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UNCARING  
~ A Poem by Gary Beck ~

Streets of my city  
decomposing  
as fast as prosperity  
leaves the middle class,  
deserting  
those seeking admission  
to security,  
effortlessly denied  
to so many.  
I did not know  
how poverty consumed  
so many,  
with our leader's collaboration,  
or they would find a way  
to halt the slide  
to dissolution.

**A HIKE IN THE MINIMUM WAGE****~ A Poem by John Grey ~**

Some politician assures me  
I'm the villain of the piece.  
Make five cents more  
and I'll send my employer  
to his ruin.

I walk across the parking lot,  
past his brand new BMW.  
I multiply the number  
of employees at the factory  
by the hours they work  
by that brute of a nickel,  
subtract the answer from  
his shiny beemer  
and the answer's the kind  
of car he'll soon be driving  
once the new law's in effect.  
I'll give you a hint.  
It's still not the car I drive.

**IT WOULD BE EASIER TO THINK OF WHITE KNIGHTS**  
**~ A Poem by Holly Day ~**

if I wasn't the one always killing spiders, digging holes for dead pets  
going to work every day. If it wasn't me putting food on the table

I'm not sure why. My mother used to tell me  
that no matter how hard a wife works, she still has to pamper

I think of the lessons my daughter is learning  
at lunch, the way I shut down and just take it when he accuses me  
his constant harping on the state of my hair and my weight. I want

Disney images of princesses  
of house-cleaning mice and flowers  
but mostly I want her to know  
about the princes.

**SUN SNAKES**  
**~ A Poem by Stephen Philip Druce ~**

Stirring sword tongues brew  
coiling crackle blaze gaudy,

choking rattle slither-peppered  
pierce scorch and grip,

splashing bowl of sticky twitching  
poison fire sip—

and the sun snakes shout,  
they hiss and shout—keep out!

**EPHRAM PRATT LINES THE RIVER WITH BAGS OF SALT**  
**~ A Poem by Jack E. Lorts ~**

Surrogate mule skimmers  
line the boulevards

in West Melrose,  
where barn owls

chase alkalized rainbows,  
like high flying scavengers

alive with a finger  
stuck in the dike of

a red ball express,  
distancing the moon jumpers.

Treat them like absent jurors,  
meditating on stolen secrets,

overheard in the absence  
of frolicking gremlins

honoring their ancestors  
by singing silent arias,

taught by addled gypsies,  
anchored to their caravans

by wooden sheep,  
stolen from Bingen track haulers,

lining the river with  
bags of salt,

mined in the sweet dreams  
of medieval choristers.

**SADE'S SONG**  
**~ A Poem by Thabit Akil Walls ~**

Love, the syringes in my veins, strung out, defenseless to this singular, whirling, waltz. May I have this dance? Not once, but perpetually shimmying, teaching me how to embrace, 4/4 as we dip, cradling you over puddles in the rain, as winter belts out Billie Holiday blues. Track marks, bluish green blotches from last night's Foxtrot. Awaken to morning's dope sick, aching, fiending until you return. Love, you can strut the earth 333 years and never find a bum as I. Dissolution, forever I live, a junkie, injecting love's serum, amidst collapsing veins.



**THE COLLECTED TEACHINGS OF AG NOM, NONG**  
**~ A Poem by Daniel Ablev ~**

The farmer was blowing harder now. We opened the dead and looked inside. We couldn't see much, but we felt a spectacular presence of a cold rectangular eye shopping for misfits.

Dimmer cooked up hot milk that looked at us/art as if it were eating Parkinson's/Parkintron.

Things don't even know what bricks and tears have in common anymore.

I lay a fingerling upon its face and felt, well, *trouté*. I Notice: Wormy warmth came when the sound of anything was suddenly checking out my protopleonasm.

A sickly dream (with a hat) turned towards me and said: "I'll have you recruited in no time."

**TWO POEMS by Ajise Vincent**

\*

**LAMENTATIONS**

because their crowns  
have been adorned with pearls & blue ribbons,  
& their aspirations are now  
like eagles that soar in the seventh heavens.

because wise men from the east  
present them with gifts of validation,  
& their cerebrum deciphers the intricacies  
behind the flight of crows

they masturbate on altar  
of the holies of holies,  
pouring watery semen  
on the name of God, himself

he, who created the winds  
that whispers tales of our ancestry  
to the ears of trees

he, who path seas with earthen rod,  
who swirls like lightening  
& makes a millennium seem like a toddler

now put up for mockery

by nitwits seeking pertinence

does a chick that stray away from the hen  
in a den of vultures live to see dusk?  
can a man wrestle against the erraticism of the wind?

mortal, do not touch  
the tail of the tiger  
for you are dust  
& to dust you will return.

\*

## CONFESSIONS II

*(for P.E.)*

the chemist next door is an egomaniac  
she wears the word—"pride" like a bikini  
on the curvature of her body  
yet i cannot but love her,  
especially when she picks up bundles of cash,  
grind them into atoms of amino acid  
and feed the gay rats  
that eat the spine and neoplasm of my dissertation

**TWO POEMS by John D. Robinson**

\*

**CUSTODY**

As he pulled back the metal panel of the cell  
door and peered  
through, I recognised  
him and said "Hello  
Mr Orford!"  
he was the father of  
an old friend of mine  
"John, what are you  
doing here?" he asked  
looking serious and  
puzzled maybe even  
disappointed;  
"There's a woman  
involved" I said  
nervously grinning;  
He smiled and said  
shaking his head;  
"Of course, a woman,  
it's always a woman  
right?" and then  
Sergeant Orford  
asked "Are you  
hungry John?"  
"Yes" I said  
"Okay, stay steady and

I'll be back soon"  
and sergeant Orford  
came back with a  
meal, the first decent  
meal I'd had in days  
and a few months  
later facing the judge,  
feeling awkward and  
a little shaky as he  
passed sentence on a  
minor drugs offence;  
sending me into the  
wisdom of probation  
for a year;  
I walked away and  
remembered kindly  
sergeant Orford and  
the meal and the  
woman who had  
since vanished and  
I walked from the  
courts to a small  
stretch of woodland  
across the road and opened  
up a bottle of wine  
and lit a joint  
and waited for a breeze  
or something  
to give me some  
kind of direction,  
one no doubt  
that'll lead to  
another nowhere  
to another room

of uncertainty  
to another road  
that I've followed  
again and again  
only this time  
hoping it'll be  
different.

\*

### **A GREY-HAIRED OLD BITCH**

For a very short while  
I worked in a small  
factory that produced  
specialist steam -irons  
for  
the green baize of  
snooker and pool  
tables;  
I was tasked with  
packing these  
fucking things into  
cardboard boxes  
and this grey haired  
bitter and snarling  
bitch of packaging  
shit, showed me how  
it should be done;  
she was old and proud  
and meticulous and  
loyal and humourless  
and  
fussy and constantly

criticizing and she  
pissed me off and  
so I packaged the  
irons in a slightly  
different format  
but achieving the  
same result and this  
old seasoned viper  
screamed at me  
that I was doing it  
all wrong and what  
was the matter  
with me  
and I told her  
“Go fuck yourself!”  
and she moved away  
crying real tears  
and the next day I  
was called into the  
manager’s office  
and was fired;  
it wasn’t emotional  
and I strolled across  
the road to a bar and  
ordered a drink and I  
thought of the steam-  
irons and cardboard  
boxes and of the  
grey haired woman  
and felt pity and  
jubilant, like I had  
escaped something  
dangerous  
and  
consuming.

## WINTER'S WITHIN MY HARDWARE STORE ~ A Prose Piece by William C. Blome ~

Winter's within my hardware store. Successive snows have piled up like a stack of magazines, and sometimes it's all I can do to keep the main aisle clear so shoppers are still able to grab their roach powder and reach for their rodent traps. (Hey, I'm not intending to be gloomy or dour at the outset when I reference eternal pests like bugs or mice. It's just that most of the time, folks don't browse hardware stores for frivolous or joyful items. Nails, screws, tools, smallish boards and lumber: hard goods are what you think of when you picture my store, but regardless of that, would that I might come up with a way to introduce impulse buying here.) I do know I still have two-thirds of my roof up there, and, to wheel suddenly now in an entirely personal direction, my sense of physical desire is, I honestly think, more acute now than when I was twenty-five. I'd say I average a decent erection every other day or so just from watching attractive neighborhood women inside my store. Thank god my customer base ceased being a largely male domain some time ago. The skill now, of course, at this time of year, is for me to be able to discern a good body beneath a layer or two of winter clothing, but believe me, I can, I can. Oh, I may peddle hard goods, but my morning dreams are devoted to soft shit. And really more than anything else, my craving to more directly interact with these women shoppers is what gave me the idea of carrying a new product, something that might be popular and—okay—upbeat for women, and something I could display for sale in the back of the store, right here next to me and the cash register.

I'll cut right to the chase: pairs of big, flashy, satin panties in gray, chartreuse, and black failed to get the kind of action I thought they would, and I ditched them less than two weeks after I first displayed them. High quality steel tweezers from Pakistan, in a variety of sizes, fared no better (though I used big fuchsia signage above the box to make them seem exciting and upbeat), and I wound up giving most of them away to a pair of teenagers who snickered they were going to use them in a science project. So that's been it to date with impulse buying.

But what really worked—and what's kept on working—comes from the day



I brushed snow off an opposite counter and laid out a tray of fresh baguettes. I grab them in several quiet and stealthy passes through a blind baker's establishment on my way to work, and I price them daily by pulling a dollars-and-cents figure out of my one good hat (from about a dozen different price choices I've made up on folded slips of paper). I'll confess I keep all of the prices on the ridiculously low side, for I've been that anxious and horny to have sexy females crowding about me, and so despite the long, long winter, I do have, back here and away from any accumulating snow, or poisonous sprays, or deadly traps, or all those silly utilitarian nails and tools, warm soft ladies fluttering about my person every day, till all the bread's usually out of here well before the noonday hour.

## RUM PUNCH OBLIVION

~ A Short Story by Bradford Middleton ~

Jack is sat in the most depressingly dark pub in the whole of town, Leonard Cohen's *Bird on a Wire* drones remorselessly through the dingy speakers sending the few who are present either dashing for the garden or towards the bar. Jack is already at the bar, in his favourite seat in any pub, and as the song comes on a broad ironic smile arches across his face. Those around him feign disgust at his terrible taste in music as they too, truly, deeply love the man, the life, the song.

That day the sun had finally begun to shine and town felt as if summer had finally arrived so naturally Jack sort refuge in the darkest, most depressing building in town as almost everyone else stormed the beach, the parks, the streets in a bid to soak up some sun. Jack was having none of it, he was set. He had his favourite combination of a pint of strong European lager and a shot of gorgeously dark and succulent Cuban rum. The rum would not escape his attention for too long but first up he wanted to taste that gloriously crisp and booze heavy beer, its refreshing taste knocking him out of his stoned state and into realms of reality. It is these fleeting glimpses at so-called real life that Jack feels entitles him to be as unaware of it as he wants to remain, and he reasons, what better way to do that than to just be stoned all the time. At certain points during this state he would find himself wandering off to his favourite pub and simply take up residence for a few hours during which the drinks always flowed easily. He generally just sat and people-watched, it was the perfect place for that, and continued to drink and watch, growing more disgusted with every passing moment, until he'd had enough, enough beer, enough rum and enough of every human being he had seen since leaving his home. Tonight though, things are somewhat askew as Jack finds himself increasingly compelled to talk to complete strangers who come to the bar.

Jack sat forward to again scan the selection of rums the bar had to offer and as he turned to sit back in his seat a most glorious vision appeared before him at the bar. She had long naturally red hair that reached all the way down her back whilst the black dress she was wearing clung tightly to a firm, athletic yet highly at-

tractive frame; she was easily the best-looking woman he had seen in this pub for a very long time. As she waited for service every eye in the pub devoured her figure as she leaned in and her dress moved up those succulent thighs.

“Hi,” he said as she rested on the narrow bar near him.

The silence that followed destroyed his hopes. *Why won't she talk to me*, he thought as she waited for the barman to get back from the cellar.

“He shouldn't be long, think he's just gone to change a barrel,” Jack offered this information, hoping that would knock down the wall she had built between them, a wall of total silence.

Once the barman returned she began ordering drinks, a whole host of drinks and Jack interjected with a few choice words of advice as the list grew. He finally couldn't resist making her squirm.

“That's a lot of drinks baby, is one of them mine?”

“Look, will you just leave me alone. My boyfriend is only in the toilet,” she retorted as she slammed down a shot of vodka.

“Sorry, that's all you had to say...”

“Well you old fool, my silence should have told you something, why would anyone like me want to talk to someone like you?”

She took a long drink on one of the beers in front of her and it was only a moment before Jack began to get the fear, a real bad feeling as a huge hulk of a man-beast walked down the steps from the toilet and over towards the bar. He took an armful of drinks and they moved off silently towards a table in the corner. Jack merely sat back and took in the view of the bar, now dominated by the huge hulk in the corner. His drinking continues as his mood sours, growing angry and pissed-off with the way the woman had treated him, it hadn't been that long ago that he'd been with woman just as good looking as her but now, according to her, he was nothing more than an old man. Lots and lots of rum, he thought, that is the solution. That was often his solution.

“Can you get me another rum and beer combo Amy?”

“Sure Jack, the usual?”

“Absolutely,” he said as she began pouring the beer for him. As the glass grew fuller the rum was procured and drank before the beer arrived.

“Another rum please,” he followed-up.

“Want to make it a large one?”

“Sure, it'll save you time!” he rejoiced as she delivered a glass half-full of rum and ice.

Supping at his beer he suddenly became aware of a huge shadow dominating the bar, knowing instinctively that it was the man-beast. As his voice boomed out ordering yet more drinks Jack struck up the old routine, proclaiming his love of a particular rum when the man ordered one of his utter favourites. Talk flowed between the two and contrary to appearances the man seemed knowledgeable but also interested in learning more. With all the drinks prepared Andy, as the man-beast had introduced himself as, asked if Jack care to come and join him and continue their conversation. As they approached the table a wry smile appeared across his face.

“Andy,” the woman’s voice droned, “what are you doing with this old wreck?”

“We were chatting at the bar, he seems like a cool guy and he knows a lot about rum.”

“But Andy, he’s the one who was hitting on me at the bar, he wouldn’t leave me alone and then when I told him to shut up he called me a bitch!”

“You called her what?” Andy said, standing upright, and subsequently looming over a Jack who remained seated, lost in a rum haze as he’d downed the double before leaving the bar.

“Hey, Jack! Did you hear what I asked you?” the voice boomed again, knocking Jack out of his rum-induced haze with the force of a hurricane who suddenly squirmed in his seat, realising that something quite bad was just about to happen.

“There all lies Andy, I promise you, I would never talk to a woman in that way...”

“Are you calling my girl a liar as well as a bitch? Right that’s it...” he announced as his rock-hard fist went pile-driving into Jack’s face. Jack just fell back on the bar floor and suddenly Amy realised what was going on. As she ran over Andy’s foot went into Jack’s rib cage, winding him severely.

“Stop it!” she shouted as her eyes meet with Andy’s, it was like looking at a skyscraper from the ground the distance felt so far.

Andy downed a couple of the shots on the table before he grabbed his girlfriend and walked out the pub. Jack lay in complete agony on the barroom floor and Amy dialled for an ambulance and police response as a couple of other locals made sure he was alright. He wasn’t really alright but under the circumstances he was at least still breathing.

His hospital stay was short-lived and once they’d sorted his ribs out he was sent back home. This time though he wouldn’t be leaving his flat in a stoned-out state and going to his former favourite place, he wouldn’t be going anyway except

out, out of this city and out of this life. It was the only real escape from his crushing paranoia and worry that he feared would stalk him if ever he did leave his flat after dark.

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