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of prose, poetry,
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The April Reader is a monthly publication of poetry, prose, and user-submitted content. It was conceived as a successor to the Zine Writers Guild. The April Reader aims to become a hub of online writing and content. Operating under the belief that the rise of the internet has allowed the written word to regain parity with mass media and television, The April Reader hopes to serve as a launching point for the future writers of this generation.



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The Ol' Watering Hole

By Steven Thomas

Cigarette smoke wafts through the place and I can't help but immediately regret coming. I hate cigarette smoke more than anything. It reminds me of the filthy house my grandfather kept after my grandma died. Cleaning was women's work, and he'd have none of it.

The place was comfortable enough, though, I suppose. It felt like home, grounded in that rural Pennsylvania tradition of fake wood paneling and overstuffed red vinyl chairs. It was dark, and seemed like there was probably a lot of cobwebs hiding somewhere, but to my inspection, I found none. To my surprise, there was no Waylon Jennings playing; in fact the bar was silent, "What do you boys want?" the bartender asked – a young girl somewhere in her mid 20's – wearing a Real-Tree Camouflage shirt and plain black pants. The shirt made up for my surprise that she was not a gruff, middle-aged man with a massive mustache who did nothing but grimace and clean glasses, unwillingly serving drinks when asked and casting a wary eye over all those that entered.

"Six shots," Owen's friend Cal called over my shoulder to her. "Suicides," he added.

At the far end of the bar a middle aged couple (who may not have been together at all) conversed quietly, maintaining the smoky stillness that was only mildly disturbed by our awkward intrusion. A man sat somewhere in the middle of the bar and nursed something that looked like a rum and coke, staring straight ahead, quiet and solemn.

"\$7.50," she said, returning to take Cal's credit card.

"Keep it open," he said, and I felt some admiration for his experience. He knew what he was doing. We passed the shots to each of our party, and after some discussion and deliberation over who would be the designated driver, I ended up with two shots in hand. We were quiet, staring down at our alcohol as if we were

preparing to drink Jonestown Kool-Aid.

"To Owen's 21st!" I said, almost questioningly, and we toasted and sucked down the citrus-y liquid. I looked around to see that everyone had taken their first shot of the night well, and quickly downed the second. In the back of my head, a voice said something about this being a bad idea, me being a lightweight and all, but I shrugged it off, and felt the need to requite Cal's kindness.

"Anyone want a beer?"

There was a general sense of negativity and indecision, and I showed indifference outwardly, but felt a discomfort inwardly.

"Maybe later, man," Cal said gregariously. "Don't mix beer and liquor, and I'm not ready to slow down already."

I slid into a barstool and the rest of our party stood awkwardly, just out of the doorway, blocking traffic, if there had been any. But it was barely after nine o'clock, and for most, besides those already present, didn't seem to desire drunkenness at such an early hour of the evening.

"So this is the Penny Bar?" I asked, conversationally. "Any of you guys been here before?"

They shook their heads. Owen's friends were from out of town and he had just turned 21. It was a stupid question.

"You guys wanna... uh... sit down, stay awhile? Y'know, stop blocking the entrance. Not that anyone is coming in, but if they were..." I trailed off, realizing that I had begun to ramble, filling the awkward silence that had been taken the room, the bar's default.

They all looked at me and seemed to acknowledge that this was a stroke of brilliance, shifting chairs and bar stools around to accommodate our group that was too large for this bar that seemed a place for introspective

reflection and solemn drunkenness, more than a location for collegiate parties. It was quiet and unassuming, quite content with its own existence, merely being. "The Other Place," was its moniker.

"Here guys," the bartender said as she returned with more drinks, I'll put some plays on the jukebox. She ducked deftly under the rope and strode toward the jukebox, pushing her long black hair out of her face as she peered through the smoky, smeared glass. "This is my favorite song," she said, playing 'Turn the Page' by Bob Seger. "Not bad," I thought to myself.

"You pick the songs, Steve," Owen said to me, patting me heartily on the back, evidencing a lack of motor control by inebriation already. "You know so much about music, you can make the best decision." I smiled at the compliment, but I was unsure how much real sentiment there was and how much alcohol was talking. I could feel my own inebriation building, and it crushed my sick sense of superiority.

The fare on the jukebox was as to be expected, classic rock with some disco hits and oldies tunes thrown in, and a hastily amended pop hits section to include all the songs the youngsters probably wanted to listen to. I wanted to pick something that would please everyone, particularly our group, but it just didn't feel right as I glossed over the new hits section. I paged back to Pat Benetar and Led Zeppelin and played 'Love is Battlefield' (somewhat ironically) and 'Ramble On.' The bar wasn't ready for hip-hop, and probably never will be, smoky and somber, stuck somewhere in the 80's like all those ones we've seen in the movies.

I sat down and drank my Yuengling black-and-tan, beginning to turn inward, but the music and the alcohol had finally roused the group into their comfortable space and lively discussion began to take place. "What are you studying, Cal," I turned, selecting him as the most interesting among the group.

"Geology, right now."

"At SRU?" I asked, nodding at his Slippery Rock wristband.

"Yeah, it's a shit school. I hate everyone there."

I laughed and felt no remorse, though I probably should have. "What are you planning to do with that, Geology?"

"Uh, well, I want to be a consultant for like, fracking and construction and stuff, so they know the... geological... layout of the land. Y'know?"

My tongue felt heavy and my head light – it had struck me much quicker than I had thought. "That's fucking cool man," I said, losing my tact. "I'm happy you're doing that, I mean, you seem real interested in it. You gotta do what you love. I mean, my dad wanted me to be an engineer, but I fucking hated math. So here I am, trying to be an English teacher. Maybe one day a professor, I don't know."

I remembered something very important that I had warned myself of before I came to the bar; supposedly there was a zero-tolerance policy with the "fbomb." I became uncomfortably self-aware, glancing around to see if I was about to be thrown out. No one had seemed to notice, or if they had noticed, not to care. Another of our group dropped the mother of all curse-words and I elbowed him.

"Hey, don't say the f-word here," I nodded towards the wall which displayed a sheet of paper that said:

If you drop the F-Bomb, you're out of here: no exceptions.

"I know that they got a new owner, but I don't know if they still use the rule or not. Better safe than sorry."

The word continued to escape our mouths over the next few hours, but no one seemed to care, and although I was thankful, there was still something that felt wrong about breaking the ancient rule, whether it was enforced or not.

"You good to go?" Barry asked as I leaned clumsily over the jukebox, feeding dollar after dollar into it, so I could hear more of the songs that had filled my childhood. 'Gimme Shelter' was next, and 'Achilles Last Stand' after that. "We're going to barhop soon," he said, and I didn't



quite comprehend. “

Why?”

“Well everyone else is ready to go.”

“But I just played all these songs; they're good songs,” I tried to defend our stay.

“We'll stay for a couple more minutes, but we're going to leave after that.”

I nodded solemnly, unwilling, but agreeing.

Owen stumbled towards me, sharing in the drunken revelry, and I tried to stall them so my songs could play, so I could hear 'Scenes From an Italian Restaurant' and 'Foreplay/Long Time.' I could hardly be moved, but bit by bit they budged me out of the door as the last few notes of 'Battle of Evermore' wandered out behind us.

We would go to Voodoo, where I'd talk to Sarah for almost an hour straight, trying to be as subtle as I could with the fact that I was absolutely in love with her while we talked about writing and poetry, never once mentioning her boyfriend who I knew to be somewhere, kicking around, in her life. Later we'd go to Chestnut Street and I'd try to talk to people who didn't want to listen, too busy dancing or trying to shout above the pulsing music, pushing their way through the bustling masses. I asked a few girls I knew if they wanted to dance, trying to fill the emptiness I had left behind at Voodoo, but they all had dates, or at least 'someone who had brought them' as one explained.

It wasn't a big deal.

Not like I could dance anyhow.

I never went back to any of those places. I'm not sure if I ever will. But it seemed strange to me, the way the places had become their own living entities, or in the case of The Other Place, a sad sort of non-living. Voodoo had its indie-scene brewery charm, quirky and unique, the place where poets and novelists would drink a dark, micro-brewed porter and talk about Keats and Shelley. Chestnut Street had the feel of an obnoxious frat party that would be held weekend after weekend, eternally youthful. The Other

Place, however, felt like something different; a sad sort of wasting away, kept together by people who came in not quite understanding what it was. Coming for drinks and leaving to go somewhere else, somewhere more exciting. People who didn't care about the million-penny collection or Jimmy, the long-time owner. People that had missed that history and would only be interested in relating it to some sort of symbol of small-town USA decay as the blue-collar jobs fled and manufacturing receded.

I had missed Jimmy.

I hadn't paid attention to the penny collection.

It was only a blue-collar bar that served to be part of a three-part cross-section of Meadville and its inhabitants: foreign and youthful, partying and naïve; deep and thoughtful, educated and artistic; sad and introspective, a sign of life that continued regardless of its consequences. Segregated and separate.

I guess that's all there is to it.



In Concert

By Christopher Dungey

Patrick Kile encountered his first live transvestite in 1998. Patrick was 32 years old. The transvestite was stationed behind the door of a second floor men's restroom at the Woodward Palladium selling (she claimed) psilocybin between the warm-up acts for *Bush*. Patrick watched as the warty 'shroom passed from the her palm to that of a customer. The Palladium was one of several landmark Detroit theaters gutted and renovated to accommodate aging yuppie rock fans and their offspring. Patrick glimpsed a shadow of cleavage in the skimpy black dress. He noticed the expertly applied eye lashes before being pushed toward the marble urinals. A slurring Friday night mob behind him stretched out into the mezzanine.

Heather Leonard, the public nurse Patrick's sister had fixed him up with, took even longer to relieve herself. While he waited, Patrick admired the flocked, burgundy wall paper that had been preserved. A 19th century chandelier hung with all the stage lights from the vaulted ceiling. When Heather finally emerged from the ladies room, she wasn't hard to spot. An inch taller than Patrick, her spiky blond hair was tipped with magenta. Patrick zigzagged toward her through the crowd.

"Heather! Over here!" He gestured in the direction of a coffee bar. He had started her off with a wine cooler in the car but did not want his motives misunderstood. All he knew about her was that Brenda claimed she liked to "*get her freak on*" if that's what he was looking for.

"Anyway, beggars can't be choosers," his sister told him.

"Was I begging?" Patrick was not complaining about a renewal of dating following his divorce and a long dry spell. But, neither was he complaining about the dry spell. His first marriage had exhausted most of his expectations about the institution, including some post-

modern innovations at which he had balked.

"I'll just have to go again," Heather warned. "But that's cool. That was quite entertaining in there!"

"What?" Patrick cupped his ear, sidestepping more concert goers.

Their paths intersected at the coffee kiosk just as another couple abandoned a nearby patio table. Below, on the stage level, string tuning and rim-shots were greeted with shrill whistles. The crowd on the concourse began to empty into the stairwells.

"Now we can talk," Patrick yelled. "What do you mean, entertaining?"

"Oh yeah. It was kinda hot," Heather said, fanning herself. "I think two women were making out in the next stall. They were getting noisy."

"Really." Patrick arched his eyebrows as Heather sat down. "Hold these seats. I'll be right back." He stepped up to the counter and ordered two double espressos. "You've probably got me beat," he said when he returned with the paper shot-glasses. Then he described the transvestite and her enterprise. He had to raise his voice again as music erupted from below.

"Bizarre," Heather agreed when Patrick paused. "I mean, about the psilocybin."

"You think that's odd? How many she-males have you met?" Heather's sophistication was beginning to pique his curiosity.

"Please. I push clean needles and condoms at a free clinic." Heather shrugged. "And, I wouldn't call them she-males. That's sort of like the n-word to them. Let's just say mushrooms show a level of ambition you don't usually see in that subculture."

Patrick winced down some more of his acrid

drink. “Don’t you mean sub-*gender*?”

“That’s cute. How did you know what you were looking at? Did she have her own hair?”

“Probably. But it was short, like a gymnast or something. Big Adam’s apple though, and she sounded croaky.”

“No, but before you heard her speak.”

“Oh.” Patrick sipped again. “Well, she had these beginner tits. Excuse me, breasts, but she was in the men’s john.”

“Yeah,” Heather laughed. “That *is* a giveaway. She’s probably transgender, too. Your typical TV will be wearing big ones.” They listened to the no-frills chords, lead guitar on the verge of feedback, and somber baritone vocals while she drained most of her double at a gulp. “So, did you bring us some?”

Patrick leaned forward on his elbows. “Was I supposed to? Are you serious?”

Heather leaned forward too. “I hope not. Mushrooms shouldn’t be serious. Sweetie, I hope it’s not too soon in our relationship to say this, but...” She paused as the music approached some critical mass of adolescent doom, the back-up vocals establishing a dirge-like counterpoint. “You could stand to loosen up!”

“Me? I’m *completely* relaxed,” Patrick shouted back.

“Oh-kayyy. But *you* weren’t exposed to that adult action in the can.” Heather resumed fanning herself for emphasis. “I’m kinda geeked right now. Mushrooms might be comic relief. Or, maybe you’ve never indulged.”

“In what?” Patrick smiled. “Mushrooms or adult action?”

“Touche!” Heather offered one hand across the table for a high-five while opening her purse with the other. “This’ll be my treat! Don’t give her more than ten, and we better just split one. It’s my turn for the Saturday night blood-letting on third shift tomorrow.”

“We’re going to be messed up that long?” Patrick asked. He hadn’t touched hallucinogens in quite a while. “I’m kinda out of shape.”

Heather handed him the bill. “Nah, eight hours,

tops. But if you’re having too much fun, you can get worn down. I don’t want to be dragging all weekend.”

Patrick stood up and pushed the heavy chair under the table. “So where are we doing this? Your place or mine?”

Heather winked. “You’re assuming one of us will be able to drive,” she chuckled. “Let’s wait and see. I’m not going anywhere ‘til they’ve played “Glycerine.”

Patrick knocked back the last of his espresso then retraced his steps across the concourse.

“Good luck,” Heather called after him.

The bathroom was deserted this time—except for the trans person, who clacked out of a stall as Patrick entered. She moved out of his way, down to the last sink. He bellied up to a urinal while he rehearsed an opening line. The gurl unpacked her cosmetics from a suede shoulder bag. When Patrick approached a middle sink, they traded side-long glances.

“I’ve already got a date, hon,” she said softly.

“Sure. No, I just wanted to...”

“You just wanted to ask me questions,” she interrupted, while renewing her eyeliner. “You wanted to have a provocative conversation. Am I going to have the surgery? Do I pass at work? Was I actually squatting in there?”

“No, I...”

“I *was* squatting,” the person added, taking up a glosser brush. “And I stayed tucked back for the whole performance.”

“I suppose that *is* provocative,” Patrick said. “But I’m really just here for the mushrooms, if... Yeah, my date...she sent me in.”

“Oh, you *have* a date,” she exclaimed. “That *is* a relief! I might have been tempted and I had this premonition that you’d be too much for *me*. You’d stretch me all out.”

“Uh, probably not,” Patrick admitted. “So, what do you think? Can you hook us up?”

The gurl pouched her lips in the mirror and piled her things back into the bag. She unrolled a weathered baggie from a side pouch then picked out two of the ‘shrooms. “Well, I hope *all* my



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instincts haven't deserted me. But I'm thinking, no *way* are *you* a cop. That'll be twenty apiece."

Patrick hesitated, but dug the money out of his pocket. "Here's the thing, though. My date said ... Well, we only need one and I should only go ten bucks for it."

"You can only give me a ten," the gurl repeated, unrolling the baggie again. She dropped the merchandise back into her inventory. "Baby, if I had *your* sack, I could save a fortune in hormones."

"Aww, c'mon," Patrick said. "Don't be hard-core. Can't we negotiate, at least?"

The trans stuffed the baggie into her purse. She turned away from the mirror, but stopped abruptly behind Patrick. "Hey, you know what," she announced. "Sure. I *will* negotiate. But only with the person in charge. I want to meet your date. This'll be cool."

Now it was Patrick's turn to linger in front of the mirror. He dried his hands then flicked a comb through his receding hair. The gurl smiled, shifting from hip to hip like a pensive child. She inched nearer behind him in the mirror. He waited for the modest bust to brush against him and was disappointed when she moved away. There seemed few ways left that the evening could get any weirder. But, a certain initiative, lost to Heather's height advantage, her chic appearance and apparent street creds, might yet be regained.

"Yeah, so how do I introduce you?" he asked. "What's my story?"

"Oh, my Gawd! You fucking men. Can't you just tell the truth? Tell her Woodstock was a long time ago and we have to discuss prices."

"O.K.," Patrick said. "But I don't know her that well myself. She doesn't strike me as easily coerced."

"For Christ's sake. Let that be *my* problem."

"And how am I supposed to introduce you?"

"Well, I'm Bobbie."

"And I'm Patrick." He stepped out the door then held it open for her like a gentleman. "So you were 'Robert' at one time?"

Bobbie brushed by. She hooked her right hand through Patrick's arm when he let go of the door. "It was Craig, actually, *Patricia*. Maybe you better let me do *all* the talking."

As they approached the table, Heather covered a smirk with two fingers, her chin resting in her hand.

"We've hit a snag," Patrick said.

"I can see that."

"Hon, Patrick wants me to operate at a loss," Bobbie sighed. "These are certified organic. No PCP or impurities like that—no traumas. Can't he just be sweet?"

"You *are* wonderful," Heather smiled. "You're actually getting hips. But, really—certified by whom? The USDA?"

"Past and current users, uhhh, Ms...."

"Heather, this is Bobbie," Patrick said. "Bobbie, Heather Leonard."

"Heather, your hair is *so* right for this place. No, seriously—I can show you three glowing individuals when we go downstairs, if you want testimonials."

"Oh! Do you have tickets for the show?" Heather asked.

"Well, *yeah*. I couldn't be in here without tickets. You know, this noise must be just about over. We should head down."

Patrick tried to fix Heather with dissuading eye-contact, but his date was trying to stare down their new friend. "We can just go ahead for twenty," he told her. "I'll pay for it."

"That's alright, baby," Heather said. "I want to see these satisfied customers. Why don't we invite Bobbie to come sit with us?"

"Aww, I don't...."

"Where are your manners, Patrick? Bobbie doesn't want to be by herself in that mob."

"How do we work out the seats? Her ticket'll be...."

"This is general seating, *Patricia*," Bobbie cooed, gently pushing him toward Heather with her slim hip. "There *are* no assigned seats. Just bleachers at the back, then standing room, then



the mosh.”

“See?” Heather slid an arm around Patrick’s waist as she stood up. “This’ll be wild!” Her hand massaged his first-stage love handle in gentle circles. “We’ll observe her other customers. Oh, Bobbie, you know what....” she mused. “Maybe you’d like to...no, never mind. You’re working and all.”

Patrick could not read the Bobbie’s expression with Heather now between them.

“What? I’m not *working* working. I’m here for *Bush* and I wanted to make enough to pay for it.” She held out her palm, which once again contained two of the shriveled fungi. “You guys are wearing me down. When I’m done with you, I’m done for the night. Take them now. I’m not screwing with this downstairs. If you don’t enjoy them, you don’t pay. Is that a good enough deal?”

“So then, why don’t we at least buy *you* a hit?” Heather continued.

Amplified voices rose from the theater floor—a promoter introduced a disc jockey who introduced other minor celebrities while roadies rearranged the stage. “I don’t know,” Bobbie said. “I generally don’t sample the product. Any trip I’m on can end in a dumpster if I’m not careful.”

Now Heather snaked her arm around Bobbie’s waist too. Her hand rested firmly on the adolescent hip while she continued the wax-on routine with Patrick, slowly disrupting the tuck of his shirt. “We wouldn’t leave you alone, would we, Patrick? C’mon, it’ll be fun.”

“Let me think about it,” Bobbie said.

The threesome moved, awkward as a sack race, toward a stairwell. Bobbie dubiously accepted one of the ‘shrooms back from Heather, who immediately bit through her own.

“Pat-rick. Bon appetite,” she whispered. She leaned toward Patrick and placed her mouth on his. He snorted and swallowed the surprise from her tongue, nearly aspirating the prelubricated morsel.

“Wow,” Bobbie said. “You mean business, don’t you?”

Heather only giggled. When they had crowded into the stairwell, she slipped two bills into

Bobbie’s cleavage. “Now yours, darling. C’mon. Bottom’s up!”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” the trans snickered as she, too, bit off half of her ‘shroom.

The local rock dignitaries had finally surrendered the mic and were leaving the stage as the three entered the main floor. The lights went down before Patrick could find an empty spot closer to the stage.

“Don’t move,” Bobbie said. “Wait, or we’ll step on somebody.”

Too late, Patrick’s foot made contact with living flesh in the pitch darkness. Someone on the floor cursed him. Before his vision could adjust, *Bush* exploded into “Machine Head,” klieg lights behind the stage snapping on like pyrotechnics. He brought his hand up to his brow.

“O.K., c’mon,” Bobbie called.

They moved slowly to the left, led by the transvestite tugging Heather’s hand. Patrick kept up while studying the floor for more bodies. With many halts and detours, they gradually flanked the rear of the throng which pressed toward the stage. Collisions erupted in the mosh area. Patrick wanted to watch the stylized violence, but, it was futile to delay Heather’s navigation. They were soon in a position to watch Gavin Rossdale in profile. Their final destination, however, left them directly in front of the speaker stacks. Even Heather could not bear the decibel level there for long. They backed up a few more steps and Patrick realized that his was not the only arm around Heather’s waist.

How long did it take to turn his head to make sure? That was still Heather’s ass bumping him in tempo but cool footwear distracted him from looking. One guy, the bass player, had old, red tennies on. He didn’t follow these when the guy strutted away because then Rossdale slouched toward the edge of the stage, the drop-off, to touch some hands. The bouncing kids bounded, grabbed, slapped at his teasing fingers which dangled, limp. Patrick’s eyes shifted to the front-man’s boots. Reptile of some kind. Don’t think about *that*. No, no, not gonna go there, letting his phobias get in. Not even that word. The pattern of skin was only over the toes and cupping around the heel. Cupping like he might cup a heel with his hand. Tooled oxblood uppers and



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arch: tooled in layers, convolutions. Layered and cut in a whirl, a whorl, a coil—yeah, but still a reptilian pattern. It took him forever to pull his arm off whoever's waist he had hold of. No clue in its concavity as he slid his hand off. He extended both hands toward the stage, twenty feet away. He pumped them slowly, well above any contact with other's heads, he hoped. The one favored hand mused with a tactile memory of the denim it had cupped. Cupped like the material over those expensively shod Achilles heels now stomping to the far end of the stage.

Much later, Rossdale came back. Yet, they were still playing the same tune, in the same lifetime. Album virgin, version, Patrick laughed Saliva beads blew through the white glare around the microphone. The singer held it like a wand aimed at himself, as if to include himself in a spell. He taunted them, voice beginning to rasp, that his brain was "better than the rest." For a moment, Patrick understood the boast. But no, his own organic mind was much better. No computer could duplicate this random, hilarious chaos. See? His hands and arms still flailed like seaweed in the pulse of brightness and shadow, but he had struck no one. Wait, now. That thought almost made sense. He would demand a refund. He writhed in his head with a laughter that swelled and broke like waves against the back of someone's neck. Then he turned and stumbled away from the stage, shouldering between a couple standing behind him. Neither of his companions came along. He stumbled, giggling, in the general direction of the darkness behind the speaker stack. Luckily, there was no one else seeking refuge. Even the upper, tinted spots, beaming from the ceiling far above, were blocked by the mass of black cabinets.

Patrick laughed at the concept of providential darkness, and then just as suddenly, retched. There wasn't much in his stomach to lose. A thin jet of...he didn't know what, but suspected the espresso, his esophagus burning. He'd forgotten about the side-effect. An exit sign added a red reflection to the small puddle he'd made on the concrete floor. Another swell of hilarity rose from his diaphragm. He flashed that the next heave would be filled with cartoon balloons of "hee-hees" and "haw-haws."

Patrick rested, bent at the waist with hands on knees. Now other hands massaged his back and

the back of his neck. One hand mopped his chin with a Wet-Nap. Too many hands to count.

"You can't escape the mirth," a husky voice informed him. He could hear the voice because the first tune had finally crashed to an end.

"Escape, escape," Heather spoke with an automated voice then began to mimic a prison siren. "Did you find a secluded spot for us to...uh, oh."

Patrick heard a definite splat on the concrete and more laughter. "Out, uh, out damned melancholy."

"I didn't know you were sad," Patrick groaned.

"She's just making room, sweetie," Bobbie chuckled. "You'll have to refill her. Well, somehow. Oooooo, now *I'm* talking some shit."

"At least you aren't puking!"

"Shrooms are all different, babe. The eaters too," Heather said. "Maybe I got a bumper."

Bobbie cackled hysterically at this. "Not possible," she said abruptly.

Patrick straightened and stepped out of the darkness as Bush launched into "Little Things." The heads on the crest of the mosh lurched in unison like a steeply tumbling rapids but he wasn't nauseated by the effect. He wondered where he might be swept away to if he stepped in. Who would grab his hand if he went under? How could he even have sex with Heather without laughing now? An erection, unlike the 'shroom, was usually such a serious thing, at least in his experience. Could you be this amused and still get one? What if they insisted that he fuck Bobby as well? Or, but, how about Heather with Bobby? Then he wouldn't have to be serious. Would it be impolite to laugh while *they* were doing it?

He began to think that he had lost some of his high behind the speaker stack. Or, perhaps the drug was morphing. Some of the special effects had mellowed, though every person and object still glowed in a comedic aura. He felt no renewed desire to throw himself—arms, torso, or flailing head—into the squealing lead or heart murmuring bass. Instead, the music now pushed on his face as if trying to enter his pores.



But behind his head, an odd awareness of absence distracted him from the eddies of the mosh. He felt that there was nothing behind him—no bleachers filled with the more timid listeners; no walls or staircases or upper reaches; nothing but an empty, benign darkness. He recognized this sensation from a few years ago, the last time he had tried any mind-altering substances. Would that darkness soon fill with singing?

Five years ago, in the basement of his second home, in the last days of his marriage, those walls, too, had evaporated. He thought he'd heard singing which seemed to come from outdoors. He'd forgotten that the stereo behind the wet-bar was still on. Everyone at the New Year's Eve party had swallowed blotter acid—purple microdot he was told. The voices sang a cappella, as if hiking across a meadow—*Bad Company* doing "Knapsack" which began with "The Happy Wanderer" like an epigram. Most of the guests lay on the floor staring into the fireplace. So who was that singing in the back yard? Jennifer had gone off somewhere, unable to stop giggling though she said her cheekbones hurt. Crazy Jennifer. Patrick couldn't muster the ambition or will to lift himself from the shag carpeting to go spy on her. He smiled now as he did then, picturing Jennifer in flagrante delicto. It would have been good to watch and he should have been watching because she refused, later, to describe her activities: "If you're too lazy to join in, I'm not going to fill in the blanks." But, her neck was stiff the next afternoon. She expected him to give her a massage as he lay drowsing in front of a bowl game.

Now Patrick gaped at the heavily perspiring front-man. Pandemonium resulted in the mosh when Rossdale shed his blousy shirt. He rewarded their adulation of his fashionably frail build with another pass of hand touching along the front of the stage. Patrick tried to focus on events in the present. He might otherwise fall back into the void behind him. The women could evade him easily now, if they wanted. At the same time, the disappointment or relief of their rejection, or even of their seduction might also be avoided. Then, from behind, caresses returned to his love handles—one pair of hands—and the hallucination of absence dissolved. He put off looking to see who they belonged to but a second

pair soon came to rest on his shoulders.

"We shouldn't drive," Heather's voice told him.

"No?"

"But we shouldn't stay here." Singing and shouting her approval of the band had made Bobbie's voice even thicker.

"A taxi maybe?"

"All the way to Madison Heights? Bobbie's from Roseville, hon."

"So are you going to help me out here? My problem solving isn't...I mean, at the moment I'm kinda..."

"Well the Ponchartrain would nice, or the Ren Cen? Might as well make it a party. I can go halves."

Patrick fished for his wallet. He held it to his mouth like a harmonica then put it away without making an audit inside. "I've got plastic, I guess. Should we call ahead?"

"I'm going to buy a cell phone," Bobbie mumbled. "I'd be safer. This'd be the perfect time to have a cell phone."

The hall went totally dark for a moment. Then a single violet spot appeared from the rafters to illuminate Gavin Rossdale. Patrick thought the light seemed to trickle, an illusion caused by dry-ice smoke drifting through the beam—a distant tributary, perhaps, to the flood-tide of the mosh. The image caused him to relax again, even after the notion of creeping up on stoplights all the way home had put a cold lump in his chest. This fear had not removed the grin he could feel stretching his face.

The first chords of "Glycerine" strummed from stage left as another spot cascaded down upon the head of the lead player.

"I'm just wondering who..."

"No, don't wander off again," Heather said, close by his right ear. A smallish breast, he thought, leaned into his left shoulder.

Gavin Rossdale moaned about sinking into his lover's skin.

"I mean, who's supposed to be with who?" Patrick studied the anguish in the singer's



In Concert

expression. Someone was baring their soul that way in public but he still couldn't stop smiling.

"We'll all be there, sweetie. We'll take parts. Or maybe just sleep."

"We'll play roles," Bobbie added.

For the most part, he could probably play his part, Patrick decided and had to chuckle at the way the thought was arranged. Then he sang the chorus line as Rossdale held out his magic wand for the obligatory crowd participation: "The leather days go by...Glycerine, Glycerine." He hoped that he was on key but was determined not to be left out of anything this time, no matter what.



What They Talk About When You're Well And Truly Out Of Reach

By Peter Walsh

It's a shame we've got to bury him like this, *dead*. They tell me he was such a lively boy – funny, animated – and yet here he is: not much of anything. It's as if he's not even trying, or trying too hard. But it can't be helped. Just put a flower in his lapel – no not that one, not that one, *that* one over there, yes the yellow – and with luck they'll study the flower and not the face. The distraught tend to do such things. That reminds me, face. Hand me the blush would you, dear? Such a handsome face, I snuck a look at his eyes before. I know we're not meant to tamper but if you press only-gently on the eyelids you can sneak a look without knocking anything out of place. His eyes are the most cobalt blue and, even though they're closed and there's no helping that (though God I wish there was!) we might as well bring them out in the cheeks. People will imagine his eyes when they see these cheeks. It'll be as if he's alive in the casket; what's more, they'll distract from the crinkles in the pants and jacket. I wanted to pad out the pants and cuffs, everything's a size big for a boy of his frame, but the family demanded this suit: this illfitting, off-rack suit. It was his suit they say and I believe them. It looks positively juvenile, a fidgeter's outfit. Of course I didn't know the boy, that would be *spooky*, but he looks like a fidgeter. A boy who probably vibrates right out of the frame in every photograph he takes, but our service accounts for such things. We provide, in death, the portrait one would have wanted in life. After all, this is his model shot.

Now I saw the way you eyed me before, when I left his collar up and tie-untied while I did the first coat. What was she thinking, you must have thought. But if you tie the tie and fold the collar first and then spill something, the shirt and tie will be ruined and the whole affair becomes a dog's breakfast. You have to declothe and reclothe and suddenly the make-up you've done is smudged and a two-hour job becomes a four-hour one. So I do the underlay with the collar up, that way any spills end up on the *inside* and I can fold my mistakes away. Publically, I've heard them

called happy accidents; gentle fuck-ups, privately. And while you may wonder how one could spill anything on a subject – they *are* immobile after all – you also never know when a chance bit of pressure on the sternum will give way to muscles in the face. I once gave myself an awful fright. I was sitting as I am now on the edge of the casket, bending forward towards the face. I was focused on my work, couldn't feel myself sliding in as I was – as I might do now – I didn't realise I was lowering myself on the lung and stomach. Now lungs – deflated in death – are still squeezeboxes by design and I, leaning on them as I was, caused the air to distend. The body spoke to me! Martha, it said! But it wasn't Martha at all. Actually it was mssssssssccccchhhhhh or the sound of air pressing through a contracted throat and passing through clenched teeth. Awful breath too, he had.

And I'm sorry about the adjustments in the pants, my scrawl is a bit spidery, that six did look like an eight, but they look flawless. I can't even see where you've pinned. Would you mind doing the laces while you're down there? I know: the division of labour here is awful. But you're the apprentice and apprentices do waist-down! And I hope you threaded the belt through *all* the loops this time; I can see the crease when a belt isn't properly threaded. I know you're anxious to practice what you've learned, but now isn't the time; though you'll be glad to hear this: I received a call from the constable today, you know the one, the one in charge of deceased police affairs. We've got another subject coming in on Friday – closed casket of course – but apparently there's still half a face to work with. We'll get you started there and with luck, in a month or two, we'll get another, opposite-halved head. With two halves you'll have a full portfolio! Ha! Too wicked. Too too wicked.

Now, pay attention here, you'll notice the cuffs on the shirt are a little long. I like to use shirts with long, foldable cuffs, that way I can control how much of the wrist is visible.

What They Talk About When You're Well And Truly Out Of Reach

If needed, I also dress them in a wristwatch to hide any discrepancies across the arms. If you stick in this business – and I truly hope you do, you have a sense for it – you'll come to develop strategies of your own to deal with the unseemly, inconsiderate subjects you attend to. Typically, the inconsiderate use ropes and arrive with inappropriate marks across the neck, which I cover with a high collar. Asphyxiations come with an unsightly discoloration of the skin from the gas, even I struggle to hide it, do your best with the blush and move on. Those who use a gun are lost causes from the outset – though good for an apprentice, there's rarely an open casket. Those who go with knives vary in difficulty, depending on where the incisions fall. Between you and I, the most considerate subjects overdose – the right combination of sedatives with an antibiotic will do wonders to preserve the complexion. So: the cuffs. Longer cuffs are better, even if they're not in style. Just think of it like this: you can bury him in the height of fashion, but in two months he'll be out of style and no less dead. I tend to lean towards timeless looks, even if you might find them boring or overly traditional.

When you're on your own you'll have it your way, I suppose; but that won't stop me trying to influence you. When I was learning, the woman who taught me said that everything I learned was in service of the day I prepared her. She was all about blacks, black dresses and hats, dire black mascaras. I hated it. So, years later when it was time to prepare her, I dressed her in a gorgeous colored ensemble, muted hues yes, but no blacks to be seen. I must have been something of an activist, charging upstream against tradition. But when I was done and I looked at her, really looked, from above on the job as a whole, I found it to be wanting. The colors didn't match her face, her features were eroded – as all features are, by time – and what was left could only wear mourning gear.

When you prepare me – and, short of unforeseeables, you will – prepare me with colors.

I've thought about it, and maybe you have too: I see mascara and blush and lipstick, dire but not too dire. I imagine sleeves, long-sleeves. My churchgoing attire: a nice flower print. I can't think of it for long though. Or can't now. I look in the mirror, and have for some time, and see a reflection I can't reconcile to my voice and virility.

I don't wish to say virile, but the other words that come to mind: spry, nimble, robust, are words reserved for the old, justifications for what's lost. I look in the mirror and see arms that should be taut hang with cafeteria fat. My face all collapsed in on itself. Dead, I would look like offal; my skin hard like a worm's ragged carapace. To live longer only corrupts the image further. I will slow down, my brain will marinate in cranial brine. I will forget, maybe I've already forgotten. The spots on my face will spread till my body browns, either un- or anti-tanned by age instead of sun. That the infinity between when I looked last like him and when I looked like myself has not prepared me for death, but rather disqualified me. That when I do go to this engagement, I'll find myself underdressed, not on the list; be told I've had too much to drink, get turned away at the door.



Northern Wine

(Part One)

By Basil Smith

Colony

“In Winter when it's cold, they migrate to the North

Riding on the backs of white heron.”

A nephew of mine used to be in love with persimmons. Around the end of Summer I would look after him while his mother was away. On the good days I could lie under our Papaya tree as the garden took care of him. On those good days every now and then he'd run back to me with fruit falling from his little arms. It's ripe, or it's not ripe, I'd decide in my old age and with all my expertise.

One Summer day we sat on the porch eating sliced persimmon. I was watching the sky and he was watching the ground. When he turned to me – like a cannibal who wasn't quite sure this was it -

and he asked:

“Where do ants go when it's cold?”

Across the landscape of his little toes a trail of tiny bloody footprints crawled reluctant from a pool of red.

These are just the men.

In Winter, when it's cold, they turn to stone and then they die.

But as a final act of love they fuse together like wall

which keeps their sisters safe and warm.

So next summer when you see them all once more,

It's their nephews.

It's not them.

I knew. But I told him as his had mother told me:

Shopping List, Japan

John B. did not notice the sun set.

He poured over a bilingual map, in search of one 'Lake T.'. The bus had been moving for two hours - from a small town terminal to the green mountain scape – when the only other passenger, a small Asian girl, finally asked him where he was going.

She spoke English well and with a slight American accent. They were the first proper sounds he'd heard in weeks. It was her stop as well, she said. It was only ten minutes away - a waste, John thought.

The girl gave John her Mandarin name, but the one he remembers is Eve. Eve worked at the local rope way. She was 30 years old but she looked, spoke, and would later feel like someone much much younger.

They talked and it turned to love.

'I thought so too, but the past 2 years...'

'It's this country', he replied, 'everyone is too connected. When I'm away in the hills, I ... I don't think about it; but when I come down for supplies it's hard – no one's ... they're never alone. Maybe if I spoke the language, if I could hear what they're really saying, you know? I'm sure it would remind me of how boring all that stuff gets.'

'No,' the girl shook her head 'it's the same. I think. I was the same at your age. But we change.'

'Must be that ticking clock,' John laughed half genuinely, 'If you really want love you'll find it, I'm

Northern Wine – Part One

sure. I'm sure there's a nice Japanese guy out there just waiting.'

'The man I work with, he's a bit young. But he's always - work work work.'

Eve furrowed her brow.

'It's a Japanese thing. Business,' she emphatically chopped the air into one box 'Family,' she chopped into another.

The day has been slow.

The sun is past the horizon now, soon it will be dark and the warmth will be gone. Three men in uniform slide down the mountain side in a tram – bouncing past alpine wood and dead rock faces. One of them is a boy no older than himself. The woman waiting below in the station feels nervous in a way that she hasn't since college, as if something inside - a cry or a laugh - holds breath for the pebble trip [it saddens me that I will never learn which].

She stands too close as the door opens. With a wave, the older men leave their young colleagues. またね.

I can't hear from outside, but as she sweeps the cement floor and he shuts the cabinet doors I can see their mouths as they move. She talks more than him. She smiles whenever he faces away, hoping, I think, that next time he'll catch her in the act. She tells him to leave first. And he does.

The cable-car rests in the station. The rope sways in the wind. From an aging hand - the click of a lock drowns in the mountain night. But there is hope.

'So you're fluent?' John asked, changing the subject. She was. French. Cantonese. Korean too.

He felt a little jealous.



Words of the Sea

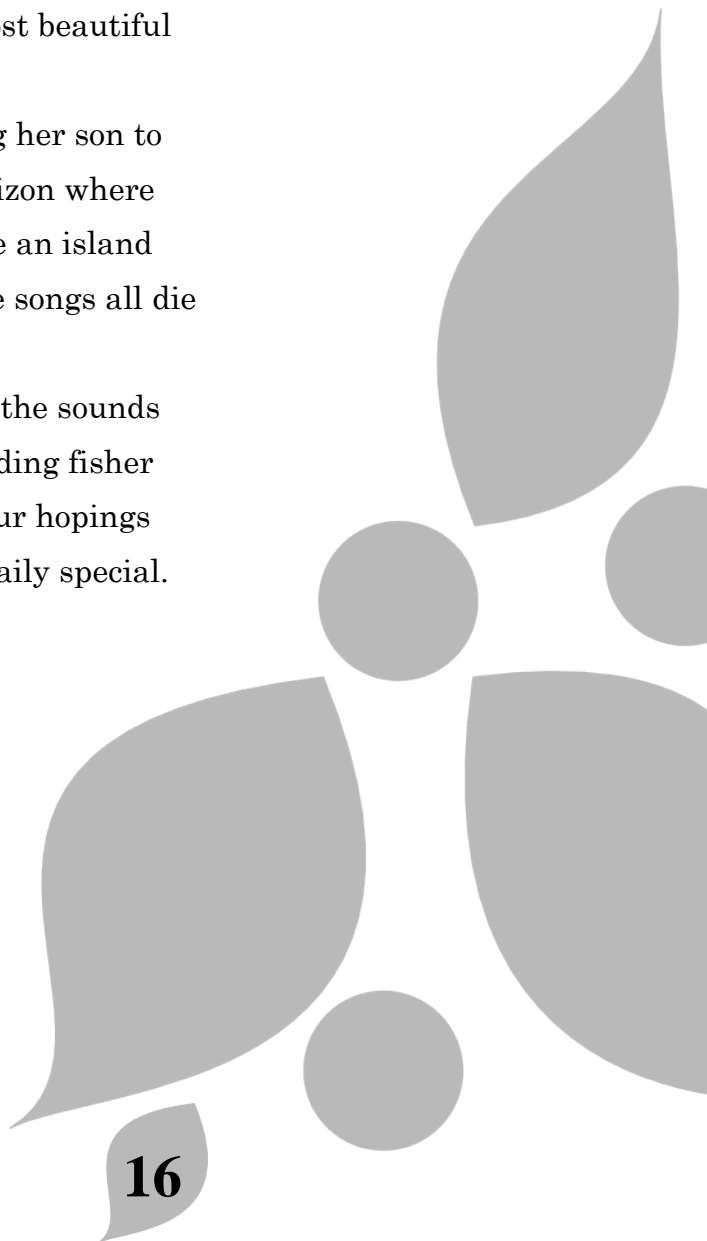
By Michel Cassavi
trans. Eli Wallis

See again the sea where the wind makes the
Most crazy dreams dance to the storm's strains and
Where memories of tender moments make
The tears of our deepest being smile

See again beaches streaked with colours like
So many refuges hiding words that
Waves erase in gilded murmurs so the
Reflux may plan for the most beautiful

See again the moon holding her son to
Slow her fall below the horizon where
Words imagine a wreck like an island
A heap of old records where songs all die

Hear again in the salty air the sounds
Beyond the cliffs always hiding fisher
Men's boats of the early hour hopings
To see some words as the daily special.



a gathering of lists

By Vivienne Mah

things I remember:

your breath against the back of my neck
individual words and thoughts collecting
star-shine against the pale, white, bones of your ribs
and a glimpse of cave blindness where your heart
could have been

and your words;
"there's a universe out there"
streaking fluorescent arrows across
skies that can't decide what shade they are;
the wrong answer, just like
the decision made to care for you

the sadness we know:

souffles sunken in \$2.50 pots
the head of a sunflower curled in petals that are neither
dead nor dying
a train carriage full of passengers wearing the same face
and rain against the windows on thursday evenings

the sadness we want:

the curve of your back, uncounted nubs in your spine and old bruises on
your hips,
the broken nightlight buzzing drunkenly
two plates at dinner, one scraped clean of the gristle
lungs filled with summer smoke and the trees burning against the horizon
phantom arms around around my waist

then, the gathering absence:

periods

and empty lines of sound

no
sound all sound
dog's heated panting

POETRY

the pop of glad wrap around a sandwich,
the thud of a leather boot against
a loose floorboard
metal meeting metal as a grate creaks open
the radio singing static and whining
nouns and adjectives, all owning
and lacking the sameness of you

me
then me
lacking
the formulas and chemicals to burn you and the message our Hallmark
cards have printed us in
out

and words in a neon script coursing through my veins, winding it's way
around words
choking the lonely out:
heart to rent
mind for sale



Laura

By George Dell

It was a thursday
And the air was warm
It was the type
Of honeyed, sun-baked stuff
Which lays heavy
on the languid, supine spines
Of the Sprawling, patched, and empty architectures
Of the highways of the earth.

It was not so long ago.
That the green white highway sign caught a sunbeam in its face
And in an instant, became
Ten thousand writhing golden imperfections.

I was going with my father
To see a woman he had known
A long time ago.
She had danced and sung in a distant, ruined age.
In a world that knew no strangers.

But She must have met, a long time ago
A person that she hadn't met before
Because the golden light has long since bled down from out of the sky
And instead of one warm glow above
A city of ten thousand imperfections shines
Glittering like an angel would

We had come to gather smoking fragments of her holocaust,
In a house upon a hill.

The house was almost empty.
Of a life
only a few cardboard boxes remained
In them I found letters
Waiting like old men to divulge
to anyone, to anyone!
A world of nameless smells
and unconquerable emotions.
But after all, after all
Only a hazy afterimage remained.
Which has long since faded.

We took the boxes with us.
And time began again
turning the miraculous into the mundane, and stealing the months and
years into uniformity.

But sometimes I go and find
A shattered piece of her memories
In them, I see
Ten thousand golden imperfections
Dancing in the light.

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* * *

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