

from

A

André Alexis

BookThug

2013

When the spell was broken, when the moment had passed, Baddeley and Andrews stood facing each other, exhilarated, both of them fascinated by the residue that God's presence had left: poetry, though these – oddly enough – were *not* the words Baddeley himself would have saved from the listening.

If there had been doubt about the patient's identity before this moment, there was no doubt left in Baddeley's mind immediately after it. The illusions, the tricks with time and space, were paltry compared to the vision he and Andrews had shared. Baddeley was ecstatic. Andrews' exhilaration was short-lived, however. He had been here before, often. He knew this moment well and was tired of it, though he tried to talk it up.

– You see? Said Andrews. It's wonderful, isn't it? How could you turn this down, Alexander? Think what it would mean to live your life in His presence!

Every one of Andrews' words rang hollow.

– All I'm asking, he continued, is this small thing. Please, Alexander. I'm being eaten alive by the sacred! No! I don't mean it that way. It's not as bad as that. It's wonderful. But I'd like to pass it on. For that, I need someone who'll free me.

– Why don't you free yourself? asked Baddeley.

– I can't. I have a duty to ...

Andrews moved his head in the direction of the Being in the hospital bed. Neither man looked at Him directly, but as Andrews completed his ever-so-slight gesture there was a moment of desolation. God's recession was not gradual or graceful. It was not like a wave receding from the shore. It was immediate, as if all seas had suddenly ceased to be. There was, in Baddeley's soul, the most complete abandonment he

had experienced; so agonizing that, for a moment, it occurred to him that his life was worthless, that the best thing for him, under the circumstances, was death. In fact, he looked towards the window wondering how high up they were.

But there was no window. There was no window, no ward, no God, no beds, no lacustrine vista. He and Avery Andrews were in a darkened room that smelled of disinfectant. At least, he was in a darkened room of some sort. He could not see the person with him. Rather, he heard the muffled sobs of another man, the intake of breath. Baddeley reached out in the dark, meaning only to touch Andrews' shoulder, but as he did the door to the room opened and there was a flood of light.

– What the hell's wrong with you people? Can't you do your nasty business at home? This is a hospital, for Christ's sake!

Baddeley and Andrews were in a janitor's closet. Baddeley's hand was raised. It was in the vicinity of Andrews' cheek, as if the nurse who'd opened the door had interrupted them in mid caress. Both men stared at her as if she were an apparition.

– Come on, get out of there, the nurse said, or I'll call the guard.

Still dazed, Andrews and Baddeley left the closet, walking down the hall towards an elevator.

At the entrance to the hospital, Andrews – who had kept quiet and avoided Baddeley's gaze – suddenly held on to Baddeley's arm, keeping him from leaving the premises, the sliding doors opening and closing, closing and opening, like Scylla and Charybdis.

– Please, said Andrews.

And he tried to convince Baddeley that, despite the desolation

one felt when God turned his back (a thing that happened after every poem), the chance to be His servant was worth all. Wasn't it better to be *Abd Allah* than a second-rate reviewer? Wasn't it worth the personal sacrifice to attain the heights of Art? And why would he — that is, Baddeley — have gone through such trouble to find him — that is, Andrews — if, in the depths of his soul, he wasn't searching for this very servitude. Yes, it would be inconvenient to do away with Andrews. But Andrews wanted nothing more than release.

– You'd be doing me a kindness, he said. I'll even take poison, if you administer it.

For Baddeley, this was a complex moment made even more bewildering by its proximity to the sublime episode he had just lived. It isn't every day, after all, that one meets "God." Although, in light of the fact that this "god" seemed to approve of murder, doubt about the Being's true nature had already begun to dampen Baddeley's enthusiasm. Yet, there was enthusiasm still. How could a man who had for so long studied the *ends* of creativity (books and paintings and such) be anything but thrilled by his (admittedly strange) experience of creativity's origin? Some part of Baddeley's soul wanted to go on experiencing "inspiration" for ever and ever. But, really, he wanted to go on experiencing it as an *observer*. The strangeness of Andrews' attitude (Andrews' desire for death) frightened him, and he was afraid to be alone in the room with whatever that presence was.

Maybe, if Andrews had allowed him time to think about it, time to consider what it would be like to live *without* inspiration, time to long for the listening, Baddeley might have more seriously

considered his plea for death. (Though, when he *did* think about it, later, it brought nightmares: pushing Andrews onto subways tracks, throwing him from a bridge or a tall building, stabbing him, shooting him, drowning him, his hands around the poet's neck, breaking it as one would a bread stick ...) Instead, feeling rushed and bewildered, Baddeley wanted only to get away from Avery Andrews. He wanted to get away from what Andrews had put him through and from the death Andrews wanted of him.

He pulled the poet's fingers from his arm and backed towards the sliding doors.

– Find someone else, he said. If you come near me again, I'll call the police.

– But you came to *me*, Andrews pleaded. You came to me!

Once out of the hospital, Baddeley looked to see if the man was following him. But, no, Avery Andrews stood rooted to his spot before the door, looking out at him as he looked back. So this was Avery Andrews: a forlorn, psychologically damaged man in reddish shoes. Once Baddeley was far enough away, once he was certain Andrews would not follow him, a sadness welled up to accompany his dismay. Andrews was pathetic, yes, but somewhere within Baddeley's soul the admiration he'd felt for Avery Andrews guttered but was not extinguished.

Colophon

Manufactured as the First Edition of *A*
in the fall of 2013 by BookThug.

Distributed in Canada
by the Literary Press Group
www.lpg.ca

Distributed in the United States
by Small Press Distribution
www.spdbooks.org

Shop online at
www.bookthug.ca



Type + design by Jay MillAr
Copy edited by Ruth Zuchter