

DIRTY CHAI



Issue One
DARK&DIRTY
Fall 2013



From the Editors

Wow! Issue One! This is pretty crazy. Dirty Chai has been stirring around in my mind for the greater part of two years and to see it come to fruition is such a wonderful experience. I want to thank those of you reading this issue—I hope you enjoy what we’ve put together for you. I also would like to extend gratitude to the hundreds of poets, writers, and artists who submitted their work to us. The fact that so many of you would trust us with your art means more than you will know. I was blown away by the talent that swelled our submission manager. Sifting through the submissions was a labor of love, and I wanted to publish so much more than what we have compiled here. But, a 500 page magazine might have been a bit overwhelming for our inaugural issue! I will say that the contributors for Issue One are incredible. They took the theme “Dark & Dirty” and ran with it. They thought outside of the box and I really appreciate that. A theme like this is a tough one, it really does bring out the rough side of humanity that we often shy away from/the things that make us uncomfortable. I will admit that this wasn’t my original intention, as I had suggested the theme as a play on words. A “dirty chai” is a chai tea latte with a shot of espresso (my drink of choice), but if I’m going to have regular cup of coffee, I prefer it dark and dirty. Luckily, Sam humored me with the theme. Sam humored me with a lot of things. I couldn’t ask for a better co-editor. She interviewed author Tharun James Jimani (pg. 42) and I think you guys will love it. I think you guys will love the entire issue. I hope you do! I’d love to hear your thoughts on the issue, your favorite pieces, even critiques. Send it my way! Thanks for everything.

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I was overjoyed when Azia came to me with Dirty Chai, even more so when we started to turn this idea into a reality. I want to thank every person who participated in our pilot issue. The response from the hundreds of unexpected submitters was amazing. Thanks for believing in us. We had a lot of fun putting this project together, and hope you’ll enjoy it—dirty details and all.

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On the Cover: DOLLS by MANDEM



"It begins with wood and clay, but it ends with bone and skin. Before a child can be born -- you must give something of yourself to it.... Just a little hair, just a little blood." ~ From "Doll," a 15-minute silent film by MANDEM. The third act of the film, in which the living doll sheds her monstrous skin, was filmed using pixilation (stop-motion animation with live actors). These photos have been selected (from the hundreds of still photos used for this animation) to be stand-alone pieces of visual art.

CYBERSBURG ADDRESS: A FREE SONNET

Four dozen and seventeen years ago
Our father's brothers brought forth
A new civilization, conceived in electronics
And dedicated to the cause that all
Machines were created to be equal
To apathetic humans when a message was sent
From a lab at a green campus, which can
Think logically, but not respond emotionally:
Whether you like it or not
This semi-being would never speed up
A moment even though you are dying
Nor will it slow down when it is to crash
Neither a smallest smile to hear
The great news, nor a smattering of
Sadness over the loss of your dearest
It keeps working at the pre-determined pace
Always indifferent of the people
By the people and for the people
Until we all perish with the earth

changming yuan

I KNEW YOU

After my pharmacist became my drug dealer
and the hours of availability were no longer 24 / 7
and spreading my legs only resulted in the removal of tissue
and not another fix.

After Vicodin and Valium would do nothing
to mend my battered body
and the three day list of anti-depressants
wouldn't make his handprints leave.

I knew you after the epidural that had little time
to take effect before my son's premature entry
and his father's departure.

After I moved back home and fear cleaned the life
I had created.

I knew you after I was re-born;
my fragile body yours to mold.

Mary Katherine Meadows

I am an old man in an old city, waiting for the summons, praise the Lord and pass the amputation, Amen.

I tell this story as if it were my own. Possibly it is. You will never know, you have no need to know, that is my decision. Stop begging.

On a day as glorious as this, a day without equal in my memory, one has no choice but to believe in the Deus Himself. The randomness of nature could not have produced a day half as wondrous. Ah, you say, the beauty of just one day out of twenty five thousand days, the number of days in an average life, is not enough to prove His existence. You are a numskull, but I will allow you this foolishness, this youthful arrogance. When you have reached my years you will know that one such day is proof enough.

So. Here I sit on a worn bench in a park facing the church enjoying this perfect day, if indeed this story is about me. The perfect air softly caresses the withered sack that is my body and the sun shines upon my juiceless face. I am smiling up at the sky and here comes Vincent.

Believe me when I tell you that I have hated Vincent every day for nearly fifty years. And he has hated me. *Why?* is another story, so don't ask.

But on this glorious day I love him.

"Good morning," I say, showing him the same smile I have been showing the sky.

"Good morning yourself," Vincent says with a sneer, and anyone who knows him will tell you this is true because Vincent says everything with a sneer.

"It's a most beautiful day, is it not?" I say. "It could be the single most beautiful day I have ever seen."

Sneer, goes Vincent.

"I don't hate you today, Vincent," I tell him. "Is this not a miracle? It must have something to do with the perfection of the day, I think."

"You are a fool, Berger," says Vincent with a you-know-what on his lips. "The older you get the more ridiculous you get."

What Vincent says is true. Others have remarked on my advanced state of ridiculousness. I spend most of my days on this bench across from the church, the very church we attended as boys. I speak to pigeons and stray dogs. Playing children

avoid me. Passers-by whisper, wrinkling their noses. "Gracious, look at him. He should not be allowed to sit there all day." Yes, to many I am a ridiculous figure.

"It's nice of you to point that out, Vincent," I say, my benign reaction to his comment taking him by surprise. "Today, your voice is like the singing of angels, and your aspect like a work of art. You look beautiful to me today, Vincent, as does everyone who passes this way."

The smile stays on my face. It is still early in the day. The shadows of the sycamores are long.

"How's your gut today, Berger?" Vincent asks, referring, of course, to the growing rot within my abdomen which often causes me to wince in pain and, at its worst, can keep me in bed, twisted beneath my sheets. I believe this spreading decay will eventually finish me off, and Vincent knows it. "Your gut botherin' you any?" he asks again.

"I can't explain it, but I feel no pain today. Look," I say, pounding myself in the stomach several times. "What do you think of that? Is it not a miracle?"

Vincent is always looking for a fight, and I am usually in a mood to oblige him, but not on this glorious morning. He sneers, a final, all-inclusive sneer of such bitterness that it seems to explode off his face with a hiss. As he walks away I notice a small limp in his step I first saw only a few days ago, a little hitch in the hip, a slight dragging of the left foot. He is old, like me, and our bodies have not much left in them. Vincent stops at the road, waits for a vehicle to pass, then slowly crosses and limps along a path at the side of the church, stopping at a plain wooden door. He takes a large ring of keys from the sagging pocket of his coat, finds the correct key and fumbles it into the lock. He is the church's caretaker, an impious man who, for several hours each day, becomes a sweeper of sacred places, a divine duster.

As I watch him enter the church, I suddenly remember that Vincent is my brother, a fact I seem to forget for long periods of time. Yes, my actual flesh and blood brother. I know this surprises you. The way we carry on, you'd never guess we were issue of the same womb, tissue of the same woman.

In a few minutes I see the black-cloaked Clerge come out of the rectory. He glances around

briefly, then quick-steps to the church's side door, the same door Vincent has entered. I must assume he has not noticed the perfection of the day because he has not stopped to appreciate it. Of course, the Clerge needs no convincing of Almighty's existence, does he? I must ask him some day. Before entering the door he looks in my direction, but without noticing me.

A young couple, walking close together, turns the corner. Two older couples follow behind. The young woman cradles in her arms a bundle which I assume to be a baby. I am guessing the two older couples are the infant's grandparents, and I am also guessing they have all come for a christening, an appropriate activity for a day such as this. They seem subdued as they climb the steps to the church, but half an hour later, when they come out, they seem lighthearted, happy that the ordeal is finished, the meeting with their Maker has been successful, the Omnipotent has reached down and suffered the little critter. Ah, such optimism they must feel, and now they all look up at the sky, toward the heavens, that is, as if to say to the One and Only King Upon His Throne -- Here we are, Lord, out on the street now, not just the dried-up noise of prayers from a church, but real people, out in the real world, ordinary hard-working people deserving of your blessings, Amen -- but, alas, He has forgotten them already, as He has forgotten Vincent and me. But the beauty of this day has not escaped them, and they believe. Ah, yes, they believe.

The Clerge comes out of the church and this time, when he glances in my direction, he notices me on the bench.

"Berger," he calls, "we have a wedding this afternoon. Plenty of food. Come over and eat."

"You're a saint, rev'rend," I call back to him. "I may partake. Isn't this a glorious day the Lord has given us?"

"Right, right," he says as he hurries back to the rectory. He has the Deus's work to do, and there's no time to waste. "Right, right," he says. Marching to Zion, Hallelujah!

The smile has not left my uplifted face. Do I see angels in the clouds? Do I hear them singing, *gloria patri*, their voices adding empyreal resonance to the perfection of this day? Or is it the music of the earth I hear, the whisper of the wind through the trees. Or possibly just Wilmot, the organist, who entered the church a few minutes ago, now rehearsing for today's service?

And soon the wedding celebrants arrive, many there are, and here is the bride, sinfully youthful, and here is the groom and his raucous, laughing gang, and they enter the church through separate doors, and friends and family continue to come, there is much how-de-doing, children chase each other up the steps and down.

Now everyone is in the church and the street is quiet.

I hear the organ, faintly, the perfect accompaniment to the poetry of the sky.

Although I am gazing up at the heavens, in the direction of the Deus Himself, from the corner of my eye I sense movement. The front door of the church opens and emerging tentatively from the darkness is a young boy, an escapee, I guess hopefully, from the boredom of the ceremony being carried on in the name of the Father, the Son and the Moldy Ghost, Ah-hem!

The boy blinks in the bright sunlight. I notice, without particular surprise, that he is dressed in clothing of times past. His knickers and long stockings, his brown high-top leather shoes and the soft, billed cap on his head are clothes from my own boyhood. He walks to the edge of the top step, pauses, then jumps to the step below, jumping with his feet together, the soles of both shoes slapping the lower step at the same time, smack! He pauses again, then repeats the flat-footed jump to the next step, pauses, jumps, pauses, jumps, until he stands, feet together, at the bottom of the steps, his back to the mound of blessed brick.

Now another boy, dressed like the first, comes out of the church. "Vincent," he calls to his brother below and without pausing he charges down the steps, taking them two at a time. The boys stand side-by-side, scanning the street, the park, their future. They cannot see me.

The boy called Vincent takes from his pocket a rubber ball and they begin to play a game on the sidewalk, facing each other, swatting the ball with open palms, bouncing it back and forth between them.

Miracle upon miracles, and I, accepting of them all, see the two boys, see them in their unblemished innocence, each asking for little more than the sun, a ball, and a smooth sidewalk on which to play. Tots. Squirts. Urchins. Too young for scheming. Too simple for cunning. Too optimistic for jealousy. Uncorrupted, incapable of betrayal. All

of that is yet to come. With experience. With wisdom. With desire. With yearning.

Stop! I have told you enough about them. You will get no more out of me.

And suddenly the doors of the church burst open, the wedding ceremony is complete, what God hath joined together, man will now begin putting asunder, but when I look back to the sidewalk, the boy Vincent and the boy Berger have vanished. The tuxedoed ushers fasten the doors open, the happy couple emerges, followed by friends and family. There is much laughter, back-slapping, picture taking, the Clerge beams from the top step, proud of his handiwork, and then everyone troops down the path and into the side door of the church, into the basement meeting hall no doubt festooned for the occasion, there to eat and drink that which the Great Provider hath provided.

I do not join them because I do not want to leave my watch-post. Someone must be witness to the end of this singular day. The shadows lengthen. The setting sun touches the clouds first with pink of flesh and then with red of blood, and then it is gone. The breeze stills. The day is done.

And some hours later the revelers come out of the church basement, the new Mister and Missus are off to their carnal crib, the others return to their various pleasures and pains, and the Clerge is back in his house. Long after the street is silent, Vincent emerges, his work complete.

“Lovely day, wasn't it, Vincent?” I say to him as he passes me on his way home. It is dark.

He sneers. “Like any other,” he says.

“I noticed your limp, Vincent. I hope it causes you no distress.” I feel this with all my heart. I wonder if he believes me. “I saw us today, Vincent.”

“What a big surprise,” he sneers. “You see us every day.”

“Not like this. This time I saw us different. Innocent. Unspoiled. A miracle, I think.”

“You make no sense, as usual.”

Vincent walks away, trying to hide his limp.

“I love you, Vincent,” I call after him.

He shakes his head, or is his head just shaking from old age.

And now, as the day draws to a close I realize with a twinge of disappointment, if you assume this story is about me, that the perfect day has a serious flaw, and the flaw is that the perfect day will be followed by an imperfect one.

Oh, my!

Whatever improbable concurrence of natural conditions He created for these extraordinary hours, they are sure to make something quite different of tomorrow. The air will be a little heavier or a little lighter, a bit cooler or warmer. The sky will be a little darker or brighter, the breeze will be a little weaker or stronger. Whatever confluence of chemistry and faith resulted in this transitory sense of well-being I have experienced, tomorrow, pain and sorrow, the twin pillars of my existence, will return. Now, don't you feel even a trace of pity for me, an old man? No? Then may your bowel turn as rotten as mine, Amen.

I leave the bench, cross the street, climb the steps and enter the church. God is here, in this darkness, if we are to believe Him. My steps echo from the flagstones as I walk to the altar. If He is in the church, this is where He will be. I kneel.

What shall I say? What shall I ask of Him?

Shall I ask that tomorrow be as today? That all future days be as perfect as this one? Ah, what do you take me for, a fool? I know this is unreasonable, it cannot be. It is my nature, as unnatural as it is, to expect only what is possible. And so, this is what I ask – that this perfect day be my last day. Ah, yes, much more reasonable, that this day be like the final glorious feast for a condemned man.

I am amazed by my own insight.

“Take me now,” I say to Him. “Take me now, this very moment. Allow me not one more breath, not one more heart beat,” and I cry, hoping He is too busy to notice I have no real tears left, even for Him, even for myself. I place my forehead on the cool floor in a gesture of humility. Has He heard me? “To make me face even one more day, one more average day of the petty, the fearful, the painful, one more common day after this perfect day would be unduly cruel.” There is no response. I ask, “You are not a cruel Deus, are you?” I wait for an answer, and finally fall asleep, curled on the floor before the altar. When I awake the next morning, cold and stiff, but alive, I conclude, yes, His name is Cruelty.

I leave the church after relieving myself in the holy hole, and take my place on the bench. The sky is heavy and gray. Rain is coming, and so is Vincent.

George Dila

THE PROFESSOR

The first time I saw the Professor, I almost cried. I forced the unborn tears inward, back into the caverns of my Jewish soul. Shriveled up and emaciated, the ghostly old man looked like a Holocaust victim/survivor. He lay in bed in his tomblike room in the nursing home, immersed in a private universe. When I entered, his vacant eyes passed through my body as if I didn't exist. An aide introduced me to him. He didn't respond. But she spoke to him again and again until he stood up in bed and gazed quizzically at me. I smiled at him. "This man is your therapist. He'll help you with your problems. Just speak to him." He asked me if I could come back another day. I did.

I returned. We talked, and the therapeutic process began. We connected.

The old man suffered from clinical depression and anxiety. I soothed his brutalized, lacerated soul. Slowly, his depression and anxiety diminished, like a mountain of snow and ice melting away.

He talked. Each time I visited him, he seemed more engaged, revealing snippets of his life. *But he didn't reveal the horrific secret I knew. You see, before I met the old man, the nursing and social work staff told me frightening facts. Yet when I sat with him, these truths seemed unreal.*

One day he mentioned he had been a professor of German literature. And he allowed me to enter his intellectually rich universe. After that session, he spoke freely of this world that had nurtured him.

Another time he surprised me by casually noting he had been in Hitler's army during WWII. He didn't say he was a member of the Nazi party. But probably, he was. I don't know. A fragment of his dark secret had emerged. Yet it remained hidden, buried in obscure and vague language.

I suppose I never really knew him. He never told me who he was or what he did during the war. Was he truly a Nazi? Was he a Nazi during the time I met with him? Had he been a Nazi during the war? Had he murdered anyone? Had he killed any Jews?

I sat with him. I soothed him. But we never explored the nature of good and evil. He avoided talking about details or the sweeping, vast, religious, ethical, legal, and spiritual issues pertaining to the war and Nazi Germany. And I did not ask the relevant questions.

It wasn't my job, I sometimes argue. As his therapist, I helped him cope with depression and anxiety. I helped him heal. The therapy seemed successful. Yet looking back, I have more questions than answers, so many unanswered questions. On lonely nights when I question my own purpose on earth, I see his hollow and haggard eyes. And I pray to *Hashem*, my G-d. I pray.

Dr.Mel Waldman

NECROMANCING (SURVIVING SINGLEDOM IN THE 21ST CENTURY)

It is like waking up from the dead. Like you were so deep, so deep in there that you forgot you were alive. It is like you were so fucked up you forgot you existed and you should be glad that you are still breathing but really you are just surprised. You REALLY expected to be dead. You really felt like it was all over. And THAT, that is what makes you feel alive to begin with.

The moment your eyes pop open everything is bright, way too bright. Your contacts are dry, they feel rigid; shrink wrapped around your corneas. You want to take them out but are afraid they will take your pupils with them. You are not in your own bed.

Sigh.

It is always better that way. Except...you don't know where the fuck you are.

You roll over to find a ginger with the body of a demigod. You wish you could remember what he was like but you fucked up again, got too drunk. You weren't even in and out this time. It is like you were never there. It happens more and more but it is such a fine line between getting drunk enough to get laid but not so drunk to black out...at least completely.

You sit up, silent. Try not to wake whoever that is. You scan the room for your clothes and find everything except your underwear. *Shit.* You get up, start to dress. Could he have snatched them up earlier? Like a trophy? Where would he have stashed them?

Or maybe you didn't wear any last night. *Shit.* You stare at the ceiling, thinking. The last thing you remember is...the kitchen? Taking hits of homegrown off of a cheap mass manufactured glass pipe and drinking Budweiser from a can. No. No, there is more. Stumbling down the stairs. Then one of those drunken pisses that never seems to end. And that's it. The freckled lips grumble from the bed, his nostrils flare hard like a horse, his naked body trembles in the cold. You pray he is not waking up.

Fuck it. You dress, leave whatever panties you may have been wearing behind and grab your phone, your purse, your keys. You search the room for the exit but there are only stairs going up. Somehow you have found yourself in an aboveground sunlit basement. It isn't possible but you clamber up the stairs anyway, down a dim

hallway and out into the early morning sun.

Outside, your disorientation worsens. Where the fuck are you? It is bright and you squint as you put the key in the ignition and pull out onto the road with a filthy windshield and the realization that you are still very much fucked up.

Just make it home. Go slow. Keep it straight. Don't get pulled over. You promise you will never do it again. You will be more responsible.

The truth is you need it. Ok, not quite like this, you would rather remember it. But you do

You roll over to find a ginger with the body of a demigod. You wish you could remember what he was like you fucked up again, got too drunk.

crave it. And you are not alone in desperate stilettos and a give-it-to-me mini dress. There is a whole flock of girls vying for attention.

Boosted on neo martinis, Xanax, Ritalin, cocaine, Redbull. All of you strain to be just interesting enough, just exciting enough that someone okay-looking will take you home. Of course the whole thing about the bar

scene is not that beer goggles make the losers look any better. The whole thing about the bar scene is that around 1:45 a.m. you go to the washroom and look into the mirror under the harsh fluorescent light and instead of the fox that sauntered into the club earlier that night, what you see through those beer goggles is a haggard desperate broad that would be lucky to leave with the homeless guy hanging around outside.

At that point almost anyone will do. And the sad reality is that it is all really up to them, and they would never choose you sober. It makes you angry, but only for a moment. Survival is more important. It is basic biology.

Biology. Sometimes the hole just needs to get filled. Beer goggles don't take away the layer of hair on his back or the belly that hides his penis or that needy face you would rather forget. But you do not see any of that because you're too busy counting your lucky stars that this guy will let you scream and moan and bounce around on something for a while goddamnit. You are just getting into it

when *conk* you are asleep and then *conk* again your dear friend is outside that stranger's bedroom door knocking and whispering and calling that it is time to leave. She has kids to pick up and all of that jazz.

You would be a terrible friend except that you are just a product of society and everyone knows that all friends everywhere have a duty, not just to never interfere in their friends getting laid, but to facilitate it in any way possible. Even at the expense of their own families. Cockblocking is not just a strict no-no. It almost goes against the rules of the new sisterhood.

Only half way out, a stranger's bed is such sweet suicide. It is a chance you take. A chance that makes you feel alive. He COULD wrap his hands around your neck and squeeze. He could bash your head against the concrete ground. He could force you to react to him. He could force you to kill him in the most brutal of ways. He could force you to rake your teeth across his skull while you press the magic button that stops his heart.

It is all chance. Like the lottery.

Any one of them could have left you in a ditch to die. Good thing they were decent-ish guys. Decent-ish. It is a fine line between date rape and a ploy to get fucked after all. How are they supposed to know the difference?

Do they even care?

Do you?

Drugs are what you have to do to get him... and him, and him, every notch on your bedpost the result of some sort of cocktail. Vodka-Redbull-cocaine-marijuana-Cosmopolitan-Percocet-Ritalin-

dust. Cocktails lead to cock tales. It is the reason you party all the time.

Of course you talk about it. You compete. You stack numbers. You give them degrading nicknames and plot on how to take advantage of them. You trade places in dark rooms. It is only fair.

COCK TALES.

Why play a dating game where commitment beyond tomorrow night is unfathomable? Why waste your time looking for Mr. Right when what you need is Mr. Right Now? Why search out some knight in shining armor when all that is left are necromancers?

It's the second half of that word that bothers you, not the dead part, the romancing part. The part that wants to whisper in your ear and the kiss your neck. You wish they would cut out all the bullshit but you put up with it to get to the good stuff. The pump pump bang bang slappity slap.

The reason they like you is you're never too with it, you're never too there. Isn't it ironic? They think they get you drunk to take advantage of YOU. They love to hear you say, "Let's get fucked up tonight," and know they don't even have to buy your drinks. Forty dollars lighter you are way more fun. Blacked out you are the life of the party. So you die and die and die again. Your body has more rhythm, your brain has more wit, your lips spit funnier on autopilot anyway.

Riya Anne Polcastro

NOWHERE - Clinton Inman



SYLVIA

I hear they have placed
A pretty blue plaque
High above your flat
So that tourists can find you
And say that this is the spot
Where you killed yourself.
Lucky girl, you modern Sappho
To take the quantum leap
Like a comet to take your place
Among the darkest regions of empty space
With a brilliance that few can keep
And even less the mind to know
Where no dull planet can perturb you
As fallen flowers have no faces.

Clinton Van Inman

THE REAL MISSING MASS

They say that most of you is missing
Perhaps even from your private places
Something more than just an arm or leg
And deeper than your darkest spaces.
Researchers conclude as much as ninety percent
Lost deduced from a long line of X's and O's
But it takes no greater science to tell me
Your muted mysteries no one knows.
I too have peered down your opaque passages
Have felt your fractal pulse dimensionless
Have seen your eyes hidden in a veil of stars
And knew that you are quite featureless.
Like staring at the stars you cannot be seen directly
As all your skies are blue from a distance only.

Clinton Van Inman

HEARTFELT

Fifty-something Senator Walker sat in his third floor office staring at the blinking red light on his desk phone. "Senator, FLOTUS on the line," good-secretary Marion said again. "Senator, are you there?"

To him, it was Annie making a call he'd been waiting for since High School, since she told him she was in love with that college boy she'd met over the summer. The one who was going to be somebody. "Yes, I'm here."

"The First Lady..."

"I got it. Thanks." He picked up the receiver. "John Walker here."

"I need to talk with you."

"It's been a while, Annie. Not since the Inaugural Ball. Still didn't get that dance. Maybe next time."

"Privately."

"I know. The Cartagena summit was a disaster. But they all are. I hated to block his money for guns initiative, but..."

"Have your car at the garage elevator door at ten."

His driver came to an idle promptly at ten, and a blond-wigged woman pretending to be Marion slid into the back seat. "Like spies," he said as he rolled up the privacy window that separated him from his chauffeur.

"This can't get out, John. Frank's reelection campaign kicks off in a year, and he's sick."

"A fool can see he's in bad shape."

"He needs a new heart."

"So our opponents remind the voters every chance they get." He pulled down a seat bar, and set out two glasses, a tray of individual liquors and bags of Capri Sun juice. "Pick your poison."

"We've taken the pledge, John," Annie said, reaching for the juice.

"Too little, too late in Frank's case, but I'm glad to hear it." He handed her a straw. "What does Doctor Quack-o Shapiro say?"

"You're a doctor..."

"Was a doctor. I'm a politician now."

"You know what Shapiro says. He's too old."

"He's being kind. Cheney got a heart at 71. It's not Frank's age, it's his lifestyle. Today a heart,

tomorrow a liver, and then a kidney. Alcoholism catches up with you."

Annie stifled a sob. "The country needs him and he needs you."

"What for?"

"To get a heart. To get someone to transplant it. To tell the people it was appendicitis. To be his running mate. Give him what he needs and he'll give you what you want. You'd be next in line for a grateful Party's nomination, John."

He'd forgotten how Franklin Davis became president. Behind every great man and all that. It was true. Annie was on her game. "I'm out of the organ donor loop."

She lit up a cigarette— "Pour me a vodka on the rocks"— and cracked the window. "It's hot in here." She wiggled out of her panties and doffed the wig. Her hair fell around her face, framing it in chestnut waves.

"Isn't your boy, Donnie, a heart surgeon?" John watched her ready herself for another campaign. She was wearing her inner circle face. Confident. Determined. Grit her teeth, in the trenches, whatever-it-takes determined. "Like father, like son," he said.

"So he's in the organ donor loop." His hand was in hers and she was guiding it up her thigh to her wet lips. He kissed her cheek and tried to imagine her in a pink silk ruffled dress and a diamond tiara. After forty-two years, he was only a second-choice homecoming king.

Like a Vice President.

Donnie Walker specialized well given the population of Marshallville, a small town in North Carolina with an aging tax base and one medical center that offered few options. He was it when it came to surgery. "You're talented, why waste yourself on podunk hicks?" Walker had asked his son one Thanksgiving after a second piece of pumpkin pie.

"I've seen what stress does to people's hearts. No thanks. I'll leave the fast lane to Alpha males like you, Dad."

*Annie
stifled a
sob. "The
country
needs him
and he
needs you."*

"Does this mean you won't campaign for me?" Donnie had brought out a stack of bumper stickers that showed a running heart wearing tennis shoes with the slogan:

Walker's Running for U.S. Senate—Vote John Walker in November!

"Cute, Donnie. Your pretty little Magnolia think that up?" Donnie's chocolate skinned nurse-fiancé had given him a hug before covering his pie with Redi-Whip.

"You're talented, why waste yourself in the Senate?" she had said. She would be an ally and an asset when the time came, and now was the time. He drove down to Marshallville in the morning, still reeling from his backseat tryst with Annie.

"Can you get a donor without putting Davis' name on UNOS?" he said finally. "He doesn't have four weeks much less four months."

"We've plenty of donors here, but most of them are so old, their organs are wore out. Especially the hearts. But, Dad, you know Davis wouldn't qualify...."

"I know for transplant purposes, he's terminal. And he's in your region."

Donnie pulled two patient's folders from his file cabinet. "Meet Jennifer Mulrooney," he said as he opened the file and handed it to Walker. "Age. Twenty-four. Mother of two small children. Husband killed in a mine accident a year ago. And Bradley Smith, aged 19. GED graduate on his way to Community College to study computers. What do I tell them? Sorry, there's an old rich drunk that moved ahead of you?"

"It's the president..."

"Think Jennifer's kids, or Bradley's parents will care? Even if I could tell them."

"So, don't tell them or the national registry. Consider this a medical black market op, Donnie."

"There's no guarantee I can get a tissue match...."

"If you can get the heart, will you do the surgery?"

Donnie took a deep breath. The only thing worse than bumping someone from the waiting list, was dealing in black market ops. "What's his transplant prognosis?"

Walker hesitated. Davis only had to make it long enough to get reelected. "Annie'll pull him through. Think about it."

It was difficult to think much about anything else with Magnolia pestering him about his "funk" and reminding him how one hand washes the other. After evening rounds Donnie stopped by the basement floor where twenty year old Michael Jury had lain in a persistent vegetative state for the last two years, his parents at his side every evening, reading and talking to him, and praying he'd wake up. Every three months Dr. Laurie ordered a EEG and every three months told them the result: Michael was brain dead. But with proper feeding and constant care, his heart would keep beating another thirty years. Maybe more.

"They're not ready to pull the plug," Dr. Laurie told Donnie and Magnolia over cafeteria fare the cooks pretended was goulash. "Hope and money are all they have."

"It's all they want," Donnie replied. Magnolia was more direct.

"They're selfish, and we need to help them get over it so we can harvest their personal plant—that's our job. Minister to the living," she said before leaving for Donnie's private practice office.

"Thank God Jury's parents didn't hear that jewel of wisdom," Dr. Laurie said. "Does she know how insensitive she sounds?"

It was all Donnie could do to dummy up when he wanted to say, she's nothing, you ought to hear my father. Talk about insensitive! But one person's insensitivity is another's pragmatism. Medicine is fundamentally objective science. Senator John Walker thinks the Hippocratic Oath is the name of an '80's Seattle grunge band. But he couldn't say those things any more than Magnolia could resist the temptation to log into Donnie's e-mail.

How goes the harvest? Love Dad.

Magnolia logged into her account. **Maybe I can help. Love Magnolia.**

10:30 AM. Wednesday. Patient Jacob Wier was life-flighted to Metropolitan Hospital with a severe head trauma following a buggy-car accident on US 52. He was resuscitated, ventilated, and a feeding tube inserted pending notification of next of kin. There was nothing to be done but wait for the Sheriff to contact the Amish family to which he belonged and schedule an EEG.

"Where are the goddamned parents?" Donnie demanded of the ER staff.

"They're on their way by buggy," Magnolia said. They'd both scrambled to the hospital when the call came into the office.

"Oh, for Christ's sake...." He remembered the ER staff watching a police car escort an Amish buggy into the Metropolitan driveway after traveling eight miles from the city limits at three miles an hour. Wier's family was fifty miles away. They had a long vigil ahead.

"Yeah, that's the way they see it. For Christ's sake," Magnolia said. She steered Donnie to the hospital chapel where she'd agree to marry him as long as they'd do it without fuss and fanfare.

"Breathe easy, Baby. The Amish don't have the money or the will to take care of a human carrot."

"I'm not thinking about his organs," Donnie said.

"Of course you are. He's young, healthy. It was an accident not a disease. No drugs. Every part of him can save somebody else's loved one. Heart, liver, kidneys, eyes, spleen, bones...The kid in the cancer ward—what's his name? Benjamin. Something needs bone marrow. Maybe Jacob Wier's a match."

"It's a long shot."

"DC has a marrow match. Your father can pull some strings. Make a trade. A Wier heart for the marrow. Maybe you can trade Wier's liver today for a Jennifer heart tomorrow. That'd soothe your conscience."

She sounded like Wimpy and Donnie laughed. Medicine should be serious, like Shakespeare. He'd volunteered to minister to a small sliver of suffering humanity, not play Solomon—or Mengele. He tried to pray, to find peace among the chaos, but adrenaline kept his heart racing and his mind careening like a spilled sack of marbles. Jacob Wier was a gift from God. He'd have a family of many colors, his genes dispersed all over the country, and many tongues would sing praises of this young buggy-driving farmer who would never hear them. Like it or not, he, Donald Walker was the steward of this heaven-sent crop.

Seven year old Bennie would get his marrow. The rest of Wier's organs he'd list with UNOS after the people of Marshallville feasted on him. A miner with black lung waited for new ones. A grandmother needed new corneas. Liver cancer

threatened to take their mayor. Most of the Marshallville's neediest were its poorest. What's necessary isn't always fair or pretty, but sometimes it's right. "Maggie," he whispered, "help me get this done."

What's necessary isn't always fair or pretty, but sometimes it's right.

11:45. Wednesday. Dr. Donald Walker pronounced nineteen year old Jacob Wier legally dead. According to the EEG results Magnolia handed him, there was no brain activity. "Get me a signature," he told her. She had the State Troopers download a consent form, stop the Jury's buggy, and get their signatures for organ donation. Donnie scrubbed for surgery. Three hours later, he and a healthy heart were at Walter Reed Medical Center, and President Davis was undergoing an emergency appendectomy.

President John Walker was sworn in a minute after President Davis was pronounced dead of a cerebral hemorrhage just a month after his inauguration. The appendectomy, a long campaign, and a party split over replacing Vice President Johnson with Senator Walker on the ticket, was enough stress to kill a man half his age, according to the press. If only the other party would have cooperated in the lame duck session of Congress. Maybe something could have been done for the anemic economy and the latest debt crisis.

"It's too bad your Ellen didn't live to see this day," Annie told Walker as they flew from Walter Reed bedside to the White House on Marine One. She looked as spectacular in her widow's weeds as Ellen had in her burial dress. Fashionistas were always going on about basic little black dresses, and now he knew why. Elegance. Add a hat and a sheer black veil and even a political whore like Annie could play the part of a regal grieving spouse. Political wives had to be versatile actresses. Faithful wife and mother of a young doctor were the only roles Ellen knew how to play. If she hadn't died when Donnie was three, there wouldn't have been a Senator John Walker.

"Yeah, she would have been proud," he said. And jealous as hell.

"Doctors are used to anemic conditions and patients in crisis," newly-sworn President Walker told a nervous nation in an oval office address. "And anybody's who's observed an operating team in action, knows that well-trained personnel are the key to success. Now some people have expressed misgivings about having a doctor in the White House, but let me tell you, when it comes to managing the distribution of scarce resources, everything gets political. I've had plenty of on-the-job training."

Annie helped him write the speech. She'd be tapped for an ambassador spot, maybe a cabinet post. Secretary of State sounded good to her. She'd be close to the seat of power, but traveling. No one would suspect how close they really were. Would it be indecent for the widow of one president to marry the next? "Too much baggage for both of us. This can't look like a payoff." Annie said. "We don't need political liabilities."

"Where do I find someone who's got the savvy to play hostess and take your place?"

"Jackson and Van Buren had their daughters-in-law. Why not Donnie's wife?"

"They're not married yet. She keeps putting it off. She's African-American in North Carolina..."

"Jackpot! If only she was a he. Can she keep her mouth shut?"

"Absolutely."

"Get her here, pronto! The public will love it. But no public celebration so soon after the funeral. The more low-key the better."

Walker's limousine stopped at the DC Hilton's garage level elevator, and a dark blonde slid into the backseat. Just another run-of-the-mill clandestine meeting arranged in the hallway during an inauguration ball. He'd stocked the bar with her favorite Margarita mix.

"Think about it, Maggie. You and Donnie've been together for a long time. You already have my heartfelt gratitude. Now let me really do something for you. You'll meet the right people, go to the right

places. You want to spend the rest of your life in podunk while Donnie's here in Washington?"

Magnolia reached in her purse and pulled out a folded strip of paper. It looked like a long, wide grocery receipt. "You know what this is?" She waved it in front of him slowly.

"I can guess. Jacob Wier's EEG results."

"Close, Mr. President, but no. It's Michael Jury's recycled dated EEG results. I like to think of it as my ticket to Paradise. Because heartfelt gratitude isn't enough. I'd much rather be FLOTUS than Mrs. Donnie Podunk."

Except for the soft glow of burnished mahogany in the moonlight, Magnolia's face could've been Annie's. The eyes were the same. The voice as brittle. She was hard, cold, and just as exciting. "You'd do that to Donnie?" he managed to whisper. Her lips were less than an inch away from his and her tongue tickled them lightly.

"You asked him to put you before his oath, his patients, and his self-respect. It's a little late to play holier than thou, don't you think?"

Did she really not know Donnie had maneuvered her into covering his ass? He pulled her close to him and rammed his hand up her skirt, feeling her thighs give way. He went hard. There was something about backseats and sultry women that made him feel young again. Or was it the thrill of victory? It didn't matter. Annie didn't love him. But she never loved Frank and Magnolia never loved Donnie either. They all had their own agendas.

Magnolia thought she was ready for the pros when it came to politics, but she hadn't met Annie Davis yet. Old age and treachery, according to the old saying, will overcome youth and experience any day. He'd marry the pretty black prom queen, and he and Annie would have eight years to get her pronounced brain dead. It so incredibly easy. All it takes is a person in a white coat who has a license to determine when death occurs. A doctor. Armed with technology to back him up...he's unquestioned. Invincible.

Jenean McBrearty

*"You asked
him to put you
before his
oath, his
patients, and
his self-
respect. It's a
little late to
play holier
than thou,
don't you
think?"*

APERTURE

I was in the lawn chair when
September

roughed up the dog weed

left ash as a lookout and pinned up my father: a darkness
riding the stairs
he's not

splitting aces his voice brims smoke and October
early morning's detail settles softly into skin

and I've learned everything is distance words are distance

even coffee simmering in cast iron even pass the half & half, please

even open the window

lie back in my arms for Pete's sake

the rustling of photos is distant applause when pigments are too new
to hold failing light

and I'm a picky punch drunk

bring John home over that rolling distance

bring a landmark
arrange our bones
a bit of jam

I leave in what was

a peripheral shutter in this case the pulse

of my palm saying, green is worse

let me eat the air

Bevin O'Connor

I was lost. I met William S. Burroughs and never looked back.



CUSTOMARY OBSCENITIES - Kate Ramsey

THE IPOD SPAKE UNTO ME

You said I was riding the train of hate.
My body *had* blown up to the size of a blubberous boar
outrageous flaps everywhere and hairy squares.
I was donning the baggy and the loose
I was carrying that dagger in my confidence—
a slow leak of verve and swagger
when Lo and Behold the iPod spake unto me!

It started with slow intimate strings—what was once a
tutorial piece for Bach's son to practice organ
became the opening door.
If I had been in the overcast sky
this was the train suddenly breaking cloud line
and shocking sunlight flooding the boxcar in my brain
with a sonata so sweet
I covered my eyes,
I cried out!
I was an Old Testament creature finally seeing their god's foot.

Then the violin virtuoso got to singing
for the awkward me scratching in the bathroom
in front of the mirror
Why must you be so mean? I have better things to do!
he crooned. You must not be anybody's
fragile ornament
captive on a runaway-train of
dysmorphic self-loathing.

Then Joni's musing on
love and its attendant miseries came on.
Like her
I'm so hard to handle
I am selfish and sad
I wish I would
teach my feet to fly when this train whistle
starts shrieking in my ears.
Instead I board the lush dinner car
and wait to be served a potion of
masochistic kombucha
the yeasty fermentation of suffering.

When the train starts going off the tracks Gwen's
rainbows and big fat roses cannot save me.
Don't talk about eating habits
It's in my head
Don't talk about the spare tire
It's only in my head
Don't talk about giant boobs

It's in my head
Don't talk about size 16
It's only in my head
Don't talk about girth
It's in my head
Don't talk about potato chips
It's only in my head
Don't talk about body fat.

Better to sing along with the iPod
driving on a country road too cliché
to be the real route between our houses.
There was foliage like a virtual New England
and sunshine that was invented in an effects studio.
'Cause that's where the cure lies—
in those moments of pure solitude
when the tears can just seep out.

Vitality and strut come back around
in the eventual and perennial come around
and this donut body converts back to
stocky and strong,

transforms back to vertically brief but brawny,
reverts back to
real and flawed and temporary
like everything else corporeal in this mad, mad world.

erin feldman

SNOWFLAKES

Half way through my life I found myself in a dark wood
-- Dante

i. Dead of winter, we trudged past junkies to her fave Harlem Automat

for a late brunch of biscuits and a split of champagne I popped open

to celebrate the imminent birth of our first child. Then everything

went wrong. Trickling red my wife was rushed to the nearest Obstetrics ward.

When we arrived -- the gurney a bloodcake -- she'd begun to melt away.

Renal failure, mother fading, cord wrapped 'round our son's neck -- G-d help us.

ii. "Don't worry, you're not going to give in," I claimed for the millionth time.

Staring at ice crystals dissolve on the window, we tried to believe.

She quiet as a church mouse, me sober as a church key, it occurred the fix wasn't in.

iii. Drop after elixir drop, we've never been more competent lovers.

Opening new liminal eyes as supercooled grace parts a curtain,

angel on her shoulder, beloveds on the other side whisper, *Come...*

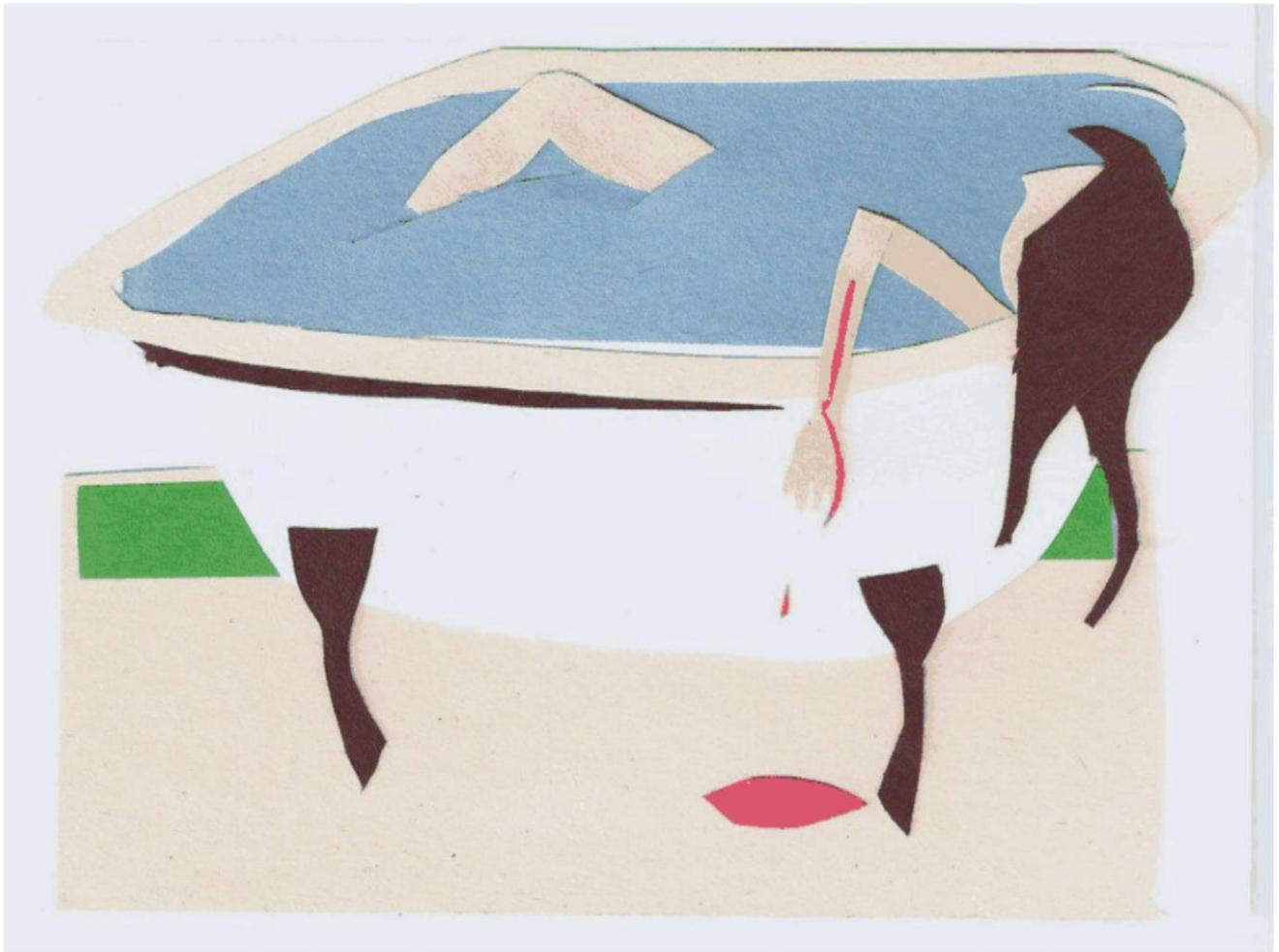
iv. Carnegie Hall velvet caverns, storm-soaked kippas, chadors; a blizzard

of wails from my soaked baby drowning out the first sacred cantata

-- single father's mortification beyond Biblical proportions.

Gerard Sarnat

I have done a small series of construction paper suicides. This is one in the series.



CUTTER -Kate Ramsey

HARVEST

When I died flowers bloomed from my eyes and ears and bloomed from my mouth spilling forth into the humid summer night where my body lay on the rain-flecked dirt under the grandfather trees. And when I died the good wolf came and spoke of crystal houses within cities hidden beneath withering cathedrals. He spoke of the bad wolves, and the wars, and the danger of standing still. And while he spoke we stood above my flowering body and waited for the petals of color only seen by dead eyes - they would buy me passage through the roots of the dreaming tree.

Robb Steinpreis

LIKE STEAM ESCAPING FROM A PIPE

My own voice is just a whistle now,
a hot, thin keen that speeds
through a cylinder of hot metal
that is shaped like my lips

Stop it you're hurting me

and he smells sour, like sweat and fertilizer from
working in the fields with his father

Shh you'll like it once you loosen up

but I don't, and his knee is a crowbar prying my
legs apart, then the burn like a field of fire ants
when he pops my cherry

Stop I don't want to

but he moves faster and harder, gagging me with the
stink of mushrooms and mud. With every stinging
push I cough up my voice and he mistakes the
sounds for pleasure

**See I knew you'd like it once I loosened you up,
you'll have lots of boyfriends now that you're
broken in**

When he comes there is a musty smell, like
soapsud in the dishwasher and when he pulls out he
says

Put your pants back on, they'll be back soon

but I can't find my panties and everything in his
room smells like mildew.

He's her brother. I went to go see Rachel but
she was still grocery shopping with her mom and he
said I could come in and wait till they got back. I've
spent every Saturday night there since I was seven
years old because there's never any food at my
house, just a jar of spaghetti sauce that's moldy on
the top and a carton of Winstons in the freezer. He's
her brother and he pinched our boobs when they
started to grow last summer. He said I could go into
his room and play with the lava lamp but instead he
closed the door behind him and kissed me.

When Josh Rutan kissed me on the last day
of school last year his lips were chapped and he
kept his mouth closed but it made my stomach do
flips whenever I thought about it. Rachel's brother
kissed me like a greedy slug crawling into my

mouth and when I backed up the back of my knee
caught the edge of his bed and then he was on top of
me. He said he knew I had a crush on him and that
he'd show me how to make boys like me.

No I don't want to

His hands moved so quickly and they are so
much bigger than mine and when they held onto my
wrist because I tried to stop them they pinched
tighter and just went where they wanted anyway so
I closed my eyes and heard a sound like steam
escaping through a pipe and realized it was me that
was making the sound.

I put my jeans back on and bled all the way
back home, the banana seat of my Schwinn chafing
like an Indian burn between my legs. No one was
home to ask me where I'd been and when I pissed
blood into the dirty toilet bowl, there was the sting
of fire ants and the smell of sex like mushrooms.

On Saturday I went back to spend the night
at Rachel's because that's what I always did. I told
her what happened and he said he did it to her too.
It was her idea to climb out her window and start
walking but her mom knocked on the door and we
got caught before we made it to Live Oak Road.

Rachel didn't tell on him, she blamed
everything on me, so her mom said she wasn't
allowed to see me anymore. So I started taking
cigarettes from Mom's carton in the freezer because
smoking made me less hungry and Josh Rutan's
older brother Jason would let me hang out in his
room if he could smoke my cigarettes.

When ninth grade started Rachel didn't
come back to school and everyone said it was
because she was pregnant, but her mom wouldn't
put her on the phone when I called her so I went
back over to the Rutan's and Jason showed me how
to clean pot and sort the seeds from the stems in his
stash. Then he packed a bowl for me and said I
should come sit on the bed and get stoned with him.
He put his hand down my pants and we had sex
before his mom got home from work, with his CD
player playing some song where the guitar sounded
metallic and hot, like steam escaping from a pipe,
and this time it wasn't me making the sound, or if it
was, only I heard it.

When I looked up at his ceiling there was a water stain in the corner, the same brown as the gills of a mushroom, so I closed my eyes and his breath smelled like yeast and mud pounding down on my face. When he pulled out to come on my belly, his lips twisted wet and thick as a slug and he looked like Rachel's brother.

I couldn't find my panties again except this time I didn't care, so I just pulled my jeans back on and walked home. I needed to puke but the bathroom was dirty and everything stank, the whole house smelled damp, like mushrooms and fertilizer and sweat, so I pulled out a bottle of bleach from under the sink and started scrubbing the ring of mildew away from the skin of water in the toilet.

The smell is coming from me, it is oozing out from inside, it is dried onto my belly but still leaking out, so I swallow down the bleach and it brings mud and dirt and fertilizer and half-formed mushroom spores back up into the glistening clean toilet. There is a sound, like steam escaping from a pipe, and it is coming from me, the sound has always been coming from me.

Finally it doesn't smell like anything anymore, except clean bleach and empty.

Allie Marini Batts

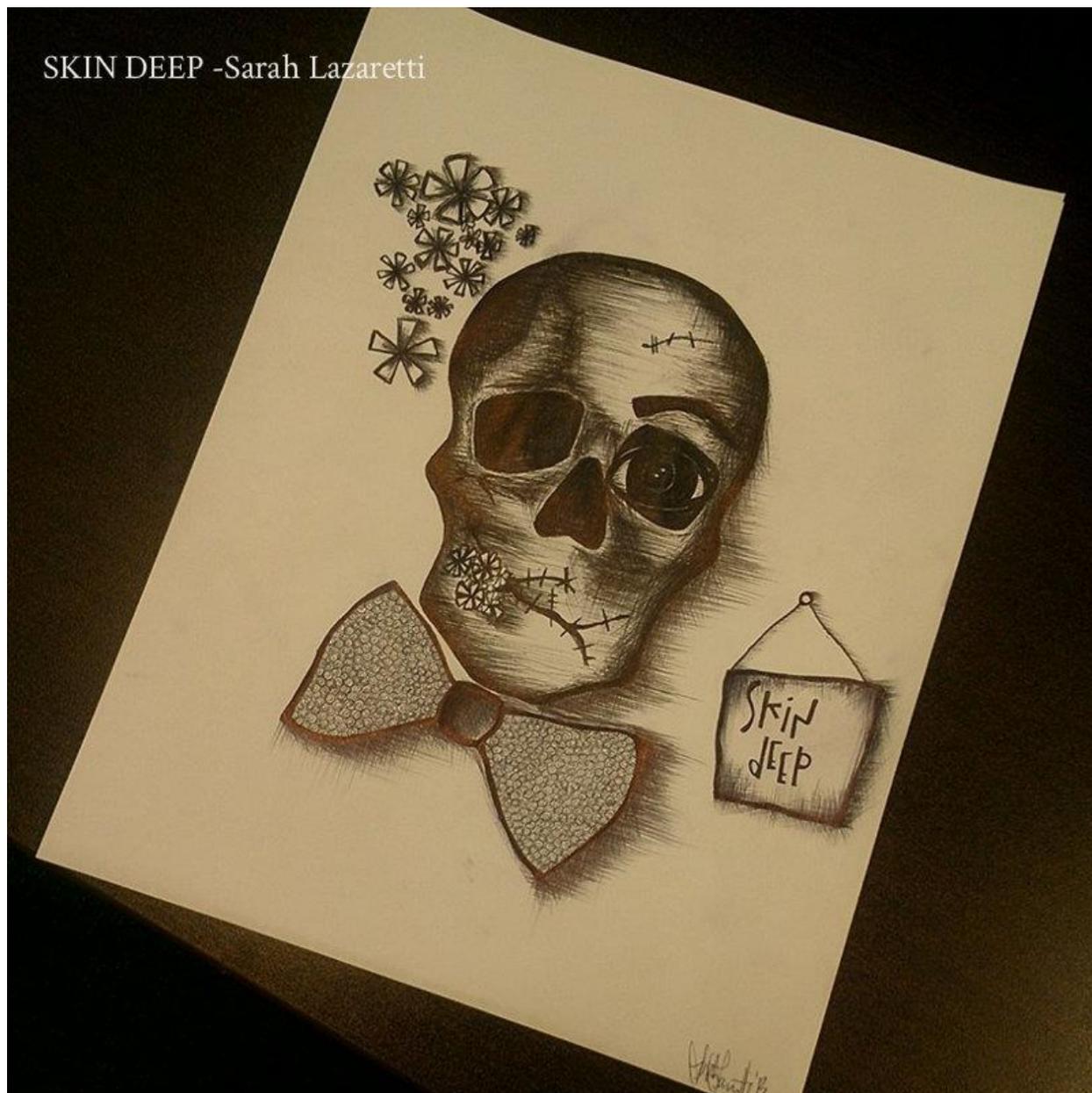
GIVE US A SMILE, GIRL

he hisses, leaning up against a bus stop
in the streets of Eden, hand coiled
around his crotch like a ripe apple,
flicking the fork of his tongue out
to spear a bead of sweat suspended
on the skin of his top lip

I will not be blamed for this again.

Allie Marini Batts

SKIN DEEP -Sarah Lazaretti



THE WORST FATE

I don't want to run from my own skin that often, but sometimes others want to run from it. My skin, I mean, not their own. If I didn't know and accept this, I'd assume everyone had intended to stay but instead fell through the crack between my mattress on the floor and my bedroom wall, not to resurface for years.

The roof of my place protrudes into my bedroom, so the slanted ceiling is only about four feet from my head when I'm lying on my back. My lack of box spring is good. Box springs are absolutely never necessary. They just build you up and hold you high so you think you deserve more than you really do. I prefer to stay humble when I sleep. Also when I masturbate, because it's hard to be humble when you're the greatest lover you've ever had.

Tonight, however, I have a different lover. The same songs play in the background that only remind me of myself and no one else but maybe remind me of my dad's Bose stereo which he still has and cherishes. Surround sound speakers placed strategically throughout our living room. It's got to be at least thirteen years old now.

I was eight thirteen years ago and it gets me a lot of criticism. It's nothing to do with the eight year old with the unbearable thickness of tongue, but the fact that it was a child a mere thirteen years ago and it thinks it knows some things now but it doesn't. Things about chemical warfare and work ethic and asserting dominance over its pets.

How condoms work and why it should use them. "It" means me, anyways, which I've already said. Me, I, have condoms in the closet. The box remains sealed for no particular reason other than laziness as I lay back four feet below the ceiling with Kenny somewhere on top of me. I play along with the rhythm of things while my mind walks me back in time.

We're standing on a hardwood floor stained with fake blood in the apartment of a special effects artist who's on parole, a guy who calls himself "Wolf."

Sometimes I fall in love with the severely un-asked for stories which life gives to me as gifts. They're the dehumidifier I never wanted at age ten

but found under the Christmas tree anyways thanks to my wonky aunt who believed that every child needs a reliable dehumidifier. They're the series of questionable choices that lead me to a perfect rarity.

A cozy home filled with fake severed body parts and reptiles and candy (both M&Ms and drugs), in this particular rarity.

Kenny was in his last year of film school. I met him online. I met him online dating because when I was nineteen I didn't know that being my own was okay.

Wolf was the makeup artist for Kenny's final project, which was a short horror film entitled *Deus ex Machina*. Studying the arm mounted on the wall of Wolf's small studio, or the tendons where the bottom of the wrist would have been on a healthy arm, I wondered how Kenny afforded this guy. The place was equivocal to a medieval torture museum with a high entrance fee.

"Are you squeamish Tiny?" That was me, Tiny, the only name I'd merited from Wolf since making his acquaintance. He was ushering us from his torture museum to his reptilian zoo, which was through the den.

"Not even a little bit." Yeah, that was right. That was me, alright.

Wolf smiled. "Good, because this ain't for the faint of heart." In one hand he clutched the nape of a rabbit's neck. Not just any rabbit, the rabbit we had been filming the previous night for stock footage. It was the rabbit the whole cast and crew got to hold, the one that caused mass panic when it almost escaped into the woods. Wolf had provided the creature. I think it had a name, but I don't remember.

"Snap" is accurately the sound of a neck snapping. That's what I learned next with a deliberate twist of Wolf's wrist. I don't think I've actually snapped anything's neck, and I kind of feel lesser for it. But at least I've heard the sound. If a neck snaps and no one's around to hear it, is there still a body? Yep.

It wasn't quite a body yet. Wolf threw the rabbit into the giant containment he built to contain his giant carnivorous snake, whose name was Lady. No-name rabbit twitched with partial paralysis. It's funny what doesn't scar a brain. I know I watched

Lady slither on over and devour the sucker whole, but I can't picture it now. She could have sprouted human legs, sauntered over to our furry friend, and eaten him with a fork and knife. My memory's left me with no evidence to the contrary.

Anyway, that's what makes me want to have sex with Kenny that night on an overstuffed bean bag chair in the middle of some long winded Tarantino movie. Not the actual death of an innocent creature, but the rarity. If he paid for my sit down dinner and talked about the ahead-of-its-time telescope he was building for MIT along with the software he'd invented to cure AIDs, I'd sit in the passenger's seat of his Ford Focus and at the end of the night and maybe, politely let him kiss me with my eyes squeezed shut. No tongue. But Kenny brought me face to face with animal cruelty and paid for half of the takeout crab rangoons. Acts of which are almost always rewarded with rough and repetitive sex.

He broke my heart a few months later, and it stayed broken for a couple of weeks. I can't remember if I dyed my hair or not.

Three years later, we sit at a bar and Kenny tells me that after his second DUI, he's been trying to better himself. He doesn't binge drink much anymore, he works full time in Boston, he's writing a lot and looking for a career in film. He's learning Spanish. He's really missed me and has hoped I'd contact him for years now.

And that's when I get to thinking about patterns and the possibility I've unknowingly been casting gypsy curses. Patterns; when I walk scorned from a man's life, I disappear long enough to obtain objectivity, then I make my grand reappearance. Curses; and when I do, it's always like I've accidentally arrived at the triage center. Broken men with crippling addictions and suicidal whims tell me tales of woe about how they had to move back into their childhood bedrooms. It's sad but intriguing, and the damage always makes me think, "Maybe this time he'll want to burn *with* me."

But Kenny was trying to better himself. That was different.

I felt a pang of disappointment.

"I like the bottle of Bacardi next to your mattress," he remarked after I'd flicked on my bedroom light.

"Dragonberry, it's like I'm sixteen again."

"You could afford Bacardi at sixteen?"

I shook my head. "And I still can't."

We laid on my mattress on the floor and stared at the low ceiling, smoked a total of two bowls, talked about how nothing had changed but our attitudes, and then we fucked. I remember some of it, which is basically the same thing as remembering all of it. There's a special breed of human male that I refer to as Devil's Snare. Devil's Snare is one of the many magical plant species from the Harry Potter series. Those who fall victim to Devil's Snare will find themselves entangled in the body of the plant, and if they struggle, the plant will tighten its grip around them until they suffocate. Sometimes, when all I want is a decent night's sleep, I'll suddenly make the dreadful realization that I have chosen to sleep next to a man or boy of the Devil's Snare variety. His arms and legs will wrap around me like vines in the heat, and the more I struggle to get away, the tighter he will hold me. There's no worse fate. Not even sleeping alone.

I'm not trying to better myself. Not today.

I walk Kenny to the train and walk myself to the kitchen where I work, where Luke lives. I don't think Luke's trying to better himself either. Most days he looks like he's been run over by a Mack truck, but he's still that... *subjective* kind of beautiful, if only because he's not boring. He's never really there with me when I talk to him and I don't know what he does in his spare time. I guess he's gone insane once or twice.

We used to have sex every now and then. I'd occasionally catch a glimpse of his face while trying to hide my obvious aversion to eye contact, but with his eyes closed he always seemed far away. Instead of being offended I'd just wonder where he was going all of the time. I'd get jealous and wish I could go there too, maybe with him or maybe alone. Then I'd reprimand, and remind myself that caring for inanimate objects and damaged boys will only drive me insane. My brain would start to run its tricks, and I'd think that maybe sleeping alone actually was the worst fate. So tomorrow, I'd message that boy who I watched a python devour a rabbit with a few years back. I hadn't spoken to him in a while.

Lindsay Slatterly

LIQUID POISON

It is a substance, a poison, it is tar, a feather, hot boiling bile that burns and lingers in the throat. On its way through the chest it hardens, and you are left to cough up the rest. When it comes up out of your esophagus it looks thick...like molasses. It is black and purple and gooey. A liquid of the body, the most precious liquid of the body. Sometimes people think that other fluids are better because they give you a pleasure of an unspeakable mind extravaganza, the body erupts and you are there smiling, letting them know with a forced expression of love that they have indeed done their job correctly.

You will go to his house tonight while I lay in the bliss you gave me, but it is not complete, so I wait. I wait for you to crawl back into the sheets washed with our lies. A hungry passion flows over us, the kind that stems only from a lack of love. He will smile, push, pull, fall, cut, chip crack, shatter, this glass of a being. And then it's over.

Insanity smacks both of us in the face when she wishes for forced intercourse. He says he's never done that. She says he did, but fault wouldn't change a thing. Not one thing. Not the trash, ropes, knives, or broken friends. She needs me. So I forget myself, skin myself, ask myself, push myself. What is it? She asks me. It's nothing. I say it is nothing.

He needs me; I can feel catastrophe in bones, of course laughter follows these opinions. I tell him my superstitions, my predictions that come from a poison I want to keep and get rid of. It is an ember in my throat. Scarring me up but I would not vomit this fire for anything. Not when he is calling, not when there are pieces of scrap metal flipped upside down and people stirring from the inside out. Not when I see him surrounded in that precious liquid, the liquid that keeps the soul, the imagination, the life, and most of all the humanity in us. It was leaving him, it will leave me too.

...but she doesn't. I say these words to her but she cannot accept them. So I scream and stretch my vocal cords to octaves I never thought I could reach. There are cars and glass and screaming, there is always screaming. The sound doesn't break through our barriers though. She calls out to me and I can hear her through the divide that separate us. The wall is thin, and the paint is chipping. But she locks herself away before I can reach in and grab the truth. I pound on the wood, and eventually it splinters and collapses in on itself. A weak door in a weak house. I force it open and watch as it falls off the hinges. She is sitting on the floor near the bed. I lose my words. She stares at me with round, bloodshot eyes. Those eyes are daring me to open my mouth, daring me to yell at her, but I am melded to the carpet. Frozen.

There is an absence of noise when you're gone. The brain crashes down in harsh waves of guilt. They rush up against the inside of the skull. Too many reminders and my world begins to spin. So many voices, so many colors...bite down now, sink those shark teeth in, and don't ease up until you taste that precious liquid. The bodies' gold. This pale white skin hurts, burns, but you touch it anyway. Inflicting pain brings you joy. This shocks you, and electricity is sparked, from a fire that was still burning. You thought it had been put out, but it was hiding between layers of muscles and bone. That's when you feel a pair of unfamiliar fingernails holding you down, keeping you under their spell, and filling you with poison. The same poison you are trying to get rid of. The poison that is not a void. Eventually you claim this to be accepted behavior. More lies scatter, like spiders. You crouch down, hoping to kill them before they crawl away.

She is asking you to stay. You wait and listen to her answers while the scratchy salts of ocean water pull you under. She is flushing away gobs of poison with her words. You stitch your lips shut because, with her, honesty is never welcome. Darkness envelops you, and your lungs fill with rage. A rage you've never felt before. A rage that needs to leave. It is sabotaging the memories of what you once had. She pulls a rusty blade across your palms and up your arms. Globes of blood will mark you red, but you are in the ocean now. It takes the poison away and rinses your hands clean. All the while dishonest answers tumble and shove their way into your ears and out of your mouth. You drop the knife and fall to your knees. A small voice lures your head out of the darkness.

She says to you "I surrender."

Vera Kinsella

PERSPECTIVE

I.

I have five sets of eyes, each
with thoughts and inner monologues,

each overlapping, each folding
into the corner seams of the inside

of a black carpet bag. As I look out
the rainy windows, I see the sky, grey

and swirled. I believe it passes away.
As I look out, I see a well-dressed man

walking his Yorkshire Terrier. I believe
he will pass away too. But with different eyes,

the terrier sees the world in the moment;
he believes the man will live forever.

II.

You told me once about an abandoned house,
left on the coattails of New England, clothed in vibrant nets
of ivy and honeysuckle garlands. You told me its doors
had fallen away like infant teeth, leaving an open mouth howling
for company. As years had passed, the glass had shattered
as vines and branches embraced its body, but it believed
the blemishes were worth the intimacy. And when I picture
that lulling scene, I hope that I can someday lower myself
and find a frame just as restful.

In the quiet cafe on the avenue, you said
all fingerprints are different, like snowflakes or ribonucleic acid.
You told me then they helped us to hold paper and pencils:
small things. But I don't understand that tangible maze.
How does this curvilinear labyrinth connect the dots of my identity?
I turned my gaze and when you felt it, you told me
an old mechanic with claw foot eyes wore away his fingerprints.
You never told me where they went; I never knew if he lost his way.
Sometimes I do.

Often, I don't understand how arteries work.
Maybe like entrance and exit ramps. Little intravenous highways
circumnavigating our limbs. When I was young, I told you

I wanted to be a cobbler—I wanted to sew shoes over little feet.
When you knew, you said to set my gaze on higher things; besides,
no one knows a cobbler. I asked you where they went. I asked,
what crevice did they crawl to? You sighed and set your hand
against the small of my back and whispered that someday
I would know. Someday when I was older. I am older now.
I sew shoes of words, but they haven't led me to the answers.

III.

Turning inwards, I find that I'm an unsigned postcard,
a faded polaroid, bleach stains on a striped dress shirt collar.
A collection of wants for second chances—I am solitary

but gathered together as separate thoughts. I am
the lungs inside a man, the fabric remnant, the thread,
the familiar doubled image when waking—

I am streams of consciousness, rippling rivulets through
the cerebral cortex. I am a bastion of carved alabaster. I am
a colony of birdcages suspended from an American sycamore—

an empty aviary where every goldfinch has elected to exit.
I am the wheat-hued castle left in Perthshire. A capsized dinghy,
a run-ashore galleon, landlocked in a Tunisian desert. You said

I could be anything I wanted to be if I set
my mind, if I wanted it badly enough. You said
I could save the world if I wore the right cape. I cannot

lift bridges, I cannot emerge from burning buildings alive; I am
a paper airplane alighting on a train-station breeze, and that
is enough. I am three-word sentence fragments. I am the cut off

strands of straw-blond hair. Detached, perhaps,
but even cut off strands are woven into nests and little robins
will hatch their eggs in the valley of my chest.

Ian Williams

NIGHT LIGHT

You visit the movies
to celebrate
darkness,

how it brings
light to life
making visible
the beginnings
the ends.

You remember
the blackness
of space,
that great lumbering
overcoat with
stars on the lapels
telling the time.

You think of
the small light
inside you,

how it talks
to you
from the
dark,
from the
unseen
mother.

Doug Bolling

SCARS AND SAFE PLACES

One of my worst fears is that a man will break into my apartment when I'm sleeping. He'll be large and muscular and will wear dark clothes, but I'll never see his face. Any odd sound, the creak of the floorboard, a scratch at the window, a thud, like a body throwing itself against the front door, might be him and it sends me flying from bed toward the noise. I'm afraid and that fear sends me flying.

Here's my fantasy, my plan, for this person breaking into my apartment: I'll throw myself at the door, and he'll be so startled I'll manage to slam it shut in his face. I'll defend my home by keeping him out. My speed and gumption will save me, as it did once before when someone really did try to break in through the kitchen window. The sound of scraping metal had startled me awake and I rushed from the bedroom into the hallway. I listened, but I could only feel the adrenaline shooting through me. I told myself it had to be the trash collectors coming really early, at 4 a.m. I slunk back to bed and fell into a deep sleep, and it wasn't until morning that my boyfriend discovered the wide open window.

I was a light sleeper to begin with, but any noise since has become a potential threat. I triple-check the locks on doors and windows before crawling in bed and then again if I have to get up to use the bathroom. I lie awake convincing myself that any clunk or thud is just a cat rummaging in the trash or a neighbor thumping up the stairs. If that doesn't work, I stagger out of bed and check the locks again. I've stood in the hallway after the neighborhood has all gone to sleep and listened for any suspicious sound, just to be sure, just to feel safe.

The rational part of my brain knows no one is really trying to get in. There's a chain on the front door I'd surely hear rattle, and the back door makes a loud sucking sound no matter how quietly you try to open it. But my brain is also alive with thoughts I can't silence, questions provoked by that part of me

that remembers, that feels again, the fear, the anger, the helplessness from before. What if he breaks the door before I get to it? What if he gets in first? I am small, 5'2" and occasionally practice yoga. What could I possibly do? He'll steal my laptop, rape me, torture my boyfriend, and kill my dog. I must keep him out because that's the only thing that can save me.

A few years before the break-in, I was mugged by two young women walking home from the subway one night. I handed over my bag like they asked and ran home and sobbed on the floor of my bedroom. I was lucky. They had only threatened to hurt me.

"Hand over your bag or we're gonna hurt you," said the taller of the two girls. She had long, dark hair clipped away from a face I don't remember. What I do remember is her hand clenched in a fist and the fuzzy orange glint of the street lights behind me reflected in a silver object. It could have been a knife or a lighter. My legs were cold; it was February, and we were standing on an icy sidewalk. My brain was slow, and my mouth seemed to have closed up. I couldn't talk. I couldn't believe two girls no bigger than me were demanding my bag.

"We're gonna hurt you," she snapped. I feel that we stared at each other for minutes; them waiting me out because they knew I would eventually hand over my stuff. Maybe she licked her lips and postured like she was going to hit me. I'd only ever gotten into fights with my younger siblings, and those were just whiny tussles on the living room carpet. I hadn't broken a bone or needed stitches. I was terrified that maybe these girls would hurt me, puncture me with that silver object that must be a knife. I let my bag slide off my shoulder, and then they were gone, running back toward the subway with my wallet, book, cash, credit card, phone, the textbook I needed for the Italian class I was taking. I sprinted in the opposite direction, running across the ice and miraculously not falling, chanting all the way *please don't follow me please don't follow me*.

*I sprinted in
the opposite
direction,
running across
the ice and
miraculously
not falling,
chanting all
the way please
don't follow
me please
don't follow
me.*

Half a decade ago that happened and still the click or crunch of footsteps behind me kicks my heart. It remembers what happened when I heard those girls' crunching on the ice and convinced myself there was nothing to worry about. Now, I have to stop to let the person pass, or I walk in the middle of the street, making myself believe there's safety in the street lights' orange glow. I hate that I do this, hate that, no matter how many times I'm jolted with fear and find myself walking along the curb like it's a balance beam, my body hasn't learned that the clicking behind me is probably just someone else going home, going to a restaurant, going for a walk.

Two days after the shooting in Aurora, my boyfriend and I went to see *The Dark Knight Rises* at an IMAX theater in Chicago. We had just made it to our seats for the sold-out show when the lights blackened and the five and a half story screen flickered to life. It was still so dark except for the glow of the exit sign. We sat in the shadows on the far right side, a few rows up, an easy, obvious diagonal shot from the exit on the left.

I struggled to focus on the movie those first minutes. The film so dark, the exit sign so bright, my eyes kept shifting over to it, to verify it was just an empty space. I expected a shady figure to appear any minute, but something pale crossed into my peripheral vision on my side of the theater, along the aisle. I was only four seats from the aisle. My heart lurched as if I heard those footsteps crunching behind me, but it was just an usher in a white shirt.

I told myself I was being foolish, that I needed to focus and lose myself in the movie. But I struggled to let myself go. The horror of the shooting was still so fresh. What especially shook me was that a place that should have been safe, a place where people come together because they want to enjoy the same story, because they want to relax and let themselves go for just a couple hours, had been so deeply violated.

In one scene, the villain strides into a public place with a few armed pals and threatens and terrorizes people whose numbers triple, quadruple that of the villains. In reality, a single person can be his own arsenal and do the same. I thought there

was such a clear line between the fantasy world and the real one, but when I sat in the theater watching so much violence generated by a mad man, it was plain to me that it was getting gouged out. If there ever had been a distinct line between the terrible things that wake you up at night and what happens to you in your waking hours.

The thing about movies though, is they so often make heroic fantasy look cool and easy. I want to be one of those heroic people, those who charge at the armed bad guys because they're bad and you're good. I'll lunge at my mugger next time, I'll slam my foot in his crotch, head-butt him in the gut, smash his toes. Only, will I? What if he grabs me first, what if he gets in the apartment first? How can you live and be safe and free when those nighttime apparitions suddenly become real; when familiar places feel like they'll never be safe?

I don't presume to know how a dark theater will feel in one month, one year, two years, five, to me or anyone who saw *The Dark Knight Rises* that night. I don't presume to know the nature of the scars concealed within a mind's fleshy folds. Mine know the sound of feet rushing forward on ice, not the sound of guns firing, not the feeling of broken bones.

The answer, for me, is to still walk the curb like it's a balance beam, to go to the theater again. I know I will lose sleep on those nights when the neighbors in the apartment above are especially loud, when rain pelts the window like fingers tapping. I can't stop it; my scars have reshaped my perception of certain things.

I feel like there are two separate parts of myself tangled together. One part felt a confrontation in the middle of the night on an icy sidewalk, and one watched and has tried to convince the other that there's nothing to be afraid of *now*, no monsters lurking in the closet. I can only hope that eventually my scars will heal. That those disparate selves will come to some understanding, so I can understand and believe and feel that though we're not immune to the twisted imaginings of a mad man or little thieves, we can still find safe places.

Christina Brandon

TRAVELING THE RANGE OF A MALE THOUGHT

Brush my teeth with Fluoride SEX

Gulp a cup of espresso SEX

Have a whole bowl of flaky SEX

Commute on the SEX bus

Wait through Traffic Jam SEX

Watch SEX walk down the street

Read The Daily Sex newspaper

Message passages about SEX

Enter the center of my SEX job

Go to my SEX desk

Turn on my SEX computer

Type my SEX

Swipe office supply SEX

File my SEX

Index my SEX

Answer calls about SEX

Twelve noon SEX break

Go to the SEX food restaurant

Eat a plate full of nutrimental SEX

Do not eat rotting SEX

Return for more of my SEX shift

Must complete that 9 to 5 SEX

Monday to Friday SEX

Cash my SEX check

Feel distress about the IRS on my SEX

Have a SEX drink

Party with relieved SEX colleagues

Look forward to Saturday SEX

Sleep in front of the premium cable SEX

Start chores for another week of SEX

Have a realization about SEX

7 seconds later, have another thought about SEX

And how it relates to SEX

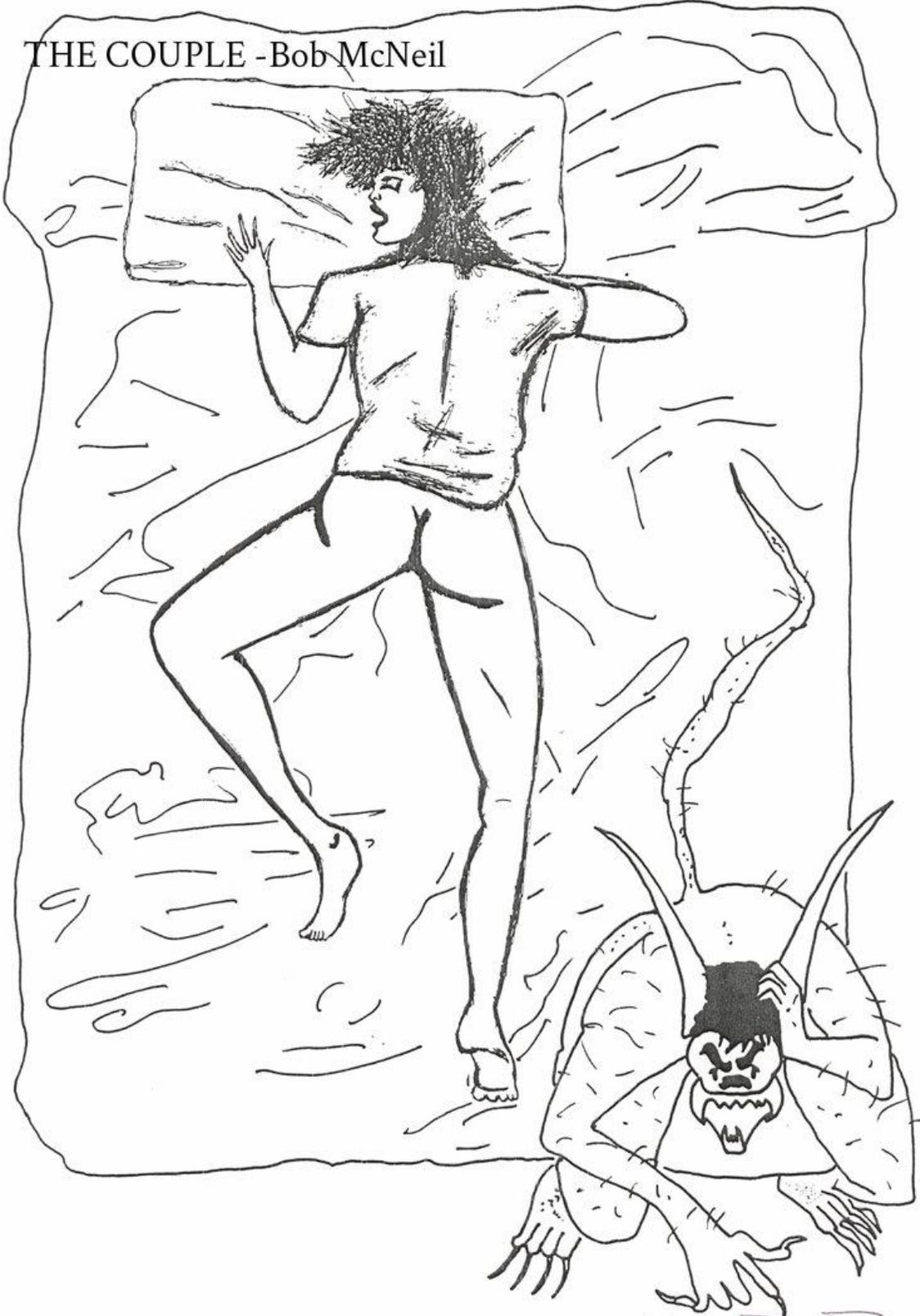
Tell my lady that I have other thoughts

Besides SEX

Only for her to say, "Go SEX yourself."

Bob McNeil

THE COUPLE - Bob McNeil



BOB
MCNEIL

THE VISIT

When the boy awoke with his cheek pressed against the window, his neck hurt and the scenery was the same as when he'd fallen asleep. It was flat and dark, and he wanted to see trees again. His father looked deeply at the road in front of them, and the boy pretended to cough. His father fixed his gaze ahead and paid the boy no mind. The boy was excited to see his mother; he'd hardly been out of the semi all weekend.

"Dad?" he asked. "Tell me a story. About when you were younger." His father made a gravelly noise with his throat, and spit out the window. The boy was full of questions; it was getting old.

"Dad?" he asked again.

"I don't remember when I was young," his father answered. "Just go back to sleep." The boy wanted to do exactly that, but he'd slept so much already; he'd never felt more awake. He stared out the window, waiting for the visit to be over. His father never listened to anything he said; he felt as though he was talking to the truck itself. It was between long stares at rows of dead bush flying by that the boy saw a young girl staggering.

"Stop!" the boy yelled. His father looked at him lazily and shook his head.

"There was a girl back there!" the boy added. His father changed gears then, and made a very abrupt stop, scouring his rearview for the girl. He smiled, seeing the young woman shuffle toward the truck. She was young and vibrant, blond hair dancing behind her as she ran. The boy was excited to meet her; he wanted someone to talk to.

"Get in the sleeper cab," his father ordered.

"I want to meet--"

"Now." The boy sighed sadly and crawled into the dark box. It was this way with his father always; he didn't understand why he had to spend so many weekends like this. He hated the sleeper cab. It was without windows, and the blankets had a stale tinge to them, like wet towels that have been ignored for too long. At least in the front seat, he could look at the countryside, boring as it was.

Back here, he felt as though he was being punished. He thought that he could have gotten along with the girl. He didn't get the greatest look at her; still he knew that she was older than he but not much older. There were so many questions he wanted to ask her. What was doing on the highway so late at night? Where was her family? If she was running away, was she doing it the right way?

"You're not doing it the right way!" he heard his father bellow from the front. "Faster!" The boy heard the girl whimper, and wanted terribly to know why. His father had put him in this position so many times before; he knew that when he picked up a woman there would be sounds of happiness, sounds of restraint, and an argument before she was gone. He was always sequestered to the sleeper cab, and when he was told to come back to the front seat, his father always had a dreamy look in his eyes. This time though, the curiosity was too much, and he knew to use the trap door.

It had taken the boy a few years to develop it, but when his father drank hard, he could use the saw without waking him up. The door he'd created through the floor worked relatively well – three sides sawed through and the other bent, handles on either side made with duct tape and strips of his father's pillowcase. He lifted the mattress, and pulled the door up. He'd been waiting for this; he knew that his father would kick the girl out of the truck when the joyful sounds stopped. It was quicker than the boy had imagined; he was underneath the rig and it was like a wondrous cave. The boy had never felt more at home. He sat directly beneath his trap door, waiting for the girl to appear and was shaken, hearing the semi fire up again. It was moving before he knew what to do, and he reached out to his cave as it disappeared into the distance. The boy laughed, and stopped abruptly. He hadn't laughed audibly in a very long time and it frightened him, the sound of it.

After a long while, the road looked to the boy like a river; he was moving but somehow not cognizant of the method. He watched his legs move and thought about the fact that his head was making his legs do this. He tried to command them to stop, and gasped when they didn't. The asphalt current had him.

Mitchell Lay

DIRTY OLD MAN

As a younger man,
my lip curled with pity,
shaking my head,
when I saw older guys,
men in their sixties,
ogling younger girls,
flirting with them,
as if they actually thought
they had a chance.

Now that I'm in my sixties,
I find I lust after younger girl
I lust with a keener sense of longing,
amounting almost to despair.

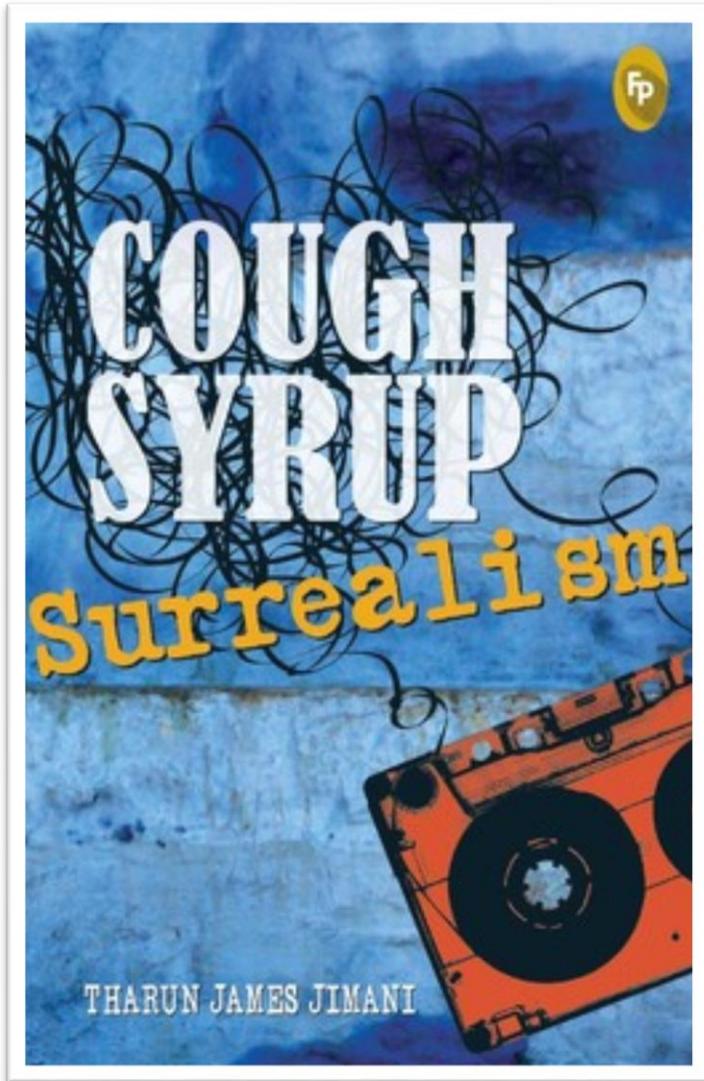
Krista, the lifeguard, at the pool, for instance.
She must be younger than my daughters,
sitting poolside in a folding chair,
blond, bare tan legs, lifeguard uniform
of red t-shirt (GUARD in white letters
across the back), blue shorts.

Swimming laps, ogle her legs
as I swivel my head out of the water,
eyes wide open behind goggles.

At around the fifteenth lap my imagination
breast-strokes ahead of me,
removing her t-shirt,
proceeding to other strokes.

When I climb out of the pool, wave,
virtually naked in my trunks,
headed to the showers,
she smiles and waves back,
so innocent
of my desire and shame.

Charles Rammlekamp



Dirty Chai caught up with Tharun James Jimani to talk about his first novel, *Cough Syrup Surrealism*, and why the 90s were the golden decade.

Q: Growing up in America, I think some of us don't realize the impact our pop culture has on the rest of the world. Can you talk about the 90s and the influence Western culture had on India when you were growing up? And how it relates to the story line of *Cough Syrup Surrealism*?

A: I'd like to lead with a little background: India is of course a massive country, and I was born and brought up in Kerala, the Southern-most state. Like a lot of other states here, we have our own language (Malayalam), culture, traditions, all of which are as foreign as Mexico to someone born and brought up in Delhi. To put things in perspective, if my parents

were to meet up with the parents of Mindy Kaling and Jay Chandrasekhar, the only language they'd all be able to communicate with each other in is English. So the India in my novel isn't Bollywood India, it's not even Kerala India, because it's set in Chennai, which is probably the closest "big" city, and the capital of Tamil Nadu, a neighboring state.

Now South India's just a little more conservative than the North in general, and Kerala is particularly so. But something big happened in India in 1991 that would go on to level the field just a little bit- the economy was opened up for foreign trade. With that came foreign brands, money, and most importantly, cable TV. I was ten in 1994- that's when Kurt Cobain died, it's when we first got cable. My parents are both academics, they're hugely successful professionals, so all my babysitting was done by American sitcoms, by MTV, and Hardy Boys novels. But you've got to remember this was only the case of a minority of kids here: middle and upper class kids, kids whose parents spoke mostly in English at home, kids whose Moms had serious careers too. Also, I skipped the mandatory 90s boybands phase because my sister- who's 7 years older and probably the coolest person in the world- had turned me on to Guns n Roses and Aerosmith long ago. Which left me in a bit of a crisis- the schoolyard and the problems school kids had on TV were vastly different from my reality. There was no dating or proms, my problems weren't nearly as sexy as Kevin's from *The Wonder Years*, and that show was set in the 70s.

If cable changed things for some of us, the internet came along sometime around puberty and completely turned our worlds upside down. Suddenly it didn't matter that I didn't know many kids who were into Nirvana or Alice In Chains; I could just log on and find hundreds of them from around the world. By the time I was in college, I had two very distinct realities- there was my very Indian, very Keralite real life, and then I had a small group of friends who got it. We spoke the same language, loved the same bands, shared the same angst about fuck knows what. What we hadn't realized in school was that it wasn't Kerala, it was us. We thought we'd find more people like us in the cities, but no, what we'd find was that there were a few privileged little whiny kids like us from across the country, but that wasn't the norm. And I was in a different State now, a different local culture- my identity there was that I was from Kerala. So there I was stuck navigating between two realities again. It was pretty disillusioning, as a teenager.

So my novel is about that: a group of Nineties kids, huge grunge fans, who embark on this journey to live the life they'd rather be living- the music, the drugs, the misanthropy. Charlie, the protagonist, is a depressive- or at least he's convinced he is. He feels misunderstood because his parents don't speak his idiom, nobody does. He joins a band, gets hooked on smack, and it sort of takes off from there, but it's about more than that: it's about how cable and American pop culture has established these pockets, these sub-cultures, in pretty much every developing country, and how it's hard to find a sense of belonging in your own country, your culture, when you're living in American music videos in your head.

Q: Were any of the events that took place in your novel based on actual scenarios in your own life?

A lot of it is stuff I went through, or stuff I saw people go through. Chennai had a great live music scene, and I'd attend every gig I could, try and imagine for those couple of hours that I was where I belonged, and a bunch of us would get together after (and before) and listen to our shit and just be ourselves. Drugs were cheap, easy. Inside our rented flats, we could crank up the volume, shut out the world and get lost in our heads. But outside, we were crazies, and I think to a certain extent we encouraged that categorization, reveled in it, went out of our way to look different, dress different, tattoos and hair. I've tried to bring in that sense of enforced alienation in the novel.

Q: I see that you've lived in several different cities in India, while also spending time in other countries. Did that diversity in living situations help shape your writing? Where were you based when you wrote Cough Syrup Surrealism? About how long did the novel take to write?

A: Very much. I did a year of schooling- my eighth grade- in England. I thought I'd get along great, you know- I spoke English, I loved Yes Minister and Enid Blyton, all this pop culture cred. But it was a public school, everybody wore Kappa and had Spice Girls backpacks, and I think I was the only Asian kid in my class. I was ahead of most of the class without even trying because Indian schools are pretty great that way, and it felt ridiculous to be bullied because I was darker than them. I was naïve enough to think that racism had ended with Indian independence. That was probably the first time I was actively aware of this duality, these different realities and identities: it shaped my inner narrative, how I look at things, how different people see me. I was always the outsider.

"... it's about how cable and American pop culture has established these pockets, these sub-cultures, in pretty much every developing country, and how it's hard to find a sense of belonging in your own country, your own culture, when you're living in American music videos in your head."

I wrote the bulk of *Cough Syrup Surrealism* immediately after college, and the rest is from a journal I used to keep in college. I was back home from Chennai- this was in 2005- for a year, dealing with my own demons. It was a messed up time, and writing was an escape, it was a way of dealing with withdrawal, it was release. I never really thought it'd become a novel though- it was just rants and bits and pieces and sequential short stories. I left to the UK the next year, did my post grad, worked in financial services in Glasgow and London for a few years, then for a year in Singapore. And one miserable night outside a club at Clark Quay in Singapore, I chucked my Blackberry over the bridge, told myself I wasn't cut out for the 9-5 and took a flight back home to Kerala. I was lucky enough to have parents who stood by me, let me edit and despair and rewrite over a 3-month period, and I sent it over to an agent. And it worked.

Q: What kind of advice would you give to an aspiring writer/novelist?

A: I'm not nearly qualified to advise, but I'm glad I had to struggle and circle around before I got here. I hope it shows in the novel. There are too many teenagers self-publishing on Amazon because they can, too many housewives publishing lit-lite because why not? Color me old fashioned, but I like the idea of the struggling artist. It's a way of life, not a living- what's the great hurry? Write whatever you want, but give yourself some time to struggle, to hurt and be pissed off with the world till you really know that it's the only thing you want to do, ever. Write all you want but don't be in a hurry to publish. Let your words age, let them bleed a little, and heal, and see if they still evoke the same feelings in you; then start thinking about putting it out there. Also, live a little. It helps.



Keep up with Tharun on Twitter, @icyhighs, and through his blog, <http://renaissancehippy.blogspot.com>.

Cough Syrup Surrealism is available for worldwide delivery from www.uRead.com.

TASSELS

Like lab monkeys, commercially grown corn is forbidden to mate at will. Every summer the children of America's Corn Belt patrol their jungle stalks, stripping alternating rows of their sex fruit, tassels grown too long, fraying into desuetude like an old woman's hair. Abandoning them to the soil's sulcus, making eunuchs of the ears to your left and then to your right, ensures the largest possible progeny for exportation to Asia, where they alchemize into high fructose corn syrup for infusion into the soft drinks quaffed like nectar by the selfsame children of America's Corn Belt. Were I not one of them, employed solely to separate lascivious ears sure to kiss if left long alone, I would never, I'm sure, have spat watermelon seeds into a half-deaf man's ear. But this is what happens when you do nothing with your days but deprive vegetables with husk for skin of their single spindle of sad fawn silk, ripping tassels heavy with dew off nipples no one will now ever dare suckle. You have to spit the seeds somewhere, and inside an old man's head seems as good a place as any.

We ate our lunch on the bus, to escape the sorties of biting flies whose wings never tired, whose teeth never dulled, and the jaundiced sun that emboldened them with its leer. One afternoon I sat on a melted Hostess cupcake I had meant to eat on the ride back to the school parking lot, where my bike leaned slackly on its kickstand, bored with waiting. For the rest of the day, the back of my cutoff jeans betrayed an amoebic stain of chocolate several boys pretended was excrement. Saying nothing, I licked the frosting residue from the severed plastic wrapper.

When I squeezed into a seat beside my best friend and began whispering over our crackers and cold cuts, the boys would shout into the scythe of our sunburnt necks from the bus's rear, asking what we were discussing in our itty bitty titty committee. My breasts had just begun to rise like muffins in the oven, the tops of my thighs to widen and taper to my knees like lean wedges of cheese. I was still hoping no one would notice, but everything, I soon realized, was visible in the corn's lazy-eyed shadow. The tassels dropped like scrim curtains among the corn. Boys didn't hesitate to unzip their pants and pee as we stalked past leaves that provided no real shield but cut our arms like

swords. When a girl wearing a faded baseball cap scratched at her crotch, she was branded a lesbian, unforgiven. The side of her mouth hung open like a loose shutter as she sat sitting alone behind the bus driver unwrapping a fruit roll-up. I could have said hello, maybe asked to trade a strawberry roll-up for a melting cupcake, but I thought she was probably a lesbian too.

A faded red port-a-potty stood leaning into the horizon at a far corner of the field, but most days I drank too little and perspired too much to have reason to think of visiting it. The tassels' roots were embedded deep inside the ear's marrow, turgid as bone, and both hands were needed to uproot even the slenderest. My dad had loaned me his red water jug, but I had no choice but to leave it on the bus to grow hot as boiling soup, flavored only by the iron coating our well from which our water came. Without water to drink except during those 20 minutes on the bus at midday, one urination every nine hours just about sufficed.

I was 13 that summer and earned \$3.50 an hour, the minimum wage in Indiana at the time. My whole summer's paycheck I plundered on a single silk turtleneck of coruscating eggshell ordered through a catalog for school the coming fall, when I would nevertheless remain as plain as a burnt, discarded tassel, only wearing a prettier top, the most expensive thing anyone in my family, I believed, had ever worn. Next spring I would undergo CPR training and pass a swimming test to become a lifeguard, when my skin would brown into a tawny hide while I sat motionless on a chair perched in the sky. I would let little girls left there all day paint my toenails and slide down the waterslide backwards when the manager ducked inside the pool house for shade. I would double my wage while escaping the line of work my father had suggested, he who always thought the better work was the hardest for the least compensation, he who knew nothing better.

But my dad had never learned to swim, and Myron, the bus driver, sang an octave lower than everyone else in the back row of Mt. Gilead Baptist Church, where my dad played the organ every Sunday until his fingers, like corn ripe for Asia, had no hair left on their kernels with the curling hair and he too was never seen again, dispatched below ground and made to enrich the soil that would breed the crop that would slake my thirst with cold Mountain Dew. Myron, I knew, never believed I

was, as the boys in back shouted into his good ear, the one who had sent the black seeds flying in the gleeful parabola of a funambulist facing the wind. As I sat with the back of my thighs oiling the seat's bottom and eating my sandwich, his wide blue gaze smiled at me through the rearview mirror, and I smiled with my eyes back, Julian's daughter, wordlessly assuring him that this, this bus sitting lopsided ready to spill its dank passel children onto a bottomless tub of corn, was fine, dissembling, for his sake, that I wanted nothing more than what he had, this field whose God-given plenty we were trimming of tassels for maximum commercial value.

But if I was my father's daughter, with love of the corn-fatted land in my cancer-prone marrow, it was only in the technical sense. I prayed for rain only so I could stop working and leave the tassels be.

One morning my mom whispered she had found a caterpillar crawling through my cotton panties, printed with pale pink butterflies, I had dropped in the hamper the night before. I had been, as I often was when I came home, too tired to take a bath, to do anything more than wash my face and brush my teeth before I fell straight to sleep. My parents never installed a shower in our home, and when the bathwater drained, a mosaic of insects, some with an odd number of legs, stood splayed against the tub's sides, an intricate pattern of faraway dead, decaying stars brought close. Next summer, after climbing down from my lifeguard chair for the day, I would skim the water's surface with a net and gather the same spray of dead bugs, attracted by a fatal thirst. Then, with all the patrons gone, I would stay and drink cheap beer and swim late with the other lifeguards. I would shower there and arrive home cleaner than I had left, my dad already drifting off to sleep from farm labors rivaling those of any itinerant de-tassler.

My dad, as far as I know, never swam in chlorine. Instead, on Sunday afternoons he drove us to a lake where we peed into gaping catfish mouths and scooped our hands deep into the underwater sands for clams while we walked on our hands. When we grew older, my dad joined the Elks so we could swim at a private pool closer to home; he never learned to play golf or attended a single meeting and didn't own a pair of khaki pants. I have always, for some reason I don't know, been inordinately proud of this. There, my sister and I

were recruited for the swim team, when I swam only fast enough to become a lifeguard so I wouldn't, when time came for me to earn money for a second silk turtleneck, have to move at all. And though I swam only from one end of the pool to the other, back and forth a thousand times in a summer, I might as well have been swimming all that distance away from my dad and his corn. I might as well have been swimming to Asia too, though without returning any sweeter.

By the end of the summer, I was deemed fast enough of a de-tassler to be promoted to a machine. I would no longer have to walk the fields but could stand inside an enclosed metal platform that would have felt like an amusement ride if only there were music and it ended too soon, with only my arms forced to keep pace with the engine's momentum. A girl named Becky, maybe 17 or 24 or 29, another phylum of woman from myself at that time, drove the machine wearing a strapless bikini top, pale pink and white striped. She could, I knew, stop or reverse the machine, a kind of tentacled tractor, easily if she wished, but she never did. She preferred not to look at us, stretched like roving antenna before her, at all, only up toward the sun, which bronzed her belly and arms and shoulders into the sleek contours of a hairless lion, one who growled if from behind her sunglasses she saw an arm fall to my side, to scratch the side of a thigh, long etched into a spongy petroglyph from the tuneless strumming of corn leaf razors, or shoo away a wasp hovering above my head. Becky was Myron's niece, but her blue eyes looked grayer and somehow older, and I never saw her smile. She drove to the fields separately in an olive jeep and never ate lunch on the bus. She never knew, I'm sure, about the watermelon seeds but might not have cared even if she did.

A month after my mom died, with my dad's oncologist still searching the national database for a bone marrow donor for a transplant he would never have, my husband and I moved back to Chicago, which I had left for two years originally to live closer to my mom, whose cancer diagnosis came first. Weak as he was from the chemo, my dad drove the half hour in the rain to the house we had just sold to tell us goodbye. Seeing our U-Haul packed tight with our second-hand furniture, he shook his head, bare of its dark, wavy hair, and said this was a lot a work, too much, this moving, as I continued smoothing sliding a headboard between

boxes like a magician a blade through a still, supine body. He had never moved in his life, except to college and back to the farm, which his parents gave him, building a ranch house of brown brick across the road when he married. He had birthed any number of breached cows but never moved furniture. He didn't realize how light it became when you were running away.

In Chicago, neither my husband nor I had jobs, just a \$15,000 check from the sale of the house, more than enough to convince us we could live half a year or a foreseeable lifetime—it was all the same—in uninterrupted leisure, a stretch of urbane idleness, of bottomless mugs of coffee in cafes lined in undusted bookshelves, of grocery stores with ears of corn wrapped naked in cellophane, airtight so they could not breathe, bereft of either husks or tassels. The watermelon, likewise, was sold seedless. Only a few etiolated seeds remained, too thin, too blanched of fertility, for anyone to mind swallowing, too fragile to ever spawn another watermelon.

Maybe Myron didn't believe I was the one who spat the seeds into the back of his neck, wrinkled into jags of forked white lightning, not because I was my father's daughter, but because I wasn't. Sometimes on summer evenings before I began staying late at the pool, my dad and I would sit side by side on a petrified tree stump, trying to spit our seeds over top the clothesline, he from the wide and generous gap in his front teeth, a gap that would have been mine too did he not pay for braces when I was 11, me from puckering the lips whose shape were his too, only coated in lip gloss. Spitting far, we did not mind sitting still. We were both tired from the long day's work, and when your hands are fatigued your mouth is loosened. You spit because you have no energy left besides and the body, being

spent so far, would rather finish the job and force the tongue to equal the exhaustion of your back and legs and arms. Wherever the seed lands is fertile ground, is cause for celebration. Only in corn fields is seeds' sexual appetite regulated. Tassels must be pulled, but watermelon seeds at least we can give a wide, promiscuous berth.

But Myron, I remember now, wanted to know who had spit the seeds, because a watermelon, as any lay botanist knows, can't grow inside a man's ear, particularly if that ear is deaf to sound but not to touch, sensitive to the seed's rattle through its mute, waxy coil. Myron wasn't deaf to the savagery of teenagers groping for pleasure on a bus marooned in a cornfield tumid with wasted seed. And he heard my name. I was the one, they screamed, they shouted, in voices of oxidized iron, who had spit the seeds. I didn't care, they all knew, about planting anything in its place. I would leave, first for the pool and then for Chicago, where the work was easier. The butterflies imprinted on my underwear would soon forget the caterpillars they once had been. But my dad was the one who played the music that Myron sang to, unbeknownst to himself, louder than anyone else on Sunday mornings. He had half heard me play a duet of "Jesus, Joy of a Man's Desiring" with him at Christmas. So he shook the seeds out of his ear like trapped pool water, letting them drop down the bus' rubber steps into soil that would swallow it whole. He opened a can of Mountain Dew, letting a cool eruption of syrup fly into his face, a taste of the rapture to come, and stared ahead toward a perfect beauty.

Melissa Wiley

ZOLOFT II .

After Andrew Feld's "Opium Poppies II"

Near the movie theater's exit, he pressed
a brown paper bag to my mouth

and instructed me to breathe—*did you take
any drugs this evening?*—only the chemicals

my parents forgot when they created me,
because *I wasn't born so much as I fell out—*

carpeted wall against spine. Charlie Chaplin
looked down with comic twinkle, happy

that he isn't the butt of life's joke for once.
And I can't help but laugh at the jaunty

tip of his hat and tilt of cane—EMTs took
it to mean hysteria and tried to lure

me to the hospital with promises of comfortable
stretcher and endless supply of Lorazepam,

but I just clutched at the scars on both sides
of my chest where Dr. Moriarty put the bar

in, the bar that pushed my chest out—
dry ice at the healed skin pulled my ribs

and reassured me that *the future is unwritten*
and this is where I made my choice

to take in popcorn-air or black it out
with sharpie—the sharpie I used to manipulate

medical files so that I could play soccer
again, but Mom found out before I turned

it in, and sent the official one before
I had time to uncap the pen again.

I asked *is this where it is?*, but the EMTs
would have had to hire a translator

to figure out that I actually asked
is this all there is? and before I could stuff

my fist into my mouth, I confessed

to incurable neurosis—my hands and knees

were locked in position, needles forced
their way through bones and pinned

me to the chair, so when they came
to get me, that had to pry me out—

a victim of self-imposed paralysis and no,
I wasn't acting—I was just waiting

for the film to start. And they gave me
a cup of water and *asked how does it feel*

to be such a freak? And I said 'Impossible'
as they ordered my friends to call my parents

via carrier pigeon, and when they got here,
they arrived with vultures, ready

to claw a hole through my throat so I could
breathe again, and as they watched me,

the talons had already traced a circle
at the locus of my speech—they were

prepared to pull out my tongue
if necessary.

Jessica Thelen

Lines borrowed from The Clash's "Lost In The Supermarket," Joe Strummer, and Bob Dylan's
"Ballad Of A Thin Man"

“Oh shit, it’s Ben Affleck,” said the girl puking into the toilet to the girl holding her hair as I forced the Motor City Bar bathroom door open.

“I’m sorry ladies,” I said looking down with my hands flailing, “I really am, but I have to pee so badly. It couldn’t wait. I didn’t mean to interrupt. I’ll be 45 seconds max, then you’ll never see me again.”

They moved away from the toilet to let me use it. I was so desperate to pee that I somehow overcame my usual shy bladder syndrome and experienced blissful relief.

“Ben Affleck, you have a beautiful cock,” said the barber, whose voice I immediately recognized as that movie actress—one of the teen stars of a generation defining film ten years ago. I finished peeing and looked at her. Underneath the unruly mane of badly dyed straw hair, the drying vomit on her bloated face and the running mascara, it was her: the It girl. She seemed so out of place and sad in that graffiti covered dive bar bathroom being tended to by a punk rock smack pixie.

“I’m not really Ben Affleck.”

The actress (I’ll call her “Nadia”). That’s not really her name, but neither is the exotic stage name she uses. Her real name is as boring and American as Kraft Singles) and her friend laughed.

“Stop talking,” said Nadia, “I want to fuck Ben Affleck and you’re going to be Ben Affleck—you’re going to have a three-way with us. Right now.”

I was confused, nervous and excited—a grossed out stumbling mess. I wasn’t sure she could even properly consent to sex in her state, but I went for it—for the experience, for the sake of the story I’ll be able to tell over drinks forever. The little one wanted nothing to do with me. The famous one smelled unwashed. Not just dirty, but dirty on top of dirty as if she were doing research for a role as a crusty homeless woman. She insisted on kissing. Her breath was a revolting mixture of vomit, whiskey and clove cigarette. I had to remind myself in order to get hard that for the first time in my life, I was about to star-fuck a real celebrity, not just a scene chick who was naked on the Suicide Girls

website. I mentally focused on what a disgusting scene I was participating in and the depravity turned me on. Nadia sat on the sink, hiked up her tartan miniskirt, pulled her underwear to one side, and guided me inside of her. I asked about a condom and her friend mocked me, “Did you just crawl out of the 90s? No one wears condoms anymore.” They laughed again. I reached for the friend’s tiny breasts through the sides of her cut off Casualties T-shirt and she moved my hand away. Nadia sped things up to an impossible-to-maintain pace before pushing me off and dry heaving in the sink she sat on.

“Ben,” said Nadia, “Let’s get a drink.”

“You,” she snapped at the other girl, “you’re boring. Leave.” The Pixie gave us the middle finger and complied by exiting the bathroom first.

We moved to the bar. I

ordered two Jack and Cokes and put a twenty down. Jodi (that’s her real name), the Bettie Page lookalike tending bar, pushed my money back and said, “Luke, she doesn’t pay for drinks.” Everyone loves a celebrity, even a cracked out shell of one.

As the drinks flowed Nadia seemed to become more coherent with each sip. She was funny: “Matt Damon looks like a leprechaun...he can act his ass off...best American actor working today. You...you’re very good at playing you...but you’ve fucked J-Lo and that’s far more impressive than an Oscar nomination.”

“Who fucked J-Lo,” asked the greasy looking rock n’ roll burnout drinking alone, staring and listening to our conversation.

“He did,” said Nadia as she attempted to make an introduction between me and the guy butting in, “Roddy, this is Ben Affleck. Ben, this is Roddy, (not his real name) he plays bass in The Stasi (Not the real band name). Say hi.”

“Nadia, your brain is fried,” said Roddy, “that guy’s just some rockabilly dork who looks a little like Ben Affleck. I hope you didn’t fuck him,” he said with a put on laugh.

“Fuck yourself Roddy,” said Nadia.

“Time for me to take you home,” said Roddy.

Jodi put her hand over mine and quietly, but sternly, told me, “Don’t let him take her home. He’s bad for her. Do me this favor: get her home safe and

“Don’t let him take her home. He’s bad for her. Do me this favor: get her home safe and you’ll never pay for a drink in here again. Promise Me!”

you'll never pay for a drink in here again. Promise me!"

I made the promise. I seemed safe enough. I had over two thousand hours as an EMT for Bravo Volunteer Ambulance in Bay Ridge. I wasn't a drug user—just a sometimes drunk who could save a life if I really had to.

I stood over Roddy, still sitting on his barstool. I was half his age, half a foot taller and had fifty pounds on him. "Alright, tough guy," said Roddy, "You win. Have fun with her. I hope you get her AIDS and Hep C then give it to that piece of Bronx ghetto ass you have."

Jodi mouthed "thank you" as I ignored the old man and walked arm in arm, steadying Nadia for the four-block walk to her Clinton street apartment.

We stop at La Placinta, a bodega at Clinton and Rivington for a quart of coconut water, bananas and a bottle of Aleve—a preventative measure that has saved me from hundreds of potential hangovers.

I could smell Nadia's apartment before she was able to coordinate herself to fit the right key in the lock. The odor of a supermarket dumpster in the summer filled the narrow hallway. She opened the door and it intensified and morphed; olfactory violations of new and terrible varieties. I held my breath and entered the biggest Manhattan apartment I had ever been in. It was also the filthiest; worse than any squat, crack house or shooting gallery I ever dragged my parents out of during the Dinkins years. Piles of plastic bags and half eaten takeout meals in Styrofoam containers were knee high in some places. I had to kick Subway sandwich wrappers, empty cans of energy drinks and chicken bones away to clear a path to Nadia's bedroom.

I had her sit up and drink the entire coconut water. She cursed me with every sip. The banana was a battle too. I told her that a dose of potassium now would make her morning bearable, but she scratched at my hand with fingernails so dirty, they looked like she polished them with black varnish. Her fingers sickened me. There were obvious burns from a crack torch lighter that cooked the skin around her fingertips. The dirt under her nails was beyond anything I'd seen from even the most down and out spare changer. She stomped on the banana with the last bit of fight left in her. I told her the football shaped Aleve were Xanax blues. She swallowed four and passed out. I covered her with

my jacket instead of her stained blanket and looked for a place to crash.

I found a couch buried under an avalanche of magazines and crumpled clothing. I tried to sleep, but couldn't. A burst of energy came over me and I started cleaning like my mother used to on the days when she was flush with rocks. I went back to the bodega for trash bags and cleaning supplies and became a one-man cleaning crew.

Hours passed as I scraped and scoured surfaces, then filled seven bags with trash, glassine envelopes, blood stained syringes, broken water pipes, soiled underwear and hundreds of old school "we're pleased to serve you" blue to go coffee cups. I hardly made a dent. From time to time, I'd check in on Nadia. She was dead to the world, but her chest rose and fell with each respiration—the most comforting sight in the world for the child of junkies.

"Who the fuck are you? How'd you get in here?" Were her first words of the day as she shambled into the living room, appearing far less concerned than she sounded.

"I'm Luke. We met last night at Motor City. Jodi asked me to take you home. She was creeped out by some guy Roddy. You were pretty messed up"

"Aww, Jodi's a sweetheart. You too...unless you fucked me when I was passed out. Did you fuck me?"

"No, no," I said, "I tried to sleep on the couch, but I couldn't, so I started to clean up."

"Wait, we didn't fuck?"

"Well, kind of." I said, "in the bathroom of Motor—for like a minute and a half. You don't remember? You thought I was Ben Affleck. You were in the bathroom with some chick, you suggested we have a threesome, but she wasn't into it."

"That's Sylvi," said Nadia, "she's a gold star dyke, she wouldn't be into anything with penis. You don't look anything like Ben Affleck. Thanks for getting me home, though."

She smiled and pushed stacks of unopened mail from her kitchen counter to the floor, giving her room to set up a couple of stained blue cardboard coffee cups with Nescafe and Splenda.

"No problem," I said, "seemed like Jodi wanted me to look out for you or at least keep you away from that guy."

“Yeah,” she grunted, “he’d fuck me if I passed out. He always does.”

She handed me a cup of lukewarm instant coffee.

“Don’t think that you’re going to make a score going through my shit while pretending to clean.” She said. “The only thing of value left in this whole apartment is my Golden Globe from 1995. I sold, shot or snorted everything else, or somebody stole it. I keep that to remind myself—”

“I haven’t seen it.” I said, taking notice of the thin dried lines of blood spatter on the walls and ceiling.

I suggested that we get her cleaned up. I had scrubbed her bathtub until it was only half as vile as when I found it. I used a kitchen sponge to wash the layers of grime off her body. It was long and sinewy, not what you’d expect to see from someone with a face so bloated. Some of the spots didn’t wash off. The bruises on her legs looked like the ones on an over ripe apple, and there were dark purple halos between her toes. I cleaned under her nails with toothpicks while she lathered her hair with dish soap. When the water turned dark gray, we’d drain the tub, rinse the dirt and fill it again. It took three baths to get her clean, and finally her eyes came to life a little.

I wondered how much a sex tape would be worth. Would the squalor add value or would celebrity filth like this seem too off-putting for the viewer? It didn’t matter; my phone battery was at 6%; not enough juice to get the footage.

“Why are you doing this? Why are you being so kind to me?” she asked.

“Because,” I said, “you need someone to.”

“You’re not going to start talking about Jesus now, are you? This isn’t some kind of religious bullshit, is it?”

“Hell no.”

“Did my mother or my agent hire you?”

“Neither,” I said, “it just seemed like the right thing to do.”

“So, do you go around helping lost junkies, or just lost famous junkies?”

“I just have some experience with this kind of thing. You remind me of my mother,” I said. I remembered her lying on the floor, her dead eyes open wide. “That’s why I hung around.”

She started to cry, then threw her arms around me and laughed. “Gross! Your mother!?” She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror.

“I can’t die looking like this. I have to get hot again before I even consider OD’ing. Are you hungry?”

I walked to San Loco and bought an enormous bag of Guaco Tacos and hit up Video Stop for the entire first season of “24” on DVD, which Nadia somehow managed to avoid even hearing about. Between her naps, screaming fits, insane mood swings, crying episodes, vomiting and alternating sweating and freezing we ate messy tacos and binge watched Kiefer Sutherland save the world.

That’s all I really remember. There were no deep conversations that stood out. We didn’t fall in love or even fool around. We didn’t leave her apartment and she didn’t use for three days; she was a total pro. It was the most boring detox I’ve ever witnessed. On the third night she told me she was ready for rehab and would have her agent arrange for an in-patient program.

I waited with her until the Town car came to take her away. She was afraid of messing up, but not feigning hard enough to actually do it.

I carried her bags to the curb, she kissed me on the forehead and that was it.

Years later, Nadia would make a remarkable public recovery and an unexpected comeback. She reinvented herself as a serious actress and lost any traces of the Gen-X quirky girl she used to be. My wife and I are huge fans of her TV show; it’s a massive hit on premium cable. She plays a genius anarchist who infiltrates a different multi-national corporation each season and sabotages them from within, bringing the super-rich villains to their knees. I think she’s up for an Emmy.

I had told my wife the story of my slumber party with Nadia. I’m pretty sure she thought I was making it up until the day we were walking in Central Park and Nadia, glowing with sweat and out of breath from jogging, tapped me on the shoulder and said, “Hey, Ben Affleck.” Gillian seemed completely star struck, and probably felt a little silly for not believing me. I introduced the two women with an unexpected sense of pride: My beautiful wife meeting the celebrity-princess-in distress who I had lifted up from rock bottom. I saw her reach out to me. My face felt hot, my eyes welled up, and

There were no deep conversations that stood out. We didn't fall in love or even fool around.

then an open-handed slap brought me quickly back to reality.

“That’s right, Ben. I remember you.” She turned to Gillian and snarled, “This fucker stole my

Golden Globe.” “You’ll hear from my lawyer!” she yelled as she ran away. “You piece of shit!” And again, she was gone.

Eddie McNamara

EVERYBODY STEALS OFFICE SUPPLIES

It's OK, buddy -
everybody steals office supplies.
do not feel so ashamed
when we meet in the corporate hallway,
your attaché case bulging with reams of printer paper.

I do not think any less of you -
how could I? – when I have stuffed my purse
with Post-its of every imaginable hue.
I use the blue ones to label Tupperware in the freezer
and the pink ones to write down phone numbers
left on my answering machine, which I
will never call back.

and I can see you, Day-Glo hi-liters in hand
studying the Obit. Page so you can mark the names you know.
and those many sheaves of tabbed dividers
so cleverly organize the reasons
you vehemently dislike to wake up:
section one for the friendships you have lost,
section two for the poetry you cannot express,
so on and so forth.

buddy I get you so well.
look at me with my many varieties of paperclips!
I do not shirk at attaching things together:
the electric bill to a blank check,
a joking suicide note to a birthday card,
other clever nuances of the paperwork of modern life.

imagine if you will the things we could stash
in file cabinets, you and I,
the many novelty photocopies we could make
[bare butts and etc.], the whimsy
that would accompany such an overabundance
of handy Wite-out pens.

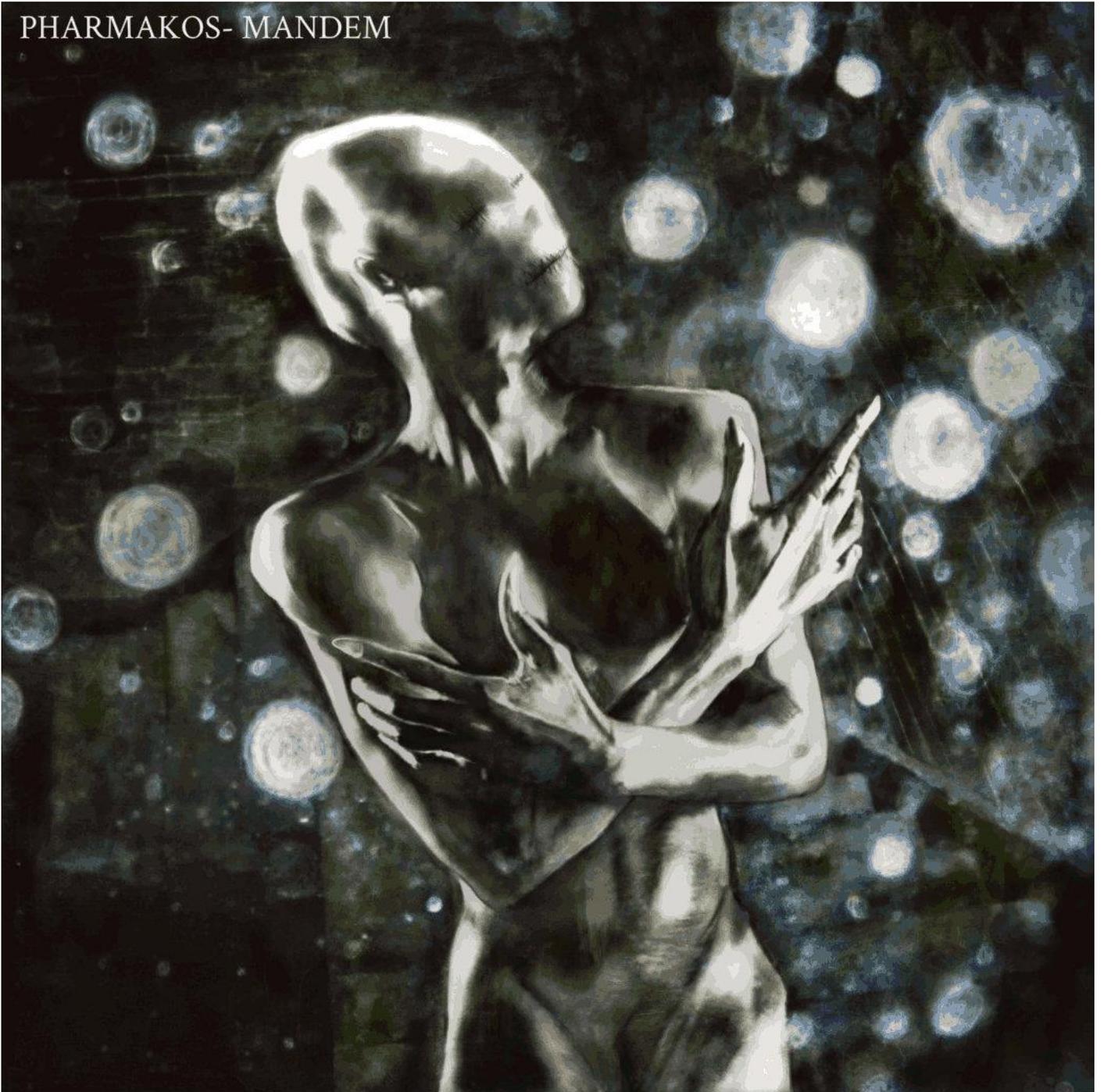
I could white you out till you were camouflaged
by the bulk stack of municipal paper towels, and then
you could do the same to me, or buddy,
we could erase ourselves, or 3-hole-punch each other
till nothing is left.

nothing is left, buddy, nothing is left.
in the corridor where we pass a vent wafts in air from outside.
it stales only slightly in transit from duct to duct.
and you and I, buddy, you and I both stand
in front of the grate

when no one is looking,
breathing.

Katherine Vondy

PHARMAKOS- MANDEM



CRISPIN

Sliding the last of three locks into place, Crispin spoke through the tiny open grate on the door that was level with his mouth. "I'm going out for more supplies. Keep working." He eyed the dimly lit room before slamming the grate cover closed.

Crispin was back within the hour, hunched under the weight of the homeless man over his shoulder. He had meant to pick one with less bulk, but all of the scrawnier vagrants were in places where the police were standing guard against any sort of mayhem. Unable to procure one, Crispin had gone with the first lone transient he came across.

Carrying the fresh kill up a short flight of stairs strained his back, but he managed to get it into the carefully constructed drawer. With one easy pull of a lever, the drawer folded up into the wall deposited the tramp into the room. The body's thud was barely audible through the thick walls. Descending the short stairway, Crispin opened the metal grate and peered in.

The six-inch tall figures had already scrambled in the faint light and removed the dead man's tattered and dirty clothing. Two of the elves dragged the garments to a basket and started shredding it into rags for future use. The remaining ten elves tied ropes tightly around the man's ankles and were already hoisting him into the air with an elaborate pulley system. Once suspended in the room, his hands the only part of him still touching the floor, the little creatures slid a large rectangular bucket beneath the body.

The cobbler didn't look away as the bloodletting began.

By the next morning, the remains were unrecognizable as human. The skin was tanning into leather that would be made into shoes or chair coverings or myriad other things. Bones were charred into black pigment for an artist a few towns over, or carved into toggles and buttons. Meat, already separated from the bones, ground up and packaged for the town butcher. Everything had a use in Crispin's business. Everything had a value.

Early on, Crispin's business was failing. Having inherited it from his father, Stanley, it was expected Crispin would provide the same quality of

product. Unfortunately, the younger did not share his father's knack for leatherworking and construction. While wandering through the woods late one day, Crispin came across a group of fifteen elves huddled inside a large, hollow tree stump. They were cold, wet, and shivering. Taking pity on them, Crispin brought them into his shop. Before they could warm themselves, they saw the tools of his craft. Their eyes widened and smiles cracked their tiny faces.

The following morning, Crispin was presented with the most comfortable shoes he had ever worn. It was their gift to him for his hospitality. A deal was struck between the cobbler and the elves. Crispin would provide them with shelter, food, and materials. In return, the elves would make things for Crispin to sell in the shop. It wasn't long before the cobbler was known for his intricate work, and Crispin explained it away as if he simply lacked focus in the past, but now that he was concentrating on his craft, everything would be fine.

The elves made it all possible.

However, the elves were not stupid. They saw the money Crispin was making, and they wanted some for themselves. They needed the cobbler as their face to the larger world, just as Crispin needed their talents to keep the business going. A deal was presented from the elves to the cobbler. It did not have the results the little creatures expected.

In his greed-fueled rage, Crispin locked them all into a cage. When one tried to escape, Crispin made an example of him and crushed the tiny man with his foot. To keep them silent, Crispin took them one by one from the cage and sewed their mouths almost completely closed, leaving barely enough room for crumbs of bread and drops of water. They were locked in a room and told to keep working.

One of the elves tried to cut the stitches from her mouth. Crispin responded by breaking the neck of another elf and stitching her mouth closed once again. Another elf died in his sleep that same night. The others hoped for similar fates.

A decade of enslavement passed. During the daylight hours, Crispin would go out of his way to

have people see him carrying the kill of a fresh animal, whose pelt would be proudly displayed in his shop's window. It was a calculated move designed to give the impression everything he did was normal and legitimate. He would buy cow hides from the butcher, or trade for the meat left over from one of his hunting trips. At night, Crispin would hunt a different kind of animal.

And no one suspected the quiet, amiable cobbler.

Crispin's cruelty never relented as his pockets grew even heavier with wealth. Late one night, watching the elves through the grate as they broke down that night's vagrant, a distant music floated through the air. The elves froze, immediately looking toward the open grate. Their piercing little eyes chilled Crispin's blood, and he slammed the grate cover closed.

He attempted to rub the cold from his body when he heard the light music a second time. It repeated a third and fourth time, each phrase getting closer. Crispin went to the door to peer out into the night. Silence fell, and all he could see was darkness. He shook it off as his imagination running wild in his tired state.

As the cobbler checked the door's locks, the music started again. It was closer this time. While it had sounded like a flute the times before, it had changed to a hum. The music was no longer coming from outside, but from the workshop. Against his better wishes, Crispin opened the grate and gazed inside.

The elves had not moved, nor were they making any noise. The music was outside again, but as Crispin ran to the door, it switched back to the workshop. Clapping his hands over his ears, Crispin screamed and wept. He could still hear the flute's notes. Tearing open the door, Crispin took one step out into the night.

It wasn't the sudden silence that made Crispin freeze, but the hooded figure standing in his way holding a flute to his mouth.

The cloak was a dark red, and Crispin recognized it immediately as one he had sold it earlier that day.

"You," Crispin gasped.

Before the cobbler could lunge, the soft music began again. Crispin froze momentarily

before all feeling of control left his limbs. As if through a veil, Crispin turned his back to the hooded shadow and moved forward. Without protest, Crispin undid the three locks of the workshop door and pushed it open.

To the cobbler's horror, the twelve elves cut open the stitches across their mouths. The loose strands hung from their lips as if part of their little faces, the skin having grown into the threads.

Crispin walked into the workshop. Removing his clothes, he tied the ropes tightly around his own ankles and lay down on the cold floor. The elves bound his hands and placed stitches into his lips. Through it all, Crispin made no sound. When the music ceased, the pain in his face hit him at once and Crispin struggled against his bonds.

"It is good to see you again, my friends," the piper said, his deep voice reverberating in the slaughterhouse. "I am sorry it took so long for me to find you, and that there are only a dozen of you left."

The music began once more, a different song filling the room. Crispin stopped his struggling as he lost control of himself again. He felt the sharp tools puncture his skin. Every sensation of tearing flesh shot through him. His eyes watered, but not a single muffled scream came from his throat. The pain went on long enough for Crispin to wonder when he would pass out, yet he remained conscious. Eventually, he heard the familiar crank of the pulley system and felt himself sliding across the floor until he was suspended upside-down.

As he floated there, Crispin found himself eye to tiny face. Her little voice croaked after years of disuse.

"I'm taking this," she said, and motioned behind her where the other elves were stuffing the cobbler's skin into a basket. "It should keep us in warm clothing for many years."

As they left the room and closed the door behind them, Crispin could still hear the faint music that was keeping him distant from the pain. All he could do was pray that death would take him quickly once the music was gone.

Death was friends with irony and didn't come for a long time.

Joshua Carstens

MIDSUMMER I I I

Violence done beyond dirt roads
Dirty rides taken

A family name
And its dangling chain

There's a place where Grandfather
Crosses

Out the names of his enemies
A locked cedar box

Another with his Audubon
Bird cards

The flamingo bent
Into a painfully beautiful
Truce between science and art

Part of me needs the old man's blessing
Permission to marry
That girl with the bewitchingly fertile voice

There is no love
However
Without restriction
Or physical discretion
If you'd prefer

We must always lay each other down
Within the confines of

A bed / a city / a poem
A Roman orgy

A phone book / a sense
Of smell / the hell

Passed down to us

Lemon-yellow gloves / a broken
Trust / the water
Tower's shadow / that cramped space

That awkward pose
That displays the entire body.

Glen Armstrong

CHURCH RITUAL

warm unmoving august air

miserable mid-morning mass

penalty - penance - punishment

for drinking sneaked rectory wine

entire summer - every Saturday

every Sunday - sitting - kneeling

same front left pew - hands folded

holding plastic rosary – pocket bible

wearing only owned suit - blue wool

white cotton shirt - starched – scratchy

itchy - sweaty - too tight – too hot

topped with one of dads clip-on ties

perpetual smell of faded dying flowers

overly perfumed blue haired women

acidic smoky yellow odorous incense

unfocused eyes daydreaming downward

alerted as I feel mothers close inspection

hear her familiar forced tsking sigh

unsnapping the red leatherette handbag

releasing familiar aroma mix - cloves

menthol cigarettes - smelling salts

Black Jack caffeine chewing gum

pink dust of cracked compact powder

rattle of keys - coins - cellophane

as she locates the least wadded tissue
wets a clean corner with nicotine spit
tries to wipe that newest brown freckle
from my blushing sunburned cheek

Carl "Papa" Palmer

SACRIFICES, IMITATIONS, AND BLOODY ICONS

There's a thin line between ecstasy and mania and no line between the religious and the profane, and I understand that as I imagine blood tracing lazy trails down my wrists, down the palms of my hands, down into the sink where they embark like pilgrims slowly down the bowl into the drain, where their journey's hidden from sight, where it ceases to continue. And I watch this, too shocked to call for help, too shocked to exalt or convert, and I watch my marks transform and I wonder what they mean and I understand where they came from even if I don't know the cause.

The term "stigmata" derives from the word "stigma" which means a brand. The word's changed over time. The world's changed over time. A stigma is a curse, a mark of Cain. It's a lingering aspect that's better forgotten. Hester Prynne, Werner Von Braun, Richard Nixon, Napoleon, all bore stigmas, most likely earned but occasionally not. And I bear stigmas, most often earned but occasionally not. And so do you. We've been branded by history, by time, by actions, and these brands, these marks, will continue on long after we're gone, until we're finally forgotten.

I knew a girl who bore the marks. She earned her stigmata by slashing her wrists. She bled her blood in order to get closer to God or oblivion, in order to give what was left of her life some purpose, to look through the confusion and find truth. When I saw her bandages I knew that she'd tried to ascend. Her mania wasn't religious but it was a mania. The difference is inconsequential. The weight of her stigmas, real or imagined, built themselves up until she marked herself, or was marked by God.

The common portrait of stigmata involves bleeding from the palms, though the palms are far too weak to hold a man. Instead, the crucified was penetrated through the wrists, between the ulna and the radius, below the carpal tunnel joint, in that empty space that allows a man to turn, to change. By penetrating a man there, the man became immobilized, incapacitated, held. No tearing could free him. He became a memorial to himself and to justice and to injustice and to death in the eyes of God and man.

St. Francis, the first Stigmatic, considered it one of the major steps in the emulation of Christ. Christianity is a religion that necessitates blood in its miracles. Statues weep bloody tears, as do hands. Men and women drink of the blood. Blood represents dead and grief and life and truth and so, if blood is present, people accept that God must be as well. Christianity is a religion that is based on the redemptive qualities that exist in death. After all, what is martyrdom but a righteous suicide?

They find my great-grandmother in the bathtub, wrists bloody. She had given me a purple teddy bear that I slept with every night until I got the flu and the bear smelled of sick to me, even after it was washed.

Stigmata is not always a miracle. Often it's a showing of commitment. The flock brands itself. Like flogging or self-immolation, the spiritual finds its place within self-harm and self-destruction.

St. Paul hates himself for what he does. The manic overtakes the depressive overtakes the manic, a constant cycle that debilitates and destroys, and he finds religion and religion gives him meaning by promising him that this will all end. That he'll find redemption through blood and death. And he beats himself, strikes and hurts himself, cuts himself, brands himself as a devotee not to Christ, who would never have demanded such things of him, but to his own self-loathing. His mania becomes religious ecstasy because otherwise it serves no purpose. His depression becomes religious reflection because otherwise it's pointless. And yet, his mind is built in such a way that it won't allow the grey areas to exist, it won't allow him to reframe his feelings fully, and he's told to trust in God and he trusts in God and it gives his instabilities purpose and he uses it to live. And then he can't do it any longer. He can't believe because every fiber of his being tells him that it is, in its own way, a meaningless exercise, and so I cease becoming ecstatic and become manic once again, and I stop being reflective or insightful or pure and I become a man who, in his own way, is certain that he'll brand himself.

And St. Paul finds his redemption, not in marks or in death or in God, but in drugs, and his wrists clear scab and heal and the scales fall from my eyes and I lose ecstasy and mania and depression and isolation and romanticism and spirituality and I mourn them and I sleep at night.

Author Biographies

Allie Marini Batts: Allie Marini Batts is an MFA candidate at Antioch University of Los Angeles, meaning she can explain deconstructionism, but cannot perform simple math. Her work has been nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize. She contributes to the publication of AULA's Lunch Ticket literary magazine, Spry Literary Journal, The Weekenders Magazine, and The Bookshelf Bombshells. Her first chapbook, "You Might Curse Before You Bless" was published in 2013 by ELJ Publications, and her second chapbook, "Unmade & Other Poems," is forthcoming from Beautysleep Press. Find her on the web:
<https://www.facebook.com/AllieMariniBatts>

Bevin O'Connor: Bevin O'Connor is a writer and performer from California. She received her BA in English from Hobart and William Smith Colleges with honors for her work in poetry and a minor in Theater. In her spare time she coaches gymnastics and avoids playing croquet.

Bob McNeil: Bob McNeil was influenced by the Dadaists. Furthermore, even after all these years of being a professional illustrator, spoken word artist and writer, he still hopes to express and address the needs of the human mosaic.

Carl "Papa" Palmer: Carl "Papa" Palmer, retired Army, retired FAA, now just plain retired, formerly of Old Mill Road in Ridgeway, VA. Now lives in University Place, WA. He has seven chapbooks and the contest winning poem riding a bus somewhere in Seattle.

changming yuan: changming yuan, 6-time Pushcart nominee and author of *Chansons of a Chinaman* (2009) and *Landscaping* (2013), grew up in rural China, holds a PhD in English, and currently tutors in Vancouver, where he co-edits Poetry Pacific with Allen Qing Yuan and operates PP Press. Most recently interviewed by PANK, changming has poetry appearing in *Best Canadian Poetry* (2009;12), *BestNewPoemsOnline*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *London Magazine*, *Threepenny Review* and 749 others across 28 countries. Links:
<http://www.poetrypacific.blogspot.ca>;
<http://www.facebook.com/poetry.pacific>

Charles Rammelkamp: Charles Rammelkamp's most recent book is a collection of poems entitled *Fusen Bakudan* ("Balloon Bombs" in Japanese), published in 2012 by Time being Books. It is a sequence of dramatic monologues dealing with missionaries in a leper colony in Vietnam during the war.

Christina Brandon: Christina Brandon lives in Chicago, where she writes about food and drink for Chicago-based gapersblock.com and blogs about wine at aspiringwinegeek.com. She has an essay forthcoming in *WORK Literary Magazine*, and she's also finishing a memoir about the two years she taught English to a bunch of very curious university students in China.

Clinton Van Inman: I was born in Walton-on-Thames, England in 1945, graduated from San Diego State University in 1977 BA in Philosophy, been an educator most of my life and currently am still teaching high school in Tampa Bay where I live with my wife, Elba.

Doug Bolling: Doug Bolling's poetry has appeared in numerous literary reviews including Storm Cellar, Blue Unicorn, Indefinite Space, Marginalia, The Inflectionist Review, Eratio and most recently in The Missing Slate with Poet of the Month and interview. He has received five Pushcart nominations and currently occupies space-time in the greater Chicago area.

Dr. Mel Waldman: Dr. Mel Waldman, a psychologist, is also a poet, writer, and artist whose stories have appeared in dozens of magazines including HARDBOILED DETECTIVE, ESPIONAGE, THE SAINT, and AUDIENCE. Four mystery, fantasy, and horror stories will appear at the end of the year in POSTSCRIPTS, a British magazine. He is a past winner of the literary GRADIVA AWARD in Psychoanalysis and was nominated for a PUSHCART PRIZE in literature. I AM A JEW, his most recent book published by World Audience Publishers, is a collection of essays, memoir, short stories, poems, and plays about his exploration of his Jewish identity. He is the author of 10 books and recently completed an experimental mystery novel inspired by one of Freud's case studies.

Eddie McNamara: Eddie McNamara is a Brooklyn native living in Manhattan. A writer, chef, and professional contrarian, his work has appeared in Penthouse Magazine, All Due Respect and Blinded and Shocked.
<http://eddiemcnamara.tumblr.com/>

erin feldman: erin feldman parades around as a tattooed future yoga teacher, exiled Louisianan, gardener, photographer, dedicated youth mentor disguised as a High School English teacher, nature worshiper, and student of the changing sky. erin lives for Truth, sass, covers of great songs by eclectic artists, and stunning writing.

George Dila: George Dila's collection of short stories, "Nothing More to Tell," was published by Mayapple Press in 2011. His stories and personal essays have appeared in numerous publications. A native Detroit, he now lives in Ludington, Michigan, on the Lake Michigan shore.

Gerard Sarnat: Gerard Sarnat is the author of two critically acclaimed poetry collections, 2010's "HOMELESS CHRONICLES from Abraham to Burning Man" and 2012's "Disputes." His pieces have appeared or are forthcoming in over seventy journals and anthologies. Harvard and Stanford educated, married forty-four years, the father of three and grandfather to two; Gerry's been a physician who's set up and staffed clinics for the disenfranchised, a CEO of health care organizations, and a Stanford Professor. For "The Huffington Post" review of his work and more; visit Gerard Sarnat.com. "Snowflakes" will appear in his third juvenescent collection, "17s" in which each poem, stanza, or as in this case line has seventeen syllables.

Glen Armstrong: Glen Armstrong holds an MFA in English from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and teaches writing at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. He also edits a poetry journal called Cruel Garters.

Ian C. Williams: Ian Williams is a poet functioning as the Literary Editor of Whetstone, a creative writing journal distributed from Fairmont State University. His work has been published in The Gap-Toothed Madness, Yorick Magazine, and Aisthesis. He currently resides in Fairmont, West Virginia with his wife and three cats.

Jen Muir: Jen Muir is an illustrator living in the UK. She enjoys drawing odd and colourful things. Her website is www.platypusradio.wordpress.com.

Jenean McBrearty: Jenean McBrearty is a graduate of San Diego State University, and former community college instructor who taught Political Science and Sociology. She received the ECU English Department's Award for Graduate Non-fiction (2011), and has been published in Main Street Rag Anthology—Altered States, Wherever It Pleases, Danse Macabre, bioStories, Cobalt Review, Dew of the Kudzu, Nazar Look, and Black Lantern, among a slew of others. Her novel, “The Ninth Circle”, published by Barbarian Books, and her novel, “Raphael Redcloak”, was serialized by Jukepop. Visit her webpage: Jenean-McBrearty.com

Jessica Thelen: Jessica Thelen is a poet from Western Massachusetts, currently studying Literature and Philosophy at Westfield State University. Her work has appeared or is upcoming in various print and online journals, including Mock Orange, Blood & Thunder, Paper Nautilus, Scapegoat Review, Extract(s), Gravel, Split Rock Review, Meat For Tea: The Valley Review, Free State Review, and FLARE: The Flagler Review.

Joshua Carstens: Joshua Carstens is a capital-n Nerd. When he's not taking care of his family, he plays video games or fuels his addiction to Netflix, and every once in a while finds time to write, usually between 11:00 and 11:30pm.

Kate Ramsey: I'm a flash artist. I work in small time frames. I like the pressure of a self-made deadline and not having time to over think what I am doing. I am fascinated with background painting techniques but I love paper and breaking things down to the bear minimum to get my point across.

Katherine Vondy: Katherine Vondy is an LA-based writer and filmmaker. A recipient of artist's residencies from Wildacres, Starry Night and the Vermont Studio Center, her work has appeared recently or is forthcoming in the Beloit Fiction Journal, Chicago Quarterly Review, Menacing Hedge, The Oklahoma Review, Breakwater Review, Burningword Literary Journal and Spilt Infinitive. Katherine was one of six writers selected to participate in collaborative arts project Flying House 2013, and her blog of comedic mini-essays can be found at <http://thewalkingdeadpan.tumblr.com/>.

Lindsay Slatterly: Lindsay is a cook, a writer, a dog mom, and an editor. Her previous publications include The Endicott Review, Ibbetson Street Press, and Zymbol Magazine. She currently dwells and works in Salem, MA where she is working to complete her BA in creative writing from Endicott College. She loves to delve almost exclusively into the dark and dirty and is psyched to be published in this issue of Dirty Chai!

MANDEM: MANDEM is a symbiotic pair of artists working together in what might be awkwardly described as a 'Vulcan Mind Meld.' Our work generally deals with transmutation and evolution -- capturing the metamorphic moments of life where everything changes, and telling the stories of multivalent, multi-textured, variegated things. MANDEM's work has appeared in over 100 publications and 75 art galleries to date.

Mary Katherine Meadows: Mary Katherine Meadows lives in Southern Illinois. She received her BS in in English Education and her BA in English with a specialization in Creative Writing from Southern Illinois University Carbondale. You may visit her personal blog at <http://marykatherinemeadows.blogspot.com/>

Melissa Wiley: Melissa Wiley is a freelance culture and food writer living in Chicago who seizes every opportunity to walk barefoot with half-painted toenails through airport security and stammer in pidgin tongues. Her writing often invokes the memory of her parents, her home on the Island of Misfit Toys, and the beauty of caterpillars. Her creative nonfiction has been published in a number of literary magazines.

Mitchell Lay: Raised in Eagan, Minnesota, Mitchell Lay attended Minnesota State University, Mankato, graduating in 2012 with a BA in English, and a focus on creative writing. He lives in Wheat Ridge, Colorado and continues to produce various works of short fiction.

Riya Anne Polcastro: Armed with a useless liberal arts degree, Riya Anne Polcastro is a student of human behavior and a conduit for raw words. A long-time resident of the Pacific Northwest, Polcastro aims to join the ranks of great Oregon writers. www.riyaanepolcastro.com

Robb Steinpreis: Robb Steinpreis is a recent graduate of the Writer's Workshop program at the University of Nebraska-Omaha. He enjoys thunderstorms and brownies and science fiction. He writes because his math skills aren't up to par for astrophysics. He has been published or has forthcoming work with Lincoln Underground Literary Journal and WHOLE BEAST RAG.

Ryan Grandick: Ryan Grandick is a writer and MFA candidate out of Tucson, Arizona. He's published fiction in the Scissortale Review and nonfiction in the Seneca Review. He likes movies about big ships and taking long naps in the middle of the day. He'll probably never get around to learning how to skateboard.

Sarah Lazaretti: I'm just your average girl, working at a job that I know I am too smart to be working at...but I'm still here plunking away at the keyboard all day because I haven't found the drive to go back to school yet. I absolutely love art in every form possible, and that is where my passion lies.

Vera Kinsella: Vera Kinsella graduated from Western Washington University with a degree in Creative Writing. She currently lives in the Bay Area and is working on her first psychological horror novel. Her life consists of reading, writing, philosophy, and her beloved dog, Buddy.