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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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A Likely Visit



By Logan Ellis

Mason's mother slapped her husband as soon as he walked through the door. There was no predictor this time, no hurried pacing in the kitchen, no fresh cigarette ashes churned and tapped to the vapid air. She simply strode across the living room as soon as the rusty signal of door hinges squeaked across the house, just as the sun finally realized no one was paying it any attention, just as the street lamps decided to sputter back to life, just as the cockroaches began to writhe with nocturnal excitement underneath the water-stained floorboards. Mason, who had been tugging his untrimmed fingernails on the ripped stitching of the leather couch, yelped in surprise, as did his father, who dropped his worn tweed coat. The moment wavered, his mother's sudsy pink dishwashing glove dripping, the dim fluorescent lighting coupled with the lonely sinking light from outside faintly illuminating the colored soap bubbles as they drifted from a quickly reddening mark on his father's cheek down to the dirt-riddled doormat. Finally, his father relit the dying flame within his eyes, and they commenced blasting a heated arsenal of words into each other's faces, hers laced with question of his tardiness and accusations of betrayal, his still angry with the absurdity of the situation. Slowly, now officially exiled from adult matters, Mason slid down the taut leather of the couch and hurried to the tranquility of his room.

The door was the only barrier in situations such as these; it cut the screams short and shielded him in sanctuary, in forlorn fantasies of youth. He began picking

off a list of things to do: watch Casper again (No), play with the Legos at the back of the closet (No), watch reruns of Hanna-Barbera cartoons (No, not even Scooby Doo or Huckleberry Hound could save this day). Finally, he resorted to revving a Hot Wheels Mustang model toy car up book ramps and around the windowsills of his room. It was tan, slightly chipped from all the action it had gotten wheeling across grocery store produce and school desks. His parents added a new car to his collection after each argument they forced him to listen to, as if the nearly endless series of vehicles would lessen the confusion he felt, as if they weren't fueling his desire to someday feel the pulse of a car's engine at his command, to someday drive away, regardless of age, regardless of permit or license. The tan mustang was a result of an argument for the perfect vacation spot, Yellowstone Park or Pensacola. Mason slammed the car hard on the valley of his dresser, up the incline of his doorframe, across the plateau of his TV, until the wheels began to wobble, a plea for mercy.

Finally he stopped and fell back onto the splotchy brown carpet of the floor. He stared into the speckles of the ceiling, tracing drywall constellations of coagulated triangles and squares. The constellations of a child's bedroom ceiling, surely there is some magic there, some predictor of his life. He tore his eyes away from the nonsensical shapes and stared into the cave of lost objects underneath his bed. It was time for his last resort to satisfy his empty boredom. He dipped his hands underneath and dragged out a large leather-bound

book with crinkled binding. Hidden around the edge of his blanket, back pressed against the worn bedsprings, he slowly thumbed through the impossibly thin pages until he found a large bolded word levitating above the proceeding minuscule font. They were called “books,” but seeing as how the entire collection was in itself a “book,” Mason called them chapters, like in his Goosebumps books. There was something adult about them, something that bespoke an untold language of professionalism, or muffled jargon behind partially closed doors. He wanted to know what they meant, but more than that, he wanted to dissect them, to take the adult world apart piece by piece.

Today, he came across a chapter titled Leviticus. Gingerly, he ran his finger down the length of the tall page, the paper so thin the words seemed to be raised, ready to burst from the page and attack. Once he reached the bottom, he followed the curious trail to the inner crease, the disappearing crevice of which he followed into the top leftmost corner, which he pinched between his index finger and thumb, lifted slightly and began to tear downwards. The sound was not a tortured scream, rather, a prickly caress of his ears, a subtly destructive noise that cancelled the heavy reverberation of banging throughout the walls of the house. The final rip was like tearing apart desperately interlocked fingers, a cliffhanger of aching curiosity and longing. It was like a tragedy everyone wants, a heartbreaking gasp of relieving closure. He placed the completely separated page at his side and continued, ripping and ripping until the entire chapter towered next to him.

He continued until muffled sobs infused with the sound of clamoring feet charged down the outside hallway, making him halt his breath and slowly turn his head towards the door. When they passed, he slowly exhaled, then sucked in a cleansing rush of oxygen. Though his parents had not personally told him it was unacceptable to rip pages out of books, he knew

that it was frowned upon at school. If he was discovered, he would be whipped just like Tasha Counts, who tore apart *Green Eggs and Ham* and threw it around the classroom like confetti.

Mason waited until he heard the slam of his parents’ room door before he summoned the bravery to continue. He turned back—his thumb still wavering in between two pages—to meet the unexpected graze of sticky lips and a pleasantly curious whisper against his ear:

“Whatcha got there?”

With a choking gasp, Mason flinched away, causing his pile of Leviticus to avalanche underneath his bed.

A woman sat next to him, her legs nestled together at a sharp angle and her arm resting on the spaceship blanket of his bed as if she had been there all along. Her long strands of blonde hair were live wires, interrupted by a few rebellious curls. Her face was small, shaped like a withering heart, embroidered with dark red lips, glittery red eye shadow circling shimmering lagoon eyes like a scorching oasis, perfectly-lined white teeth, and enough blush to make her expression desirable, warm. The flawless curve of her chin led down the delicate inward arch of her throat to the gleaming mother of pearl necklace stroking the shiny pale skin of her clavicle. Her torso and feet seemed compact, smashed into the boundary lines of her dress and small stiletto shoes, exuding an accustomed discomfort that would be cringe worthy, though none of it seemed out of place, or wrong.

Her eyelashes, plumped and upturned, fluttered as she leaned in close, the sweet smell of cinnamon on her breath enticing a sort of levelheaded confusion from Mason’s nose.

“Is that what I think it is?”

Mason pulled his eyes from her

overwhelming image down to the leather-bound book he was clutching in his white-knuckled hands.

“Umm...” he grasped desperately for an answer. *No, Yes, I don't know* all formed on his tongue simultaneously, rendering it a useless knot inside his mouth. Finally, he decided to shrug, a pathetic shudder of the shoulders that made the woman raise her eyebrow and shift back.

“You don't know? How old are you exactly?”

Should he talk? Something told him to scream for help, but something also told him to answer, to welcome this woman who had appeared from nowhere, to show her around his room.

“I'm guessing you're around six, huh?” The woman let the number lead her eyes over Mason's wispy, fox-orange hair to his hazel eyes. “Yeah, you're six”—Mason was indeed six, but she nodded so surely that even if he weren't six, he would still be six—“I'm gonna call you Sixlet. You just look so sweet, and your face is all round. Ever been to church, Sixlet?”

Mason recalled a discussion between his mother and father about attending church on Easter, but a sudden argument (surprise surprise) on who was going to drive ruined the plans. He didn't know what he would be missing, so he just watched PBS all day and accepted the blue jeep they presented him later. Mason shrugged again, unsure of what to say, still beguiled by her presence.

“Man, you don't know much, huh?” She raised the corner of her mouth into a speculative smirk, letting her comment hang in the unnerving air before continuing.

“What you have there is called a Bible, and you probably shouldn't be ripping out its pages, you could get into some serious trouble with the ‘Man upstairs.’”

With this, she flicked a red-painted fingertip to the ceiling, lowered her head, and rolled her eyes into a scowling glare.

Finally, Mason's silent curiosity unknotted his tongue.

“In Heaven?”

The woman tensed her shoulders.

“I guess you could call it that, if you're some Jesus Freak. I just call it an option. It's probably too windy up there, for my taste. I like it much hotter. Geez kid, how do you know about Heaven if you don't even know what a Bible is?”

He settled back into reclusive shock. He hadn't been too hasty when ripping out those pages; he had given the Bible a chance, read a few passages from a few chapters, soaked up information that sparkled with inquisitive excitement and then waned in the speculative. His mother always mentioned Heaven when she spoke of his grandparents, or if he asked too many questions—*Oh, for Heaven's sake!* He knew it must exist, he just didn't know why.

The woman rolled her eyes. “Look, kiddo, if you keep ripping up the oh-so sacred words of God, you'll be sent down instead of up!” With this, she rolled her wrist until her sharp fingernail pointed downward. “I'm assuming you know what that is, too?”

Another sudden door slam shook the walls before Mason could answer. His mother's footsteps pounded down the hallway again, this time with even more urgency than before, as if the fight they had dragged to their room was over, yet still seething with residual tension. She would cauterize her wound by finishing the dishes, cleaning the kitchen, and reclining alone in the bathtub, while Mason's father wandered until he found somewhere to sit, alone, outside. Mason knew that screaming for help wouldn't get his parents' atten-

tion; they were too busy lost in the chaos of their own heads. He hugged the Bible slightly closer to his tiny chest.

The woman seemed to notice his sudden unsettlement and peered over him. “What’re your parents arguing about, Sixlet?”

“I don’t know...” Mason faintly whispered. “They yell a lot.”

The woman cocked her head to the side. Her eyes held a sudden glow of sympathy that made Mason uncomfortable. They seemed to know something that he did not, the kind of “something” that, even when it’s finally revealed, still throbbed with shadowed secret.

“You don’t have to be insecure, ya’ know?”

“Inse...what?”

“Insecure. You can tell me anything.” Her smile was so sweet and devilish, an invitation to open trust that set Mason aback—he did not even know her name, where she came from, her family. How could she promise such discretion? Mason shrunk back from her, eyes set on the window, which he just realized had been open since he came in, open and inhaling the spring wind.

“So what, you’re not going to tell me?” She heaved a cinnamon sigh. “I guess I’ll tell you then...you’re Mom thinks your Dad’s cheating on her.”

She stood—gracefully, with the poignancy and cautiousness of a doe—and crossed the room to his dresser to examine herself in the mirror, the cushion of carpet capturing the sound of her stiletto shoes. She smoothed the wrinkles out of her dress, tugging and tightening perfection back into the lines of her thighs, then leaned in close to the Windex-wiped surface and pursed her lips. She grabbed a small purse sitting next to Mason’s DVD

collection of animated movies and fluidly brandished a tube of lipstick. He didn’t even see her purse there when he walked in, nor did he realize at the time that she wore the same shade of lipstick as his mother—dark cherry red, the kind that glitters the second it is summoned, in a royal spiral, from the tube.

Mason remained frozen, still hugging the heavy leather Bible close to his chest. Cheating? His parents never played video games, at least not to his knowledge. They were too grown-up for that. They played board games, but only with their best friend couple the Burgs, sitting around the circular dining table, flicking cigarette ashes into a gaudy ashtray—a grave for the poison they’ve puckered and kissed more than each other—while Mason attempted to entertain their comatose son, Ashton. One particular day, he left to use the bathroom and returned to find Ashton coloring in his *Cat in the Hat* book. His mother told him that Ashton had an “active imagination” and that he needed to “express his creativity in special ways.” She even let him keep the book!

Mason stared at the exposed, freckled back of this woman who had appeared from nowhere, wondering if she would try something just as uncanny, wondering if everyone who acted innocently had deceitful intentions.

“You know, cheating?” She continued, still looking in the mirror. “Sex with another woman?” She rolled her hand to summon some kind of understanding from him.

“Sex?” Mason had suddenly adopted a foreign tongue.

“Yeah, sex. Ya’ know?...” Struggling to explain, the woman made an odd gesture by forming an OK-sign with her left hand and jamming the index finger of her right hand through it.

FICTION

“I don’t...know...” Mason uttered, shaking his head.

The woman waved the concept away with her hand as she turned, finally, and puffed her cheeks in faux exasperation.

“Well now that I think about it...” She tilted back, keeping her gaze locked onto the ceiling, as if tilting back her head into a pool of water, holding it directly underneath the surface. “Maybe it’s not cheating, exactly, I mean, I’m more like an occasional thing, cheating is more long term...”

She shrugged and rolled her eyes again. “Anyway, it’s true. Your mommy is an observant woman. She should be more observant than that, considering how handsome her man is.”

Mason shifted uncomfortably, staring down at the Bible in his arms. From this perspective, the gaps of missing pages suddenly looked frayed and repugnant. He wondered if the “Man Upstairs” was God, the man mentioned at the beginning of the chapter Genesis, the man whose name everyone was so careful to pronounce. He wondered if the “Man Upstairs” (or God, he should start calling him) would forgive him, if this woman was God’s daughter. She looked so much like the window decals he saw plastered on everyone’s cars around Christmas—blonde hair, blue eyes, emblazoned smiles.

Suddenly, shyly, he burst, “Are you an angel?”

At this, the woman raised her eyebrows in surprise and burst into untrained laughter, the kind of laughter that was sure to infect all those around her. Her curls bounced and twisted around her face; her Chiclet teeth gleamed, unashamed. Mason twisted in panic in the direction of the door, afraid his parents would hear this beautiful lunatic telling him their secrets.

“Don’t worry, kiddo, they can’t hear me,” she sputtered in between laughs. She laid a sharp hand on her chest to halt the hysteria, her pearls glowing with delightful ferocity. “And to answer you, I am anything but an angel.”

“Who are you then?” Mason was finally putting his foot down, rather feebly, on shuddering ground.

The woman’s twinkling laughter gradually ceased, until she became still, reflective. “No one special, Sixlet,” she said, twiddling her sharp fingers. “I’m just a fucked up woman, that’s that. Always have been. It just runs in the family. Isn’t it funny how we stay fucked up even when we know we shouldn’t? I guess it’s a choice, but really I think we’re just born into it, it’s just as dark as our blood.”

She paused, her tongue twisting against the inside of her cheeks, as if tossing her words around. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t use that language.”

She leaned in close, until she was inches from Mason’s face, until the pupils sunken in her lagoon eyes resembled fiery black suns—drowned, but somehow still alive.

“Let’s just say I’m a confused woman who knows exactly what she’s looking for.” She gently took his palm and cupped her hand over it, creating a small tent of huddled secrets that sparkled and whispered inside. “Here, give your daddy this. Tell him he can come back anytime, free of charge.”

Her sweet cinnamon-scented breath traced the inside of Mason’s nostrils, dizzying his head. When she removed her hand, a bundle of twenty-dollar bills, folded over one another in neat squares, rested in his palm. He stared at it for a moment, letting the top layer of bills slowly unfold like a roly-poly unfurling from its private world. She laid a surprisingly heavy hand on his shoulder, steadying him

and drawing him close so that her powdered makeup mingled with his nose and her livewire hair tickled his forehead.

“Now don’t forget, alright?”

Confused, dreary, Mason nodded, not so much to signify understanding, but to make her go away.

The woman loosened her grip and let him slide back on the stray pages of Leviticus that were wedged underneath him.

“Alright, Sixlet. I have to get a goin’. And give your dad every single bill, okay? He left in the middle of our business today. I guess he got a little paranoid or something stupid like that.” She paused for a moment. “And tell him to grow a pair, if you can remember that, too.” She gave a boastful wink before adding, more to herself, “Sometimes, I feel like we’re the only ones who have our heads on right. Women might as well be the new men.”

She stood still for a moment, staring at the speckles in the ceiling, before wrapping the thin, beige strap of her purse around her and walking over to straddle the windowpane, the thin white curtains brushing her face. When she turned back, the window framed her like a poor Polaroid snapshot—flashed, shaken, laughed at, then pressed in a thick photo book and left in a box in the attic. In the meek, pearlescent, wavering glow of the twilight, she looked much older, much more bold and defined, not with beauty, but with age, experience, that intimidating secret flashing once again.

“Don’t go wettin’ the bed, alright?” She winked, then ducked through the window and vanished, her cinnamon laughter and twinkling eye shadow glitter clinging to the atmosphere, the vibrant outline of her red dress slowly fading.

For a long time after she left, Mason sat there, letting the silence explode in

his ears while he tried to cope with the breathlessness ripping apart his chest. The house was still, there was no noise, save for the now far away gurgle of water building in the bathtub for his mother’s bath. He looked at the money in his hand again, then back at the window. It became apparent that he had interrupted something he shouldn’t, that he had seen and heard something that should never have happened, that the money in his hand should be nonexistent, not here, not now. Quietly, he gathered the pages of Leviticus, stuffed them inside the Bible to stow back under his bed, and curled onto his comforter, flipping through each individual bill and tracing over the raised face of Andrew Jackson until the lull of the wind-whipped curtains put him to sleep.

The Lobster That Wouldn't Sleep

By Tom Sheehan

It had happened again and bright-eyed, thick chested Judd Farro, half clad in the yellow foul weather gear of his trade, couldn't remember how many times it had happened over the years. The sea, obviously, has its own rules and regulations, he thought, its own machinations, and you don't really count on them. But here, in its own great mystery, the lobster with the bold *X* on its backside was caught anew in one of his traps, big as life, healthy, and as if daring to say *Here I am again*. The *X* was indelible, unmistakable, and struck him with an awed intensity.

Judd Farro, lobsterman, knew the sea in his knees and in his heart: the endless rock that caressed him in the shift of tides and the swells at play, either out on the broad expanse or lodged in port softly bumping in that slow time dance against the dockside. And there was too the endless ache in his heart when he was not out on it. That he didn't know the sea as well as he should in his mind was completely acceptable, for with the sea came the immutable laws governing it and all those who toiled on it, like he and his kind, and the absolute idiosyncrasies that played with those same laws. But even so, Judd was comfortable with his lot in life, skipper, owner, husband, father, a man who celebrated the vast sea itself, who was iron-fisted, muscled, beaten brown by sun and wind and salt.

Much of his lot in life he had gotten from his father, a lobsterman before him,

who had plied his way in and out of the small estuary that was the Saugus River, just north of Boston, to gather his crop from the great Atlantic, to do his great battle of survival out there on the *Father of All Oceans*. It was his father, Ivan Farro, an oak slab of a man, legendary on the river and in the trade, whose words were very early carved into young Judd's mind, along with the great guffawing laughter that came with his introductions: *We're the Farros, lately of Egypt, now of Saugus*. People warmed to the genial and hardworking giant, and the father's ethics and strains passed clearly to the son.

It was Ivan Farro, at a party one evening at his home when Judd was just a boy, who first lined up a dozen lobsters and declared, "I am going to put all these lobsters to sleep in the middle of the kitchen floor." The heart and soul and meat of his trade, and most undoubtedly of all there with him, inched about on the old birch flooring with the clumsy gait of elephants, dark little out-of-this-world creatures with their claws tied back by broad-banded elastics. Some were bigger than others, but all were *keepers* to this hardy band of men who fought the sea for these ungainly treasures.

Some of the lobsters appeared as if they could just drill their way down through the floor, so rambunctious they were in their actions. Others appeared not so boisterous, perhaps a bit weaker, having less desire for survival.

"Hey, Ivan," came one strong but gargled voice, "Those 'uns on the end ain't *weaks* is they? You could told if you gave un a hotfoot!" His own laughter preceded all other responses. Judd couldn't see who said it, but he guessed at Herb Comeau. Because of his line of site, he couldn't see Herb in the kitchen, but a hazy flavor of him crept into his mind, small, cigar-y, white-toothed all the time in that part of his mouth where the cigar wasn't clutched, all of the sea on him the way it was on his father, the signature of the river and the sea and the salt and the lifetime under the sun, and the smell of the boats, the unmistakable mix of diesel and salt that brands some men for life.

Ivan shot back. "Should I take their boots off before I light them up, or do you just want me to put the whole dozen of them to sleep like I promised?" He held a lobster out as if it were a token of his promise.

Judd, watching from the second floor landing of the old colonial keeping room of the house they lived in, almost leaped to attention again at his father's words. He craned his young neck to see into the kitchen from his place between the balusters.

The broad back of his father bent over as he knelt on the floor. Judd shifted his position a few balusters and saw his father pick up one of the lobsters, still struggling for the open sea, for the sea bottom and its myriad food, its claws trying to menace the grip that was on it. Slowly he began to rub the back of the lobster, riding the knuckles of one hand up and down the dark green but splotched back of the deep crustacean, the ugly grasper of sorts, the clawed menace the likes of which had once gotten desperate hold of Judd's little finger and almost kept it. Perhaps a full minute his father rubbed, all the time keeping up a constant run of chatter that Judd could make no sense of: *The sea is full, but the pan is clean. The waves are rough, but the butter's keen. You've been done in by baits*

and chums, now sleep, me Buck, until eternity comes.

All the while he rubbed, he repeated the words, sometimes changing his delivery, sometimes bringing them almost to a tune, now and then a lilt, now and then like a deathbed vow in a voice as serious as Judd had ever heard, chambered, dark, resonant, the echo of the sea somewhere in it, bottom talk that Judd could only sense but knew was real. Much later in life he'd think of the words *mystical* and *mythical* and all they conveyed and how either seemed for that time to be the most fitting, for he was watching his very own father in this strange rite, his very own father taming the terror of the deep. The once-vicious grip on his little finger came back in clear recall and he could feel it all the way up his arm as he knelt on his elbows. He loved that giant of a man as he loved nothing else in life, except, of course, his mother.

"Now sleep, Bucko," said his father, "until the pots aboil", and he placed the lobster on his head and the two points of his claws, like the Tricorn, an even and balanced position which Judd had never before seen a lobster in, upside down in this crazy world. He remembered riding the swing in the Ballard School playground that way and how the blood had rushed into his head and made him so dizzy he had fallen off the swing and had taken a good whack on the back of his head. Now here this lobster remained perfectly still and there was no sound from the kitchen except the claws of the other eleven lobsters trying to find their way home. Judd's mouth hung open and he was afraid that he'd have to hold his breath as long as the lobster stood on its head. It was almost as if an enjoyable panic was toying with him. He was certain that he could breathe if he wanted to. Well, almost certain. He took a quick breath to prove himself right.

The lobster stayed in that clumsy position, not one claw moving, the thick tail motionless, and his father reached for a

second creature at his knees, and began the words again: *The sea is full, but the pan is clean.....*and before Judd could believe it there were eleven lobsters standing on their heads on the kitchen floor, and not a word from Herb Comeau or Lance Kujawski or Dave Penney or any of that intrepid band, or from their women, suddenly drilled to silence by the still parade. Judd could smell rising up to him the salt and the diesel and the acrid edge of whiskey and tired beer in the mix. And the mass of clams in the buckets and the oatmeal his mother had fed to them the night before to clean them out. And the exciting newness and freshness of sugar and butter corn he knew would be his on the next afternoon, corn all the way down from Middleton or Danvers or from a little stand his mother had found way out in Georgetown, a nice ride's worth on a Sunday morning.

To Judd the array of motionless lobsters looked like sentinels on guard duty, for his father had arranged them in a perfect row, using the edge line of one piece of birch flooring as the crown point, a place where lobster heads bent at neatness and sleep. And mystery.

But the last lobster was a rebel, a far more desperate creature than its companions, something of a different order or a different breed, resistant, stoical, culled for this very one and special moment, for even as Ivan Farro carried on for the fortieth or so time the ritual of his words, singing them, praying them, uttering them almost as oaths, cajoling, entrancing, the last lobster did not do his bidding. Even when his father's voice came as an old sea ditty, rollicking in its words, full of creaking beams and sounds that were never port sounds, that last-stand lobster waved its claws in the air, snapped its tail at Ivan's hand, called the sea onto itself, failed to buckle under.

At length the other lobsters had fallen over, Herb said he was hungry, Ethel Bridgeman had turned the heat up under

the big pots on the stove, and Lance and Dave began to gather the other lobsters from the floor.

"Not this one," said Ivan, "Not this Bucko! This Bucko's going back in tomorrow." His voice was strictly serious. He held the lobster over his head. "No quitter, this one. No siree! I'm going to mark him and if any of you guys bring him up in your traps, do him and me the honor of chucking him back. This guy's a tiger!"

He took a knife from one of the drawers and scratched a large X on its backside. Then he took an indelible marker off the shelf and drew the X right over the etched mark. "See here, guys." He held the lobster out toward them. "See my mark. If you bring him up, toss him back in. He's earned his time. Do me that favor." He found each of their eyes with his own eyes, and the promises were silent, and absolute.

And the party had continued and the pot had boiled and young Judd Farro had fallen asleep at the head of the stairs.

All of it he remembered again as he looked at the marked lobster, the X as plain and as bold as the night of the party so long ago. Whether it was the same one was doubtful, but you never knew when it came to the sea, rules or no rules. Perhaps a new breed had been uncovered, or set in motion by his father, perhaps a new *Genus Exus Homarus* abroad on the deep. He remembered so clearly the night of the party and the alignment of sleeping lobsters. And the strange one who wouldn't sleep like the others, and the storm that beat at the coast very suddenly a few cold months later and his father going down into the depths forever, and the smiling little Herb Comeau from Moncton or Memramcook or wherever he was from with his now eternal cigar, and Josh Billings and his son Peter, and Eddie LeBlanc and the Fewers and the Donovans and the Capecis and the Savios and the

Gallivans and others from the Saugus fleet. If he said all of their names any more it would hurt him, so he cut some of them off, but an ache as big as the sea itself had settled on him once more.

Judd Farro held the lobster over his head and yelled to Yancey Dewey off his port bow. "Hey, Yance. I got that big old sucker again!" The old mythic lobster, a dark green and splotched character swept up from the drama of the sea, serious as a clutch of dark bones, was waved in the air, a semaphore of impractical sorts. When Judd, at length, heaved him over the side, the splash was gone quickly.

Suddenly Judd was in the middle of a grand reverie. This hard-working man, who fought against the hard sea, all things around him buffeted by the fishing laws and the Maritime Laws and the low catches of the times and the often bare scratching for survival that colored every moment of his days, was caught in a reverie. But the reverie he enjoyed. It said it had captured him up as if scooped by a great fist. It said that someone was standing right beside him. It said someone was sharing the deck with him, sharing the slight cut of the breeze on his skin and the roll of the deck marking its meter at his knees and his hips, and sharing the wide expanse flattening out beyond everything just the way Kansas grass or Iowa grass surely must go on forever, or the void out past all the stars. And the soft and hollow ache coming anew in his chest.

Yancey Dewey, pulling and yanking at his own traps, yelled, his voice carrying cleanly over the water. "The sleepless monster takes the bait again! You can bet one thing on it, Judd." He stood straight up from his task on the deck of his boat, a mark of punctuation for his words. "Your old man's got a hand in this. Said he'd never let go and he sure hasn't."

The endless roll of the sea was yet broadcasting itself at Judd Farro's knees, at his hips, swinging its mythical and

timeless magic, and far over the small white caps running under the most patient of winds, from a distance without measure, from either that far not-so-illuminated point of reference on the horizon or from the confines of his own mind, he heard the chant his father had sung: *The sea is full, but the pan is clean. The waves may be rough, but the butter's keen. You've been done in by baits and chums, now sleep, me Bucko, until eternity comes.*

Judd Farro, deep within himself, as far down as he could go, knew that the sleepless lobster would come again into his trap, that the indelible marking would endure, until the time came when he would be stretching out for it himself, the sea all around him.

The sea had its laws and regulations.

Too Late, Buddha

By Jessica Catalli



He was thankful when He arrived there, at the Bodhi Tree. The ground that lay below the massive, swaying greenery was dampened by the shade; a refreshing welcome after His long journey from the Castle where He had allowed Himself One Last Look. He lowered himself to the cool grass, allowing his robe to collect beneath him. Had he known such beauty was concealed Beyond the Castle Walls, He might have arrived sooner.



I: The One Who's Wishes Will Be Fulfilled

Ding.

The mechanical silver mouth of the elevator heaves open and exhales hopeful visitors into the hallway. As they disperse, some comfortable in their route and others pausing to consult the signage, a quiet group of exhausted staff, weathered spouses and distracted children squeeze their way in to the tiny metal box. Jack had come to learn that this commotion was common, as his room in the Saint Margaret's Cancer Center was located "unreasonably close to those damn elevators". At this moment, Jack remained in his bed, sketching images of towers and sidewalks, becoming increasingly frustrated at his own inability to capture the heights of the Toronto buildings that he so longed to look up at.

Jack was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer at age fifty eight. A little over a year ago, he was admitted to the hospital and had recently spent his sixtieth birthday in his room with his three roommates. "Not by choice," he had reminded them. Jack

lost a considerable amount of weight since his diagnosis and the gray fleece robe he wore over his hospital gown showed it. His face is littered with specks of graying hair and deep lines that remain creased even in his sleep. In his waking hours, he never says much about himself, and he never has visitors to introduce like his roommates do. Indeed, the only thing Jack's roommates know about him is that he is bald and he frowns a lot. They are also aware that Jack has yet to name anyone as his Substitute Decision Maker, the person who would look after his interests in the event of his death; they know this because for the second time this month, a cluster of suits and scrubs were crowding the doorway to speak with Jack.

"Mr. Trotter," one of the nurses called, "there are members of the hospital's Office of the Public Guardian and Trustee here to see you."

Jack lifted his head, only half interested.

"Also," the nurse continued, entering the room, "I need to take your vitals."

II: The Castle

"I suppose you can't do that from the door way," the old man grumbled, pushing aside his pad of paper. The motley of professionals stood uncomfortably still, unaware of whom Jack's comment was directed at. "Come on then! I won't bite!"

In a moment, the nurse began to take Jack's temperature and record his pulse. The two men from the Office of the Public Guardian and Trustee, who had the pleasure of meeting Jack just a few short weeks ago, introduce the woman who accompanied them. They tell Jack that she is a social

worker who often works with the Office in situations like these.

Jack did not like the man's phrasing. "Situations like *these*," he growled, "do not call for any outside input. I will choose my Substitute Decision Maker when I want to, and only then!"

The woman stepped forward. "We understand that, Mr. Trotter, it's just that upon your admittance here, you indicated that you would name somebody so that the Office would not need to represent you in the event of you being unable to represent yourself." She set her briefcase down on his bed to retrieve a document. "The reason I am here is because you have made it quite clear that the Office's involvement in your decision making is the last thing you want for yourself. In fact, you note here on your submission form that *the last thing I want is a bunch of white collars calling the shots*."

Jack smirked at this, pleased with his own cleverness and wit.

"At any rate, Mr. Trotter," the woman continued, ignoring his expression, "I'm here to help you work through the process of finding someone to look after your wishes. And if you do not identify a Substitute, the law dictates that the Public Guardian and Trustee are required to step in and act for you."

Jack remained still, his jaw rigid. The nurses had left by now and the energy of the room had blackened with the intentions of the suits and Jack's own hesitations. He looked at the social worker; her icy blue eyes were fixed on Jack's and it was clear to him that she was not about to give up her search for compliance. He sighed. "Give me a new sheet and go away. I'll have made a decision by the end of today."

The woman reached into her briefcase with her eyes still fixed on Jack, who was waving away the men by the door. She placed a fresh sheet on his table along with

her business card.

"You're welcome to call my business phone should you have any questions," she said before leaving.

"You're welcome to call my business phone should you want to kiss my ass," muttered Jack when the suits were gone.

III: Beyond the Castle Walls

For hours, Jack lied in bed staring at the blank sheet, abandoning it occasionally to gaze out into the city. He does this often, imagining glass skyscrapers in the place of boring brown buildings; modern-style gardens instead of parking lots. "Put the parking underground or on the rooftop," Jack often said. "Give the people somewhere to have lunch." Jack knew the city inside and out. Although he aspired to become an architect, Jack had chosen to earn his living as a taxi driver.

From beyond the curtain enclosing his bed, Jack heard his roommate answer the telephone. He spoke in hushed tones and seemed to be consoling someone he calls Honey. Jack rolled his eyes, "This guy's in the hospital with a set that doesn't work anymore and *he's* the one doing all the comforting."

His roommate laughs quietly into the phone and starts to hum. "I'll be looking at the moon," the man sings unaware of his nose neighbor, "But I'll be seeing you..."

"Shut up over there!" Jack was upset now; he didn't have a clue whose name to put down on the sheet and now he had to deal with wannabe Sinatra. He didn't think so. "I'm trying to think!"

"Mind your own business," his neighbor called back to him, "you miserable bastard!"

That wasn't the first time Jack had been awarded that title. He shuffled back to his bed, unaffected by his neighbor's insult.

Except now, he had that song stuck in his head. He sat back in his bed and recalled the last time he had heard that song.

It was the spring before his diagnosis. Jack was sharing a meal and a bottle of wine with his girlfriend Ana. She had returned from a trip to see her children in Florida, each grown up with a house and a family of their own. The sun was good to her.

“You’d love it there, Jack,” she said sipping her wine, “and they really want to meet you. They want to meet the man who’s made me so happy.”

They smiled at each other. “And I figure,” she continued, “that if you like it there as much as I do... you’d want to live there.”

“Oh I don’t know about that,” Jack responded, “I don’t think I could leave home. There’s still so much I haven’t done yet Ana.” He looked up at her and saw that she was upset by this. “Ana...”

Ana set her glass down and leaned in towards Jack. Her chocolate brown hair was stuck to her cheeks and other places that were already dampened by tears. “Like what, Jack? What do you have left to do at fifty-eight? I’m tired and I want to know where this is going. I’m tired, Jack.”

Jack was half asleep now, letting the paper fall helplessly to the floor. “Why didn’t I come with you?” He whispered, “Where are you, Ana?”

IV: One Last Look

Jack was awoken by the rickety sounds of the hospital’s Activity Cart. The volunteer pushing the cart knocked on the door and made his way into the room. “Any of you gentlemen want a puzzle? There’s a deck of cards here too, and some magazines.”

“Nothing for me, thanks,” Jack said, getting up from his bed. The attendant gave

him a funny look. “What?”

“Nothing, Mr. Trotter. I just can’t recall the last time you responded with anything other than ‘beat it’... Or ‘nice wheels’.” This stung Jack a bit; this was more evidence explaining the empty white boxes on his form.

“I’m sorry about that,” Jack mumbled, more to himself than to the volunteer. The young man nodded and backed out of the room then slowly wheeled away.

Jack entered the bathroom. He ran the tap for a few moments before splashing water on his face and neck. He glanced up at the clock which told him that the social worker would be back momentarily to pick up his form. Drying himself off, he returned to his room to make his decision.

V: The Bodhi Tree

Jack never had children. His parents had passed. His only brother, who lives in Vancouver, had no idea what Jack had been diagnosed with. Indeed, the only person close enough to Jack as of late was Ana. Ana, with her hopes for the future and visions of things – things Jack could not see himself a part of. For a moment, he considered putting her name down and how she might feel when she is notified that he had chosen her; Jack could picture her walking through the door, heartbroken and passionate, just like he remembered her. But he knew it could never be. He would only be a burden to her, taking her away from the life of happiness she had found for herself. He thought back again to that warm spring afternoon on the patio.

He got up to move beside her, but she stopped him. She took the napkin from her lap to dab the corners of her eyes before continuing, “I’ve come to realize that you aren’t looking for the thing that I want to find.”

“What do you mean? Ana, I’m not look-

ing for anything – I have you! I don't want anything else." He was nervous now. They had settled with the waiter and he noticed her hands smoothing out her dress. She stood up. "That's just it, Jack. I love you. But for me, the picture is not complete like it is for you. I'm sorry... Goodbye Jack." And she was gone.

Jack was startled to see the social worker standing at the foot of his bed. "Are you okay, Mr. Trotter? I was about to call a nurse, you were unresponsive for some time..."

"No, that's not necessary, thank you." He brushed the collar of his robe upwards, warming his chest. "I wanted to ask you... If the decision I make today is permanent."

"Permanent?" The woman repeated. "Mr. Trotter, the hospital only needs you to finalize your choice for the purpose of your file. Should you feel the need to change the identity of your Substitute Decision Maker, you may do so at any time through the hospital or your own attorney."

Jack brought his hand to his forehead and let out a sigh. "I didn't know that. Thank you Miss." Shaking, he marked an X inside of the box next to the Office of the Public Guardian and Trustee. He handed the sheet over to the social worker who, despite her perplexed expression, thanked him and promptly left.

In the privacy of his room, sectioned off by pale green curtains and a sad plastic chair that was never filled by his own visitors, Jack felt a frightening sense of peace. He walked over to the window and pressed his face against the glass. He saw his reflection in the quieting city below and knew he might never have to correct the X he placed inside that box.

S c o r i a

By Landon Rhode

Vera's feet were sore because she had spent the week jumping in front of oncoming traffic, and jumping took physical effort. By the time she was detained by local police, she had jumped 24 times in 3 days, and had been known across supermarket aisles and hairdressing circles as The Jack-Rabbit of Los Angeles: when she was caught, the police officers responsible had used a net, and dragged her to the back of their cruiser with great consideration, as if they were ferrying a mythic beast. When Vera was put under examination by a team of psychiatrists, she was considered rational enough to bear her crime, and a court agreed, sentencing her to 17 years in prison. Her detention facility had a small hole in the floor to use as a toilet, and a slab of concrete jutting from the wall to coax her into reflecting on her crimes: Vera had built pipe-bombs since she was eleven, using instructions printed from the internet and materials appropriated from her mother and father's meth lab. For years, she had built a reservoir of explosives with the intent to detonate them in public, and in doing so be forced into a mental institution free of charge, circumventing her lack of healthcare, and solving her self-diagnosed inability to rationally cope with reality. She had not considered that it would land her in jail, she had not considered researching whether or not psych wards cost money anyway - they did. She had considered, however, that bombs could potentially kill someone, and didn't want to have that on her conscience, and so decided to jump instead. Unaware to her, even in her reflection, was that she secretly desired to ruin the life of whoever it was that ran her over. She wanted, without consciously knowing it, to paint a windshield and mark herself in the eyes of the driver forever.

But modern cars have excellent breaks, or Los Angeles drivers swerve exceptionally, or she simply jumped too soon or too obviously. She had never been hit. Closing her reflections, she decided that she would escape from prison. Life in prison had become unbearable, just like the life before prison which, having now been in prison, seemed ideal and filled with choices and air. She attempted to escape three times, and in each case was found by a guard and put into a worse cell. Had she been rational, she would have waited patiently for her 17 year sentence to run its course - however, rationality is not available to someone in a dark cell on a cold night, at least not in her mind. In her third cell, she dreamed of dying by inactivity, that she would lay there and that her urine and feces would swell inside of her and without being voided would strangulate her organs. She dreamed about her funeral and how the priest would be wearing flannel pajamas because he couldn't be bothered otherwise, and that he would speak of her disdainfully, dubbing her "in the end, more shit than woman, a turd in the shape of a girl." This was inexcusable, to be forced to wait for such a death. How she configured her actual death involved the theft of cigarettes, which had been furtively smuggled to inmates and stored in their cells: she took a cigarette from each cell and lodged a bundle of them in her throat - but she died far before suffocation or toxic shock set in, when the inmates caught wind and used her skull to paint a thick red line across the floor of the shower hall. Her final thought - as her skin peeled off her face and onto the linoleum in swaths - was regret that her pain had only intensified, and how she ached to return to the concrete slab, which was her new approximation of heaven.

The Spy

By Duane Marlow

Mr. Baron and his wife Mrs. Baron, members of the once-famous 'Baron Clan' which had dominated much of the east-coast steel industry way back when, stood waiting impatiently for the train to take them to Granada House.

They claimed their seats after thoroughly brushing away any crumbs or dog litter, and the train pulled away humming. Being a Sunday morning, the carriage was silent and almost empty, and so the opportunities for the two Barons to sublimate their disdain for one another by directing it at other passengers were limited.

"Look at that damn hippy" said Baron, looking down at a flannel-shirted young man whose facial hair was on the verge of becoming too long and ragged to be described as 'stubble'.

"They'd call that a 5 o'clock shadow back when people bothered to work for a living, clocking out at 5 o'clock with a dirty little beard poking out," responded the woman, studying the young man, who tentatively raised his eyes to the couple in confusion.

Mr Baron and Mrs Baron simultaneously averted their eyes, both staring directly ahead, leaving the young man shaking his head and bouncing the balls of his feet the music from his headphones.

"These hippies is the kind that ruined Benjamin no doubt," said Mr. Baron, pausing to consider the evidence for this spontaneous assertion. "All them drugs they take and godknaws where they buy

'em from. Probably the spics or the arabs".

Unlike many of his business associates, Mr. Baron pronounced 'arabs' without gliding the initial 'a', which did not mean that he didn't share the same distrust and therefore dislike of these people, only that it wasn't as obvious.

The train pulled up and the two got up and alighted onto the small empty platform. They made their way to the sole taxi cab outside the station entrance and Mr Baron asked to be taken to Granada House. *Yeah, that Granada House, what of it?*

The vehicle nosed its way through the tight, winding country roads. The fields around them were glowing in the almost-radioactive sunshine, *and if the engine weren't so damn loud* the two Barons would hear the chirping of the birds hidden among the dried hedges all around.

"Did I tell you Spillane found more of the stuff in his college dorm?" asked Mr. Baron, peering at his own reflection superimposed on the rushing hedges.

"No. Was it the same thing? Was it reports and case studies and all that like what we found?"

"Yeah," he replied after a pause, "same stuff. Doctor Fonstein, you know from the old neighbourhood? Well he told me it's a symptom of schizophrenia. Delusions, alternative realities, that horseshit."

Mrs Baron had found thick folders filled with handwritten pages in her son's private study after he'd left for college to study business economics under orders

from his father. She dutifully passed them to her husband, who became enraged having read only a dozen or so of them. He read what seemed to him to be reports on random individuals, accompanied by theories about their lives and summations of their character. His initial thought was that his son was being paid by some communist cell to expose the private lives of the wealthy families with which the Barons associated.

He'd immediately hired a private detective, Spillane, to see what he could dig up about his son. He wanted to know who his friends were, where he hung out and who he dated and screwed, placing emphasis on the desire to report back any Russian-sounding names, any '-vichs' or '-kovs'. Better to stamp this sort of thing out early before things get out of hand.

His wife had softly reminded him that the Cold War had ended a decade ago, and this eased him a little. Having already paid the detective, he ordered him to follow his son around campus, to see who he was writing these things about and who he was reporting it. Spillane had come back confused and hesitatingly concluded that the subject didn't seem to have any sinister connections. He kept to himself most of the time and wandered through the city alone, often taking walks through the poorer areas and taking pictures or scribbling on his notepad before rushing back to his rented apartment.

Spillane had eventually managed to break in to the apartment one day while Benjamin was out walking, and had taken polaroids of the stacks of paper all around the apartment, the ashtray like a pincushion for the dozens of stubbed cigarettes. This disturbed Mrs. Baron. She wanted something done about the situation. What if the other mothers found out?

Mr. Baron could not begin to fathom why Benjamin wandered around, writing lengthy reports on strangers, noting their

facial expressions, overheard snatches of conversation. It was an uneconomical use of his spare time, and therefore the diagnosis was made. He was insane. Benjamin was pulled from his studies after failing the first semester. He could have stayed on, his surname allowed that, but his father was adamant he needed fixing. He needed this schizophrenia or whatever to be taken care of. Like falling shares or a dip in profits, everything could be fixed.

The cab pulled up on the expensive gravel of Granada House and Mr Baron and Mrs Baron made their way up the steps and into the grand, high-ceilinged foyer of the mental institute.

"Baron, Benjamin Baron... Yes that's right... Sure."

Mrs. Baron looked with contempt at the man rocking back and forth in the hallway, leaning against the polished oak panelling. They were escorted to a private hospitality room and seated in cushioned chairs which, Mrs. Baron listlessly suggested, had been imported from the country houses they'd visited in England the previous summer.

After a short while the door was opened and a boy stepped into the room. He wore casual clothes, a chequered woollen vest over a crisp white shirt. He was fingering the threads of the vest and adjusting the tight shirt to fit his body.

Fifteen minutes later Mr. Baron and Mrs. Baron said goodbye to Benjamin and Mr. Baron reached out a steady hand to the boy, who took it without lifting his eyes to his father. Mr. Baron filed the loose pages of the contract into his briefcase, dabbing the ink of each signature to check it wouldn't smudge and force him to come back to have them redone. He thought he'd spotted one of the lengthy numbers missing a zero, but on closer inspection he was mistaken.

They arrived back at the station five

minutes before the train was scheduled to arrive. He asked his wife to purchase the financial paper while he went to look for a bathroom. They met just as the train door was opening and Mr. Baron hadn't the time to realize that she'd accidentally bought a literary magazine which, it being Sunday, had been padded out with additional content so that it resembled in size and weight Mr Baron's usual financial daily.

He cursed her stupidity and tore it open like a petulant child, briefly darting his eyes down the length of the carriage to spot any *weirdos*. After disinterestedly scanning the pages he reached a magazine inside. On the glossy front cover was the picture of a young Asian man; 'The Kafka of the Internet' read the text above. Pouting in a lower corner was a bloated face with melting jowls, under whom it read "No discernible talent... why I disdain the cult of Wallace". Some sort of bullshit review magazine he thought.

Mr Baron opened the central page and saw a two-page spread. Some short story that had won an award published exclusively in...yadda yadda. He squinted at the author's name.

"Hey look, B. L. Baron," he said to his wife, his paunch vibrating with the slight chuckle. He scanned the prologue of the article and his eyes intuitively found the number amongst the text.

"Two grand, and for a story!"

Mrs Baron looked disinterestedly at the page and then covertly returned her narrowed eyes to the young woman breastfeeding the baby which sat on her bobbing leg.

"Hey, we should make a story about Benjamin. I always said there was money in these things," he laughed, turning the page.

The Dollhouse Victim

By Tom Sheehan

Badger Martineau was displeased. Perhaps it was the cheese in his soup, or another point in making age a paramount factor of life. Whatever worked in him, a bit of a grumble, heartburn, it was fleeting, and went its way, fading like an offshore breeze. His granddaughter Alexa had no part in it, he was sure, for she had considerably brightened each day in coming to the house, to visit, to play, to invest time in the dollhouse.

It was the dollhouse he had made for her mother when she was but a child of the same four years; some of it made at sea, most of it made in a corner of the cellar a winter or two. The little house, a scaled down model of the very house he had lived in for more than seventy years, sat in the front room, by a window so neighbors passing by could see it, on a carrousel affair. At night a light illuminated its front façade like a billboard advertisement on the Turnpike. *Traveler, take heed. Rest is here.*

From his old and mostly battered but comfortable Morris chair by a side window looking down on the river, eventually the sea, Badger could see all the details of the miniature home: clapboard exterior, double chimneys that gave it a Colonial calling and stamp, two floors with a pitched roof. It was painted white as foam in a good and proper wake. More than once the whiteness had made him think of sails thrusting at their lines, grabbing at a West wind. From the backside he could see the partitions of each room, doors of closets, balusters and rails of banisters, carpeted stairs up from the front hall to the bedrooms overhead. Red brick fireplaces, made of grooved paneling, sat on each wall of each room. The monster chimneys, down through the huge archways in the cellar,

had great responsibilities in the house, being the ultimate shoulders. Wide maple floorboards added the grandest touch of character, almost screaming out authenticity in their corn syrup shine, their golden patina.

Yet now, for perhaps the eighth or ninth day in a row, or was it more, the unsettlement had come upon him. He had tried to make the point of remembering when the feeling came. And it came when Alexa was in the house. Always then and never at any other time. But he loved the child so much he threw the thought away like a wild throw to first base, too hot to handle. But it came back to him each time. She'd be at the little house, her blonde hair atop her shoulders, humming to herself, talking to imaginary friends, much as he had done at sea on lonely watches, to a sailor lost at sea long ago or a shipmate who had gone ashore from a most memorable cruise and had never come back, a stretch of pure loneliness. The jabber was a monotone, a humming, a companion for silence, and moved the way a small wave seeks a bay or a sandy beach.

This acknowledged point, this quick rush to notice, only made him more disgruntled; but for all his years he was a man of details. Alexa, he saw, could be hours at the house, and nothing would come to disturb him. She would dismantle whole rooms of furniture, reset and re-style one room from another's goods, make beds face east and west rather than north and south, swap remnants of rugs, change the character of walls, and thus of rooms. None of it would really bother him.

"Alexa," he'd say, just as a matter of conversation, to let her know he paid attention, to mark a response, "why didn't

you like the way that room was laid out? It was neat and proper just the way a trim ship should be." Was there reasoning to her decisions rather than some kind of rote? The Morris chair made sounds beneath him as he leaned forward.

"Oh, Grampa, my best friend Joe didn't like it. He said he was tired of it. He's such a good boy. I thought I'd let him have his way. You know, like you do me." The smile floated to him like a lifeline; lost at sea and saved.

"You are a most marvelous and engaging child, Alexa, much like your mother was at the same age." The strange delights she created ran with the sudden ill feelings he had, as if neutralizing his small despairs.

It was a week later, his mind clear as a bold sky, all his rote now parceled into proper niches, that he keyed onto the one missing ingredient: no matter what article of furniture she touched, little happened to him. But when she picked up the miniature rocking chair he himself had made, modeled after his own grandfather's chair, set it into the exact same position every time in what had been his grandfather's room for years, at the same window, at the same view down the river, the clutching came over him. Displeasure came at once, a kind of despair moving on him, and though he knew it was not directed by this engaging and delightful child, it was she nevertheless who put it into motion.

The contradiction leaped upon him. The connection was absurd, yet it was there. Down into his soul it went worming, no wake behind it, no dragging lines, no loose wheel at the helm, but straight into his soul. Two days later, when she picked up the chair and put it back in the same exact position, as she had done on every occasion, Badger Martineau knew something occult, strange, perhaps forbidden, was working on him through the innocence of his grandchild. The sense of displeasure grew.

"Alexa, why do you put that little rocker back in the same place all the time?" The old Morris chair creaked and groaned beneath his shifting body as he looked at her kneeling at the dollhouse. For a moment her joy seemed part of the structure.

Like cookies from the jar her eyes looked, wide and spontaneous and yet something else in them, alerting him. To what? Was it her absolute charm? Her sudsy clean innocence and naïveté? "Doesn't it belong there, Grampa?" Her way was inscrutably honest, direct, and compellingly innocent. The blonde tresses were neatly tied into a small bun on top of her head and her cheekbones leaped out under those fair eyes. "All the other things, the beds, the bureaus, the rugs, the other chairs, can be any place. They belong any place. I think this chair belongs here." With an outstretched hand, her head twisting back to look at him, her index finger with a knowing and loving move, a soft and sure gentleness, touched the old rocking chair in its place at the bedroom window, the river and the sea beyond it for sure. A relationship was being cemented, and Badger was thinking that she could do it with her eyes closed, when a long forgotten scene came back on him, clear as Irish crystal in Mother's cabinet.

In one startling moment the old sea captain Badger Martineau saw his own grandfather, the great elder Tilmon Martineau, seaman too, bearded, calling from the chair at the window. "Look, sonny boy, there comes The Lady Esmerelda off her cruise. Six, maybe seven months now. There'll be jawing and pouring and empty cups this night for Smithson and his crew. I hope the old boy comes by to pay his respects. I took him on his first cruise. Damn well better!" He had leaned forward in his chair, the cane under his chin, one leg under that chin, the other leg off yet in the depths of the China Sea.

It was so clearly enacted it shook him down to his heel. And in the middle of it,

like a black space, a void, there was something missing or hidden that continually gnawed its way at him. Alexa had no part in this, he was positive, but the void, the blackness, was there.

Three days on top of that revelation, Alexa at disruption and reassembling the house, the void was still a spot of anonymity in his mind. She picked up the little rocker, the last piece of furniture on the floor and gently placed it back under the bedroom window, the sea and the river surely beyond that view. Looking back at her grandfather the smile was broad and genuine and full of happiness as if she had accomplished one more gallant or thoughtful deed.

“Does something tell you where to put that chair, Alexa?” His cane was leveled in the air at the room on the second floor, at the rocking chair, and his hand shook but a little as he held the cane as an arrow. The old sailor was aware of other trends and twisting going on about him. For the first time in many years the phantom pain came back from the missing foot, the phantom pain from the phantom foot he had lived with for a monstrous stretch of years. That responsible, deadly storm he could feel again and the wind driving its own fury all across the China Sea and the terror and pain of the spar coming down on his leg. *Oh, Lord, was this sweet child his messenger of death?...as he thought that spar once was.*

“Oh, Grampa, don’t be silly. Chairs can’t talk. Even if they did, would it be chair talk? Or wood talk? Or furniture talk? Would a little kid like me know it?” That ever-delightful light was in her eyes, in the curve of her lips, as she slowly gave a look to her grandmother looking from another room. Her hip swung out in a sudden stance, the woman in the child. Oh, he had seen such things in his long life. He remembered her mother in a moment of silver flashes at the back of his head; whole scenes of her wrapped in the magic and joy of her own young days...and his. *No, not*

this child! Yet he could see his own daughter with a face so dirty and black he could see but her eyes and her teeth, and the widest grin of all across her face. Caught he was in sense and apparition, time swelling and contracting, strange winds indeed. Back into the contour of the Morris chair he went, nestling, waiting for...*for whatever.*

There it came, in another flash of silver, his hand reaching into his grandfather’s open purse on that very windowsill, taking the gold coin, slipping it into his pocket. Knack Courtis had told him he’d give him tons of pennies for one of the gold coins. Knack had a way of promising the moon, had magic on his tongue, bore deception in his heart. All hell had broken loose at home when the coin was discovered missing. Not a soul offered up Badger’s name. It was unthinkable that the godly child would steal from his beloved grandfather.

And the weight of the coin hung on him for years, until his grandfather was gone. Somewhere at sea, under Trade Winds, in the terror of The Horn, that weight was dispatched, it seemed, forever. Now another child had found it and brought it back. God, how foolish had he been. Knack was, at length, nothing but a conniver, a thief. Badger wondered what had happened to the coin. Knack was known to have amassed many coins in his day.

So it was, after added weeks of recall, the displeasure coming alive when only Alexa was in the room, at the dollhouse, at that chair, that Badger Martineau began seeking information about Knack Courtis. Knack, he found out from the milkman, had died in a train crash in Idaho a good dozen years earlier. But there was a daughter living in the next town.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Ma’am, my name is Badger Martineau. I knew your father a long time ago. I know that he collected coins and wonder if that collection is still extant. One of my favorite coins might well have been in that collection.”

"I know of you, sir. I know of your daughter and some of your sons. My father left few things. Property, mostly. He had come into possession of a large parcel of land out west when the train accident happened. The train went right off the bridge. I think just about everybody on board was killed."

Badger relented and told her the truth about her father's promise, about the gold coin, about the disappointment. "I think it was a 1905 gold ten-dollar piece. That small theft haunted me for years. I think it has come back again." He told Knack's daughter about Alexa's place in all of it, about the chair, about some kind of relentless pursuit now coming on him. About his doubts and his true considerations.

"I have some few things of father's, in boxes mostly, one old trunk I haven't looked into for years, Mr. Martineau. I promise I will look. 1905, you say?"

"Aye, 1905, a shine you wouldn't believe."

A week later, a knock at the door, and Knack Courtis' daughter Pamela came to his chair. A huge smile was on her face. In her hand she held a shining ten-dollar gold piece. It sat in the palm of her hand like a token straight from Fort Knox. It caught the slanting sunlight as though its surface had been a mirror, the way a wayward coin in the gutter might catch the early sunlight, at a slant, as an eye catcher for an early walker.

Pamela took everything in. She saw a sudden change in the one-legged old man locked into an old Morris chair, his beard egret-white, a gnarled cane hanging on the back of the chair. She caught her breath when she saw the dollhouse in the front room, the beautiful child kneeling at it, the furniture strewn about but being re-assembled one room at a time.. The little girl turned and smiled at her. Pamela swore that they were exchanging a secret,

that the knowledge of everything possible and true was crossing between their eyes.

Knack's daughter was a happy woman when she left Badger Martineau's house. The old man had fallen asleep in his chair. The child Alexa had charmed her until her mother had come to take her home. Pamela had some new friends.

And she had one old friend that she called when she got home. He was an old classmate. He owned a coin shop a few miles away. "It was perfect, Sebastian, just like it was the very same coin from out of the past. I thank you, for an old man and for a lovely little girl who plays with the dollhouse her grandfather made many years ago. They are a most happy pair."

Wax and Pen

By Logan Ellis

The moment is so far away but so close—exotically familiar:
An island ablaze in the middle of a shimmering lake,
building, but never extinguishing,
orange light flickering a lost rhythm across
the pearlescent surface.
A spindle tower of wick, collapsing,
left a vestige of dilapidation, solidified
essence bleeding residually through
seething scent.

The moment: my grandmother's pen, the one she keeps festooned to her denim
button-down pocket, wavering before a candle, silver clip pen being licked clean of
innocence, fed to the hot breath of destruction—
flint spark, match
snuffed by boot
heel, tree root cauterization
led and fed
to ember whirlwinds:
the same power, condensed.
It doesn't look hot; it doesn't seethe with neon orange, pulsing with hatred, harm; it's
just as cold, sneering and searing. I am pointless until I tear it from the starving heat
and push it against my face.

How will it feel? What is it like to burn a scar into your skin?

Phil from gym class has scars; they dot his face, red and pulsing
with the prick of prepubescent fingernails
dirty with the fresh soil of kickball.
Caleb has scars on his knees, one for every bicycle accident;
they wander along his legs,
smooth divots of
new flesh where the asphalt was dug out.
Evan in homeroom has scars; they cover her arms from her wrist to
her elbow, like braids of rope, scabs
given new breath every week.
I have nothing decorating
my knees, my arms, my face. I've
been nothing but safe, the one
who hasn't been branded with parental indiscretion.

Scars will make me worth it, scars tell Phil and Caleb and Evan that I've splattered
my blood across tree-root-crackled concrete, that my skin is flayed and pinched
between razor heads shoved deep in my drawers, that underneath my clothes I'm just
pockmarked and festering, that my hands have been and will be just as impulsive as
everyone else's, just as lost.

Untitled Tanka Poem

By Andrew McGuffin

Searching for something
Left to dwell in this silence
I find nothing here,
Except ephemeral joy
And dull unending sorrow

The Right Steps

By Brittney Dussault

Sunrise in a city I never dreamed of seeing.
I dreamed of you, though.

Wine glasses stacked,
casting rainbows on a cold floor
littered with stray sequins,
lost earrings, and the forgotten dreams
of partygoers.

I'm in your shirt-
I've lost everything else.

But you're found, always found, by me.

In the kitchen with your hair curling
and the tattoo on your side swaying
sluggishly as you move over the cold floor
with your bare feet.

Pancakes are turning golden brown.
Bacon sizzles and like so many other things,
you want to get this RIGHT.

Your mouth keeps mute-
it's too early for words-
but your eyes smile and you watch me
doctor my coffee to the point its sweetness
would make a child cringe.

I'm trying to assemble my hair into a form
that's manageable.
You brush it from my neck, rest your head
in the vacant space.
You build a house with your arms
on the empty real estate of my back,
fingers playing over my shoulders.

My white picket fence.

It's too early for words,
but your breath forms a song
and I let myself be lead in the dance
you've been promising me
for a lifetime.

The bacon burns,
the pancakes are inedible.
We find a box of chocolate
and a forgotten bottle of wine.

You dance me to bed.
We redo last night.

Wake up and dance in the sunlight
of a city I could never dream of
leaving... without you.

Body Reference

By Paul Olexa

“We felt in abs-sense
ceding set fleeced,
clear herculeans,
tasked after
treasured
chest,

mountained bearings
hanging over, erect
with cents of
earned sweat,

running thoughts
sucirceding
waves of ‘wh-
ere deed her
c halves g
-o’, fae
told mistsings.”

Senseless

By Steve Wheat

Near the window, the sun crowns
her brown hair with dust. She sings now
when his brush seems unsteady.
*Why can't you take a picture,
and paint that?* She was terribly bored
of sitting. *Because it's not the same,*
a response he thought indomitable.
The blondes never complained,
but they were easily flattered.
Some of his women didn't even stay
for him to finish the painting. Those faces
emerged like sparks, the kindling of memory.
His spare room and bedroom filled
with painted women, against the walls
and under the bed, piled like tombstones.
It was usually their idea to take off their clothes,
and he never objected. Easier to mix flesh
than figure out fabrics. Only one picture
hangs on the wall. It was his favorite.
He painted her in mid-wink.
She knew something the others didn't.
She hung above the window where others sat,
under sunlight or stars. He played
indie rock and jazz while he painted.
He despised classical music. One day
his world of colors faded to white noise,
when he saw a new portrait of his favorite girl.
Black and white, under the bold, large font
of a headline: **Slain Girl Found in Park.**
He never read the article. He kept the picture.
People look frail in black and white,
Slowly, he stopped painting during the day.
His girls became serious, wore dark make-up
and black clothes. They looked like ghosts
under the artificial moonlight on the canvas.
He wanted to paint a corpse. Maybe
it's like painting the eyes of the blind.
He found a blind girl and took off her glasses.
Windows to the soul, he thought,
does that make the blind monsters?
He asked what she heard when he painted.

A record player, an eternal needle scratching
the surface, moments before the music.

POETRY

This was painting to her, hints of static
trembling before the percussion section.
He filled his life and his easel with the blind.
For the blind, eyes are mirrors, and they
hasten to cover them, before we see ourselves
reflected. After a while, it was the smile
that captured his attention most. A blind
smile, unassuming, lips forming in a vacuum
sequestered by the imagination. The last
blind girl was painted only from the chin
to the lips. He wondered where to get her
eyes. He thought nature was geometry,
so he found a deaf girl. Her eyes beamed.
He sewed together these two girls. One
without vision, one without sound.
The Rembrandt Frankenstein, a puzzle
of flesh. After it was done, so was he.
He painted himself in the old style.
He lived through a mirror for a week
before he finished capturing himself
in glass and fabric – color and light
He took his old, dead goddess off the wall,
and placed his collage in its place,
it was the only piece with a name,

Senseless.

He only hoped if the girls ever saw it,
or touched it in some distant future place,
a synapse within them would fire,
as they realize we'd all been painted
in sinister, savage strokes, filling the void
of a womb with light. While a blind woman
listens for footsteps and a deaf girl watches
for a creeping shadow under the front door,
a man hangs his self portrait next to a woman
he can never love, and saunters outside
with a hammer, a hundred nails,
and a hundred women, ripped from their frames.
He spent the day in the city's largest park,
nailing his women to the trees. Nobody
asks questions. Concern is the measure
of the size of a city. They must have thought
it some obscure artistic endeavor.
His women watched the sunset, unmolested
by the stir of insects. Beams of light
scythe into their open eyes on a Saturday morning,
the joggers take notice of their company.
News Anchors arrive to document
the dozens of anonymous art pieces,

followed swiftly by reporters, and revelers.
Beautiful faces flooded the news stands,
the papers wanted to know the mystery
artist. Rewards were offered, velvet ropes
erected. A great many boys fell in love.
While a lonely man sat in a dark room,
thinking, when the skies opened,
and poured their turpentine, his girls
would make the most colorful puddles.

On the Thought that Light Needs Something More to Torture

By Logan Ellis

We lay in bed with bodies constricted,
staring into streetlamps
floating,
 flickering,
in the daze of newborn darkness,
rasping sunlight they've collected from
the dying bursts of evening
in an ochre of breath
as hot as ours,

shooting shadows into cushioned
backseats—aura of siphoned air through cracked windows
singing lullabies into limp necks—
flashing, bending,
 breaking, warping,
blinking empty thoughts across pollen-dusted roads,
sojourn for those at travel,
seeping spectral tree branches across
the windowpane dripping with sweat
as cold as ours.

We lay hoping that
shadows aren't born from us again, that
light won't create the children we aren't ready for, the
children we cannot love;

we lay hoping that
their limbs won't sneak in—
light-footed on our starch sheets—
melting in and out of the darkness,
in and out of headlights chopped
through the blinds against the back wall,
eyes crimped and enthralled with mysticism,
waiting,
 watching,
with hands clenched in innocence
as dangerous as ours.

L1me

By Gunker

All caves and stone lead to masonry.
That masonry then leads onto limestone and rock
which is carved into plentiful shapes.
Then it's cubed by the bit, dozen and triangle.
No no angle is spared for a brick tangle.
Yet the cave stone still inches its way thru the lime.

spine

By Dargan Dodd

how tight a line,
the skinny dancers
rope across the
parquet, thrusting thighs,
waists and skin
-- moans
mixed with the freshest
beat. a lust for more
rhythm, a thirst for love
in a sea of fake plastic
Wonderbras
that claim to offer
support,
an escape
from the daily grind
-- a trade
for the nightly one,
underneath
short dresses
and long lists
of complaints about
their blush and how
cold it is on Neptune.
their moves are subtle
and blatant, programmed
to make you believe
their slogans
are memorable and catchy
-- easy
to hope
for when the world feels empty,
however obvious and
fleeting they may be.
even in Hollywood,
a warm body is
something to hold.

Fl'ushed wimpskweels.... o' happihomo

By Gunker

Last emb0r, did weep upon our aeons of grandeur.
Wept into a grid for eternity.
It did not even scream, it swept into suds on a bay made of
glass and electrons, consumed by its own network.

Crash.

Error.

Crest

By Alfred

Holy water rusts the ship;
I do expect poison from it:

It idles in the font and
Baptizes the widow,

Flows in the Ganges
And quenches the Sati.

Yet, unlike the daughters,
I sail uncharted waters;

Always looking on,
Never diving in.

Cold Blankets

By LoliSlush

Remember that autumn night?
Streaked with vermillion, and enveloped in a crisp breeze.
That night, we gazed upon the heavens.
Which was alight with invitations, to parties that were long since over.

That night, we made a promise.

You and I.

But our promise, was akin to wrapping ourselves in a cold blanket.
The warmth could never take hold.
No matter how strongly we wished-
miracles don't exist.

Within our home, we lay still, cocooned within the biting blanket.

A promise,

is a promise,

right?

Phantasms linger still, crowding each room of this creaky house.
Whispering, mumbling, apparitions from beyond the void.
Shoulder to shoulder, we slowly suffocate. Our guests no longer a comfort, but a
curse.

Please, lay your head down,

and go back to sleep.

Are you content with accepting this "white lie"?

For the sake of our promise, it's best if we left those skeletons settle.

Hey you, don't despair.

It's not as though, you'll be left to gaze upon the stars alone.

After all, a promise, is a promise.

You, who thought that if you ran fast enough, you could reach the end of a rainbow.

Are you content with this promise?

Because that too, turned out to be simply-

wishful thinking.

Reality lies and deceives. But you can trust me.

Even if we're both shivering in this blanket, far past the event horizon.

After all, we're bound by oath.

POETRY

When this star finally sputters, dims, and dies away,
We'll be as two corpses in one grave.
Because I am you, and you are me.

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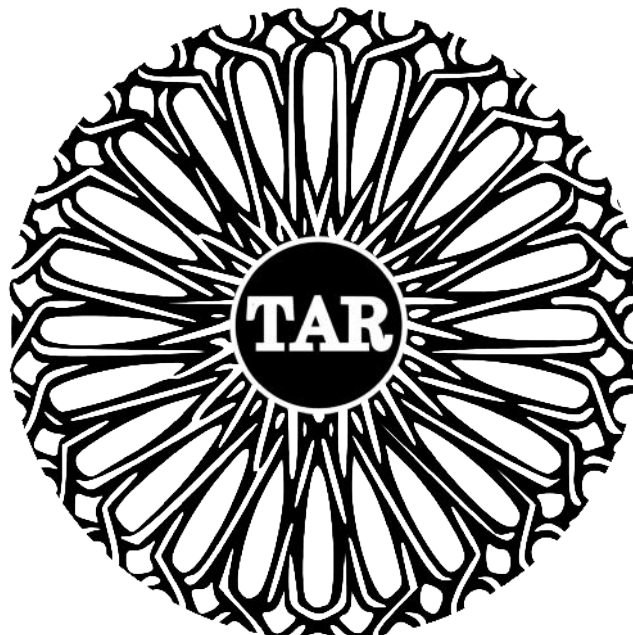
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