautiful southern California where his heart carried him. He was adverse to all things city; the melting pot of culture, the hustle, and the often cruel dispensaries that these things could produce. Gwen was born into the beauty of California, loved and lived every inch of it's glory, but as she grew up, its beauty staled. She was quelled to the east coast electricity, a new life, and new places to explore. Jonah was a college graduate who built his honest career in a variety of corporations, working a stable nine-to-five. He was the embodiment of strength, clarity, and balance. Gwen was a dancer who came alive at night. She was a wild and free California girl lustung for spiritual and experiential advancement. Their oppositions were culprit to their attracting undertow. Equally so, it was the culprit of their demise.

The superficial differences between them wore the relationship thin and they became victims of their own circumstances. When the resistance weakened, Jonah made the decision. It was the hardest of all decisions; to release Gwen to find her dreams waiting on the other side of the country. His heart was staked in the beach, hers in the city. He fought for stability, she for freedom. His days were her nights, her nights, his days. Though the distance impregnated between them, one truth, the purest of all, stood sturdy; they loved each other.

How painful it is to be set free. How ugly the face of truth is when he spits at you and cries: "Love is not enough!" How lonely the road to salvation, to assuaged pain, through the wreckage of hearts and gauntlets of crumbled dreams. How terrible it is to grow apart and travel alternate paths as sole human beings, never to find each other, only finding a way back to themselves.

At the same moment on the opposing end of the country, Jonah's eyes glaze with unshed tears as he watches the rain fall upon the shores of Pacific Beach. His mind travels to New York. To Gwen. He tries to imagine her. *Who is she with? Where does she sleep?* And then, the tears bellow up in his eyes and slowly roll down his cheeks. At this moment, more than anything in the world, more than California and its vast beauty, he wants to be with her. She has his heart. She has his soul. The waves crush and torment the shores mirroring the pain in both of their hearts. Jonah is in his utopia of San Diego; Gwen in her wonderland of New York; both are living out their individual dreams, though taxing their hearts. Forever has slipped through their hands.

December 19, 2012:

Gwen catches a taxi to the airport. The traffic is far worse than she has ever seen. Cars and cabs fight each other, while the sidewalks flood with shoppers. The city lights stream through the snowy white streets to show the faces of the assembly blocking traffic.

"C'mon. Outta the way!" The disgruntled driver yells to the menagerie in the streets. It is wrought with people boasting signs inscribed with a variety of fatal notions. Things like: *The End Is Near! The Mayans Were Right!*

"I'm gonna end your world if you don't get outta the way!" The driver yells again.

It was an expensive cab fare, but Gwen makes it to the airport and boards her flight to California. This is the first time that she will be back to see her family. She observes the rest of the flight patrons as she patiently awaits her departure. She takes notice of all sorts of video screens, cell phones, and laptops illumine. Patrons consuming and feasting on advertisements and campaigns. Fear and consumption. A little boy and little girl across the aisle: He is sucking on sugar induced energy drink; she is studying a celebrity tabloid magazine. The couple behind her is arguing about their mortgage. A republican and democrat hide contempt for each other as they discuss the November election. The tension amongst everyone feels thick and greased with hysteria. She often feels strange in this world of backwards morals, especially encased in an arena so amplified like this. Could it just be the holidays? The state of the union? Or could it be that she is going back to California. . .

In the midst of her thoughts, a young woman, about nineteen, takes the seat next to Gwen. Her eyes are a sad watery blue and are shrouded by light blonde bangs that she has probably fashioned to mask her acne. She has on far too much makeup, which has stained her skin orange. Her shoulders lay hunched over to diminish her size. Her dress is modest. Gwen manages to generate a smile to greet the young woman, though within her, a monster of cynicism is lurking. The girl relinquishes a Wal-Mart shopping bag from her grip and unloads its contents. A bottle of soda, flaming hot chips, a tabloid magazine, and The Book of Mormon.

"Hi," the girl says.

"Hello," Gwen replies.

"Are you going home for Christmas?"

"I am." Gwen states, then ties up the awkward pause with, "Are you?"

"Oh that's nice. I am actually going on a mission trip for my church. My name is Susanna."

"Nice to meet you, Susanna." And with hesitation, Gwen shakes her hand.

"Do you believe in God?"

Gwen's cynicism sinks deeper, while her anxiety rises.

"Yes I do."

"Are you familiar with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints?"

"I'm not sure..."

"Have you heard of Mormonism?"

This is not the conversation that Gwen would choose while trapped in the air. At this moment, she really does not want to have any conversation, for all she can think of. . . is him.

"Yes."

"Oh, well what do you know about it?"

"I know that it was founded in America by a man that claimed an angel directed him to ancient text on gold plates and that only he could decipher it."

Susanna is a little surprised at the breadth of Gwen's knowledge, but then takes note of her solemn demeanor. "You seem to have some sadness inside of you. God wants us to be happy and share His joys here on earth. He wants us to know where we came from and where we are going. May I talk to you about Jesus Christ?"

Gwen takes a moment to choose her words. She feels this is all very invasive.

"No thank you. I respect your beliefs. But I

would like to sit quietly."

"Okay. Well, if you change your mind-"

Susanna plucks a postcard from her Book. It has an image of Jesus Christ. Face serene. Arms wide open. Beneath him there is an inscription of a website address.

"-you can go to this website and order a DVD that may answer some of your questions."

An advertisement for Jesus.

"Thank you," Gwen replies as she takes the postcard.

"You know, God can give you the answers to where you're going. . ."

"Thank you, but I don't need to know."

The pilot's voice mumbles over the intercom as the engine streams to life: "*Flight attendants, please prepare for takeoff.*"

"Why not?"

"Because the world is going to end in two days."

December 21, 2012:

It is eleven a.m. Jonah affirms this by looking at his wrist. There, vividly emblazoned, is the gold watch that Gwen gave him for his thirtieth birthday. He never ceases to be mystified by the oblique knobs and intricate beauty of this piece of jewelry. Since Gwen moved to New York, he has not worn it, until today. Looking at it, he ponders. *What have I done? . . . How could I let her go? Why did I tell her to leave?* Logically he knows that she needed to grow and to nurture herself. His mind can tell him this, but his heart continues to question that logic. Jonah sinks to the bed. Head in hands. He is about to go home for Christmas, without Gwen. A sad holiday he is about to embark. The television sings Christmas carols. It is the only festive ornament throughout his living space.

Deck the halls with boughs of holly fa la la la la la la la la
Will she be coming home for Christmas? He wonders.

Tis the season to be jolly fa la la la la la la la la

His mind spirals down in torment.

Don we now our gay apparel fa la la la la la la la la

He grabs his phone and ruminates for a moment about calling her. When she left, she asked him not to contact her, for it would be too painful. At her request, he ceases his whim.

"Oh please, Gwen, just call me..."

Troll the ancient Yule Tide carrol fa la la la la la la la la

Jonah shudders at his outward request to the

universe.

The carol carries on, and over the languid vocals, Jonah's phone rings. He moves his attention to the ringing phone. The nameless number is brandished across the screen, but he knows. . . he knows this number like the chartered constellations in the sky.

"Hello?" he says.

"Hi," she says.

A breathless moment lingers on both ends of the line.

"Merry Christmas, love,"

"Merry Christmas to you too," she replies back. There is a moment where they relish the silence, before she says to him: "I'm in California."

Those simple words, *I'm in California*, instrument the melting of his heart. She's here. His California girl is home.

Just as his voice cracks a reply, a deep earthly rumble is heard outside. So loud, deafening, and portent. Its procession is the ground shaking beneath Jonah's feet. The chasm intensifies harder, more violent with each thrust. Jonah sequesters himself in the bathroom doorway, gripping the phone as if it were his appendage. The earthquake continues its merciless lashings as Jonah watches it destroy his home. Pictures ripped from walls, dressers and drawers timber to the floor, lamps fall, and light bulbs burst. Jonah uses the strength of his arms and his broad shoulders to pin his body in the doorway. Over the crashing sounds, he yells into the phone. "Gwen!"

The quake comes to a halt. Suddenly, drastically, quietly. . . an electrical hum lingers in the air, while in the distance he can hear the panic delivering outside. He collects himself and puts the phone to his ear again. "Gwen?" There is no answer.

With focus and great haste, Jonah collects his coat and the backpack that he constructed in the event that this was to happen. Their survival kit. He climbs what is now an obstacle course to escape his home, until he makes it to the outside air. He dials Gwen's number again. Lines are busy. He looks at his watch: 11:20 a.m. Another tremor shakes the ground instigating more screams. There is a car crash just down the road, windows on homes are shattered, and stop lights sway against the bluster of cold wind. The rain has stopped. Jonah feels

the air twirling against him. Hot to cold, cold to hot. He looks to the sky and sees the plumes of clouds running cowardice just beneath...the moon.

There it hangs low in the late am hours, illumine in a melancholy grey. It is grand. Far greater than anyone has ever seen. In the distance, beyond the moon, shielded by clouds, he sees the sun scalding a hot fiery red. Both are verbose in their mutual challenge against one another. He looks to the ocean where the sea level has risen and the waves move violently to the shores, and he knows that the God of all storms is riding its chariots. Hysteria is now ensuing with families running the streets, and others trapped in their homes. He tries to phone Gwen again. Nothing.

Jonah's car is trapped beneath an electric power line, and rendered useless. Another tremor shakes the earth. He looks to the sky to foresee the great eclipse and the bubbling sea beneath it. He then looks to the opposing road. There is no way out by vehicle. Cars have crashed, lampposts, and power lines have crumbled. He must continue on foot to find Gwen, and the route to her mother's house where she would be staying for the holidays is not too far. He runs, and jumps, and dodges the earth until he makes it to her home stay, but the door will not budge open. Jonah slams his body against the door once...twice...and the third time with all of his force, he pushes it open. The place is shrouded in darkness and destroyed from the quake. He calls out her name making his way through the destruction.

"Gwen! Gwen! Where are you?"

There is no answer. There is only the sound of chaos outside which he has now disregarded on his quest. His own voice evaporates into the walls and he begins to pray for her safety. He removes a flashlight from his backpack and searches the house when he finds a window open in the bedroom. Right then he knows. He knows that she escaped and followed the plan that they created so long ago in the event of an emergency. He follows her same path out the window, down the street and to their meeting spot.

His eyes dart around the big open field where they are to meet. There are others who have found sanctuary in the field, but where is

she? He calls out her name again.

"Gwen! Gwen!"

And then, under the blinking sky, in the center of the field, they meet eyes. Their blood swims warm at the sight of one another, and the electrical current between them erupts. It is as if they have both been asleep and are seeing and breathing again. Their bodies rush to one another to intertwine. Body's close and warm, they feel their hearts dance in synchrony. Jonah's strong hands explore her body to discover an injury on her arm. A deep cut running along her forearm.

"You're hurt," he says as he guides her to the ground.

"It's okay. You found me," she breathes as he unloads the first-aid kit from his backpack.

"I'll always find you. No matter what. It's you and me, Gwen. You and me."

He fixes the cut on her arm and looks into her deep green eyes. Those eyes that he loves so much. His favorite color. And in a sobering moment, the tears spill from his dark brown eyes as they look into each other. She takes him into her now mended arm and they feel their mended hearts together again. Jonah always protected Gwen from harm of the sometimes-dark world, and Gwen protected Jonah against sometimes-dark emotions. In an exterior world they were so different, but on deep, spiritual levels, they were one. And in this moment they realized that their earthly, mortal desires paled in comparison to their eternal love. That being separate was impossible in the natural world, and no matter how far they would go, the universe would always bring them back together. Gwen takes Jonah's face into her hands and moves her lips to his, and without any words, they say to each other, "I love you."

Just then, the immense sky cries and wails thunder. The rain comes pouring angularly onto them and lightning shatters the earth's cries. Jonah takes Gwen by the hand and guides her to safety in a neighboring office building made of brick. Inside it is dark and abandoned. They lock the doors and isolate themselves in a room where they dry themselves and turn on the portable radio only to discover the doomed fate caused by immeasurable storms, hurricanes, earthquakes and hysteria.

"I can't believe this, Gwen. Is this really happening?"

"Are you asking if the world is really ending right now?"

"Yes."

She takes a moment to decide between optimism and realism.

"I think so, love. I think the world is cleansing itself."

"Cleansing itself of what?" he asks.

"Of us," she replies. "Jonah, what do we do?"

"We have to survive," he says, and he takes her hands into his. "I won't let anything happen to you. Do you understand? Nothing bad will happen to you."

"I understand."

He moves closer to her and touches her face.

"I'm so sorry, Gwen. . .I'm sorry that I let you go. You are so important to me, and I only wanted the best for you. I didn't think our relationship would last much longer in that city. It's stupid. It's so stupid, Gwen. We must never be apart." He seals this promise with a kiss so deep and so meaningful. Gwen moves her body into his as his strong hands grip her waist and maneuver her to the floor. They move undulant as one and peel their clothes back to feel the warmth of their skin pressed a top their blood rushing bodies. Gwen wraps her legs around Jonah as he moves inside her. The distance and time that has passed has built the tension to be strong like rising sun. They move with one another and release together. And in this moment, in the dank building with storm and hysteria brewing outside, with their humanity dangling on shreds of existence, they are warm and infinite within each other.

* * *

Some hours pass. They check the radio, but only to discover fuzzy, dead air. The storm outside has weakened and they decide to venture outward in attempt to find their families. The streets are flooding; they carefully make their way away from the building to the rural neighborhood in attempt to find salvation. It is cold, bleak, and ghostly as there is no one to be seen.

"Jonah. Look." Gwen points to the sky above them. They see nine stars burning white hot, lined up with the sun and the moon. The entire galaxy ordered together, pointing like an arrow to an unknown terrain. It is hypnotizing. For a moment, Gwen and Jonah forget where they are and stay mystified by the total galactic eclipse. As

they marvel at its beauty, they see it move like a serpent so that every star glides to hide behind the moon. Then, there is nothing but darkness.

"Let's go. We have to move," Jonah instructs.

The earth emanates a deep roar. They turn to witness its attack. Hot and cold winds run through the air as the ocean climbs higher and higher.

"Run!" Jonah yells.

It has risen to monstrous proportions and curls over to demolish the land. They stomp the wet ground running for their lives, never releasing the grip from each other's hands. It's coming. The ocean is coming to swallow them whole.

Jonah quickly finds a tall, brick apartment complex with a fire escape ladder. He hoists Gwen upward and they climb to the roof with only moments left before the wall of water crashes into them. He fastens the survival kit to her back, and then ties her to an iron post with a nearby watering hose.

"What about you?" Gwen cries.

"It's okay. I'm strong," he reassures her.

And it's close. The tsunami comes riding in with the fiercest voracity. They wrap their bodies around the iron and look into each other.

"I love you," she says.

"I love you," he says.

And here it is.

"Hang on!" Jonah yells.

It comes crashing onto them like God's merciless beating, and they are no match against its tyranny. They hold each other with every ounce of their strength as they are engulfed in the deep, dark, ruthless water. Nature's force is too powerful against their fight. The current rips Jonah from the iron, and Gwen holds both of his hands as his body flaps against the waves. She pulls harder and harder, but it is so strong. It is too strong. The current rips them apart and Jonah is abducted into the dark abyss while Gwen is left to witness. She releases a scream as she watches her love fade into demise. Her body is then ripped from the iron, but her lifeline, the hose wrapped around her, tugs on her like a lasso, and she is saved. He protected her. But the water keeps coming, and she is trapped as it fills the void in her lungs.

Gwen submits to the earth's violent prowess, and ceases the fight. Once she accepts

her ill fate, her body moves gracefully with the water. Just as the music moved her so many times to dance, death will now be her conductor.

This is the end for her and Jonah. They will ride death's carriage to the next life where they will forgive their mistakes, and where they will be together as one, again. They will have their future, and their past, and they will never forsake the present.

Darkness.

Sometime later, Gwen sees a light. Then she feels the whispering cold air. Her eyes blink open to reveal an infinite sky. She feels her body sturdy and unscathed, and then the ground beneath her, which is hard and puddled from the ocean. She rolls over and coughs out the water inflated in her lungs. There is tenderness around her waist and when looking down, she discovers the lifeline. She is alive. She survived the disaster.

The storm has subsided and the sun moves away from the moon and the galaxy animates into mercurial motion. Gwen stands atop the building to examine the destruction. Homes gone, business's ruined, cars demolished. A society vanquished. She collapses to her knees and looks to the sky and it's blinding sun, and once again, releases deep tears. She cries not just because Jonah is gone, but also because he promised her that nothing bad would happen to her. And he held up to his promise.

Eleven Months Later:

Gwen and the other survivors have built camp where they practice symbiosis. They harvest the land pure and free to build a new, sustainable civilization abandoned from all status. Each survivor providing service, including searching and nursing survivors. Some were found, but most were lost, including Jonah. His body was discovered fifteen miles from Pacific Beach where Gwen was able to identify him by his gold watch. She longs for him, and sometimes she wished that the storm had taken her as well. But for universal complexities, she survived, so that they could survive.

Gwen gave birth to their son, and his name is King. She often questioned the series of events, but when she looks into his brown eyes, her favorite color, she understands everything. Through King, she connects with Jonah in a place higher than the living world. And, just as Jonah would not let harm present itself to her, she

will prevent harm from their son. Inside of him, they are one. Forever. Gwen and Jonah's mortality was tested, but in her arms, she holds their immortality.

Charnley & Leonard the Blind Man

By Tom Sheehan

Leonard wondered if it was some kind of contest, if it smacked of more than what it seemed. He had heard the poem a hundred times, Chamley always walking around with the book in his shirt pocket or back pocket suddenly reading it to him, again and again, and Leonard, the Blind Man of North Saugus, let the words sink in and become part of him, part of his sightless brain. Just like Chamley had become part of him. Chamley's face he could not picture, nor eyes, nor beard, nor jut of chin, but settled on the imagination of Chamley's hands and could only do so when he felt his own slim unworked hands, the thin fingers, the soft palms, the frail knuckles, how the fingers wanted to touch a piano but couldn't, or a woman, but who wants a blind man?

Chamley, he noted early, walked with a heavy step, a plod on the earth or trod surface, so that the framework of the old building vibrated and made echoes of itself. Chamley's hands must be robust and huge, Leonard thought, because he had been a farmer at one time, a tenant farmer, a milker of cows, a digger of land, a puller of weeds who just happened to read poems. Just think about that, he said to himself, think about the farmer, think about the distance between two men, how wide it can be, what narrows that distance, sound or silence? What kind of providence can a poem bring?

*Silence is the color
in a blind man's eyes,
sounded again.*

Though Leonard initially could not begin to visualize the poem on the page (not with the sensitivity or capture of Braille or the impressions of an old copper etching he'd known),

perhaps not ever he thought, the way the verses were built, the white space supporting the sounds. This, even as Chamley repeatedly explained the structure, often testing Leonard's patience to the darkest limits, the words building on a pad in his mind, a pad conjured up in an instant. At first they collected in a bunch that he had time

to separate and sound off on. What the hell, if he had anything he had time, a whole ton of time.

Then the words, each one in turn, eventually assumed a hazy kind of identity and a place alongside another word or two. Sense came of some of them finally, and then one night, alone, a clarity, as if a shell of awed proportions had gone off in his head, exploded its sound and meaning in a dazzling display of whiteness. His brother Milward had once tried to explain the properties of a white phosphorous shell to him, the heat and the dazzling light and the rush of energy traversing a forward slope of a mountain in Korea. The nearest thing to them Leonard had ever known, to both Milward's description of

white phosphorous and this final poem, was pain. He used to tell Chamley his gall bladder attack was a poem because that had struck him awake on several nights at full

alarm, fright leaping through his body, a stabbing in his guts, a poem of pain fully understood down to its root and rhythm.

*his red octaves screaming
two shades of peace
in sanguine vibrato,*

Chamley had said, "I'll stop at the end of each verse, each line, so you can see, can visualize, how the whole damn poem is made." As if a piece of punctuation or explanation, he added, "Don't let my rambunctious choice of words upset you. I am not very selective, not schooled. I only mean by them what I'm trying to say." At that moment Chamley's voice was heavy and anvil-like, canyon stuff, back-of-the-barn deep, not a classroom voice, not a poet's voice, no obtuse edge to it, no carriage of partial mystery, no forecast of shadows. It was the no-nonsense voice of a farmer who knows the land is an enemy of wild proportions or the friend of a lifetime in one swift reaping. Patience, it could have said, all the rough stuff notwithstanding.

"But your voice changes when you read the poem," Leonard said, "the sound changes, you

get cryptic, short-tempered, and don't tell me I'm getting short or I'll kick you the hell out of here! You think I can't see you, don't you? Well, I know when you're standing in the doorway or in front of one of the windows. One room, one door, seven windows, I could find you in a damn minute."

And for his own punctuation said, "And don't shrug your shoulders like that. I know what you're doing when you do it. And your voice changes then, too. I could call you an *Octavarian*." He tittered, less than a *guffaw* it was, half full of respect, measuring, playful, reaching. "Hell, man, sometimes I can see better than you." His fingers tapped slowly on the tabletop, a radioman sending out his own code.

Chamley only smiled, yet standing in the doorway on this visit so Leonard could find him in that shadow of shadows, that deep shade of an eclipse of the whole man. He'd been in the shadows his whole life; his dimensions raw and few but known.

*a purple strike lamenting rivers
and roads lashed in his mind,*

One day a year earlier and there's no one there, and then a voice says, coming off the front walk of the one-room house that used to be the old North Saugus School, "I'm a new neighbor now. I'm Chamley. I come to live with my daughter Marla in the old Corbett house. I have a poem here about a blind man I'd like to share with you. I like to read some poems. Not all poems, just some of them. I've watched you walk all the way to Lynn to see your brother Charlie and all the way up the Pike to see your brother Milward, some days your cane flashing like a saber, the sun giving respect to its duty. This poem reminds me of you and I wonder what you might have to say about it."

Leonard's quick words leaped out of the darkness. "You followed me?"

Chamley spoke as if he were plowing the land, trying to make the furrow straight, the endeavor simple. "No, you were going my way, so I went along with you, some ways in

the rear, but then I went past both times, to see Ma Corbett in the nursing home in Lynn and off to an old friend's new home in Lynnfield, but not far from Milward's place."

Chamley read him the poem for the first time.

*like a crow's endless cawing
of blackness anticipates nothing.*

"That's a damn love poem," Leonard shouted, "and I don't even have a girlfriend. What the hell are you trying to do to me? What are you saying?" There was no way he could fathom Chamley's face, what lurked in a half smile or the set of eyes, how his mouth was framed, the lips readable. If he dipped one shoulder in a half shrug, was it a signal he could interpret?

"Everything is love, Leonard, or no love. Everything. You don't need a girlfriend to have love. I don't have a girlfriend. My wife's been dead two-three years now. I love this poem. You made me see what it's like, this poem. I just want to know what it does for you. If it does anything. I am never sure of things like this, such argument or reasoning. You sow a seed, take care of its bed with tender care, it grows. If it doesn't, better find out why."

"You're like a damn busybody hen, popping in here, following me like I was a damn cripple or something, sticking this poem in my ear. I never had a poem in my ear."

*And now, for all my listening,
it is your hand on my heart,*

"I'm trying to be a friend, Leonard. I wanted to share something with you. I'm just an old farmer who loves this poem."

"Not outright pity, I take it."

"None at all. I don't give a damn if you never see another shadow in your whole life, if that's what you want to hear from me." Leonard knew he was blocking one of the windows, the idea of sunlight failing around him, a personage of shadow.

*the mute fingers letting out
the slack where your mouth reached,*

They had, with that declaration, become friends for one long year. Chamley would come and read the poem, always reading it from the book, never having it memorized, saying he couldn't do it. Leonard never told him he had it memorized, had said it a thousand times a day it seemed for months on end, at first the words cluttered on the pad and then standing like singular statues. There would be a pot of tea on the old kitchen range, converted to gas by his brother Milward, and the tea would hit the one room as if it had been sprayed with pekoe or oolong or something else Asian, a cutting swath of clear acid in the air, hitting the sinuses, clearing them, drawing Leonard and his friend to the stove

on cold days or to the small porch on warm days, the late sun spilling on their feet, the poem following the way a shadow comes along or moves ahead of a body proper.

Leonard said one day, the wind bitter and cold outside, the windows rattling, "Why don't you ever read one of the other poems?"

"It would only dilute this one, Leonard, cut right through it. If I know one poem in my life, it's worth it, and I know this poem because you know it. It's real for me. It's like my wife, my one woman forever. I'll not dilute her. Not for one damn minute. Not forever. The same as having a best friend. There's only one of those. Everyone else has to get in line.

*reached, your moving away,
a pale green evening down
the memory of a pasture*

Came the day eventually, in the sock of winter, they said the poem like a duet at work, the words falling in place with unerring accuracy, rhythmic, shared, together, almost one voice, the room expanding around them, a spring pasture coming to them, silence coming

at them, one word and then another word hanging in space like they were parsing each one in the midst of the air, a letter at a time, a slight whoosh if need be, the rush of a consonant or its

soft command on the lips, sibilant, syllabic. The blind man and the sighted man said *silence* as if they stood in the middle of a mausoleum, and the word hung there for them and then died away and became itself. All around them they felt the word become itself. When they said *color*, some long minutes later, Chamley had his eyes closed and Leonard had his wide open, and they knew they were twinned in this sound, this nothingness. Leonard was ferociously at ease.

The next day the knock at the door was timid, feminine, like feathers, Leonard thought, pigeon feathers in the eaves. It was Chamley's daughter Marla. "I have news about my father." The tone of her voice abounded with that news, harbinger, omen. "I found him this morning in his bed the way he wanted to go, peacefully, in the darkness. That's just what he said to me one night recently, 'Peacefully, in the darkness.' He also said that when it comes on him he wanted you to have this book." She placed the book of poems in Leonard's hand. "He said you'd know what to do with it."

She was a smaller shadow than her father standing in the open door, the wind rustling behind her, death hanging back there in the darkness of the day as if it were words ready to be spoken, dread highlights hunting the darkness. The old schoolhouse had no echoes, no vibrations, the sills socked home tightly on the granite bases. Half the size of her father, Leonard thought, yes, perhaps half the size.

Leonard motioned for her to close the door. "Shut the death out," he said, and his fingers found the page of the poem where that route was worn like a path. Listening for her steps, seeking minor vibrations if there were any, he offered the open page to Chamley's daughter, their hands touching. An electrical movement passed through them and he remembered a static charge coming at him once from a metal file cabinet at Milward's house.

Her voice was soft, hesitant. It would take her time. He had plenty of time. Now Chamley had all of it. Against one window she posed a smaller shadow, but a whiteness lurked in aura. Leonard thought of the white phosphorous Milward had

Tom Sheehan

spoken about as Chamley's

daughter Marla sifted through the poem. He tried to picture her small hands holding the book open. There was something delicate he could almost reach, fragile, silken, but it was lost in the poem as she spoke it, her breath instead nearly touching him, cinnamon with it, and perhaps maple syrup, yet day and night all coming together in the one essence:

Arrangement by Tones

*Silence is the color
in a blind man's eye,
his red octaves screaming*

*two shades of peace
in sanguine vibrato
a purple strike lamenting rivers
and roads lashed in his mind,
like a crow's endless cawing
of blackness anticipates nothing.*

*And now, for all my listening,
it is your hand on my heart,
the mute fingers letting out
the slack where your mouth
reached, your moving away,
a pale green evening down
the memory of a pasture.*

It was faint but indelible, he decided; discoverable, he assented; mild but ascendant, he owned up to; and Leonard the Blind Man knew how soft and delicious it was on her tongue, at her lips, coming from her mouth, the poem, the poem her father had found for him.

If You're Reading This; It's For You

By The Fresh Keeper of the Light

I take the call.

Blackness. Sweet, sweet blackness. That's how I see it, anyway. Some people see white. Some people see nothing. Blackness is nothing, to me, so I guess we are all seeing the same thing. You look down and you can't see your feet, like some shooter from the 90's. It's turtles all the way down, except there aren't any turtles. I don't know how else to tell you, man, but it's so fucking sweet. Absence of input, a mayhem of noise, silence, sweet silence. Nothing envelops my being, taking me with it into the abyss-- there was no "me", there was, just, nothing. How to describe it? Lasting an eternity and yet taking no time at all. I fall.

All too soon my eyes opened and my brain revs up and I start to take stock of where I am. I'd fallen over in the high, it seems, I'm sprawled on the floor of some dark grey closet. Spit stains the side of my mouth and my wrist hurts something awful. The device, shaped like an old telephone, hangs limply from its spindly cable on the wall. Through the high pitched ringing in my ears I could hear someone knocking...

"...time's up ya bum... more than an hour... got customers waiting..."

An hour? A forever. I close my eyes and pinch my temples, trying and failing to grab one last bite of eternity. The ringing in my ears reaches a buzzing crescendo before fading back into that strange familiarity, and one of the voices that I had been escaping whispered in my ear, ...*can*

be yours for only...because you deserve it...

More knocking on the door. "Come on you sprite, you cunt-ass fuckwit. Next in line is here, you want more, you come back when you have the exchange." I groan in response, and haul myself up to my feet. I slam the pulsating orange button with the flat of my fist, and almost fall through the door as it slid open. Almost immediately a short fat balding face owned by the supplier springs into view.

"Ah, there you are, fairy-ass mother-fucker. Who do you think you are?" says Phil rhetorically.

"I've been coming to you for three months now, Titties," I croak, "You could call me by my dang name, it wouldn't hurt you."

"Phil! It's Phil! You scumbag junkie you..."

I don't catch the rest of what he says as a voice whispering *Bill's Blades, a cut above the rest* drowned him out. I trundle home.

Across the dark metropolis...

The city. "A neon fuckfest" is what my old man would say. He was born back in the early 2000's, in a sweet spot where technology and advertisement weren't yet completely synonymous. These days, well-- humanity landed on Mars, and we stamped a fucking logo on it.

"Just where have you been?!" my girlfriend shrieks at me by way of greeting, wrapped in a stained white tank top and

throwing a dirty plate at my head, which I duck at the last second. "Out on the event horizon again?! Every goddamn week you're out there, and I'm *ecstatic about the way your hair smells, only five more days and we're going to be evicted you dumb shit!* Don't you dare roll your eyes at me *for your clothes say more about you than words ever could.* The new line from my mother, she tells me nobody picks up when she pings! Because we don't have any fucking 'net left you fuck! You fuck, you fucking, god you make me so *excited. Enthralled. Enchanted.* How will the new *Ethernet eZoning* leave you, I should have, I should have so long ago... Oh man, what happened to my life..." she breaks down in sob, holding her face in her hands. I take this as a sign to leave and slink into the bedroom, closing the door behind me. I'm pretty sure I hear another plate smash against the door but it's drowned out by a McDonald's spot. I flop onto my bed, scattering half eaten donuts and dirty paintbrushes onto the floor. I regard a painting I was composing before I'd left-- a hideous, twisted man, mouth ajar, limbs slowly contorting into a giant yellow "M". That's probably what triggered me running off to the Booth, I figure. I turn up my stereo as loud as it will go, all but flattening my skull against the giant UpBeat speakers which were half price at Target when I got them and it almost *A new lease on life. A new love. A new, you!*

I am scrabbling, through my desk. I am banging the keyboard, on the desk, watching food crumbs and hair and weed and ash fall out, and I get my index finger and I scrape and I get as much green as I can, and I pick the hairs off it and I scrape and I scrape and I look in my cone piece and I have such a meagre amount, I have some *wood*, some *chocolate*, obvious *lint*, ash, a breath of weed, a literal *dust mote*, an iota of weed, I light it up, I inhale, there is smoke, but I know it's nothing, I

smoke, I don't get my buzz, I just get more desperate, my heart is racing, I'm trying not to think about her, so instead I begin this search again, on the floor, in the cracks in the bong, in the, fucking, ashtray, I'm looking *in the ashtray*, there is *literal ash, on my fingers, my fingers are black from ash*, just trying to alight anything, inhale anything, *consume* anything, get my buzz, get my buzz, get my buzz...

When I emerge from my room my girlfriend has calmed down. She has a new skull-shaped headset wrapped around her head, obscuring half her vision. Every time we speak it's a battle-- she always has to decide whether to pay attention to me or to one of her shrill friends or topless six pack cunts she has on the other side, their heads also buried in a mess of metal and wires. She doesn't even look at me when I walk in, just keeps smoking her cigarette and mouthing silently to whoever she has online. I sit down beside her and put my head on her shoulder, tired. I depress into our brown torn couch, settling. I notice her nipples bleeding through her top and grope her breasts. She smells like she hasn't showered in a while. I sink to my knees and hoist her legs apart, biting and kissing her flabby thighs, working my head towards her cunt which I breath warm air on. I lick my lips, and hers, around and around before engulfing her clit in my mouth. As I lap up her juices I fumble with my jeans, take myself out and slowly jerk myself off. I couldn't say if she notices me, and I get up without cleaning my cumstain and walk back into my room.

Phil snarls at me. His words are drowned out by the sound of a thousand feet marching, a Nike ad, I think. I extend my hand, he snatches the money away from me and I enter the chamber

and take the call.

This time it's white. Hyperbolic time, the day outside that lasts a year inside. I walk around, on a white that is solid and yet opaque, a heavy gravity weighs down on me. If I squint I think I can see a house way off the distance-- the white is blaring and blinding. The house is all muted greys and reds and browns, cracked plaster, cobwebs, a memory from long ago. Instinctively I walk towards it but it never gets any closer; in fact it seems to recede further into the horizon with every step. I will never reach that house, I realise, I will never have a home, and I sit down to cry. I can hear nothing except the pounding of my blood inside my temples, like I am in space. My limbs feel heavy. The silence is blessed but I can feel the high being reduced. I wonder what the next step is, if there is a stronger fix available. After forever and all too soon my body starts to lift up, up...

Later I'm at the cinema, I'm watching a movie, it's a parody, I think, a *Star Wars* satire. There's a kid running around as Darth Vader, it's cute, the helmet is just a bit too big for him, too dark and foreboding, silly kid! He is trying to use his Jedi powers to move things, to lift the dog, I'm chuckling it can all be yours for the low low price of and he runs to the garage and he tries to lift the car in it and lo and behold, it raises! You can see his hands *unbottle fun* shaking in excitement as it lifts off the ground. A parent, female, blonde, all teeth, watches on in pure joy, and the audience shares that laughter, we all of us in the cinema share a unified chuckle. Then the car turns and reveals the Mazda brand and it wasn't a movie the whole time, but an ad, the ad before the movie starts and I didn't know, I didn't realise, and I break out in a cold sweat and everybody else is still chuckling and my nails dig into the side of the chair and I realise I need another hit of

the *original, truly authentic passion for people.*

I'm back in the chamber. It's all white, again, but the house on the horizon seems closer though no more within reach, and colours are bleeding into the sides of my vision in a psychedelic rainbow wash. I'm smiling, I feel content, at peace. I have been here forever, not yet long enough, but a satisfying amount of forever. It is nice. I keep jerking my head, catching snatches of what sounds like the call of water birds, of seagulls. I am thinking about the ocean, seeing it for the first time as a child. How awfully big it was! And small I! I remember the grit of the sand under my feet, and the smell of my mother's skin, sweet, of sunscreen, creamy. Almost like cooked pork. I close my eyes and it is lovely.

whispers of

My eyes fly open, and dart around nervously. I could have sworn I heard something. No. Just seagulls. Just seagulls...

the world

My eyes open and I'm inside that grey closet, on my back. I stumble out bleary eyed, I think Phil spits at my feet. "Heya, Phil," I say, and look off into the distance for a long moment, carefully planning my next words. "Does... does it ever wear off?"

"You ever done any other psyche, kid? Nothing's never sweet as the first time."

"Is there... is there anything stronger?"

Phil's gut laugh follows me home "Just the one thing," he says.

My girlfriend is at work so now is the time to jerk it. I flip on a porno and I'm lazily stroking myself to this blonde

The Fresh Keeper of the Light

bombshell, mutter Yeah's and Come on's in an effort to rouse myself up. It's a surprisingly tasteful shot, which turns me on more- she's naked but you can only see down to her shoulder blades, the hint of breasts and nipples teasing me, egging me on. She's telling me how bad she wants it, winking, biting her lips, her hair gold and shimmering. She smiles a great big white smile, a shit-eating grin, and just when I'm expecting her face to be plastered in cum a small hand-held vacuum hovers into view and I realise it's the pre-porno ad I forgot to skip past and as she grins holding the device a voice whispers in my left ear *discover great things...* I'm holding my limp dick in my hand and I turn the TV off.

The chamber is horrible *bringing the world to you* to me now. I lose all sense of who I am, what I am, where I am, but I still feel myself exist, in a terribly *the place to meet* human form. Bound to my physical being, I become all wet tongue and teeth inside my head, gnashing, I become my limbs, flailing, attached to my brain by *back by popular demand* taut cables. I feel dizzy, sick. When I come around vomit stains the wall yellow, and Titties is yelling at me to leave. I stumble through the streets, a high pitched ringing in my ear, *everyone's talking about* what could be angels singing. "The wasted potential of it all," I'm saying to myself, "Everything is potential, wasted. Everything could be so much better, could be so wonderful. Imagine if it was all art. Imagine if all this technology was *art...*" I'm in dire need of art, of escapism, of release. I would go back in the Chamber if I could fucking afford it. I hold my head and I start to cry and I cannot stop the voices.

I am standing by the river and I am naked *the scent of you clings* and I have no feelings inside of me any more *Zero. Less than zero.* I am staring into the wa-

ter and it is black and terrible and there is no *relief, when you need it* my mouth tastes of ash and vomit *because life should be delicious.* I have been staring for hours with tears running down my cheeks and flashes of my life keep replaying through my mind *every moment needs a song!* though I imagine her yelling more often than not I remember tender times with *loved ones can be hard. That's why we're here to look after you* kissing her cheek, soft and warm, her laugh, her hand in mine running in rain *are you man enough to take the challenge?* pictures of my mother, young and healthy at the beach *special occasions* and I take a step and the water comes up to meet me and *no fuss.*

Lonely Together

By Augustin Lopez

Mark Littleton and Lizzie Kaplan do not know they live in the same apartment building, one in unit 7B and the other in 12F. But they are infants, so all they really know are their cribs, and that mommy provides food, and that food turns into vomit or a little “dinky” as Ms. Kaplan refers to fecal matter. When she is older, Lizzie will be embarrassed by her mother’s vocabulary.

After six months, Mark’s family moves to Squirrel Hill, and after a year, Lizzie’s to Lawrenceville.

In art class, Mark draws characters from Dragonball Z in marker. He asks Ms. Wendel if he can go to the bathroom. He may. Mark returns and finds that someone took a red marker to his anime masterpiece and gave his characters curly moustaches. It must have been Dominic Martinez. Mark punches him in the head. He gets detention for three afternoons.

Mark is ranked first in his Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare clan. His favored arsenal is the G36C equipped with a red dot sight and grip for increased accuracy, and the M1911 .45 as a sidearm, even though most in his clan prefer the Desert Eagle with laser sight.

On her seventh birthday, Lizzie’s parents take her and her many friends—boys and girls included—to the Discovery Zone. Lizzie crawls through the plastic tubes of the jungle gym, she wins 198 tickets playing Storm Stopper, and she is gifted ten (!) Polly Pocket dolls. That night, she sleeps comfortably in her Polly Pocket comforter.

It is cold tonight, but with her hand in Greg Thompson’s, Lizzie feels warm. The playground at her old elementary school looks smaller than she remembers. Greg leads Lizzie into the tube slide where they retreat from the wind. He tells her she’s beautiful and kisses her, sliding his tongue along her braces. His hand slips under her shirt. She says no. In two weeks, she’ll say yes.

Mark's first girlfriend Elena Thurber watches him from the stands. It's a penalty kick, and if he scores, the Schenley Spartans will qualify for State. It is raining. Mark winds his right foot and kicks. The shot is wide by 14 feet, rolling past the goal post to nothing in particular. This is Mark's first year on the varsity team, and he fears it will be his last.

Mark didn't think he would be accepted into either university, but now he must choose...

School of Visual Arts (SVA) in New York City, where he will receive a BFA in Graphic Design, work as an Art Director at an ad agency, live in Manhattan, marry a woman named Lily Friedkin, divorce her, then marry Frances Calvina, and divorce her too. He will have no children.

Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) at home in Pittsburgh, where he will receive a BA in Finance, then he will be hired as a Corporate Accountant at GHB Bank, and he will find love with a woman named Lizzie Kaplan, move into a house, and produce one child.

It is Thursday night and Mark has just received the call confirming his internship at GHB Bank for the summer. To celebrate, he goes to the market to buy a six-pack of beer. A band of CMU students loudly debates the Eurozone crisis while paying for some loosies. They should really keep it down. Back home, Mark pops open a beer and toasts to himself. He spends the next hour in silence, reading about the Eurozone crisis online.

Will there be drinking tonight? "No." Will there be boys? "So?" Lizzie's mother pulls up to Theresa Baum's house and Lizzie exits the car. As she walks across the lawn, her mother yells at her to be home by 12:00. In Theresa's basement, Lizzie has two shots of whiskey and a wine cooler. She sees Greg for the first time in a year—since he cheated on her with that bitch Angie Dembowski. Lizzie is home by 11:57.

Ms. Kaplan packs her daughter's clothes into a Rubbermaid bin. Lizzie scans her bookshelf to see which novels to bring to her dorm at University of Pittsburgh. Her mother tears up as she finds Lizzie's footy pajamas buried in the closet. Buried further in the closet, Ms. Kaplan finds a picture of her ex-husband/Lizzie's estranged father, but there are no tears.

Barcelona is unbearable during the summer. Both of them in a sweat, Carlos Soldado wakes Lizzie up by kissing her shoulder. He is not hungover, unlike her. They met at orientation for their electrical engineering program at the university. Lizzie runs her hands through his hair, thinking how lucky she is to get mostly everything she's wanted in life. In three weeks, Lizzie will miss her period.

"Hi, Dad...No, I can't really talk right now...Yeah, I'm at the office...I know it's 8:00 but this report was supposed to be done 3 hours ago...I did see that email, yes. I have to go where to pick up her medication?...That's pretty far. When do I go?...10:00 AM! I can't guarantee I'll be awake... She's gonna have to wait a few hours then...Why do I even have to do it? I don't want to do her chores...Fine. Bye."

MEMORY REPRESSED. NO LONGER AVAILABLE FOR DISPLAY.

Lizzie is not accepted into a single graduate school. She opts to teach at the Kerr Elementary, Grade 2. The only student to get enthusiastic about school is Luke Cunningham, who particularly shines in the science curriculum. She thinks he could be a great scientist one day. When she grades Luke's tests, she holds her abdomen, and thinks about everything she doesn't have.

This club is too loud, so Mark and Sam McKay step outside for a cigarette. Sam lights it and passes it to Mark. He coughs. His head rolls in a circle. Sam tells him is actually a joint. Rage fuels through Mark. "You've already passed the drug test," says Sam. "Smoke some more. It'll calm you down. Jesus." Later, Mark grinds on a nameless girl for four songs in a row and then takes her home. It is awesome.

At a bar on Forbes Avenue, Lizzie and Mark watch a band play U2 covers for most of the night. Neither of them particularly enjoy U2. They briefly make eye contact at 11:32 PM, but both are too drunk to remember it.

Staring at the computer screen, Mark's eyes slowly close. It's only 4:01, but he's already tired. Every morning, Mark wakes up and feels his soul drain out of him. Commuting, typing, getting yelled at, yelling at others, eating the chicken caesar wrap for lunch, driving home, Netflix, Netflix, Netflix. He's got to get out of this.

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Harriet Lynch, the poet, is the best thing to ever happen to him. The past 5 months have been Mark's happiest, as the couple walks hand-in-hand through art museums and bikes through Schenley Park. Most importantly, Mark is getting laid on a regular basis. This love has given Mark the newfound power, the courage, to maybe, potentially, possibly leave his job.

All Lizzie wants for her 27th birthday is a nice dinner with her mother and stepfather, Mr. Neustadt. By the time the appetizers are served, she gets her wish: How is work? Do you need money? You should consider graduate school again. Fed up, Lizzie retreats to the bathroom. "Oh, she has to make a dinky," says Ms. Kaplan-Neustadt.

In Aisle 4, Lizzie accidentally runs her shopping cart into a stranger's. Correction: it's Greg Thompson. They talked about what they've been up to since high school. He: married, wife pregnant, living in Greenfield, operates a profitable bookstore. She: teaching for now, but still figuring things out. Later, as she waits in line to pay, Lizzie thinks about how Greg is a stranger to her now, an alien.

It's a small house—two floors, two bedrooms, no backyard—but it's hers. Her mother and stepfather offered to fill it with furniture, but Lizzie wants to create her own space. At IKEA, she can't decide if she wants to buy a bookcase for the second bedroom (turning it into an office) or a queen-sized bed (guest room.) No visitors soon, nor much work to bring home. The second bedroom remains barren, white, so Lizzie can still dream about its walls.

Harriet is in Colorado visiting family. Lizzie has tomorrow off for Columbus Day.

The bar is empty, save for two lonely souls. Lizzie buys Mark a drink, which he accepts, flattered. This leads to a 3-hour conversation lasting five beers and two shots per person. Turns out Mark and Lizzie both love Mediterranean food, Kanye West, and have visiting Machu Picchu on their bucket lists. Mark does not mention Harriet at any point tonight.

Harriet fits the last crate into the trunk. Her belongings are now free from Mark's apartment. Standing at the doorway, they both look sullen. Despite the circumstances, she says she does not regret their relationship. Mark thanks her for understanding, and then offers her break-up sex. Harriet gets in her car, slams the door shut, and drives away instead.

To: mark (from bar) [291 messages]
Sent: 01:29 AM, Sept 4
Body: Do you want to come over tonight? My friends bailed on me and I'M BOREEDDDDDDDDD :(

Maybe I shouldn't have left Harriet. She was good for me. But she was easy, too easy. With her, I knew every day would be the same. That doesn't inspire me. There is no heat in my heart or in my loins for someone like her.

—They have sex.— *When is he going to finish? This is taking forever...*

Mark moves in after a year of dating. He sees the empty second bedroom and moves his desk in, his computer—it's now his office. Lizzie would like to paint the walls peridot green, but Mark won't allow it. He says he needs a "man cave" for those late-night hours when he prefers digital company in favor of the real thing, like Master Chief or Batman.

At work, Melanie Tashkin brews coffee while Mark retrieves his sandwich from the refrigerator. She comments on his nice tie, which is a normal blue tie, but whatever. Melanie takes a sip of her steaming cup and asks Mark to taste it. He does, making sure his lips touch where hers had. It's nice. She says that maybe they could get drinks after work today. Instead, Mark will masturbate to Melanie when he gets home, and never speak to her again.

Mark can be such an asshole sometimes. He can't pick her up from work today because his buddies dragged him to a stupid bachelor party at a bowling alley. Luckily, Dennis Yeardley, the Phys Ed teacher, offers her a ride. In the parking lot, Dennis touches Lizzie's knee. She can't tell if she is frozen scared, or melting to his touch. His fingers climb further up her leg. After 2 minutes and 41 seconds of intercourse, Dennis asks her, "so d'you still need a ride? Or did you just want to fuck?" Lizzie will not tell Mark about this.

"Lizzie, I'm surprised you've stayed with me for so many years, and these years have flown by. Before you, my life was boring. But now, we live in a house, with a garage, and an Apple computer. Everything changed when you came along, and I want more. Lizzie, will you marry me?"

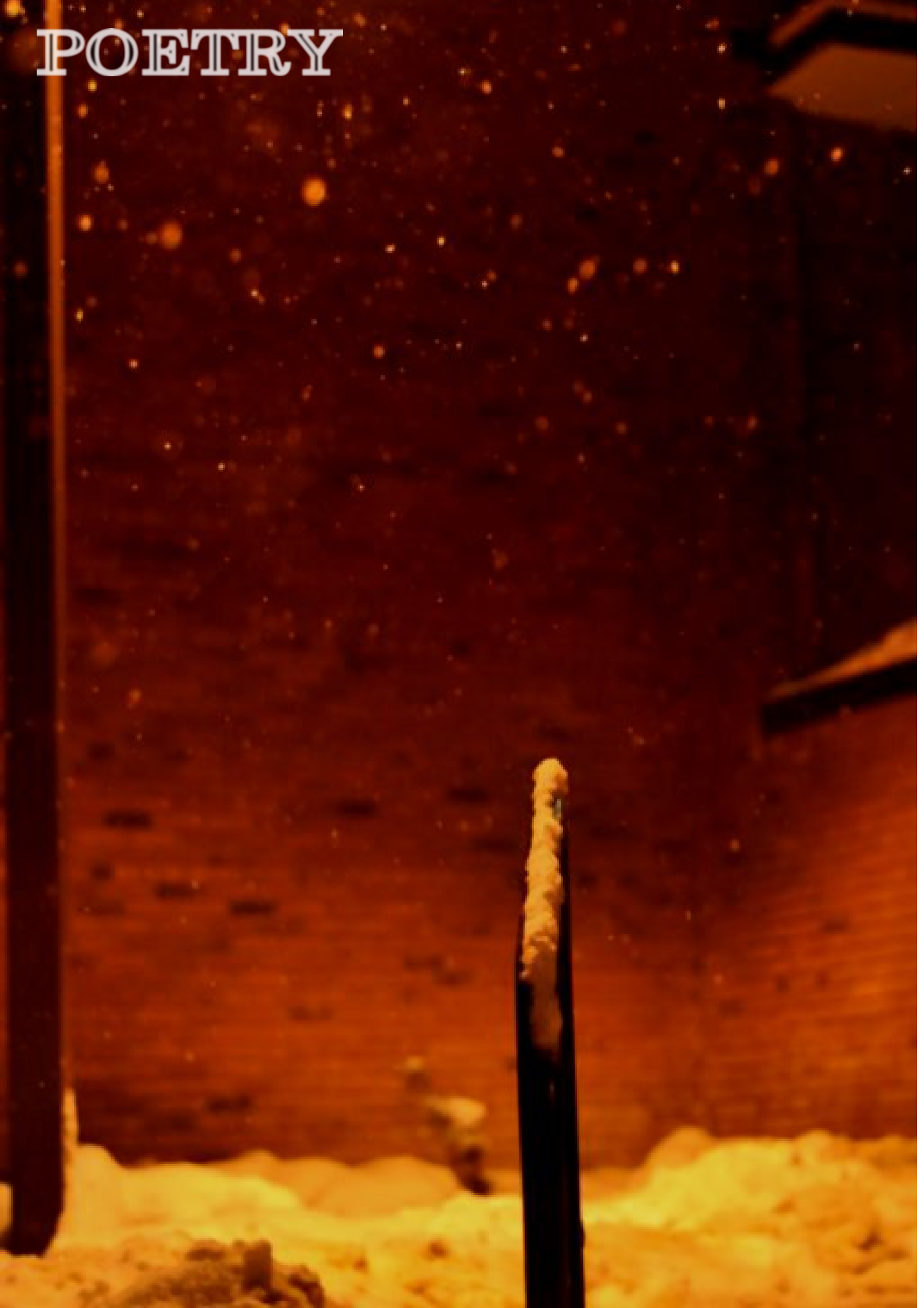
"Yes!" They are both 30 years of age.

It must be all of the pasta Mark eats that has contributed to his expanding beltline, but hey, his co-workers have the same. There's a certain peace in knowing that the same Italian meal waits on your kitchen table every night, and the kitchen table of every other male in the city. It's like everyone participates in an event bigger than he. Lizzie scoops some spaghetti onto Mark's plate, and he relishes in the familiar morsels.

"Great meal, honey. Yet again!" Lizzie hasn't told Mark about her pregnancy test. He would be overjoyed, and she is too, she supposes. Maybe they could both use the change. She sits down across from her husband and asks him if he'd ever want a son or daughter. "A boy, and his name will be Terrence. He'll play baseball." If it's a girl? "Then it'll have to be softball." Mark goes back to stuffing his face. Lizzie loses her appetite.

Mark and Lizzie continue to live together. They clear out his office to make room for Terrence. They paint it royal blue. Lizzie quits her job when Mark gets a promotion at GHB Bank. With Mark's busy work schedule, the couple sees each other an average of 3 hours per workday, but neither complain.

POETRY



curator wanted

By Marylyn Tan

I have a heart like a stomachache
and eyes like Venice. My parents
think I am retiring for the night
when I lock the door to lie,

slowly suffocating,
my head a plastic bag

vaguely wondering how
everything can throb and keen
with agony
when not one hair of my head
(as the Christ Jesus once said)
has been harmed.

All my skin is yet smooth
the whorls of my fingertips
perfect lily-pads in a pond
to which I have forgotten the way
still.

To an onlooker,
nothing sates me until
I make art of my sheets
painting with ankles, wrists,
the corners of my eyes. I sit

leaking an inadvertent
Van Gogh (I don't know art)
like a question mark.

Here no one changes the sheets.
I think I may have

whole museums inside me.

Stilts

By Marilyn Tan

I'd never do a Chinese boy
(I don't like opium-thin shadows
in my bed and require

my dirty talk
to be grammatical).

I'd never do him, though
I relish bamboo poles
far more than I know.

Fishing-rod forests
thicken fast,
but my garden's bamboo
never grew.

I'd never do a Chinese boy
but still my ribcage is
made of wood

and clasps a lantern in the day
insisting it be lit with matches
of oak of coconut of hazel

as it pines
for somewhere else.

I'd never do a Chinese boy
but talk with strangers across the world.
The middle kingdom now is a call away

but my hollowstem throat
will never speak.

I cross my chopsticks
when I eat.

Twinkling Companies

By Paul Olexa

To talk as a lone, want
a walk, a way, home,
draws hither
all ley miscreants,
hiss, wisp and flick
best left spent,
by gone cinders
waft out shade's morn.
Hear, however,
inroad toward a
pivotal division,
dusk unsung to dawn forgone,
a lone-hum promises
airy's bound revision.
Upholding grounded
cobblestone,

a split

maintains suss-
sunked precision:
trickles smearing groves,
gesticulations grown
wilder, but savagedless.

Clear, imbibed mantlehide:
a single stalking threat,
noise at home avoided
in muted meadows met.

Trunk road

By R. C. Betritt

Driving north in the dark,
the sky proves illusory, as fog parts;
a landscape of cloud is revealed,
and departing briefly, swerving suddenly,
filling up with imagined wanderings,
lonely, over the clouds which caress lovingly
the heaving breasts of the hills below.

The rest of the journey, I'm occupied,
encamped in a reflection of the hills
carved out of cloud by glaciers of light:
to romp amongst those glens,
and tear down into the lonely cold corries
would be the finest of deaths.

Jellyfish

By Harry Cross

Decided to take up swimming
A little out of touch
I've been keeping to the sides so far
Never did like it all that much

But still I come each Saturday
Bob among the deep-end divers
And hear the slap of wrinkled feet
Above the gaping, gulping culverts

The shallow end is for the girls
They're taught to stand and dive and twist
They sit and toe the liquid loam
And sometimes find dead jellyfish

i haven't said anything in a while

By based poetry

small spaces and grand experiences
when three or four people shout
it echoes in the hollow caverns of my body
a drumbeat heart vibrating through

tectonic plates shove up into each other
they form mountains and sine waves
washing over continents shorelines bodies
pushing and then receding with the tide

the crust of the earth does not say hi
or ask how finals were or
fret about a neck
not the way that i do

a fault line doesn't apologize for anything

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