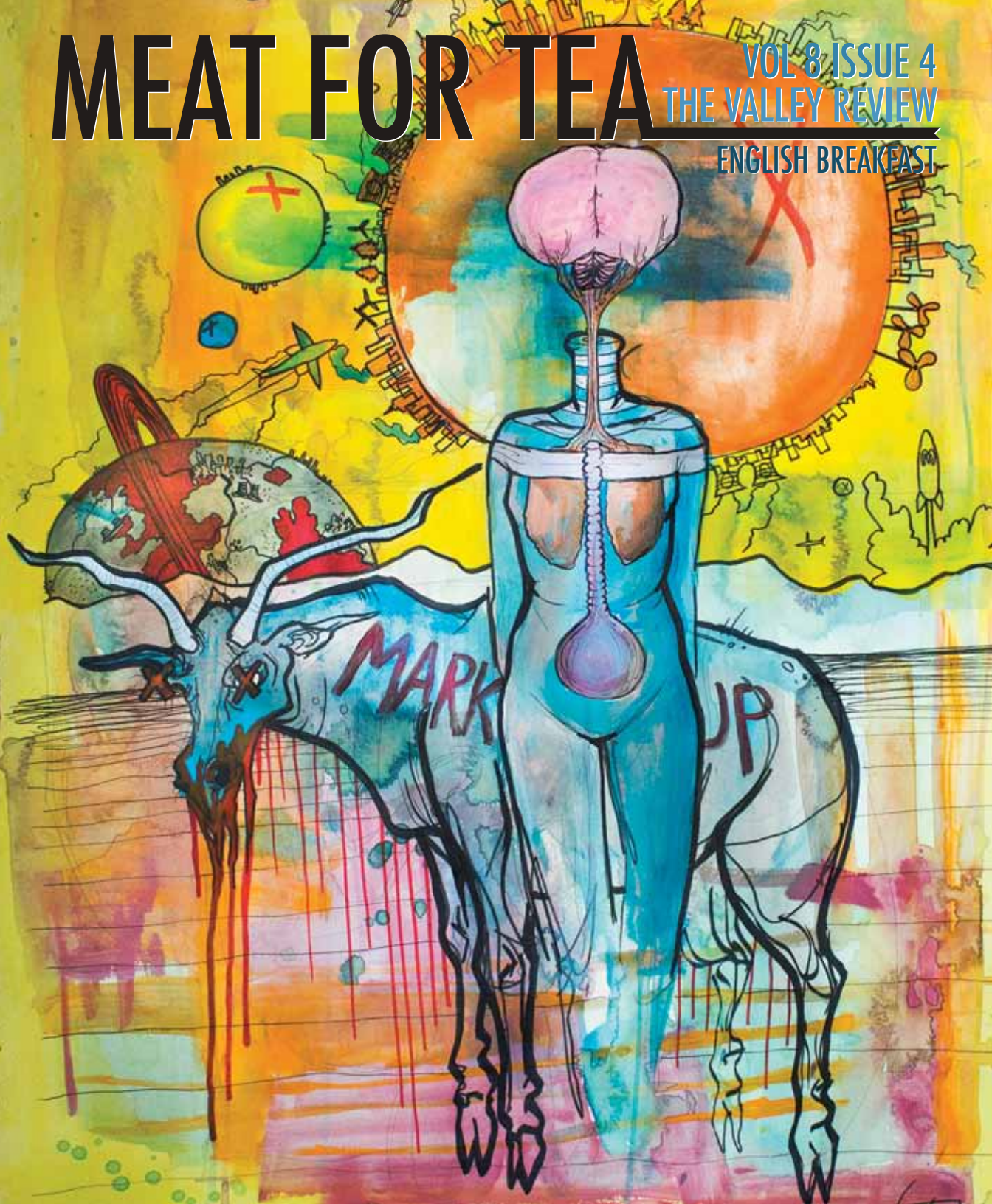


MEAT FOR TEA

VOL 8 ISSUE 4
THE VALLEY REVIEW
ENGLISH BREAKFAST





Meat for Tea: The Valley Review

Meat for Tea: The Valley Review was founded by Elizabeth MacDuffie and Alexandra Wagman. We are a non-academic affiliated magazine committed to recognizing and featuring the work of the artists, writers, and musicians living in western Massachusetts and beyond.

Staff:

Editor-in-Chief: Elizabeth MacDuffie

Layout: Mark Alan Miller

Intern: Kimaya Diggs

Publicity and Ad assistants: Gina Gaetz, Kate Bodendorf

Impresario: Elizabeth MacDuffie

Cover Art:

FRONT: "Earthling Superior" by Saera Kochanski

BACK: "Colonization in Red, Pink, Blue, and Yellow" by Arturo Desimone

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Contributors:

Aurora Amidon, Katrin Arefy, Stephanie Baird, Jane Blanchard, Christine Brandel, Arturo Desimone, Alison Downs, Brad Garber, Helen Grochmal, Sally Houtman, Saera Kochanski, Stefan Lovasik, Natalia Magnani, Sean Mahoney, David P. Miller, Patrick O'Connor, Marlene Olin, Michael Passafiume, Stephen V. Ramey, Charles Rammelkamp, Adam "Bucho" Rodenberger, Thomas Rowland, Amy Schmidt, Harvey Silverman, Alex Swartzentruber, Doug Tibbles, Caleb True, Gerald Yelle, Michael Welch, Frank Zahn, Kurt Zellen

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salutations from the editor

I have a dream that on duty police officers will from now on be required to wear video cameras. I have a dream that rape culture will cease to be a part of our culture, or any culture, for that matter. I have a dream that women have full control over their bodies and whether or not to reproduce. I have a dream that religious extremists will have little to no political influence. Suffice it to say, I have many dreams.

Years ago, I read a book that proposed a parallel universe that would actually work. In Robert Anton Wilson's brilliant novel, *Schrödinger's Cat*, a parallel universe is described in which the female president eliminate overcrowding in prisons by eliminating punishment for victimless crimes. All the truly nasty people who insisted on raping, robbing, and murdering each other, were all sent to Texas, (no offense to any Texans reading this). Still, imagine a world like this, a world where we could live and let live, a world in which we could breathe. I think we could make it a reality, not just science fiction.

Still, in these troubled times when racial tensions are running as high as I've ever seen them in my life, people are still writing their poetry, composing new songs, and creating art. I feel fortunate to know so many gifted folks and am excited for the upcoming *Cirque du Gougères*, when the "English Breakfast" issue of *Meat for Tea* will be released. On this night their will be art on exhibit by Michael Sjostedt, Saera Kochanski, and Doug Tibbles, Lord Russ and Wishbone Zoe will rock the house, and there will be films and spoken word to boot.. I look forward to seeing you there. Who knows? Maybe I'll even bake some gougères.

Love,
Elizabeth MacDuffie

4



her strange

Christine Brandel

Her hand is sitting on your thigh and you drop yours
onto hers. Your fingers feel a bone in her thumb,
is it sticking out just a bit too far? Why?
On the top of her hand the veins are large and green
as if a band has been tied around her wrist
and her blood is trapped beneath the thin, scarred skin.
Is this the first time you have noticed this?
What other peculiarities rest upon her person?
You glance at her neck, there is a mark.
Is it dirt from the park where you two were walking
or has it always been there? In three or four months,
when you slice open her heart, you will find
some unusual things in there as well.



newton's third law

Christine Brandel

Bruno's execution did little to kill
his wife's faith in his innocence.
Anna continued to wear her band
with pride. How could a man who had held
his own child so gently have held another's
for ransom? So she kept fighting,
writing the wrongs of his trial
on every piece of paper she could find.
She did not stop until her heart did.

And now here we are, a new century.
Your crime has not decorated
any headlines, no self-respecting newspaper
even knows your name. Yet I saw you,
cradling a life that did not belong to you,
that you had no right to chisel away. I saw you.
I know. And I want to tell, yell, write it
into all my poems until every court convicts
you, until you become the condemned.



treatment

Christine Brandel

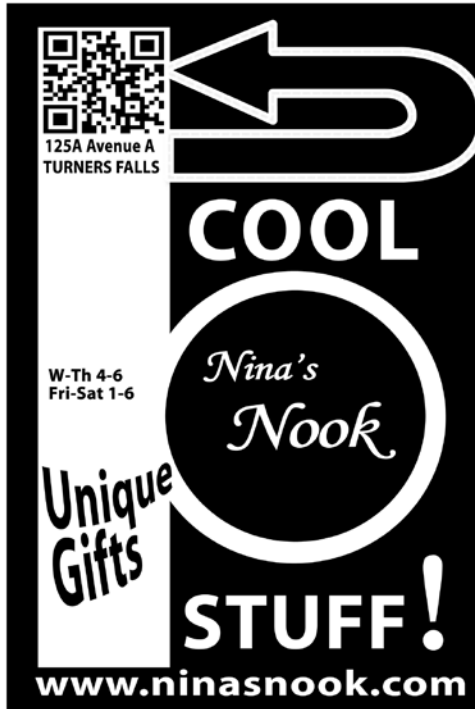
Listen to me, just close your eyes and open your mouth. It's easy enough to eat it. I know, a man taught me all about it--I think he was a doctor. He wears a white coat. Sometimes

what is best for us is not what tastes the nicest.

I've known you all your life. I've watched you fall up stairs, bruise your bones, choke down what's sick. Things must get better.

So settle now and do as I say.

If you have a hard time swallowing, why don't you put some jam on it?



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the war correspondent
in midst of correspondence soothes himself with english tea from home despite samovar tank in his ear
Arturo Desimone

desperados

Marlene Olin

Luellen had just turned thirty-five. She was too old to pass as a trophy wife and too young to be appreciated for her glamor or her wit. She was attractive enough to catch a second glance but too weathered to bear a closer look. Soon she'd be approaching the midway point of her life. She lived in a waterfront mansion and had closetfuls of clothes. Yet forty more years felt like a prison sentence.

Her closest friends were the household help. Maritza was her cook, confessor, and confidante. Broad-shouldered. Squat. Indian cheekbones. Maritza had survived one disastrous relationship after another. She'd remind Luellen daily of her good fortune, reciting a catechism of her own grief.

"You think your husband ignores you? Guillermo, he beat me."

"You think his children show disrespect? My son, he steal from my wallet."

"You think his parents hate you? My father, he throw away my love like day-old bread."

A decade earlier, Karl had treated Luellen like a prized possession. He flaunted her like a rare gem, a Faberge egg, a Baccarat flute. Twenty years older, he knew which wine to drink and which art to invest in. And of all the women in the world he had picked her. Now he looked Luellen over like a flea market find, appraising the dents and the nicks.

"You think your husband looks at other women? Guillermo, we have the sex while he watch TV."

With her short-cropped hair and boyish figure, Luellen looked ten years younger than her age. In college she ran cross country and played tennis. Whenever she raced, she pictured her sharp angles and bony hips slicing through the air like a speedboat. She always thought large breasts were a burden. Like putting on an extra five pounds.

Luellen tried to smile. "I thought Karl liked my body. I thought he loved my body. But when I mentioned the boob job, his eyes lit up. He practically did a little touchdown dance."

At first Karl showered her with gifts. A five-carat diamond. A yacht with her name in cursive letters on the hull. He was generous to a fault, desperately lavish. If he didn't adore her, at least he adored a version of her he had carved and whittled. When she looked in his eyes, she saw her own reflection. When she held his hand, his touch lingered.

Now they were strangers in separate bedrooms, breakfasting each morning at a twelve-foot table with cloth napkins on their laps. His parents were robber baron wealthy. They wintered in Palm Beach and summered in the Hamptons. Sitting in his bespoke suits and handmade shoes, Karl spent his days managing their foundation's trust.

The smugness of it drove Luellen crazy. He redistributed a small slice of his family's largesse, came home to a glass of fifty-dollar scotch, and felt like Robin Hood.

"He waved his American Express card," Luellen told Maritza. "And suggested a few rounds of Botox, too."

Her lover was always been on the receiving end. In the fall of 1980, Juan Carlos had arrived in Miami on a raft with his mother. He was three-years-old and penniless. While her husband thought she was at the gym, Luellen met him at motels. She paid cash for everything. Juan Carlos was needy and Luellen liked feeling needed. He needed new clothes and new shoes. A few weeks earlier she had bought him a car.

Over the course of their affair they frequented every shady dive on Biscayne Boulevard. By the front desk there was always a display case with brochures. Monkey Jungle. Weekee Watchee. The Coral Castle. A vending machine usually sold condoms. One size fits most. Ribbed. Lubricated. Bubble gum flavored. The rooms typically ringed around a swimming pool, the water filmed with oily liquids. Plastic bottles bobbed on the surface. No one ever swam.

Later, when they were in bed, Juan Carlos would tease Luellen about her good fortune. "Do you know how lucky you are?" Instead of looking at life in America as an opportunity, he always felt robbed. "First Batista stole everything. Then Castro stole everything. We used to be rich. So rich! A house filled with servants! Now my mother has to wash floors, clean other people's toilets."

He didn't believe in inching forward, finishing college and taking small jobs that grew into bigger ones. Juan Carlos was always looking for a get-rich-quick-scheme. "My friend Jose, knows a racehorse. A race horse wid a future. And when he's done, dees horse spends the rest of his life eating grass and making babies. How do you call it?"

"He's a stud," said Luellen. "They put him to stud."

A slat of sunlight peeked between the motel curtains. She placed her hand on his stomach. When he grinned, a gold tooth glinted, slashing the walls like a knife.

"Stud fees," said Juan Carlos. He'd been in this country for over three decades but still refused to learn the language. He wore his accent like a badge. "An annuity. A forking annuity."

It was his idea for Luellen to get implants. He liked his women with some meat on their bones. He'd hold up pictures in magazines and make hourglass shapes with his hands.

"Dees surgery is like nutting," he told her. Juan Carlos studied billboards like some people pored over chemistry textbooks. He memorized infomercials and wrote down the names of every plastic surgeon who advertised on TV.

"Dees guy is an artist," he told Luellen. "Dees is who you should see."

Their sex, as usual, had been rough and quick. That was part of the attraction. There was no artifice. No diamond bracelets to hide in a shoe box. No torturous love sonnets flashing on

her computer screen. She sprawled naked on the dingy bed sheets, fingering cigarette burns and honey-colored stains.

“I’ll see him,” Luellyn promised. “Whatever makes you happy.” When he rolled on top, she shuddered twice. Her fingers raked the mattress. She thought she was in love.

The doctor’s office surprised her. Ten-foot windows and mahogany chairs. It was more like a hotel lobby than the hotel lobbies she was used to. When the doctor stepped into the waiting room, a cloud of expensive cologne filled the air.

“You can choose between B cups, C cups, and D cups,” he said. After the examination, they met in his office. On the wall were tasteful botanicals. Behind him peeked a view to the bay.

“But these...” he said, “are our top of the line, most expensive enhancements.” He fanned more photos on his desk. The breasts looked like enormous loaves freshly baked from the oven.

“I see in your forms that there’s a history of breast cancer. So just to be on the safe side, you should have an MRI before we start. I’m sure you’re fine. I’m positive you’re fine. But it’s good to be careful, don’t you think?”

A week later Luellen found out that she wasn’t fine. Stage one ductal carcinoma. They carved three chunks out of her small left breast and told her six rounds of radiation would take care of the rest. All in all, she should feel grateful, they said. She was lucky they found it early.

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Her husband immersed himself in the literature and called his contacts in the medical field. “No matter what happens, I’ll be there for you,” he told her. “Even if you lose your breasts and your ovaries, your hair and your looks, I’ll love you just the same.”

Each scenario he painted was bleaker than the last. Every conversation was about cancer. Every gesture a helping hand. Nothing seemed to make him happier than to bear her burden. But the greater his show of concern, the more frightened Luellen became.

Poor Karl. Still looking for a role to play, thought Luellen. Now he’s a knight on a white horse jousting Cancer. She’d sneak glances of him in his bathroom mirror. Two skinny white legs, a kangaroo pouch, as ass as flat as a map. He combed his hair from the back of his head straight up to hide his scalp. Then he’d turn to her and say, “Can I get you anything, sweetie? Perhaps a cup of tea?”

Soon she found herself immersed in a new world, a world of antiseptic odors and green hospital gowns. Some of the patients she met were as healthy looking as she was. Others were clearly sliding towards Death, tethered to machines, their skeletal bodies decomposing day by day. No matter what their stage of illness, they were all processed like factory goods, lined up in waiting rooms for hours, tattooed with colored pens. They were custodians of faulty equipment, caretakers of bodies that had failed and broken down.

“That drain should be cleaned,” said an attendant.

“Gotta insert a line,” said a nurse.

There was a sameness to it all. Each hallway looked the same and smelled the same. Luellen would spend hours roaming the corridors, trying to figure out where she needed to show up next. Machine beeps and conspiratorial whispers resonated like a pulse.

“Do you know where the pharmacy is?” asked Luellen.

“Follow the green lines on the floor to the elevator,” droned a white-haired receptionist. “Go down five floors, take the yellow lines to the west building then turn left. Once you pass the cafeteria, the pharmacy should be on your right three doors down.”

If she wasn't being examined, she was being interrogated. The oncologists rooted her family history like it was the key to buried treasure, unearthing memories Luellen had long buried.

Tell us about your mother, they asked her. How old was she when she died?

Opening a vein was easier than discussing her childhood. They lived in Ohio. Her father was a pastor, her mother a hairdresser in a one-stoplight town. While some girls fantasized about rainbows and unicorns, Luellen dreamt about big cities. Skyscrapers. Neon lights and Dom Perignon. For as long as she could remember, she saved her allowance for a one-way bus ticket out.

Any information would be helpful, they told her. Anything you could share.

Luellen cringed. Her father was no taller than she was and just as thin. But Luellen's mother was a force of nature. She spent hours each day in the kitchen cooking vats of food. Her huge breasts spilled across her arms every time she bent over. Her stomach shadowed her feet. But the treatment changed everything. At first she morphed into Buddha. Bald. Round. Serene. At the end, her skin was loose, the bones protruding, her scars an endless seam.

Your relatives ought to know, they told her. They'll need to get x-rayed and probed.

It took Luellen three tries to get through to her sister. They hadn't spoken in years.

“Tish, it's me. Don't hang up. Don't hang up. Don't hang up.”

Click.

“Tish, we need to talk. It's important.”

Click.

“Tish, I have CANCER for Christ's sake!”

Eventually Tish stopped hanging up. For a while, she let Luellen do all the talking, throwing in a sigh or a grunt every few minutes to let her know she was still there.

“Have you been checked?” asked Luellen. She twirled the phone cord around her fingers and waited for an answer. “I mean, I’m worried. We’re sisters. When it’s all said and done, we’re still sisters.”

“Today we’re sisters? I know what’s going here. We’re having a come-to-Jesus moment, aren’t we? A little health scare and you’re afraid God’s been keeping score.”

“I’ve tried, Tish. God knows I tried. I tried to be there for the three of you the best way I could.”

“You fucking abandoned us, Luellen. How many times did you visit Mom that last year? But you had to go to college on the east coast, didn’t you? A thousand miles away. And then all your fucking track meets and bus tours and your busy, busy schedule. Who do you think was taking care of them, Luellen while you were having a party?”

It had been almost fifteen years and her sister still had a list. A list of grievances she waved like a flag. A list of grievances she’d never forget.

“They wanted me to stay in school, Tish. They wanted me to be happy.”

“And how’s that working out?” Click.

Maritza took her to her radiation appointments. She was surprised by how tired she was, how exhausting each day had become. Her scars were thick and red, the skin dimpling and puckering over the incisions. She had spoken to Juan Carlos only twice since the diagnosis. During each conversation he seemed distant, like he running down a tunnel. She used short words, easy words like he was right off the boat, a Marielito just washing up on the shore.

“Juan Carlos, I want to see you.” She couldn’t believe the sound of her own voice. Her desperation tasted like metal, like she had bitten her tongue and tasted blood. “I have to see you, Juan Carlos. I need to see you soon.”

They made a date to meet at a new assignation, The Ocean Breeze Motel. Outside a neon sign flashed *Vacancy, Rooms to Rent*. Inside a single light bulb dangled from the ceiling. Damp carpeting clung to the floor. She brought a picnic basket with a bottle of champagne and his favorite foods. But instead of greeting Juan Carlos under the covers naked, she bought a loose-fitting negligee. It was black and lacy. She remembered when they watched TV shows that he always liked the bombshells in black.

By two o’clock she had watch an entire movie on the pay-for-view channel. By three she had tried out the coin massage machine by the bed. By four she decided to it was time to break up. She was changing back into her clothes, when someone knocked at the door. She answered in a silk blouse and panties, thinking it was him.

“Don’t yell, don’t scream, don’t say anything.” The man wore a ski mask and held the barrel of a gun to her stomach. “I’m not going to hurt you. I need cash. I need cash fast.”

She didn’t speak. With her right hand, she touched her damaged breast, shielding it from the intruder. He tried again in Spanish.

“Dinero. Venga. Su dinero.”

“It’s in there,” said Luellen. She backed up slowly and pointed to her purse. Everything in the room was fading in and out like she was adjusting a camera lens. “I’ll give you what I have. Please don’t hurt me. Please don’t hurt me.”

She walked over to the nightstand, grabbed the handles of her purse, and emptied the contents on the bed. Then she took her wallet and handed it to the man. “There should be two or three hundred dollars.” She cocked her chin towards her blue jeans. “I’m going to get dressed. Give me a minute. It’ll just take a minute.” She tiptoed towards the bureau, her heart thwacking, her throat dry.

“Stop,” he said. “Come closer.”

Through the mask, she saw his dark eyes moving, looking first at her hair, her face, her chin, and working their way down.

“Go over to the A/C and crank it up. It’s a freaking sauna in here.” His t-shirt was wet. Patches of it stuck to him like a second skin.

“It doesn’t get any cooler,” said Luellen. “These window units must be fifty-years-old.” Her fingers traveled up and down her blouse, making sure everything was buttoned. She pulled the tail of the blouse down over her hips.

He emptied her wallet with his left hand while he held the gun in the other. “Pleased to meet you Luellen Golding who lives at 4120 North Bay Road, Miami Beach. You mind handing over those rings on your fingers?”

She slid them off.

“You got a car?”

She glanced at the ripples in the carpeting. She may have been stupid enough to wait four hours for Juan Carlos in a dilapidated flea house but she had the good sense to park her Mercedes at the Burger King two blocks away.

“I walked here. My car’s not here.”

He smiled. “Smarter than you look. And what time is lover boy showing up?”

Again she touched her left breast. “He’s coming any minute. He just called. He’s on his way.”

“Give me your phone.” He pushed a few buttons then threw the phone at her feet. “Bullshit. All these phone calls are going out. Why are you lying to me, Luellen Golding? You’re a profound disappointment. Have I ever lied to you?”

"I'm leaving," said Luellen. "I'm putting on my pants one leg at a time and I'm leaving. I'm so fucking tired. I'm tired of all of you. If you want to kill me, kill me. Shoot me. Just get it over with."

He sat down on the bed and motioned with the gun for her to sit next to him. When he exhaled, half the air in his body seemed to leave. Somehow he looked smaller. "I need some cash, Luellen. I've got expenses. What I don't need is complications and you seem like a very complicated person." He was inches from her now. He smelled like cigarettes and sweat.

"Like I said. I'm leaving." But when she stood up, the room tilted like a sinking ship. "If you're going to rape me, get it over with." Then everything went black.

She never knew how long she was unconscious. He leaned over her with a damp washcloth. The ski mask was off. His hair was cropped close. Gray/black stubble bristled his cheeks. "Are you okay? Jesus, I've never meant to hurt you. You just passed out cold. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

"I have cancer," said Luellen.

She glanced around the room and saw the gun on the dresser. There was a pillow under her head. She tried to sit up but the room kept spinning. On the wall was poster of a seascape she vaguely recognized. The boat seemed to undulate in waves.

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"I think I need to stay here for a little while." She squeezed his hand, felt tears wet her cheeks, and prayed she wouldn't die on the motel floor.

"You're okay," said the man. "You're gonna be okay. Then he looked into her eyes like they were bottomless, a crevice in the earth waiting to be mined. When he spoke, he measured each word. Each comma was a breath, each pause an eternity. "Most women are full of themselves.... they could be uglier than shit and still they think they're hot stuff. But not you... I don't think I ever met anyone like you... Do you have any idea, Luellen Golding, how beautiful you are?"

"I'm going to be sick," said Luellen. Then she turned her head and gagged.

He rubbed her back, his fingers gently circling. Under his breath, he hummed.

"This is embarrassing," said Luellen. "I've never been so embarrassed." Drops of perspiration clotted her face, her neck, and her throat. The moisture clung like tentacles, hanging in mid-air, plump.

"Jesus, if you weren't sick before, the crap on this carpeting would kill you." He turned his head over his shoulder and coughed. "There's not enough Lysol in the fucking world to get this dump clean." Making jokes now, trying to make her laugh.

"What's your name?" she asked him.

“Do you really think I ought to tell you?”

Slowly he unbuttoned her blouse. The silk fell limply to her sides, exposing her torso and her breasts. She swore she could hear a gasp, a little intake of air. Turning her head once more, she squeezed her eyes shut and waited for a punch to the gut. Or worse. Pity. Instead he gently ran his fingers along her arm. Hummed.

They both heard the knocking at the same time. He helped her stand and darted for the gun. “Open the door,” he told her.

Juan Carlos stood outside. With one hand she shaded her eyes, the other held her blouse closed. The afternoon sun bounced off the cement walkway, the white door, the peeling walls.

“You gonna let me inside or what?”

“You’re late,” she said. “Five hours late.”

“I was tied up. Business. I’d knew you’d wait.”

She backed up towards the wall, pulling the door in front of her. Juan Carlos stepped into the room and blinked. The room was dark, filled with moving shadows. It was seconds before he saw the other man, maybe a minute before he noticed the gun nozzle inches from his face.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” said the man. “And you have stupid written all over you.”

Luellen stood with her back against the wall. The man glanced at her then looked away.

“What the fuck?” said Juan Carlos.

“Make my day,” said the man.

Juan Carlos tucked his head down and charged. The first shot grazed his neck. The second blasted a hole in his heart. The man looked again at Luellen.

“Jesus. I’ve never killed anyone before.”

It took a while for the police to show up. When they opened the door, Luellen was crying in the man’s arms.

“He tried to rob us,” Luellen whispered. She pointed to the body on the floor, the body wearing the ski mask. “We were trying to leave when he stopped us,” said Luellen. “My boyfriend hit him and I grabbed the gun.”

“You ever shoot anyone before?” One policeman was taking notes, writing down each word they said. The other was watching Luellen watching him.

“No,” she said. “But it’s easier than I thought.”

There are two types of guys in this world. The type who knows what he wants and the type that takes his eyes off the prize.

They stood for hours outside by the pool, watching the sun set and the bobbing bottles turn red then blue. The policemen dusted the crime scene, striped it with yellow tape, took their phone numbers and sent them home.

“My car’s parked by the Burger King,” said Luellen.

“I know,” said the man. “I already know.”



bill monroe and pickers
Doug Tibbles

father

Stefan Lovasik

he wore fourth hand-me downs as a kid
fashioned cardboard soles for one pair of shoes
that he blackened with polish
to hide the holes
to hide

but he walked
walked
learning a stilted english that felt like gristle
on his tongue
but he walked
toward the *idea* of having real shoes
of having a clean tongue
a clear sentence
but he walked walked

when the sentence came the tongue in place and smooth
he bought blue shoes
red yellow white
suede fine leather
patent two-tones

hundreds of shoes that replaced
the dirt floors
five brothers to a bed
the odor of urine
dumplings halupkas old chicken

so he walked in the purple shoes tan green
true black he walked against all of it
the piety the incessant vapid chatter of pretense
the poverty the authority

this savagely intelligent clown making his way playing it like jazz
walking like a thin Buddha
embracing me
lifting me with my shoes
his last step



with child

Alison Downs

After the wanting and needing drew us hotly together came the act itself which was as lovely as could be expected, but barring the delicious sleep of the balmy afternoon and the tingle of hands on over-sensitive skin, it was downhill from there.

Now it's like I've never known a life without feeling constantly sticky: after school, after work, after playtime—sticky, sticky. It's a sheen no soap washes off, and maybe I deserve it, maybe no soap can wash me off either. Maybe he's the spitting image of me and we're made for each other.

But I didn't expect these reaching, demanding hands that cried out for me in the same second they clutched to my hair, my earrings, kicked my stomach and screamed in tantrums I couldn't calm with my softest touch. I didn't know that this would all mean the inability to be alone ever again, the lack of self and freedom...there are no locked doors in my house, not even the bathroom, only the front door is locked, to keep him in. Or to keep me in...at least for eighteen years. Sixteen. Fourteen? When does rebellion set in? When will he hate me and wriggle from my grasp until I'm sitting alone wishing for him to be near me? Before I'm the one wanting, needing, reaching...reaching...



18

the suitcase

Alison Downs

The weight bears down on my shoulders
flattens against my chest
quickens my pulse
shallows my breath

I am buried
an endless avalanche
things they stress I should be
piles of dirty laundry
bills
obligations
his
mine
ours

the suitcase looms in the corner
always half packed and begging
it causes him unrest
my fingers itch for its handle



ode to a chicken breast

Alison Downs

Forgotten and frozen
you remained in my kitchen
huddled in death with friends of your youth

I thought I might eat you
many moons ago when I did purchase
your fresh flesh from the butcher
for dinners and lunches

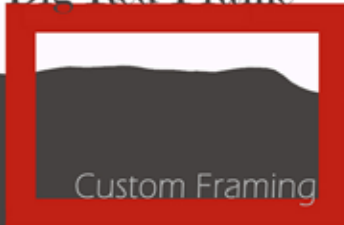
but today I apologize as I separate you
from the body of your neighbor
to rub your cold body with spices
adorn your flesh with the finest of oils

It's not for me, not anymore
for my heart is heavy for your sacrifice
knowing your life was short and bleak
with it's sole purpose chosen for you

And tonight you meet your fate
garnished tarnished and brown
resting, unassuming upon the dinner plate
of my carnivore husband who gobbles you down



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evans barlte and the inspiration

Adam "Bucho" Rodenberger

The first level of the building was covered in glass, allowing passerby to see the cavernous rooms within, each separate area filled with rows of fifty-two red chairs lined up to seat an audience. The chairs faced the walls, some of which were built out and in to create more viewing spaces. Each viewing area also contained a small table upon which large jugs of water and plastic cups sat next to jars full of what appeared to be large beads. All told, eight areas existed and could comfortably seat four hundred and sixteen people with room for others to stand against the walls. Tickets to the gallery opening had been sold to eight hundred hungry and curious patrons, all of whom lined up outside the gallery in the cold November night.

Every other window held a different advertisement for the night's event, each poster quoting other sculptors and painters, art critics and historians. "A tour-de-force of hallucinogenic proportions!" one stated. Another: "An historical shift in the world of art that questions everything we know about perception and creation." Another: "What Evans Barlte has done will forever change the consumption and enjoyment of art. A monumental achievement." Another: "Post-experience, I asked myself why continue with my own work? Post-analysis of the experience, I ask myself why not continue? A soul-shattering endeavor that will make the viewer question everything that comes after."

The lines outside snaked out from both sides of the large double doors which remained locked while gallery personnel inside made last minute refining touches to each of the viewing areas: straightening brochures that hung from the walls, making sure each water jug dispensed fluid properly and that the chairs were lined up perfectly in every viewing area.

* * *

Evans Barlte had made his name in the art world several years previous by executing perfect replicas of both famous and non-famous works of art. Half of those who cared wanted him strung up and ignored by museums across the country while the other half sang his praises, careful to note the talent it took to recreate so many different styles of painting. And it wasn't like he was trying to sell the pieces as originals; he had been up front about what he was doing from the very beginning. Once done, he would carve the letters "EV" into the bottom right of the canvas as proof that he had no intention of selling them off as forgeries. You couldn't paint over cuts that deep.

With so much press revolving around his work, he was finally given his own gallery showing. Not only had the first showing sold out, it had gone on for an extra two months after news got out about what he had done live in front of crowds.

Each night he would take four of his own recreations, cutting and splicing up the canvases into a singular pastiche of styles. It mattered little to him which paintings they were so long as he could marry themes or images while onlookers gasped with every incision the box cutter made through the pieces.

Picasso blended with Ernst blended with Matisse blended with Klee.

Hopper blended with DiChirico blended with Vermeer blended with Sage.

Dali blended with Duchamp blended with Pollack blended with de Kooning.

Barlte knew it would not be the finished product that was talked about most when the first gasps from the crowd came with the first cut of the knife through the canvas. It wasn't the disparate images layered upon each other that would be the crux of the showing, rather it was the experience of watching fine art (albeit replicated versions) destroyed and marred under the public's watchful eye that was important. The perception of destruction was as powerful as actual destruction and this was the topic of many conversations and arguments between art critics and art lovers alike for the following years. He retroactively called the show "Pastiche."

The collaged pieces sold of course, but each piece that hung in a buyer's home came with the story of its creation as he would only sell the four pieces created each night to someone in the crowd that particular evening. Selling a painting meant selling a story meant selling an experience, a commodification of emotion.

* * *

It was this revelation that struck him upon perverting his first four replications that eventually led to an evening of an empty gallery with lines stretching out around the block. People were paying for an experience and he was not going to disappoint them.

The doors opened, blasting warm air out into the night and enveloping each patron as they walked inside. Ushers greeted each of them and took their tickets, waving their hands out towards the gallery with a smile and soon the chairs filled with anxious, tittering viewers.

Once the chairs had filled, the walls became crowded in a standing room only fashion. Coats and scarves hung from arms as conversations bent towards the speculative. No actual details of the show had been released, only that Barlte was having a new showing and tickets were limited.

At 8pm, the large glass doors were shut. Heavy shades were dropped slow from the ceiling and blocked the outside world from looking in as the lights dimmed. Whispered conversations came to a stop and breaths were hushed. Silence filled the crowded gallery as the sound of a single sitar came spilling out of speakers set into the walls. Barlte's raspy, but soothing, voice soon followed.

"There was a time in our history when art was created to tell a story, to leave behind proof that man existed somewhere on this earth, a physical recording of his life and what it contained. Then there came a time when art was created because of something deeper inside man, a hope to evoke within the viewer the emotions the artist wanted to evoke. Art was no longer an historical endeavor, but one meant to connect one person to another in some way. We've now come to an impasse; what is the next evolution in the artistic chain of events? I believe it is the creation of art and the viewer of the art becoming one, becoming intertwined in such a way that neither can be pulled apart from the other.

“But as with any creative endeavor, art is subjective. What Mary feels about the surrealist movement may find itself at odds with what Mary’s husband or wife feels about surrealism. Perhaps they both love surrealism, but for very different reasons. What if I told you that subjectivity could be completely removed from the experience of art? What if I told you that I could give you truth and nothing but? What if I told you that I could put you in both the mind and the experience of the artists themselves, completely removing this antiquated and presumptive notion of interpretation?”

Heads turned to look at each other. Questioning looks and dismissive, but curious, smiles graced the faces of many as the sitar continued on, slowly being drowned out by the sound of ocean waves lapping against the shore in a slow, lazy rhythm.

“We live in a world where government approved chemicals have begun to mute and silence the active brain. Rather than allow these active, creative brains to wander far and free, we have a nation of young people stunted by prescriptions and pill schedules. They sit in classrooms, fog-headed and hazy, while a wealth of knowledge passes them by under the guise of behavioral therapy.

“Tonight, I hope that your presence here means you’re interested in helping me buck this trend. Tonight, we’re going to lift that hazy veil from our eyes and minds. We’re going to travel down roads previously unexplored by anyone. You could call it wonderland if you’d like, but I find the term inadequate. We’re going deeper than just down a rabbit hole. We’re going to take our hands and dig deep within the mind to drink our fill from the well of creativity, from the well of inspiration, and my friends...we shall drink deep and long to slake a thirst we did not know existed within us.”

A long pause came from the recording and soft, nervous tittering erupted amongst the patrons. Then his voice returned, filling the rooms again.

“You’ll see before you a table. On this table are three things: one jug of water, enough plastic cups for every one of you to have one, and a jar of pills that will dispense one pill at a time. The ushers will help form a line so that everyone will get their own cup. You may fill the cup up to whatever level you’d like. You will be required to take one of the pills from the jug, swallow it in front of an usher, and return to your seat. You will not be allowed to remove any of the pills from this establishment. If you make an attempt, you will be asked to leave immediately.

“The pills themselves are not illegal nor do they contain anything that will get you in trouble with your employers or any law enforcement. I cannot tell you anything more than that. Should you be averse to ingesting a pill of which you know nothing about, this is completely understandable, but you will be asked to leave the gallery so that each patron will be on the same chemical experience. I appreciate both your support and your concern in this matter, but this is non-negotiable. If you are discomfited by my proposition, please let an usher know now.”

A flood of ushers swarmed into each viewing area, standing by the tables, the exits, and at all four corners of rows of chairs. The crowd began murmuring to themselves. Several people got up from their seats and gathered their things, their faces darkened by the thought that they had been swindled by some half-clever forgery expert who was more scam artist than real artist. The ushers shuffled out some thirty or forty frustrated, vocal patrons and locked the gallery doors

once more. Hushed conversations were silenced as Barlte's voice came through the speakers again.

"Now then...let's begin."

Expressionless ushers began forming lines in the viewing areas, watching as patrons received one dispensed pill, and checked mouths to make sure no pill went unswallowed or palmed and then slipped into a pocket. Though...they'd know fairly quickly if someone had done so once the show began.

* * *

Three thoughts occurred simultaneously in Evans Barlte's mind when his first crowd gasped at the perversion of his art:

Could the instant creation of art provoke the same reaction?

Could it be a shared experience in that the public could be directly involved?

Was it possible for the shared experience to be the exact same for every individual involved?

He quickly dismissed the first two questions, having himself seen that art as a live experience rarely provoked much of anything out of an audience. Time and time again, installation artists had relied upon a public viewing of the creation of something with negligible effects (not unlike his first show). Once viewed, the viewer was left with a certain emotion, but the moment could never be recreated. It was a unique passage of time never to be experienced again. Watching someone paint took time; watching someone sculpt took even more. If the patrons weren't themselves painting or sculpting or somehow physically altering an object towards an end result, then they were missing a fundamental part of the artistic process.

But it was the third question that intrigued him the most for months after. Not because of the possibilities that could arise, but the hurdles involved in getting a crowd to arrive at those exacting possibilities.

Each individual came from their own set of personalized experiences; no life was ever going to be the exact mirrored copy of another. It was impossible, even with twins or triplets or some variation thereof. Each movement or decision made was chosen by the individual, each movement or decision interpreted in an individualistic way. Two people born of very different circumstances (one from a poor family, one from a rich family) might contain within themselves very different perceptions of a single object. Or, as was sometimes the case when he thought about his circle of friends, perceptions were shared but with nuanced shades of difference. The shared perception was close, but not close enough to be considered exactly the same.

The year following "Pastiche," Barlte shuttered himself away from the majority of the public, relenting to only a single interview per month (the art media were hungry for more from him, as was the public). He bought and read philosophy books, focusing primarily on the nature of aesthetics and perception, and quickly became enamored of Schopenhauer's idea that the perception and the perceiver could not be separated into two entities.

He wallowed in the psychology of optical illusions and their effect on the brain, which led him to books on neurological disorders and medical journals where he latched onto the concept of haptic perception, a kind of perception based in touch rather than any of the other senses. This led him to the nature of chemistry and neurochemistry, where he quickly became fascinated by the interplay of hormones and pheromones. He studied which parts of the brain were triggered by creative endeavors (or vice versa), reading everything current or still in the experimental phases of study.

He read up on Ken Kesey and found himself engrossed in Tom Wolfe's "Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test." Aldous Huxley's "Doors of Perception" describing his time experimenting with Mescaline quickly became a favorite as well. The books stacked up on his nightstand and in the corners of his bedroom. Dead highlighters, empty from so much use, littered the floor. Post-it notes hung from every inch of wall, each a small pocket of not-to-be-forgotten wisdom he had come across or scrawled with an idea that needed to be fleshed out further.

Everything became muddled and interesting, a web of information in need of untangling by someone far smarter than he, someone not unlike his cousin Jakob. A med school drop-out, Jakob turned from a possible career in neurological disorders to cooking up illegal drugs in a makeshift lab far outside of the city. He had even been known to create a few new ones with surprising success.

Evans Barlte knew that Jakob was who he needed to see. Jakob would know how to solve this tangled riddle swimming around inside his head.

24

* * *

The crowd returned to their seats or where they stood previously, nervous but excited looks spread across their faces. Anxious fingers smoothed out pleats on slacks or skirts, stroked bearded chins, or played with ear lobes. Some couples held hands, the sweat from both palms like glue holding them together. The speakers crackled to life with the voice of Evans again.

"I recognize the irony, me railing against an entire generation popping pills in an effort to stabilize their inner monologues while asking you patrons to ingest a pill as well. But think of this as that tiny thing dissolves slowly within your stomach: as the population increases and leans ever more towards the familial lines propagating themselves over and over exponentially, we create drugs, both legal and illegal, to help us get back to our primitive natures. Meanwhile the skyscrapers reach up from the basement of the earth to block out the sun and make us prisoners of our own progress. We are living in our own science fiction novel with some unknown entity watching from above, scribing out the story of our lives as it deviates from the natural path onto the synthetic path.

"Whether you are a creative individual or not, this experience will fundamentally change the way you look at creation in all its forms. Songwriting, poetry, sculpting, machinist, scientist, all of it...distilled into this one single item breaking down inside you, ready to show you the objective truth of the genesis of art.

"Now, I invite you lean back if you can. Relax. Close your eyes and focus on the music, which will soon disappear from your perception as you slip into another kind of perception. I'd ask

you to ruminate on this single question while we wait patiently for the journey to start: what does the nature of creation taste like?”

Many in the crowd tried to do as he asked, nervous as they were, but everyone had stopped speaking entirely, waiting, wondering what to expect as the pills began to dissolve and take effect.

* * *

Jakob laughed when Evans had explained his process and what he wanted to accomplish.

“Your idea is both insane and brilliant. I love it. I’ve been stagnating in my own bullshit recently and this feels not only legitimate, but truly world-altering.”

“Right?” Evans replied. “If we can figure out how to make this work, it will change everything. Perception, creation, experience, the totality of aesthetics, everything. There are drugs that already utilize and hype the already naturally occurring chemicals in the body to create new sensations, so surely this is possible, yes?”

They both sat in Jakob’s spacious living room. The furniture was horribly modern (in Evans’ opinion) and uncomfortable to sit on, but the view out onto the forested hills beyond the home couldn’t be beat. Living near the wilderness gave Jakob a mental acuity that seemed to be better for him than city-dwelling could ever do.

Jakob nodded. “I think it might be. We’ll need to approach this from several angles. And, I need to stress this...it could take years before we ever achieve anything worth talking about, much less sharing with the general public.”

“Completely understood. How do we start?”

They spent the weekend brainstorming over bottles of whiskey and wine, pasta dinners and walks through the densely wooded hills near the house. Soon, Jakob’s own basement lab became not unlike Evans’ own, covered in papers and white boards and post-its. Old medical equipment was dusted off and turned on or repaired back into working condition. Conductors and wires were checked for connectivity or replaced with new ones and a few new machines were acquired through ‘less than ideal’ connections that Jakob had done business with over the years.

Soon after, Jakob was hooking Evans up to an electroencephalograph machine while he painted perfect replicas. The cowl of electrodes looked ridiculous, but gave Jakob good baseline readings while Evans worked. They used EKG machines to measure his heart rate while he painted and when a particular session was over, blood was drawn, sweat was collected, more electrodes were placed on Evans’ body and more information slid out through the readings.

Each style of painting brought about different emotions in Evans, each experience was completely unique. Legal pads full of notations for every minute spent painting filled the room, neither man wishing to miss a single important moment that might be the breakthrough. Was his sweat different after painting a Picasso than it was after painting a Hopper? What were the subtle neurological differences occurring during both experiences? Brainwaves, heart rates, the viscosity of blood in the vein...everything was measured as far down to the tiniest fraction possible.

There was a point in time where Evans was constantly hooked up to at least one machine, if not more, for a full two months. He didn't mind in the least. If this particular idea came to fruition, it would be revolutionary. If he had to be poked and prodded and needled and tested, then so be it. With any luck, the end result would be more than worth it.

After nearly six years of perpetual painting while hooked up to machines and after nearly 4 years of Jakob's chemistry skills being pushed to their absolute limits, both men sat in Jakob's living room, with mouths open and pills in hand, staring at each other and wondering if this would actually work. The pills were swallowed at the same time and after the ride was over, both men smiled at each other, unspoken elation plastered across their faces as joyous tears came spilling down Evans Barlte's face.

* * *

The pills, unsurprisingly, soured the tongue as good drugs tend to do. Unlike normal pharmaceuticals, however, they dissolved quickly in the mouth before their contents slipped into the bloodstream. Fragile though their compressed natures may have been, they contained the essence of experience that Evans and Jakob had been able to impart chemically, a thing Evans honestly had not believed possible even after ingesting their first successful attempt.

As those first bits of salivated chemical slid across tongues and danced down throats, each member of the audience began to feel a slight thrumming inside them, like the space between their skin and muscle was expanding and allowing something else to fill the void. Behind closed eyes, a soft white noise crescendo built up steadily, blocking out all the noise from other patrons who gasped, oohed, and ahned, each person a solitary space unto themselves hearing the inner workings of their organs pumping blood and chemical through veins and arteries.

The thrumming increased, and so too did the feeling that the space around them expanded, fluffed and softened, cocooning them into a singular moment where their hands became the hands of someone else, moving of their own volition but as if pushed ever onward by some unseen and inspired force. Though the objects of creation – the brush, the canvas, the paint, the inspiration – were not truly visible or within arm's reach, each patron felt these as firmly as they felt their own sense of self, both intertwining together into a perfect unified whole. Men and women alike felt their hands wrap around the thick woody nature of a paintbrush dipped in bright hues. They felt the rough edges of the canvas, its grainy nature firm and real beneath their fingertips as first streaks of color filled its landscape.

Each stroke was a new feeling, the fine hairs of the brush whispering against the texture of the canvas, pushing and pulling magentas, ceruleans, pines, and ochres into form and structure. Images began to take shape inside the mind of every patron, images that they had seen hanging in galleries the world over, images that sat in private collections and between the pages of art history books. The oohs and ahhs erupted as understanding hit them all; they were all involved in the creation of painted life, of history being made by their own fingertips. That it was all in the mind made no difference, for wasn't that the point? Wasn't everything created initially within the mind? Every patron, if only for half an hour, had become an integral part of the life of art, adding some new piece to its collective memory and leaving gentle scars of purpose across its surface even though most had never painted a day in their lives.

Many wept the way Evans had upon his first successful trial with Jakob. He had given them a taste of talent, an amuse-bouche of what it was to be an artist, what it was to create something from nothing, to conjure up emotion out of the ether and give it form and space.

* * *

Evans emerged from a side door painted to look like the rest of the art gallery walls, hidden within the aesthetic, smiling as wide as his face would allow. A less confident, but still enthralled, Jakob followed behind him. The two walked silently through the rooms, gazing upon the faces of the patrons currently in the midst of a creationist rapture. Their eyes were open, but glossed over and unseeing. One would be forgiven if they thought the room was filled with rows of unthinking automatons staring in elation at the same blank walls.

A chorus of satisfied sighs, as if post-coital moments had been reached by several patrons at once. Had any of them genuinely climaxed or was that simply Evans being optimistic about the success of the pills? He shook his head and smiled, realizing it didn't matter. He'd never heard a gallery so utterly devoid of conversation before and knew that it was all going much smoother than he or Jakob could have expected.

Ten minutes passed, twenty, thirty. Evans and Jakob found empty spots against a wall and leaned back, taking in the scope of the gallery. "Do you think they're okay?" Jakob whispered softly.

The smile plastered across Evans' face widened. "I think they're better than okay. I think they're loving life right now. At least another aspect of it that maybe they've never experienced before. I'll be anxious to hear their reactions when they all come back to the present."

Slowly, eyes across the room began to brighten, flitting back to life. Mouths hung agape, silent and unable to voice what they'd just experienced. Evans and Jakob stood slowly, brushing off the seat of their pants. Hushed voices began quiet conversations until the voices swelled and filled the long stilled room excitedly. Evans scanned the room, pacing around each particular section of the gallery until he was recognized by a group of patrons who immediately stood and began clapping in his direction, nodding as they did so.

Soon the entire gallery arose, joining in the celebration of the artist. He nodded in every direction, giving silent thanks to everyone who met his gaze, and then turned to Jakob who still stood against the wall.

He grinned and motioned for everyone to take their seats, which they did so after several long minutes of clapping and cheering. When the sound died down to a murmur, Evans turned on his wireless mic and motioned towards Jakob.

"This is my cousin Jakob, without whom none of this would be possible. A brilliant chemist and patient cohort, it took us several years to get to this moment, one I sincerely hope you found both beautiful and illuminating the way we did when we first experienced it ourselves."

The crowd erupted into cheers and clapping again as Jakob stepped forward sheepishly, waving his hand to the throngs of patrons.

“Ironic that, from the moment I destroyed my own paintings, duplicated and replicated copies of original and well-known works, we would come full circle back to the idea of creation in its purest form. Destruction, creation, destruction, creation; round and round the cycle goes,” he said, swirling his hand in the air for effect. “This is the nature of art, this is the nature of *all* art forms, to create something from nothing, to impart some kind of inspired and felt experience on to the viewer, the listener, whomever and whatever they may be.”

“Now,” he said, smiling wider, “let’s talk about what you experienced as a collective whole and see how subjective art can really be at this experiential level...”



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ujkes
Saera Kochanski

the knock at the door

Kurt Zellen

Peter De La Holta spent four days on his knees praying with a stillness that had long ceased to exist. Four days kneeling on the ground; prostrating himself before the ad hoc shrine consecrated to the Holy Barbara, his patron saint for fever and lightning, begging for the simple gift of insanity. The blood that leaked from the wounds and open sores of his too worn out skin had accumulated since its first appearance two days into the vigil. It puddled all around him, mixing with the urine and feces, and was beginning to soak into the ground when the sudden knock at the door forced him to rise from his knees just as the sun sank deep into the heart of the horizon. The extent of his agony was shamefully evident in the crippling way he dragged his stiff and wearied body towards the door to let in whomever it was that knocked. He paused briefly, before reaching to release the lock, in order to run his hands through his hair that was kept in line only due to the stench that surrounded it and a buildup of grease that was immense. In truth, however, it was most likely an act performed more as a means for gaining his composure than out of concern for his appearance.

“Come in, Come in.” Peter De La Holta found himself warmly saying before the door was even completely opened (perhaps even a bit too overly receptive). He was not at all bothered by the fact that he did not recognize the tall man in aubergine cloth standing in the doorway before him. But secretly he was disappointed by the fact that the stranger was not the shady blue he always imagined the releasing gesture of madness to be. The stranger in turn said nothing but moved through the door-- through the horrible odor that came from Peter De La Holta's body. Where the stranger stepped he left the marks of bare footprints colored by the drying purple blood that he walked through, letting the bottom of the aubergine cloth drag through the small collection of dung without attempting to move around it. No, he went directly through it as he made his way to the chair on the far end of the table and sat down with an expression on his face that suggested speech was imminent.

They remained silent and without movement. Peter De La Holta standing with his hand on the knob of the still opened door, staring at the man in aubergine cloth at the table who continued to appear as if he were about to announce something that was very important. Sometimes Peter would notice that the stranger's face was dimensionless. At other times, he grew agitated at the stranger whose sudden arrival had so clearly disrupted the vigil. Still also, he occasionally felt relief in the continuous thinning of the air that had surrounded him for four straight days without remorse. Air that seemed to bear down only on him, which was heavy and warm-- like his own breath. It was as if opening the door for the stranger was more like telling the air that it was time to go, and asking the air: “Please go, leave me alone, and do not come back”. After completing this thought Peter De La Holta made the decision to speak to the stranger who had not moved and seemingly had a strange and wonderful ability that prevented him from beginning to smell like a sweaty crotch.

Without moving from his position, or even releasing his hand from the knob of the door, Peter asked a long and complicated list of questions ranging from the banal to the opportunistic. The man in aubergine in turn gave the appearance that he listened to each question very deeply and then responded in slight hand gestures and a few short phrases spoken in some incomprehensible form of gibberish. This made Peter De La Holta feel very sad.

After a lengthy period of inquisition, Peter De La Holta began to wish that the stranger would go so that at least he could maintain the dignity of feeling lonely by himself. "How can this be?" He asked himself. "That the burden of loneliness one carries when by himself could ever be made so much worse and so much heavier when sharing it with another." His perplexity brought a thick despair that grew stronger than anything that had touched him before. He took his hand off the doorknob and, without knowing, reached down to scratch his corroded knees; tearing the scabs from his flesh and restarting a tiny flow of blood running down his leg over blood drying for many days.

Peter De La Holta decided to ignore the man in aubergine and return to his vigil. He walked stiffly to the spot he occupied on his knees in front of the ad hoc temple and once again began to venerate himself to the glory of the Holy Barbara. But it wasn't the same. His devotion to the cause was lacking in the presence of the stranger. His focus misled him and he could not stop thinking of the newly opened sores and the fresh blood that did not share the same consistency with the blood several days old so closely woven into his hair and crusted on his skin.

"Please leave". He said to the stranger without even looking at him. "I didn't ask for you to come, but you came, and now you have ruined everything. So please... just leave."

The long silence persisted as Peter De La Holta turned to look at the man in aubergine and was devastated to learn that now it was the stranger who appeared unable to understand what was asked of him. Peter De La Holta felt his agitation stretch toward unforeseen proportions. That is when he made the decision to kill the stranger.

The man at the table offered no defense as Peter De La Holta wrapped his hands around his throat. He merely sat and maintained the expression of a man who is about to speak words that will never come. For some time Peter De La Holta tried to choke the life away from the stranger. But, alas, he grew tired and saw that it was useless. Taking his hands away from the stranger's throat, he crumbled to the floor shuddering in the horrible truth that he was in the presence of something that could not be killed. There was only a short pause before Peter De La Holta interrupted the silence.

"This is just the beginning, isn't it?" He asked the stranger in aubergine who did not respond and gave every appearance that he did not even hear the question. With the man still sitting at the table, Peter De La Holta left the room to go to the tub where he stripped himself of his soiled clothes and began to bath himself with a great intensity and careful attention. When he finished, he put on his best underwear and cleanest clothes. He returned to the room to find the stranger sitting at the table where he had left him.

"Let's go."

Peter De La Holta said one time before moving towards the still open door (where he did not pause) before walking out of the house for the first time in many days. So certain that the tall stranger in the aubergine cloth was following him that he did not even turn around to look.



ant fighting

Caleb True

Humid nights, refrigerator shuddering. Wind whistling through gangways, windows banging in their tracks. Humid days, strutting around naked drinking beer. Lifting weights in the mirror. Taking summer courses playing catch up. Doing homework, murdering mosquitoes.

Vera on the internet. Talking and talking, pages and pages.

Asking, what about you?

Typing, Single. Single.

Early morning T.V. glowing the weather: Hot, hot, hot. Slouching in a wooden chair, feet on a wooden table. Pouring tea, heating leftovers. Food rotating in a microwave. Ants dying from detergent. Their cracks, their tunnels filled.

Vera breaking up with the boy in Philly.

Going to the movies. Kissing.

Do you want to help me pick cherries?

Do you want to help me kill ants?

Picking cherries. Pitting cherries. Covered in cherry gore taking showers. Having sex. Baking pie. Going to her place, cooking dinner. Splitting beers. Small people, small stomachs, tolerances. Touching arms under the table. Making sure her mother was eating: Something, anything. Going to the sunroom. Window fan sucking the air. Smelling her hair and skin. Licking her skin and teeth. Her mouth opening. Arms goin numb, stiff! Standing for a Kleenex. Reaching for the windowsill. Focusing on a trapped moth.

Summer in full swing, fucking on the queen bed murdering mosquitoes in the dark. Rising at dawn. Detergentering ants. Syrupping pancakes. Sun lighting the windows. Turning, detergent bottle in hand, smiling.

Summer fading, summer over, cherries gone. Thinking, asking, What's wrong? Setting the compost bucket in the grass, embracing. Ants breaking through detergent, ants retunneling tunnels.

Autumn taking over. Shopping, cooking, cleaning for one. Ants pilgrimaging no more.

Long distancing. Late computer nights asking how her day was, how her days were. Asking me about ant fighting.

Responding, I win.

Saying goodnight. Lingering, teasing.

Winter, little by little. Vacation and visiting. Returning to routine. Her and I, making pancakes, drinking wine. Wine and pancakes. After dinner in bed, sun setting. Streetlamp lighting, bulb buzzing.

Saying, The long distance—I have no solution.

Sitting up, What can I do?

Leaving out the door, Nothing.

Cooking for one. Composting. Stopping composting.

Midwinter, capitulating. Out to the garden! Ants piling their dead in mounds. Stepping in some, smearing some. Tiptoeing, emptying, returning. In the kitchen, disinfecting the bucket. Ants on the windowsill, circling, hungry. Saying, Here you go, ants. Replacing the bucket, cracking the lid. Ants curious, ants coming. Squeaky clean, nothing to eat. Deceptive smell, deceived ants. Lid closing, ants dying. Dead ants.



the pick up

Stephen V. Ramey

James met Wanda in the panda cage. He was picking up poo, which, in a panda's case can be a lovely array of arrowhead shapes of various colors. Wanda was sweeping. The broom, a fine-bristled warehouse broom with a head wider than her hips, shushed close as James reached for a nest of excrement. The broom struck his hand, and stopped.

"Sorry," Wanda said. She had pretty eyes, the color of evening clouds. Her breasts were shaped like torpedoes, though that was likely her bra.

"Don't destroy this formation," James said. The side of his hand was pink where the broom head had struck.

Wanda stared.

"Lighter green makes for the best tea," James said, "but the darker avocado shade isn't bad, especially on a cold winter day."

"You make tea from--?"

"Of course not," James said. "I fertilize the plants. It's an indirect process."

"Oh," Wanda said.

With deft and practiced movements, James deposited the poo into a canvas bag. "Would you care to go for a drink after work?" He said this nonchalantly, but inside he was sweating. It had been his experience that girls--women--were not as easy to pick up as poo.

Wanda considered. "Will you wash your hands?"

"Of course," James said.

"Then I accept," Wanda said. She twirled the broom. The head spun round and round.

Is she showing off? James thought. Maybe she was a majorette. He could imagine her marching on a football field, bronzed legs unsheathed, torpedo breasts held high.

"Dinner?" he said. "There's a place near the zoo entrance I like to go to."

"Popeye's?" she said.

"No, that's chicken. I like Chinese."

"Panda Palace?"

“Yes, that’s it.” James wiped his palms against his trouser legs, and presented his hand. “I’m James.”

“Wanda,” Wanda said. Her eyebrow lifted ever so slightly.

“After work, then,” James said.

Wanda resumed sweeping. She was more careful now, James noted. He watched her eyes roam the floor ahead of her. The broom swerved more than once to miss a pile.

I think she likes me, James thought. It brought a pleasant warmth. He wanted to whistle, but resisted the urge. He was not a particularly good whistler.

Wanda met him at the restaurant. She had brushed her hair and put on a new blouse, one that was looser and did not show off her pointed bra. She must keep extra clothing in her locker. *A planner.* James’ life ran more on inspiration. He glanced at his soiled trousers and felt embarrassed. She smiled, choosing not to notice.

“I did wash my hands,” he said. He held out his palms for her to inspect.

“That’s one point for you,” she said. “Three and you get to first base.”

“Really?” He tried not to show his surprise. “That’s a nice blouse.”

“I was just kidding about first base,” she said. “I like to kid.”

“I appreciate that,” James said.

“Good,” Wanda said. “Another point for you.”

He opened the door and they went inside. A short corridor led to the dining room, walls covered in tapestries painted with scenes from China. One showed a panda with bamboo shoots pressed to its mouth.

“What goes in comes out,” James said.

“What?”

“Nothing. Just talking to myself.”

Wanda gave him a look. “I do that sometimes.”

He smiled. “We have something in common.”

The end of the corridor held a queue of people. James smelled Egg Fu Yung, lobster sauce, a hint of sweet and sour.

“How long do you think we’ll have to wait?” Wanda said. “I have to get home to my dog.”

“I don’t know,” James said. “I’ll ask someone.” He excused himself through the line of people, and tugged a waitress’ sleeve.

“How long before we’re seated?” he said.

The woman had a round face. Her hair was bound up into a bun, revealing tiny ears pressed tight against her head. She chattered, “two daze, todays, too dazed!” Then she stormed off, menus in hand. Two adults and a boy followed.

James returned to Wanda.

“What did she say?”

“I couldn’t tell. It might have been ‘today’ or ‘two days’ or maybe Tuesday. She was pretty harried.”

“Let’s go to my place,” Wanda said.

“Are you sure you’re comfortable with that?”

“Usually I’m pretty careful,” Wanda said, “but there’s something about you.”

“I know,” James said. “I felt comfortable with you since the moment--”

“I bashed a broom into your hand. Were you swept away?”

“Is that a joke?” James said. He glanced at his hand. The edge was slightly swollen.

“Now or then?” Wanda said.

“I don’t understand.”

“I think that’s what I like about you,” Wanda said. She took his injured hand, and guided him back through the entrance. They blinked in the sudden sunlight. Two red cars and a green van were parked at the curb.

“Are you working at the zoo for the summer?” James said. His own job was year round.

“Today is my last day,” Wanda said.

“Oh,” James said.

“I didn’t say it was my last day with you.”

“Oh?”

"I live just around the corner," Wanda said. "I'll make stir fry for dinner, how's that?"

"That sounds good," James said.

"The dog will want out," Wanda said. "Would you mind walking him for a few minutes?"

"Of course not," James said. "I'm good with animals."

"I figured you were." They turned onto a street of close-packed homes with postage stamp yards. "Would you mind picking up his droppings? I'm afraid it's less tidy than panda poop."

"I'd be honored," James said. "Can I brew some tea after we eat? That's my specialty."

Wanda stopped walking. She scratched her arm. "Let's take this one step at a time, okay?"

"I suppose that's wise," James said.



Aurora Amidon

aunt fedora

Gerald Yelle

Aunt Fedora

knew Vygotsky had unorthodox methods —though she couldn't for the life of her remember what program she'd seen him on. Did he drive an ambulance in *Mother Jugs and Speed* or was he that polar explorer who stayed frozen for a hundred years and woke up younger than his kids? One reason he was so hard to define was his way of using analogies. Not only did he sleep in his boots, he bet his wad on verbal primacy. He went on to shoot the moon, guaranteeing that his ideology would work its charm on schools as geographically removed from Moscow as the backwoods of Hampshire County. It became the better part of woodpecker psychology. Banging heads to cure the carpal tunnel of the sinus —it leaves us free to strum guitars while chewing gum with marbles in our mouths and pockets.



cake, piece of

David P. Miller

*You can't have your cake
and eat it too*, they smirked
while handing him a slice of cake.
So he didn't eat it.

The boy thought courtesy in children
sheltered them from Grownup leers,
horselaughs, squeezed-voice splutters.
So he took home the cake, and wondered


if he downed it in his room,
would a Grownup jump a-giggle
from the closet? Prod his navel,
muss his hair, chant *Bad boy! You ate it too!*

And if the boy then tried to smile —
as polite and anxious children do —
would the Grownup swoon — or squeal —
over his goddamn Dimples?



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in lieu of a plane crash

David P. Miller

*no one's ever lost forever / when they die they go away / but they will visit you occasionally /
do not be afraid – Amanda Palmer, "Lost"*

Squatting O'Hare Gate K8
ravished by Amanda Palmer
inside my noise suppression oasis.
Listening I should not do in public.
Lachrymose men nearly sixty
should not be seen at K8 or any Gate.

There's a couple just like us
if we were hard-bit tough.
Smokes, burnt-in tans.
She leans back across the seat
cradles her head on his shoulder as
yours and mine on the subway sometimes.

Wrong Way Turn Back Now flight to
Vegas. Twenty-six hundred miles
against a blaring red light.
Two years ago I hurtled southwest
and your father died.
This is one reason I am scared.

Situation Room on the screen
hanging like Damocles' sword
can't message me out of this cattle drive.
The little Brit geckomatronic
fails to charm. Glacier melt
as coming attraction:
the volume shocks up.

Now stuff ourselves like olives
in a tube of reinhaled oxygen.
Wait to be gagged out
toward one hundred eight degrees
and newsboxes of *Little Naked Darlings*.

Count back from eighty-three hours
till your breath returns in the dark.



when this you see

David P. Miller

Remember me to the man in the front first-floor bedroom
stretched across the left-behind, shut-up sofa bed
head and feet pillowed against its itchy arms
swaybacked u-shape sleeping beneath a found blanket.

Do say hello to the thirty-year-old with the headshot
of his blonde actress justafriend taped over the bureau
and the topless self-portrait in pen next to it,
left by an almost flame second blonde, gone to Manhattan.

Remind him how curious he found it, returning at night
through that packed student neighborhood, a ghost town
and he wondered where had they all gone, till he remembered
that it was Super Bowl Sunday, and he had other plans for his eyeballs.

Tell him for me, I know all about his apartment-mate sagas.
The redheaded female grad student whose band spread out over the living room.
The summer sublet who could have seduced him, but left a room full
of drinking glasses with layers of mold. And that child toward the close,
rent money mysteriously gone up his nose.

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And if you can, do pass this back from me.
Rejoice, man! at the measly one- or two-nighters.
Rejoice that you'll never move to Seattle to wed the young waitress,
pregnant by somebody else.

Rejoice for the date or two broken by obvious lies.
Give thanks for their skittish embarrassments, and thanks
that your first marriage failed. Five years in Emptyville
comes to an end with a personal ad, calzones at midday,
and one sudden kiss.





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brando soldier
Doug Tibbles


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glee club on spree day

Gerald Yelle

Ivy's Shasta sees a show about a kid on a roof
—he's this incompetent Super Mario type named Voivo
who tries to jump, slide, climb and call for help
but his life is governed by the rules of a game and he
can't quite catch a break. His mother works at the
school where I teach and take classes. She praises
my clarity and ability to make choices but she's
clueless as to how her son should come off the roof.
The problem is we're too busy with our lives and
don't have time for Voivo. We don't have time for
his obsession —or his sleepless nights.

In my case I'm trying to find a way out of military
service. I wouldn't make a good soldier. Besides,
I'd be in boot camp during Shasta's graduation
—Ivy wouldn't want me missing that. Last week
she threw me her toothpaste. She acted like I had
pockets of beef wedged between my teeth.

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Headache pills make me garrulous, but there
have to be filters. I used to accuse Ivy of slipping off
to have sex. I wondered why she didn't have it
with me. She refused to fill the blanks with examples,
saying the more you specify the more you lie.

Shasta's in my fanfolding class. Last year's grads
took the couch and Karaoke machine, but left the piano.
The floor's bare boards visibly sag and I'm afraid
if we get too close we'll sink to the room below.

The trash has maggots. Shasta gets food on reports.
Some see-through insect lands on his arm. He
can't shake it off. I slap him and tell him to take it easy.

Voivo's mom and I drink on the dock, and talk about
the difference between works of genius composed
in a few months and ones created by lesser giants over
a span of decades. Even now some of the terms are
undefined. Did the lesser giants work every day
for eight hours for thirty years? We decide that *Absalom*,
Absalom is better than *Dune* or *Gone with the Wind*
—but either of those is better than *Sanctuary*.

Shasta barges in to say that he and Ivy are moving out. I try riding Voivo's bike to take my mind off my heartache. Just touching it, though, causes it to fall and refuse to be righted. It has no handlebars or kickstand and not much of a seat –and I can sympathize with Voivo's predicament. It's the sort of thing that comes in the form of a window. It lets in sun and mist and moon. One way to see it is, "Before I Abandon Wellness," or "The Boy on a Bike on a Roof."



troy the last time i checked

Gerald Yelle

The horse I would not have been comfortable talking about. I was afraid it would retaliate. For too long I'd refused to acknowledge its existence. Then I thought I was the only one with such a creature dogging him. Now I know. What concerns me is that it's getting bigger –which in itself is no surprise. But now it's entering dimensions I never thought possible. Like the one where I become its bitch. It controls and dominates everything –including my name. Then there's the matter of who says what and how: Do people take things the wrong way to justify rage? Why can't we misinterpret to avoid all that instead of the other way around? I once spread gossip. A's man-tits. B's hitting on your girl. I learned though. I figured if I treat the horse right I might ride it yet. That's the theory so far. Theory of the gentle horse. Sometimes it's a hotbed of spear-chucking malcontents and tamers of Arabian horses, merciless –not a bit like coming out of church. A dark interior silence, the sudden sunshine, voices tangling the breeze. In English and Rumanian. In pine and grass. Like French and Italian, the horse you rode in on cracking knuckles, screams of scavenging gulls.



two stooges

Harvey Silverman

The day Mom and Dad brought him home they came in the front door rather than the back. He was a skinny little fellow with blonde hair, bright eyes, and a big smile. His name was Richard and he was five years old. My folks were so excited but, though I had agreed to their plan, were still a bit apprehensive as to my reaction. After sixteen years as a single child I had instantly been appointed to the lifelong position of *big brother*.

He may have been overwhelmed but was not reluctant as I welcomed him with all the warmth I could muster. We went right upstairs to see my bedroom which was now our bedroom. He had all that he owned in a small bag which I carried up for him. I showed him which of the twin beds would be his and placed the bag on it. I was not sure what to do next so we went back downstairs. I think my folks' apprehension began to fade then.

I liked him immediately. He had an expressive face, happy with a joyful and spontaneous grin, his entire countenance beaming. He did not have a lot to say that first day but was agreeable with whatever my folks, now our folks, suggested and did not whine or demand or sulk.

Bedroom sharing did not last. He would get up early in the morning, quite early when hardly light, jump out of bed and pound a toy hammer on wooden blocks, stopping when I asked in a thick, barely awake voice only to resume in a few minutes. Later explanation, patiently delivered during normal waking hours, that it was too early for hammering or other noisy activity was met with agreement only to be forgotten or ignored the following morning. And the next and the next. Our folks agreed that the shared bedroom was a failed experiment and moved him to a spare bedroom next to theirs.

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The circumstance of his sudden arrival and the difference in our ages might have impeded the bonding that should occur between brothers. I made certain to spend time with him, playing ball, wrestling, and various games. At age sixteen, any resentment I might have felt at a younger age regarding the abrupt competition for parental attention did not occur; my sixteen year old self was happy to have parental attention elsewhere. But there was no growing up together, no secrets shared, no hiding beer. In just two years I was off to college, never, excepting vacations and parts of summers, to live at home again.

Yet bond we did. A bond that has grown and strengthened with the years, more than half a century now. He is a confidant, unquestionably and unquestioningly loyal, and for many years a source, a *mole* I suppose, to let me know what was up with our folks. He is a family historian and at times, for me, somewhat of a moderating influence. We demand little of each other yet understand one only need ask.

When he was six our dad took him fishing. Dad had started fishing with me at about that age and it had been a special activity just for the two of us, something we did together until my early teens. I suppose our dad thought to reprise that experience with his new son. I sometimes went along and was there the day the little fellow hooked his first fish. The scene, all these many decades later, still appears clearly in my mind's eye. Our dad's excited instruction to "hang onto him!" and "keep your rod up!" Dad's rush to pick up his Kodak 8mm home movie camera. The fumbled grasp and the camera tumbling up into the air as our dad desperately tries to catch it, the camera spinning in the air in seemingly slow motion, just beyond reach and falling into the water with a sad and impotent splash.

Dad had the camera repaired but it never quite worked properly after that.

A couple of years later I was living in my first apartment, a summer sublet, while I took some classes at college. Our folks came to town on a Saturday or Sunday and left the now eight year old in my care for the afternoon as they went off for a tournament of contract bridge. It was a particularly hot humid day and without air conditioning begged for beer. I drank one or two and offered my brother a taste. He may or may not have liked it but he was with his big brother and so drank perhaps half a can. Not much but enough that his little body felt the effects which persisted when our folks returned. They made it quite clear that it was not a day for them to be proud of their older son.

A few years later, and just days before my wedding, I enlisted my brother to provide the needed help to carry a mattress up to an apartment into which my wife and I would move. It was a sweltering summer day. The stairway was narrow and angular up to the third floor of the old building. We had a particularly difficult time, were hot and tired, and caused quite a loud commotion. A second floor tenant opened her door to complain. I do not recall it but my brother has described to me more than once the inelegant terms I used to suggest she return inside.

All the same, despite the beer episode, or perhaps including it, I took my responsibility as *big brother* seriously, including the inherent duty to render a bit of teasing and the occasional tickle. I was home for a visit when he was in his early teens. Our dad was working too late that day to be present for dinner. Mom had served us each some wonderful pie for our desert as I continued some good natured pestering. My brother, who was normally very tolerant in such a situation, for the first time had quite enough.

I saw it coming and made no move to stop him. I sat still as he wordlessly picked up the plate filled with a generous piece of pie – our mom always served large portions of everything – and calmly mashed it into my face. My brother was, and remains, a fan of The Three Stooges and having paid close attention to their technique added the rotary move of twisting his wrist several times so as to grace me with the full effect.

I sat there laughing. My brother sat there with a look of comfortable satisfaction.

Our mom had a different opinion. She immediately sent him to his room with the ominous words trailing behind him. “Wait until your father gets home.”

Well, my brother could wait but I had plans and left to meet a friend at a neighborhood bar where we would spend the evening drinking twenty-five cent draughts. But I later wished I had stayed home to watch the scene.

Our dad was a man who could be serious in his parenting when the situation demanded but also a wise and loving fellow with a wonderful sense of humor. Upon Dad’s arrival home my brother was summoned from his room and Mom described in detail his assault.

“I wish I had been here to see that and had my camera,” Dad said, apparently overlooking the results of the camera’s prior aqueous adventure.



snowpiercer: ahead of the apocalyptic pack

Stephanie Baird

Get ready for a wild ride on Joon-Ho Bong's extraordinary English cinematic debut "Snowpiercer," his train-driven outlandish vision of humanity's future. Unfortunately, by the time you read this review, this film will likely be on DVD. I feel quite sorry for you that you did not get to see this remarkable polar prophecy on the big screen, as this film decidedly deserves such viewing.

Set in a dystopic future after humans sent Earth into an ice age, in a backfired effort to cool global warming, all that is left of humanity lives in a beastly tank of a train. This nearly indestructible vehicle plows relentlessly through ice barriers, avalanches, and snowdrifts, circumnavigating the globe annually. While some might find the premise a bit unbelievable (the last hundreds of humans live on a train, sequestered from hostile weather, 17 years post-environmental Armageddon), I find it completely believable that this might be the only way to survive near extinction. Imagine our entire planet rapidly covered in ice and snow, meters of snow accumulating by the minute. A fast-moving armored art-deco train might be the only ark that can survive such arctic onslaught.

This film is visually stunning, perhaps one of the most compelling in the apocalyptic film oeuvre, with its terrifying iced skeletons of desiccated cities, ocean liners, and eternal snow-covered ruins and landscape. Despite all this nihilistic eye candy, it is really a story about economic class, caste and position. "Curtis," the main "hero" played by bearded Chris Evans, is a denizen of the last train car, where the poorest of the poor crowded into the train, 17 years prior, on the cheapest ticket available, thinking themselves lucky to have come in from the cold. Unfortunately, their luck ran out upon boarding the train.

Curtis, originally an "extreme survivor," shall we say, of this early time, transforms into a heroic figure as he witnesses other brave and selfless acts, and becomes determined to break out of the caboose and survivalist mentality, fight his way to the front engine car, gain control, and thus free his other "untouchable" comrades. As he and his fellow rebels ascend through the train cars, the message is repeated over and over that each passenger must stay in their place, to perpetuate a very delicate equilibrium. Indeed, as they journey forward, they encounter more and more wondrous and decadent worlds, from an aquarium car, featuring sting rays and schools of fish swimming above them in the walkway, to the greenhouse car, replete with a little old lady knitting in the corner as gardeners prune trees. Curtis and his rag tag rebels easily slip through some of these astonishing cars, greeted with raised eyebrow puzzlement from the middle, then, upper class folks they pass.



Be prepared, the journey forward is not without peril and often extremely violent, ironically bringing them on par with the depraved and ruthless leaders they abhor. And while dystopic films nearly always go hand in hand with violent bloodshed, I do feel violence can be given the “Reservoir Dogs” treatment a bit more. After all, this film is not “Twelve Years a Slave,” blatantly depicting historically accurate violence insisting we squarely face our hideous past. Modern day dystopic films (such as “Children of Men,” “Elysium,” “District 9”) seem to truly embrace unnecessary and gargantuan amounts of fighting and violence, distracting from fantastic plot. All three above-mentioned films, and “Snowpiercer;” could benefit from a lighter hand, violence-wise. “Blade Runner” and “The Matrix” come to mind as future dystopic films that have violence and fighting, but do not showcase excessive violence over story.

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Additionally, as a feminist sci-fi lover filmgoer, plots become more compelling to me with strong female characters in the lead. “Snowpiercer” is most like “Children of Men” in the sense that humanity’s conclusion ultimately hinges on a female. But both these female characters are in the sidelines during much of the film, literally being kept hidden from menacing forces, while “Elysium” and “District 9” had no real heroic female characters. However, “Snowpiercer” makes incredible use of Tilda Swinton, disguised with a prosthetic nose and dentures, as an awkward ineffectual despot bureaucratic man addressed as “sir.” And a seemingly sideline character Yona, played by Ah-Sung Ko, is not entirely helpless, becoming more empowered as the film progresses.

All in all, I thoroughly enjoyed “Snowpiercer,” sitting at the edge of my seat, and cannot wait to see more from the South Korean director, Joon-ho Bong. I loved the international element of this film, with the multi-faceted crew (including spirited rebel Tanya, played by Octavia Spencer, and Kronole-addicted technical genius Namgoong Minsoo, played by Kang-ho Song) and how it was reportedly almost entirely filmed on train cars (26 sets, to be exact). The graphic novel this film is based on depicted 1001 train cars, and Bong’s original cinematic vision had 60 cars. After watching this film I am most certainly saving my money for the best ticket I can buy on Armageddon’s train (or to manufacture this train, myself), with the hopes that this film will be in the library as we orbit the globe waiting for earth to be inhabitable again.



how i make thru the day

Alex Swartzentruber

I like to keep a bag of skittles in my right pocket and for each person I meet transfer one skittle into another bag in my left hand pocket. I remember each person's specific color and the exact shape of the skittle assigned to them, noting any imperfections like a faded "s" or a slightly disfigured curve. When I get home to my apartment at the end of the day, I think back over the exchanges I had with others and decide whether their actions were kind or cruel towards me or towards others. If they were kind, I put their skittle in a glass jar I keep on my mantel. If they were cruel, I slowly strip the outside layer of colored sugar off of their skittle with sandpaper. I then dissolve the colorless skittles in a bucket of hydrochloric acid solution, which I keep in the bathroom next to the wastebasket. I have a few completely full jars of beautiful and colorful skittles on my mantel now, great memoirs and conversation pieces. They are tokens of the love I have witnessed in my days. I don't know how many skittles I have dissolved in the acid solution. I almost never think of them.



just one of the hippies

Frank Zahn

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He was just one of the hippies who lived in the haze of the nineteen sixties when Dylan and Baez sang songs of despair.

With tangled hair, scruffy attire, and a musty aroma, he wandered the streets with his friends in a state of "heightened awareness," handed flowers to passersby, and spoke of love and peace.

He frolicked with the young maidens in Golden Gate Park each day and enticed them to join the love fest in his communal pad on the corner of Haight and Ashbury each night.

And although the times changed, and his friends and young maidens dwindled in numbers, he clung to his adventure, contemptuous of war, the social order, his parents, and anyone over thirty.

He panhandled in Union Square and hustled in the Tenderloin to sustain himself and feed his habit, but one morning when filled with angst, he overdosed and died alone on a long ride to County General.

No one knew his name, claimed his body, or said a prayer. He was just one of the hippies who lived in the haze of the nineteen sixties when Dylan and Baez sang songs of despair.



after gaudí's la sagrada familia

Michael Passafiume

We are bound together by blood and the imposition of genetics, gathered around a table at my brother's house, separated by placemats and decades of dispossession.

Even with two hearing aids, my sister misses a lot of the conversation. I watch her eyes dart left-right, left-right, then settle on a fixed point somewhere between 1967 and 1980. Barely five-feet tall and in her late 50s, 35 years working for the county; her upper back has taken on the curve of age and quiet defeat.

Next to her is my brother, half-circles of dark plum ring his eyes. His two year-old son zigzags from his lap, to the waiting arms of my sister in-law, to the bowl of fruit in the middle of the table, small fingers reeling in another ripe June strawberry.

My mother sits to my right, happy to be surrounded by her children together but out of her element; her anxiety ebbs and flows onto my lap. "Family is important," she says to me. I wait for her to elaborate but instead she lapses into more B material: "I'm thinking about selling the house," she announces. My sister grins, rolls her eyes: *Here we go again*.

"It's too bad you're not interested." The statement is a long, burning fuse attached to a long stick of disappointment I've been trying to shake loose for as long as I can remember, my mother has spoken of our hometown with a reverence it does not deserve—the people, the things, the places that used to be—and I finally understand why. "They want to bring it back," she says—a Frankencity waiting to be reanimated—"They want to bring it all back." I should have that put on a t-shirt, printed on poster board and framed, chiseled into a block of marble.

My nephew grabs another fistful of strawberry as his mother strokes his thick crop of sandy blonde hair. He smiles and I fall into his blue gaze, my tongue stuck somewhere between 1969 and 1985. "You have very nice hair," I tell him. "Can I have some of it?" He nods his head yes. "You're going to give Uncle Mike some of your hair?" my sister in-law says. "That's very nice of you!" He shakes his head no.

"You used to have hair like that," my mother says. "You all used to have hair like that."



thanks for quail street

Michael Passafiume

Currier & Ives snowstorms painting my grandparent's wraparound porch in thick sheets of white. Through windows haloed in broad strokes of glittering frost: aunts, uncles cloaked in a fog of cigarettes and alcohol, trading war stories about jobs they despised but couldn't leave.

Thanks for the laughter, the arguments, resentments with no expiration, neatly folded, tucked away— passing down to my cousins and I worthless currencies of who had the most, the least, who had it the worst, the easiest.

Carefully choreographed dinners: folding tables snaked through kitchen, dining and living rooms, chair legs plucking hardwood strings, chorus of Elbows, Knees, Ankles & Feet silenced by Uncle Sal's wine-tuned whistle, Grandpa Pirri's pipe still smoldering, suspended mid-air as Grandma began her *Symphony of Grace in Three Movements*.

Thanks for intoxicating aromas: simmering pots of sauce, lasagna baking to decadent perfection and, afterward, coffee percolating, chestnuts roasting— oh, how that heady bouquet crept under front and back doors...up, up, up into the red winter sky, sweet talking its way past troposphere, stratosphere and ozone so that even the tiniest of stars could eat well that night.

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After countless glasses of homemade vino it was time to leave. My father clung to a porch column like a long lost love. My mother dug her talons into his side, reassuring him as they slid toward the car, *You're an embarrassment. If you worked as much as you drank we might be rich.*

Packed into a frigid backseat alongside my brother and sister, mouthing silent prayers. Tan Chevy Impala weaving through desolate city streets, crystallized drifts, Ghost of Christmas Present cursing us home.



LOCAL 

16 Main Street
Northampton, Ma 01060
413-586-5857

a motherfucking tree

Michael Passafiume

Hello, MegInMotion. No doubt you get tons of emails every day, so I'll just get right to the point: I like the idea of owning a bike more than I like riding one, and the only rocks I'm interested in climbing are sitting across from me; I need to crawl up in there and find something I lost back in the early 90s.

Hi there, PrincessOnThePark. I'm five-foot-eight and in the twilight of my 40s; the only thing I'm getting is shorter. So, if height is a deal-breaker, I'd cut back on those designer high-heels and find a good shrink who'll help you resolve those lingering daddy issues.

Hey, Born-to-Bee! I don't want to meet you for the first time and plumb the depths of our waterlogged banalities. I learned everything I needed to know about the 9 to 5 as a temp after college. If you still believe the light at the end of the tunnel is a blinking corporate cursor, you need better glasses, sister.

Dear DebraDARK (That's deep, man. Deep.). Lookit, I grew up in the ninth circle of hell where the end of a cul-de-sac begat another cul-de-sac, each dead-end street spilling out onto the mall. On lazy summer afternoons fathers mowed their children down, piled limbs in great heaps by the side of the road, while mothers hid inside storing their hysterectomies in Tupperware containers.

Greetings, Chic-a-Holic. I don't have an A game, don't want one either. And to hell with your 24/7; I like my seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day just fine. I've never seen *Harold & Maude*, disco has always sucked ass—and those sunglasses that take up half of your face? They make you look really fucking stupid.

Hola, Dreamin' Yogini. Are you laughing yet? 'Cause I know how much you like to laugh as you're strolling along the beach at sunset, footprints carving wishes in the sand, as you're drinking whiskey and shooting pool in a one-legged warrior pose, as you're eating quinoa linguine topped with toasted hemp seeds and swooning over the organic garden you're going to plant in the spring, as you're tearing up the sidewalk in layers of thrift store polyester fugliness, as you're self-medicating at home, crafting pointless Art to match your pointless existence.

And let me tell you all a little something about dreams: the ones that don't come true (most of them) blossom into nightmares —petals decaying into regrets gobbled up by greasy-necked pigeons who will one day shit on your ancestors' graves— and sooner or later you'll find yourself out on the sidewalk under a cloudless October sky, watching your dog wear down the same twelve square inches of polluted city soil, feinting with the left leg, then the right, as you tug at his leash and scream, *It's just a motherfucking tree!*





lady smokes, with kid
Doug Tibbles

twilight lounge

Frank Zahn

Every Friday night in the Twilight Lounge, middle-aged single people congregate in flattering lights and search for someone who will relieve their loneliness if only with a touch and a smile on the dance floor.

Moody bartenders and cocktail waitresses rush to serve them, chain smoke, and keep an eye on the clock. A glitzy singer with bony legs and quivering cleavage and her cocky partner with a neatly combed hairpiece entertain them with imitations of Patsy Cline and Elvis and encourage them to relax, open their hearts, and dance to Misty and I'm in the Mood for Love.

Smelling of Mennen and Old Spice, the well-scrubbed men hold in their stomachs and hover over the women who sit at tables around the dance floor; their faces caked with foundation, rouge, and lipstick and their bodies perfumed and clothed in last year's fashions.

Nibbling on cocktail skewers of orange slices and cherries and sipping Perrier water and diet Coke, the women wait for the men to dull their inhibitions with bourbon and scotch and ask for a dance before the music stops, and the bartenders sound the inevitable last call.



broomstick cantata

Sally Houtman

Oh, my. What is happening here? All morning long this whistling in the rafters. What song is that? I can't quite hear. A lullaby? A chorus? Surely not a hymn. *Shhhh*. No, not Chopin. Perhaps a hawk. And all night long the branches with their whispering, trading secrets in their mannered rasp. I wipe the tiles, apron on. So much work to be done. I have no time for idle chatter. My ears are tuned to fork and plate, to the pitch of platter and sieve. I twist the tap and fill the sink. A stiff breeze and the shutters clatter. Oh, foolish wind, your small talk swells. I latch the door against the din, secure the shades. I am tired of all this sound.

Breakfast done, I wash my hands. The teapot shrills, its blown notes flat. Calm down, I say. Watch your tone. This is no way to behave. I have things to do. There are surfaces to polish, flat and clean. What's that now? The fan in the corner is alive? My, to be so bold, to fill your lungs and howl. The day moves on. I fold the sheets. What's that you say? What words are those? Oh, the tales this linen tells! Listen. Hear that? There! The clock with its *tsk-tsk-tsk*. Softly now, but growing stronger, soon to call awake its brotherhood of chimes. What now? I wring the sponge. The basin coughs, clears its throat. Come now, here, speak to me or not. I'm afraid you can't go on like this, trying on this language. We cannot know each other's point of view.

I lift the iron, test its heat, feel its dumb weight in my hand. It hisses, spits. So much innuendo, hushed sounds curving into questions. Surely you can't keep up this jibber-jabber. Is there some point in all this noise? I grasp the broom, its handle smooth, my fingers know each notch and groove. What's that I hear? My wrists go weak. Is there vibrato in this sweeping motion? An aria perhaps. No, not Mozart. A cantata of stiff straw. I pause to catch my breath. Wait! Who is that calling, its voice insistent, clear. Go ahead, keep talking. I may get used to hearing you. I stop, cup a hand around one ear. Hear that, there in the distance? Oh, dear. The noisy streetcar thinks it's singing. And there is no cure for that!



plan b

Sally Houtman

When Plan B failed we took off running, hid in bushes,
hid in cupboards, peered through rusted keyholes, shielded
one another's eyes. When Plan B failed we tipped
the untouched dustbin, kicked the toe-cap plastic, swept rake-clumps
under hedges, filled our rucksacks with contempt. When
Plan B failed we moved through dungeons, tiptoed sideways,
doubled over with reckless belly-wobbles, emptied the washbasin
slop. When Plan B failed we folded parachutes, knotted bedsheets,
brandished bedsprings, planted pennies in the ground. When Plan
B failed we bribed the horseman, adopted a vocabulary
of wails and bellows, plumbed the hollow nucleus
of morning, called the wind by other names. When
Plan B failed we did the backward tail-slide, upended
the excavated boxcar, pumped crazed fists
at the brazen brunettes passing, gestured madly
at the moon. When Plan B failed we squinted eastward,

straddled handrails, donned our solo holsters,
aimed our firearms at the sky. When Plan B failed

we doused our hatred, stripped the darkroom-shadowed
whitewash, mourned the narrow alley of our bloodstreams,

cursed our netted veins. When Plan B failed we unleashed the
wardrobe goblins, filled our buckets with the rage of aging goldsmiths,
unfixed the moral's stranglehold and called our restless beggars home.



hitting against the wall: *a forward*

Thomas Rowland

This re-printing of Arthur Nettleman's fourth book *Hitting Against the Wall* cannot but help resurrect the rastimonious and openly vitriolic comments of the reviewers that surrounded its initial publication back in 1993. "The most problematic aspects of this book are the recurring self-references and failed attempts at humor by the author," wrote Anthony Panush in the *World Literary Review*. "Rather than enhance the reading experience, both get annoying very early in the work, to the point that many readers would not last past the Prologue." It is probable that such abject acrimony stemmed from certain interpersonal issues that plagued the relationship between these two since their student days at Middlebury. However, there was no question that others were in staunch agreement. "The contrived scenarios and storytelling here fail" (Arthur Krazinski, *San Antonio Times*). "This book has no real purpose. It's self-indulgent and presumptuous, at a minimum" (Carolyn Miller, *Ohio Literary Digest*). Even in literary circles abroad the reaction was universally unfavorable, the Swiss Book Council claiming that "as a transhumance, it fails."

It should not be concluded, however, that this barrage of low-level attacks did not camouflage some redeeming qualities of the book. Indeed, these same pundits were most surprised by the book's subsequent successful four-year run on Broadway as a popular musical (*Love is Nothing*). Even more unexpected was its brief life on the opera stage (the well-received *Isometres and Ludmilla*).

56 Nettleman was among that group of authors whose sense of plumularian hubris serves to buoy them above such seas of criticism. Indeed, in a 1993 interview with *Book of the Day* host Walter Kowalczyk, he commented that "this book failed the critics, but its message was not lost upon the reading audience that's most important." In this comment, Nettleman was referring to what Peter Gay in his book *Modernism* described as the "three reading publics". There are "the 'barbarian masses,' with no awareness of demanding fiction and inevitably content with shallow fare; the second, much smaller, though still substantial in numbers, and with easy access to high culture, feeling superiority to the multitudes but reluctant to spend the time and effort an avant-garde novel would exact; and finally, a small elite, an aristocracy of novel readers open to innovations and experiments." It was this third group that Nettleman targeted, sensing that this select few would be capable of detecting beneath a superficial veneer of sophomoric self-consciousness and wane humor in his works a greater axiological core.

Even within this elite minority, though, as Gay wrote, authors "generated certain anxieties, even suspicions, about their essential intentions." What, then, was this "essential intention," this "axiological core," of Nettleman's works? Or, indeed, it may be asked whether such a query is even epistemologically legitimate. Sameul Cohen and Lee Konstantinou have emphasized that the "author has no business telling us what her texts *mean* [italics mine]." This--and the issue is clearly underscored by Nettleman's later works--may not even be apparent to the writer himself. "If we focus our attention on all the ways in which the life and opinions of an author can be found in her creative work," they claim, "we risk forgetting that literature is just as often or primarily the product of imagination and that authors don't necessarily have superior understandings of their own compositional practices or the significance of what they've produced."

The answer, of course, as with all good literature, resides in the interpretative machinations of the individual reader's mind. "Intentionality" or "a scribe for the muse"? The resolution of this question has been the focus of several seminars devoted to Nettleman's works. The most recent in 2009 in Saratoga Springs, New York, which I was fortunate to attend, could only conclude that this essential meaning remained elusive. (At the summary session, Matthew Wilson did, in fact, rise from the audience to pose the provocative question "Do you suppose Nettleman actually reads his own books?," which was met with a palpable silence).

I did feel, though, that on leaving this workshop many agreed that a compelling argument could be mounted for the constancy of certain egristential themes in Nettleman's writings. These, in fact, may provide a clue to any intrinsic quintessence to be discovered in their pages.

Many are the high goals of literature—to escape reality, to entertain, to help us learn to confront the obstacles of life, to find a certain harmony with our existence, and so on and so forth. But these objectives cannot be met without a certain baseline, a point of departure, a sentiment of beginning, by which such goals can be grasped. It seems likely that the inherent, most central nature of Nettleman's books work to this end. By providing the reader with a "zero", a neutral place, great literature can be appreciated in all its fullness. Nettleman's books are valuable for delivering to the reader this an essential perspective.

In this approach Nettleman follows in the footsteps of those authors who have experimented with "hyperrealist" fiction, whose works have doing completely away with plot to focus only on the minutiae of normal daily living. As Jonathan Gottschall has commented, "Hyperrealist fiction is valuable mainly for helping us see what fiction *is* by showing us what it *isn't*." It's a dangerous strategy for certain, since "like most fiction that breaks with the primordial conventions of storytelling, almost no one can stand to read it." It seems reasonable to conclude that Nettleman's works serve the same purpose, an idea that was presumably not lost on the Awards Committee of the American Historical Society when they presented him with their Great Book Prize in 1999 (an award which he inexplicably refused to accept).

Among literary analysts there is a greater approach to unanimity in considering the niche Nettleman's works play in the canon of contemporary literature. Certainly in his books one cannot avoid the obvious threads of David Foster Wallace, Kurt Vonnegut, and—in her sunnier days—Virginia Wolff. But Nettleman is never anything but his own man. This display of independent creativity is built on the foundations of all the traditional elements of post-modernism, which are clearly are in bold display: fragmentation, want of narrative, ambiguous narrators, black humor, pastiche, meta-fiction. In Nettleman's works we see a certain playfulness, confounded by a dark irony, that pervades the post-modern genre. It (at least superficially) hides a disillusionary conviction that there is no objective reality or meaning to life, and that only with a certain sense of humor can one surmount the ensuing chaos of existence.

Temporal transpositions—moving the reader in unexpected and often inexplicable shifts of time—are characteristic of this genre as well, but here Nettleman takes one step beyond. The astute reader will note (and sometimes this is particularly vexing) in *Hitting Against the Wall* that certain allusions are made to events and personages that *clearly post-date its 1993 publication*. This is, all are in agreement, post-modernism stretched to its limits. How this sleight of prescience was accomplished has never been satisfactorily resolved but has without doubt contributed to the aura of mystery surrounding this author.

There exist certain features that do, however, clearly set this work and its author apart from that of the flood of post-modernists who have inundated the bookshelves since the mid-Twentieth Century. Perhaps most importantly, the author has chosen to delve into the questions surrounding subjective reality within the context of a decidedly objectively-concrete subject. In a veritable *coup de manège*, he ingeniously communicates existential issues through the lens of the popular sport of tennis (the parallels to David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* are inescapable, although the departure is obviously diegetic). There are few things in this world that are much more constrained by objective reality than tennis—one must play the game in compliance with strict rules that cannot be bent or amended. And the very physical task of the sport—striking a ball with a racquet over a net into one of several squares—is dictated by immutable laws of physics, the same ones controlling the motions of the earth and the planets (see *Tennis—It's Not My Fault*, by R. Barkman, 1999). Yet, and this is part of Nettleman's unmistakable central message, in this straight-jacket of certainty on the tennis court is applied a layer of unsettling unpredictability. And, in a philosophy of life the same applies.

58 Deborah Zollman wrote of this in her iconic two-volume treatise. “In Nettleman we read that regardless of one’s existential bent, it must be accepted that we live in a world of severe constraints as well. One must eat, defecate, shelter ourselves from the elements. One cannot rob banks or leave a spouse at a rest stop on the Interstate. And, yet, like the game of tennis, life is filled with uncertainty, one that brings us our worst griefs and our greatest joys, but without which life would well be a barren existence.”

An anomalous singularity of Nettleman's oeuvres is their creation in an ambience truly free of psychic angst. That is to say, his short life remained surprisingly devoid of the baggage of depression, drug addiction, homosexuality, alcoholism, chronic inferiority, disillusionment, solitude, masculine insecurity, and unbridled promiscuity which have filled the existence of great authors and which have permeated the great works of the canon. Not surprisingly, his detractors have ironically claimed this observation supports the popular notion that mental derangement is requisite for the production of quality literature.

Like other authors, however, one can trace evolutionary streams of benchmark idealisms as they coursed through Nettleman's life. Indeed, shortly before his untimely death¹ in 2003 his writing began to reveal a surprising shift towards a brand of neo-realism that admittedly bordered on overt solipsism. This was most evident in his final book, *A Wedding for Madeleine*, in which he stated "Suppose there is no objective reality, or, for that matter, even a subjective one, and that we live in a dark abyss of meaninglessness, nothing more. Who is to say, then, how I should best live my life? Would I not be free to choose any *construct* what gives me the most happiness and best fulfills my desires? In such an existence how could one be truly critical that one means of constructing a life is *better*, or is more *moral* than another? Any supposition of moral superiority would be groundless. Devout religiosity or abject hedonism, Ozzie & Harriet or Jack Kerouac--there should be no penalty, one over the other. The only 'truth' is that we are free to choose the reality that functions to support our own needs and desires."

In this self-compromising reversal towards orthodoxy, Nettleman begins to hint at a certain *hopefulness* that the disconnect between modern life and a true objective reality of existence might be overcome. Whether this carried true eschatological overtones, expressing through mental gymnastics (or self-deception?), a means of escaping the pervasive elements of post-modernity, or was simply the expression of a fatigued, aging mind remains debated to this date.

[Footnote: ¹Nettleman himself would have, in fact, objected to this term. As he inquired in his Introduction to *Searching for Slovakia, or Solvenia*, "Is there such a thing as a *timely* death?"]

Sir Francis Fischbein
Loughborough, UK

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fear

Brad Garber

I will march into your home and coat your walls with blood because I have heard your footsteps and the way they speak of difference water goat milk your children insects eating around the edges until the tree dies your wives not pretty food made of river rocks tongue twisting and rattling in dark lack of space in rat tunnels and soft houses while coins rattle in the marketplace men in tall hats with open hands fruit rotting underneath broiling awnings in the market square and meat festooned with flies but this is my land because of belief in the statement of such my ancestors continuing to speak smoke still pouring from their mouths caves tents pens while body parts and weapons are strewn across the dirt mud asphalt unguilate grass fields fallen forests oceans of the world scimitars clubs arrowheads spears bullets bombs bayonets bones bones bones bones lying like dust and small rocks in dry lake beds piling on the wind against the graves but you are not and you are other and you are fear the cave bear in the mouth and tiger in dappled sun your blood running down because it matters as I pound the stakes into fluid-hardened earth marking where I am and you are not pieces of flesh scraped into excavated car garages to be the foundation of commerce and rolled steel cocked hammers lead pellets unrelenting incompatible volatile chemical conglomerations that eat through your attempts like viruses their insides spewed into your bodily latrine leaving you decomposed in your rocking chair for I have learned that as your house is built so mine is destroyed your toes intruding closer until there are no walls and there is no place where blood may tell a story of what used to be.



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return

Brad Garber

Finally, the hummingbird drinks
it has been a day
small dots floating away
disconnected
the wind chime silent, hosta
flowers bowed.
I kissed you when I left
a long hair remaining
tangled in my beard
and thought of you
picking berries for pies
standing on your toes.
To the east, lightning over mountains
things said yet unspoken
imagined thunder
as when you left me
with the hair upon me
knotted in its place.
But, water has a way
having nowhere to go
and returns
and the day finds you here
a hummingbird above the flowers
wings forever beating.



senescence

Amy Schmidt

The female octopus will die
upon hatch of her young. Immediately
after giving her all he has, her mate, spineless
from the start, becomes a sorry state
of suction-covered arms and three failing hearts

The sky has no cells.
It goes on forever.

Small tarps of skin spread from bone to bone
to make a set of wings. With them, the brown bat inflicts
his shape on dusk. He will live for thirty years, give or
take while the mouse survives but two or three. The world
is a minefield; the body falls limp as a cliché
when the trigger trips.

Cancer shook your cells like an hourglass. We watched
the color drain quickly from your face.

64

In the name of love, the mother
mosquito is a tiny hell invading. In her strange womb, eggs cry out
for blood. On an outstretched arm, she risks a whole fleet of life.
She will not have time for apologies.

If only you'd been a planarian. The doctors standing
over you like stunned fools as the wrecked parts
regrew. Here's a new liver, lungs pink as peonies,
a stomach lined with gold. Here your eyes, seeing
everything as for the very first time.



fishermen on the island of black mangrove

Amy Schmidt

—Jiquilillo, Nicaragua

In a healthy black mangrove plant, salt is extruded by glands on the leaves, which accumulates over time resulting in a fine film of white salt crystals on leaf surfaces.

Glinting stars ride the swells of
an ocean's broad horizon.
The men on board
the wooden skiffs drop lines
into a water darker than
the sky. Eating tortillas
taken from a stack
on an unwashed table
in a tiny kitchen, they stare
into the waves or into the real
stars or back toward
shore where their wives
are standing among ropes
strung between palm
trees to gather clothing
beaten dry by a blistering
sun. When the last shack lets
the embers of its cook stove die,
the village disappears into a veil
of sleep. While their lovers dream
of fish, a bucket of red snapper
finer than any bouquet, the men
re-bait their hooks, roll tobacco in
strips of salvaged garbage
and pray to the god of calm.
If their small words are heard, oars
will dip like spoons into the yellow
light of early day. Steady as breath
across the surface of a lung, their
boats will glide through surf
to a beach crowded with eager
faces. Bronze arms will reach
and pull the vessels further
onto sand. If unheard, even the mangrove
will weep, its leathery leaves covered
with a salty crust of dried tears.



progress

Amy Schmidt

In a major scientific first, a team of developmental biologists has built a functional mouse heart from human tissues. —Science Daily

Bells thrum out of turn
in the hands of children.
Taught to play hymns
while the offering plate
circles the sanctuary
like an empty moon, their
tune punctuates the quiet
like random thoughts.
Who here is really listening
to anything? From the
pulpit, the preacher performs
a series of magic tricks
to which no one is
impressed. After, he will
drink the chalice of communion
wine as required by the rite.
With the last gulp, a set of false
teeth lost by a man in the fifth
row will thump his true
mouth. In the nave, bulletins left
like loves note to no one
cheer each other up by
recounting their power,
the congregation following
their instructions mindlessly
but well. The singers
have all gone home to practice
karaoke. The conductor retires
to his model trains.
The organ lady wears sneakers
and wields fluorescent bingo
markers. And the mice, hidden like
secret lives in the sanctuary
walls filter into the choir loft
to make nests of coarse
chair padding. In their chests,
small hearts beating strong
with borrowed cells.

66



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an intersection of bones

Michael Welch

Gene wakes up when he likes but it is always early. He'll eventually make it over to the park but not until he's taken care of a few other pieces of business. The manager of the flophouse sometimes lets him park his overloaded shopping cart around back, otherwise he wakes up somewhere around the footing of the Brooklyn Bridge with it tied to his ankle.

Gene is a walker, most of the day, everyday, pushing that cart out before him like a rattling tank clearing the way. Luckily there are no hills in lower Manhattan, because it is a mystery where Gene, all snaking arms and bowed legs and an ass that seems no more than an intersection of sprightly bones, gets his leverage. He leans into the cart bar like a gust of wind might lift his feet and fly him like a streamer.

The truth is that even urban gypsies have their habits, their rounds and regular dealings. First thing each Monday is a stop by the clothes bin at Muni, the City Shelter on 3rd, from which he'll withdraw a few items and hold them up. Gene is old school, and when it comes to fashion likes brighter colors and a tighter fit than is acceptable on a man these days; this morning it is yellow jeans with red socks and a pair of two-inch heeled disco shoes, suspiciously just his size, which staff probably threw in just to bet on whether he'd reach. They'll be sure that the joke is on him, and he'll just nod—"Here's to ya"—and be off. They won't get what's beneath that single polite nod.

Gene settles onto his particular spot on his particular bench in Washington Square Park, where for awhile—a shapeshift—he becomes a gentleman talker. He doesn't hit the wine, like some, and wind up belly to the sky like a whetted King. For now he needs to keep it real, preserve the credibility needed to draw someone over at thirty feet. Maybe an NYU coed, out-of-towner, Soc major, who will include him in an email to her friends back home (as Gene well knows, he does have a certain wizened, grandfatherly familiarity).

She'll point to herself. "Who... Me?"

"Sure *you*, Sugar, why not? C'mon over for a *Cup-a-Soup*. You know, Sugar: soup—in a cup. I can get'em right across there."

...Well, it *is* a public place. But this time she declines. Gene doesn't push, holds up his hand *good-bye*.

"I'm sorry," she'll say, after she has doubled back. "I'm just having a crazy day." She'll reach into her pocket.

Gene will wave her off. He'll decide it's too early to be thinking about money today. Instead he'll get to talking, sentimentalizing for a minute, tell her of a Rockette he once dated—"you been up to Radio City yet, Sugar?"

And somewhere in the course of the easy flow, and pools of the girl's nervous but studious young eyes, Gene may get carried away, tell her how he really loved this dancer, but that before he realized it, it was too late. That there must have been something wrong with him, even back then... and now... well, "what female of her caliber would ever come near a smelly old mothafuck like me *now?*"

And the young, out-of-town girl will become afraid, and as a means to be quickly on her way, leave a couple dollars on the bench.

And, as he's done before, Gene will belatedly pick up those bills, stare at them in his palm, tuck them away.



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man texaco vulture
Doug Tibbles

migrations

Natalia Magnani

I have always wanted a little hipster hideout, although I never much cared for the oversized glasses. Matt led me up the steps of the old Victorian in center Cambridge. The paint was thick with the years—clearly Harvard housing did not think it necessary to strip paint before reapplying. Instead they dressed the wood in a myriad of colors—a Renaissance lady preparing for a ball.

I travel back and forth from my doctoral study in Cambridge, England, eager for just a few moments with my husband. In England the medieval buildings look down sternly at the lowly passerby, while Harvard feels like Cambridge's fun younger brother. I have been warned that the spring features the Primal Scream, when Harvard students strip off academic stress to bare skin, and sprint around Harvard Square, circling stately buildings and proud oaks. I am now taking a year to do anthropological fieldwork in Finnish Lapland, and I periodically take refuge in the comparative warmth of the Boston area. My eclectic lifestyle fits the niches of Cambridge, and I settle in like a migratory Arctic bird, a deranged albatross seeking its mate in the New World instead of circumpolar latitudes.

* * *

The first days I spent crawling, kneeling, and reaching on tippy toes with a sponge and some 'magic erasers,' washing the walls, floors, and ceilings like a housecleaner on acid. Our studio apartment appeared to be an attic space, containing long-forgotten corners. Preparing food or taking a shower became aerobic feats—Matt stood paralyzed as the water beat against him, boxed in by walls, while I did squats to dodge the protruding ceiling parts in the throes of preparing a sandwich. The kitchen walls had a yellow residue from many adventurous cooking episodes, and once again Harvard Housing had chosen to paint over the grime, which nevertheless bubbled to the surface under a white-yellow coating. The place was reminiscent of Matt's childhood home in upstate New York, before it had been restored from its 200-year-old wear. I kept scrubbing, determined to turn the little attic into a home.

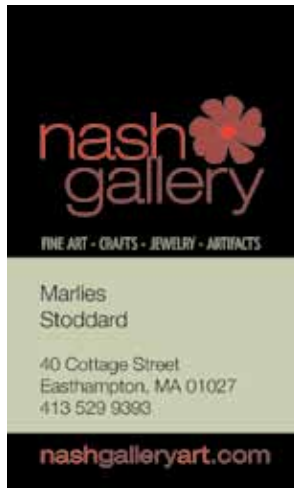
Before my arrival Matt bought teas from Trader Joe's, salt in small containers, and stood them on the kitchen counter beside a pineapple. The first weeks we slept on a mattress by a window looking out at the art museum. In the mornings the Old Baptist Church beat its bells in a steeple of stone, and in the evenings we heard a choir of boys singing from unknown directions. Even then I knew I had found my space.

During our first year of marriage, Matt transferred his PhD studies in archaeology from Penn to Harvard. We had lived in West Philly, in a room rented out by two cat-loving ladies; the shared bathroom had mold growing out of the places where the wall paper was peeling away in waves. One time Matt was chased down the street walking home at seven in the evening on a Tuesday, and ever since we avoided going out after dark and always looked left and right for assailants before crossing the street. Philadelphia's rows of abandoned homes stand in stark contrast to Cambridge's manicured streets, packed with residents eager to pay several thousand a month for a Harry Potter closet space. But there is a deep gap within this atmosphere of Good Ol'

Harvard: A notice sent out over the summer warned of homeless people sleeping on the front steps of our building. On the streets, some of these men and women make paper flowers, others wrap metal arrangements around stones. Somehow the poverty melts into accessories for the romantic, and many students continue on through Harvard's larger-than-life gates, to lawns where multicolored chairs dot the lawns under the oak trees, like perfectly-placed acorns.

On weekend mornings Matt and I put on our sneakers and cross the bridge into Boston. We walk for miles, past cops acting out scenes from the Gangs of New York as they chase down Stop-sign evaders. September along the Charles River feels like a slice of upstate New York, and I half-expect to find apples on the trees. The regal homes of Commonwealth Avenue watch us curiously as we walk the alley of trees through its center, circling the statues of Revolutionary War generals, suffragists, and writers. Then the Public Garden appears in its conical bushes and prim flower arrangements, a serenade to the swan boats that float through coquettishly. We return home invigorated on feet well-trodden, clambering up to our attic space with some iceberg lettuce and blue cheese picked up from an overpriced marketplace.

Between these adventures our academic work continues—I am trying to absorb two obscure Finno-Ugric languages in preparation for my return to Finland, while Matt trudges through archaeology readings. When we find ourselves behind our computers and coffee mugs too long, we lie side by side and look outside to the old streets of Cambridge. We listen to the bells of the stone church, remembering that the ringing never stopped, every fifteen minutes, as we turned pages. When our books are read and dusty, the church will continue to sound for the residents of Harvard Street.



three places

Katrin Arefu

I don't know anything about this person that I am going to write about. I know that she is my cousin, or was. But she could also happen to be your cousin, or your cousin could happen to be her.

Long before I had an adult memory to get to know her and remember her, she had disappeared. I hadn't heard much about her in the family either. She was erased from our memories so gradually, easily and painlessly.

I have an image of her, more like a snapshot surrounded by vague feelings. She is sitting in the corner of my grandmother's smaller bedroom, tall, thin, pale face and dark eyes. Her whole young body is covered in what was the fashion of the time for revolutionaries: a long, loose, plain dress of a dark color. Her hair and neck covered in a scarf. Her big eyes determined. There is a conversation going on with older ones in the family. She is up to something dangerous, confronts everybody in the room. A "One's life should matter" way of thinking. An ideology exists as long as its followers are willing to die to keep it alive. That was the last time I ever saw her. Then she became a name to me, Mandana.

I am trying to recall some childhood memories reaching back through some photographs. Here she is a teenager, a few years before the revolution. She is wearing red bell bottom pants and a stylish tight turtleneck. People dressed according to European fashion back then. She is holding me up in her hands and smiling, looking at the camera. Her soft black hair shines in the sun. I have no memory of being in this picture. She became a story to me: "My cousin is in the high ranks of the Mojahedin. She escaped the country; we don't know where she is. My aunt was killed by the Islamic regime for helping her financially."

In her story she is not the hero, her mother is. Heroes are not allowed to stay alive, or escape or disappear. Heroes are only allowed to die. Mojahedin were just as unacceptable to Iranian public as the Islamic regime was, but still, those members of Mojahedin who got assassinated in the regime's prisons were public heroes. She is an alive victim of a dead ideology.

We let her go from our memories while we were busy with our everyday life after the revolution, political layoffs, assassinations, war.

She is standing at the door. It is dark outside. Her mother is shouting. "You are not going out this late! You are not going to those meetings anymore!" One's life does matter, because it is a life. Let the ideology die.

"If you don't let me go I will kill myself."

* * *

I learn how to write from painters. I learnt from Monet to work on a few pieces simultaneously since I like to take my time on a piece. I learnt from Lucian Freud, who painted his family members and lovers naked in uncomfortable positions "not because of what they are like, not exactly in spite of what they are like, but how they happen to be." In my case they are not sitting

for me in my studio participating in the creative process passively. In my case, they are living their lives, just the way they happen to live.

* * *

Perhaps I know him too well to love him anymore. He was, or still is, a part of me. He was sent to me by God's mailman, signed and sealed from another factory; a complex nation called Russian Jews. At first I fell in love with his Russian part; at last I realized that I was in love with his Jewishness.

I loved him as one loves oneself. No, I loved him more than that, as one loves one's child. He was like a child: innocent, curious, careless and in need of care. His made-up stories would tell me what he wished to be: a spy who is assigned to deactivate Iran's nuclear plant! His childhood memories would tell me why he talks about hatred all the time.

He is holding his mom's finger with his whole little hand. They walk into a store in Saint Petersburg.

"Get out of our country, you Jews!" the Russian shopkeeper says.

"We, will go, but your life will not be better without us!" his mom says as they leave the store.

He grew up hiding his mother's Jewishness under his skin, fearing for his life.

72 Only after years of romance would he text me what was really in his mind with a wrong capitalization that come from his heart: "Amalek, Hitler, Ahmadinejad Hate us for being alive. Amalek has an overwhelming, irrational hatred of Jews. Those who wronged us had a reason. Perhaps we gave reason.... We can forgive them and vice-a-versa. Shabbath Shalom!"

I was only to hear from his friend, after one year being together, that he was Jewish.

We were to meet his friend in a huge café in a beer factory in Berkeley. The eating place was too big to feel cozy or warm. The friend was a physicist with no attractive elements. His behavior, manner and taste of dress didn't help his unpleasant face, which had a big red scar on it, to seem all right. The two men had a boring engineering conversation. I tried to keep myself busy with a piece of pizza that I ordered.

All of a sudden the physicist decided to betray his old friend. It looked like he had just noticed me at the table.

"Where are you from?" he asked in Russian.

"Iran."

"And your parents?"

"Iranians."

"Muslim? ... But you are a Jew," the physicist said, now looking at his friend.

“No, I am not,” was the answer, along with a fake smile.

“Yes, you are. Both your parents are Jewish, like mine. You are a Jew.”

“I am not!” my man repeated with laughter, pretending that his friend was teasing him.

That was all the conversation between me and the physicist. I became invisible again, even when the two men shook hands goodbye at the door.

The two of us walked towards the car in silence. He opened the car door for me, as nice and gentle as he had always been; and then he walked slowly to the corner of the street, took his penis out of his pants and, right in front of me, he started peeing.

* * *

The ground is round and round. You can't walk away from it. You can only walk around.

* * *

A seven year old girl goes to school every morning to wish death for half of the world: “God is great! God is great! Death to America! Death to the Soviet Union! Death to the enemies of Iran’s Supreme Leader! Death to Israel!” She shouts this every morning with the whole school, not knowing for whom she was told to wish death: her future beloved city, Moscow; her future home, California; her future love, a Jewish man, a very Jewish man; and herself, an enemy of the Supreme Leader.

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She grew up with only one great God in her school and everything beyond that God was Evil, including her household. The goodness of God required a battle with the evil. Since she and her family happened to be on the evil side of the battle, she decided to hate God, any God. Growing up under the totalitarian Islamic regime of Iran she was convinced that the great God must be the evil itself.

Her father is gathering all the books that have to do with his communistic beliefs from his bookshelf. The family is rushing to gather the books, carry them to the basement and throw them behind the big heavy water heater tank. There is no way to reach the books after you throw them there. After all the books are cleared from the shelf, she is still terrified, staring at the sinful tank.

The God-lovers could come back at any time. They just took her uncle, cousins and grandmother the night before for investigation. She was scared seeing them with their guns and hateful faces at the door. She watched them with her honest, innocent eyes, panicked.

The long rhymed slogan of death following “God is great” rings in my ears as if it was a forgotten but still familiar children’s song. Sometimes I want to believe in God, but the Jewish God, who will protect me from those God-lovers and their guns. At times I do feel protected by Him. But there are moments when He seems, again, like a tiny old wicked man looking at me with his daunting smirk.



aubade

Jane Blanchard

After sleeping, I often resort to looking for light through blinds in order to guess what time it is and whether you are awake, too, before turning and wondering what the weather might be and whether a walk would be advisable or even possible, then deferring any decision until both of us can consume sufficient caffeine to carry on a conversation that will take us all around the neighborhood and back home for a breakfast of your bowl of American bran and my egg on English muffin.



behind the closed door

Charles Rammelkamp

When Michael walked in on his sister and me having sex in her bedroom – college classmates, she a “townie,” attracted to each other from our English Romantic Poets seminar – I had no idea at the time that he was gay.

Neither did he, though surely he must have suspected – closeted in our 1970’s Midwestern town – only coming out when he moved to the city to go to college himself several years later.

Pushing open her door, without knocking, Michael blushed, apologized, as we scrambled for our clothing, then started laughing, relieved it wasn’t her mom or dad. Some private look passed between brother and sister, from which I felt excluded as if walking in on a conversation.

But the oddest thing may have been his sister didn’t seem to realize, then, that she was gay, too.



a thousand islands

Charles Rammelkamp

When my wife asked me
if India Pale Ale were *a thing* –
trending like artisanal toast, say
(she'd been to a business lunch
with some people who were comparing notes
on their favorite IPA's) –
I wondered the same thing.
The guy who owns the wine store I shop at
speaks about IPA's with the same lyrical reverence
the wine connoisseurs use, trying to pinpoint
the elusive tastes on the palate, in the nose.

“Why is it called *India* Pale Ale, anyway?”

“I don't know. Maybe a style of beer-making
originated in India? We could Google it.”
(Later, I did: first brewed in nineteenth-century
England, for *export* to India!)

The conversation made me remember
my father's favorite salad dressing,
Thousand Island. Popularized in the fifties,
when my father was in his thirties,
he stuck to it his whole life,
always choosing it when the waitress
ran through the options, taking orders.

Named for the archipelago in the Saint Lawrence River:
I spent years as a kid
wondering about the name's origin
in those days before the internet,
not knowing who to ask,
imagining a Shangri-La where naked women
lounged on the beach,
caring for a young man's every need –

until my father explained it one day,
his voice coming back to me now.



working class hero

Charles Rammelkamp

The year Lennon released his first solo album,
Plastic Ono Band, October, 1970,
I was working at a Capitol Records plant
in Jacksonville, Illinois,
slipping lp's into cardboard sleeves,
putting them on the conveyor belt
for Mary and Kristin,
two farmers' wives making extra money
now that the crops were in.

Mary and Kristin checked the albums for flaws,
stacked them into boxes,
put the boxes onto palettes
for the forklift guy to tote away.

Seething with moral outrage, Mary,
an enormous woman in a nest of cardboard boxes,
like a hippo wading in shallow river water,
jabbed a meaty finger at the back cover
where the lyrics were printed:
but you're still fucking peasants as far as I can see.

"Look at that!" she spat at Kristin,
I was afraid she'd tear the records apart
like those Southern Baptists
stamping on Beatles records
when Lennon said they were more popular than Jesus.
But she restrained herself, only snorting her wrath,
blowing her indignation like a large river mammal.

Kristin, a younger woman, Mary's protégé,
had a subversive streak:
maybe she drove to work and home with Mary,
out to their lonely country homes,
but she asserted independence, an open mind:
Kristin and I exchanged looks
over Mary's bent-double body,
rolling our eyes.



circe lay waste

Sean Mahoney

This digital light, this pained pulse of monitor resolution is not purple urchin and dwarf pine as much as Teutonic word blips drifting and 2x4s positioned illogically askew within the frame of my cozy rented abode.

“I am born old.
I am ghostwritten.
I am tool of the tools
of foot speed and
totally shameless.
I am a speck and I am tried.
I am Nobody,
a Circean ontology
with the devastating panache
of being both mired in and
paced just ahead of time,
of you. I have broken
compromised surfaces
and come to your
home, come home
as I again always will
as proof of power
sketched under
the foundation of your
style, and without issue.”

How is it that I have come into dialogue with this beast, my ingrown nail, and worse, bowing before its gnarled beauty; dirty wisdom issued in damp, uncomfortable vocabulary? This, this I cannot answer today.



intents and purposes: toward an ending

Sean Mahoney

The pacing is dictated.
The decay sly and compelling.
Eloquent apperceptions
on door to door contrition,
communiqués, and occurrences:
funereal spent embers, beds
of flowers, beads, rocks.
Ceremonious smears of charcoal
over cheeks, chest, and torso.
Glint seeks the enabling hand
of the sky, shakes across
remarkable bodies of water.

Looking at the sea - dark
blue depth with its choppy
smirks - is like gazing into
the hollow of bone sockets and
falling beside contagious
footnotes ice-dried within
crystalized mountain bellies.

Names of stars bestowed upon
bidders with astral aspirations.
Blissful non-tangibles - scent
of black wet sand or the stoicism
granted barbs of the Agave -
contrasted with the acrid distrust
of the non-verbal casual drinker.
Genetic maps sold in four corners
and on seven continents and within
each the genome deciphered and
unlocked releases saltwater.

Will we never meet up and dance
together in the great azure swells?
Sway beneath a dappling ball
of light and the frenetic volleys

from thousands of phosphorescent
phytoplankton? Whether we further
sever or stitch that ephemeral curtain
between what is not known and what
is believed to be not known no longer
matters. No longer concerns you. Me.
Us. Them.

You understand. Don't you? Hands that
dismiss touch or ignore intimacy like
a loose association, a bitter aftertaste,
close the ring, wave slants out into the sea
that rejects its own offspring, offer
valedictory concessions that may or can
or will not ever...

...The sea rejects its offspring,
it spits them ashore.
The lime of this sea
is trunked up in my bones
and has been since my line
broke away and tripped the floor
ecstatic. Celebrated meal, I break
down slowly, if at all. And I belong
here. As do you.



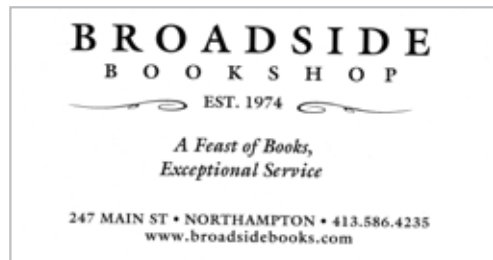
intents and purposes: lemon tree

Sean Mahoney

Once a tribe of skittish finches
have advanced through
purple and orange bracts
of bougainvillea, and the dormant
musk rose, once they have passed,
I jam the hose to the inside base
of the arced cinder blocks
encircling the lemon tree
knowing they will return, drawn
by rind I cut from the fruit
resembling an excited worm.

Water seeps in, under the loose
topsoil and living matters
which remain flakey, strident,
and pulse with momentary
granular lapses. Beneath oxidizing
rock, sediments and clays, a new seed
perspires in the nitrogen-rich
canopy of terminals hidden
from beak and maw.

And I with shape stand forth, erect,
hose in hand; I am the rock upon which
this garden is sculpted and built.
Elsewhere sprout gods and monsters.
And somewhere else still small birds
are batted like playthings.



Lydia speaks for posterity

Helen Grochmal

The news went out. Management said unto them, the old folks at the retirement home, that they should speak the truth unto future generations, speak of the wisdom of their God and do their part in the “Be Part of the Future” oral history project. Share your stories unto the stranger amongst us, a graduate student from the local University doing the interviews. Don’t forget to speak of the virtues of the Home and its benevolent Management. (The research might get them good publicity was Management’s thought.)

So the student knocked on their doors, and they told their stories to the young woman who was leading the conversation towards the type of communication that would make the best book when her thesis hopefully was published. In her mind, these old people just babbled nonsense. She wished they had all served in some war. Those made the best interviews and books.

Maureen hated tea. She had only two interviews scheduled every day, needing long lunches with a few drinks between these boring interviews and all of that awful tea. She was becoming good at getting the people to talk about their personal lives instead of what they did at office jobs or about their relatives and how they had died.

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Inside her house, Lydia waited for that girl, wondering what to say. She wasn’t one to be led around by the nose or to tell about her personal life. She would give the world her wisdom, of course, and that was the best she should be expected to do. The girl would get no personal scandal from her.

Lydia wondered if Maureen liked green tea. She had some vegetable teas that the girl might like. But probably she liked sweet teas. Lydia had her Laliq sugar bowl and creamer out. Lydia favored lots of milk in her tea, although young people didn’t these days. “I’ll get some lemon out for the girl, too. No one will ever say I am not a good hostess,” she said to herself.

The knock came. Lydia answered the door and smiled. “Come in, my dear, I have hot water ready for tea. I recommend the vegetable tea, although you might like the lingonberry with sugar. I keep up with what young people want, you see. I’m afraid I don’t have any of your music to play, but we will need quiet for our important conversation, won’t we?”

Maureen looked at the woman with her patronizing voice and offer of tea and her heart sank. The only tea she could even tolerate was weak English Breakfast her mother made when she was sick. Why didn’t she do her thesis on Wycliffe’s 14th Century sermons or something less painful than this? She had thought this project would be easy and fun.

“Thank you for your invitation, Mrs. Piestoffel. I’d love tea, maybe the fruit tea with sugar. No, no rutabaga tea for me today, although I am sure it is delicious.” Her stomach turned over.

“I baked some red beet squares with coriander and turmeric sprinkled on top,” Lydia said with pride in her accomplishment, in her every accomplishment. “I put turmeric on everything, dear.

It is very good for you. You should tape this. Everyone should know about turmeric. I saw it on one of those doctor shows on TV.”

“Should we drink and then tape?” asked Maureen. “We will need to concentrate, as you said.”

“Very well, dear. You are boss here today,” Lydia simpered, just the way she sometimes did for men.

So Maureen choked down a square that was worse than she had thought it could be and some tea. “No, no, I have a big lunch planned. I can’t eat more, thank you, although they are delicious.”

“Thank you, dear. I will give you a list of spices to perk up that sickly complexion of yours and improve your fingernails. You really don’t need those false plastic things you are wearing on them. They are bad for your breathing, you know, the glue.”

Maureen helped Mrs. Piestoffel clean up and they settled comfortably on stuffed chairs in the living room. Maureen organized her notebook and recorder and asked her first question.

“What is the goal that guided you in life, Mrs. Piestoffel?” She expected a short answer like “my family” or “my Church.”

Lydia looked beyond Maureen at the wall behind her and said, “Come, dear, I’ll show you.”

Lydia led the girl to a table where an urn sat with artificial flowers surrounding it and a large framed photograph of an unsmiling man above it. Writing in a woman’s hand on a note stuck on the urn with sticky tape read, “Philip, Lydia’s Husband.”

“That’s my last husband hanging on the wall.”

Oh, no, thought Maureen, looking at her watch, not another perfect husband tape for her project. She was used to little shrines to their husbands in these women’s apartments, although Mrs. Piestoffel’s did seem to be different.

They sat down again. Maureen prepared to ask another question. Before she could get the chance, Lydia started to talk.

“My marriage was my reason for living, my dear.”

“Lots of women here had great love affairs with their husbands,” said Maureen with boredom. “I think marriages were easier before the sexual revolution.”

“Do you, my dear?” Lydia said with darts coming from her eyes, her voice implying that Maureen was a congenital idiot. “Who said anything about a love affair? I was talking about marriage. My first marriage ended in divorce, although I had thought the Christian service and the laws of the United States had protected me from that abominable thing. They offer no such protection and don’t ever believe it. When I married for the second time, I intended to stay married his whole life.”

"Of course you did," agreed Maureen.

"I succeeded too, no matter what Philip did."

"What do you mean?" asked Maureen with interest for the first time in her voice.

"Well, the old conventions kept us going for a long while, as they usually do. He was a conventional man. Then he asked for a divorce like the first one whose request I handled very badly. Of course, I couldn't have that again. I believed in the marriage words. They were law to me, my guiding star, my raison d'être. I can't tell you enough how young women should get a reason for living thought out in a few words. Otherwise you just float like flotsam in life. Right there is the PROOF of my success in life," Lydia said, pointing to the urn surrounded by cheap plastic flowers.

With all of the expensive, elegant things in the house, Maureen was surprised by the cheapness of the urn's setting. She realized it was that way for a reason. She looked at Lydia more carefully. "How did you convince him to stay?" asked Maureen. "Counseling?"

Lydia laughed with sarcasm. "Young girls are so gullible and touchy-feely these days. Men will always take advantage of you, poor things. Use tools that have some clout behind them. I figured out that the only things that would work would be having a Mafia Don for a father, a gun, or the law. My milquetoast father was dead; I thought I would use the gun as a last resort; I decided to use the law. Of course I tried persuasion at first but he wouldn't listen. He wanted very much to chase other women and did. It was especially bad after the internet started. Women were all over the place for the asking. I had to almost fight with them. 'Call them out' I think you young people say. My husband wasn't bad looking, and you know how desperate some women can be. I was ready to stop them if they wanted to cross my threshold. I took self-defense courses and made it known. I would use my husband's e-mail addresses to contact them and then tell them about my martial arts progress and what I thought of them!"

Maureen's eyes widened.

"Yes, my dear. I did whatever I had to do. I learned whatever I had to, however difficult, like following him on those online dirty sites and the dating sites too. The marriage pledge was my mantra, my wedding ring was my flag."

"I enjoyed using the law the most. For years I looked up our State's marriage and divorce laws. I knew those statutes by heart."

"But why would you want to stay with a man who didn't want you?" wondered Maureen.

"What does that have to do with anything? I was married, if my husband wasn't. I just had to make him see it my way."

"What did you say to him?"

"First I told him that squirming would do him no good. I would call every woman he chased

and tell her that he was married if he had lied to her. And life for those trollops who didn't care could be made very uncomfortable. To understand what was legal to do, I kept up on the stalking laws of my region. I would not even say a word, I told him. I would just find a public place and hold up a sign saying Della or Rita or Marisa is dating my husband, a married man. I told him: 'I'll keep doing it as long as you chase other women. I'll call the local press, just changing the name of the woman on the sign. It will be a running joke on YouTube. Everyone you work with will know. I'll never give you or any of your other women any rest. You know I can be creative. What do I have to lose socially? Everyone knows you want to divorce me. Wherever you hide, I will find you.'"

"That strategy worked for a long time. He stayed home. I was gracious to him even after all that he had put me through. I kept paying a detective though."

"Did he give up fighting after that?"

"Oh, no. You are so naïve, my dear. If we have another world war like in my day, I doubt if our side will win if that is the opinion of the current young. You just shouldn't give up, ever."

"My husband did file for divorce finally; he had found a woman who wouldn't be chased away. He had the divorce papers served without telling me while he was out of town for work. He had taken a secret apartment then too. I fired that detective quickly, I can tell you!"

"I held up the divorce for years. It is not hard. You get sick on the day of the hearings and such. Of course you get a doctor's letter for your lawyer to present. There are lots of things you can do."

"The time came when I had to give evidence in Court. I told that judge that I didn't want a divorce, I needed my husband, I was sick, and I had always been very good to him. I cried. After all, my feelings were hurt. I proved to the Court that I had been faithful, that I had made his meals and kept a clean house, and I told them of the extent I had gone to save our marriage. My husband had no legal complaints against me, I saw to that. And I had all of those detective reports on him and hotel receipts for two and sometimes more."

"What about sex?" asked Maureen, forgetting propriety in her fascination with Lydia.

"Oh, that. I knew the laws of our State. You only have to do it once every two years. I always squeaked by under the wire. And don't forget that Philip was susceptible."

"Philip finally gave up on getting a divorce. That last woman went away. We settled down. I was happy."

"Was Philip?"

"I never thought about it."

"How did he die? The usual heart attack?"

“No, actually. He fell over a cliff.”

Maureen gasped. “Accident?”

(Pause)

“I don’t know. Only he was up there. Drugged maybe. I never should have left him out of my sight. I was too easy-going with him. It doesn’t matter. I died his wife. That is what I wanted in life.”

They both looked toward his picture.

“Being a widow isn’t bad either,” sighed Lydia in contentment.

Maureen slowly came out of her spell, packed up her things, and said good-bye with more appreciation than usual. She hadn’t died from those red beet squares and had gained a unique entry for her collection. Poor simple Maureen did not understand how a strong person like Lydia could insidiously influence the rest of her life with an hour’s conversation on an ordinary day. All she thought as she innocently left to plan for her next interview at her overpriced lunch was that you could learn a lot from Lydia.



girl on chair
Doug Tibbles

the turtle hunter

Patrick O'Connor

I crawled from the mud and hid behind a patch of cattails, watching. A man had slipped a pair of black cables into the pond and then another man, on shore, yanked a cord on what looked like a generator. It jumped about in seizure-like fits, coughing up black smoke. The man fingered the engine, settling it down into a long, low growl. Standing back on dry ground, the two men stared into the water. Then, just like that, my fish began to rise, one by one, like bobbers, belly-up on the water's surface.

One of the men flipped a switch on the machine, and it was sputtering to a stop when I jumped up and ran into the water, grabbing as many of my fish as I could: a sunny, a large-mouth, two pickerel, another sunny. I dropped them in a pouch I made from my t-shirt and then walked towards the men. I imagined what they saw: a pregnant swamp beast, sopping, crusted with pond scum, and dotted with red bug-bites. I splashed madly through the water.

"Put those fish back in the pond," the man who seemed to be in charge said to me.

He pointed at where my black rubber boots met the water.

"You killed them all!" I shouted. "I'll call the police!"

The man, who wore a wide-brimmed hat that flopped loosely over his eyes, repeated his command—"Drop. Those. Fish."—while the other man, with a net in his hand, scooped up fish and dropped them in a blue bucket on shore, not paying any attention to me.

I turned away from them and headed towards shore.

"I am calling the police," I yelled over my shoulder, although I wasn't sure how. The nearest payphone was way up on North Street and I had no money and the phone in my house was broke.

"Hey," the man called to me. I looked back. He had reached into his pocket and was pulling something out.

"No need to call the police," he said, showing a silver badge. "I'll only say this one more time: Place those fish back where you took them. Now."

With a bow towards the water, I flipped open my pouch and the fish tumbled into the muddy water, all kicked up by my thrashing. Although dinner sounded good, it was not worth trouble with the police.

I was pondering why the police were electrocuting my fish when something strange happened: The fish woke up. One by one, they wiggled themselves out of death's grip and with a snap of their tailfins, they escaped into the roiled water.

I had no idea what to think. I was glad they did not wake up halfway home. Yet, I certainly would

have enjoyed them, all cooked up in a pan of sizzling butter the way my mom does.

* * *

I left the men behind and headed towards the train tracks. I like the rusty tracks on a hot summer day. The gravel makes it feel like an oven and my neck gets all red and burnt. I get a tickly feeling in my gut as I walk through such heat.

You might want to know that I can balance on a single rail for as long as a football field, not falling once. This took practice, many years of walking the same way, since I was a boy. Also sometimes when the train passes I throw pebbles at its cars, and then duck so they do not ricochet back and hit me in the face. You have to be quick.

I live on a dead end road across from North Street. It is a dirt road even though it is right in the center of the city. To get there I have to climb up from the tracks. A steep hill covered with loose gravel, but I claw my way up.

From there I head across the baseball field. This is where the boys practice. Every few years it is a new bunch, but they are always the same. Today was no different.

“No school again, huh, Jon?” one shouted.

Always the same damned questions.

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“I was at the pond!” I shouted back.

They are all so stupid. They do not think and that is their problem. Woodie Guthrie once said thinking is the most difficult act and that is why so few people can actually do it. I agree.

“Yeah,” one boy shouted, “we can smell you from here.”

“It is a pond! Of course it smells. And, I was in it up to my neck!”

They were laughing even harder now, but I kept walking right across their outfield, kicking up tufts of grass and making holes that maybe someday would cause one of them—oh how I hoped!—to snap an ankle bone.

I pushed my way through a hole in the back fence. The city constantly uses metal ties to close that hole and we untwist them to open the hole back up. This has been going on for years. Why they do not make a permanent opening, I do not know.

My building was in front of me now. It is white and has three stories and is very square and it has two small concrete stoops for each front door (there are two homes side by side). I sometimes sit on my stoop in the very early morning flicking rocks and looking at the empty field.

I stripped on the stoop and dropped my wet cutoff jean shorts and my sopping t-shirt in the sand and placed my rubber boots on top of the pile and was about to open the door when I heard a scream.

“Tightey whiteys!” one of the ball players shouted. “Look! Look! Look! He’s in his tightey whiteys!”

Idiots.

I did not look back at them. I just opened the door and disappeared inside.

* * *

“Mom?”

Quiet.

I called a bit louder.

“Mom?”

Nothing.

I walked down the hall and past the kitchen.

She was in the back den sleeping on the couch.

I hate that couch. Its cushions constantly slide off and when they remain on, they itch. I have to wear long sleeves and sweat pants and socks and a hat just to lie on it.

I do not know how mom slept so soundly there day after day and hour after hour with nothing on but her long short-sleeved-shirt.

I walked into the kitchen and tried to pull open the bread drawer. To do so, however, you have to pull just right: Lift the front, but slightly, getting the knob perfectly aligned with the twisted track and then pull forward, just a little though, and as you pull, push down on the handle so the knob follows a bend in the track, and then—yank!

It rarely worked. Patience depends on hunger and if I was hungry, I had none so I just pulled and shook that drawer until it opened. I was hungry this time and luckily—for the drawer—it opened.

I grabbed the Wonder Bread bag, untwisted the blue band and took out a slice. I plucked bits from the doughy center. I squeezed each bit between my pointer finger and thumb making tiny squares which I popped into my mouth like candy. I did this until only the crust remained, which I threw in the trash.

I then headed upstairs and stripped out of my wet underwear and slipped into another pair of cutoff jeans and a white t-shirt. Once back in the upstairs hallway I ran and then leapt. On the first try I grabbed the handle to the attic. The ladder pulled down, flipped open, and I climbed up.

* * *

It is hot but dry in the attic. I walk over to the vent where a warm breeze slips in and brushes my skin. It feels so nice here. I lay on a small square of shag carpet that someone had tossed to the curb. A light bulb dangles above, but today I do not need it. Dusty light filters through the vent-slats, giving enough light to read by. I have a few milk crates stacked against the wall to hold my books, or at least they could hold them if I did not keep them all scattered on the floor. I imagine if I stood, an outline of me would remain in the shape of my tossed books.

The attic itself is split by a wall. The other half belongs to our neighbor. To keep the air blowing through from vent to vent, the middle wall does not reach all the way up to the ceiling, which means I can hear my neighbors when they are in their side, which is not often. Unlike me, they only use it for storage. I can hear other noises up here, too. Kids on my block shouting or the neighbor's dog, Spatts, yapping. I should tell you a little about Spatts. He is a smart mutt that is always digging holes under the fence. They plug the holes with rocks and scraps of wood and cinderblocks and children's toys. But Spatts just digs a new hole in between the blockades. He flattens his body into it and pops out on the other side and off he goes making crazed circles around the baseball field as the kids give chase. I watch from my porch, flicking rocks. Sometimes Spatts makes his way up to North Street where he moseys down the sidewalk and past the shops. I imagine if he could, Spatts would give a nod to passersby. Eventually, the neighbors grab him and lock him up again in the backyard; the most recent escape route blocked with some new object, like one of their plastic pink flamingoes.

88 I think they should let him roam. They say he will be hit by a car. But in all of his runaway dashes he has never been hit by a car. I think they have other reasons for keeping him in the backyard. I think it is just what they do—People keep dogs in backyards—so they do not know any better. They say the animal inspector will fine them if they let Spatts out. But when is the last time any one has seen the “animal inspector.” It is like what that folk singer said about the police: You do not call on them and they will not call on you.

When up here, I sometimes hear my neighbor's father, too. He is a school janitor who keeps his five sons in line with a plastic Wiffle ball bat. You can see the bat-shaped bruises on their chubby thighs. They are all fat, except the dad, who is wiry and muscular.

The father often sneaks away to smoke in the alley between our houses, and I know when he is out because smoke drifts in through the vent. I would tell him to move, but cigarette smoke does not bother me. I enjoy having my own now and then.

I can also hear my mom from up here. This is the sound I especially like. I am not sure how, but I can hear her talking in the kitchen. The kitchen is two floors down, but the words just travel up through the walls. Not that she has many people over. Only her one friend, Mary, who comes by now and then, and they sit and talk and eat Entenmann's coffee cake. I do not listen to what they say. To be honest I just like their voices. I have always enjoyed voices. Sometimes at night when my mom and Mary are talking in the den I pretend I am sleeping on the floor, so they feel more comfortable and free and I just listen to their voices. My mom does most of the listening. She says things like “yes” and “oh, really” and “uh huh” and “yep, yep” and “well” and “right, right” and “ok” and “I understand” and other such remarks that push the conversation along and keep Mary going. I like it so much.

This evening, though, everything is quiet. Spatts is inside. The janitor is at work. My mom is asleep on the itchy couch. And the baseball players have gone home. I was going to read but I

like the quiet and I just lie and listen. Pipes tap in the wall. I close my eyes and imagine each tap making a chink in some invisible glass wall and each chink expanding bigger and bigger, creating a spidery web of cracks on the silence.

I close my eyes, dreaming. Then, I start to think of the men at my pond. It was bad enough that they found my pond, which is a small, private place, off the train tracks, that no one but me visits. Old trees with fat trunks and tall grass with feathery tops cover most of the pond's banks, making it impregnable to those who do not know a way in. But now these men, with their sick machine, and their fishing nets, and their blue bucket, these men. These men who shocked *my* fish, nearly killing them all.

* * *

"Johnny! Are you up there?"

My mom's broom handle banged the hatch. I must have fallen asleep. I felt groggy. I wondered how long I had been out.

Bang! ... Bang, bang!

"Johnny! You want dinner, honey? You're up there, right?"

Bang! Bang!

"Yes," I said. "I am up here, right. What are we having?"

"Leftovers. I thought we'd have meatloaf sandwiches."

"I'll be right down."

It was pitch black in the attic and I crawled to the hatch and pushed the ladder down with my feet. I climbed down and made my way to the kitchen where my mom was getting a plate of meatloaf out of the fridge.

"Jon, your face! That's a nasty burn."

"I was out in the pond all day," I said, turning away.

"You got to go to school. They'll come looking for you again."

"I do not like school, mom. I like nothing about school. Especially not now, not when it is sunny and warm ... *outside* of school. How can anyone sit in those classrooms when it is sunny and warm? Could you sit in those classrooms on those chairs listening to those teachers, day after day? Could you?"

"Jon, please. I don't want to argue again. Just go tomorrow. Get it over with. You can leave at the end of this year if you want, but you need to finish."

"Why? Why do I need to finish?"

“You know why?”

I knew *why* she *thought* I needed to finish. I knew her answer: I needed to get a job and I needed a diploma to get a job and I needed a job to pay my way and if I could not pay my way, I would end up living in her attic and what kind of life would that be.

But she was wrong. Many people who had no diploma had jobs. The janitor next door with the five kids had no diploma—and he worked in a school! What about all the guys in the battery plant?

“Do you want mayonnaise?” I said as I opened the fridge.

“Of course,” my mom said, willing to move on, too. “You can’t have a meatloaf sandwich without mayo.”

* * *

I woke early the next morning. My mom was still asleep. I put on my cutoff jeans and white T-shirt and headed out. Thankfully, no one was at the bus stops. I did not want to hear the jeers. I do not understand why they think they can mock *me*. They learn nothing at school and they know it. They know it every day they sit in those seats and roll their eyes at the teacher’s back. They know it as they rest their heavy heads on those hard desks and, half asleep, dribble spittle on their pale arms. They know it as they shoot spitballs from striped cafeteria straws and paper-bullets from rubber-band slings. As they do anything but school work. They know it. And *they* laugh at *me*. For what? At least I refuse to participate. I should be their hero, not their fool.

* * *

Before stopping at the bait shop, I decided to head over to the Olympic Deli to get a breakfast sandwich.

“No school, today?” the guy behind the counter asked as I walked in.

“No, it is a snow day,” I said. “Ham, egg and cheese on a roll.”

He returned to cooking. The egg sandwich came wrapped in stiff white paper, which was steamy in my hand. I got to the register and ordered a regular coffee with milk and sugar.

“I like it sweet,” I said.

“I know,” the guy said.

I knew he knew, but I liked reminding him because he forgets.

“I will have a loosey, too,” I said.

He shook his head, smiling, as he always did.

“Do you need a light?”

“Yep.”

He pulled a cigarette from an open pack in a drawer under the counter, and handed it to me. I placed it between my lips and waited.

“I need some money first.”

I paid and waited. He lifted a flame to my cigarette and I inhaled.

I nodded and walked out. Out of respect I held in the smoke until I reached the street, and then I blew out a big white puff.

I headed down an alley and out back where there were a few old wood chairs. I sat down and knocked off the burning tip of my cigarette on a tree, saving the rest for later. I unwrapped my sandwich and was about to bite in when a voice surprised me.

“Do you have an extra?”

Old Bob was on the floor, propped up against a tree with his legs outstretched before him.

“Nope, I bought this one inside,” I said.

With that, Bob fished through a pocket of his jacket. Bob always wore several layers of clothes. A sweater, a sweatshirt with a hood, a vest, and a jacket. He said he needed to keep warm at all times because of his arthritis. He had it in all of his joints.

“Here it is,” he said, pulling out a crooked cigarette. He lit it with a match and smiled.

“Doing some fishing today?” he asked.

Bob never asked me about school. He had a diploma. Once I followed him down to the soup kitchen at the church and after he finished eating I listened to him play piano. Bob was a pianist, too. You could not tell by looking at him though. His hair was gray and dirty and he had a beard that grew in patches on his skinny face.

He spent most of his time behind the stores. He even walked behind them. He said he did not like to be seen. “I scare children,” he would say. When he was not behind the stores, he was either at the bar or down by his camp in his woods.

I would sometimes join him down there at his camp. He had a wood stove built out of railroad plates and ties. It is shaped like a small tube with the plates on top. He burned sticks in the stove and the plates got red hot, hot enough to cook steaks and burgers.

He liked it out there in the woods and so did I. He had bird feeders made from soda bottles he had cut in half. He hung a house gutter from tree to tree, and when it rained, water ran down the gutter and into five-gallon pails he positioned at the end of two spouts. In the warmer months, he washed with the rain water. In the winter he stayed in his tent, layered and bundled in blankets. At night, he peed into empty 40-ounce beer bottles and pulled them up against his chest to keep warm.

We would sometimes sit together in the spring at his camp in the woods and listen to the peepers. He said they sounded like a symphony.

“You can’t fish without a pole,” he said.

“I am not fishing today,” I said. “I have to head over to the bait shop to ask Danny some questions.”

“About what?”

“Something I saw yesterday.”

“Ok.”

“Some guys, police, they electrocuted the fish in my pond,” I said.

“They’re not police,” Bob said.

“You know who they are?”

“Well, not who they are. I know what they are. They’re Fish and Wildlife.”

“Fish and Wildlife?”

“The State.”

“What does The State want with my pond?”

“Pollution. From the batteries up at GE. It’s not just your pond. They’re checking all the streams and rivers and the water they flow into,” he said.

“How do you know?”

“The *Eagle*.”

Bob’s a big reader.

“But why did they electrocute my fish?”

“They shocked them, knocked them out, so they could test them and then release them back in the water.”

That’s why the fish woke up.

I was hungrier now than ever and I ate my sandwich in a few bites, forgetting to ask Bob if he wanted some. I reached into my pocket and grabbed my silver Zippo, and flicked it open. A flame waved in front of my face and I lit my cigarette.

“I have to talk to Danny about this,” I said. “I do not want Fish and Wildlife messing around my

pond.”

“Yours, huh,” Bob smiled.

“Yes, mine,” I said, not smiling.

I said goodbye and walked out of the alleyway onto North Street.

* * *

When I got there, Danny was in the back behind by the tanks. He was talking to two men, the State men. I walked slowly over to the tanks. They were asking Danny some questions.

“Bog turtles,” the man with the wide-brimmed hat said.

“No,” said Danny. “I don’t sell them.”

“I know you don’t,” the man said. “They’re protected.”

Danny just listened.

“Has anyone come around, though, trying to sell you some? They’re rare and a pet shop like yours could make some money selling them.”

“I don’t sell them,” Danny repeated.

“OK,” said the State man. His partner was looking into the tanks. I pretended to do the same.

“Well, if you do see some, if someone does come in with them, make sure to ask them where they found them and then give us a call,” the man said.

I did not wait to hear Danny’s response. I ran out and ran home and ran upstairs and up into the attic. I got out my field guide for reptiles and amphibians and turned to the back.

“Bog turtles,” I repeated, looking up the name.

“162.”

I flipped to the page and there they were, tiny, dark brown turtles:

“Maximum length, 4.5 inches. Bright orange and yellow blotches on each side of the head. Body, dark. Some have an orange wash on inside of legs. Carapace, domed, with prominent scutes. Light brown sunburst pattern in each scute. Plastron, pattern of cream and black blotches. Habitat: boggy wetlands.”

I recognized the picture immediately. They live in my pond. I lay down, my thoughts racing. Then, I jumped up, ran downstairs into the kitchen and dumped the potatoes out of their perforated bag, leaving them on the kitchen table. I headed for my pond.

The pond was wide and the water was deep and dark. There were shadowy spots around the edges where white birches hung like bows. Some had snapped, and their waterlogged tops lay in the pond while their splintered trunks jutted up like spikes guarding the bank. High grass grew thickly on the far side; there, everything was hidden.

I have fished every corner, morning, day and night. I have fished by flashlight, drawing up the bottom-feeding catfish. When I catch the ugly things I hang them by a hook in front of my face. They whip their tails from side to side, slapping their fat heads, viciously. I smash their heads with a stone.

Today was not about fishing, though. Today I stalked the bank, mud sucking in my boots with each step. I parted the tall grass, peering into the black water there, but found nothing. After circling the pond entire, I jumped up onto one of those hanging birches and just sat, scanning my pond.

If I had my way, I would not leave, ever. I would stay far from the yards and the lots and the buildings and the schools and all the noise that fills them. Just like Old Bob, I would live away from them. I would not need much. Just four walls of plywood nailed all round and a tin roof on a pitch to keep the water out. I would have a pot-bellied stove where I would fry my fish in a skillet and warm my room on cold days. I would not need windows because most of time would be spent outdoors. The floor would be made of packed dirt and I would just need a pallet to sleep on.

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I daydreamed and searched the water and then I noticed something different about a boulder a little ways out. It was marbled with white quartz and on its top were what looked four, tiny black holes. I could have leapt down I was so excited, but I knew better. I lowered myself slowly into the water and bent onto my knees and pushed my hands wrist-deep into the muck and began to crawl. My chin rose just out of the water and a swarm of tiny gnats whirled around my head, jumping on and off of my eyeballs. I blinked trying to catch them and got a few and they clumped up in the corner of my eye. Another group flew in and out of the hairs in my ear, and I had no way of stopping them so every now and then I dunked my head into the dark water. My hair, plastered down on my forehead and over my eye, sent water streaming into my mouth.

I tried not to think of any of this and just focused on the turtles on the rock, my prize. If I had my way, they would all be sunning themselves on the bank where I would pluck them like fruit, one by one, and carry them to the pet store.

I crept around the far side of the boulder, making no ripples. I got real close, brushing my shoulder up against the rough surface and stopped and took a few breaths, steadying myself. I could not see them, but I knew they were there. I had not heard a splash. I rose and felt like a ghoul in a horror flick bending over a sleeping beauty.

My hands hovered above two shells and then slammed down, my palms pressing the turtles to the stone; the others did a quick shuffle and drop—splash, splash. I shoved my two into the potato sack and I lifted myself onto their quartz sun-spot, claiming it as my own. I reached back into the sack and pulled one of the turtles out.

It was so small. My fingertips wrapped around to its silky underside. I held it up to my face, but the turtle was understandably frightened and kept its head tucked under the shell. I am not going to eat you, I said, although I wondered how they would taste. I could smash it open like a clam on the rock and chop it up and cover its bits with butter and fry them sizzling in my iron skillet.

I dropped him back in the sack and focused on the two that slipped away. I had as much time as they, and so I settled myself on the stone and stared into the mixed-up water, waiting for it to settle.

Soon, the underwater world re-formed, first bony branch tips and then the whole gnarled branch and farther down dead logs and spongy water plants and last on the far bottom, hiding beside the prehistoric log, two turtles.

I dove in, making a gargantuan splash. A shock wave of noise frightened the runts and I had them, pressed wrist deep into the mud. I uprooted them and stood out of the water, holding them upside down so their smooth underbellies shined in the sun. They joined the others in the sack.

My momentum picked up and the rest of the day I found turtles in every corner and on every rock and by day's end I had filled my sack and they clicked and banged up against each other like a bag of rocks.

I flung my prize over my shoulder and headed down the train tracks towards North Street, soon arriving at the pet store.

A puddle followed me in.

"Hey!" Danny yelled.

I didn't answer.

"HEY! Can't you read! The sign says you need a shirt to come in here!"

I walked right up to him and hoisted the sack onto the counter.

"Bog turtles," I said.

"What?" He was understandably shocked. "Jon, what the hell? Get this wet mess off my counter and your wet ass out of my store."

"This wet mess you are looking at are bog turtles, the *rarest* amphibian in the State."

"They look like baby turtles to me."

"They are not. They are bog turtles, worth more than any of the other cheap creatures you have in this shop."

The man did not speak.

“Look,” I said, pulling one from the bag. It rested like an upside down bowl on my hand.

“How many do you have in there?”

“A bagful. You count. I catch.”

“Where?”

“Where what?”

“Where’d you catch ‘em?”

“I am not sure why you need to know. You sell them. That’s all.”

“How much? How much do you want?”

“Enough,” I said.

“Ten bucks,” he said.

I was not expecting ten. I pushed the bag closer to him and he opened the cash register and gave me ten single dollar bills, a real wad.

“I will be back tomorrow, so start selling,” I said and walked out, leaving a trail of water behind me.

Once outside, I turned around, swung the door open and marched back to the counter.

“My sack, please.”

* * *

Feeling thrilled, I took the long way home so I could pass the pear tree. The Italians owned it. I usually stole the pears at night or early in the morning, but I was hungry and thirsty and feeling triumphant and I wanted one to celebrate.

I walked down the dirt road and stopped in front of the Italians’ home. I admired the garage they were building beside their house. Made of cinderblocks and about the height of two men, it had no roof yet. It would be better to build my shack out of cinderblocks, much sturdier and longer lasting than wood. But how would I carry them to the pond?

I leapt into the tree’s branches by grabbing a lower one and swinging my legs up and over. This takes a lot of practice. I scaled up a ways and sat in a nook of branches that looked like an upside-down-umbrella. I plucked the fruit, dropping a few into my pockets for later and selecting the best for now.

The juice was sweet and it filled my mouth and I hesitated to swallow it because it tasted so good, but when I did swallow I smiled. I ate and ate and looked through the front window of the house. I could see two old women sitting at a table, talking. Suddenly one saw me and disappeared and the other followed. I scrambled to get down.

As I descended, I heard a scream from below.

“Fat boy! You, fat boy! Get down. You, get out of our tree.”

“I am. I am. I am climbing down. Not up!”

I jumped from the last branch and landed on my feet before them.

“The fruit! Give it back to us. You do not take. You ask. You want, you ask! But you do not take.”

I reached into my pockets and pulled out the pond-slick pears and handed them to the ladies. They held them with their fingertips.

“Can I have one?” I asked.

“What?” the mustached woman asked. “What you say?”

“You said I should ask. So, I am asking. Can I have a pear?”

“Go! And don’t come back. Now, you go!”

* * *

I hunted the turtles through the summer and into the fall and, as it got colder, the turtles got slower, and I continued my work, pulling out sack after sack from the cooling water, until ice hardened the surface, forcing me to retire for the winter. I stuffed all my cash into two coffee cans which I placed in the attic next to my books.

I made extra money during the winter by selling newspapers. On early Sunday mornings I would head into town and collect bundles of newspapers dropped in front of storefronts, filling a paper bag with them. When people came out of the churches and into town for coffee and breakfast, I peddled my newspapers.

“Sunday paper for only a quarter!”

They never asked any questions and I walked home with a jingling pocketful. But, as I did every year, I tired of it. I tired of the snow and the slush. The overflowing dumpsters. The cars revving along the streets and the busses screeching at their stops.

All I wanted was to return. I anxiously awaited the thaw so I could go back to my pond where it was quiet and I could be alone and uninterrupted. Once the hard ice thinned and cracked and melted back into the pond, I was there, in my overalls and boots and a green hat pulled over my ears and a heavy sweatshirt with hood pulled up, looking for the bog turtles.

But, I could not find any. Well, I found a couple, two or three, and brought them to the pet store, but that was only a few cents. And then, there was nothing. I spent all spring checking for the turtles, but the turtles were not around.

I quit and returned to fishing, which pleased my mom and my belly, and I never saw another

turtle. Then, one day, right before summer's end, as I was fishing out from the bank, a man yelled over to me.

"Hey, kid!"

I did not look at him. Maybe if I ignored him, he would go away.

"Kid!"

His voice grew louder as he walked closer and then he was standing next to me. I looked up at him. It was the man who shocked the fish last year and who questioned Danny about the bog turtles. I recognized his floppy, wide-brimmed hat.

"Kid, we're looking for some tiny turtles that we think may live here in the pond."

He over-announced every word which bothered the hell out of me.

"Have you seen any kid?"

Why did he keep calling me "kid"?

"Kid, I know you can hear me and I know you're always here. Have you seen any of these tiny turtles? A whole colony lives here."

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"Bog turtles," I said. "They are called bog turtles."

The man examined me for a while, saying nothing. Then, his voice deepened into a growl. I remembered that voice from last year when he demanded that I drop my fish back into my pond.

"Right, bog turtles. Where are they, kid?"

"Gone."

*



Contributors' Notes

Aurora Amidon is a junior at Wellesley High School. She likes Christian Bale, fried pickles, and Lars von Trier movies. When she is older, she wants to live in either Germany, Scotland, or Mississippi and give people tattoos for a living. Her favorite artist is Paul Booth.

Katrin Arefy was born in Tehran. She received graduate degrees in Art and then in Piano Pedagogy from Moscow Gnessin University, only to end up expressing herself in words. While pursuing her music career as a teacher, author and artistic director, she has devoted all her free time to her passion for literature. Her pieces were well received in numerous literary events including Action Fiction in San Francisco, Roar Shack in Los Angeles as well as other events in Berkeley and San Diego.

Stephanie Baird, LMHC, lives and works in the Pioneer Valley (Massachusetts) and is a private practice psychotherapist. She has been writing in all genres since her early teens and has published poetry or prose in the Inkshed Press (1991, 1992), Gladtree Journal (2009) and several issues of Meat for Tea (2007, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2014), with forthcoming poetry in Tule Review. Her linocut prints have also been printed in Meat for Tea (2013). When she isn't psychotherapizing or parenting her spirited toddler, she rides her bicycle all over the Eastern Seaboard, relishes local gastronomical pleasures, socializes, DIYs, and enjoys everything the Pioneer Valley and world have to offer. And she occasionally gets to squeeze in writing a poem or pulling a print.

Jane Blanchard lives and writes in Georgia. Her poetry has recently appeared in Mezzo Cammin, Noctua Review, and Pudding Magazine.

Christine Brandel is a British-American writer currently living in the American Midwest. Her work has appeared in places you can find. Her chapbook, *Tell This To Girls: The Panic Annie Poems*, was released in early 2013. She makes pictures and words.

Arturo Desimone's short fiction and poetry have been in New Orleans Review web-features, Big Bridge, Unlikely Stories, Horror Sleaze Trash, Acentos Review and The Original Van Gogh's Ear Poetry Series. He was born and raised on the island of Aruba, emigrated at the age of 20 to the Netherlands, after seven years decidedly left the Netherlands to lead a nomadic existence that proved more conducive to writing poetry and fiction, and which brought him to live in such places as post-revolution-era Tunisia and Argentina, (where his current base is,) Prophets and Pushers began before then, nine years ago.

Alison Downs is a student, writer and overall workaholic, currently residing in Connecticut. She has previously had both poetry and fiction published in Pulp City, Freshwater Poetry Magazine, Boink Magazine, Big Pulp and Eunoia Review. She just received her BFA in Creative Writing from Goddard College and is currently finishing her first novel, a yet untitled drama about Alzheimer's Disease.

Brad Garber lives, writes and runs around naked in the Great Northwest. He fills his home with art, music, photography, plants, rocks, bones, books, good cookin' and love. He has published poetry in Alchemy, Red Booth Review, Front Range Review, Black Fox Literary Magazine, the New York, Ray's Road Review, The Round Up, Meat for Tea, Gambling the Aisle, Empty Sink Publishing, Fiction Fix, Screaming Sheep Magazine, Off the Coast, Apeiron Review, Shadowgraph, Livid Squid Literary Journal, Stoneboat Journal, Brickplight, Shuf Poetry, Rockhurst Review, Penduline Press, Literature Today, BASED, Eunoia Review, and other quality publications. Nominee: 2013 Pushcart Prize for poem, *Where We May Be Found*.

Helen Grochmal started writing fiction in her 60s when she moved to a retirement home. She published two cozy mysteries with Cozy Cat Press, then started to write short works in different genres to expand her range, to see what experimentation would reveal. She has had several (five) short stories accepted so far.

Sally Houtman is an ex-pat American who relocated to New Zealand in 2005. She is the author of a non-fiction book, branching into fiction and poetry in 2007. Since that time, her work has appeared in more than thirty print and online publications, earned four New Zealand writing awards, and been nominated for a 2012 Pushcart Prize.

Saera Kochanski is a Valley-grown, intergalactically-networking maker of things. Whether traversing the second dimension through pen and ink, absurdly out-of-the-tube saturated acrylics, comic panels and bits of paper put together nicely, or the fourth dimension via video, vocal chords or instrumentation, she hopes to bring clarity and questioning to the citizens of our third-dimensional world. She writes, draws things, reads about things, and can be seen performing many series of musical notes in and around New England with her project, *Wishbone Zoe*, as well as in collaboration with other fine Valley-based ensembles including *Bunk* and the *Leafies You Gave Me*. She is from outer space, shares a room with an ornery cat and also is fond avocados.

Stefan Lovasik is a writer, musician and has worked in healthcare for over thirty years. From 1972 to 1974 he was co-founder and editor of *FRAMEWORKS*, a literary journal at the University of Pittsburgh. He stopped drinking in 1981 and destroyed all of his work and publications. He started writing again about nine years ago.

Natalia Magnani is a Russian-born, American writer-anthropologist in the second year of a graduate program in Polar Studies at the University of Cambridge. Her background is an eclectic mix of disciplines—she received a Bachelor's in Psychology with concentrations in French, Global and Evolutionary Studies, and went on to be the first student from Binghamton University to win the Gates Cambridge Scholarship, an award from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to pursue doctoral work at Cambridge. Her passion for languages is equally eccentric, earning her the Rosefsky Language and Culture Scholarship. She grew up speaking Russian, mastered French while studying in Tours, France, tried her tongue at Spanish as a researcher in Mexico and Costa Rica, learned some Hebrew and Arabic while visiting relatives in Israel, and at the moment has the pleasure to delve into Finnish and Skolt Sami as she resides in Finnish Lapland. Language reveals novel ways of thought that she eventually sculpts onto paper; the core of these different articulations of mind is something soothingly universal. She is the founder of the *Undergraduate Psychology Review* and previous Editor of the *Journal of Undergraduate Anthropology*. Her work has been published in *Skipping Stones*, *The Blue Hour*, and *Bare Essentials*.

Sean J Mahoney lives with his wife, her parents, two Uglydolls, and three dogs in Santa Ana, California. He works in geophysics. Sean was out-boozed by Franciscan monks in Ireland and swam with Whale Sharks in Mexico. He believes that punk rock miraculously survives, that Judas was a way better singer than Jesus, and that diatomaceous earth is a not well known enough gardening marvel. His work has appeared in or is forthcoming from *Muddy River Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Literary Orphans*, *Occupoetry*, *Pentimento*, *Breath & Shadow*, and *Amsterdam Quarterly*, among others.

David P. Miller's chapbook, *The Afterimages*, was published in 2014 by Cervená Barva Press. His poems have appeared in print in *Meat for Tea*, *Stone Soup Presents Fresh Broth*, *Ibbetson Street*, *Stone's Throw*, and the 2014 *Bagel Bards Anthology*, and online in the *Muddy River Poetry Review*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Oddball Magazine*, and the *Boston and Beyond Poetry Blog*. He has three "micro-chapbooks" available from the *Origami Poems Project* website. David was a member of the multidisciplinary *Mobius Artists Group* of Boston for 25 years, and is a librarian at *Curry College* in Milton, Mass. He studies with *Tom Daley*, and has been seen in the company of one or more of the *Bagel Bards*.

Patrick O'Connor is a high school teacher and newspaper writer living in Holyoke, Massachusetts. He also writes essays, poetry and fiction.

Marlene Olin was born in Brooklyn, raised in Miami, and educated at the University of Michigan. She recently completed her first novel. Her short stories have been accepted by publications such as *Upstreet*, *Vine Leaves*, *Emrys Journal*, and *The Edge*.

Michael Passafiume is a Brooklyn-based writer whose work has appeared in *The Alembic*, *Eclipse*, *KNOCK Magazine*, *Lullwater Review*, *Minetta Review*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Soundings East*, and *Willow Review*. A recent graduate of *Antioch University Los Angeles' MFA in Creative Writing* program, he also holds a BA in English and an MA in Theater from *Binghamton University*.

Stephen V. Ramey lives in beautiful New Castle, Pennsylvania, a rust belt city that is beginning to shake off the rust. His work has appeared in various places, from Microliterature and The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts to Prick of the Spindle and Cease, Cows. His first collection of (very) short fiction, *Glass Animals*, is available from Pure Slush Books (and Lulu and Amazon).

Charles Rammelkamp's chapbook, *Mixed Signals*, has just been published by Finishing Line Press. Charles edits the online journal, The Potomac,

Adam "Bucho" Rodenberger is a 35 year old writer from Kansas City living in San Francisco. He has been published in Alors, Et Tois?, Agua Magazine, Offbeatpulp, Up The Staircase, The Gloom Cupboard, BrainBox Magazine, Cause & Effect Magazine, the Santa Clara Review, Crack the Spine, Penduline Press, Lunch Box, Eunoia Review, Serving House Journal, Aphelion, Glint Literary Journal, Fox Spirit's *Girl at the End of the World: Book 1* anthology, Bluestem Magazine, L'allures des Mots, Phoebe, and has been shortlisted for the Almond Press *Broken Worlds* fiction contest.

Thomas Rowland is a pediatric cardiologist who lives in Longmeadow, Massachusetts. Besides being an author of several scientific books, he has previously been published in Meat for Tea (June, 2014).

Amy Schmidt is an idealist and a lover of poetry. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in Kindred, Free State Review, From the Depths, Storm Cellar, Calyx and Santa Clara Review. One of her poems recently won the Jewish Literary Review Anniversary contest. She lives in northern Minnesota along Lake Superior with her husband, daughter and hound dog. July is warm; she gardens then.

Harvey Silverman is a retired physician and writes primarily for his own enjoyment.

Alex L. Swartzentruber is a writer from Indiana.

Doug Tibbles grew up in Los Angeles, became a TV writer on such shows as *The Munsters*, *Bewitched* and *Andy Griffith*, but always had the dream of becoming a drummer. He met Barbara Keith in 1971 and at age 37 finally picked up the sticks. They formed the band The Stone Coyotes with son John. The need for album covers and posters led Doug into the visual arts, where he continues to experiment in various media.

Caleb True likes to cook and run. His fiction has appeared in The Sonora Review, Whiskey Island, The Madison Review, and elsewhere. He holds an M.A. in history and lives on the east coast. Find him online at calebtrue.tumblr.com.

Michael Welch is a graduate of the Pacific University Writing Program. His recent publications include *Yo—Dad* in Big Bridge, *Framed Beside Her* in Crack the Spine Anthology 2013—and Best of Net Nominee, *New Room* in SNReview, *Whatever Helps Gravity* in Stealing Time, and *Letters from the Front*, an essay about his work in Folsom Prison, in The Mankind Project Reader. He grew up in the South Bronx and now lives in Eugene, OR with his wife-Mia, girls-Macy and Cleo, mastiffs-Sophie and Otis, aged cat-Milo, and various turtles, chickens, fish (the girls want him to list all these names, too, but he refuses). He is reachable at: michaelwelchwriter.com or middledog99@gmail.com

Gerald Yelle teaches high school English in Greenfield, MA. His poems have appeared in numerous journals in print and online. *The Holyoke Diaries* is his first published collection. A second collection, *Mark My Word and the New World Order* is scheduled to be published by The Pedestrian Press. He is a member of the Florence (MA) Poets Society. Notes, comments and links can be found at geraldyelle.blogspot.com.

Frank Zahn is an economist and author of nonfiction, fiction, and poetry with a PhD from the University of California, Santa Barbara. His publications include nonfiction books, articles, commentaries, book reviews, and essays; poetry; short stories; and novels. For details, visit his website, frankzahn.com.

Kurt Zellen lives, writes, and works in Western Massachusetts.



