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THE APRIL READER

a literary journal
of prose, poetry,
and essay.

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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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Northern Wine

(Part 2)

By Basil Smith

Northern Wine: Child

I don't know if everyone has a first memory of killing something, but mine is from when I was 4.

It was a nice, clear day in January or December. That morning, my father left to check the possum traps that litter the hill side behind our house. And I joined him.

The hillside was mostly barren bar a handful of grey trees. My father told me that the trees were over a hundred years old. 'Inside the yellow buckets' he lectured 'is a slice of apple. The possum puts his head inside to get at the apple and then this [he points to the metal bar that looks comfortably like clothes line] snaps up breaking his neck.' I must never never touch the trap myself, he explained.

I asked him why we kill possums. It's because they eat the leaves of these hundred year old trees, and without those leaves they die. I looked at the grey trees, each like concrete set in a giant's lung, and thought winter must be very harsh without clothing.

Then we found one. I ran, I had to be the first to get a good look. Thinking about the way its body flayed out makes my neck hurt- its head jammed inside that yellow opening. It was fat, brown, furry, and dead. (For something so mobile when alive they feel heavy when not). Its eyes were black and empty. I prodded it with a stick and the belly squeaked.

Dad undid the trap and removed the corpse. He handled it weightlessly, his hands hairy and clumsy like my own now, but stronger. He pulled from its pouch two hairless babies.

I don't know what my father said and I don't know how long I persisted but soon I cupped the siblings in my hands, the stick discarded.

We found more possums but I had what I wanted and I was happy.

I can see myself playing with them. I'm sitting at the foot of a staircase that leads up to the second story of our two story house; the story where the family sleeps. I wear one of those tacky hats with the flap around the neck, and my nose is covered in white sunscreen. The asphalt is hot and uncomfortable under my bare legs. I sit hunched over the pair as they wriggle about on a piece of flat wood. They are so very hairless, and I can see the blood beating through their translucent naked skin, like spider webs or the arachnoid mater. Tiny hands and feet. They smoosh between my thumbs. When I poke them with a twig it compresses in a way that human skin, even newborn skin, does not.

Plucking tossing rolling bouncing, moving them to my right eye then to my left then in between and crossing my eyes, smelling them, kissing them against my cheek. With thoughts of school and the cousins I saw once fortnightly, I want to lick them.

I gave them names and sex, myself and my sister - my younger brother not then yet born. They played lead in my stories. In those stories *I* was the oldest child and my sister was the shy kid that needed saving.

After a few hours of make-believe I could smell my mother's cooking. Inside I was greeted by my father at lunch and he asked me where the possums were. I was still playing with them, I said.

He told me that they had to be 'destroyed'.

But I was playing with them, I protested.

They **HAVE** to be destroyed - the trees.

That made me quite angry.

I picked the left - the male - first; not because he was the uglier of the two or because I am sexist or because I am self-loathing - to this day I am absolutely decidedly egalitarian. Left to right just seemed the more logical way to proceed, maybe because that's how I was taught to read. I don't know.

The hammer wasn't very big and my aim was poor. Only those areas directly contacted compressed. While outside of the blow he maintained his possum-y composition, like stepping on dog poo. Bit by bit though he became a paste of skin, guts, blood, and underdeveloped calcium. Done, I repeated the process with his sister. They didn't make much of a sound and neither did I. But as the board bounced against the asphalt it made a thwuck that resonated through the general mid-day silence; it's not a sound I care for.

In the end I gave them a 'viking funeral'. I didn't know at the time what a viking funeral was, just that at the local school where my parents both taught - where my babysitters were the playground and driveway and wooden tables engraved with blue-ball point pens, long since washed out - some of the older kids were learning about vikings. And vikings were cool.

From the flower bed I gathered a few daisies, a few sprigs of lavender, and a white flower run through with magenta streaks. I split the lavender and all the daisies - but one - between the left and right sides equally to create a frame. Then with the remaining daisy and magenta flowers, plucking each in that she loves me she loves me not fashion, I swept the scene.

I carried them to the edge of our tree garden - a dark place with solid bark matting which hurt bare feet. You were brave and good folk, taken too young. I recited the one prayer I knew by heart and half of the prayer I was learning. I tossed the chopping board into the garden and retired for the day.

My parents raised me to believe that repenting over a bad deed is a thing to be proud of. An honest man will never steal, they said. My burial was so beautiful and well intentioned that no one would ever think to fault me. Reclining into the old family couch I flushed with peace. There was I: standing proud before the class room, my ABCs spoken clearly and with no mistake.

Northen Wine: 1963

In a small town a little girl played under her kitchen table.

Outside it was another nice day. But for the girl the real treat were her mother's legs. With the premise of a drawstring sack and a few chipped

marbles - two unwanted cats-eyes, a handful of dark rollers, and one prized ruby Granddaddy - she watched the legs sticking out from under the plastic table cloth. The gnarled toes and yellowed bunions - often smoothed into dust by a plastic board. The white streaked brown legs which climbed, fatly, to her mother's skirt. They carried their carriage, every now and then, to a pot of boiling stew. But sitting at the table, watching a soap opera, they bounced in time to her mother's heart beat.

The girl covered her mouth with one hand so as not to breathe on a varicose vein. The other hand massaged the air above a growing birth mark; playing with the static between them.

"Din Din," the doorbell rang

"IT'S OPEN," yelled the vibrating legs.

Nanny Josephine. Once a great beauty it was said. *When she entered the kitchen, the smoke slithered from her lungs, soaked down her leggings, and spilled onto the ground where it formed an unbreathable mat.*

"Ello ello."

"Did you bring it?" It being a cheap bottle of gin. From the local town, 10 miles away. \$1.40 for the lot.

Nanny Jo must have been about to say something, because the legs said:

"Wait a minute." And a person took form beneath the drapes. "Why don't you play in your room?"

The little girl gathered her marbles, then wrestled her way from under the table.

"Hold it there miss snooty. Give Nanny Jo a golden smooch". She tasted like a hospital.

The little girl stomped, intentionally, to her room. Still in the hallway she closed the door - loudly - then tiptoed back to the kitchen where she listened.

The television hummed through the boiling stew.

"Small or large?"

"Girl. You always ask the silly questions ya dumb bitch. Give me the boys cup - fill it twice and once again."

Gin tinkled. Nanny Jo drew a chair and sighed. The

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conversation took its turn past things irrelevant and then arrived at the point.

"Some anniversary." Nanny Joe sighed again. "Has she called?"

The mother shook her head.

"To Marama [Moon in my native tongue]. That girl was born for another world." *Marama. A young aunty who came by each day to play after school when she was young, and after work still when she was not young. Her face was beautiful and her hair was light and soft to touch. But each visit the pale fire in her eyes burnt more and more. She moved down south to Lake Taupo for a better job opportunity and for Rest. Lake Taupo the biggest and deepest lake in the country. When you go, always wear layers or you will freeze.*" God knows she's where she belongs."

The glasses rattled and the old ladies drank themselves into peace.

In her room the little girl prepared her pack - some matches, a knife, a reel of string, a purple towel, a woolen sweater, and a rain jacket. By the time she got back to the kitchen the ladies were well asleep. Their bodies heaved like whales on sand. She shut off the stove. The stew boiled down. She filled a canteen from the tap and pocketed two apples and an orange from the refrigerator.

* * *

The road was loose gravel and hot under the sky. Barren paddocks sat on each of her shoulders, dotted with thin cows and thin cow poop, and these gradually ripened into plantations of apples, mandarins, watermelons, strawberries, and naked vines - not all fruiting at once of course. All of these properties were serviced by small molding cottages, distinct from her own only in their state of non-disrepair.

The cows with their individual names - identified by markings and demeanor - stopped chewing their grass, and slapped tails to say hello. Even though she could not see him today, she tipped toed past the Stallion den just in case. The rotting fence looked weak beside his bulk; and the speed with which he ran: there was nothing faster in the world. And then she arrived where she intended, at the commons.

Long ago the grounds had belonged to a local farmer. But year after year it failed to yield, and so he gifted it, at least in word, to the locals. One day the farmer sold up and moved away. No one knew who owned it. The new man who bought out the farmer's deeds thought it could be his but he, truly, did not care.

Some of the lot was kept clear for events. But most of the property grew over with failed mandarin trees. Fern bushes ever more encroached on their roots, and each year the fruit was more bitter than the last. Sometimes the children ate them on a dare. Other times when they were hungry.

Today, the community had gathered for the weekly game of rugby. Cars sat discarded along the road and on the side of the field. She drew her fingers across their bodies and marked her cheeks with the dust like war paint or funerary ash.

In one game, adolescent boys, not quite old enough for work, tackled and tried with middle aged farmers. Their spines crunched in the lock, the Synovial fluid leaked from their knees, and their elbows peeled raw as they slid across the grass. In another game to the side, the children imitated their fathers and brothers. And between it all, the mothers watched in folding chairs and with drinks and gossip in their hands; rocking, on occasion, to one side or the other so as to dollop out another helping of expected but nonetheless warmly received hoorahs.

The little girl snuck beside a woman using a tabloid as a fan, and she asked:

"Auntie, how far is Lake Taupo?"

The woman thought and then smiled.

"What an odd question. Why would you want to go to Lake Taupo?"

The women around quieted.

"I want to visit Marama. How long would it take to walk to Taupo?"

"Child. It's too far to walk. Trust me."

"Why don't you go play, girl," added another aunt.

One of her cousins, Beth, a girl the same age,

took her by the hand. The women spoke rapidly in hushed tones and concerned gossipy looks.

From the arms of an older boy a ball sailed through the air and landed softly in the girl's hug. It felt cold, and grass shoots stuck wet to its surface *and then they dried in the sun and disintegrated into a thousand tiny particles.* She punted it back.

"Afterwards we gonna swim. You comin?" said Beth.

* * *

After an hour of walking on the road the little girl could feel the bag chafing. Soon her skin would be rubbed raw to bone, and the friction would ignite a forest fire, she knew.

She crawled carefully down into a ditch on the side of the road and jumped past the dry bed. Scrambling up the other side she found a flat piece of grass and dropped her pack. The sweat caking her back cooled in the heat.

She cleared the ground, unzipped the bag and laid out the purple towel, flattening it out on each side until nice and perfect. Next she unscrewed her canteen and poured water into its lid. She gulped it down quick and filled another. She took out an apple and bit. The apple tasted just as any other apple did, tart, pleasant enough but acceptable; sometimes they made her feel sick. She would only know how good those apples were when she was old.

A truck drew down the road, a dust cloud flying behind into the blue. It was a Ute. And she knew this one exactly at a glance - it was Gun Brown's. Gun Brown was the only white man living in the community (most lived in the cities and sub-let their land to the locals). His trucks were always in spectacular condition, unlike the rest of the village he let his vehicles go before they died. He was a smart business man, it was said.

He rolled down his window - an ungraceful arm movement.

"Kia ora e hoa."

"Kiaora, Mr. Brown."

"Is that one of my apples you're eating? Did you steal it from my farm e hoa?"

"No. It's one of Pops."

She crunched and chewed with emphasis.

Deep inside the black of his pupils, a monkey wrench fell between the gears and the machine ground to a stop. The whine was sharp on her ears. Wedging a stick between the gears, he heaved and put it back to work.

"So where are you off to girl? That's quite a haul you got there."

"Town."

Gun Brown was about to comment on how far that seemed, and how she could use a ride, when another ute rolled past the ridge. A local family coming back from the game, the parents in the front - father covered in mud and grass - and a pair of boys on the back. They joined the conversation.

"You headed to Margie's, girl? Get on eh." Margie was Marama's **old lady** who the little girl stayed with on holidays and weekends some times. A trip she'd not taken recently, out of choice.

The little girl waved good-bye to Gun Brown and packed her things quickly.

"Slow down girl, no hurry."

On the way in she chatted with the boys. It had been a close game, Henry (the bigger of the two) tackled someone so hard they almost exploded; they wanted to swim but they had to buy clothes for school; the adults don't talk about Marama because someone cast a Makutu on her.

"Makutu?"

"It's like bad magic" said the older boy "It used to be real common when we had witch doctors, but now you don't see it so much. Mum said in her nan's day everyone and their mother was getting Makutu'd. Left and right, you know. That's why they buried their hair and nail clippings or burnt them, and all crazy stuff, cause if someone got a hold of them that's it you were done for - stuffed real royal. Mum said Marama had a Makutu and that's why she ran down the street with no clothes on and why when they found her she was sleeping in the pig pens."

"That doesn't sound like her. Anyway, magic isn't real."

"Yeah yeah I know. Me and him we think its a real fat one too, eh."

"Yep." chimed in the younger kid.

* * *

FICTION

The town of twelve hundred sat on the banks of the Karawa river. For anyone who visits the town, the first thing they see are the huge metal silos of the refinery, then its pipes, then its ladders, and only after the actual town. It took 2 minutes to drive from one end to the other. It had a handful of shops and not much else.

Dropped outside of Margie's gate, the girl waved the family away. Their horn tooted.

Margie lived in one of the state houses set up for the local workers. It was a lot more modern than the houses out in the country, but it was small and the symmetry of its design sapped it of any life. The little girl knocked on the door and let herself in.

"One minute. Indecent. Make yourself at home."

In the state housing kitchen the little girl prepared the sugar and milk. She poured out the old tea, the leaves whirling down the sink like sailors to their doom, and she refilled the kettle with water and put the kettle over the burner. It bubbled and steamed. When it whistled she took the kettle off the burner and spooned in a few leaves; the water blackened behind the metal. She filled two mugs with milk from a glass bottle, and then slowly poured the black liquid. Into her own mug she spooned 3 lots of sugar, and 1 lot for Margaret. In the lounge she spread out two mats on the coffee table. And then she walked the drinks in suit.

Waiting. The room was coloured state housing tan, and a TV dominated the room - she turned it on - mid day programming - and turned it off. Her tea was too hot to sip so she looked over the pictures plastered across the wall and along the mantle place. At one end there were pictures of young people the girl did not know, and then there was Margie when she was young and lovely. Mixed in with these were pictures of Robert "Willy" Lowells, Margie's second husband, when he was young and handsome too. The pictures aged and held hands and gave birth to a little girl. The girl danced across the pictures, striking a new exciting pose for each; each one leaving her older than the last until she was Marama true and proper. There were a few pictures of the little girl and Marama too, but not many.

Meanwhile, the wall spoke preparation: a quick shower, opening cabinets and brushing teeth, shifting dresses across the clothes rack, drawing

drawers, the pop of small pots and a cheap compactor. And a final smack of lips that OK'd the routine.

The girl took her seat on the couch and dusted her thighs.

The eyes in the wall shifted from side to side in time with the grandfather clock. The TV set sat quiet.

Margaret looked tacky. For reasons of practicality she'd shaven off her eyebrows and painted them back on. Her frame was large and unwieldy. Her hair was coarse and dyed. The elastic of her skin had weakened which left her with a constant sagging look. And she'd fit it all inside a white floral dress that was slightly too small. In these respects she was no different from the rest of the town, but she carried herself with a constant sense of awkwardness that insured nothing ever fit.

"Oh, hello." Margie said hiding her surprise. She refrained from hugging the girl. In comport, she took a seat in her rocking chair and sipped her tea.

"What brings you here dear. Is Grammy alright? Did you walk the whole way? Are your legs OK?"

The girl thought into her drink.

Leaving the questions dangling, Margie rocked in her chair. Cars drove by outside.

"Margaret." the girl stared flatly imitating an adult "I think it's a good idea if we go to Taupo. Do you agree?"

"I ... we ..." Margaret stuttered.

"We must go to Taupo." she nodded.

"..."

"But we must." the girl flared with sadness.

"We... can't.."

"Well why not!" she sprang out of her seat. The tea spilled into her lap and Margie gasped. She ran for the kitchen. She brought back a kitchen towel, red and white patched, and a blue ice pack. The small bundle sobbed on the couch. With a mother's touch Margie dried the girl's face and legs. She wrapped the pack in the towel, and steadied the burn.

"Look girl", said Margie, "We'll see her soon enough, and when we do she'll be all better. OK?"

"OK?" Margie repeated.

The girl nodded.

"It's cold, but keep it on. Even if you burn for just a second, the flesh cooks much longer - and you, you've been burnt for a while. Still," she kissed the girl's forehead and her eyes were like clouds on a hot day "you won't scar. Be happy eh?"

"Should we put the tele on? We'll get a new pot too - of the good stuff (lemon tea, the girl's favourite) - Ok? She hugged her gently and delivered on all she said she would.

* * *

Margie's partner Willy drove the girl home. From the front yard, Margie waved until the car was out of sight and then a little longer. The flowers of her dress billowed lightly in the afternoon.

When the scenery grew more comforting the little girl asked Willy for the time. He checked the dash - it was 4 in the afternoon. That gave her 2 hours until nightfall.

She asked that he drop her at a trail-head by the side of the road. Willy pulled over and leaned across to open the door:

"Say hi to pop for me."

"I will. Drive carefully Robert." she said, meaning it as sincerely as always.

As a woman the bush would be a mystical, frightful place for the girl. When she chased after her own kids on the trails, she couldn't help but think that the birds and their songs, especially the deeper, croaked songs, signaled something sinister. Like a foot wire rigged to a shotgun, or a man with a bat behind a tree. But as a girl it was simply a route from one place to another. She watched her feet and avoided the hazards. And the birds, she barely noticed.

The trail dipped down to a stream, which it crossed via a set of laid out concrete blocks, and then continued up the bank to a hill path. When she reached the water, she squatted and watched the stream pass over rocks and sticks. She dropped a leaf and tracked it down the bend where it slowed and the water fattened out to become '**the water hole.**' The

kids were gone, but wet and unearthened stones marked where they had chased each other earlier. *A boy swung from the rope swing. He let his hands slip at the zenith. He sank to the bottom. The water bubbled. The stream jumped into the air and climbed for the sky and brushed the clouds and brushed the invisible stars, stealing some of their spirit. Falling back to earth, the girls screamed as they were swept off the banks, and dragged down into the river depths where they were never to be seen again.*

She felt at peace watching the water. Should I dive for their bodies and save them from the eels? She asked the stream with her hand, and it bit back coldly - *No! They are mine.*

Another half hour of climbing and she reached the crest of the hill. The hill-top looked over the entire district. Lands of growth and prosperity. Smoke plumed from the town in the distance. Mountains sat on all sides of the valley, sheltering their peoples from the world. In winter they would be white and old, but they were green and naked then.

Dropping down slightly, the trail joined with the cemetery and the new road that led up to it.

Outside the gate, she washed her hands and mouth under a tap. As civilized as she could, she wiped the excess on her shirt and spat into the grass. She latched the gate and closed it behind her.

Most of the oval portraits were rain faded, and she did not truly know who they were. Once she had asked pop why they always walked to the cemetery, it was so far and for what?

He smiled:

"This is where I was born and these people are my family; if not by blood then by friendship (but honestly, girl, its mostly blood)." he winked.

"Well, they're a part of me. And I'm a part of you. So they're a part of you too, sorta. I guess. Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe pops just trying to be smart, eh?" and he laughed handsomely.

So she greeted them as friends.

To pop she gave a big big big hug and nestled in his lap. It was growing late, and together they watched the sunset.

Erythrina

By William Schmidt

I killed my father. I killed one of my brothers.
Killed a couple of my friends over the years.
Killed my wife.

I buried her in that desert and now her body is in the trees.

Coral trees. Same as the batch I planted on the edge of the rough we called a home. My trees died before I put her in the ground. Sometime after, another patch over her head took to sprouting and flourished near her grave.

The trees and the sows died but my hair kept growing.

Believe me. Parts of Texas are best left un-dug.

I had to leave home and I never went back. I took little with me. We slaughtered my horse at the livery and I sold the meat to the quartermaster for a nickel a pound.

The southern bells rang, but by that time I was onboard the train as it was leaving the station. I grew my whiskers out and my let hairs go long. Took to calling myself William Smith.

They will pay you up to five hundred dollars to kill a man in Texas. For that reward you must transfer his corpse to the proper authorities. Red nigger scalp can fetch you two hundred dollars in some places.

The body in my care, the man it belonged to, had a broad chest. His stubble had finally formed a modest beard. He never liked his facial hair and no woman would ever admire him for it. His belly was fuller and his face was hairier when I come across him, but he was the kid I was looking for, or close enough to make no difference, of that I reckon true.

My elders stitched a yarn about a man they once knew in their young days, a dark fella that come through town on a pale cool night. He was looking for a tomb deep enough to hold his bride, deep enough

that the demon on his trail could never unearth her again.

After three days under the hot sun his stiffened body softened as it began to decompose. The blood ran into the lowest levels of his parts, that being his head, hands, and feet what with him draped over the back of my horse like he was.

In the wild, the body is tainted by the harsh beating of the sun, turning skin into boiled leather. Parasites, worms and rot, would like to eat away at the kid's features and it was the rot that destroyed his sandy blonde face.

After more than two weeks on the trail you could touch the last specks of me and blow them away as if I were the dandelions gone to seed. Shall this be the end of me as well? Shall we be an epitaph? Will I make a marker in the sand?

I listen to the trees. Everything speaks. We don't always know the language but it still talks. The rustle of the breeze tells me to snap the charred bones.

See what the marrow leaves.

I heard the sound of a thousand horses and took in the smell of an empire abroad, my American empire, a musk of our new world conquering the old, with its smokes and greases in the air.

In another year the railroad will stretch out here to San Antonio. Perhaps the demon will take on its wheels and catch up to me that much sooner.

I took the body to the United States Marshal's office.

I presented the ticker from my bill fold and identified the kid as the boy inked as wanted on the poster.

His skin had turned a dark black with deep shades of bright red running the length of his arms. His body had begun to spill and rot under the line of rope that I had tied him to the back of my horse with. He was all filled up with spores and pus and the bastard oozed out as they pulled him out of my tarp and examined him.

His hands and face were swollen and bloated. Pools of shifted blood patterns tattooed his putrid flesh as his skin broke open, leaking green distended intestines, living snakes fighting to be free of his corpse. His light blonde hair had become a beard of bacteria and fungus. His eyes were gone, replaced by insect larva.

His flesh was a pox of blisters, only a thin layer covering his exposed skeleton remained.

The bounty was not honored. I received no payment. The Marshal asked me my name again. I told him I was William Smith.

William Smith was a man with long hair and a shaggy beard. I met him on a train to New Orleans and I slit his throat while the train stopped to take on water. We left his body behind. I dropped him in a small ravine and filled it with rocks.

A gray dog, more pup than full-grown, sniffed at my boots as I walked into the saloon.

“Who’s mutt?” I asked the room.

“That one’s mine,” a stranger said.

“What’ll you take for him?”

“Wasn’t planning on selling. It’s a girl,” the stranger corrected me.

“Damn bitch. Forget it,” I said at him.

“Dogs and men, an ill breed alike,” the stranger continued, jabbering at his mates.

Dogs aren’t men. I would never think to speak ill of them.

I told you early on to believe me.

You shouldn’t have.

I shot everyone I ever knew after I was done knowing ‘em. Reckon I couldn’t stand the idea of

them living in this world without me.

When I die I want you should burn me up and cast my ashes out to sea, to swim and drift down to the murky depths of leviathans and monsters.

Take my eyes with you, if you ever gaze into them again you will feel a terror and the tremor will buck you under.

Don’t let the maggots eat my eyes.

The ocean is where god puts all of his mistakes, the creatures too fearsome to walk the earth.

I belong there.

Gods and anchors, hold tight to my ankles, wrap me up in the line, tangled and drowning, and sink me. Sink me. Sink me.

The whiskey jockey asked if I needed a drink and I told him I needed a dozen. I told him to fill every glass that he had.

I closed my eyes and listened as the southern bells rang.

Polly's Visit

By Carol Smallwood

Polly arrived in her husband's pick-up. It was a stretch for her to get out because she was a little woman and I had to smile because a Ford pick-up didn't quite coincide with my image of a retired, tiny registered nurse whose receding chin emphasized her bird-like look. Although I hadn't seen her since we were kids, I had no trouble recognizing her—her brown eyes were as full of life as ever, even though her auburn hair had that out-of-a-bottle shade.

"Oh, I love your house," said Polly after hugs.

"Thanks!" I hung her coat up and asked, "Did you have any trouble finding my place?"

"No, none at all. Your directions were super clear." Her voice had such a ring of unbounded optimism, I felt like extending my foot so she'd fall on her beak-like nose. Polly put her hands on her hips and twisted to one side until her bones "were heard from" and then did the same to the other side. She used to pop her knuckles so I checked to see if they were oversized like Aunt Hester said they'd be, and when I saw they weren't I felt disappointed and cheated.

"I'll put your boots on the furnace to dry."

"Oh, that'd be super."

"Please have a seat." I left her patting her hair, perched on the edge of the chair. When I returned from the utility room I said, "You're very brave to drive from St. Paul this time of the year."

Polly dismissed it with a wave of her hand and said, "Oh, I asked St. Christopher to keep his eye on me." She added with such conviction, "I have a super guardian angel," that I glanced above her shoulder half expecting to see an angel as portrayed on holy cards awarded to good children at St. John's Catholic School — in a white robe, barefooted in midair, smiling, with perky wings. Polly looked at me carefully and said, "You look well in green. And how'd you do it — you don't have any lines on your face."

I looked down at my green jumper and said,

"Oh, thanks." I'd been told in high school home ec class, when we'd taken turns holding color swatches against each other's throats, that green was my color because it highlighted my green eyes. Others had complimented my skin — but lately it'd been dubbed "youthful." My square chin had always contrasted with my fair skin, blonde hair, and even features — Polly's cheeks had a blotchy look some children have; her nose was still so pointed it didn't look real.

"Would you like some tea? I have some apple cinnamon, mint, or orange pekoe."

"Mint sounds super."

After I'd put the kettle on I said, "I'll give you a little tour of my house if you like," because she'd kept sitting on the edge of the chair like a bird anticipating a worm.

"I'd love one. You have a lot of privacy here, don't you?"

"It's almost *too* secluded, but I wanted a quiet spot."

"You have quite a bit of room."

"No matter what you have, I don't think you ever have enough closet or storage space. I've come to the conclusion that if you have space, you'll fill it." When I came to the first room down the hall I said, "This is Scott's room."

"I see lots of blueprints. He a contractor?"

When I replied, "Architect," I noted with satisfaction that Polly was impressed. "It's very hard for Jenny to be away from him. He got a phone for the room and uses a calling card — their monthly bill must be terrible. He describes every new house he looks at in great detail."

"It's super you have him around to help you settle in."

"Yes, he's been a great help. He's easy to have around." I waved my hand, "You can see he's pretty neat."

The next room was a storage room filled with things I couldn't part with--things I hoped someday the kids or their kids would treasure--I hadn't anything of my parent's except a quilt my mother had given someone; everything else was lost when their house caught fire after their greenhouse burned.

When we returned to the living room Polly said, "You're as methodical as you were as a child." Yes, she was probably right: I'd put my books on shelves grouped just like I had them in Nicolet City. "You always walked on sidewalks and never took shortcuts on the grass. Where'd you get your dining set?"

"I wanted a big table and found it from a newspaper ad when Cal and I first moved back to Nicolet City." A few of the ebony and rosewood marquetry squares had been lost but otherwise the matching mahogany sideboard, hutch, table and chairs looked the same. Then I recalled a dream: I was sitting at a dining table deciding what to do. I was to be married to a local boy but couldn't go through with it. Everyone belonged to the same church or were relatives and I wanted my freedom--they thought I was mentally unstable and doomed. I felt tempted to go ahead with marriage to one I didn't love -- to fit in -- but remembered *Brave New World*: "Orthodoxy means not thinking--not needing to think."

"It's super. And I love your grandfather clock. Does it chime?"

I nodded and said, "I'm glad you got my address. I've often thought about you. Tell me about your kids," and then wondered why women automatically asked each other first about their children.

Polly began pulling her hair through her fingers like she did as a child--if she'd been eating something sticky she'd end up with hair like Medusa. "Eddie's in Colorado. He stayed in the Air Force, never married, and loves traveling a lot. Pattee's in Wyoming and has two girls. She married a realtor and become one herself when the girls graduated from high school." She opened her purse and I knew what was coming next.

After I made my proper comments on the pictures, I said, "Your mother showed me pictures of you when I visited her but after she died I lost track of you."

"I'm glad we got in touch again. Even if it's the time in our life we're the old farts we used to make fun of."

I laughed and said, "Hey, we're not old yet! But, I admit the last time I got towels I picked bright striped ones and realized my days of buying beige towels were over."

"Remember those days at Girl Scout camp? We had..." But I was remembering last night's dream of going through many mazes with others at girls' camp. We were told to follow each other in two rows through long tunnels and I was terrified when the tunnel got very narrow and drew me in like a vacuum.

After Polly adjusted her slipper socks, she said, "My mother wrote me that she couldn't believe your uncle or husband didn't give you any help raising your kids after your divorce."

I stared at the red crickets on her slipper socks and said, "I often think of your mother." I'd longed to tell Aunt Ida about Uncle Walt and wondered how much Polly's mother had guessed. I looked at Polly adding sugar to her tea, and didn't think it'd do any good to tell her that I'd been only a few hundred dollars from being eligible for food stamps, after giving up my job at White Feather so I wouldn't lose custody of Mark and Jenny. Like with Barryton, I'd planned on them coming with me but wasn't allowed; I'd gotten a three room house for us in White Feather (my lawyer said to try and get a job as close to Nicolet County as possible) but it was decided that the split custody only applied to Nicolet County. I'd never lost that deep cold fear of Cal taking them away like he said if I couldn't support them.

Scott shook his head at me when I'd shut the lights off behind him and I'd said, "Yes, I know. I'm cheap." But, Aunt Hester had always said, "If you can't say something good about somebody, don't say anything at all," so I didn't tell him why I did it.

To make Polly change topics, I told her, "I hope it doesn't snow when you're on the road."

"The forecast is for three inches tonight."

"I'd love to have you stay."

"Thanks, but I can't." Polly twisted her back again a few more times till she "heard her bones speak." The creaking never bothered me, but I know it did others. "How old were Jenny and Mark when

FICTION

Cal died?" Polly wasn't going to let Cal go away.

"In their early twenties."

"Do you have a picture of him?"

"I found one unpacking a box before the funeral. Just a minute." When I re-entered the room with a framed black and white picture, Polly quickly flipped over her tea saucer. Had she checked my silver too? Mary Elizabeth was the one who'd always done things like that after blowing back any hair escaping her coils. Funny, whenever I couldn't do simple things like getting the wrap off Wendy's crackers or splattering half & half getting it out of McDonald's containers, I remembered how inadequate she'd made me feel that I hadn't attended her all-girl college. Well, my silver and china were respectable even though I'd given Jenny my Wallace sterling and Lenox china I'd bought gradually over the years, to have something of value to hand down. After I'd gotten the sterling and china though, I no longer admired them in Barrons catalogs and missed that.

"This is Cal's graduation picture after getting his M.D.--I was going to give it to the kids but forgot to take it with me to the funeral." Cal's hairline was already forming the "M" so typical of men's receding hairlines but it was carefully in place — he must have already been using "A little Dab'll do ya!" Brylcreem. His concession to casualness was to occasionally not use any, but the more natural his hair appeared, the more abrasive he became; the furrow between his brows and sneer were just becoming perceptible. I'd also kept a little grade school picture of him showing the good in him before it'd begun corroding.

Polly said, "He was nice looking."

"Thank you." But the most noteworthy thing about him I suddenly realized had been that there wasn't anything noteworthy about him; he was as smooth as a trout in a stream. I smiled politely and lifted my Noritake cup but only admired the platinum band and replaced it in the saucer. I'd debated what to do with the picture — my first impulse after smelling Brylcreem — and I'd been taken aback on how sharp it'd been — was to smash it to oblivion. She handed it back to me and added, "I bet he knew his own mind."

"It was his sense of strict morality and purpose that'd first attracted me and his lectures made me feel he cared." And he'd come riding by in a white clinic coat so dazzling that I'd only seen Dr. and

Mrs. embossed on 25% cotton fiber (hopefully watermarked) white stationery. I fell in love with him the spring of 1963 when *Two Faces Have I* zoomed up the Billboard Charts and were married within three months.

During the sixties (the decade of JFK's "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country") it was only the "out-of-it" females who pursued careers because "they hadn't been able to catch a man," doomed to look like the drab old woman on the card nobody wanted in the game of Old Maid.

I asked, "Did your professors call women students "twig gatherers" because they'd work until their houses were furnished?" If women weren't married by twenty-one, it was assumed there was something wrong with them or they were not attractive enough to catch a man. The more attractive and innocent you were (why buy the cow if you could get milk through the fence) the more marketable you were — that is, you'd get husbands with the most earning power to provide for you and your kids.

Marrying someone like Cal was considered a triumph--as Uncle Walt said, "A general surgeon, but sure as hell, still a surgeon," and when my girlfriends began falling away I saw it as a sure sign of envy. He'd known what to do on our wedding night but I assumed it was because of the classes he'd taken in anatomy.

Polly said, "Well, at least your kids had a father longer than you did. You were too young to remember your father when he was killed and it was so fortunate that Walt adopted you. I'll always remember Walt as a Horatio Alger-super-American-success story."

I smiled politely and offered her more pineapple wrapped in broiled bacon, wishing I'd thought of using the Corning Ware warming tray I'd gotten for Cal.

"I suppose it worked for him too since he didn't have children of his own." When I didn't reply, Polly asked, "Where's your brother?"

"In Milwaukee."

"I heard he'd become a monsignor." Polly got a funny look and then asked, "So how've you been feeling?" Maybe she was trying to find out if I'd been in a rest home--it was the story that'd been spread when I'd gone to the University of Wisconsin--

Barryton.

"It still seems like I should be going to work and I'm not sure I'm ready for retirement. Still, things were stressing me more."

Polly switched hands, began twisting the hair on the other side of her head, and said, "Yes, I find I don't have the patience I once had."

"Do you ever have the feeling you're not contributing anything now you're retired?"

"No. I'm having a super time enjoying things I've never had time for before." I didn't reply because I'd recalled counselors saying I didn't let myself enjoy things. She asked in the same chirpy tone, "So, how're you adjusting to your move?"

"Oh, fine." With Scott around, preparing regular meals gave me some structure, since I felt I should be home when he returned from work. He said I didn't, but it seemed the thing to do; I automatically picked up after him but I was glad when he'd asked to do his laundry after seeing me put his whites and colors together to save soap, water, and electricity.

"It seems like you're pretty well settled here. I suppose divorce must be difficult but it happened years ago."

But it was like yesterday when Uncle Walt had come over after I'd begun divorce proceedings he said, "You look sick." He sat at the dining room table in Cal's captain's chair arranging his pocket change. "The contraceptive loop's unhealthy and if you don't want sex or kids you should have your tubes tied." He hit his fist on the table and swore. "I don't know if you've been running around, I'm just concerned with your welfare. Cal has all his money I loaned him in his new building and you don't need any damn support." His voice quivered and I prayed he wouldn't cry. "I can't understand it-you've everything you want and see everything ass-backwards. Christamighty! If Cal was running around or drank it could create some problems, but by God, you won't marry again and you're going to be alone."

I felt Polly looking at me and thankfully recalled her asking, "I hope you won't be alone for Christmas?"

Hisashiburi Kawabata-sensei

By Basil Smith

It was night time in Tokyo. The streets were filled with people on their homeward commute.

A taxi signaled out of the traffic flow and stopped in front of a restaurant. The door opened and a girl in a plain sky blue yukata stepped out onto the side walk, careful so as not to snag her dress. Ayako Asakura's mother met her half way and patted her down one last time.

"Have fun, birthday girl!" She blew her a kiss and closed the car door. The taxi merged back into traffic. Ayako waved at her mother in the rear window.

Only when the car was completely out of sight did she let her arm fall to her side. She turned around and walked briskly passed the restaurant.

Her red obi was bound tight around her waist and, in combination with the raised sandals, it greatly impeded her step. As she passed through an opening in the street, down the flight of stairs that led into the railway system, she clung carefully to the railing to keep out of the way of the other commuters. A foreigner with an oversized backpack and a rough beard climbed in the opposite direction. He watched the girl as she descended.

She passed several closet boutiques; all with the same interior decorator who fancied warm lighting and the colour of flesh. A boy her age stood outside of one store in a chef outfit waving around a basket of bread.

Beyond the boutiques the scenery turned to transit shades of white and grey; the only dashes of colour were the maps of the city network and posters offering deals to faraway places.

The Marunouchi line ran on a raised loop and connected all the important places of Tokyo.

Riding on the train put Ayako into a trance as the city lights blurred by and the carriage seemed to drift left and right. A woman's voice pulled her from this trance as it announced Akihabara station once, and again in English. As the thumps of the

tracks grew slower and more pronounced Ayako tightened her grip around the standing bar.

Even on the platform she could hear the sounds of Akiba seeping in from the streets below; they mixed with the station announcements, and as she neared the eastern exit they soon became all she could hear.

The station opened out into a pocket of shopless concrete. Hundreds of people swung shopping bags and stared into flip-top cellphones. The largest group stood and sat outside the AKB theater in different poses of waiting. The running neon sign said there was still another half hour to go. A deciduous tree sat behind the group. A metal bar wrapped around the tree for people to sit on, and she wondered why no one had taken the opportunity.

Anyway – this was not her destination. She moved further into the heart of Akiba.

For every street there were fifty or more shops. Shops without an inch of sticker or poster-less wall. No space was put to poor use. Bins of goods extended high past human reach. Lines of shelf were fit where they *could* be fit, making the isles so thin you had to join a congo-line to shop, lest you knock something off the walls. Even the walk-way outside of shops were littered with human sized action figures and cardboard boxes overflowing with electronic parts. Everything was mauled by taped on pieces of plastic which advertised prices; she had no idea if they were bargains or not.

High pitched anime voices and chip-tune music filtered out of each store, so that if one was to stop and listen, at any given time in that walk they could hear six songs at once.

The road-ways were cordoned off on Sundays, and people walked everywhere they shouldn't. If for every street there were fifty shops, then for every shop there were thirty people; which may sound like a lot, but it was fewer than last year and *that* was fewer than the year before that.

The red, five-story *Club Sega* building passed by, filled top to basement with arcade machines and capsule toy dispensers and sweaty people. Ayako thought nothing of it.

Not far from *Club Sega*, wedged between a ramen shop and video game store, she arrived at her place of work. It was a small building. A seedy blue light emitted from the doorway and the first thing visible, two steps from the entrance was, a grungy stairway. The first floor was dedicated to selling stickers of anime characters. She ignored this and ascended two flights.

On the third floor, outside the main door there was a sign telling patrons specifically what they could NOT do to the maids. No touching, no asking for personal details, no stalking.... Two boys in their early 20s wearing plain-black button up shirts guarded the entrance.

"Good evening Ayako," greeted one.

"You're late, again" grinned the other, more handsome, boy.

She bowed quickly to both of them and hurried inside.

Two maids stood at the front. They started the: "Welcome home, Maste-" before breaking out of character for a laugh. Ayako bowed.

The manager, a thin nervous middle-aged man, recognized her straight away and gave her a look of disapproval which she pretended not to see.

The cafe was half-full, but the girls worked as enthusiastically as ever. Serving drinks, making food, acting out fantasies.

Her best friend Yukari played paper-scissors-rock with an obese regular. Ayako could never recall his name, but his 'thing' was little sisters. Evidently Yukari had lost a round as she was yelling in a high pitched voice. When Ayako passed by Yukari squealed even louder, knowing that this sound hurt her friend's ears.

In the backroom Ayako read the sign-in board. The board had cells for each type of duty, with velcro dots to attach personal tokens – robots, animals, stars, etc. A single dot remained. She took the baby turtle from her locker and signed herself in.

The manager knocked on the door and

opened it without waiting. He continued to wear his disapproval.

"You're late again." he wiped the sweat off his growing forehead.

"Sorry." she bowed.

"You're never on time, I have to wonder if you enjoy it out there."

It was not that she enjoyed street work, but it was preferable to playing kids games and casting spells over novelty dishes; and nothing could be worse than the 'dance' breaks. Ugh.

"Sorry." she bowed again, "What should I wear?"

The manager scanned the outfit rack quickly, then scanned Ayako slowly.

"Wear that."

The boy, who, judging by his spotty beard growth and his tired skin, must have been older than her, flipped through a plastic folder looking for the pose.

"This one." he pointed with his greasy fingers.

A cartoon girl with fluorescent physics-defying hair in an anatomy-breaking lean held her hands in a heart shape.

"No problem, no problem. *OK*" Ayako said with two hyper enthused thumbs.

She bared her teeth. "One, two, three Nyan Nyan!" His friend took the picture. "Good work Master!" she clapped her hands. She bowed and sent him off with a pamphlet.

Ayako worked in the middle of the main intersection, where the majority of the foot traffic passed. She was not the only one of course. Many girls in various types of uniforms - Pokemon costumes, maids, Gundam robots, gaudy bronze Ganguro - advertised in that intersection with their shrill baby cries and their leaflets. And every day, groups of geeks gathered around them trying to get some interaction for free.

Today Ayako had gathered the largest following. It was like the day she'd first been out there, when she was a novelty, but it was better.

FICTION

Although she could avoid the sustained awkwardness that arises when there's no one else to push the problem guys off, she was no longer nervous like she was back then.

The next boy had the look of someone stretched for no good reason. When she struck a peace sign he wrapped his arm around her waist. She shuddered.

"Do I recognize you?" he asked.

"Me? I don't think so. I'm no one of note."

Flash.

"No, I'm sure I recognize you."

The boy was about to press the issue when an oddly effeminate yell rang from near by.

Two lines of beautiful girls in school uniforms marched right on through the intersection. They chanted as they marched, and the crowd chanted in response. Their names were thrown at them like flowers. A regiment of security guards circled around making sure they had always the right amount of space.

At the front of it all one girl, with fashionably crooked teeth, waved a banner as she stepped in time to the chant of her followers; for her, most of the cheers were given.

Ayako and the other advertising girls watched as all the boys and men, moments before enamored, were drawn away like waves retreating back into the ocean.

"What's with the dress?" her best friend Yukari yelled from the kitchen.

Ayako knelt to brush the stubborn dust into her pan.

"I was praying at the shrine and I lost track of things!"

"Oh! Well you're gorgeous! Did you see how the manager was looking at you?" Yukari walked out of the kitchen. Her sleeves were rolled up and her arms glistened.

"I swear when you left he was gonna run out too."

"Gross." They both laughed.

"Alright. I'm done." said Yukari. "Are you done?"

It had been less than forty minutes since Ayako had come in from the streets, but in that time the electric town had waned considerably. Most of the shops had rolled down their corrugated shutters, and only a few adult stores and the arcades remained.

Ayako had waved Yukari away at the train station. But rather than catch the next one, as she had said she would, she had instead walked right back into Akiba.

It was too early, so she bought a pastry and a canned coffee at a convenience store. Because of the confinement of her dress, she had to stand at the store's assigned window seating. A few shoppers passed in the street outside.

Her phone beeped.

"I won't be able to see my baby tonight??? /(&_ ;)s. Don't forget to thank Mr. and Mrs. Itano for their hospitality. I will put a spare change of clothes on your bed in case Hikari's are too big, OK! Good night my girl. Sweet dreams. XOXO"

In the window reflection people inside the store read around a magazine stack. It was the action of one girl, as she flipped through a manga volume, that gave answer to one of Ayako's worries.

Ayako Asakura found the non-descript entrance down an alleyway. She knocked and Mr. Tanaka opened it right away. He was an older man, but he wore the clothes of someone younger; they suited him well.

"That's a lovely dress Haru, uh, sorry Miss Takizawa. Come in, please, after you."

She looked down the corridor in wonderment; judging by its depth the place must have occupied the entire block. She was surprised that no one else was there to greet her.

"Where is everyone?" she asked.

"We believe that our clients settle in much

nicer when they take their first step without so many distractions."

Ayako had to admit, it did calm her nerves.

"And make up?"

"Forgive my forwardness, but you look absolutely perfect as you are. Now, please – your room is the one adjacent. It's already unlocked."

She let herself in and she had to step back for a minute. They had done a fine job in recreating her bedroom, just from her pictures and her notes. From the little radio she kept on her study table, to the teddy bears that slept at the foot of her single bed – it was the same. Even the painting of the turtle on the wall! She could hardly believe she hadn't drawn it herself.

She stroked the bed sheets.

"The same brand was out of stock." Mr. Tanaka apologised and bowed profusely.

"No. It's fine." She turned and grinned. "No one could tell the difference."

"Still, I am most humbly apologetic. Excuse me asking for this, but do you remember the script?"

She did.

"Excellent. It's alright if you're not perfect. There's a uniform in the wardrobe along with an ear piece. Put that in and if you forget anything one of my staff will feed you the cues. Other than that: relax, be yourself, and most all of -- have fun. If you have any problems, at any time, feel at absolute ease to stop and ask."

He moved to close the door but stopped half way.

"And I just wanted to say, Miss Takizawa. I am a big big fan of your work. Good luck!"

"*Good evening everyone, Haru here.*" the girl in uniform whispered to the camera. She spoke slow with frequent pauses.

"*A lot of you ASMR-bunnies have been requesting, that I do a bit of face, brushing.*" She played with her hair, something she would do many times in the course of production. "*I've been a little, afraid to do it because, I'm not that confident in my face, and, I think it would bring too much attention*

to it, but I thought, since, it's my three-hundredth video, maybe I would give it a try."

She pulled a thick paint brush from off-screen.

"*Today I've got my favourite brush,*" She ran the bristles with her finger, then brushed one side of the camera, "*I love the sound it makes when, it runs over the microphones, I find it very relaxing. When I'm editing, if I use, if I use this brush sometimes I fall sleep.*" And she ran it across the other side.

"*OK*" She brushed slowly up her neck. "*Like I said, I, feel very uncomfortable about this. But, if it makes you all, feel tingly, then I am happy to do it. I would like, to do anything to make you all, feel, tingly.*" She paused to brush her neck in different strokes.

The brush moved up to her chin and swept across the bottom of her face, "*when, I was young, I felt bad, about, my, lips. I thought, if I had softer lips like my friends, that I would look better. My, nose is no good either. Sometimes, I wish I could, have it different. But life isn't like that, sometimes ... but I believe every person is beautiful.*"

She leaned her cheeks closer to the camera and ran the brush in circles over them. "*I believe every person is beautiful, truly. I am, a beautiful person. I will not let the world get me down.*" She turned to show the back of her neck, the crane's beauty, the brush ran up it in long sweeps. Her chin quivered like someone about to cry.

"*I, have many, things that, make me beautiful. What I, am inside, makes me someone of worth, it over, powers, my problems. My, problems*" She stopped brushing to stare into the camera. She smiled. "*There are no problems, only details that make us unique and beautiful.*"

{Good work Haru.} said the man in her ear.

"Next I will--"

Someone knocked on the door behind her.

{Act confused. Good. Good. Good. Now, answer it.}

The girl in uniform walked away from the camera.

"Mom?"

FICTION

It was not her mother. It was an old man dressed in old man clothes.

"Ah!" the girl clapped her hands in excitement. "Mr. Kawabata, long time no see!" She bowed deeply, and he bowed lightly in return. "Come in, come in. Please." She pulled the man over to the camera and set an extra chair from her study table. She lined it up and helped him to get seated.

"Everyone, Mr. Kawabata," she indicated with her palms, "Mr. Kawabata, everyone. He is my teacher from school. He retired-- how many years was it now? I haven't see him in so very long. He was my favourite teacher. Mr. Kawabata why don't you say hello to everyone."

The old man had been staring at the girl without stop. When he heard these last words he reached out and ran his hand down her bare thigh.

{Excellent work Haru. You've done so well so far. Now, put up a fight.}

The cordons were removed and the roads had become roads again. When a car passed by she felt conscious of how odd she must look in its headlights; a girl in day time Yukata waddling alone in the Akiban night. Above her, in the buildings, only a few humming neon lights remained.

For once, without the crowds she could hear everything about herself: the rustling dress, the echoing wooden steps, the breeze rolling passed her ears, the slight whistle that her nose made when she breathed in.

She found a neon-light she could use. Below it, an elevator faced out into the street. She pressed the button and waited.

When it arrived she hopped in and punched for the 7th floor. As it rose she enjoyed the heaviness, to be more substantial for a while, but to know that one could shed the added weight at the press of a red button. She would spend her life riding elevators if she could.

It opened to a dimly-lit manga-cafe.

The receptionist, quite cute, assumed she was some drunk who'd missed the trains. Ayako saw his judgment in full and it made her laugh. She played along and pretended not to understand as he directed her through the options and the use of the shower.

She paid for the night package and wished him sweet dreams.

Browsing along the wall-stacks of manga she found a volume of *20th Century Boys*. She carried it back to the reception and took a blanket off the rack nearby. She made a goofy face at the cute guy behind counter.

"Sweet dreams." he repeated.

"You too." she replied.

Ayako weaved through the maze of cubicles; most were empty but from a few there came the sound of typing.

She found her own, number 108, and slid open the intransparent glass divider. She stowed her sandals next to a pair of complementary plastic slippers. She threw the book and it slid across the black vinyl. She threw the blanket and it landed in a soft pile. She threw herself as she had thrown everything else and the padded floor felt more comforting than she had imagined. She fell asleep as she was.

Stronghold Baby

By Eli Wallis

She vomits. The porcelain is cool on her fingers. Is this how a sea-cucumber feels? Can sea-cucumbers feel? Not to insult sea-cucumbers, but any daily routine that involves oral expulsion must be pretty numbing.

She coughs and clears her throat. There's a kid outside, yelling in a horrible sing-song-in-overdrive way. The sky is grey and the neighbour's roof is blue through the mesh in the open crack of window. She told him when they first looked at the house that a blue roof was trouble. He said that if it was, it wasn't their roof and so it wouldn't be their trouble. She said that it was always neighbourhoods that were troubled and he said renters would never be part of the neighbourhood; the kid without a fairy or model without a dog.

She vomits again. She retches louder. He calls something up the stairs but she can't hear him over the retching. Models vomit. She had a dog once, or at least a little puffball that resembled a real dog. Does that make her a model? Or do those things have to be concurrent? Could she file as a part-time model, most-of-the-time vomiter? She starts to smile and takes a breath through her nose and stops. He's slowly thumping up the stairs. He thinks she doesn't know that he goes up the stairs on all fours when there appears to be no one watching, but she does. The kid outside is closer now, but the breeze has turned into a light wind. She can make out an I've only been in love once, then I learned from that before the voice runs away again.

"What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" She flushes away breakfast. He is eating from a yogurt cup with a spoon. "Do you have to eat that?"

"I don't have to, but I am." The young voice comes back mingled with a female one. They bounce around incoherency. She can smell the banana-substitute in the yogurt. "It looks like you're ready to start drinking from the toilet." She throws up. "But that doesn't explain the vomit. Or I guess it does."

Mostly water splurts out. Splurts. Retch. Vomit. Expel. Throw up. Upchuck. Is that all? She can't think of others. "Is that kid rapping again? He's like seven." Puke. You are puked; grabastic pieces of amphibian shit. She laughs and coughs. He is down the hall and mumbling something about jedi. The sky is moving, but barely. The wind whistles or howls or whatever. She thinks of the tree in the back leaning and bending and whipping and cracking and crushing. She can't hear it rustle. The house makes house-sounds and somewhere a loose bit of panelling shakes. "We gonna ride till the wheels fall off." He hands her a glass of water and sits on the floor next to her. She drinks some and forces it down.

"Thanks." She coughs. They look at each other. A man-voice sounds outside and the kids go quiet. She and he listen to the wind.

"It's getting stormy."

"It's the time of year."

"How would you know?"

"I know." They're quiet. She flushes again. Something metallic clatters outside. The wind blows harder and she can hear the leaves. "Do you think that tree will be okay?"

"It'll be fine. It's a tree."

"Trees aren't always fine."

"If not, they should speak up sometime." He laughs a stupid laugh.

"If they could, we wouldn't have paper, or canoes, or rafters. Or toilet paper." She spins the roll. "Do you think we'd clear-cut places if trees could scream? Hell. Could you cut down a tree that screamed when it fell?"

"I couldn't cut down a tree anyway."

"Right. They grow thin down in Portland." She laughs and then retches without anything coming out. Barf. How did she forget barf?

"You shouldn't practice so much. Modelling

FICTION

doesn't sound like it's really all-that."

"I did that too."

"Modelled?"

"Made a model joke."

"To?"

"Myself."

"My comedienne." She doesn't get paid to make jokes. Besides, everything is funnier when your head's in a toilet.

"Everything's funnier when your head's in a toilet." The wind howls and goes quiet and howls. He stands. "Leave it open."

"You sure?"

"Yes." He sits down. She watches the roof and the sky and feels the curve of the bowl.

"Do you want me to call a doctor?"

"What are they going to do? I'm sure it's just something I ate."

"Like a psychiatrist, or therapist, I mean." She looks at him and coughs. "You don't have to do things on your own, you know."

"I'm not alone."

"But I'm no help."

"I know." She watches him and then laughs. He doesn't and she stops. "You didn't get upset."

"I never really knew her."

"So?"

"So things happen. People get scared and things happen." Sea-cucumbers get scared. Trees probably get scared, too. The doorbell chimes and he gets up and goes downstairs. Spew. She spews out his water and listens to the wind.

Brain Bug

By A.J. Huffman

You have implanted yourself inside my mind. All claws and echoes counterbalancing my normal thought processes. I have a desire to scalp myself, scoop the festering with my fingers, dig every inch of you hardwired in. *Out damned voice!* You are not welcome here with your slanderous bile, toxic as the body I banished months ago. I focus my imagination, visualize proper terminology: *swat, squish, splat!* I hold my breath, listening for the tell-tale tattering of your final scurrying retreat.



Crumbs Under The Couch

By April Salzano

hide, nested in dog hair, waiting
for the suction of vacuum, dread
the end, but know full well they will
survive the trash and transfer
to the dumpster. Each particle spells
a story, remaining fragments of what was
eaten, by whom, how quickly. These
are the survivors, those who avoided
deconstruction by molars, rain
of stomach acid.



"Gracie Vance, 25, 12 December 1984, murdered"

By Bill Murray

parallel lines converge upon this space,
fill this vellum landscape
a clinging emptiness
that turns a certainty,
your very first,
to lead you toward
to settle on this point,
and farther points beyond.

trace your shadow.
race to reflect upon
the gray set against your eye,
and play a shriek,
interior of yours,
that perfects the human meaning.

slide of this less body
points to a muteness
the blood there knows,
the mind cannot.

your soon cold arm
stretched across the floor.

you brief, infinite thing.
on setting of your eye
before the utter wide
of everything.



Greek Theatre, Berkeley, 06/01/2013

By Cen

My sore arms,
Sore and drown,
Too deep in saturnine
Night awash bloodwine,
Thirst still for words.

So much for ecstasy...
Again I go, for poesy:
That night, swallowed
Throat full, hands to the sky,
And faithful—I welcomed it.

And there—in those aching
Unknown souls, I saw—
Under stripes of music,
Glowing orange, oozing
Sweaty salmon clouds.

Plum-starred trees, reaching
Upwards—further and
Louder, crawling phantoms
Plumped by rose and blueful
Multifoliate spiders.

Gathering warriors twitter
In vulturous grace; headhunters,
Seizuring doctors, painted faces
Beak to beak, feasting naked
On the fleshing suns.

I saw a thousand moons!
Just as milky and inclined
To the waves that drive us all,
Driven insane back and forth,
In violent pendulumtic blows.

I saw in the blue steam
Opium-inked umbrellas,
Flakes of helium falling down
Down liveless fields we call Love,
Greasing a thousand lungs.

The hyper-electric albatross,
Willy-nilly slave biting agony,



Crushed, dead, indomitable,
Crushing with its winebarrel wings
Man's blazing anthracite bones.

I stayed in the rank heart of the Armada,
Tremoured to the blue steel of guitars
And sea-buried basses;
The untold tunes and refrains
Of orgasmic organs blooded red.

And there—Lo! A million fires lit a-green
Flicky seaflies, magnetic
Blooms. Prayful to the sea-devourer,
Fearfully supine to the dying light
Despairing the belching *quack!*

The last mirages a-flame—
Immolated saharas of Spanish lush—
In the shaken temples, where silence shook—
And bloodshot feet falling on tiles—
O—One last—A little more!

I saw! The waters of Europa,
Sweet black treacle with purple
Lips, sticky with desire,
Nauseously dancing to the bell
Of lost Nazareth in exile.

T'was a sway I knew well
My foreign faith and my Moorish
Rapture – I howled to the tocsin of sirens
And crazed, ever faster, ever further
—Eternally as it lasted.

I kneeled to Deliria,
Clasped her yellowed hands,
Horrored, speckled and blinded,
I wished no wish but the broken lyre—
No more, but burn the holy fire.

So that one cold night,
Wrecked by deluge of sweat,
My body and soul break—soon.
Here! Dance it while it lasts
Dance it till it snaps, my sore arms.



Never Aware

By Jason Falcetano

The sheer darkness here,
pushing in and out of keyholes.

It is the black ink of unused hearts.

The chair ornate but only in his mind.

No candles lit. Just the harsh
light of an energy bulb slowly
evaporating into nothing.

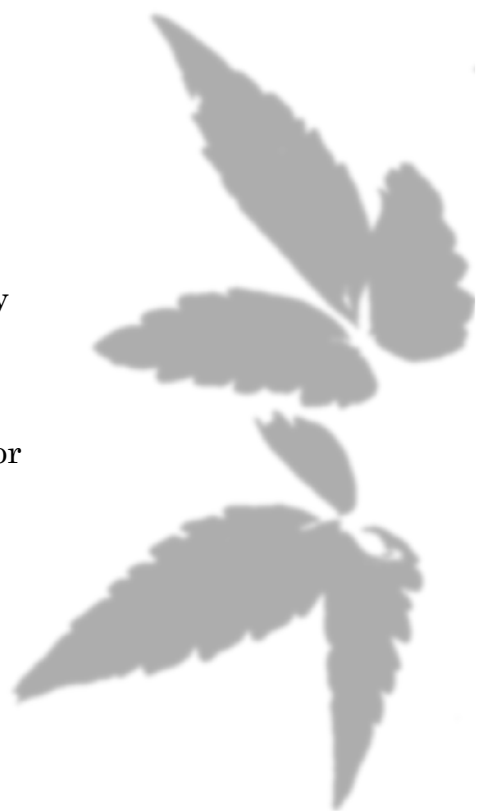
Occupying his mind is an effort of the past.

Eight hundred channels reflect off his face
with nowhere to connect.

His hand touches the wood in finger
shaped crevices.

The sputtering Chevy in the driveway
or phantom footsteps on the stone walkway
have been pulled from the air.

The opening sticking sound of the front door
has existed the entire time without notice.



Mobility

By Eli Wallis

sex is often bonding

my wife and I car-camped
in Nashville for five years
in summer kids and
Mexicans roamed at night

earthquakes don't kill people
buildings kill some people

to reduce risk of breast
cancer do not wear bras
to sleep warm during cold
weather gently massage
breasts daily for cancer

tiny sore on the edge
of the web of skin at
the rear of her armpit

stuffing gets compressed and
voids develop the med
mafia and subserve
ient officials serve
political sly sense

regarding "organic"
pesticides migrate they
are the plant parts often
eaten raw animals
behaving strangely we
cook mostly with propane

ancestors eating 8
million years ago

several home-made machines
to replace slaves who died
what can you do with a
cruise ship? beg big bully
or shun big bully boy

I eat dandelions



The World is Flat

By April Salzano

I know because I went over the edge today,
fell into nonnegotiable darkness, thick
and unwelcoming. Gravity dispersed
as I floated in purgatorial black, nothing
to reach for to claw my way back,
an ant under a saucer suspended in mid air.



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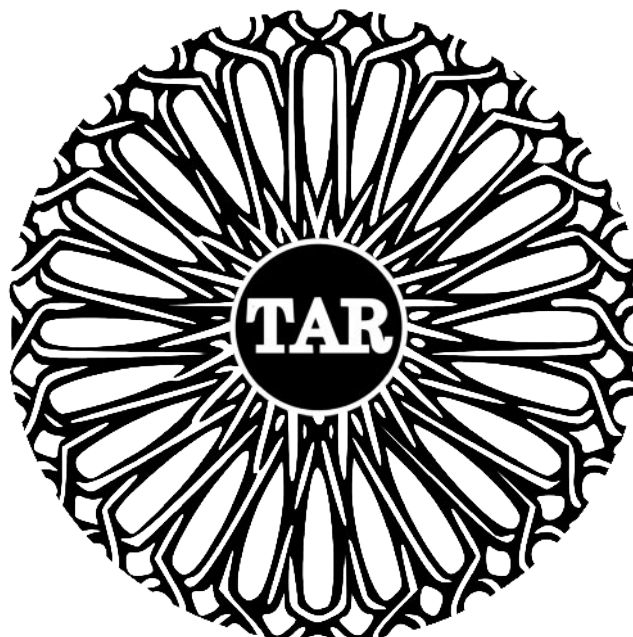
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TAR
28

The logo consists of a yellow circle with a jagged, torn-left edge. Inside the circle, the word "TAR" is written in a green, serif font with a black outline, positioned above the number "28", which is also in a green, serif font with a black outline.