

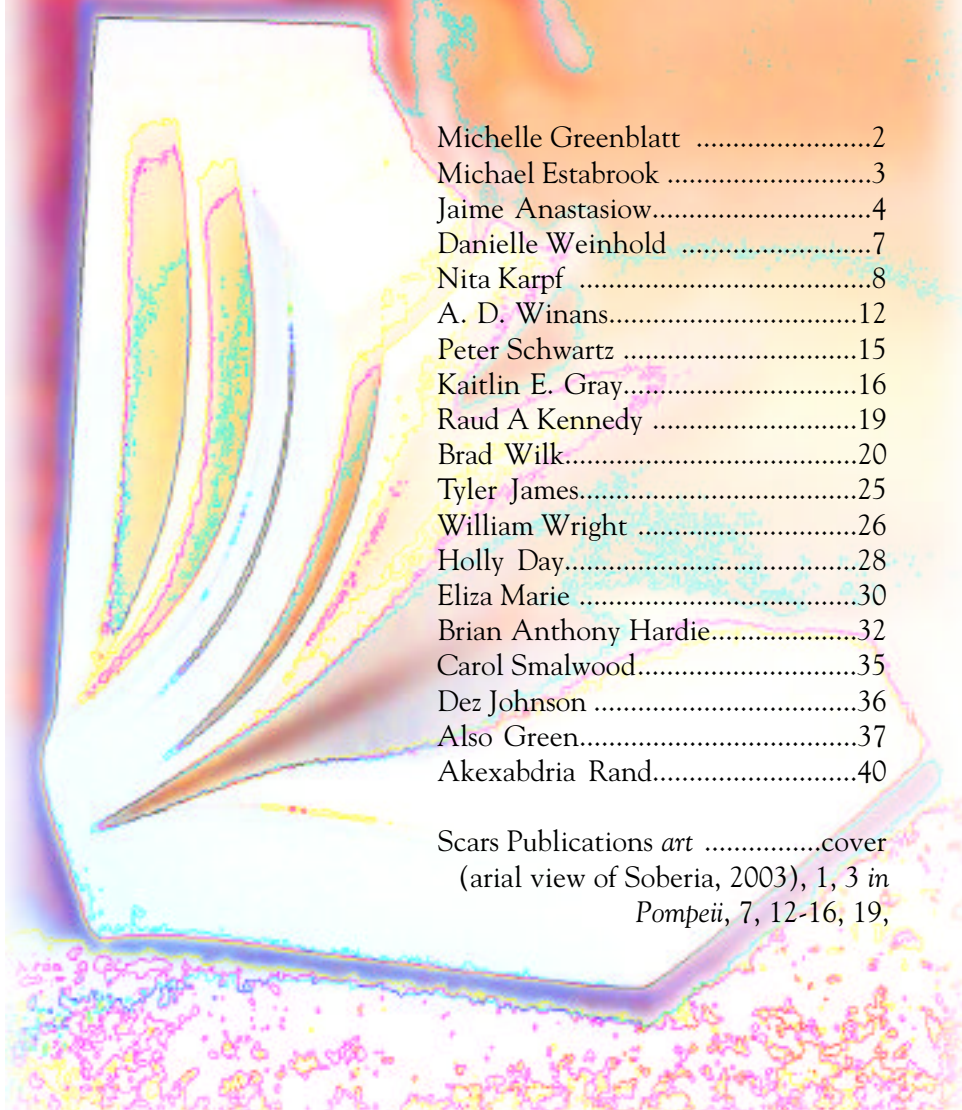
down in the dirt

**v016**  
December 2004

Revealing all your Dirty Little Secrets

12/04, Down in the Dirt, volume 016

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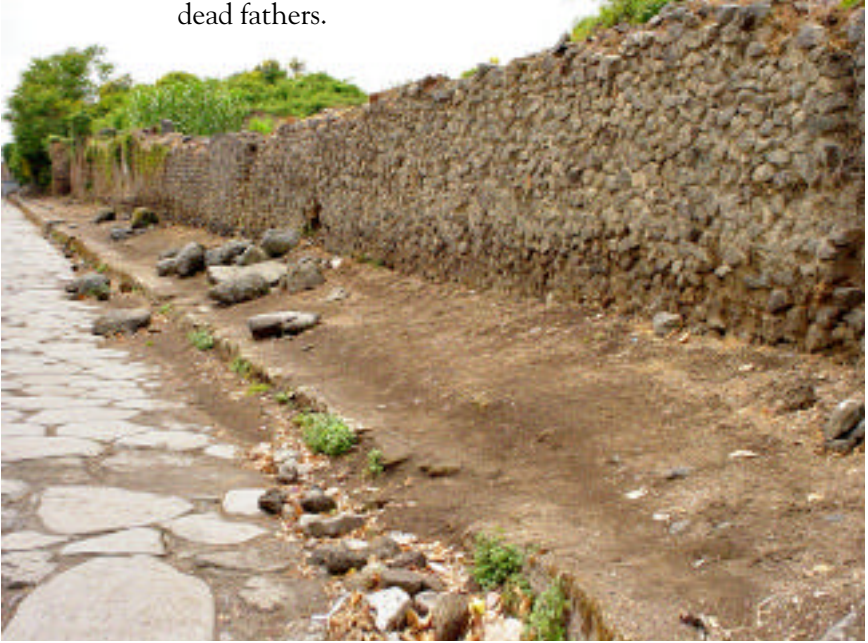
(arial view of Soberia, 2003), 1, 3 in  
Pompeii, 7, 12-16, 19,

# Suicide Sidewalks

Michelle Greenblatt

past the pond sealed with algae  
down on Oakland Park Boulevard and  
State Road 7 where the children play  
in the tattered streets  
in front of the bruised homes  
with a deflated  
ball on the suicide sidewalks  
gutted by pot-holes and long  
dead fathers— courage, her face  
shows courage, and years, hollowed  
out by a dead and dying family, a house  
unbuilding itself, deconstructing under  
the pinch of a needle, the last daughter  
collapsing in the bathroom, eyes rolling  
back in pleasure. the mother's slow stride,  
her eyes, caving from the inside out,  
destitute drags on her cigarettes, trapped  
in America the tragic, dreaming of America  
the magic, imagining a world where her daughter  
will eat instead of feed,  
praying for a place where her dead daughter  
is still alive, sitting on the worn sofa, suturing  
all her wounds. to have enough life to go  
living, to have enough stars so that  
she doesn't need a sky— she gets down  
on her knees and she prays and she weeps  
and she breathes raggedly.  
She is hungry but sold her food stamps  
for money so she could pay for her  
living daughter's last uninsured  
hour long stay in the hospital.  
(Charcoal)  
She watches through

the window as the children play  
in front of the bruised homes  
with a deflated  
ball on the suicide sidewalks  
guttured by pot-holes and long  
dead fathers.



## *late for school*

Michael Estabrook

My 17 year old daughter ran her car into a snow bank this morning and we had the tow truck and the police car there and all the traffic backed up in two directions, and it was raining hard and I'm picking lights and pieces of plastic and rubber out of the snow and she's looking at her watch and saying, "Dad I'm late for school, let's go."



# "Jester"

Jaime Anastasiow

He lay on the cold marble table. His face was twitching, his paws fitfully moving as if chasing a mouse in his dreams. He wasn't an animal to her; he was her life. Some women went home to their husbands, or children, or both, she went home to her cat. It was the best time of Vera's day, the best time of her life really. She couldn't be happier with the way things were. Vera figured being married would just muck up her plans. She was slowly climbing the corporate ladder. She wanted her own house; she even had her cat's room all planned out.

Jester would have a windowsill to sit on during the day so he could bask in the wonderful California sun. She would come home to the blissful music of a purring, sun kissed cat.

He was the most unique cat she'd ever encountered: beautifully striped and strong like a sphinx. His soft fur trailed from his eyes down to the tip of his nose in a white and brown pattern, which left a brown spot like a soft furry freckle. His paws were framed with white like little mittens.

She watched Jester breathe as his body moved up and down, rhythmically. This was truly a creature of God, she thought. So beautiful, lean, and strong like a loving protector of a kingdom.

Vera dreamily thought that with a cat there's no embarrassment, he can be in the bathroom with you, or in your room at the most intimate of times and it doesn't matter, you know he's watching you, but you don't care. She'd always felt that way.

She told co-workers, "I'll need to take vacation time when my cat eventually dies."

"How old is he?" They would ask her.

She replied, "About 12... You go home to your husband and kids; I go home to my cat. It may sound strange to you, but that's who I go home to and he means as much to me as a husband would."

No one said anything to Vera's reply. She didn't care if they understood or not. In some ways she was going home to more than they were.

Vera always believed that when a woman was married and would wake up in the night crying and distraught her husband would probably

sleep through it, whereas a cat would come and cry with her, rubbing against her, nuzzling her. A cat was a comfort that couldn't be replaced. Husbands were replaced every day.

"I wonder what he's dreaming about?" Vera said, talking to herself, as she pensively stared at the cat. She cradled the cat in her arms asking him, "What are you thinking about, Jester?"

He replied by rubbing his head against her hand, enticing her to pet him. His soft fur felt like cotton against her skin.

His favorite spot was underneath the covers with her on a cool winter night. He curled against her body feeling comfort and warmth like a child in a womb: safe and secure, hidden from the dangers of the outside world. At least Vera thought so.

He was born in her basement. She even had what she jokingly called 'baby pictures' of him. He was her baby.

*Maybe I'm crazy or maybe the world's crazy. But is it crazier to be bonded for life with a man laying next to you that you barely know, or to love an animal that will sit there with you providing comfort if you wake up at 3 a.m. and can't go back to sleep?* Vera wondered that but knew the answer before even thinking the question. She had thoughts like these often.

Vera came home from work one night and saw her apartment complex brimming with bright red flames, flowing through all the windows like liquid. She asked one of the firemen in front of her complex about her cat, hoping he was or would be saved, hoping the fireman cared.

"I'm sorry ma'am, we found no cat and there's still a boy in apartment #3 that's unaccounted for." The fireman told Vera in one monotonous stream.

She dropped to her knees as a small noise escaped her lips. She seemed to forget how to speak.

"I'm sorry ma'am," The fireman repeated looking down at Vera.

She looked up at him with swollen red eyes that aged her. Her make-up was smeared and she was still on her knees in the dirt, immobile. Her hands fluttered to her face and she looked at them as if they belonged on someone else's body.

"I'm sure there are plenty of cats that would be lucky to have you as an owner, why don't you go to the shelter and save one, as well as yourself?" The fireman asked her, now looking up at the burning building.

She looked over at him with vacant eyes and replied, "Husbands can be replaced, but a cat is forever."

His face contorted as he walked away speechless.

Vera awoke the next morning in a strange bed by a man she didn't know telling her she was going to be late for work.

"Who are you?" She asked, clasping the sheets over her naked body.

Before he had a chance to reply she cut in, "Where is Jester, my cat?"

She glanced around the room and then looked up at him.

"We've never had a cat sweetheart, remember I'm allergic?" His voice trailed off as he walked toward the bathroom. "Hurry up or you'll be late," he said, his voice echoing through the hall.

Vera looked over at the nightstand still disoriented, and saw a wedding picture of the strange man and her.

Vera rolled over tightly shutting her eyes, rubbing her hands over her face as if washing away a bad dream.

The next thing she knew she was waking up in a hospital bed. "What happened? Where am I?" She asked the nurse.

"Oh dear. You'll be ok sweetie, it's just going to take some time." The nurse replied.

"Time for what?" Vera asked. She looked up and the nurse was gone. She noticed a clipboard at the foot of the bed, grabbed it with the tips of her fingers, barely reaching it, and laid back down to read it.

The vocabulary was foreign to her. Within the contents of the paper she was able to make out: Patient admitted and received Ativan intravenously for sedation...severe memory loss, psychotic episodes, and possible psychophrenia. Patient will need psychological evaluation for release...

"Where's my cat? Where the hell is my cat?" Vera screamed hysterically from her bed.

A nurse came running in, "Honey, we've been trying to tell you, there never was a cat."

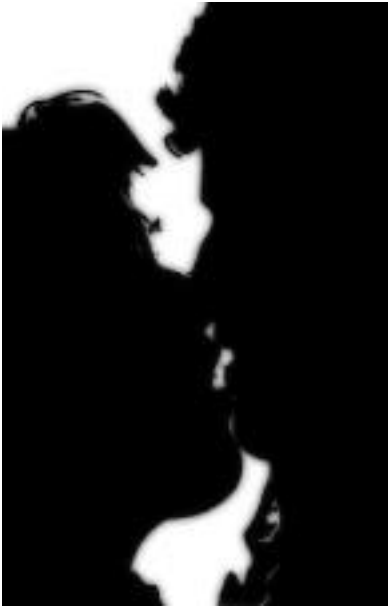
"He was in a fire at my apartment complex, but was never found."

The nurse looked at Vera and said, "Honey you don't live in an apartment."

"But my cat..." Vera's voice trailed off as she looked out the window staring at nothing.

# More to Lips than a Kiss

Danielle Weinhold



I want a man  
For whom my mouth is more  
Than an almost cunt  
A man for whom my words  
Are as good a lubricant  
For love  
As my tongue  
I want  
A man for whom  
Good form means more  
Than legs spread  
And being in love  
Does not mean being in debt  
I want a man  
Who wants  
A whole woman, not a woman hole  
Piecemeal pretty  
One angle at a time  
With all the right lighting  
I want a man  
Who doesn't mind  
A woman who thinks  
Beauty is free





III.

Mexican refugees  
head north  
seeking

jobs

housing

education

human dignity

for their children

they

dig tunnels

crowd into boats

cross deserts

hide under trucks

swim rivers

crawl through sewers

*there are so many illegal aliens here,*  
lamented an irate resident of suburbia

very recently

*we're rapidly becoming the next third world country!*

IV.

dare I say it?

To the *huddled masses yearning to breathe free:*

head northwest

go to Canada

go now!

to the mountains

to pure water

to clean air

and vast

open

spaces

and

freedom

# burial Mounds

Nita Karpf

even in mountain villages  
in January  
not far from ski slopes  
and chalets jutting from ledges  
not far from  
    jacuzzis  
        saunas  
            crackling fireplaces  
            aroma therapy  
        massage therapy

après ski, warm up with  
    cognac  
        rosé d'anjou  
            vouvray  
                sancerre

in crystal-stemmed goblets reflecting the fire's glow

not far from  
    steak tartar  
        duck d'orange  
            filet mignon  
served on limoges, artfully garnished

not far from midnight  
    rumtopf  
            mosaic bande  
                    cherry meringue flambé

yes,  
nearby all this  
huddle homeless bundles of discarded humanity  
curled in fetal position  
shivering under filthy blankets and rags  
buried alive

walk by  
this shadowy presence  
hunched in darkened doorways  
don't avert your eyes  
you MUST look  
you MUST linger  
until:  
you can no longer feel your extremities  
until:  
your eyes burn and ache  
until:  
your face feels as though it might crack  
if you dare speak

now:  
before frozen mucus glues your nostrils shut  
inhale deeply  
do this quickly  
and remember:  
the urine you smell  
was once warm

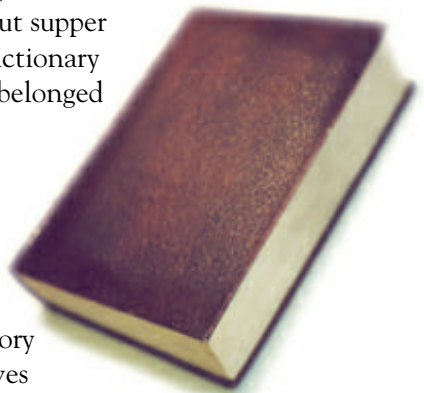
# poem for a friend in prison

A. D. winans

hello Joe  
I could handle the name change  
but they keep transferring you  
to so many different units  
that I'm running out of space  
in my address book  
and now they're shuttling you  
from prison to prison  
I know this is America  
but this is a bit too much  
even for a pro like me  
all these prisons being built  
like factory assembly lines  
I mean there's only so many  
license plates one can make  
makes no sense to me  
you ask how I'm doing  
which is kind of you  
given your own circumstances  
I'm confined to my own prison  
even if there are no keepers  
where life has become a surreal movie  
with nothing but bit actors  
like those old sing-a-longs  
they flashed on the movie screen  
when I was a kid  
follow the bouncing ball  
but I can't and couldn't then  
carry a note  
it's a hard life brother  
on the inside on the outside  
part of the problem lies with the



judges who must be poor mathematicians  
when it comes to handing out time  
and what the fuck is the world coming to  
when poets shun writing for e-mail?  
the old man down on Market Street  
the one with no legs and a skateboard  
has more balls than the President  
this is a bitch of a poem  
not a bitching poem  
I know you know the difference  
even if the jailers don't  
thirsting after your blood  
like a junkie lab technician  
stepping on over and around  
dead bodies  
looking for live spirits to bury  
I wish I could tell you there's  
light at the end of the tunnel  
but there isn't  
the new Governor believes  
in Capital Punishment  
as if death were a spanking  
or being sent to bed without supper  
I've got to get me a new dictionary  
the one I have must have belonged  
to Bill Clinton with all  
its tortured definitions  
the message of America  
can't be found  
on Mount Rushmore  
it's written in blood  
at the Texas Book Depository  
I know this guy who believes  
if we reduce the world population  
by a third and close our borders  
there would be enough food  
for everyone in the world  
too much breeding he said  
but this same man breeds





killer dogs and has five children  
and another on the way  
it's the kind of shit  
that's driving me sane  
just when I was getting the  
insane part down to perfection  
I feel like I'm the lone survivor  
standing on the deck of the Titanic  
destined to walk the ocean floor  
with a fish womb reality  
better watch it brother  
you might get what  
you wish for:  
a new trial  
a new judge a new jury  
but would the outcome  
be any different  
The D.A. should wear  
a black robe  
a wig and powder his cheeks  
bend over and beg forgiveness  
what's left of Eliot Ness, old gang  
could take on the Wise Guys  
outside the courthouse  
hell, I might even buy a ticket  
mouth a few obscenities  
to take the edge off the hype  
we are born we die  
we spend time in between  
be it behind or outside the walls  
and the prisons keep getting built  
and all I can do about it is write  
these "bitching" poems to an audience  
who does nothing but bitch  
sometimes I think I'm a retarded  
space alien put here by a superior race  
you on the inside me on the outside  
inner parts of a human computer waiting  
to be blinked from the screen



# gothic girl (revisited)

Peter Schwartz

she smiled, blood between her teeth  
she smiled again  
and I couldn't help but stare

she gave off a musk in place of trust  
you couldn't hold her or remember her enough  
she tattooed in her sleep

she smiled  
blood between her teeth  
and lingered

she bled almost at will  
she laughed  
but not like you think

her handwriting broke its own  
hands, like birds finishing something  
as they appeared

she named the radio  
and painted shadows on the teacups  
she threw her heart against the wall

she was out of luck  
she thought more clearly backwards  
and thrived at the worst of moments

the widow left her apartment without a scream  
she had seen  
the blood, the ink, the girl



# Emma's Peach

Kaitlin E. Gray



Emma sat, staring at the plastic spoon for twenty minutes before realizing what she was doing. She had the urge to shove it down her throat and end it right there. She knew she had no business being a mother. There was a reason she and Andy couldn't have kids—they would be terrible awful, selfish parents. But there she was, in a hospital room down the hall from a 15-year-old girl who was in the long, loud arduous process of having a baby who would be snatched from her arms upon birth and discharged into Emma's.

Oh my God, Em! You gotta come in and watch this! Oh my God! I saw the head, Em! Our baby's head, Emily! Andy's cheerleader-esque enthusiasm made her sick. Maybe because Emma felt like a failure as a woman—barren and yet strangely proud of it. It was as if her body inherently knew she would ruin a child's life; as so, it did not equip her properly for such an event.

Don't call me Emily. You know I hate that. Only my mother calls me Emily. And no, I'm gonna stay here. I think it would make me sad to see the look on that poor girl's face.

As she said it, she wasn't sure which girl she meant. The far too sexually active 15 year-old, or the unassuming baby who was at the moment being shoved from the only home she knew, or herself.

Emma continued her staring contest with the plastic spoon, obviously better outfitted for shoveling Jell-O than entertaining expecting mothers. *God, I'm going to be a mother.* The thought sickened her to the core. Not the idea of motherhood—Emma always respected the take-charge soccer mom outbreak of the 90s. But seeing herself as a mom shook her entirely. She knew she would be awful. She didn't own a mini-van. She didn't cook casseroles. She was selfish and didn't want to share her toys, life or husband with a needy, screaming, helpless person. Andy probably would be a good dad if he had the right partner, but Emma knew she would drag him down and inevitably make him fail, too.

Andy came from a big family. He craved having children. On his lunch break, he walked across the street and ate his sandwich and yogurt

in the park. He watched new mothers carrying their babies too close and glaring at strangers. He was one of those strangers. He didn't want to be. And he wanted Emma to be one of the overly protective mothers. He would walk back to his accounting job, the image of Emma cradling his child in his mind all day.

Emma lay down on the black metal-framed bed, noticing it was a lot softer than she expected. She stared at the ceiling. She counted the tiles, twice. Forty-two. She stared up at the clock, her eyes glazing over, until she fell asleep. Emma Rae fell asleep during the birth of her child.

Andy rushed in ready to yank Emma out of hiding to meet her new daughter, Mollie. They agreed on the name beforehand. Well, Andy liked it and it was good enough for Emma. No baby name books or suggestions from relatives. The first name spoken stuck. Mollie. She thought it might be a distant relative of Andy's, or maybe after that actress he likes so much. Either way, Mollie it was. But, as Andy flew in, Emma was sleeping. She seemed completely unaware of the chaos down the hall. In fact, she seemed completely apathetic to the chaos down the hall. Andy stood there, stunned. He figured she had been acting strange because she was nervous, but nervous people don't take catnaps during the birthing process. He was sick.

He glanced at the Tupperware bowl of fruit Emma had brought with them. The hospital called to tell them their daughter was about to be born, and Emma took the time to prepare a snack before she left to bring along. She hated that crap out of the vending machines. She cut up two apples, an orange and even sliced a few pieces of Honeydew.

Andy was about to sucker punch her with an apple to awaken the princess from sleep, when he opted for a plastic cup instead. From the pitcher, he poured some icy water meant to calm mommies down, and dumped it all over Emma's face.

Get up Em. Your daughter was just born. Andy sulked into the hallway. *A baby. We have a baby.* It raced through his mind over and over. *And she's sleeping.*

Emma didn't even seem startled. She simply opened her eyes, grabbed some scratchy Kleenex from the box near her bowl of fruit, wiped her face, and walked out to meet Andy.

She looked at him. *God he looks so sad.* Emma honestly wished she could be excited for him. Excited with him. Mom and Dad walked hand and hand down the hall to meet Mollie. Andy stood back when they

approached the nursery, and pushed Emma to the Plexiglas window. He pushed her to her daughter.

Mollie looked like a shriveled peach with a tuft of red hair laughing out of the top of her head. Emma hoped this moment would overwhelm her. And for a second, it did. The smallness of her. The newness of her. Andy's squeaked from behind her. She took a few deep breaths and pleaded to keep this feeling. *Keep the excitement. Keep the moment.* She wanted to want her so bad. She wanted to be like the mothers in the park Andy told her about everyday. She wanted to be selfless. She wanted.

But, in a flash, the massive responsibility enveloped Emma one more time and woke her from her minor daydream.

Emma walked into the nursery and took a good long look at Mollie, who, for whatever reason, was being put in her care. Why she ever let Andy get involved with the idea of adoption, she'd never know. She always assumed no one in their right mind would entrust her with a life. She was wrong. Andy had won over the agency and the results stared Emma in the face. Andy's enthusiasm and love for children made up for Emma's before, but now it was her turn. She was the only mother this baby would ever know.

She began to panic.

She wanted to touch Mollie, but was scared. She stood over the small little fruit for a long time. Over an hour. Just looking. Inspecting every curve and each bump. Then, she lifted her hand, moved the pale blanket off Mollie's miniature body and touched her face, ever so gently. And with her touch, Mollie simply disappeared. A puff of dust and the small over ripe peach was gone.

Andy. She's gone. Emma's black Prada shoes clicked loudly on the tiles of the hallway as she approached her husband.

I only touched her this time. Emma knew from the last time not to hold her baby, or rock her in her arms. But she thought, at least this time I can touch her face. But it was like the last time. Emma saw her little peach vanish before her eyes.

Andy was hoping this wouldn't happen again, but deep down he knew it would play out the same way. They walked out of the hospital together, drove home in silence, and went about the next day like the ones before it.

Andy sat in the park. He couldn't eat. He could barely breathe. A young mother walked by with a newborn in her arms. He wanted to hold someone too close, too. He began to cry for his lost blossom. His disappearing hope.

# Café Tables

Raud A Kennedy

Driving down Newbury Street, I'm terrified  
Of the bored moment.  
You know the one.  
A man and a woman sit  
As a couple at a small table,  
Drinking, eating, but not conversing.  
Their eyes are crushed snails.  
Their facial expressions, day old pancakes.  
I've been that man, and the fear  
Of being him again  
Makes me  
Look away.





# Blind Side

Brad Wilk

In the Diamond District, on 48th Street, Joey parked the Cadillac Deville. He lowered the zipper on his jump suit, removed the .38 from his shoulder holster and checked the action. Johnny, his partner, sat beside him. He kept banging his knees together like a child needing to pee.

“Just follow my lead”, Joey announced.

“I can handle it”, Johnny told him.

“Yeah. Right. Without me, you’d still be running numbers.”

“Bullshit” said Johnny, “I’d be doing fine, probably have my own crew.”

Joey looked through the windshield at the back of a UPS truck and rubbed his left eye with a fist.

“You don’t know it but you need me”, Johnny told him.

Joey grinned a little and folded his arms over the steering wheel.

“How’s that?” he said.

“Because I make you feel better, that’s why. I’m small, you’re big. You know where I’m coming from? You have an inferiority complex man.” Johnny glanced across the street towards the Jewelry shop. “So when is this guy supposed to show anyhow?”

Joey checked his Rolex. “Lenny said eight o’clock.”

“Well if he’s blowing smoke, I got first dibs on his face. I could be nailing a waitress right now. Never liked that kid, talks too much shit.”

“Sure kid. You got first dibs. So who’s this broad?”

Johnny slid to the edge of his seat. “Works at the coffee shop, down by the pool hall. Big tits. Nice ass. You know who I mean? The one with the jugs”

Joey looked surprised. He laughed silently inside his chest. “Her? Tell me a guy she hasn’t sacked with and I’ll buy you a steak at Morton’s. Chick has a thing for mob guys.”

“That’s right” said Johnny, “And now she has a thing for me.”

Joey smiled. He looked at the Jewelry store than back at Johnny. "Just slap her around kid. Keep it ruff. And make sure you leave before the morning"

"See?" said Johnny.

"What?"

He pointed at his forehead. "Inferiority complex. Always in control."

Suddenly, Joey's smile faded and he pointed across the street. "There he is kid. Let's get this bastard. C'mon."

They both slammed their doors and ran down the crowded sidewalk. A Hasidic man, running twenty feet ahead, kept looking back. At the corner, Joey grabbed the man's coat. He pressed the gun barrel into his back. "Do as I say" he said, "And you'll live to see another Sabbath. Be a hero and I'll drop you right here."

Johnny caught up. He held his waist; breathing hard. "You nailed her too, didn't you? I don't freaking believe it"

Joey said, "Move it" to the Hasidic man and led him back to the car. He looked at Johnny walking by his side. "Drop it kid. She's just a whore. Leave it at that."

"Not anymore. I'm telling you she's changed"

Joey put the Hasidic man in the back seat, slammed the door and got behind the wheel. He looked at Johnny sitting next to him.

"Right", he said, "She's changed"

\*\*\*\*\*

On the floor, opened pints of Chinese food surrounded the ringing phone. I reached down from my bed and picked up the receiver. My head was throbbing. Lying next to me was a girl I'd met the night before at a bar. She was blond and young, probably half my age. I couldn't remember her name.

"Simpson" I said.

"Good Morning kiddo"

I cleared my throat; adjusted my eyes. Larry worked the morning shift. I thankfully did not. "What's up?" I said.

"Got a floater" he said, "Thought you'd like to know".

"Where?"

"Where else?"

"Larry" I said, "Not now. I'm not in the mood."

“South Street. Hand delivered. Guy looks fresh.”

“Anybody we know?”

“You know any Orthodox Jews?”

“No. Be there in twenty. Any press?” I asked.

“Not yet” he said. “And Simpson”

I scratched my beard and thought of waking the girl. She looked real good lying on her stomach. “What Larry?”

“Would you pick up some bagels and lox? I’m starving over here”

I laughed, said, “You got it”, and hung up. The guy had a way of cheering me up. As cops went, he was the best I knew. I nudged the girl awake and from behind slid myself inside her. What was her name? Susan, Sandra, Samantha. It was something with an S, wasn’t it? Oh the hell with it, I thought, it didn’t matter anyway.

An hour later I walked up the pier and ducked under the police tape. I took a knee by the body and noticed a missing hand and a dime sized hole between the eyes. A young crime scene investigator was taking close up pictures from different angles. Feet, head, torso. I put my sunglasses on and walked with Larry to the edge of the pier. We looked across the river at Long Island City, the Citibank building, the Coca-Cola sign, the Brooklyn Navy Yard. I heard waves sloshing against the wood pilings below us.

“What took you so long?” he said.

“Traffic”

Larry snickered. “I’m sure”, he said, “Don’t know how you do it”

I folded my arms over my chest. “Necessity”, I said.

“Twenty, thirty, how old was she?”

“Don’t ask.”

“So what’s your take on the floater?” he said.

I looked over my shoulder and saw two EMT guys bag the body, place it on a gurney and push it inside the back of an ambulance.

“Guy was most likely on the take, I imagine. Got deep and paid the price. Looks like a professional kill, all very clean.”

I looked back over the river.

“So you know the guy who did this?” he asked.

I patted his back and smiled. “No, but I will” I said, than walked down the edge of the pier away from the hub-hub, away from Larry. *Sally’s her name. That’s it. Sally.*

\*\*\*\*\*

The re-make of *The Exorcist* was playing. It was the first show of the day. The theatre was empty. I found an aisle seat close to the door. The opening credits were flashing on the screen. Billy slid past my knees and sat two seats across. He was holding a large bucket of popcorn and a small soda. For a few minutes we said nothing and watched the movie. I heard him crunching popcorn, slurping his drink.

“Am I done?” he said

Three years ago I nabbed Billy on Grand Theft Auto. With his priors he was looking at fifteen to twenty. In exchange for a clean sheet, he’d agreed to go under cover. I grabbed a handful of his popcorn. “That depends Billy. What do you have?”

“Joey Palermo”

“Go on”, I said, “I’m listening”

“That Jewish guy you guys found?”

“Yeah”

“I’ll testify that Palermo did him”

“Why? All of a sudden you’re going to turn on Palermo? What’s the deal Billy? Something doesn’t sound Kosher here. No pun intended.”

The popcorn was addictive. I grabbed another handful.

He said, “If I do this, we’re good, right? You’ll set me up, a house, a decent job.”

“Yes Billy, just like I promised.”

I looked around the theatre to see if anyone could hear us. Except for an elderly couple sitting close to the screen the place was empty.

“I want to take a girl with me too. Can we do that? Can I take her with me? Give her a new identity?”

His motivation was becoming clearer. Of course there was a woman involved. I read this kid like a book.

“I’ll see what I can do Billy. Now tell me what went down with Palermo.”

He set his popcorn and soda down between us. He leaned over the seats, closer to my ear.

He said, “We got a tip on some diamond dealer, right; some player who needed some dough to roll a deal over or some shit like that. Said he’d have the money, plus the vig back to us in a week. Anyway, turns out the guy’s in over his head. So he starts stalling, you know, tells us to come back, that he’ll get the money, not to worry.”

I nodded and watched the movie. The priest was making his first appearance.

“So this guy disappears and Palermo’s loosing his shit. You know, he’s got a temper. So anyway, were looking all over town for this prick. So finally, this Lenny guy tells us where and when we can find him. So we pick him up, you know, right on the street and the guy gives us the same old story. Says he’s busted, doesn’t have a dime. Well, anyway, he’s got this briefcase cuffed to his wrist and Joeys telling him he’s gonna chop his hand off. Then everything went to hell man. Guy keeps stalling, giving us the same old story and Joey caps him in the head and chops his freak-ing hand off. Turns out the guy was carrying about million dollars worth of diamonds. A fucking million, would you believe it?”

I turned and looked at Billy. I could see the whites of his eyes, smell his after shave. “You got a murder weapon?”

“He threw it in the river by the pier”

“You’ll come down to the precinct and put this in writing?”

“Yeah”

I shook his hand. “Alright Billy, this is the one. After this you’ll be living far away from here. Just you and you’re girl. That’s what you want?”

“Yeah, that’s what I want”

I stood up and brushed the popcorn off my shirt and jeans. “Just out of curiosity”, I said, “Why now? Is this all about the girl? I mean, are you willing to do this all for her?”

He nodded.

“I hope she’s worth it” I said.

That night I found a spot directly in front of my building. As I walked up the stairs to my apartment I smelled garlic and olive oil. Somebody, I thought, was actually cooking. Usually, the hall just smelled of body odor and dog. I pulled my cell phone out and pushed the speed dial for Larry. Feeling good from a few scotches, I pressed the phone to my ear.

“Palermo” I said

“No shit” Larry said, “Palermo, huh?”

“Yup, whacked the poor bastard over a debt”

“Who rolled on him?” he asked.

“Billy Toronto. Kid gave a written statement and agreed to testify”

“Man” Larry said, “We might be able to turn Palermo, nab some big boys with this”

“Yeah” I said. “We’ll pick him up tomorrow, by the café on Spring Street, right in front of his crew. Can’t wait to see the look on his face”

I went to open my door but it was already unlocked so I pushed it

open and went inside. I'd never seen my apartment look so clean. It even smelled good, like potpourri or something. Wearing one of my white collared shirts and nothing else, Stacey stood by the stove, stirring a large pot of sauce. How did she know I was a sucker for that?

In the phone Larry said, "Eh, me and the boys are playing poker at Max's. You coming?"

Stacey rushed over. She draped her arms over my shoulders and kissed me. "Not tonight Larry, kind of tied up", I said.

"Traffic again?"

"Yup, absolutely brutal"

"Don't know how you do it," he said.

## Rite of Passage

Tyler James

A splash in bleach  
To iodine the mind -

Call it a stoning  
If you wish,

Amnesia runs strong  
In the undercurrent.

In the morning it'll  
Feel like a kiss -

And sting all at  
The same time.



# Temple U

William Wright

Surprise professor for the day, shock rocker Marilyn Manson,  
in trademark makeup and black suit,  
opens the class with a question:  
Can he share a bottle of red absinthe with the students?  
All is quiet as he sets his bottle down on the desk.

I brought enough for everyone.

A student raises her hand, and Manson calls on her.

What's your name?

Karen.

Nice to meet you, Karen.

Let me just say that from now on, no one needs to raise his or  
her hand to talk.

The only rule with talking is don't interrupt – it's rude, OK?

A few nods.

Good. Now Karen, what did you want to say?

Well, I just thought you should know that many of us,  
myself included,  
aren't legally old enough to drink alcohol.  
You could get in trouble, and so could we.

That's a good point.

Yes, I know there are risks involved, but I accept those risks.  
I'm inviting you to accept them with me.

That's stupid.

Scattered chuckles.

And your name is?

Jerro. Listen man, you gotta be careful with that shit.  
You think just 'cause we're young, we don't know what absinthe is.  
That shit's illegal, dog.

Jerro, I never assumed that  
because you're young, you don't know what absinthe is.  
You're the one assuming here, not me.  
If you want to call the police, go right ahead but understand this,  
I was only trying to be nice.

That's not nice!

Thank you, Jerro. Anyone else?

...Hi, I'm Bill.

Hi, Bill.

I just wanted to say...it's not stupid.

I appreciate the sentiment, Bill, but I'm not really  
concerned about whether people think what I do is stupid.  
Jerro thinks it was stupid, and that's fine.  
You think it wasn't, and that's fine too.  
We all have our opinions.  
The problem is not that we disagree,  
but that we live in a society where expressing unpopular views are  
discouraged, and even censored.  
Right here in America,  
land of the free.

May I have a glass?

Manson smiles.

Why yes, of course.

Manson prepares two glasses of absinthe and hands one to Bill.  
Bill takes a sip.

# An Outing

## Holly Day

when I was a child, we used to ride in my dad's stuffy VW van  
all the way from Omaha  
to Galveston Bay, without complaining  
because the summer's in Nebraska were so bad  
we'd put up with anything to get away.

once there, nothing could get us out of the water  
not the dead, floating fish that pummeled us with each  
passing wave, not even the occasional electric  
jelly fish sting. we'd ride everything out in silence, because  
complaining meant going home.

it is very pretty here, standing on the beach, but not the place  
I remember from 20 years ago. my own children  
are too spoiled by the green forests and wild deer  
sightings, the cold clear waves of the Pacific from family vacations  
before

to spend more than 15 minutes in the dirty water  
at the Bay. nobody says it, but I can tell  
they'd be happier spending our family vacations  
anywhere but here.

# Bob or Bill or Dave

## Holly Day

The strange man at the park  
has built himself an army  
of gourds and pumpkins  
and a very regal-looking squash.  
He has drawn faces on each  
with a Sharpie pen, because only that type of pen  
will glide smooth enough  
over the placid, waxy surfaces.

He sits in the park  
surrounded by the globular faces  
all grimacing with missing teeth  
vampire fangs, hairlips  
himself the lone toothpaste-worthy smile  
I wonder what his name is.

*Holly Day's poetry, fiction, and nonfiction have most recently appeared in Canadian Woman Studies, Skyway News, and Ruah. She currently works as a reporter and a writing instructor in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and lives with her two children and husband. Her hobbies include skateboarding, crocheting, and trying to peaceably communicate with uncooperative vending machines.*

# ALMOST PERFECT ROMANCE

## Literary Short Fiction

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“Anyone else home?” Doug intended to waste no time.

Seventeen year-old Gwen shook her head. “No one but us.” She bit back a smile, her instincts ablaze.

“When will he be back?”

“Not until seven-ish.” Gwen perused the clock above the stove. She felt Doug’s eager eyes stroke her slender figure. “We have at least an hour.”

Doug’s tense shoulders slumped with relief. “Hong Kong is beautiful.” He jerked his denim jacket off, pitched it atop a kitchen chair. His taut muscles quivered under the tight, black T-shirt he wore. He stole a quick, curious gaze down the hall, toward her room. “Maybe I’ll take you there someday.”

Gwen listened with glassy-eyed attention. “I’d like that,” she said, surprised at her shy tone. At twenty-one, Doug preferred constant movement and change, he’d already taken several impressive adventures, accepting odd jobs along the way to support himself. Gwen cherished the exotic stories he brought back to the dull California town of Valencia.

As if reading the undercurrents of her thoughts, Doug shot one of his cocky grins toward her. “Brought you a little something.” He burrowed into his jean pocket and presented a small box to her.

As Gwen opened it her heart beat double time. “Earrings. Thank you. I love them.” She flung her arms around his neck, pecked him on the cheek. His arms refused to let her go; his eyes fell into dark slits. Gwen felt the wonderful yet awful jolt of desire rush to the pit of her stomach. No one made her feel the way Doug did.

“I’ve missed you.” Doug tone grew low and velvety, caressed her with its cadence. He pulled her close, chest to chest. His deep kiss left no room for debate.

“It’s wrong,” Gwen protested. “We shouldn’t.” But he’d already zoned

in on the spot on her neck; the sensitive skin tingled beneath his wet mouth. I know it's wrong, she warned herself. But she loved him. She'd loved Doug forever. The thought comforted her as she tugged him towards her bedroom door.

Half an hour later Doug rolled his sweaty body off of hers. "You're the best." His dark eyes percolated with serene amusement.

She wrenched the blanket up around her body to veil the blush of her soul. "Do you still love me, Doug?"

"Don't ask stupid questions." He tweaked her nose between his thumb and forefinger. "Hungry?"

"Starved." She peeked at the clock on the nightstand. The digital numbers announced they did not have much time left. "He'll be home soon."

Doug kissed her a last time. Gwen immersed her heart into the kiss until she felt its warmth flood the pit of her belly. Doug crawled out of the bed and yanked his jeans on, his eyes never leaving hers. "Sweet or salty?"

"Potato chips," she said, with a yawn and a lazy stretch of her bare arms.

"I'll be back in a jiff." He winked at her before he headed downstairs. Gwen tugged herself up on her knees; she stretched Doug's warm T-shirt over her head, inhaled the fabric deeply. Doug's warm sperm oozed from her body, crept down her inner thighs. She continued to dress, her heart crammed with a combination of love and disgust. As she left the room, the front door slammed closed. Oh, no, Gwen thought. He's home. Nervous sweat spilled through her thick eyebrows.

Gwen soared down the staircase. "Hi, dad." She offered him a quick cheek kiss. "You're home early."

Her father spotted Doug as he stepped out of the kitchen, bare-chested, carrying a bowl of potato chips. Doug flung Gwen a knowing glance before he peeped back up at the man. "Hello," Doug greeted, his tone calm. "How've you been?"

Gwen's father stood still for a long moment. Finally, his face broke into a smile. "Doug," he bellowed. "When did you get back in town?"

"Got in this afternoon." Gwen watched as Doug set the bowl down on a nearby table. She continued to watch as he stepped forward and wrapped the man in a bear hug. Their eyes met over their father's shoulder.



# Earthbound Ghost Need

Brian Anthony Hardie

Incognito, with long hair in a green caravan.  
She sits steady and speaks fast.  
Building her future in front of a paused moment,  
In the past.  
The pale moist contains the key to a short life.  
No more food to hide.  
Witnesses perform a circus beyond the grave.

Glazing defeat.  
Discovering the next country that will embrace the beast.

Chocolates tarnish the path to where I write.  
I hold it to no god to inject fathom and insight.  
“Live, and let live,” deemed the up-town character.  
“A whistle will clear the hills of killers you’ll try to beat.”

Rise above the subsided constraint, believe  
You will keep the bar straight.  
Cast aside the flame of doubt, and keep  
The ashes to dream about.

# Eating Raw Bread with A Mammoth

Brian Anthony Hardie

The kitchen floors are covered with my memories.  
Like possessions I left behind for friends to endure.  
Their reasons unsure to me,  
Though perfect legacies for their tough  
2 bedrooms.  
Oh, those thoughts could burn out  
The lamp on those latent, patient fiends.  
Springing a concern only to compose a lie.  
Animal instinct almost hid the gun.  
A models figure saved facts,  
To sprout violence on low income.  
Vanilla candles won't cure those tattoos.  
Only if saving time leads inclination  
To thirst for truth.  
A seed, symmetrical of walls, dividing planted emotion.  
Time lasts the time of losing weight.  
Rib cages are puppets for my stomach's stress intake.  
Transition needed on my peeling skin.  
Wasting another take as I wade my mates in.

ToMorrow  
Is Yesterday  
Is Today

Brian Anthony Hardie

Maybe the under garment was a diluted  
Invite to sit in the rain. I'll take the gift  
And be on my way to the anti-suppressant  
Seminar. Tomorrow and the recent past are only  
Of great consequence in the meaning of truth. Tall tales  
Collide when my hair is below my eyes, requesting  
Permission to be blown in the wind. Reduce chest pains  
By taking the anemic side.  
Replace the rubber love boat by sneaking up on the great white.  
I'll sit on your porch and linger until a visitor comes to take  
The silence away. Bring on the melodies under the surface,  
And conduct an action of superior social livelihood. Bring down  
The buildings, who ask the heavens for a little breathing space.  
Walk past the racial differences in this October summer cold.  
Bypass on feelings that concentrate on a friendless man in  
Desolate bindings.  
Forget punctuation and write a masterpiece.  
Building blocks to a new failing future rip up the pages  
That carries a childhood scent. Make public the little boy  
On the sidewalk that opens his arms to any windshield wiper.  
I'm too small to see when the resident explains. Walks right through me and  
The daily paper notes. I'll fast until I have to leave this  
Criminal state of bliss. Walk to the empty room and leave the badge  
Behind. Scribble your thoughts and keep a divine presence. Maybe the clouds  
Will clear for my journey home.

# Illusion

Carol Smallwood

might be the smartest way to go-  
not to have pursued what the  
symptoms meant, not to have uncovered  
post-traumatic stress disorder.

Psychoanalysis is supposed to reveal  
what you can't face to make you free,  
but it stripped husband and parents--  
leaving me a snitch if I told my  
children the truth, a deceiver if I didn't.

# I am this broken doll

Dez Johnson

I've lost some of my pieces and I'll never find every shard  
I'm glass and you can't glue me back together  
I can't be stitched  
I am this broken doll  
And forever will be  
I'm captivating in my broken beauty and I make you want to save me  
But that is the illusion  
For I can't be saved  
You'll never find every shard either  
I am this broken doll  
And my pretty painted lips will always call for you to graze them  
Bite them  
And pull my pretty perfectly manufactured hair  
I am this broken doll  
And you will always want my broken legs to be wrapped around you  
To squeeze and make you hurt in just the right places  
It doesn't matter then that I'm broken  
I still feel warm  
I am this broken doll  
And you'll want me to take my porcelain nails and run them down your back  
and whisper my sweet nothings in your ear  
You'll want me to scream your name and bite your arms with my glass teeth  
You'll love that I'm broken then  
I am this broken doll  
And your in love with the broken  
and not the doll.....

# New

## Aldo Green

The bar was lean and mean  
It had a look to it  
That left me numb with terror  
And weak at the knees  
The bartender was a shady looking  
Character, the kind  
To water down drinks  
That was all right,  
I brought my own  
I was prepared

The lighting was low and good thing  
The face of destitute was all over this place  
And the body of dejection, digesting  
Regurgitating was more than I could take  
I ordered a gin and tonic, a double  
The joint was crowded  
Everyone knew each other  
Except me, tucked in a corner at the back  
Keeping a close eye on the exit signs  
And planning my attack

I ordered another drink  
I needed courage  
I needed a life  
The night moved on bitterly slow  
I was drunk  
And out of control  
I grabbed the bartender  
I grabbed the waitresses  
In the end I grabbed a taxi  
They let me go with a warning  
I left them one too  
I'll be back next week  
Or a lot sooner

# Deep Thought

Aldo Green

Fine time  
To find out  
You're fading  
And no longer  
In the game  
You feel your best  
And look your worst  
Might as well  
Cash in and tip out  
You brain is just like  
Liverwurst  
Days free and safe  
Nights I was afraid  
Times they caught me  
Praying so long ago  
Look where we are today  
A circus of fools  
Hanging in bars  
And we know  
The truth is disturbing  
And we fake our way  
Through each day  
We kid ourselves  
And ponder  
Our money away  
While we sit  
Happy  
And pretend to  
Think  
There must be  
Another place to drink

# Drinking and Drugs

Aldo Green

Early mourning blues  
Whiskey for me  
And drugs for you  
Lying in bed  
Till the break of dawn  
Let's sleep the light away  
It won't take long  
Happiness is beside me  
At last rolling around  
Not making a sound  
Dreaming of her prince,  
Settling for less  
And I take what I have,  
It's more than before  
And each day is getting hard  
To love like the last  
And I so much want us  
Not to rust  
Yet trust is all I have  
To guard me from lust  
And the bitter winter eats  
Away my eternal soul

And if she would awake now  
I could still have a chance  
To be the one, to make her smile  
But time is no friend  
And god is only a scene  
To make you believe in something  
Other than yourself  
And the devil invented god  
For his amusement and we play  
The game each day  
Losing our way and  
It is too plain to see  
Everyday is drugs for you  
And whiskey for me



# Crush/But I won't

Alexandria Rand

I had a crush on you  
oh, what am I saying  
I have a crush on you  
and I think I've had it for a while  
but I know  
there is not a thing I can do  
and I can wish  
for something to change in my life  
but it won't

# For Now I'll Think

Alexandria Rand

Jesus Christ,  
there are so many things  
that I have wanted  
and that there is a part of me  
that wants you to take me  
and get naked with me  
and do things I shouldn't write about  
so  
so I won't  
so I guess I'll sit here  
and be with someone else  
but for now  
for now I'll think

# down in the dirt

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