

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/4

Adam Moorad
Terrestrial

A bus moves down the street. It stops then drives away. From the front steps, Mars can see it disappear, slowly abandoning him. He looks around with a polarized expression, feeling as though he is in competition with every living thing on the planet. He is running a race against every known species. He is losing the race, his track of time, and himself in his own orbit. Mars stands and walks down the street through his neighborhood. The pavement rocks him one way, then another. There are rows of identical apartment buildings separated by thin alleyways. Each building has an irrelevant name displayed by illuminated signage: The Sierra, The Courtyard, The Village, The Laurels. The brick buildings. Dried chunks of Spam. The grout between chunks. Infected scabs. Green with moss and fungus. Evidence of slow, silent decomposition.

A car pulls up the street, turning right without indicating, gravitating in a sluggish orbit in the direction of Mars. He watches the headlights, the blank windshield, the scuffed fender. The driver approaches slowly, tapping on the gas pedal, before stopping at the curb. Mars remains motionless.

Venus rolls the window down.

"Don't just sit there," she says. "Help me." She emerges from the car with two bags of groceries. Mars walks over to the car.

"There's more in the trunk," she says.

Mars takes the bags from Venus and follows her inside. The sky is cloudy, looking as though it wants to rain. Venus opens the mailbox. A full box of mail, side-stacked, stuffed.

"Bills, bills, bills," she says.

Mars begins to sweat, thinking, It must be the southern air. He looks around the neighborhood. A constant layout of neutral color, blurry and muted by the soft murmur of far away voices and motors. Mars doesn't speak, imagining the expressions of people in kitchens and bedrooms doing exciting things, things they will always remember – things that will not fade away. Mars watches Venus as she climbs the front steps. She grasps the doorknob, turns it, and removes her keys. It is still locked. Mars examines the cracks in the cement steps, touched by fossilized feel of it. He stares at the stains around the cracks in the ground and the dirt inside them, feeling them beneath his feet as he tries to think of something to say. He imagines the different things he should do to make the overall appearance of the residents more appealing. He will cut the grass. He will water the lawn. He will clean the gutters and trim the bushes along the entryway. Minor chores. He sits down with the bags on his lap, thinking, Now what? He thinks about his body and compares it to his mother's, wondering what she looks like when she was alive. He closes his eyes, imagining what woman Venus reminds him of most.

"You're home early," Venus says, turning around, looking at Mars. It's the only eye contact he's had all day.

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/4

“I took a sick day today,” Mars says, wearily. “But I’m not sick.”

Inside, Venus tells Mars about her day. About her conversation with her mother about her father. About the inconsistent temperature of her office. About a dog she saw – it’s size, it’s eye color, it’s tail – then about animal’s owner. She says, “They looked just like one another.” She laughs. Mars isn’t sure what to say.

“What time is it?” Venus says.

“I don’t know,” Mars says. “I lost track of it.” He circles the apartment and tries to envision a different way he can arrange the furniture. His mother would be able to give him suggestions. She would offer helpful ideas on what colors to paint different rooms. Where a lamp should be positioned and how the closets could be organized to utilize their maximum capacity.

Mars walks into the bedroom and stretches out across the covers. He stares at the ceiling for ten minutes. He thinks, I should paint the ceiling blue like the sky. He decides he will do this. He will paint the sun and moon. The atmosphere will be permanently clear. Venus walks into the bedroom and Mars closes his eyes. He opens them once he feels her breath coalescing around his nostrils.

“I need to have sex,” Venus says.

“Okay,” Mars says. He thinks, A minor chore.

Venus tries to hand Mars a prophylactic, but drops it.

“Oh, oops.”

“That’s okay.”

“Why don’t you move a different way?”

“Wait a second.”

“It’s already undone.”

“Careful.”

“Hand me that pillow.”

“This one?”

“That one.”

“Lean over this way a little.”

“I can’t.”

Mars holds his eyes shut for a while then opens them. He can see the smoke detector on the ceiling. A red light blinks. It blinks again. Mars thinks, Is that good or bad? Does it run on batteries? Do they need to be changed? Do I need to change? He wonders if it would function correctly in a life or death situation, vaguely acknowledging the small amount satisfaction awaiting him on the other side of this moment.

Venus slips quietly over the sheets, speaks softly, and pants. She is always breathless. Mars never understood this about her. Even her silence winded. Mars thinks, It must be the southern air.

In the bedroom Mars feels some sort of misunderstanding is at work between them, a confusion about words like “happy” and “sad” – and even binary terms, like “clean” and “dirty.” Mars looks out the window and imagines linguistic

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/4

scholars huddled in libraries, furiously reading from dictionaries in candlelight, deciding what descriptions best fit the definitions of terms like “hot” and “cold” or “hard” and “soft.” Mars feels soft then anxious. He stands then climbs out of bed and waits at the window, looking out at the neighborhood through the lens of the storm glass. He wonders if his apartment is a home, or just a habitat. He inhales and tries to remain calm. Venus pants from somewhere in the dark. They are only inhabitants. Mars looks at the sky and wishes it would rain. Naked, he feels cold and exposed, inhibited, inhabited by a disorienting miasma. He breathes in then out.

The sun sets. Mars wonders how he would react to a sudden and violent emergency. A nuclear disaster. An earthquake. He sits on the bed with his back to Venus. Every emotion a cystic ball of siesta, throbbing. Every thought a waterlogged memory floating in a puddle on empty pavement. Mars yawns, placated and numb, caged in insomniac slumber. Dried chunks of Spam coat his lungs. A bus passes outside. Mars listens, thinking, The world is not working now. He pictures what the morning will be like and wonders if he will feel any different.

“Are you awake?” Venus says, eyes closed.

“Not yet,” Mars says and stands, feeling the floor rise between his toes.

The planet tilts one way, then another.

ADAM MOORAD'S writing has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *3 A.M. Magazine*, *H_ngm_n*, *Elimae*, *PANK*, and *Pindeldyboz*. He lives in Brooklyn and works in publishing. Visit him here: <http://adamadamadamadamadam.blogspot.com>